Wanderer 231

Chapter 231: Ambitious projects

The last thing Percy wanted was to mislead Noland into ruining his life. Suffice to say, he'd made it abundantly clear that the Vault of Magic was a veritable dystopia, full of callous gods who treated their own children as trash. He emphasized that he didn't even have a clue what Metatron did to the test subjects. For all he knew, they all ended up dissected on an operating table somewhere.

'Well, not really. I'm confident he keeps them around, at least. But you might just spend the rest of your life in a cage, if you're unlucky.'

Still, as much as Percy had harped on the Vault's downsides, the advantages were also undeniable. For one, Noland would never have to dig another day in his life. He would likely never have to forage for food either. Sure, the Vault's deities might subject him to all kinds of torture, but starvation was unlikely to be on the list.

'And you said I'll get a second core?' Noland asked.

'Technically, you already have that. You just need to find A LOT of life mana.' Percy clarified.

'Screw that. It's been years since I last saw a vitality worm. Just sign me up for this place already.'

'Are you absolutely sure?' Percy asked. 'Like I said, there's no going back. Even if you hate it, you'll be stuck there.'

Noland shrugged.

'I'm sick of Subterra anyway. Every day is the same. Just digging through a mountain of dirt, hoping to find a morsel of food on the other side, trying not to suffocate in the process. Ah, but can you repeat the part about the challenges real quick?'

Percy raised an eyebrow, wondering why his host would be interested in that. Of all the things he'd shared about the Vault, the challenges were among the few that might not even concern Noland. Still,

he ultimately recapped everything, talking about both the combat and the magiscript challenges. The latter were the ones he was hoping to target this time, as there were a few new runes he needed to learn. That said, he did want to give the others a chance too. Even if he failed to clear any waves, he could at least experience a gravity affinity first hand.

‘Sounds good. Then, do you mind delaying the trip by a few days?’ Noland asked. ‘I’ve got an idea to help you blitz through the early waves of those combat challenges you mentioned. Consider it a thanks for saving my life.’

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‘Careful!’ Noland warned as Percy tried to pick the sacks off the metallic floor. ‘If you bump those things too hard, we’re goners.’

Before entering the portal, Noland had spent the last three days procuring a few things for the trip. The first was his food – just some tasteless grubs, really. He’d harvested those from the slimy walls of a cavern located a few hours away from where Percy had met him. According to Noland, that place was something like a secret stash he generally left untouched, to use in case his daily forages didn’t go that well. Obviously, he wouldn’t be needing that any longer. Suffice to say, Percy wasn’t particularly thrilled by the idea of eating live bugs for the next month or so, but they were supposedly rather nutritious.

In any case, the second bag Noland had brought along was a lot more interesting. It contained some glowing orange crystals he claimed would explode with quite a bit of force if they weren’t handled with care. If Noland hadn’t exaggerated their effect, they definitely sounded powerful enough to take a bunch of Orange golems out.

‘First things first.’ he shrugged, before pressing his palm against the floor.

“User ID: WANDERER.”

“Authorization granted. Welcome back to the Vault, Percy.” the cube replied as soon as he had worn the translation device back on.

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‘Whoaa!! That’s seriously cool! But why are all these people staring at us?!’ Noland asked.

Percy rolled his eyes.

‘I told you to get some clothes before coming here. It’s not my first time coming here naked, but most of my previous hosts were either beasts or demi-humans…’

Noland hadn’t thought it necessary at the time. Percy was still unsure if it was just his host being an eccentric, or if all his people were nudists. Maybe it was just a consequence of living underground? Either way, he wasn’t the one who’d be staying in the Vault with this body. If Noland didn’t care, why should he?

Shaking the pointless thoughts out of his head, Percy then dragged the two bags to the challenge cubes – this time employing a little more caution. It was only once they arrived there that he asked the system for his life mana. A process that didn’t take more than a few minutes.

‘There. All done.’

‘You mean I’ve got a second core now?’

Percy nodded. Next, he briefed him in on the logistics, asking him to spend the next few days clearing his channels. This was one of the perks of coming to the Vault with a sapient host. At least, he wouldn’t have to do everything by himself this time.

‘So, what will you be doing in the meantime?’ Noland asked.

‘Studying.’

Admittedly, Percy’s goals for this trip were rather ambitious. To get through the second wave of the Orange magiscript challenge, he’d need to draw a total of ten runes. Currently, he could only use five: the concealment, preservation, control, hardness and absorption runes. Of course, he had also learned

to draw the pocket and stability runes he'd relayed to Nesha, but he couldn't activate either of those without space mana.

Learning five more runes was already a lot. Not to mention that he also intended to delve into the basics of magiscript proper this time – to finally start combining runes together into more interesting enchantments.

Had this been a year ago, he wouldn't have stood a chance at this, but learning new runes got easier the more you practiced. And Percy had practiced a lot, while maintaining his armour and scythes in preparation for the ambush. In addition to that, he was already a foot into magiscript, as he'd spent some time learning to attach the control runes to his other enchantments, familiarizing himself with the process.

'I should still strive to get everything done in the next two months.'

Technically, he wasn't that pressed for time. His destination on Remior was easily over three months away. Furthermore, he'd already discussed things with Nesha and Elaine. The group had decided to take their sweet time getting there, even if it meant running out of rainbow grass and having to downgrade to the regular elixirs for a few weeks. After all, the last thing they wanted was to rush, and leave a trail for the Divine Root to follow. Still, he'd rather not stay in the Vault longer than he had to. Every second he spent here was a second he could be investing into a different clone.

Entering the cube, he propped the two bags by a wall, before browsing through the system for the runes he wanted. Sadly, he still had to go about it via the tedious way. With over 200 credits, he could just about afford the rune index, but that would leave him broke.

'This time, I need to make sure I earn enough credits to get the index before I leave. It's going to save me more money in the long run…' he sighed, listening to the cube recount the books he'd picked.

Without knowing exactly what each volume contained, he often had to buy a couple of them to ensure he ended up with a suitable variant.

"Evaluation complete. User has bookmarked a total of 14 items: 'Memory rune, Vol. 4, 11', 'Growth rune, Vol. 1, 3, 16', 'Heat rune, Vol. 7, 8', 'Pressure rune, Vol. 17, 21', 'Rotation rune, Vol. 2, 16, 18',

‘Cascading control enchantment’, ‘Self-repair enchantment’. Total cost: 180 credits. Current balance: 209.”

Percy felt his heart clench upon hearing the price. A wave of curiosity soon seeped through the cord, but he just brushed it aside. Poor Noland still had no idea how stingy his new compatriots were…

“Just do it already. I’ll have them as hard copies this time.” he sighed.

“Confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 29. Delivery in 12 rits.”

It didn’t take long for the cube to spit a towering stack of books out, each of them steaming hot. Percy didn’t waste a moment before picking the first one up. In any case, there was no reason why he couldn’t enjoy his time here. If he ignored the painful challenges, the steep costs when buying anything inside the Vault, and the strict schedule he was always under, studying runecrafting wasn’t that bad in and of itself.

Honestly, Percy liked delving into the topic, even from a purely academic perspective. Magiscript was, in many ways, superior to real-time spellcasting. Sure, it wasn’t easy to draw a functioning rune in the midst of battle – let alone a more complex enchantment. Still, with enough preparation, one could accomplish pretty much anything they set their minds to, as Dranold and Rambert had found out the hard way. Not to mention world-spanning marvels of magic like the Vault itself.

Of course, Percy wasn’t nearly ready for such a large-scale project just yet. He currently had two, slightly more modest goals in mind. One had to do with alchemy. The other with his Phantomscale Raiment.

The thought made him grin.

‘If this works, I’ll never have to worry about my armour’s maintenance again!’

Chapter 232: Self-repair

Percy’s top priority during this trip was the self-repair enchantment. While his reinforced mana had proven an excellent material for his constructs, its greatest drawback was that it didn’t last nearly as long as he would like. Even when he used his preservation runes to extend the lifetime of his spells, the sheer amount of time he had to spend maintaining them made many of his projects untenable.

Of course, this applied just as much to his scythes, as well as anything else he might create, but the problem was most pronounced when it came to the Phantomscale Raiment. It simply involved way too many components, making its upkeep an absolute nightmare.

'Let's see… The simplest version of the enchantment requires the memory and growth runes…'

All in all, it wasn't that complicated. As the name implied, the memory rune would essentially memorize the shape of an object as it was at the very moment when the enchantment was activated. From there, it would constantly feed this information into the growth rune – much like a magical blueprint. In turn, the growth rune would restore the object to its intended shape whenever it deviated however slightly.

That said, there were countless variants of these runes – much like the rest Percy had come across during his studies. Usually, they differed depending on the materials the enchantment would consume to repair the item. After all, the lost materials couldn't be replenished out of thin air.

Luckily, all of Percy's constructs were made purely out of his own mana, so he hadn't needed to look beyond the simplest variants. According to everything he'd read, the final product would be extremely straightforward to use in his case. He'd only need to pour some mana into the runes once per day, and they would take care of the rest, keeping his armour in top condition. By adding his preservation runes to the mix, he could extend that time even further.

'It's not even that important. Spending a minute or two per day is infinitely better than having to reforge the whole thing from scratch…'

Then again, there were a couple more issues he'd have to solve before he could apply this to his armour, but those were for after he returned to Remior. Right now, his priority was to actually master the enchantment.

'The Vault's magiscript offers two primary approaches to concatenating runes.'

As Percy had learned pretty early on, combining runes required them to be linked together in some manner. Most runecrafting languages – including the one they had on Remior – only provided a single avenue of doing so. Usually, it involved drawing the runes side-by-side, taking advantage of some shared feature to fuse them together.

