Wanderer 171

Chapter 171: Disgust

Percy wanted nothing more than to dive back into his work, having lots of urgent tasks to tend to. The looming threat of House Tantalus aside, there were only 9 more months until the lotus bloomed, and he wanted to return to his family by then.

Sadly for him, his injured channels forced him to place everything on hold for a few more days. Unable to use mana, he couldn't condense crystals, nor cleanse his cores. Even sending out his next clone had to wait a while longer.

But that didn't mean he remained completely idle.

Knowing the name of his trait, he figured this was as good a time as any to explore the benefits it granted him. Of course, he still had no clue how it could possibly help him improve his magic, but there were other, mundane ways to put it to the test.

To this end, he approached Leah, the lady who'd spoken for him and Nesha during the other day's discussions. Apparently, she was the town's resident tailor – the very person Nesha had purchased their clothes from. Though it wasn't a wardrobe change Percy wanted from her.

"Do you think I could work here for a couple of weeks?" he asked, eliciting a raised eyebrow from the woman.

Naturally, she was a little surprised to see a young man – and a noble scion at that – display a sudden interest in her profession. Still, she eagerly agreed to his request as soon as her initial confusion faded, happy to help Percy after everything he'd done for the town. In fact, she offered to tutor him of her own volition, and even to pay him for his work.

Suffice to say, Percy refused to take any money. Besides the fact that he didn't need it, he had no idea if he'd be any good at this. His trait might have raised his proclivity towards the art, but he wasn't sure if being a little skilled with a thread and needle would cut it.

'Getting some experience is more than enough.'

Over the next few days, Percy showed up at Leah's workshop every morning. At first, he merely watched her as she wove patches of linen, stitching them together into shirts and trousers. The outfits she crafted weren't anything special. They looked simple and unassuming – a far cry from the silken robes and elegant dresses noble men and women regularly wore. But they were certainly practical. Far better suited for the difficult, laborious lives of the commoners they were meant for.

"Do you want to give it a try?" she asked on the third day.

Under different circumstances, Percy might have chosen to observe her for another week or two. But his channels were almost back to normal, and he knew his schedule was about to grow a lot more hectic. The more practice he got with his trait now, the better.

'Oh well… If I ruin the fabric, I can just pay her for the damages.'

Recalling the way the tailor had handled her tools, Percy set to work. The first thing he noticed, was how natural it all felt. Holding the needle wasn't awkward in the slightest, and guiding the thread came with an innate understanding of how to avoid knots and tangles. Paying more attention to the process, he was surprised by the sheer dexterity and precision by which his hands moved. As was his mentor.

Not wanting to freak the poor woman out too much, Percy took a step back, trying to appear more normal. He knew it wasn't his own talent at work, but the Weaving trait doing most of the heavy lifting. Still, he continued to experiment a little whenever she wasn't looking.

At some point, he discovered he didn't even need the needle!

Somehow, he could pinch and push the end of the thread through the smallest of holes and openings with his fingers alone! It almost felt like an extension of his body, responding to his will as well as his mana did! By now, Percy would have to be a fool if he couldn't tell his skill in this profession bordered on the supernatural!

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Tracing his fingers along a coarse linen shirt, he could easily visualize the way the horizontal weft and vertical warp threads interlocked into its grid-like texture. More than that, he instinctively understood why they'd been woven like that, and how the slightest variation in their structure could affect the final shape and seam of the shirt.

'This is wild. Between my trait, Sengo's teachings and Nesha's help, we can probably start a business empire…' he chuckled.

Of course, that was not to say he had nothing to learn from Leah. While he could handle fabric as naturally as breathing, there was still a lot of nuance involved in crafting a functional set of clothes.

"You'll want to match the stitch to the weave," the tailor said, watching him closely. "If you just sew straight across without following the grain, the fabric will bunch up, or worse, the stitches might tear again." she advised him at some point.

Well, that certainly explained why the patches he'd hastily applied to his own clothes were starting to come undone already. Whatever instincts he'd stolen from the mysterious spider, they didn't cover making clothes for people.

In any case, to accommodate his rapid learning speed, Leah handed him progressively tougher tasks over the next three days, before culminating in his final project – weaving an entire linen shirt from scratch. It was time-consuming work – or was meant to be, in any rate – yet Percy still managed to finish it in an afternoon after putting everything the tailor had taught him into practice.

'Wow. How do I get more traits?!' he wondered, half-jokingly.

He did vaguely remember he was only ever meant to absorb one, but he'd have to ask the girl about it once he figured out how to return to her world. The only thing he lamented was that his trait didn't seem to have a direct application in combat. Having achieved so much with it in a single week, he could hardly imagine how powerful he'd grow with a trait related to spellcasting.

'Let's not be ungrateful.' he sighed. 'I didn't even know these things existed a year ago…'

Bidding his mentor farewell, he returned to his house. He'd agreed to drop by Leah's to help her out whenever he could, but he could no longer afford to do it full-time.

"Is your little vacation over already?" Nesha asked.

"More or less." he shrugged. "What's the situation with the snitches?"

Percy had asked Nesha to keep an eye on the people she'd singled out. If they were right, the traitors should be leaving town soon, to report them to their masters. Of course, people did travel to and from the town every now and then, mainly to transport goods to the neighbouring Greyquarry town or House Tantalus, but such occurrences weren't that frequent.

"Yes." Nesha nodded. "Two of them left this morning under the pretence of transporting wheat to House Tantalus. For context, the harvest season isn't even over yet – so typically they shouldn't have done this until a couple weeks from now. Not to mention, they aren't the ones normally in charge of this."

'Micky. From now on, I want you to fly in a wide circle around the town every few hours.'

'For how long?' the crow groaned.

'Indefinitely. We'll need to know when the Greens arrive, so they don't catch us by surprise.'

Naturally, the bird complained. Waking up several times per night was bound to be unpleasant. Still, he agreed, not wanting Percy or Nesha to get killed in their sleep.

It wasn't until all of that was settled that Percy finally activated his boosting art, sitting down to condense some crystals. As cumbersome as it was, it had grown into a bit of a habit by now. In fact, he thought he might have even missed it after not doing it for over a week…

'Nah… Not really.'

Forming a blob of cyan in his hand, he soon shaped it into a solid sphere, before squeezing it between his palms. Its size shrunk rapidly as Percy settled into the routine task.

And a few minutes later – seven to be exact – it was done. Percy had managed to shave a lot of time off Crystallization over the years, though his improvements had already slowed down to a crawl. He estimated he wouldn't be getting much faster before Yellow.

Shrugging, he was about to condense another one, when he noticed something strange. A weird feeling bubbled up as he stared at the cyan orb pinched between his thumb and index finger. It was almost like disdain… or disgust, even.

He frowned.

'What's going on?'

It wasn't like he'd done anything new. Nothing he hadn't done a million times before. Yet, for some reason, condensing his mana like this had felt wrong. He could instinctively tell there was a better way to do it.

Suffice to say, he had no clue what it meant, but he did harbour a pretty good guess as to where this feeling was coming from.

'Interesting…'

Chapter 172: Hot or cold

Percy was dying to explore the strange feeling, but he had to finish all his chores first. He spent a couple days brewing ahead for himself and his companions. He also sent a new clone out – hopefully to the Vault, but he wouldn't know that until he was back.

Only then did he finally allow himself to delve into this new project. Perhaps it would lead to a dead-end, but until he obtained the runes he wanted from the artificial world, he couldn't start working on his next spell upgrade anyway.

‘Let’s see… My pure mana can essentially take four different forms.’

Leaving his fused mana aside – since it was structurally identical in its corporeal phase – Percy manifested his cyan mana in all its different states, one after the other. At the same time, he allowed himself to sink into the clarity afforded to him by Weaving, contemplating the feedback it provided.

First, the regular mana felt soft and squishy. Trying to fashion it into any sort of solid construct was ill-advised, as Percy had found out years ago. Not that Weaving was particularly constructive with its criticism. While it was happy telling Percy what it disliked about the substance, it didn’t bother explaining how he was meant to fix it.

Then came the crystals. Again, his trait loudly protested their creation, warning him that they were way too brittle. And too rigid. He wouldn’t be able to weave a web out of–

‘Wait, what?! A web?! Why would I care about that?’ he creased his brow.

Were these intrusive thoughts some side-effect of the trait? Percy wasn’t particularly happy evaluating his magic based on how suitable it was for catching bugs. But he shook his head, unwilling to write this path off before he even treaded it.

‘Fine. Web it is. Let’s see if I can please you.’

Next was the intermediate step he obtained by mixing the soft mana with the cyan powder. In his analogy to concrete, these rice-shaped grains were equivalent to the gravel that made up most of the substance. Expecting the trait to complain again, Percy was shocked to receive some positive feedback for a change! He could tell Weaving still wasn’t overly thrilled with the grains, but it wasn’t as quick to dismiss them as before. Instead, it nudged him along, encouraging him to keep going.

‘Weird, but ok.’

Finally, Percy used Reinforcement. Filling the space between the grains with powder, he held everything in place with regular mana, before hammering at the mixture with his willpower, trying to lodge its pieces together. Over the next few minutes, he gradually ironed out the kinks in the material, purging its impurities one after the other. In the end, he was left with a cylindrical slab of cyan in his hand – a small

section of what he usually used for his scythe's shaft. It hadn't taken him too long either, as he'd grown much faster at this over the past year.

'How about this one? You've got to be a little impressed this time, right? It's a Refined spell, for Phoebe's sake!'

