Wanderer 361

Chapter 361 – A meeting of gods (2)

"So, what are we waiting for?!" Poseidon asked. "Bring him in already! Lock him in a room and have him send clones and impregnate women! We don't have that long! He's just a Red-born – he'll die of old age in the blink of an eye!"

Many of the gods nodded, though a few looked at him in disdain. Everyone in the hall – both the men and the women – had taken many mortal consorts over the millennia, siring countless children. They did that partly to alleviate the boredom that came with their long lives, and partly because it was good for Remior – to pass their blessings down and improve the quality of the future Green-borns.

But no one could compare with Poseidon, who constantly maintained a most excessive harem of dozens of women, indulging in all sorts of carnal pleasures on a regular basis.

That said, Phoebe had to admit he wasn't exactly wrong about Percy. Remior had never produced a bloodline even remotely as valuable. She might have even agreed with him if she didn't have better plans for the boy already.

"I still find this difficult to accept." Artemis said. "This is all impressive stuff, to be sure, but why are we just letting him get away with killing our Holy Children? Why do we care whether he knows we're onto him? His opinion is wholly inconsequential!"

Phoebe turned to Ares who had remained silent throughout the meeting. The red-haired god looked back at her, a question lingering in his fiery eyes.

She nodded at him.

"You're in charge of our expeditions. In your view, what is the most important resource Remior currently lacks?"

All eyes turned to look at the god of war as he took a few moments to think about it. In some ways, he was the polar opposite of Poseidon. After Phoebe and Zeus, Ares was the most respected in the

pantheon. Everyone understood he had an extremely dangerous job, as he was the one who risked his life out there, leading their demigods as they travelled to alien worlds for the sake of their own.

Eventually, he spoke.

“There are all sorts of things that would help us. Another Decree… a way to turn our Yellow-borns into gods… elevating our alchemy and runecrafting… giving all our demigods a second core… All of that is important. But the number one thing holding us back is the relative weakness of our strike force…”

Many faces lit up in understanding, realizing where the god was going with this. It was a well-known fact that gods couldn’t easily step foot on foreign worlds without catastrophic consequences. This wasn’t a problem when discussing barren planets, as they could deploy their demigods and loot whatever resources they needed from them – no Blue or Green, beast or sapient, could possibly compete with a demigod.

But barren worlds didn’t have that many things of value either. The best resources were found on other lesser springs, and most of them had gods protecting them. Since Remior couldn’t deploy their own gods there, they had to rely on their demigods to fight against actual gods.

Naturally, it was always a bloodbath. It took dozens of demigods to hold a god back even briefly. And the losses were inevitably monumental. It was rarely worth it. Raising the average level of their Green-borns would go a long way – and they were definitely going to work on that too – but there was something that would help them a great deal more…

“But he can never reach that level!” Hera exclaimed, likely guessing what Phoebe had in mind. “Even if he gets a spell powerful enough, he has to be a demigod for that to matter! At most, we could maybe push him to Violet or White… And even that would be a tall order! Bridging the gap from Red-borns to Green-borns is something even the Moirais have failed to do!”

Phoebe grinned.

“You should have read his Status, Hera.”

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She lifted her gaze from the goddess, scanning the room. Her eyes briefly lingered on each of the others' faces before she spoke again.

"He had three Masterful spells at Orange." she said, watching their expressions change again. "He's improved more since then. He's defeated Acton in single combat after reaching Yellow with both cores. If it's him… I'm not only confident he'll get the spell… I think he'll go a step farther than others before him. Even at White or Violet… it might just be enough. And even if he can't quite get to that level, he'll definitely surpass a regular demigod, so he'll make a great addition to the strike team regardless."

The hall broke into chatter as the gods and goddesses discussed this with one another. They all understood the implied meaning in her words. Phoebe was talking about a special designation for certain mortals.

It wasn't a grade – it was more of a title. Much like titans were simply gods who had created a Decree, there was a similar feat for mortals. Though individuals like that were even rarer than titans. They weren't necessarily as valuable as them, but they were certainly more important than the average god.