The brilliance of Metatron's language was that it also allowed one to stack multiple runes on top of one another, thanks to the circular shape most of them had in common. This gave its users many more options when trying to enchant an object, allowing them to create far more interesting things.

'The good news is that I don't have to reinvent the wheel just yet…' he exhaled in relief.

Self-repair enchantments were extremely common, and the book Percy had bought contained countless examples. Of course, it wouldn't always be this easy. Once he started improvising his own enchantments, Percy would have to get better at figuring this out by himself. Luckily, this was a project for later. Besides, even just copying the enchantment down came with its own share of challenges.

As always, when merging multiple runes, one had to keep both their individual effects in their mind, as well as their joint function. Consequently, the difficulty climbed exponentially with the number of involved runes.

"Cube, start the magiscript challenge, Orange level, wave 2. User ID: WANDERER."

Noland raised an eyebrow in surprise, but Percy reassured him that there was nothing to worry about.

"Authorization granted. Wave begins in 18 rits."

Obviously, he wasn't even close to meeting the requirements just yet. Then again, there was no penalty for failing the magiscript challenge, so there was no reason why he couldn't practice inside it. That way, he could keep track of his progress too.

"Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!"

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'Enchantments: Memory (General, variant #61), Growth (General, variant #24), Self-repair (General, variant #3145). Difficulty: 1.6. Runes drawn: 1231. Time taken: 20000 rits. Success rate: 34%. Score adjusted due to difficulty: 54%. Wave failed. Try again?'

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“No. And please stop listing the variants I used. The messages are getting a little clustered.”

“Choice confirmed.”

It had been over a week since Percy began practicing. As expected, getting the new runes down had been a piece of cake – relatively speaking. It was just merging them together that was proving quite a pain in the ass. Not only was it much more time consuming, his success rate on the self-repair enchantment by itself was still below 20%. That said, he’d discovered quite a few new interesting things while experimenting in the challenge.

‘This might go better than expected.’ he couldn’t help but grin.

Apparently, the cube counted the self-repair enchantment and its components as different runes when drawn separately. For the second wave of the challenge, Percy needed to draw ten runes in total, which he had originally planned to achieve after learning the new batch of runes. However, he hadn’t considered the possibility of cheating his way with combinations.

‘Just sticking the control rune onto all the others might be enough to get me through the third wave too!’

Between the self-repair enchantment and 9 controlled variants, he would have access to 20 enchantments in total. He still didn’t know what the requirements of the third wave involved, but that ought to be enough, right?

And it got even better than that! The greatest downside when concatenating runes was the added difficulty. However, it seemed the system was more than willing to compensate him for that – at least to an extent – by adding a difficulty modifier and adjusting his final score.

In any case, there was a reason why Percy had taken a break from runecrafting, and it had nothing to do with the challenge. Rather, it was his host that had prompted him to pause for a few minutes.

‘Wow. When you told me you’d be spending all your time doing this, you weren’t kidding.’ Noland whistled. ‘I hope this Metatron guy doesn’t make his test subjects learn magiscript. My brain ain’t built for sitting around all week…’

Percy couldn’t help but roll his eyes. It hadn’t been that long since the guy begged him to bring him here, sick of labouring all day in his underground hell.

‘I take it you’re done clearing your channels?’ he asked, changing the topic.

Noland nodded, eagerly drawing some ambient mana into his new core, revelling in the feeling of power rushing through his body. Percy didn’t pay that much attention, however, having experienced this sort of thing a few too many times. Instead, he scrutinized the mana itself carefully, trying to discern its affinity.

‘Bad news for you.’ he said, instantly recognizing the unmistakable feeling of pure mana gushing out of his abdomen, forming a small cyan dagger in his hand.

Though this was good for him. Drawing the runes with a familiar affinity would be much easier.

‘I don’t really mind. A second core is still a second core.’ Noland shrugged.

‘A healthy attitude to have.’ Percy nodded, slightly jealous to see how much better his host had taken the news. Then again, Percy had been a teenager when this happened to him…

Shaking the pointless thoughts out of his head, Percy gave Noland a few minutes to stretch a little and grab himself a snack, before walking back to the centre of the room.

“Cube. Start the challenge again. User ID: WANDERER.”

This time, he intended to put the self-repair enchantment aside for a few hours, to earnestly tackle the wave. Between the new core and the cheat he had recently discovered, he already possessed all the

tools he needed to clear it. This way, he'd be able to learn the next wave's requirements early on, giving himself ample time to prepare.

'Ok then. Let's do this thing.' he took a seat, reading the prompt one last time.

'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.'

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The most annoying part about the magiscript challenge was how long each attempt took. By Percy's estimates, 20000 rits were already nearly seven hours, and this was still a relatively low level.

'I sure hope I got it this time…' he sighed. This was actually his second attempt after having made his mind up. Suffice to say, it was with bated breath that his eyes landed on the prompt.

'Enchantments: Preservation, Concealment, Hardness, Absorption, Control, Memory, Growth, Controlled-preservation, Controlled-concealment, Controlled-hardness. Difficulty: 1.2. Runes drawn: 1500. Time taken: 19743 rits. Success rate: 83%. Score adjusted due to difficulty: 99%.'

'Thank Phoebe!'

It was mostly the controlled variants that had held him back. The score adjustment itself had made up for his lower success rate, but it hadn't given him any extra time, forcing him to just barely complete the wave by the skin of his teeth. And that was after filling the last 500 spots in his quota with the simple control runes. Alas…

"Congratulations! Wave 2 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 200. Current balance: 229."

‘Ok. I think I get why you’re doing this.’ Noland pitched in. ‘I admit, this is quite the adrenaline rush you get once you succeed.’

‘Right?!’ Percy would have hugged him if they weren’t sharing a body.

Of course, the exhilaration of beating a wave was only a small part of it. The real prize were the amazing spells he’d be able to craft once he returned home.

‘Oh well… One step at a time. First, I need to master the enchantment. Then, I’ve got a few more books to read before trying the third wave. And there’s the other cheat we brought along…’

Percy hadn’t forgotten about the explosives they had prepared for the combat challenges. The idea of blowing those annoying spider golems to shreds was honestly one of the things keeping him going.

‘Just a little longer…’

Chapter 233: Cascading control

“…100.” Percy muttered as he finished drawing the last instance of the self-repair enchantment.

The growth rune was made of an inner circle, with multiple tendril-like features extending outwards in specific patterns, making it resemble a caricature of the sun. At any rate, this inner circle was rather easy to pair with the outermost circle of the memory rune, which was filled with a grid-like pattern in turn.

Suffice to say, Percy began all his challenge attempts with the self-repair enchantments, as they were the hardest and most time-consuming ones to draw by far. If he failed, he could just abort the wave and start over, saving himself some time. Luckily, he didn’t need to do that right now, his current attempt being just about passable.

‘So far, so good. Let’s go for the controlled variants next…’

By now, Percy had spent over six weeks in the Vault. He’d already reached a satisfactory level with the self-repair enchantment. Even though he couldn’t draw it successfully every single time, he didn’t need to. As it so happened, reality was more forgiving than the damn challenge – at least for what he

intended to use it. He only had to succeed once for each piece of his armour and it would work forever. Naturally, he could afford to try a couple of times until he got it right.

In addition to that, he'd also studied the other runes he'd bought. The heat, pressure and rotation runes hadn't been picked randomly. They were the bread and butter of any alchemic cauldron worth a damn, and Percy had already decided they would be handy to know. Not only would he be able to craft his own cauldrons with his clones in case he needed them – much like what had happened on Atlantis – but he would be able to repair his own back on Remior if it came to it. Not to mention a couple of upgrades he had in mind, to help him elevate his alchemy to the next level.

'Ok. Far from perfect, but I think the mistakes are still in the acceptable range.' he nodded once he was done, wiping some sweat off his forehead. Only the simple runes were left.

If it hadn't been for this project of his, Percy might have considered it a waste of time to learn how to attach control runes to all his other enchantments. However, it was honestly good practice for what he wanted to accomplish.

After all, the enchantments applied to a cauldron couldn't be used in their raw state. Each of them had to be modified with control runes, and not just one of them. The first control rune allowed an enchantment to be switched on or off, but it was possible to take that further by adding more of them. The second gave the enchantment four possible states, the third one eight of them and so on.

Any decent cauldron – even the ones they had on Remior – needed to have its enchantments affixed with at least four or five control runes each. This was necessary in order to more delicately control the temperature and pressure of a concoction. Which was exactly why Percy had even purchased the book on the 'cascading control enchantment'. Sadly, he hadn't had the time to put its teachings to practice just yet. This would easily take a few more months. Still, he'd made sure he understood the underlying concepts well enough to work on this when he returned home.

'I'm feeling good about this attempt.' he grinned once he finished drawing the final control rune. At least, he hadn't run out of time.

'Enchantments: Preservation, Concealment, Hardness, Absorption, Control, Memory, Growth, Heat, Pressure, Rotation, Self-repair, Controlled-preservation, Controlled-concealment, Controlled-hardness, Controlled-absorption, Controlled-memory, Controlled-growth, Controlled-heat, Controlled-pressure, Controlled-rotation. Difficulty: 1.6. Runes drawn: 2500. Time taken: 29312 rits. Success rate: 60%. Score adjusted due to difficulty: 96%.'

“Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 300. Current balance: 529.”

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‘Please tell me we’re done with this crap forever.’ Noland pleaded.

‘For the most part.’ Percy nodded, leaving it at that.

Doing his best to ignore his thumping headache, he dragged himself to their supplies, fancying himself a handful of bugs – oddly enough. Or maybe he just wanted an excuse to move a little, his numb feet protesting every single step.