Unfortunately, the response from Weaving was lukewarm again. It was indeed satisfied with the rod's strength, but it still protested loudly over its excessive rigidity. The greedy trait wanted its mana both strong and flexible! After all, how else would he spin it into the ultimate thread?!

Percy frowned.

'Is that the goal? I don't even know if such a thing is possible…'

He smiled bitterly. Who was he even talking to? Was it himself, the spider, or the trait? Either way, this was quite the high standard his customer had imposed on him. Pure mana was universally hailed as hot garbage for a reason. Percy was counting his lucky stars that he'd managed to amend that into something useful, yet Weaving demanded so much more…

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Then again, it wasn't so strange, given the trait's name. Percy couldn't help but wonder what effect such a result would have on his magic. Could pure mana truly be as hard as steel, yet as flexible as silk at the same time? If possible, that ought to qualify as a Masterful-tier spell.

'Well, the clone won't be back for a few more days at the earliest… I suppose I've got some time to kill.'

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From that day onward, Percy spent his mornings brewing for the group, while devoting his afternoons into researching the new form of his pure mana.

As for how he did that? Well, he was essentially playing a game of hot or cold with his trait. He tried applying subtle changes to his Reinforcement, using the trait's reaction as well as his own intuition to assess whether they brought him closer or further from his goal.

At first, he'd started with something obvious – decreasing the width of his constructs. Originally, the shaft of his scythe was about as wide as a finger, so Percy gradually reduced that a few millimetres at a time, gauging how its properties changed. Not surprisingly, the rod grew far more fragile past a certain point – namely as soon as it had shrunk to around half its previous width.

And it didn't take a genius to figure out why. If somebody was to examine the rod's cross-section, they'd quickly notice it wasn't homogeneous, as it was made of three different variants of pure mana, held together in a very specific configuration. Obviously, shrinking the shape too much messed up the delicate balance, compromising the object's integrity.

'I'll need to go deeper…' Percy realized.

The next step was to play around with the grains themselves, adjusting their shape. Which was easier said than done, as even the slightest tweak affected the construct greatly. For example, making the grains thinner allowed Percy to fit more of them in the rod's cross-section – which was good – but it also made each individual grain more fragile – which was bad.

The solution was to make them shorter too, maintaining their rice-like shape while scaling them down. However, the shorter they were, the harder it was for them to interlock with one another, which again compromised the integrity of the material.

To amend that, Percy tried making them thinner while packing them more densely, to counterbalance their fragility. This worked, but it made the rod even more rigid – it wouldn't bend at all!

'Well, this wasn't what my trait wanted, but I suppose it isn't useless… I can make my scythes a little stronger like this.'

In any case, Percy had to admit this wasn't going to work with just three ingredients. The only way forward was to add another intermediate step in the process, giving himself an extra variable to play around with. However, this also meant that the number of possible combinations would shoot up exponentially. As would the effort required to sift through each of them…

Not seeing any other path, and since his clone had yet to return, he gritted his teeth before diving into the experiments again. This time, he used two grain variants. One was small and sturdy, the other long and thin. This seemed to yield some results, as he did manage to shrink the rod some more by the end of the second week. Even better, he did that without compromising its strength!

'At least, not by much.' he thought as he examined the long, cyan fibre in his hand.

Its cross-section was smaller than a ladybug, and it seemed to bend rather easily too! A few quick tests confirmed that it wasn't any weaker than his scythe's shaft either. Percy had verified this by stacking a few of them together and then comparing how much force it took to break them.

'Still nowhere close to my goal though…'

As it was, he couldn't think of a good application for it. It wasn't nearly as thin as a thread, so the prospect of weaving it into a fabric was nothing but a pipe dream. Shrinking it down any further wasn't going to be easy either.

'There's no way I'll have it ready by the time the Greens arrive. I suppose I'll have to fall back to my original plan.'

He'd have to put this project on the side for now. For all he knew, it might be years until he got anywhere with it. The realization filled him with disappointment, as he'd been looking forward to perfecting the mana threads. Perhaps it was the thought of obtaining a Masterful spell, or maybe it was just the trait's influence on his subconscious, but he'd really enjoyed the past couple of weeks. Sadly, it couldn't be helped.

On the bright side, the clone finally returned a few days later. And it brought with him exactly what Percy had ordered.

Finally, he had some shiny new runes to play around with!

Chapter 173: Rune delivery service

The clone's memories settled in place, the events of the past few weeks rapidly flashing through Percy's mind.

This time, he'd ended up in the body of a semi-sentient for a change! It was a weird, gnoll-like creature – some kind of ugly humanoid racoon. Not his finest moment, but that didn't detract from the novelty of the experience in the slightest.

Suffice to say, the creature's tribe was quite primitive – they couldn't even communicate without grunts and growls, nor did they have much of a civilization going for them. In the few hours Percy had deigned to spend there, he'd determined they couldn't even build their own houses. Instead, they lived in caves, using only the most rudimentary tools made of sharpened stones and rugged bones.

Of course, Percy didn't leave immediately.

He did spend an afternoon or so exploring the surrounding area, as he always did, in case there was anything of note. As it turned out, the mountain inhabited by his "people" was surrounded by a dense, fairly normal-looking forest, brimming with wildlife – not unlike something one might see on Remior.

As he travelled through the exotic woods, he made a point to forage for any edible fruit and nuts he stumbled upon, tossing them in a large piece of some animal's hide he'd "borrowed" from the cave.

In the end, he didn't find any traces of sentient life, nor any treasure worth his time. His Status didn't contain anything particularly important either – just his host's Orange grade and fire affinity, along with the other regulars.

'It was worth a shot.'

Shrugging, he activated Metatron's Decree, throwing his supplies in before jumping after them, as was his original plan. Soon, he found himself lying on the familiar metallic floor, boxed inside the world-sized cube.

Honestly, he half-expected Metatron to show up, giving him a piece of his mind. Though that didn't happen. A quick check also revealed the titan hadn't revoked his access to the life mana necessary for his second core.

‘I guess he didn’t take the parrot’s condition personally.’ Percy exhaled in relief.

In any case, he had no intention of using the mana, as he wouldn’t have enough time to awaken the core anyway. Nor did he plan to try his luck in the Orange challenges either. Maybe he could have cleared a couple if he did his best, but he was on a tight schedule.

‘Can I give Gabe the mana since I don’t want it?’ he wondered.

Percy had never forgotten about his friend’s crippling disabilities. Walking to the residential area, he soon met up with him, bringing him up to speed on the recent developments.

“You mean you can just waltz in with a random body once a week and ask the system to give you… a million refills of life mana, just like that?!”

“Hey, you’re making it sound like I’m fleecing the guy or something!” Percy rolled his eyes. “Last time I only got 500 credits or so. Anyway, want me to ask if I can transfer the privilege to you this once? I was also thinking of maybe pooling resources together, so we don’t have to buy the same books twic–”

Percy didn’t even get to complete his sentence before all the runes in their surroundings flashed red, the system berating him in a scathing tone.

“WARNING: Unauthorized exchange detected. Registered users are not allowed to exchange credits, information or other resources without permission. Calculating penalty…”

“Ah! That’s my fault!” Gabe said. “I should have warned you about it. Last time, I checked with the cube if I was allowed to lend you a couple of books. It didn’t seem to mind as you were still registered as a guest.”

“Calculation complete. User’s first infraction detected. Penalty reduced to 1 infraction point. Total infraction points: 1.”

“Wow. Just… wow. What this place needs is a “stinginess” challenge. You lot would never have to worry about credits again…” Percy groaned.

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That said, he wasn’t too surprised by this development. If the Vault’s residents were allowed to freely exchange information between themselves, everyone would be doing it. That would only undermine the entire point of the challenges – to motivate the most talented people to grow while weeding out the weaklings.

Part of him wanted to slap himself for not abusing his guest status some more back when he had the chance. But, deep down, he knew Metatron wouldn’t have allowed that. Not if his goal was to entice him into joining the Vault…

“What do these points even do?”

“Well… Normally, each point lasts 50 years. If you accumulate 3, you get executed. That said, I’m not sure what’s going to happen in your case. Though I doubt Metatron will let you get away without any consequences.” Gabe explained.

“3, huh? There’s still some room for–”

“Don’t even think about it. You’re lucky the cube only gave you 1 this time. It’s usually not as lenient.”

Percy swallowed hard, realizing that most of the Vault’s residents got killed if they broke the rules once or twice. Sadly, there was nothing he could do about it for now.

Bidding his friend farewell, he then returned to the challenge cube, beginning the Orange magiscript challenge. He didn’t intend to complete it, but learning how the requirements scaled from one grade to the next would be useful. Besides, this was the best place to get some privacy, unless he wanted to rent a room.

‘Draw any five runes 500 times in total, in under 10000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual rune has to be drawn at least 50 times.’

‘Not as bad as I was expecting…’ Percy raised an eyebrow.

It turned out that the first wave of the Orange level was somewhere between the third and fourth waves of the Red level in difficulty. He could already draw the concealment, preservation and control runes well enough, so he’d only need two more to pass.

‘Maybe it’s worth a try then?’

In any case, he’d have to practice with the new runes anyway. Plus, it wouldn’t hurt to pile up some more credits for his next visit. Making his mind up, Percy then browsed the system for the runes his main body had requested. Of course, he didn’t know exactly what he’d find – he’d only come here with a vague idea of what he wanted, but the enchantments sounded simple enough that they should exist.

‘I should still buy that rune index as soon as I can afford it. I can’t spend hours browsing blindly every time…’

That said, he did eventually find what he needed. This time, he’d settled on 7 books on 3 different runes, costing 70 credits in total. The first two were for his own use:

The ‘hardness’ and ‘absorption’ runes.