One thing worth remembering was that Remior had already produced three titans in its entire history, and over a hundred gods. But they'd never had one of them. Even among the greater springs, very few did. And of course, when such individuals became gods themselves, they tended to stand out among their peers. Though this part was probably not applicable to Percy, as Phoebe also doubted he could make it that far.

She waited for the commotion to die down before continuing.

"In any case, you all know mages don't grow without danger," she said, getting a round of nods back.

In the past, they'd tried to shelter an entire generation of Green-borns, never sending them out of Remior – making sure every last one lived until the very end of their lifespan. At the time, they'd amassed the most demigods they'd ever had at any given point. Over twenty thousand of them, living over a hundred thousand years each. For that, the gods had sacrificed countless opportunities, all for the sake of producing a large batch of new gods all at once.

The end result?

Not a single one of those demigods managed to take the final step, marking the experiment as a colossal failure. Of course, the gods had feared it would turn out like that from the start – and many had spoken up against it. It was a well-known fact that talents needed danger and adversity to blossom. But they hadn't been able to resist the temptation, and Remior was still recovering from the losses, having fallen behind many of their rivals.

"What if he dies?" Zeus asked. "If not while under our protection, then out there among the stars."

"If he dies, he dies." Phoebe said. "I've obviously documented everything he has brought back, and I'll spread it around Remior sooner rather than later. Even if something happens to him from here on out, we won't end up empty handed. But I still want to give this a shot."

"Lady Phoebe… I understand where you're coming from, but I maintain that it's safer to capitalize on his ability and ignore his own potential." Poseidon protested, as all eyes turned to him once more. "Call me a coward if you want, but I don't want to lose our most promising bloodline on a gamble."

"You're all gods, aren't you?" she snapped back. "You understand better than anyone how important it is to take a risk every now and then. The things he's already brought us are plenty. Besides, his bloodline and his personal strength go hand in hand. The more things he brings back, the stronger he gets. The stronger he gets, the more clones he can send, and the longer his lifespan will be. His clones will be able to achieve more too."

She sighed.

"I understand he may fail. But I'm a greedy woman. Always have been. Becoming a goddess only made me greedier. I want it all. I want him to scour the cosmos and loot everything there is to get. And I want him to grow as strong as possible too."

She closed her eyes, not even bothering to hear their opinions. She'd already made her mind up, and she'd even done them the courtesy of sharing her thoughts with them.

Next, she looked at Hermes.

“A week from now, I want you to spread the message to the Great Houses that Percy of House Avalon – the same person who is behind the Aurora Dew – is also the owner of the two-cored crow. And that he snuck into the Thirsty Valley and murdered two Holy Children. Spread a more accurate poster of him too. Glowing eyes with slit pupils, long dark hair and a beard.”

She turned to the others again.

“The Root and the Great Houses are allowed to do as they please with this information. But I don’t want a single Green-born to get involved in any way. The foolish Parnassus boy brought this upon himself – he won’t be missed. That said, we can’t let our Holy Children keep dying either.”

The others nodded in understanding, though she didn’t pay them any heed. She was already walking away, her thoughts drifting back to the daring boy with the piercing eyes who had turned their world upside down in just a few short years.

The corner of her lips curled upwards.

‘Don’t let me down, Percy.’

If this worked, Remior might finally get one too…

A paragon.

[END OF BOOK 3: SHADOW OF THE HOLY CHILD]

Chapter 362 – [Redacted]

Air and ambient mana rushed toward Percy, a teal hurricane of playful wisps dancing around his body, leaving blazing trails behind them. Many of the drifting globules approached him too, only to be knocked away by the violent torrents.

He sat cross-legged, his unkempt hair flaring erratically as beads of blood and sweat evaporated off his swollen muscles. Getting used to his newly evolved boosting art was important. Powerful as it was, he

didn’t want to leave himself half-crippled after every fight. But this wasn’t the only purpose of his exercise.