To Noland’s credit, he hadn’t bothered him in the last 10 hours or so. A true achievement, considering how vocal the mole-person had grown over the past few weeks. And Percy didn’t exactly blame him for it either. The poor guy was probably bored out of his mind.

‘I guess he just didn’t want to risk ruining my attempt and forcing me to start over...’

At least, they were done with runecrafting. Well,kinda. Ideally, Percy wanted to buy the index and skim through it once or twice, to give himself an idea of what was in there – just so that he could plan his future trips to the Vault more efficiently. And maybe buy a rune for Nesha too. Sure, he could teach her some of the ones he knew, but he also wanted her to take another step towards crafting spatial amulets if possible. The darn things were becoming more and more important to them by the day. But neither of these tasks would take more than a couple of days.

‘I should also check out the next wave’s requirements, for future reference…’

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‘Draw any thirty runes 4000 times in total, in under 40000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual rune has to be drawn at least 100 times.’

He sighed, knowing this was the end of the road for now. Technically, he could draw over 50 enchantments if he dug into the cascading control runes, but he wouldn’t be reaching an acceptable quality with those anytime soon.

‘The only thing left for this trip are the combat challenges. If we do well in those, I can look into a Yellow host next time.’

Obviously, Percy had already ran into diminishing returns in both the Red and Orange levels. His recent progress in runecrafting should be enough to get him past the fourth wave of the Red magiscript challenge, but that was a whole lot of work for a measly 120 credits. It was best to move to the next level when possible.

‘Noland.’

‘Hmmm?’

‘As soon as you’re done eating, we can give the ‘gauntlet’ challenge a try.’

‘Finally!’

Percy shrugged.

‘I hope those crystals are as good as advertised…’

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“Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!”

Noland's gaze was glued to the black tar pouring down the walls, rapidly filling the cube's floor. However, Percy didn't pay that much heed, having seen that a few too many times already. His attention was instead drawn to the spider-like golem speeding along the wall. The annoying little critter had already claimed his life once.

'Time for a rematch.' he couldn't help but grin.

Pulling some pure mana from his abdomen, he formed a short rod in his left hand, mostly to parry an attack or two with. Sadly, he couldn't reveal Crystallization inside the Vault, so there was only so much the new core could be used for. The rest, Noland would have to handle by himself.

'Just watch and learn.' the mole-person spoke with confidence.

Drawing some of his gravity mana, he wrapped it around the orange crystal in his hand. A bombstone, he'd called it. The mana itself was quite weird. Colourless and amorphous, yet pulsing with unquestionable might – waiting to be commanded into shape by its owners will. Throwing his hand back, Noland tensed his muscles like a slingshot, as he focused even more mana in his palm.

Of course, the golem wouldn't just let them do as they pleased. Detaching two of its legs, it sent them after them, trying to decapitate its challenger. Unfortunately for it, Percy had expected that, parrying the constructs away with the rod, giving his host a chance to complete his preparations.

Not wasting another moment, Noland snapped back, pitching the bombstone at a speed he could have never managed with brute strength alone. In an instant, the crystal landed right beside the golem before it had the chance to move an inch. Shattering, it bathed the room in a bright flash, accompanied by a booming shockwave that sent the tar's surface in turmoil.

'I guess I'll need to work on my aim over the next couple of waves…' he smiled wryly at the sight.

However, Percy wasn't in a mood to chastise his host. He was a little busy trying to keep his jaw from dropping as he watched the golem's pieces slowly sinking into the dark liquid in several spots around the room.

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

“Awarded credits: 100. Current balance: 629.”

‘Wow… How many of those did we bring again?’ he couldn’t help but ask.

Noland’s smile widened as he turned to look at the sack still propped against the wall. It was about as tall as he was, stuffed to the brim with crystals that threatened to spill out.

‘Plenty…’

Chapter 234: Bombstones

Overall, Percy and Noland’s setup was quite simple. That didn’t make it any less effective, however. Using the pure mana to defend themselves, and the gravity mana solely to quickly deliver the explosive crystals to their opponents, they relied exclusively on the bombstones to take out the golems.

Naturally, the constructs grew stronger with each wave. Getting slightly larger and sporting an extra pair of detachable legs each time, there was no doubt in Percy’s mind that they would have made for tough opponents had they faced them normally. Luckily, none of them survived their opening blow, though the third one nearly managed to leap out of the way in time.

Not wanting to risk their life in the fourth wave, they decided to take a break from the ‘gauntlet’ challenge at that point, to give the ‘swarm’ challenge a try. Suffice to say, the golems were even weaker there, the explosions often taking several of them out at once. Still, their sheer numbers had made it a little difficult for Percy and Noland to hold their ground. Not to mention the strain they’d put on their limited supplies. By the time they cleared the third wave, their sack was already empty, finally putting an end to their cheating spree.

Of course, the results were more than worth it…

“Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

Percy's only regret was his inability to bring the bombstones back home. A couple of those would have made for an excellent trump card. Sadly, this was just the nature of his clones.

"Awarded credits: 300. Current balance: 1729."

"Wow! Words cannot express how glorious this is!" Percy's mood instantly took a turn for the better, some tears welling up in his eyes.

None of his previous visits to the Vault had gone nearly this smoothly. Not only had he accomplished all his goals with time to spare, he even managed it without getting his body battered in the process.

Suffice to say, it was with great glee that he finally purchased the rune index he'd been ogling for years, spending the next day studying it – much to his host's dismay. And he didn't stop there, also buying a book on shape runes for Nesha. By themselves, these runes could force a material to take on a fixed shape – in this case a cube. Combining them with the pocket, stability and control runes, his girlfriend would have everything she needed to craft her first prototype of a spatial amulet after some practice. Well, assuming they found a suitable material for it.

At any rate, it only took him another couple of days to memorize the new rune. This one didn't need space mana – even though he'd picked a variant that worked better with it. Percy could have easily learned to activate it too, using his pure mana, though he didn't bother to do that. He didn't personally have a use for it, so he only needed to relay the symbol and the instructions to Nesha, and let her take it from there.

About halfway through Percy's last week in the Vault, he had already accomplished everything he'd set out to do, even having a little over 1500 credits left to spend.

'Hmmmm… Next time, I should look into other stuff. Surely, the Vault has more interesting things in stock than just magiscript books.' he decided.

Up until now, he hadn't really had the option of branching out much. Other than the time he'd purchased the mana conversion spell, Percy had been forced to funnel all his funds into reading material to progress through the challenges. This was his first time having saved up a sizeable sum.

‘But not right now. I still have to digest my new gains…’

Besides, there was another reason he couldn’t stay here any longer. Noland’s food was nearly exhausted, so Percy would have to start spending credits on that. His only option was to leave and dump the responsibility on Metatron.

‘Now who’s the stingy one?’ Noland asked.

‘Fine. I admit this place is starting to influence me.’ Percy shrugged.

Either way, he had one final stop before bidding him farewell. While he wasn’t particularly worried about all the beasts he’d brought to the Vault, Noland was a sapient host. Even though their current arrangement was the result of a mutually beneficial transaction, Percy couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy over leaving his new pal alone in this place.

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Consequently, he’d already decided to introduce him to Gabe. Not only would he catch up with his old pal in the process, but Gabe and Noland would have each other to discuss their shared circumstances. Well, assuming Metatron allowed them…

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“Percy? Is that you?” Gabe asked upon opening his door.

“How can you tell?”

Gabe shrugged.

“Who else would visit me? Besides, you’re the only one bringing random creatures here. Also, nobody else needs a translation device… Need I go on?”

“Fair enough.” Percy replied, extending his hand. “This is Noland. I found him stuck in an underground tunnel and offered to shine some light on his miserable existence.”

Noland groaned internally over the joke, though he still took control of his body for long enough to shake Gabe’s hand.

“I’m actually on my way out of the Vault, but I figured I’d bring him here first. I’m hoping you could spend a couple of weeks teaching him the language, since he won’t have the translation device after I’m gone.” Percy added a second later.

Gabe didn’t seem particularly happy about it, though he ultimately agreed. At least, the system hadn’t threatened them with a penalty this time. Apparently, the Vault’s language wasn’t considered a restricted resource. This was probably because all the kids here learned it for free before they were even old enough to be subjected to the Vault’s brutal economy.

‘I should put some effort into learning it too. Maybe I can sell the translation device back to the cube for a partial refund once I no longer need it…’ Percy thought. He’d slacked a little on it, preferring to focus on his other studies during the past couple of trips.

Next, he proceeded to brief Gabe on Noland’s details, getting some information back from him in return. Apparently, his former host had made some progress of his own on magiscript. In fact, he was a little further along than even Percy, largely due to devoting all of his free time on the subject. Sure, his missing eyes made it a little tougher, but Gabe had still made it work through Mana Sense alone.

“Are you going to try the challenge?” Percy asked.

Unless Metatron woke up feeling particularly generous one day, Gabe’s only option was to get to the sixth wave of the magiscript challenge and ask for life mana to restore his eyes. A rather ambitious project…

“Not yet. I think I could get through the first wave if I got lucky, but that’s about it. The Green level is much tougher than the ones you’ve tried, and it’s not like I’m in need of credits just yet.” he explained.

Percy nodded in understanding. Logically, Gabe's current funds should last him long enough for his second core to reach Green, and then at least another decade past that. Hopefully, that would be enough for him to fix his eyes. He'd need them before he could resume the combat challenges, and he'd need those to make it to Blue.