Percy wanted to include both of them in his new spell. But he didn’t have any special mana type requirements this time, so he’d only get two tomes on each. That should be more than enough to settle on a couple variants he liked.

As for the final rune, he needed it to work with space mana again, as it was meant for Nesha. This wasn’t part of their preparations for the upcoming fight – just the next step in her studies to craft a spatial amulet. The ‘stability’ rune was a key component of the artifacts, as it ensured the pocket dimension could safely store objects for a prolonged period of time. Percy was going to look through 3 tomes on it, picking the most suitable variant.

‘It’s a pity I can’t use it in the challenge.’

He would still have to memorize it by the end of his trip, but he couldn’t activate the stability rune without space mana.

“Alright, just buy those. I want them in hard-copy format.”

“Confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 109. Delivery in 6 rits.”

Percy didn’t waste a second before diving into the stack of books. The hardness rune he ended up picking consisted of a single circle, with several progressively smaller hexagons nested inside one another. Not the toughest shape to draw. Even better, he estimated he wouldn’t have much trouble visualizing its effect, as he could simply focus on his reinforced constructs, doubling down on their existing properties.

As for the absorption rune, it was a little trickier to learn, as he didn’t have a very clear image of how it would work in his mind. Absorption runes came in all shapes and sizes, from heat absorption to light absorption, to sound absorption and so on. What Percy wanted was a relatively simple force absorption variant that worked with pure mana.

Overall, mastering the new runes was relatively straightforward. Getting them to the level the challenge wanted took a bit longer, but he figured he’d have to put in the effort back home anyway if he didn’t do it here. So, he simply gritted his teeth for a few more days until…

“Congratulations! Wave 1 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 100. Current balance: 209.”

Percy finally had enough credits for the index, though he wouldn’t have any left for the next runes if he bought it now. Deciding to postpone it once more, he quickly checked the second wave’s requirements.

‘Draw any ten runes 1500 times in total, in under 20000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual rune has to be drawn at least 100 times.’

‘Yeah, I think we’re done here.’

The darn thing was even tougher than the fourth wave of the Red level!

Shaking his head, he finally allowed the ethereal cord to pull him out of the gnoll’s body, letting Metatron do whatever the hell he wanted with his new toy as he drifted back towards Remior.

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Percy opened his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips as he pondered over his latest acquisitions. His new spell would involve quite a few moving parts, but it should massively raise his survivability even against a Green once he got it to work.

‘Time to forge myself some armour.’

Chapter 174: Gauntlet

Percy’s efforts to use his mana defensively dated as far back as his first month in the Alchemists’ Guild, when he developed his Glove spell.

That said, the flimsy layer of cyan mana had never been particularly impressive. Back then, he hadn’t even known about Reinforcement. Not to mention, his second core had still been at Red. Consequently, the Crude spell was arguably the least impressive entry in Percy’s Status to this very day.

‘I suppose it’s time to do something about it.’ he grinned.

Of course, there were plenty of obstacles standing between him and his vision for the new spell. For one, he had to navigate around the contradictory requirements that any piece of defensive gear had. Namely, it had to be strong enough to resist an enemy’s attack, while at the same time being flexible enough to not inhibit its wearer’s movements. The good news was that Percy had already taken this into consideration back in the day, learning how to properly distribute the mana around the spell for this exact reason.

Gathering some mana from his abdomen, he instinctively allowed it to wrap around his hand, forming the construct. Having used the spell countless times, it no longer even required much thought to summon it, though it had admittedly been a while since he last needed it.

In any case, he flexed his fingers a little as he closely examined the construct, reminding himself how he had designed the thinner layer of cyan to coat his joints, allowing them to bend more easily. At the same time, he'd made the rest of the structure thicker, thus offering better protection.

'Sadly, adding Reinforcement will only complicate things…' he grimaced.

Obviously, if he wanted the spell to survive a Green's attack, using the stronger variant of his pure mana was a no-brainer. Unfortunately, that wouldn't work for the joints, as it would make them way too rigid, regardless of how thin he made it. And he couldn't even make it too thin, as he'd recently found out the hard way. Suffice to say, the only solution would be to use both his soft and hard mana, and to ensure the spell transitioned seamlessly between the two.

'If only I had managed to get the threads to work, this wouldn't be a problem.'

He sighed. The magical silk his trait had commissioned would be the perfect fit for this spell. Sadly, there was no way he'd complete the ambitious project anytime soon. Then again, it wasn't the end of the world. Practicing how to smoothly blend the soft and hard mana together would only help with that.

'Alright. Let's get started then.'

Walking over to a corner of the room, he picked up a large clay jar. It was old, dusty and unassuming – exactly how he wanted it. Removing its lid, he peered into the seemingly empty vessel. The only things one could see were a couple of concealment runes he'd carved along the inner walls of the jar.

However, not everything was as it seemed.

Suddenly, a flash of teal shone within the clay jar, illuminating its dark belly. A fine powder of the same colour soon manifested out of thin air. This was one major advantage the teal powder had compared to the cyan variant – it was easier to hide.

Naturally, Percy would have preferred to keep all his valuables inside his spatial amulet, but he couldn't fit everything. Definitely not the large stash of powder he'd prepared for both his elixirs and his weapons. That had left him no choice but to get a little creative with his hiding spots.

Shrugging, he pinched a handful of the substance, before pulling some more pure mana from his abdomen, blending the two. Obviously, mixing fused and unfused mana together meant the resulting constructs couldn't be made invisible or intangible anymore. Doing that would only result in the spells crumbling apart. But he didn't need to worry about that right now.

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Condensing a few rice-shaped grains, he next mixed all three types of mana, before wrapping them around his free hand. Next, he placed his hands side by side, comparing the two as he started working on the upgrade.

'Let's see… That part is supposed to be harder… That segment has to be a little shorter or I won't be able to bend my thumb…'

At first, he focused on distributing the mana properly, determining how much he'd need in each region for Reinforcement. Only once he was happy with that did he begin hammering at it with his willpower, forging the harder pieces in the correct shapes.

Crafting the upgraded glove took much longer than the Soul Harvester. While it only needed a fraction of the mana, its structure was many times more complicated, as it involved over 15 different pieces. And Percy had to work on each of them separately. In fact, he even discarded a few, recreating them from scratch after realizing he'd made a mistake.

By the time he was done, the sun was already down. Still, Percy wasn't satisfied with the result. At first glance, it appeared exactly like how he'd imagined it. In fact, he was confident it would probably survive a Yellow's spell too. Plus, he didn't have much trouble flexing his fingers.

However, there was a different issue with it.

'It looks great right now… but what happens when I let go of the soft mana?'

Withdrawing his hold over the soft mana, he watched all the connecting tissue of the glove crumble into motes of cyan. With nothing linking the hard pieces together, they began to fall apart, a couple of the fingertip guards making crisp sounds as they hit the floor.

'Hmmm… I guess there's nothing I can do about it. I'll have to actively hold everything in place during a battle.'

It wasn't ideal, but only the crystallized and reinforced variants of his mana could survive on their own for a prolonged period of time. Though it wasn't that bad – he already had to manually keep the regular Glove active – he'd just have to do the same with its upgrade.

'I should still adjust its shape into something more practical so that it's not a pain in the ass to wear…'

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Over the past few days, Percy had modified the regular Glove spell, making it even thinner than before.

The idea was to wear it underneath the harder pieces, and to design everything so that it slid together nicely. That way, it would only take him a few seconds to equip it before a battle. He even added a few small holes in the harder pieces, so that he could fasten them in place with a few strings of soft mana.

After he was satisfied with the new glove's practicality, he fine-tuned its design some more. He strengthened some pieces here and there, shrinking or re-shaping a few others, to maximize its defensive capabilities while keeping it comfortable to wear. In the end, he even added a couple more components, such as a wristband and a forearm protector, to extend the protection it afforded all the way to his elbow.

'This is a good start, but still problematic…' he thought as he scanned his armoured hand.

There was no doubt in his mind the spell was already usable in a fight, but neither he nor his Status were satisfied enough with it to declare it as such. After all, it currently took him several hours to forge all the components, and it would only survive a few days at best. That meant he'd have to keep replacing it over and over again – something he had no intention of doing. Not only that, but he didn't think it was

strong enough to endure a Green's spell just yet. Which was a problem, because he'd already graduated from Yellows.

That said, Percy had already foreseen both of these problems. And he'd come up with a solution:

Runes.

Allowing the soft mana to fizzle out again, he removed the pieces one by one, laying them on a table in front of him. Next, he picked one of the smallest components up – one of the pinkie-guards, before willing the mana to shatter.

Collecting the scattered powder, he then pulled some mana from both cores, fusing it together before mixing the soft teal mana with the dust of the same colour. This time, he intended the construct to last a couple of weeks, so he was going to do it properly.

Replicating his previous steps, he soon reforged the piece exactly like before, with two small additions. Careful to not compromise the spell's integrity, he embroidered two circular symbols on it.

Within its inner wall, he added a preservation rune, to ensure the construct survived a while longer than normal. On its exterior, he instead added a hardness rune, which should elevate the construct's rigidity somewhat, allowing it to endure stronger attacks. Whether this would be enough against a Green remained to be seen, but Percy had a few more tricks up his sleeve. Alas, those were for later.

Breaking and reforging the pieces one by one, he then finally slotted them back onto his arm, fixing them in place with some soft teal mana once more. Only when he was done did he lift his arm, marvelling at his handiwork.