His mana flooded the ring on his finger, the object greedily drinking the substance before spitting a part of it back out. The augmented mana sported a darker hue, as did the glowing lines along his arm. They were mostly grey with a faint blueish tint, though they swiftly faded into their previous colour as they dispersed through his body.

A few lines didn’t, however, snaking directly into the core in his sternum, thanks to his deliberate efforts to accelerate the internalization of the blessing. It felt heavier than the rest of his mana. It was as if the ring had opened up a new door in his mind, allowing the substance to evolve in a direction he couldn’t have even perceived without it.

Percy wasn’t the only one working hard either.

Both of his clones were still inside the Valley, as he figured it was inefficient to send them outside the temporal acceleration again. Even if he kept them with him until he left, they would only lose a little over a week of travelling, at most – from their perspective – which wasn’t even worth mentioning compared to the several months of more productive things they could be doing here instead. Before his fight with the Holy Child, his options had been rather limited, but things had changed since the Green-born’s death.

One was inside Micky’s body, working alongside the familiar to develop his spells and make up for the lost years. The other was still with Nesha, the two discussing their future plans with Elaine. They all understood they had to leave this place very soon – for multiple reasons – though they had yet to decide what each of them was going to do moving forward.

In any case, Percy fully trusted his clone to figure things out – they were the same person, after all – so he didn’t pay any attention to their conversation. They could just brief him in later.

Right now, he was too busy with his own training to care.

Mastering the Carnival and absorbing the concept weren’t the only things he was working on. In his hands, he was playing around with different blends of soft and crystallized mana, finally having the time to perfect his mana threads. This was what he had originally planned to do during his time in the Valley,

before Acton and his trip to Felmara prompted him to adjust course. He had intended for the new Spectral Art to be his first Masterful spell, as he couldn't have imagined that he would register half a dozen others beforehand.

'Not that it's a bad thing.'

Even the regular Dance would have arguably been more impactful than the mana threads, let alone the upgraded version. Perhaps, he should be thanking Acton for putting so much pressure on him.

Sighing, he threw one last glance at the broken string in his hands. It was definitely thin enough to weave a cloth out of, but it had turned out much more brittle than he'd intended. He was about to scrap the failed construct and move on to the next combination when he sensed something strange going on in his core.

Normally, he had to split off part of his attention to draw the augmented mana to his sternum, and he still lost much of it along the way. Right now, it was heading there on its own, however, as if the organ was inviting it over by itself.

'Is it…?'

The old god sent a mental nod back.

'Should be. A lot sooner than I had expected too…'

Percy's heart skipped a beat. It had barely been a month since his fight with Acton, so not even a full year had passed since he got the ring. Zoris clearly hadn't lied about his boosting art speeding things along.

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Over the next few seconds, he watched with bated breath as the flow continued to intensify, the mana in his core feeling heavier and heavier. It reminded him a little of the time his familiar had eaten the lotus petal, though a few things were different.

Unlike the conflict between the air and water affinities that the crow had experienced, the new concept was currently being welcomed with open arms. Perhaps that made sense, since the blessing of permanence was derived from the soul affinity, so it naturally fit his core like a glove.

Regardless, it still put some strain onto the organ. It felt bloated, a strange pressure slamming against the crystalline walls, threatening to crack the core open from within. Or rather, it didn't feel quite as serious. He didn't think he was in any actual danger, and he figured it wouldn't take him long to grow used to the mild discomfort. But he also understood it would be a bad idea to try and stuff a second blessing into the same core while he was still a mortal.

Soon, the pressure reached its apex, the concept clicking in his mind as it fully settled into place. Almost immediately, the mana spreading out of his chest changed colour, the dull grey substance flooding his body in much greater volumes than before. He could tell he no longer needed the ring – anything the priceless artifact did, he could now accomplish without it.

Grinning, he opened his Status, eager to check that everything had gone well.

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Blessing:

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'Hey, Zoris… Do you think I can still get a blessing for my other core?' he asked, some hope making its way to his eyes.

'Probably,' the god shrugged. 'I've never seen a Moirai in person, but based on what I know about cores and concepts, I don't see why not.'