'Anyway, he's got plenty of time. If it looks like it's not enough, I can offer Metatron something to help him out…'

Admittedly, the idea of handing the callous titan something precious made him sick to his stomach, but he wouldn't allow his friend to starve to death if he could prevent it. Normally, the titan shouldn't let his most precious test subject to die like that, but he might be willing to do it if it meant putting more pressure on Percy to accept his terms.

Either way, bringing another person here might have not been Percy's wisest move. His new buddy had grown on him, giving the powerful god another thing to blackmail him with.

'Don't even go there.' Noland said, Percy's thoughts having inadvertently spilled through their connection. 'You've made it very clear what sort of place this is. I came of my own volition, remember? I don't know what the future will hold, but the past few weeks have honestly been quite the exotic vacation. Whatever happens from here on out is none of your business…'

Percy sighed. He knew his host was right, but he couldn't absolve himself of all the responsibility. Then again, he couldn't afford to let such valuable opportunities pass. Had he brought a different Orange host here, chances are he wouldn't have earned nearly as many credits this time.

'I hope you still feel this way the next time we meet. Maybe you can also negotiate with him how you want to be treated.' Percy replied, before elaborating.

He doubted Metatron gave the beasts much of a choice in the matter, but perhaps he'd make an exception for Noland. Rather than placing him in a cage and experimenting on him directly, the titan might be open to letting him live like Gabe, as a regular resident of the Vault, completing challenges and earning his own credits. Then again, it was debatable whether that would be better, considering the man's lower grade. Either way, this was for Noland and Metatron to discuss…

Bidding both men farewell, Percy stored the device before removing his soul from his host's wounds, allowing them to resume their recovery unobstructed. The pull from his main body instantly yanked him out of the Vault in a familiar manner, having already grown rather powerful over the last couple of months.

Drifting through the infinite darkness, Percy couldn't help but go over his latest gains, as well as the questionable price he'd paid for them. Eventually, he would have to make this right. Frankly, he'd already grown sick of having to tiptoe around the powerful, subjected to their whims – whether that was Metatron, or the Divine Order.

'Sooner or later, I'll grow strong enough to see them eye to eye. To speak with them on my own terms. To voice my own demands… One day…'

Chapter 235: Trouble in Gentlebreeze town

An overwhelming rush of memories flooded Percy's mind, bringing him to his knees. Noticing his soul wisp on the way back, he'd just about managed to put his brewing equipment away in time, to avoid breaking or spilling anything by accident.

A good shout, considering how troublesome this clone was to assimilate. He wasn't necessarily the longest-lived one he'd ever sent out, but he'd spent months training non-stop, bringing a mountain of runecrafting knowledge back. Advanced knowledge that Percy now had to digest in an accelerated pace.

'Ugh… At least I got what I wanted from the Vault…' he sighed a few minutes later, once he was back on his feet.

His brain still pounded like a drum, and it would take him a few more days to fully wrap his head around the new runes, but he should be good for now. Fortunately, he was alone in the room, so he hadn't needlessly worried his companions.

Nesha was busy mingling with the town's residents, trying to procure any alchemic reagents she could find in the local marketplace, hoping to extend Percy's dwindling stash. It was important, as he wouldn't be able to replace his trollsfury potion, nor continue to brew Aurora Dew without them. Of course, they were more likely to find what they needed when they reached their destination, but that was still a few weeks away.

At least, Gentlebreeze town was many times larger than Bogside town. More developed too, with taller buildings, cleaner streets and a bustling economy. Sure, commoners didn't live easy lives anywhere on Remior, but falling under the jurisdiction of a noble House that didn't treat them like cattle made a huge difference.

Checking himself in the mirror, Percy couldn't help but frown as he rubbed his chin.

'Not quite there…'

He'd grown a bit of a stubble over the past couple of months, hoping it would help hide his identity when combined with his glowing eyes. It must've done something to that effect, since nobody had pulled him aside just yet. A rather important place to be, as he'd already spotted wanted posters of him and Nesha in multiple towns. Fortunately, the Divine Root's information was a little outdated, Baldy having done a great job keeping the news of his Sorcerer's Eye from spreading.

Still, his disguise was incomplete. Ideally, he wanted to grow his hair longer too. Sadly, he'd have to wait another year or two for that. Then again, he shouldn't complain. The girls had it much worse, having had no choice but to cut their own hair short for the benefit of the group…

And that wasn't the only sacrifice the others had made. Micky had had a tough time travelling while skipping meals and conserving his stamina. They couldn't even bring him into the towns, so he was currently camping a few miles away. At least, his situation had improved a little. Pretty early on, they had discovered that the crow could use Regulation with Percy's fused mana too, by absorbing it through his other mutations – his beak, talons and eyes.

Since then, he'd not only managed to clear his new channels, but he'd even learned how to split his ice mana into its components, regaining access to his other spells. Of course, he still had to find a use for the new affinities, and to finish tempering his pathways. Elaine was currently keeping him company, partly to protect him, and partly to teach him her Circulation pattern.

'I should make it up to them.'

Technically, Percy was already pulling his weight in the group by providing everyone with Aurora Dew. But he wanted to do more for them if possible. Not necessarily for Nesha or Micky – he'd already done plenty for both of them over the years – but certainly Elaine. After all, his cousin had risked everything

to accompany them. Not to mention that she brought the most to the table merely by being with them, thanks to her high fighting strength.

Naturally, he'd offered to teach her runecrafting like Nesha, but she'd declined. Her affinity wasn't particularly suited, and she didn't really have the patience for it either. The only other thing Percy could do for his companions was to grant them a second core.

Strictly speaking, he'd already promised to do it for Nesha. Ideally, he would have liked to extend the favour to everyone – Baldy and Galahad included – but it just hadn't been possible. First, he didn't feel confident repairing a Blue's damaged soul, let alone a Violet's. Even for Elaine, he wouldn't dare risk it unless they had a Green soul available for Micky to eat. Then, he'd also had a clone active during his time back home, so possessing his relatives hadn't been an option.

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Much of that was solved right now, but they'd also need life mana to fix the Decree. There wasn't much of a point in giving anybody the seed if they couldn't germinate it. All it would do would be to rob them of the ability to use healing potions. Sadly, they wouldn't be able to return to his family for the foreseeable future. Their only alternative were the green mushrooms, but they'd need way too many of them for this to work.

'I guess this is something we'll have to work on, once we settle at our destination.'

The sheer number of corpses they'd have to procure was mind-boggling, but it wasn't like they had a better option. Either way, this wasn't that big a problem. As long as the Divine Root failed to discover them, everything else they could deal with. And it didn't seem like their enemies had any more karma users to send after them.

'I just hope Baldy is alright.' he smiled bitterly.

Percy had no way to contact his grandpa. While he'd done his best to draw Deimos's ire to himself, the guy didn't sound that reasonable. Percy could easily see him taking his anger out on House Avalon. Especially considering that Jason had gone missing in the vicinity of their estate. Anybody who was unfamiliar with Percy's combat prowess would assume he'd had help taking down a Green. Sadly, there wasn't much he could do about it, other than hope his grandpa was wise enough to handle the situation.

Sighing, he walked out of the inn, deciding to take the rest of the day off. His headache would make brewing annoying, and he could use some fresh air. He also had to talk to Nesha about the new runes as some of them concerned her.

Strolling down the street, Percy ignored the stares he got from the townsfolk. He was used to them by now, owing most of the attention he received to his eyes. Sure, the default assumption was that they were the result of his bloodline, but not many bloodlines were nearly this eye-catching.

Heading towards the market, he soon noticed something strange, however. The place was always busy, but there were many more people around right now than when they'd first arrived in town. There seemed to be some kind of spectacle drawing everyone here...

'Shit. I hope Nesha hasn't landed in any trouble.'

Hurrying along, Percy pushed through the growing crowd, soon reaching the source of all the commotion. Luckily, he spotted his girlfriend standing a few rows away, not involved in whatever this was. Still, that did little to stop his face from paling.

Several officials stood there, holding the commoners back, each of them sporting an elegant attire that Percy recognized all too well. Most notably, they were all adorned with insignias depicting some roots emerging from the underside of a cloud. And there were five of them, all of them at Green.

'No! Did they find us already?!'

Instinctively, he wanted to run away. But he held himself back, knowing that would be beyond foolish. Not only would he draw their attention even faster, there was no way he could possibly outrun five Greens.

Forcing himself to calm down, he realized something was off with the situation. Nesha hadn't tried to escape either, nor did she look very shaken. Besides, sending so many people after them was a bit much, wasn't it?

'It's just a coincidence. They must be here for something else.'

Exhaling a breath he hadn't even noticed he was holding, Percy allowed himself to relax. Next, he scanned the scene more carefully, trying to piece together what was happening. Other than the men of the Divine Root, there were two others standing there. Or, well… only one of them was standing, the other being on the ground.The first was a young boy. He couldn't have been older than 13, or maybe even 12. Yet, he looked as if he owned the whole town, his gaze brimming with uncontained arrogance.

As for the other person, he was clearly distraught, grovelling at the boy's feet, seemingly begging for something. He was much older too. A middle-aged man with a Green core pulsing in his chest. He was clearly 'only' an Orange-born, but this was still a strange way to treat a Green. At that level, one was already considered an elite, regardless of their birth-grade. Why was the man kowtowing to the boy? Was he trying to apologize for something?

Either way, the kid had to be quite important, to have so many elites guarding him.

"Esteemed Holy Child! Please, show mercy! Let alone the discount, I would have given you the trinket for free had I realized who you were!" the man pleaded.

But the boy didn't respond, merely kicking the man's face as if he was nothing more than trash. Nobody moved to stop him. Even the victim didn't bother resisting, letting the kid do as he pleased.