And the Status didn't miss its cue either, announcing his achievement.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Glove – Crude -> Phantom Gauntlet – Refined!]

Chapter 175: Just getting started

"Wow, that looks like quite the spell." Nesha pitched in.

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” Percy grinned.

Reaching into the mana around his arm, he willed one of its properties to shift. Without warning, the entire gauntlet vanished into thin air, causing Nesha’s eyes to widen. She opened her mouth, seemingly about to ask, though she held herself back. She knew enough about Percy’s magic by now to figure out what he’d done.

“It’s still visible through Mana Sense.” she noted after a second.

“Of course. Though I’ve thought of a way around that. I’ll work on it later.”

Nesha nodded, but she didn’t say anything.

Next, Percy tried to make the Gauntlet incorporeal, though that didn’t go nearly as nicely as he had expected. Having failed to time all 18 or so transitions properly, he watched the pieces of the gauntlet fall apart as they lost contact with one another in several spots.

Hearing Nesha chuckle, he rolled his eyes.

“This last bit might require some more practice…”

At any rate, this would only be useful if he had to defend against a soul user.

“Percy… I don’t want to rain on your parade right after you upgraded a spell, but I don’t think this is enough for you to survive against a Green by yourself. We don’t even know how many they’ll send this time.”

“Why not? I can just point my hand at their spells and block them with my amazing gauntlet!”

“Come on. Be serious. What’s the plan here?” Nesha asked, not buying his bullshit.

“Alright. Just lighten up a little.” he shrugged. “Who said this is all I’ve got? Nesha, the Vault of Magic is a treasure trove of runes.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I’m just getting started.”

***

Percy stared at his Gauntlet’s pieces in its deconstructed form. Technically, it was already useable like this, but he had much greater plans for the spell.

Like he’d told Nesha, he’d worked hard to master several runes from the Vault, and it would be a waste if he only used the preservation and hardness runes on it. Of course, Percy had yet to delve into magiscript proper, so he wasn’t able to merge multiple runes into the same enchantment. The solution had been to engrave the two runes on different sides of the object, applying one to the interior, while leaving the other for the exterior. Sadly, his Gauntlet had already run out of surfaces for him to draw on…

‘For now.’

Pinching some teal powder from his trusty jar, he mixed some soft mana with it as he used Reinforcement once more, shaping it into a new piece. It took him several minutes until he was satisfied, but he eventually moved it close to his eyes, a grin tugging at his lips.

It was a circular band similar to the pieces that went around his fingers’ segments, yet this one was a little wider, as if it was meant to loop around them. Picking one of the previous components from the table, he pushed it inside the new one, rotating it at the same time. A few teeth in the interior of the wider band slid right through the nooks Percy had carved in the other one, as the two objects joined together with a satisfying click.

It fit perfectly!

Even the two sets of holes on the pieces aligned nicely – those were there for the teal strings to pass through, fastening the bands to the rest of the Gauntlet.

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Nodding in satisfaction, Percy examined the structure once more, verifying there was nothing out of place. The two bands didn't have exactly the same shape, the second one extending a little further back – resembling a spiky scale. That way, it would even cover the joints somewhat, protecting them without inhibiting them much. R𝒂Nobɛs

'And now I can add more runes on it!'

By adding a second layer to the band, Percy had just created two new sides waiting to be engraved! Naturally, one of them would have to be adorned with the preservation rune again – it had to be present on every single piece to ensure their longevity – but that still left him one free slot.

Of course, he didn't bother drawing the runes right now. He still had plenty more pieces to perfect. Besides, his armour would probably end up replaced a dozen times over before he needed it.

His eyes shifted to the next piece, as he picked up another handful of powder from the jar, resuming his work.

'I wish it wasn't such a tedious process though.' he sighed.

***

Besides the ridiculous amount of time required to prepare the new spell, its greatest downside was arguably the sheer amount of teal powder he needed for all the pieces. If he had to condense them on the spot, Percy would easily need a week just for that.

'The good news is that it can be recycled.'

While he had to reforge his Gauntlet every few weeks, he didn't have to keep condensing new crystals – well, besides the ones he needed for the elixirs. Suffice to say, the contents of his jar were immensely valuable for him, as they represented several months of accumulation.

'I might be the only mage on Remior who has to carry ingredients around to use his spells…' he smiled bitterly.

Regardless, he knew it was worth it.

Based on what he'd learned in the Vault, a rune's effect largely depended on the grade of the one who drew it. Given Remior's underdeveloped runecrafting techniques, it would take a Green or even a Blue to match the potency of Percy's enchantments. By that point, the runes wouldn't be effective enough for them to rely on during a fight – which was why he'd never heard of anybody else carrying enchanted equipment.

'I'm sure there are some worlds out there where it's more common.'

In any case, Percy donned his Gauntlet once more – all 54 pieces of it – marvelling at its improvements again. He had actually not stopped at the second layer, instead opting to add a third one on top!

He could have pushed it further, in theory, but at this point he'd already have to spend a huge amount of time maintaining all the pieces. Besides, he was swiftly approaching the limits of how bulky it could get without starting to bog him down during a fight.

That said, the imposing teal Gauntlet now had several spiky protrusions covering each joint like a dragon's scales, all of them adorned with runes. Percy had even reordered them, deciding to keep the force absorption enchantments in the deepest layer, to mitigate the impacts his body received. As for the hardness runes, he'd moved them to the middle layer, to protect the armour itself.

The only layer that wouldn't be protected was the outermost one – but that one had a different purpose. Turning the construct invisible, he looked at Nesha.

"Well? How is it?"

The girl squinted as she circled Percy. Presumably, she'd activated her Mana Sense too. It wasn't until half a minute later that she replied.

"I can tell something's off, but only because I'm actively looking for it. It's not immediately obvious."

Percy nodded. Naturally, he'd engraved concealment runes all over the third layer! While his runecrafting technique had plenty of room for improvement, it was more than enough to hide the construct from plain sight!

"Neat!" he exclaimed, taking it all in.

Getting this far had taken him weeks, but Percy thought the result was worth it. And, apparently, his Status agreed.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Phantom Gauntlet – Refined -> Phantomscale Gauntlet – Refined!]

This was his second spell to evolve while remaining within the confines of the Refined tier, the other being Synchronization. Percy had no idea where Refined spells ended and Masterful spells began, but this had to mean he was getting closer, right?

"Percy… I still don't see how a gauntlet is going to help you." Nesha said, bursting his bubble.

"It'll be plenty… together with the other pieces."

"Other pieces?! Was that your goal?!" Nesha seemed taken aback. "We don't have time for this! It's been weeks since those people snitched on us! The Greens might be here any day now!"

But Percy wasn't deterred.

“Like I said. If we get attacked before we’re ready, we’ll just abort the operation. Micky is still regularly patrolling the area around the town. He’ll spot them hours before they reach us.”

“Do you actually think you’ll have a full set of armour ready in time?”

“Probably.” he shrugged. “The Gauntlet was the hardest piece by far. It’s full of joints and required dozens of pieces. The rest of the armour should be much simpler. I’ll have everything done in a couple of weeks.”

Seeing she wasn’t convinced, he continued.

“Nesha, House Tantalus can’t just send a group of Greens whenever they want. I’m more worried they won’t take the bait in the end.”

“If they do, do you think our preparations will be enough?” she asked.

“Did you finish enchanting those slabs of stone I gave you?” he asked back.

“Yes.”

“Then, they’ll be enough.”

Chapter 176: Stitching

Percy had chosen a Red host this time. The lower grade might be a little annoying, but this was the first soul he found today that was both sentient and in a relatively decent condition – right past the threshold where it could be possessed.

Naturally, he wasn’t planning to return to the Vault just yet – his main body was still busy finishing up the armour spell. In fact, Percy had decided to not bother with the artificial world again until all the madness surrounding the lotus died down a little. There was no point, as he had plenty of other things to be working on in the meantime.

‘Hello? Anyone there?’ he asked once he found himself inside his new vessel.

‘Wh-Who are you?’ a timid voice rang in his mind. It sounded young too.

‘Oh shit! Did I finally stumble upon a regular person?!’

Percy was ecstatic to get a normal response for a change. Not an overly defensive outburst like Micky’s, or a snarky remark like Gabe’s, or a brain-dead host like Takeo. Just somebody asking the obvious questions!

‘My name’s Percy.’ he replied. ‘Do you understand what happened to you?’

‘I’m Enki.’

The child then remained silent for a few seconds, seemingly recalling his circumstances.

‘I… I was playing around the Marble Reef when something bit me… I didn’t think much of it at first, but I started feeling a little sick at some point… I tried rushing back to the orphanage and then… The next thing I remember is you.’

Listening to his host, Percy felt his metaphorical heart clench. The poor kid was just out having some fun when disaster struck. While it was nice they weren’t being hunted by an enemy or anything of the sort, he wasn’t sure how much of a problem the venom in their veins would pose moving forward.

‘Alright. First things first. I’ll try to patch our souls up so we can move around. We’ll deal with your physical condition later. But I’ll need your cooperation for this. Is that ok?’

The boy sent a mental nod back, which was more than enough for his soul’s innate resistance to disappear, allowing Percy to interact with it more easily.

Scanning the soul, Percy was somewhat surprised at how little damage the poison had caused. The cracks were admittedly quite deep, but they were also narrow and fairly scarce. As far as he could tell, Enki could have probably survived this on his own, had he been a bit luckier.

'And now, he's going to die regardless of what I do…' Percy thought grimly.