Percy's smile widened. A ring related to the pure affinity was even more likely to exist. In fact, he was willing to bet there were several of them around the universe. Not that it would be easy to get his hands on another, but the possibility was there.

He shook his head.

‘Anyway… let’s focus on my current blessing before I start worrying about the next one.’

The entry said it would strengthen his soul. Technically, that had already happened. After months of flooding his channels with the enhanced mana, he could clearly see that the ethereal silhouette resting inside his flesh now sported a much darker hue. If he wanted, he could have already started sending out more clones or absorbing a second fiend.

The only reason he hadn’t tried any of that yet, was because Zoris had advised him to wait. Now that he no longer had to worry about losing the ring and its benefits, he was free to explore his new abilities to his heart’s content.

Pushing his boosting art to its limits, he watched the last of the glowing lines change colours, the burning wisps outside his body following suit. Both his channels and the external flow functioned as extensions of his core, so they even seemed to attach the new concept to the ambient mana on their own – to an extent.

Fusing it with his pure mana wasn’t that difficult either. Unlike Gabe’s blessing which turned his mana hotter and messed with the fragile balance between his two affinities, the blessing of permanence didn’t seem to present much of an obstacle in Percy’s case. The new properties didn’t affect the way it interacted with the cyan mana in the slightest. At the same time, there wasn’t much of a benefit to adding the blessing into the mixture, as it didn’t really affect any of his spells either.

‘I guess most soul users wouldn’t have been as excited as me about this particular concept…’

Without his bloodline or the technique to absorb spectral fiends, the blessing wasn’t nearly that useful. He could even imagine some mortals refusing to internalize it, thinking it wouldn’t be worth it. At least, that should be the case if they belonged to a powerful faction that owned a better ring for them to choose from.

‘Actually, that’s another thing I was wondering about… I know I can’t absorb a second blessing into the same core, but do you think I could still use the ring if I found another for the soul affinity?’

‘How many rings did you say Svarog made before they stopped him?’ Zoris asked. ‘From what I recall, he’d only done this to a couple dozen gods before me.’

‘I was told he created ninety-nine rings in total.’ Percy said.

‘Then, I would be surprised if a second soul ring even exists. As you know, only about 1% of sapients in the universe have a rare affinity. As for soul users in particular, they should be rarer still. You should be counting your lucky stars that you even found me – let alone asking for another,’ the god said, shooting Percy’s idea down.

Yet, he wasn’t done.

‘But to answer your question… If another ring exists – and that’s a huge if – I imagine it would be safe as long as you only use it briefly and you take it off as soon as you are done. Preferably, wait a couple of weeks before each use too. Whatever you do, you mustn’t let a second concept accumulate in the same core.’

Percy nodded, done with the hypotheticals for now.

It was time for some tangible benefits.

Chapter 363 – Cords and traits

A great thing that had come with Elaine’s advancement a few months back, was the same privilege Acton and his men had enjoyed for so long. The girl’s Blue core served as quite the deterrent, ensuring that no beasts ever attacked the group of their own volition. Of course, it wouldn’t have been hard for them to deal with even the strongest creatures in the Valley, but it was nice they didn’t get their training constantly interrupted.

Suffice to say, it was with great peace of mind that Percy was currently preparing his soul clones, shoving them one after the other into the Yellow beasts Micky delivered him. He’d grown much better at this over the years, due to his experience, his sturdier soul and his ever-increasing mana regeneration. Right now, each attempt only took him a few minutes, though he wanted to get even faster at it, considering how frequently he would be creating his clones now.

As for how many he could have at once?

Well, Percy had already made three more – in addition to the ones still inside Micky and Nesha – bringing the total number of cords to six. And he had yet to hit his limit. He was currently getting ready to shove the fourth into a half-dead leopard his familiar was holding down in front of him.

Activating his bloodline, he watched the ghostly claw tear a chunk off his shoulder – he had to fashion the clones out of random spots by now – letting the dull grey wisp seep into the feline's injuries.