'Holy Child?!' Percy's eyebrow shot up.

He'd never expected to meet one in such a random place. But that would certainly explain the mess. Instinctively, his eyes fell back on the boy, this time scrutinizing him more carefully than before. Percy had previously ignore the kid, thinking he was only treated like this for being the son of somebody important.

On further investigation, however, it appeared his clothes were even finer than the ones worn by the Divine Root, somehow. They were adorned with all sorts of symbols Percy didn't recognize the meaning of. As for the boy's face, it wasn't anything special, his features as unassuming as his messy brown hair.

It was only when he saw the brilliant Blue core shining in the kid's sternum that Percy's eyes widened, the truth slamming into him like a battering ram. And if that wasn't proof enough, the suffocating

domain he unleashed upon the crowd the very next second was plenty… Percy too, felt the wind knocked out of his lungs as he finally accepted what the boy was.

After all, there was only one sort of person who could possibly reach such a high grade this young. The very people the Divine Order recruited at any cost. The only ones who stood a chance of advancing past White. The ones who might one day become gods…

The Green-born.

Chapter 236: [Redacted]

Percy quietly watched the scene unfold. His stomach churned as the boy practically tortured the poor guy, but he knew he couldn't get involved. Even if he banded together with all his companions, he'd never get past the Holy Child's guards. Let alone the little monster himself.

'So, is this what a Green-born looks like?' he struggled to keep his nose from wrinkling.

The overwhelming majority of people on Remior were born in the bottom three grades.

Around 60% were Red-borns, their lifespans capped in the low hundreds – assuming wars didn't get to them first, of course. The highest grade they could hope to reach was Yellow. Technically, Percy belonged in this category too, though his second core coupled with the Aurora Dew had boosted his future prospects to Blue. As for his fighting strength… Well, he was punching comfortably above his weight class, having already slain multiple Yellow-borns his age.

Then came the Orange-borns, who made about 30% of the population. People like Nesha and Orin belonged in this category, and they could even live a few thousand years if all the stars aligned. The highest grade they could hit was Blue – much like Percy's mentor already had. That said, Nesha could potentially aim a little higher now, all thanks to him.

Finally, there were the Yellow-borns like Elaine, Galahad or Baldy. Only 10% of the population was lucky enough to fall in this category, and they were considered the most valuable assets a noble House could have. After all, they were the only ones who could reach Violet after half a millennium, often coming to lead their families at that point. Very few Houses had more than one Violet, and most of them were swiftly driven to extinction if they were unlucky enough to lose them all. Technically, they could reach White too, but only seven Yellow-borns were currently alive who had accomplished that.

Yet in the eyes of the Divine Order, the likes of Archibald weren't much different from Percy at the end of the day. Whether at Red or White, all of them were destined to die as mortals, their candles snuffed in the blink of an eye. Even Theseus, the White core in charge of the Divine Root – one of the most powerful nobles on Remior – was nothing more than a failure in the gods' eyes. Somebody who wasn't deemed talented enough to join the Order's inner circle.

That glory was reserved solely for the Green-born.

They emerged at much lower rates. Less than one in ten thousand, in fact. The chosen ones, who could achieve immortality. All of the Order's gods and demigods had been born at Green. Their titans too, by extension. Hermes, Phoebe, Iapetus, Kronos…

'Metatron and Svarog are probably the same.'

The ratios weren't exactly identical from one world to the next, but they usually fell within the same ballpark. It was no wonder that it was deemed impossible for a Red-born to reach godhood, considering how much lower their starting point was…

But so few Green-borns existed, and only a fraction of them managed to ascend all the way. That was why each was considered a priceless asset. They could never be treated as regular nobles, nor could they be allowed to involve themselves in the pointless wars between Houses.

The moment a child was identified as a Green-born, they were automatically sent to the Divine Order for training. As much as their families might have wanted to use them as weapons in their wars, there were few crimes on Remior more serious than secretly harbouring a Green-born. Or allowing any harm to befall them.

Rare as they were, many large, long-lived Houses would eventually birth a couple of them. Still, they all understood the importance of complying with the Order's demands. Historically, only a handful of families had dared to risk it, all of them bringing calamity to their Houses as a result.

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At least, the Order was ‘kind’ enough to give each family a minor treasure in exchange, as a small compensation for robbing them of such a talented child. From what Percy knew, the jade tree Baldy used to hone his magic had been obtained in precisely this manner.

‘No wonder they want the Aurora Dew recipe so badly…’ Percy sighed.

The miraculous elixirs held the potential of turning Yellow-borns into gods. Should that happen, the Order’s ranks would climb steeply, changing Remior forever. After all, there were a thousand times as many Yellow-borns around as there were Holy Children. It would be harder for them to make it, of course, but it should still be enough to catapult their world to one of the leading factions in the universe given some time.

That said, the first Yellow-borns would need tens of thousands of years to reach godhood, so Percy hadn’t done much harm by withholding the recipe for a couple of decades.

‘Good luck explaining that to assholes like Hermes though…’ he smiled bitterly.

It wasn’t really that surprising the Order’s leaders were such eccentrics. Each of them had been taken from their family as a child, growing up without parents. They were all spoiled, being raised by others like them, never taught a shred of empathy or compassion. They were essentially given a crown from a young age, and left to do as they pleased…

Thinking of that, Percy’s gaze mellowed a little as he watched the boy torture the merchant. It was still cruel and inexcusable, but it wasn’t solely the kid’s fault. The system that created people like this was more to blame. Was this really the best way to keep their world safe?

But he shook those concerns away for now. Either way, he didn’t have the power to interfere just yet. Instead, he remained silent, clenching his fists as he observed the sickening scene before him. He might not be able to help the boy’s victim, but he could at least try to learn a thing or two about his domain.

‘It’s really weak…’ he couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.

While it had caught him by surprise at first, it wasn’t that big a deal. Compared to Galahad’s or the Starry Queen’s, the boy’s domain was gentle as a breeze, lacking any substance behind it. Not that

strange, given his age. In fact, Percy would be surprised if the Holy Child had ever fought a real battle. Of course, this would change over time, as the boy progressed through his training as a candidate god. For now though, he was a Blue in name only.

Percy wasn't sure if it was entirely due to the boy's inexperience, or if his training with Galahad had played a role, but he was confident he'd be able to move even without Synchronization if he really tried. Still, the Holy Child would sense that, and things would only go downhill from there.

'Why did they even bring him here? Is he travelling to gain experience or something?'

Not that it was any of his business, of course. The only thing he wanted was for the boy to grow bored and leave of his own accord. Sadly, the place reeked of blood by the time that happened. The merchant was still alive, but he'd need a damn good healer if he wanted to walk again.

As soon as the spectacle ended, Percy walked through the dispersing crowd, discreetly grabbing Nesha before leaving cautiously. It was only once they'd put some distance from the Holy Child's entourage that they hurried their steps, making their way back to the inn.

"What should we do?" Nesha asked as they entered their room.

"Originally, I wanted us to leave town tomorrow. We still have a lot of ground to cover. But I think we should lay low for a couple more days, until those people are long gone. I'd rather not meet them on the road by accident."

The girl nodded back in agreement. The good news was that she'd managed to buy a few crystal tulips from the merchants. Percy should be able to pacify the potion with those. Between alchemy and runecrafting, they'd have plenty of things to keep themselves busy as they waited.

Not right now though. His head was still killing him. He was about to lean for a quick nap, when his familiar called to him.

'Percy! Are you busy?'

At first, he panicked, his thoughts instantly wandering to the worst-case scenario. Had the Holy Child ran into Micky and Elaine?!

But he calmed down once the crow explained this had nothing to do with that. Apparently, he'd made some progress with his ice magic. Furthermore, Elaine wanted to speak with him too, saying she had something to give him. After bringing Nesha up to speed, the two left town from a different side, heading towards the others.

'I guess I'll be camping out tonight.'

Chapter 237: Ocarina

"Start by splitting them up." Elaine said.

Following her instructions, Micky spread his wings wide, channelling mana through them. Percy watched as two streams flowed from the crow's abdomen, each following a distinct set of channels. With a single flap, Micky sent a harmless spray of water over Percy and Nesha, the droplets dancing playfully in the soft breeze.

"He still needs a lot of practice if he wants to use magic the traditional way." Elaine remarked.

Micky had always used his second core in tandem with his mutation, taking advantage of his glowing feathers to enhance his air affinity. Unfortunately, he hadn't developed any mutations to complement his new mana types yet, meaning he'd have to put in more effort to make them work effectively.

"What about the ice affinity? Is that any good?" Nesha asked.

"Better than the others, at least." Elaine said, before elaborating. "It doesn't need any preparation since it's technically his default affinity."

Right on cue, Micky gathered more mana into his wings, this time directing it through a third set of pathways. A thin layer of frost formed over his feathers. With a sharp flap, he sent a flurry of tiny ice shards toward Percy. They didn't carry much force, but the technique showed promise.

“What about Circulation?” he asked.

Elaine shrugged.

“His channels will be tempered in a few weeks, but I can only teach him the water pattern. He’ll have to figure the ice one on his own.”

Percy nodded. That was about what he had expected. Neither he nor Micky were novices. Given some time, he was confident the crow would get there by himself.

With that settled, he brought Elaine and Micky up to speed on the day’s events, warning them to stay alert for any signs of the Divine Root. They were more likely to leave town via one of the roads than to stumble upon their remote lakeside camp, but there was no harm in being careful.

“There was something else I wanted to talk to you about.” Elaine said.

Percy looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to continue.