He could patch the boy's soul temporarily, but unless they found an external source of soul mana later, Enki wouldn't survive. Percy still had no idea what kind of world he'd found himself in, or if they had any soul healers available – but from his past experience, he didn't think their odds were great.

'I can't let that happen. Should I try healing him myself?' he suddenly thought.

It was more than a long shot. It easily bordered on impossible. Percy had never succeeded in healing his hosts' souls before – it took way too much mana for his measly stash. If he tried to do this instead of patching the boy up, he'd probably fail, wasting his opportunity here. Of course, he had no idea if there was anything of value in this world, but that was how all his clones started out. That said, the thought of putting his gains before the boy's life left a sour taste in his mouth.

Besides, there was technically no better patient to experiment on than Enki. The kid was only at Red, which meant his soul would need the least possible amount of mana to heal. Even better, his injuries were less severe than most of his hosts. If he couldn't heal this boy, he wouldn't be able to heal anybody.

'Alright, I'll give it a shot. Worst case scenario, it's still valuable practice.'

Pulling a trickle from his stash, he guided it to one of the cracks. Using Mend, he directed the mana along the wound's surface, pouring it in several interspaced locations. The crack wanted to drink the mana up directly, but Percy held it back, forcing it to work on the soul's natural regeneration instead, just like the mysterious girl had taught him.

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It worked, a few tiny tendrils sprouting like blades of grass after a spring rain. But this was never going to be enough…

‘I’ve already spent quite a chunk of mana, for so little… No way I can close all the wounds like this…’

Yet, just when he was starting to reconsider his decision, something strange happened.

A primal instinct kicked in, forcing him to yank the thin tendrils up, pouring more mana in them. At first, Percy panicked, thinking he’d gone crazy. If this kept going, he’d waste even more of his stash for nothing! ṚA□o̱B̈Eŝ

He was about to stop himself, when his instinct intensified, causing another unexpected change. Percy felt his soul squirm and shift, seemingly transforming in some manner. The whole thing was extremely uncomfortable, as if somebody was bending his limbs the wrong way, trying to mold them into a weird shape. Except, there was no bone or flesh inside his soul wisp, so it didn’t hurt.

He couldn’t actually see what was happening, but he could almost swear his soul had just sprouted a dozen thin, insect-like legs! Each of them pounced greedily on the tendrils, grabbing them, and pulling them, and spinning them to their liking.

Percy might have thrown up, had it been an option. But he stopped fighting back, letting his soul do as it pleased. By now, he’d be a fool if he didn’t know what had caused this.

‘What the hell?! Is my trait acting up again?!’

Apparently, Weaving had a few more surprises for him than he had initially expected. Of course, he still had no idea how it could possibly help in this situation, but the trait had never given him any reason to mistrust it in the past. Besides, Enki was doomed anyway, unless he found a way to save him.

Over the next few minutes, Percy observed his own soul as it cultivated the tendrils in the boy’s soul, growing them longer still, knitting them together into a weird structure. His original plan had been to stick them to the opposite side, and then fill in the gaps between them as the girl had shown him. But this wasn’t what his trait was doing. Instead, it treated the tendrils like wool, trying to guide them into a strange shape.

‘Some kind of spiderweb, perhaps? How would such a thing even help?’

That said, it was too late to give up just now, as he had already invested a hefty sum of mana into this. Letting the trait fully take over, Percy fell into a trance, watching it as it continued working on its bizarre task. More and more tendrils grew from the wound, soon joining the others in the complicated tapestry, as Percy’s mind struggled to make sense of its ill-defined shape.

He barely even registered when the trait was done, finally pulling at all the loose ends, bringing the two chunks of Enki’s soul closer together. At the same time, the mind-bending shape folded and rotated upon itself, as all the contours settled in place.

It was only now that Percy finally recognized the pattern too. Evidently, his trait hadn’t worked in a vacuum, drawing inspiration from some unknown dimension. No. Everything it had done, it had pulled it straight out of Percy’s mind, manifesting an enchantment he was intimately familiar with, having spent hundreds upon hundreds of hours drawing it during the past year.

A preservation rune!

And, evidently, weaving the enchantment out of Enki’s very soul had made it a dozen times more potent than anything Percy could have accomplished with his limited mana. As soon as it took shape, the rune bathed both of their souls in a gentle radiance, slowing their decay noticeably.

At the same time, the boy’s soul passively absorbed whatever scant motes of mana neared the wound, using them to bolster its own recovery. The improvements were minuscule, but between the more efficient recovery brought about via the Mend spell, and the potent preservation afforded by the rune…

‘The healing is outpacing the decay! I think the boy will recover by himself given enough time!’

The importance of this breakthrough could hardly be overstated. This time, Percy had only managed to apply it to a Red kid in a relatively salvageable condition, but who was to say what he could accomplish in the future, given more practice and more mana? Like this, he might be able to save his hosts from certain death, doing some real good wherever he visited!

‘Well, let’s not get ahead of myself. The boy is still dying…’ he reminded himself, dousing his bubbling enthusiasm.

He’d only healed a single crack so far, and it had already cost him around 10% of his stash. Plenty of wounds remained, and he’d have to tend to them even more efficiently if he hoped to save Enki in time.

Diving back into his work, this time with newfound purpose, he worked in tandem with his trait, using Enki’s soul as the very fabric to weave his enchantments. Everywhere he touched, the tendrils bent, and stretched, and interwove with one another, bringing the runes to life.

‘I can’t believe this actually worked.’

Percy paused at some point, examining Enki’s soul. It still looked a bit like a jigsaw puzzle, but it felt a lot more stable. Naturally, he hadn’t managed to salvage every single piece – a few were either too damaged or too small for him to properly stitch together. Not to mention that his mana was already running dangerously low. That said, he was confident he had done enough for the boy to survive.

Pride and relief blended together, fanning the flames of triumph in Percy’s heart. And… his Status seemed to share in his excitement.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Mend – Crude -> Spectral Art: Soul Stitching – Refined!]

Chapter 177: Ea’s Gift

‘Spectral Art, huh?’

Evidently, involving one’s trait in their magic resulted in yet another flavour of spell. In any case, Percy was glad Weaving had more to offer than just the long-term project he was working on.

‘What did you do? I can feel my body again!’ Enki suddenly exclaimed, bringing him out of his thoughts.

It was only now that Percy remembered he had yet to link himself to his host properly. Finding a few still-open cracks, he slid through as many of them as he could, the boy’s senses finally feeding into his mind.

The first thing he noticed was cold all around him, coupled with an oppressive pressure trying to squeeze him into a ball. Luckily, his host's body seemed to have been perfectly designed to survive in this exact environment. Twitching his fingers, he explored the resistance some more, determining they were probably underwater. It wouldn't be his first time possessing a sea-dweller, but it was his first sentient one.

Opening his eyes, he saw nothing but darkness. A few faint shapes settled in place a moment later, the exotic landscape beneath him softly illuminated by a dim red glow burning somewhere in the distance like a dark sun. To his left, Percy spotted a large, forest-like structure. Though there weren't any trees inside it, but rather a series of huge, pale corals. Was this the "Marble Reef" the boy had mentioned?

Then came the pain. It mostly originated from his chest, an agonizing jolt branching outwards to his extremities with every thrum of his heart.

'Enki, I've fixed your soul, but your body is still a mess. If they really have an antidote for whatever bit you in that orphanage of yours, I suggest you get a move on.'

Nodding grimly, the boy took control of his body, shooting towards a certain direction like an arrow. Percy was taken aback by the sheer elegance and speed of his host's strokes, having never seen anybody swim like that before. He felt the water press against the membranes between his digits, as Enki wormed his way through the cold abyss. Even at Orange and with his boosting art active, Percy doubted he'd be able to keep up with the boy in his natural environment.

Along the journey, he marvelled at the native flora and fauna, ranging from the deep sea fish with luminescent lobes and mouths full of needle-like fangs, to the strangely shaped chunks of algae drifting aimlessly in the darkness, to the exotic crab-like creatures grazing the cold seabed – only visible through faint reflections captured by their smooth shells…

Eventually, Enki reached some kind of town. Surprisingly, the place didn't look much different from what somebody might find on land. All the buildings were made of carved chunks of stone, though they were decorated by glowing pearls of all colours and sizes, illuminating everything. One important difference was that they didn't have any streets – or even doors for that matter – as people here clearly didn't need to walk on the ground. Instead, they swam from building to building, entering through the wide windows.

The people themselves looked vaguely humanoid, though their skin was a pale blueish colour. All of them sported the same membranes between their clawed digits as his host, a set of gills decorating the sides of their necks, allowing them to breathe.

Their clothes weren't anything special, all of them donned simple seaweed skirts, only a touch more intricate than what he'd personally crafted for his monkey host a few months back. Other than covering their privates, they didn't seem to be interested in fashion, most of them leaving their chests bare.

The one detail that really drew Percy's attention was their eyes, however. And it only captured his attention more than everything else, because of a simple reason – the strange dichotomy he spotted.

Nine out of ten locals seemed to have a regular-looking pair of eyes, the irises coloured in a bright topaz colour, split down the middle with a vertical pupil. But every now and then, he spotted somebody who stood out from the rest, their eyes glowing in a bright pale light.

'Yeah… That's not normal… Clearly, there's some kind of magic in place.'

In any case, this wasn't the time for sightseeing, he reminded himself. Enki had already slowed down greatly, and it seemed the boy was having trouble breathing. Evidently, he was close to having another episode, caused by the deadly venom that had claimed his life once already.

The locals gave them concerned glances, but Enki just ignored them, his eyes fixated on a large building in the distance. It wasn't until he drew nearer that he slowed down some more, this time not due to his affliction – just so that he wouldn't crash into something.