“I have a little gift for you – to make up for all the birthday presents you’ve missed over the years. I was planning to give it to you before you left the mansion, but with everything that happened, I completely forgot. I only remembered it today when I accidentally saw it in my spatial amulet.”

“Elaine… you didn’t have to do that. Just having you here with us is more than enough.” Percy said, feeling a pang of guilt. “Besides, I’ve missed all your birthdays too, and I didn’t prepare anything for you.”

But his cousin just waved off his concern.

“Are you kidding? You’ve been giving me free elixirs for months! I’ve already shaved half a year off my next promotion! And then there’s Circulation – I never even repaid you for that! Compared to all those things, this is just a cheap trinket.”

Percy sighed. He didn't agree with her assessment. As far as he was concerned, having somebody who genuinely cared for him throughout his childhood was worth more than anything. Everything else was just stuff. But he let it slide, knowing how stubborn his cousin could be.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Elaine rummaged through her belongings before pulling a small object out of her amulet. It looked a lot like the pinecones from the Whistling Woods, though it was among the largest Percy had ever seen. Its shape was almost perfect, free of deformities or scars – at least, none that hadn't been placed there intentionally. Small holes dotted its surface in a careful pattern, one that looked strikingly familiar.

"Is this what I think it is?" he raised an eyebrow.

Elaine grinned.

"I noticed you never got around to replacing your ocarina after gifting it to Owain. While I was staying with Micky in the Whistling Woods, I had some free time and thought the cones would make a perfect material for one."

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Percy brought the instrument to his lips and blew a gentle note, listening carefully. The sound was remarkably similar to his old ocarina, though it also carried the nostalgic undertone of the woods. He spent the next couple of minutes experimenting, testing each hole one by one.

"Wow! How did you get it to sound right?!" he asked, genuinely impressed. "And all the holes are exactly where I'm used to!"

Elaine's smile widened.

"I took note of the pattern from Owain's ocarina and made sure to punch the holes in the same spots."

Percy remained sceptical.

“And that was enough to make it sound right?”

“Of course not!” Elaine exclaimed. “The first one was awful. I went through hundreds of cones, experimenting with different hole sizes, until I got the sound just right!”

Percy felt a warmth spread through his chest. The ocarina itself wasn’t anything flashy, but the sheer amount of effort Elaine had put into making it was staggering. She hadn’t just made him a replacement; she had gone above and beyond, crafting something even better than the original. She’d clearly avoided many of the little girl’s mistakes too. Every note was crisp, every hole perfectly placed. He turned the ocarina over in his hands, his fingers tracing the careful craftsmanship.

“Thank you, Elaine. This means a lot.”

She shrugged, but there was a pleased glint in her eyes.

“Just don’t go gifting this one to the next toddler you meet, alright? I’m not making another one.”

Percy chuckled, but didn’t say anything else. Calling everyone over, he sat by the lake’s shore with his companions, dipping his feet in the water. Falling back, he relaxed on the cool grass, his eyes scanning the starlit sky above their heads. Placing the ocarina on his lips once more, he began playing, having missed the feeling a lot. The last time he’d had the chance to do this had been before Rambert’s attack in the Grisly Bog.

At first, the tune was a little clunky as he was a bit rusty. However, he soon improved, recalling all the practice he’d put into the art. It was oddly soothing. The only skill he’d ever invested time into, that didn’t have anything to do with his magic or his combat prowess. But he’d stuck with it regardless, still trying to grasp the beautiful melody Micky – the original Micky – had played for him all those years ago.

‘I’m still a long way from that, aren’t I?’ he couldn’t help but think.

His friend had practiced for decades to get there. Not to mention that the kik’lit was a vastly different instrument to his shoddy ocarina. Sporting two shafts and handled with four hands, it could play tunes no human was even capable of. But Percy didn’t aim to recreate the whole thing. His goal was much more modest than that.

Skipping the first part at the forefront of Micky's performance – the uplifting melody a mother might play to cheer her child up – he instead focused on the other part. The deeper, more beautiful tune. It was a sad one, but the sound had touched his soul that day, remaining with him for years. This was what he'd tried so hard to recreate back in the swamp – with limited success.

Still, his companions didn't complain, enjoying his music as he gave it another shot with his newly upgraded instrument…

This hidden layer spoke of struggles against adversity, and of the fight for one's place in the world. Like a people cursed without an affinity, trying to protect their home. Or a boy born with a Red core, looked down by all.

'Well, Micky has plenty of affinities now, doesn't he? He has a new home too. And I've got quite a few people who don't look down on me anymore…'

Percy continued to play, getting closer and closer to that day's tune. Suddenly, he felt some emotions seep through the bond, Micky's thoughts inadvertently spilling over. At first, it was just the cone's whistles reminding him of his time as a chick. But soon, the feelings grew deeper still. Older still.

Percy's heart skipped a beat as he realized what was happening. But he didn't allow himself to stop, sinking deeper into the music.

Micky's emotions intensified, as vivid memories began to accompany them. It started with flashes of the damp cell. The bloodstained arena. Those could have just as easily come from Percy.

But more kept flowing through the cord, as the crow started to lose control of his mana. Ice spilled forth from his abdomen, drawing the girls' attention. Percy nodded at them to calm them down, his focus returning to his familiar.

A cold feeling spread through Percy's chest. Initially, he thought it was due to what Micky was currently experiencing – the mana flooding his body. But the cold felt stronger than it should be, given Micky's resistance to his own affinity. It was as if he was standing amidst a blizzard, hellbent on freezing his very soul.

Percy's fingers trembled, nearly missing a note or two, as the ethereal cord shook, clearly disturbed by something. The memories kept ramming into his mind, too fast for him to even retain, as a wave of worry began to sprout within him.

'This is starting to get dangerous… Maybe we should sto–'

But he didn't even get to the end of that thought, when he suddenly lost control of his body. Everything around him turned dark, as a frigid wind blew against him, almost strong enough to lift him to the air. Instinctively, he dug his heels deeper in the… snow?!

'What the hell is going on?!'

So unsettled was he, that he hadn't even registered he wasn't alone. That only changed when he felt something clench around his hand. Another person's hand. It was warm. Comforting. Familiar.

Percy glanced at them – no, her! – trying to piece together her identity. It was a little difficult, given how dark their surroundings were, but he just about managed to make her face out – probably thanks to his Yellow core. He recognized her too! Well, he didn't. But Micky did. Sporting a long beak, shoulder-length black hair and two pairs of arms, she stood a couple heads taller than he was.

'Micky's mother…'

Chapter 238: Crimson dawn

'I can't control my body. No… Micky's body.' Percy realized.

It wasn't that strange. This was probably a fixed memory – nothing like the clones he was used to creating. Everything Micky was experiencing right now had already happened a long time ago. Giving up resistance, Percy allowed his body to move as it wanted to, focusing on gathering as much information as possible instead of fighting it.

Obviously, this had to be Huehue, but not as he remembered it. The complete absence of sunlight was odd, considering that the local star's location was supposedly fixed in place.

‘Are we currently on the dark side? That would explain the cold…’

Micky was doing relatively ok. He was still a child in this memory, but he was better dressed than Percy remembered him from their time together. His clothes were worn and full of holes, of course, but at least he did have a few layers on. More importantly, Micky was a Yellow-born, his body better suited to weather the elements.

His mother was alright too. Sure, she was pale and haggard – probably due to hunger more than the cold – but she didn’t seem to be in any immediate danger. Her Orange core wasn’t doing her any favours, but her adult body helped.

It was the third person in their company that had it the worst. Percy only registered her presence when Micky turned her way. His sister must’ve been a couple years older than him, but she was also an Orange-born like their mother. Her face wasn’t as thin as theirs – she was probably given more food than them, to better her odds. Still, she wasn’t handling the cold as well. Not at all. She was shivering, her forehead adorned with frozen droplets of sweat. Her breath was rugged, wisps of silver escaping with each exhausted heave.

“I think we should take a break.” Micky’s mother said in a foreign language, looking at her daughter with concern.

The good news was that Percy understood her, likely because he was experiencing this through Micky’s perspective. Soon, everything around him faded, the splintered memory coming to an abrupt end.

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The next thing he saw was the snowy wall of an artificial cave, illuminated by a cyan orb floating in front of Micky’s mother. The three of them were huddled together inside the tight space, trying to keep each other warm.

His sister – whose name neither he nor Micky seemed capable of recalling – was munching on some frozen rations. As for the others, they were just watching her, probably having to fast due to the scarcity of their supplies.

That was when Micky's mother picked up an object from within her clothes. An object Percy identified.

'A kik'lit!'

Placing her beak inside the wide end, the woman blew a tired breath in it, as all twenty of her fingers brushed over the holes along its twin shafts. The familiar melody soon filled the small cave, bouncing off the cold walls.

'She's even better than Micky was!'

Percy hadn't thought it possible, but the melody flowed more smoothly than the last time he'd heard it, the two tunes blending together seamlessly.

Finally having a moment to think, countless questions swirled within Percy's mind. Why was this happening? Was Micky about to regain his memories? Just how long had this woman practiced to get this good?

But he shoved all of them aside, losing himself in the beautiful music. He didn't even register the passage of time until the memory broke off again, everyone skipping to the next scene.

***

Micky was walking with his family again, trudging through the darkness. The howling winds were loud enough to mask both the crunches of their steps and their rhythmic breaths. The good news was that the girl was doing a little better than before, the short break having helped.

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"Mother… how much longer until we reach the bright side?" Percy asked, surprising himself.

“We’re nearly there…” the woman said, before sighing. “But don’t get too excited. You know we can’t stay there too long. As soon as your sister is better, we’ll have to leave.”

The boy nodded as Percy pondered his mother’s cryptic words. She hadn’t said much, but he could piece a couple of things together thanks to what he already knew about Huehue. According to his understanding of this place, the bright side was entirely under their enemies’ control. As for the dark side, it was scantly liveable. Especially for people at the lower grades.

‘I guess families on the run have to spend their lives roaming near the border, juggling their time between the two sides depending on whether they’re more pressed for warmth or cover…’

***

Percy couldn’t tell if this was the same memory, or if he’d skipped ahead again. Micky’s sister was back to doing worse, and even his mother looked more gaunt. Micky himself had grown tired, the cold seeping through his clothes, biting at his skin.

Still, it was something else that captured his attention. A crimson glint pierced through the horizon, casting its dim light upon them. The light instantly illuminated their surroundings a little, allowing Percy to make them out. A plain of red snow stretched as far as his vision did.

They weren’t close enough for him to feel any warmth yet. The sunlight Huehue received wasn’t that intense to begin with – even the places directly underneath the star weren’t very hot. But the tiniest difference might just be enough to save the girl’s life.

‘A small consolation, given how this ends.’ Percy would have sighed if he could.

Micky had already told him what had become of his family. Only, he wasn’t sure if it was days or years from now...

Either way, the others hadn’t a clue about that, so they just pressed onward with renewed vigour, their gazes locked on the eerie star. Suffice to say, Percy was more unsettled than they were, this being his first time watching such a strange sunrise.

Yet, its sheer beauty was undeniable. It was as if somebody had buried an enchanted ruby in the distance, the colossal gemstone slowly emerging from the snow with every step they took.

'A dawn governed by distance rather than time…'

***

When the memory next broke off, he found himself farther along the plain, the dim star having climbed a little higher. It was almost entirely above the horizon by now. The wind wasn't quite as cold as it had been, though the difference was barely noticeable. But that was the least of their problems.

It wasn't just the three of them anymore. Standing a few paces ahead, a group of men looked at Micky's family with unconcealed disdain. His mother was on her knees, seemingly pleading with them to spare her children. One of them stepped forth. Percy recognized him too! After all, he was the very person who'd ended this man's life!

'Mixcoatl.'

It was decades before they would meet, but – as a Yellow-cored adult – his appearance wouldn't change that much.

'So, today's the day after all, isn't it?'

Percy wanted nothing more than to stop it. To spare his friend from reliving the tragedy. But there was nothing he could do. Everything was already set in stone…

Oblivious to his thoughts, and unconcerned about the distraught mother's cries, Mixcoatl took one deep breath after another, flooding his body with mana. He manifested a couple of javelins in two of his hands, crossing the other pair of arms in front of his chest. By the time he reached them, the cyan lines had already lit up all over his body.

Micky followed suit, unwilling to take this without a fight. Percy noticed the boosting art helped a little with the cold enveloping them from outside, though Circulation probably did more harm than good, all

things considered. Their lungs protested as Micky kept filling them with cold air, a wave of numbness spreading out of their chest.

Still, the boy ignored the discomfort, rushing at the older man with a couple rods of his own, fully intent to lay his life down if he had to – to protect his loved ones.

Mixcoatl merely cackled at the sight, however. He shattered Micky's weapons with ease, the constructs not nearly as firm as they would eventually grow to be...

"Leave this one alive. He'll make a fine gladiator." he said, kicking Micky back to his companions.

The men held him down, but Micky didn't pay them any heed, struggling to lift his head up as he clawed against the snow. He raised his eyes just in time to watch the javelin pierce through both women with a sickening squelch, a splash of blood painting the snow an even deeper red.

Neither of them let a sound out, sobbing quietly in each other's arms, tears rolling down their cheeks as more blood dripped from their beaks.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!" Micky screamed, but noone cared.

Noone but Percy. Percy wanted to console his friend. To promise him they'd chase Mixcoatl to the ends of the universe if they had to. That they wouldn't rest until he was dead. But he already was, and this memory wasn't any less painful for it.

He felt the emptiness in Micky's chest, as the boy's heart was torn out. The sting in his eyes, as they welled with tears. The bitter lump nesting in his throat. The cold winds, lashing against his skin, uncaring about his sorrow. The memory was just as vivid as the day it happened.

And then… it was over.

Chapter 239: Resonance

"Percy! Are you ok?!" Nesha's distraught voice was the first thing he caught.

Prying his eyes open, he found himself back at the lakeside, resting on the same spot as before. Both girls were by his side, holding him in place. Probably to stop him from hurting himself. The patch he lay on was now covered in more mud than grass, likely thanks to all his thrashing. His clothes were stuck to his back, caked in a layer of dirt and sweat.

He nodded at his companions to calm them down, before turning his attention inwards.

The next thing he noticed was that his mana was out of control, flowing randomly around his body. A lot of it was swirling aimlessly through his channels, in patterns vaguely reminiscent of Synchronization. Yet the boosting art hadn't properly activated, due to a lack of mana and conscious control. Instead, much of it just spilled through his pores, slowly leaking out of his body.

Reigning it in took a couple of seconds. Well, most of it at least. Some got sucked by the ethereal cord in his chest. Stopping that seemed like too much trouble to be worth it at the moment…

"Wait… the cord! Micky!!"

Only then did he remember he wasn't in this alone. His familiar had been affected as much as he had. Gazing around, he soon spotted the crow a few metres away. Unlike him, however, Micky didn't even twitch. He was encased in a thin layer of ice, reminiscent of a frozen statue.

Percy's heart skipped a beat at the sight. Over the next minute or so, he repeatedly called to his familiar, trying to shake him awake. No response. Whatever the bird was experiencing had left him completely closed off to external stimuli.

They could try breaking the ice forcefully, of course, but that was dangerous. It covered the bird's organs as much as it did its plumage. If they made a mistake, they could easily injure Micky. The only safe option was to get him to thaw himself.

'I guess I'll have to reach him through the cord.'

Easier said than done. The darn thing still oscillated like crazy, as if it was attached to a tsunami. Percy was hesitant to describe the cord in physical terms – for the most part it was just a carrier for thoughts and memories. Still, he felt as if its width had more than doubled, stretched beyond its limits.

Percy frowned. This wasn't the first time the cord was acting up in some manner, but it had never been this bad before. Usually, it happened whenever his clones encountered some trouble during their return trip.

'Why is it so much more intense this time?'

Was it because of his proximity to Micky? Or the fact that the disturbance had affected both ends of the connection, rather than just the one? Either way, it didn't matter. He had to do something fast, lest the crow suffocated within its own construct.

Instead of trying to stop the mana flow, Percy embraced it. He pushed more soul mana through the cord, sending his thoughts alongside it, hoping to jolt his familiar awake.

'Come on, Micky! Say something!'

The first pulse yielded nothing. But Percy didn't give up, trying it a second and a third time. This had to work, somehow! If it failed, he didn't know what else to do!

'…caw…'

The response came strained and weak. Micky clearly wasn't in the mental space to articulate his thoughts properly. Still, this was a good sign!

'Micky, you need to calm your mana down. It's killing you!' Percy said, sending another pulse through the cord.

The ice mana in the crow's abdomen was out of control, much like Percy's had been a few minutes ago. Though the bird clearly had it even worse.

Percy waited a few moments, watching his familiar with bated breath. No reaction. The mana was still running rampant, showing no sign of stopping. He didn't know if the crow was having difficulty controlling it, or if he'd lost consciousness entirely again. Whatever the case was, they were swiftly running out of time.

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'I need to do more…'

Pulling more mana out of his core, he pushed it through their connection, trying to reach his familiar. Before his second core advanced to Orange, his mind had inadvertently slipped into the crow's body multiple times. Maybe he could recreate that?

A sound plan – in theory – but it wasn't working. No matter what he did, he appeared stuck in his own flesh, merely wasting his mana and his time for nothing.

Almost out of options, Percy took a step back. Rather than sending his mind through the cord, he focused on the ice mana on the other side, trying to yank control of it from afar. A rather desperate move, admittedly. Neither he nor Micky had ever accomplished anything of the sort. Their mana was generally their own, unless they volunteered it through their connection first. And that only worked with soul mana or its fused variant.

They couldn't just reach out and forcefully grab the other's mana without their consent…

'Or can we?'

Well, it was going to have to work, as Percy couldn't think of anything else.

Soon, a bunch of new complications arose. The fact that he'd never personally experienced the ice affinity wasn't helping. At least, he'd used water and air mana separately in the past. Percy focused on those memories. The times he had experienced intense cold might also make this easier. Like the memories he'd just watched with Micky. Or the time he possessed that alien lizard, all those years ago.

For a while, nothing happened. But he didn't let that discourage him, pushing harder. Rather than his mana or his thoughts, Percy was trying to send his willpower through the cord! To forcefully attach it to Micky's mana!

Eventually, he got a reaction. It was faint at first, but he saw the flow change course inside Micky's body ever so slightly. Perhaps it wasn't Percy's doing, but he had to believe it was. Anything else would spell Micky's doom.

Doubling down, he intensified his efforts, trying to think of Micky's cores as his own. The crow's mana as nothing more than an instrument to his will. A soft cracking sound emerged, as a surface shard fell off Micky's plumage.

'It's working!'

Percy kept disturbing the mana flow, drawing it back to Micky's abdomen. Whatever he failed to grab, he pushed outwards instead, expelling it from the bird's body. More cracks followed soon enough. Before long, the bird was able to breathe again, its emotions spilling over to Percy as it regained consciousness.

'Wow. That's intense.' Percy thought.

His own relief was instantly suppressed by the crow's sorrow and confusion. A strange thing, considering that they'd long learned to keep their thoughts to themselves. Not that he blamed his friend for feeling this way, of course. Micky had just watched his family getting butchered. A family that, until earlier that day, he hadn't even remembered.