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Entering through a window on the second – maybe third level – the boy hastily swam through the winding corridors of the sunken structure. Many people seemed to recognize him, but he didn't have time to greet them as he continued swimming, aided only by the gentle glow of the pearls adorning the walls.

Only once they reached a certain person did Enki finally stop. She appeared to be a woman, her features slightly softer than many of the other locals they'd seen on the way. What's more, some fond feelings seeped through their bond. Apparently, the boy saw her as some kind of mother figure.

"Enki, what's wrong?!" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Not that Percy would have known, had it not been for his connection to his host. These people seemed to communicate in a very strange manner, a few gurgles escaping their throat as a high-pitched sound rippled outwards with each spoken word.

In any case, the boy remained silent, merely pointing at a nasty-looking bite mark marring his lower calf, some brownish blood slowly oozing out.

Gesturing towards a bed, the woman directed them to lie down, helping them strap themselves in place so they wouldn't float away. Next, she approached them after preparing a syringe filled with a deep purple liquid.

'Enki, please ask her if this contains any life mana.'

The boy raised an eyebrow, but still did as he was told.

"No, it's just the antidote." the woman said, forcing a strained smile.

Then, she injected them without delay, probably recognizing they were running out of time. Only once every last drop of the liquid was flowing through Enki's veins did she take a moment to explain a couple things. Apparently, the heart-stopping venom of the marble-dwelling eels wasn't that difficult to counteract. Beyond that, the boy shouldn't have much trouble recovering by himself. ṘANOEş

Percy merely sighed in relief, but he didn't say anything. As long as they didn't have to go through the greedy second core waiting restlessly in their abdomen, they should be fine.

It wasn't until a few hours later, after the pain had already begun to die down, and the danger looming over their head had largely passed, that Enki seemed to remember the passenger in his mind.

‘So, Percy… Now that that’s settled, mind telling me what’s up with you?’

Percy shrugged.

‘Long story short, I bounce from body to body looking for new magical knowledge. You just happened to be the latest one.’

‘Then you’re out of luck.’ the boy smiled bitterly. ‘I’ve never practiced magic much. As you know, the fire affinity is by far the weakest one – I can’t even hold a tiny flame for longer than a second before it gets extinguished…’

‘Is it because of the environment here?’ Percy guessed.

The question caused Enki’s eyes to widen, however.

‘Don’t tell me?! Are you a land-dweller by any chance?!’ the boy suddenly asked, a wave of excitement seeping through their bond.

‘Is this your first time meeting one?’

‘Yes!’ Enki nodded. ‘There’s no land on Atlantis – our entire world is covered by a deep ocean.’

‘Hmmm? Then, how do you even know what “land” is?’ Percy couldn’t help but wonder.

The boy appeared dumbfounded for a moment, seemingly stunned by the stupidity of Percy’s question.

‘How else? Naturally, our visitors share stories of their home worlds.’ Enki spoke matter-of-factly, as if he was explaining something obvious to a toddler.

‘Visitors?!’ this was Percy’s turned to be shocked, however. ‘You’re telling me you have regular contact with other races?’

‘Of course! Did you think we’re some bottomwater savages?’ the boy rolled his eyes.

‘Well, ok. They don’t visit remote places like this town – we don’t have the proper infrastructure to host a land-dweller here.’ he clarified.

Though Percy was still confused. Every world he’d been on that had some relationship with a foreign race, it was always one of hostility. That remained true whether it was Remior, Huehue or the Vault of Magic. Other than the races which banded together – probably temporarily – to conquer Micky’s world, this was the first time he’d heard of two civilizations cooperating peacefully.

‘I call BS.’ Percy insisted. ‘I’ve been to plenty of places, and the one thing they all have in common is they’d rather take what they want by force.’

Hearing that, Enki grinned.

‘Ah, I understand the source of your confusion. Well, in our case, that’s not on the table. From what I’ve heard, our military force is practically non-existent, so we couldn’t touch another race even if we wanted to. And, we also have something way too valuable for others to risk harming us.’

‘Why wouldn’t they just take it if you can’t even defend yourselves?’

‘Well, they could – in theory – but that would just be a waste. You see, they wouldn’t be as good at utilizing our resources as we are, so it’s better for everyone involved if we sell our superior products for a fair price.’

At this point, Percy had plenty of questions, but he figured his Status might be able to answer a few of them.

___

Enki (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

‘Wait what?!’ Enki drew a sharp breath.

‘How do you have Ea’s Gift?!’

Chapter 178: Alchemic principles

‘Ea’s Gift? What’s that?’ Percy asked.

‘Are you kidding me? The thing you just made pop up right in front of our eyes!’

Thinking of something, Percy’s heart skipped a beat. But he didn’t show it. He wanted to pry some more information from his host first.

‘We call this thing a “Status”. Everyone has it where I’m from.’

‘All of them?! You mean, for free?! Don’t you have to pass the brewing test first?’

‘Brewing test?’ Percy struggled to contain his excitement.

This was getting better and better! Did these people have some sort of alchemy-based version of Phoebe’s Decree? If so, he had to get his hands on that, whatever it took!

‘Yes.’ Enki confirmed, oblivious to Percy’s inner turmoil. ‘Why would you even need Ea’s Gift if you can’t brew a simple potion?’

Percy considered explaining that Phoebe’s Decree probably had a different purpose to what they used their version for, but he was more curious about something else.

‘I’m guessing this Ea guy is one of your gods?’

The boy appeared taken aback by Percy’s question. Almost insulted, even.

‘The Holy One isn’t just “one of our gods”!’ Enki protested rather animatedly. ‘He’s the one who invented the supreme art, allowing Atlantis to flourish. All our gods look up to Him!’

‘Alright, alright. I get it already.’ Percy rolled his eyes. ‘Kid, please tell me it’s your lifelong dream to become an alchemist, and you’ve spent the last 10 years of your life preparing for the test.’

Enki tilted his head.

‘Why would I say such a thing? Of course I’d like to become an alchemist – who wouldn’t? It’s the greatest honour for one of our people! But getting into this profession is expensive. Not something a Red-born orphan could afford. Hell, I can’t even buy the pills to cleanse my core.’ he smiled bitterly.

Hearing that, Percy felt his heart clench. It was only now he realized just how much he and his host had in common.

‘And you’re just going to give up like that? I’ll have you know, I started off in a similar place myself. Still, the thought of surrendering to my fate never once crossed my mind.’

‘Did it work out for you?’ Enki asked, some hope seeping into his voice. ‘What grade have you reached?’

Like a needle’s stab, the boy’s question caused Percy to deflate a little.

‘Well… On paper, I’m still at Orange.’ he said, trying to mask his embarrassment. ‘But I’m getting dangerously close to Yellow! And I’ve even defeated a Green in single combat before!’ he hurriedly added upon seeing Enki frown.

The boy remained silent for a few moments, seemingly contemplating Percy’s words.

‘Even if that’s true, I’m guessing it has something to do with your strange ability to possess people. That’s just cheating.’ he said.

Though he seemed to catch himself a second later.

‘Sorry… I didn’t mean it like it’s a bad thing! It’s great that you have this option! But I’ve got nothing like that. Just a useless fire affinity.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Percy asked, a smile tugging at his lips. ‘You’ve got the greatest cheat in the universe, right at your fingertips.’

‘Hmmm? And what’s that?’ the boy asked.

‘Me!’ Percy exclaimed.

The boy didn’t seem convinced, however.

‘How exactly can you help me?’

‘I’ll have you know that, amongst my many, many talents, I am first and foremost a master alchemist. In fact, my main body is currently on the run from multiple gods back home – each of them eagerly yearning for my wisdom.’ řANòBËš

‘So, can you brew a lesser regeneration pill?’ the boy asked.

Percy scratched the back of their head.

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‘Well, I’ve never encountered that particular recipe before… But how hard could it be? Just find me a book – or 10 – on the topic, and I’ll get us both that Gift thingy in no time.’

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Apparently, Enki’s orphanage did have a library. Even better, it contained a few books on alchemy. Though, seeing their condition, Percy wasn’t surprised his host hadn’t thought it possible to teach himself the basics. He held a stack of loose sheets, trying to rearrange them into the correct order. The blurred page numbers weren’t making his job easy.

‘Only three books… and one of them is missing half the pages…’ he groaned.

For an entire world that seemed to survive by selling alchemical products to outsiders, their libraries were surprisingly poor. Even the Guild’s library had been in a better state.

Then again, this might not be the fairest comparison. The Alchemists’ Guild was the central hub for all alchemists on Remior, whereas this was just some random library in an orphanage, in some remote town…

‘I thought you already knew how to brew stuff. What’s the hold up?’ Enki asked.

‘Well, I’m great at brewing elixirs – not “regeneration pills” or whatever you called them.’ Percy explained. ‘I’m sure some of the principles are transferable, but I’d still need to study the ingredients and methodology involved.’

‘Methodology?’

‘Yes. The tools and procedures aside, I’ve never done this underwater before.’

The two remained silent in the library for several hours, as Percy tried to make sense of the alien books. Their pages weren’t made of paper, apparently, but some slightly oily pieces of parchment, crafted out of some creature’s skin.

Every now and then, Enki grew hungry – or bored – or, probably, both – asking him to take a short break to grab a quick snack from his room. It was some kind of pink roe stored in a sealed bowl. It tasted quite nice too, its rich, salty flavour reminding Percy of a cross between crabsticks and eggs.

In any case, despite the semi-frequent interruptions and the poor condition of his reading material, Percy did manage to piece together an overview of the locals’ alchemic ways.

Their main product – the thing they exported to their trade partners – were some cultivation pills that didn’t differ much from the elixirs on Remior. They were made from some kind of amber pearls – a local ingredient rich in stable beast mana, not unlike the nectar the Starry Wasps produced.

‘I don’t think the cultivation pills will be very useful for me…’ Percy grimaced.

He had no idea how the lifespans and advancement speed of the natives compared to a human’s, but their potential seemed to be confined within the same range as theirs. In other words, Red-borns here could only ever make it to Yellow, Orange-borns to Blue and so on – just like on Remior. Suffice to say, it probably meant the pills weren’t much better than elixirs.

However, that was not to say there was nothing to be gained here.

What set the locals apart was precisely Ea's Gift that Enki had mentioned. Percy assumed it was a Decree – it had to be – and it was the reason other races didn't dare to touch Atlantis.

Apparently, this Decree was a lot more proactive than Phoebe's, directly affecting an alchemist's ability, allowing them to greatly increase their alchemic yield. As for how exactly it achieved that, these books didn't say, but Percy guessed it had something to do with the weird glowing eyes he'd seen on some of the natives earlier.

'Can I even get the Decree though?'

He wasn't a native, which should automatically disqualify him based on everything he'd read. Then again, he was currently inhabiting the body of a local, so maybe he could trick whatever mechanism was responsible for disseminating the Decree? At the very least, it had worked with the Moirais', so it was worth a shot.

Beyond that, there was also the question of whether this Decree could even stack with the one he already had. Would he have to carry two separate Statuses from now on, or could they merge?

He shrugged.

'I suppose there's only one way to answer all those questions. But first, I need to turn the kid into an alchemist.'

Luckily, the books hadn't been entirely useless on that front. Cross-referencing the gist of their contents with his own expertise, Percy had been able to discern a few important details about the locals' branch of alchemy.

Apparently, many of the central concepts carried over from one world to another, and even from one product to another. Whether he was brewing an elixir, a potion or a pill, and whether they were on Remior or Atlantis, similar techniques were involved.

When brewing cleansing resources in particular, the so-called 'three pillars of alchemy' – pacification, redirection and deattunement were paramount. The people of Atlantis referred to them as 'alchemic

principles' and had their own name for each of them, but Percy could tell they were functionally the same. After all, beast mana always had to be handled in the same manner.

'But this book mentions more than three principles.'

There was one Percy had chosen to translate as 'extraction'. It involved separating and condensing an ingredient's properties, which was more relevant when brewing potions and potion-adjacent products, as other affinities weren't as potent as beast mana, and needed to undergo this procedure to become useable.

In fact, Percy was almost certain they had this back home too – it was probably the missing knowledge about potion-making that he'd never had the chance to study. And it was also the very thing he needed to master and teach Enki, if he wanted to get his hands on that Decree.

'Well? Any progress?' the boy asked after noticing Percy had stopped reading for a while.

Enki had tried not to sound too eager, but he'd done a poor job keeping his excitement from spilling through their bond.

'A little. I'm going to have to play around a bit to figure it out, but the basic idea isn't too different to the things I've studied in the past.'

'Really? You mean there's actually a chance we can do this?'

'Hold your seahorses, kid.' Percy said. 'We'll need lots of ingredients to practice with. And I have no clue where to get them. Do you have any idea where we can find "fast-growing moss", "kroakoa pincers" or "belimin tears"?'

'Do we need all of that?' Enki asked.

'No. They're interchangeable – any one of them should do. But we'll need at least a dozen batches. Probably more.'

The boy remained silent for a bit, seemingly considering it. Eventually, he spoke.

‘I don’t even know what a “belimin” is. And you can forget about kroakoas too. They are Blue beasts. Besides, there aren’t any around here.’

Percy frowned, thinking this wasn’t going to work. Yet, his host rekindled his hope a moment later.

‘But… remember that Marble Reef I mentioned? The place has enough fast-growing moss to last us forever.’

Chapter 179: Marble Reef

Percy felt the temperature go up rapidly, as the red glow in the distance intensified, the very water around him vibrating.

Apparently, that light he’d seen the other day was an underwater volcano – and an active one at that! From what Enki explained, his people tended to build their towns and cities in similar locations all around Atlantis, settling as close to the volcanoes as they safely could. These were their main sources of heat – and also food, as they attracted marine life of all shapes and sizes.

This particular volcano was called Samo, and its eruptions lasted a couple hours at a time, interspaced in regular intervals around five times longer than that – according to Percy’s estimates. This was how the townsfolk kept track of time, though each region on Atlantis had to rely on a different system.

‘If you’re done staring at the lava, we should get going while it’s still bright…’ Enki rolled his eyes.

‘Hey, I know you’re used to it, but this is quite a novel experience for an outsider.’ Percy protested.

The boy shrugged, before swimming towards the Marble Reef they’d seen the day before. They hoped to make it there while the eruption was still underway, as the extra light would help them in their search. If they missed it, it would just make their life harder until the next one.

‘Say, are you sure those eels are rare?’ Percy suddenly asked.

As he'd come to learn, Enki was a rather fearless kid. He didn't seem scared to return to the reef in the slightest – almost as if he hadn't nearly died there just yesterday. In fact, Percy had to force him to ask the caregiver at the orphanage to lend him more of the antidote, in case they got bitten again. After some placating, the lady had begrudgingly agreed, though a single dose wouldn't help much if the place was teeming with the creatures.

'Geez, will you stop nagging me about that already?!' Enki scoffed. 'I've been playing there my whole life! This is the first time this happened!'

Percy wasn't entirely convinced, but he did let go. After all, he wasn't the kid's dad, nor would he be able to babysit him forever anyway.

Eventually, the two reached the undersea forest, diving into the dense embrace of the corals. The dim glow of the volcano looked even scarier from within, as the scant rays of crimson danced against the deep shadows of the reef itself, both clawing at Enki from every direction. Suffice to say, Percy's heart skipped a beat whenever a small creature jumped in front of them, much to his host's dismay.

'Can you not get spooked by every little thing? It might have been funny if we weren't sharing a body…' the boy groaned.

'Have you seen how creepy most of these things are?!' Percy asked, though some heat still gathered in his cheeks. 'I'd be a lot less scared if you could actually defend yourself.'

As embarrassing as it was to be called a coward by a kid, he didn't think Enki fully appreciated how unsettling this experience was for a land-dweller. Percy was essentially swimming at the bottom of an alien ocean, his only company being a Red cored kid who couldn't light a candle to save his life. And it only got more frightening once the eruption finally died down, plunging their surroundings into complete darkness.

'Look, I get it.' Enki acknowledged. 'But nothing besides the eels is even capable of hurting us.'

'Ah, silly me. We've only got the eels with the deadly venom to worry about. How reassuring…' Percy rolled his eyes.

In the end, the two continued their search in silence, this time relying on Mana Sense to locate their target. The good news was that the fast-growing moss they needed was a mana-rich ingredient, so it shouldn't be too difficult to spot, even like this.

Of course, Mana Sense couldn't help with navigating the maze-like interior of the reef itself. The corals didn't contain much mana, making them practically invisible in their sixth sense. Consequently, Enki bumped his head against the hard structures a few too many times for his liking. Not to mention that the moss they were looking for wasn't the only thing containing mana nearby, which meant they'd wasted a fair amount of time on false positives.

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'I think this must be it.' Enki eventually said.

'That's exactly what you said the previous twenty times.' Percy grunted, but still carefully examined the area beneath their feet.

They were floating inside a ring-shaped section of corals, a blanket of Orange coating both their inner walls and the crater's floor. This was already a good sign, as that was precisely the moss's natural mana grade. Even better, the chaotic pattern via which the substance spread over the coral also matched the description somewhat.

'How long until the next eruption?' Percy asked.

'We're not even halfway there.' the boy replied.

The darkness made it difficult to verify this was indeed the ingredient they were after. In theory, they could wait a few more hours for the volcano to light their surroundings, but Percy had a quicker method at his disposal.

Taking control of the body, he swam closer to the wall, unsheathing a knife strapped to their skirt. Next, he carefully stabbed into the substance at an angle, peeling a layer out. Its texture was definitely soft enough, though there was an even better way to confirm it.

‘Eeewww! What are you doing?!’ Enki protested as Percy grabbed a handful of the slimy goo, plastering it over their stomach.

‘Just shut up. If this is indeed the moss we want, you’ll be getting a lot more than a free alchemy lesson.’

As their name implied, the lesser regeneration pills they needed to brew weren’t that different from the healing potions he was familiar with. Sure, they were solid objects rather than liquids, and they worked by enhancing one’s natural regeneration rather than healing them directly. Still, their primary component was still rich in life mana.

And indeed, the seed of their second core awakened from its deep slumber mere moments later, seemingly realizing what a tantalizing feast had been laid before it. Without delay, it pulled at the substance greedily, the Orange colour of the moss soon seeping into their skin. As soon as it reached the centre of the vortex, it vanished entirely, leaving nothing but inactive sludge on Enki’s belly.

‘Wh-What?! Where did the mana go?’ the boy asked.

Though Percy replied with a question of his own.

‘How much moss do you think we can find? We’ll need at least 8-10 patches of this size. Maybe more.’

Whether he wanted to or not, Percy would have to repair the boy’s second core before they could even start working on the pills. After all, handling the ingredient would be a pain in the ass if the ethereal organ kept sucking the mana dry.

Luckily, Enki nodded.