In any case, Percy was glad that the danger had passed, but they still had to do something about the cord. It kept shaking, drawing his mana against his will. It was also the reason for their emotions leaking through.

'Then again, it's not all bad…'

While they couldn't have it continue its rampage, the upsides of the transformation were undeniable. Percy hadn't thought about it much earlier, but his mana had flowed more easily, and in greater

amounts than ever before. In fact, he was confident he wouldn't have managed to commandeer Micky's ice mana if not for this.

The song had been the trigger for more than the crow's memory. Whatever this power was, they couldn't afford to let it slip through their fingers.

Percy sent another pulse, this time paying closer attention to the cord. The mana passed through it like a wave, briefly calming the connection down.

'This could work…'

Reaching out to Micky, he navigated through the sea of tangled thoughts and raging emotions plaguing the both of them, explaining the situation. They had to work together to regain ownership of their bond.

"Percy! Can you take a moment to explain what's going on?!" Elaine asked, having lost her patience.

"The gist of it is that we're trying to turn the accident into something beneficial for us." he replied succinctly.

A longer explanation would have to wait.

Activating Synchronization properly this time, Percy gathered a lot of mana before sending it along in a dense packet. As soon as Micky received it, he bounced it right back, in accordance to his earlier instructions.

They kept going back and forth for over an hour, the cord calming down a little every time the mana passed through it. The influx of emotions also died down, as Percy and Micky slowly managed to force the connection back under their control.

"Finally… it's done." he exhaled, allowing his boosting art to come undone.

That said, there were plenty of things still begging for his attention. While Micky had survived the ordeal, the crow's heart was still in turmoil. Percy had never really explained to him where he had come from, nor had the crow ever thought to ask. But there was no avoiding it any longer. A big conversation was clearly overdue…

And then, there was the new power they had unlocked. The cord had calmed down, but it was still stronger than ever. Their thoughts and mana alike passed through it with no hindrance whatsoever. Not to mention the new ability of controlling each other's mana that they'd have to explore more carefully.

For now, however, Percy was content just reading the notification.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Secret Art: Familiar – Crude -> Secret Art: Soul Resonance – Refined!]

Chapter 240: Micky's choice

"So… that four-armed boy in the vision… you're saying that was me?" Micky asked once everything had calmed down.

Percy nodded. Evidently, his familiar hadn't truly regained his memories just yet. Not in any complete sense, at least. He'd merely experienced those scenes as an outside observer – much like Percy had. Still, the crow's time with his old family had inevitably sparked several questions.

Percy proceeded to recount his experience on Huehue, to help Micky understand his origin. Elaine and Nesha also listened in, sitting quietly at the side. The former's expression remained unperturbed – it wasn't her first time hearing the story. Nesha, on the other hand, was a lot more curious. Percy had briefly explained how his familiar had been created, but not in detail.

"Now that we know it's possible for you to regain your memories, we can work on it together." Percy said upon concluding the explanation. "But only if you want to."

The earlier development was undeniable proof that the old Micky was still buried in there somewhere, waiting to be dug out. After all, the flashback couldn't have popped out of thin air.

But Percy's feelings on the matter were rather mixed. Had this been years ago, he'd have been ecstatic. This had all started with a – rash and, possibly misguided – attempt to save his friend's life. At the time, he hadn't expected Micky would lose all his memories, starting over from a blank slate. The guilt over that still gnawed at him to this day. Suffice to say, helping his friend regain his identity was something he'd wanted the whole time.

Yet, there was so much more to consider. The new Micky wasn't just a young, oblivious bird anymore. He was essentially his own person by now. Smart, energetic and fully capable of communication. Percy's closest family. Somebody he'd spent the better part of the last decade with.

As much as he owed the old Micky, he'd only spent a couple days with him by comparison. And he had no idea how the lost memories might affect his familiar. Percy had no intention of doing anything drastic without hearing the crow's opinion first.

"I'll do it. I want to remember." the bird replied after deliberating for a few minutes.

"Are you sure? I don't know how long it'll take, but there's no going back."

The bird remained silent, its eyes glinting with determination. Percy sighed. He didn't know if this was the correct choice, but he understood where Micky was coming from.

His soul was made of three components – the stillborn bird's, Percy's and the original Micky's. The last one was arguably the most important part of his identity. After all, the bird had no memories or intelligence of its own, and Percy's soul would have only produced another clone if left by itself. Instead, it was the gladiator he owed his individuality to. Or even the very reason for his existence. Naturally, Micky wanted to know more about that person.

"Ok then. In addition to our other projects, we'll make some time for the ocarina. If we're lucky, it might jog another memory or two…"

And just like that, Percy's schedule got filled to the brim again. He hadn't even had a full day to digest his gains from the Vault when all of this happened. Now, he had a newly evolved Secret Art to explore, and to help his friend recover his memories. Not to mention that they were still travelling to the Thirsty Valley.

“Anyway, it’s getting late. Why don’t you guys head back to town? I’ll stay with Micky.” he said.

“Is that wise?” Elaine asked. “Shouldn’t one of us stay with each of you, in case your connection acts up again?”

Percy shook his head.

“The cord is currently under control, and we won’t be doing any more dumb experiments tonight. We’ll just sleep and take turns on guard duty.”

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Elaine was about to protest, but Nesha grabbed her hand, dragging her along.

“Come on. He’s right. When was the last time you slept on a proper bed? Take advantage until we hit the road again…”

***

Percy felt a lot better come morning. His head still hurt a little, though not as much as yesterday. He could have used a few more hours of sleep, but he’d survive. At least, nothing else had happened. The cord had reverted to its original state at some point while he was asleep. Still, he felt they could expand it again if they wanted, without much effort…

‘Hmmm?’

Looking at the empty space stretching between him and Micky – who was currently perched on a nearby tree – he noticed something peculiar. A faint thin line was there, linking his chest to the crow’s.

“Since when is the ethereal cord visible to the naked eye?” he asked, though it didn’t take a genius to guess the answer.

On second thought, it shouldn't be visible to the naked eye, per se. It was probably his mutation doing the heavy lifting, drawing from his Status to make this possible. As for why he hadn't noticed it the night before? Well, the darkness likely hadn't helped. His mind had also been occupied by other things too.

At any rate, Percy was tempted to send some soul mana to Micky, to observe how the connection worked with his eyes. Sadly, he'd already promised Elaine not to do any experiments in her absence.

Sighing, he resisted the urge. Calling Micky over, he handed him some Aurora Dew, the two of them drinking their morning dose together.

'These are the last ones… We'll have to drink a regular elixir in the afternoon.'

It wasn't ideal, but Nesha hadn't found any suitable deattunement ingredients.

'Man, I really hope the Holy Child leaves today. We need to get a move on…'

The good news was that Nesha had bought several crystal tulips for him. He had more than enough to experiment to his heart's content, brewing multiple doses of trollsfury potion. He'd feel a lot safer with it too, the potion having already proven its worth against Jason.

Over the next few minutes, Percy used the Moirais' technique to cleanse both of his cores, while setting his alchemy tools up.

'Micky. Make sure to warn me if you spot anybody coming this way.'

***

The sun was already at its apex when Elaine and Nesha came back, carrying some freshly baked bread with them. By now, Percy had finished brewing, a newly bought leather flask strapped to his waist. He'd filled it up with even more potion than he'd used the last time. And there was some leftover too, which he'd stored in his amulet for a rainy day.

“You seem to be in a good mood.” Nesha noted, handing him his lunch.

“I’ll be in an even better one if you tell me the brat is gone.” Percy replied, biting a steaming chunk off the bread.

“Afraid not.” Elaine pitched in. “Though we did hear a few rumours about him. We still have no idea how long they’re staying here, but we do know where they’re going. Same place as us.”

Percy nearly spat his food out, his face twisting into a grimace. This was exactly what he’d been afraid of. Not that it was strange for a Holy Child to travel to the Thirsty Valley – that was precisely why that place even existed.

But it was quite inconvenient for them. In theory, they could try rushing out today and hope the Green-born’s entourage never caught up. Though he’d rather not risk it. Those people all had higher grades, so they probably travelled much faster than they did.

“Do you want to take a detour? It’ll add a few weeks to our journey, but it might still be worth it if we leave now.” Nesha suggested.

Percy considered it. It wasn’t a bad idea. Now that they knew where the kid was headed, leaving via a different route should be fine.

“Alright. But we’ll leave at night. Micky should spend the rest of the afternoon using Regulation to preserve his stamina for the trip.”

The crow didn’t need to be told twice. Or even once for that matter. He’d already activated his Wild Art the moment he saw Elaine and Nesha walking over.

“What should we do until then?” Nesha asked.

Percy handed her a piece of paper. He’d drawn her an example of the shape rune to practice on. Of course, the symbol itself wouldn’t be enough to activate the enchantment – he’d have to share some

additional insight with her over the coming days. Still, learning to draw the rune was a necessary step. It should keep her busy for a few hours.

“If you finish early, continue working on Circulation. Meanwhile, I’ll be sending out another clone. Now that I’m done with Rambert and the Vault, I need to go back to spamming them every couple of days. As for Elaine…”

He flashed his cousin an apologetic expression. He didn’t really have anything for her. She didn’t seem to mind, however, waving his concern off with a chuckle.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve been working on a couple new spells of my own over the last couple of years. I guess it’s as good a time as any to get back to that.”

And with that, everyone got started on their tasks. The Holy Child’s presence had really messed their plans up, but hopefully they wouldn’t have to worry about him after tonight…