‘That shouldn’t be a problem. This place is over a dozen times as large as my town and the moss is quite common. It might take some time, but we’ll definitely find enough if we keep looking.’

Receiving a positive answer, Percy then unstrapped a large pouch from his waist. Next, he scraped more moss from the coral, stuffing it into the pouch with his knife. He took care not to let it touch his skin.

It wasn't like he didn't trust Enki, but he wanted to save some just in case they emptied out the reef before the second core was complete. Brewing without repairing the Decree wasn't going to be pleasant – he'd have to wear gloves or something – but it was better than missing out on Ea's Gift.

Only after the pouch was full of moss did he seal it shut with a piece of string they'd brought along. Then, the two took turns harvesting as much of the substance as they could, feeding the boy's Decree. The laborious task lasted several hours, neither of them finding it particularly enjoyable.

By the time they were done, Samo had erupted thrice more, and they'd also had to look for several more moss-covered areas. Still, the seed was eventually satiated, the second core taking form.

Even more notably, Percy overcame his initial unease over the bizarre environment at some point. As strange as it had appeared at first, he understood by now it was just Atlantis's equivalent of the Whistling Woods – probably even safer than that, actually.

'So, you're telling me I have two mana cores now?' Enki asked.

Naturally, Percy had already brought the boy up to speed over the last couple of days. The kid had found the news difficult to accept, though Percy didn't miss the wave of excitement seeping through the bond.

'Yes, but don't try activating it just yet.'

'Why not?'

'It's dangerous if people find out about it. I'll sew you something to hide it as soon as we return to town.'

At any rate, they'd already collected what they came here for. In the end, they hadn't even run into another eel – as Enki was more than happy to keep reminding Percy.

Following his instructions, the boy swam upwards to extricate himself from the suffocating embrace of the corals. Only once he was floating above the reef did he turn towards the town, shooting towards it at top speed, eager to play with his new toy.

Truth be told, Percy was just as excited to return to the orphanage, looking forward to practicing with the moss. Leaving Ea's Gift aside, studying the fundamentals of potion-making was something he'd already wanted to delve into.

His current plan was to spend the next few weeks guiding Enki into awakening the new core. At the same time, he'd try wrapping his head around the locals' alchemy. And as soon as he mastered the extraction principle, it would finally be time to take the test.

'And hopefully earn a brand-new Decree for our efforts!'

Chapter 180: Extraction

Crafting a bandage for Enki hadn't been too difficult. The concealment rune didn't have any special requirement – it worked with pretty much any material that contained some mana.

Visiting the town's marketplace, they only had to beg a few hunters and gatherers for some scraps of mana-rich ingredients, until they collected enough fibres for Percy to do his thing. Between his Weaving trait and his growing skill with runecrafting, sewing the enchantment on a long piece of parchment was a piece of cake. Though it did mean Enki would have to pull his skirt a few inches higher to keep the bandage hidden.

'I look ridiculous.'

'Yeah, well. Suck it up. You have a second core now.' Percy rolled his eyes.

'Does that mean I can finally use it?'

'Sure – as soon as you open up your channels. So just focus on that for the next couple of weeks, and leave me alone to study. I'll need to concentrate if you want Ea's Gift too.'

Returning to the orphanage, Percy rummaged through the kitchen for whatever tools he could salvage. Naturally, he couldn't afford a proper alchemy kit, so he'd have to make do with common cooking utensils.

Being underwater and everything, the local alchemists couldn't use a regular cauldron to heat up the ingredients, as everything would just float away. Consequently, they typically used an airtight container, made of a transparent glass-like material so that they could still observe the reaction happening within.

'Sadly, there's nothing like that here…' Percy smiled bitterly.

The best he'd found was a metallic, spherical pot. The top half could be twisted on and off, allowing him to replace the tool he needed to an extent. Still, it was opaque, which meant he wouldn't be able to peer inside it with anything other than his Mana Sense. Suffice to say, he wasn't looking forward to brewing blindly.

And that wasn't the only issue. The actual tool was supposed to contain a few enchantments – such as one for controlling its internal heat, one for the pressure and one for steering the ingredients. Percy had never learnt the corresponding runes, so he'd have to reproduce everything using Enki's fire mana.

'It can't be helped.' he shrugged. 'My brewing yield should be plenty anyway.'

Putting the Aurora Dew aside, Percy estimated his yield with the regular elixirs should have already reached about 32% after brewing for thousands of hours over the past few years. And that was while going through all three of the familiar steps.

Luckily, potions and potion-adjacent products appeared much simpler, many of them only requiring a single step – the very extraction principle he was trying to learn. He guessed some of the more complicated recipes like the rejuvenation potions they had in the Guild involved more than that, as they contained multiple mana types. But that wasn't the case for the lesser regeneration pills.

Percy only needed to gather and condense the moss's properties into a solid – that was it. Suffice to say, his yield would have been over 68% if he was more familiar with the principle and the recipe, and if he was to do this on Remior, using his own tools.

Naturally, his yield would take a massive hit due to all the additional obstacles he had to overcome. Still, according to the textbook, a 20% yield was enough to condense a single pill – which was incidentally the requirement to pass the test.

‘Just 20%... Less than a third of what I’m normally capable of… I should be able to do it in a reasonable amount of time…’

Unfortunately for Percy, reality didn’t quite match his expectations. While the books he’d found in the library had vaguely outlined the pill’s recipe, they didn’t go into specifics. After exhausting the entire stash they’d brought back from the reef, he had yet to even determine the correct dosage of moss for each attempt.

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Percy was by no means a novice in brewing, but blindly tossing a random amount of the ingredient – mixed with saltwater – into the sphere was never going to work. At least, not unless they burned through way more materials than this.

Thinking of something, Percy left the orphanage, roaming the town in search of people with the strange glow in their eyes. If his guess was correct, that was a side-effect of Ea’s Gift – which meant that all those people were qualified alchemists. The sheer number of them was insane compared to what they had on Remior. Then again, it wasn’t that strange considering Atlantis survived by exporting their products to outsiders.

In any case, Percy approached as many of the suspected alchemists as he could find, begging them for tips and tricks to solve whatever issue he was facing, one question at a time. Inhabiting a kid’s body definitely helped a lot with that, eliciting a fair amount of kindness from the strangers.

‘Alright, so I’m supposed to only fill it about halfway with moss.’

‘Is THAT how they prevent the salt from messing with the recipe?!’

‘Ah! I hadn’t even thought of flipping the sphere’s rotation to stir the contents!’

Naturally, he asked Enki to take a break from his own task many a time, helping him retrieve more moss from the reef whenever he ran out. The boy complained, engrossed in activating his new core as he was, but still helped Percy out. ***r***A**N**Ő̶B̶ËŠ

It wasn't until around three weeks later that Percy managed to make some tangible progress, however. He hadn't condensed a complete pill just yet, but this was the first time the moss's essence wasn't wasted entirely, leaving behind a few useable dregs inside.

'This is less than a 5% yield though…' he grimaced.

At this rate, it would take him months to hit his target, which was something he had to avoid at all costs, not wanting to keep his main body waiting longer than necessary. At least, there wasn't a timer looming over his head with regards to Enki's condition, as the boy had healed almost completely by now. In fact, Percy had been forced to manually keep some of the injuries open, so that he wouldn't get kicked out of the body prematurely.

'Percy! It's done!' Enki exclaimed one day.

'Took you long enough.' Percy rolled his eyes. 'I only needed a week to fill up my second core the first time around.'

'Yeah, well… I'm terrible with magic. I've never really practiced since learning about my fire affinity.' the boy said, a sheepish grin plastered all over his face.

'Fair enough. Let's see it then. Try pulling some mana from your core.'

Following his instructions, Enki soon began to gather some mana in his hand, though that didn't last for long. As soon as he started, Percy took over, recognizing the feel of the mana instantly. While he hadn't paid much attention to his host's efforts over the past few weeks, there was no mistaking these channels, as they were the exact same ones branching out of his own abdomen back home.

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Mana cores:

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‘Really?’ Enki asked, disappointment evident in his tone. ‘My first affinity is fire, and the second one pure?’

Percy felt a little bad hearing the boy.

‘Enki. My second core has a pure affinity too. It’s not as bad as people say. I’ve learned quite a few nifty tricks with it too.’

‘Can you teach me?’ Enki asked with some hope in his eyes.

Though that only added a pang of guilt to Percy’s pity. It wasn’t like he hadn’t considered teaching the boy Circulation or Crystallization, but they didn’t have the time for either. It would take years to hone Enki’s body enough for the former. As for the latter, it would be even tougher for him than it had been for Percy without a boosting art to fall back to.

‘Maybe next time we meet.’ he ultimately said, watching the boy deflate. ‘But it’s not all bad news. I think your new affinity might just help me solve the issue I’ve been having with the pills.’

While Percy could heat up the sphere with his fire mana and stir it by rotating it, he had no answer for the internal pressure. He couldn’t use his fire mana for that, as it would only mess with the moss, burning it. Consequently, he’d been working with a massive handicap, as he could only control two of the three main variables.

That said, pure mana was a lot less reactive than fire mana. Not to mention how much better he could control it. By injecting some into the reaction, he could probably apply as much pressure as he wanted, improving far more rapidly than before.

If he got lucky, he might even reach his target within the next couple of weeks.

‘Enki. Even with Ea’s Gift and a second core, it doesn’t mean your life will be smooth sailing. Hell, I’ve found a dozen amazing things in my travels and I still have to fight every single day.’ Percy said, before continuing.

‘I can’t give you all the answers, but I can give you the tools to figure them out for yourself, after I’m gone.’