Sadly, things didn't go as smoothly this time.

The moment the seventh piece got severed off his soul, a wave of vertigo slammed into his brain, as he felt his consciousness sink into the cords. Only this time, there were several of them attached to him, and they were all currently near him – well within his communication range – so things got quite chaotic.

A flurry of different sensations rushed at him all at once, as he clicked Micky's beak in annoyance, while struggling to hold his footing in the stag's body, feeling Nesha's chuckle in his throat as his girlfriend laughed at his cousin's joke. At the same time, a bunch of complaints rang through his soul, his other clones clearly experiencing similar issues.

'What the hell are you doing?' 'Call one of us back already!' 'It's too many!'

Sighing, he navigated the network of cords, forcing his consciousness back to his main body. He turned back to the leopard by his feet.

'You… The new guy… Drop the body. It appears six is our current limit.'

It wasn't until a few seconds later that one of the wisps returned, slipping back into his shoulder. Only then did his soul stabilize again, allowing him to relax. Next, his lips curled up. He'd be lying if he said he wouldn't have loved another slot or ten, but this was already more than he had expected. Going into the experiment, he had prepared himself to only get one more cord. As it turned out, the blessing had actually doubled his capacity!

Of course, one would still be permanently occupied by his familiar, but that still meant he could have five clones out at the same time! Before his advancement, he'd been stuck with one!

'Like this, it won't even matter that much that I lost a bit over a decade inside the Valley…'

If he could keep sending so many clones over the following centuries or even millennia, the few adventures he had missed out on would barely be a drop in the bucket. Granted, not all his slots would always be available. For instance, he planned to keep a clone in Micky for the foreseeable future, to practice their collaboration some more. He would inevitably have to tie up another into his wasp familiar, assuming he managed to create one. And that didn't even account for whatever other things might come up.

On the flipside, it also meant he would likely get two new slots each time both of his cords advanced, rather than one. At Blue, he would have ten! It was still a mere fraction of what his grandpa had, but for Percy? This was an immeasurably valuable resource!

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'Alright, come back everybody. The party's over,' he told the clones still occupying the beasts.

He'd kept them all nearby while he explored his new limits, so that he could retrieve them at a moment's notice in case something went wrong. But it seemed he might be able to send a few outside the Valley anyway, after all.

Over the next few minutes, he patched up his injuries, allowing two of his clones to shoot off toward the stars. He kept the last slot available, however. Based on what Nesha and Elaine were discussing, it appeared the sixth cord might be needed on Remior soon.

But that was for later.

Right now, there was one more thing he wanted to do. Percy wasn't planning to waste a single day before absorbing his second fiend! And he was a lot more confident about it too, compared to his previous attempt.

Last time, he had struggled to amass enough soul mana to attract a fiend all the way to Remior. He'd been forced to preserve several Orange and Yellow souls over a long period of time, having his familiar consume them all at once – along with a freshly killed Green, to supplement his own reserves. He'd even converted his pure mana, to give himself another edge. Despite his preparations, he had barely made it.

But a lot had changed since then.

Most importantly, Percy was currently inside the Thirsty Valley, so time flowed twenty times faster for him than it did for the rest of the universe. That alone should be more than enough to seal the deal. In addition, he had also advanced, and even upgraded his boosting art. The Ring of Sacrilege… or the blessing… or perhaps both… appeared to be irresistible to the creatures too. More so than regular soul mana, at least. Finally, Micky could get him a lot more soul mana from the Green beasts around the Valley.

'Actually, it might be a good idea to hold back a little. I'd rather not attract a whole swarm of them…'

Pushing his boosting art to its limits, he spent some time healing all of his injuries, before inflicting a series of precise incisions along his soul. Next, he allowed the mana to spill out of the wounds, lacing it with all sorts of negative emotions such as pain and fear, making himself appear like an injured soul on the verge of death.

A grey mist permeated the area around him, drawing his companions' attention. Though they didn't say anything. Nesha and Micky had already seen him do something similar before, and they had his clones with them to explain what was going on.

Excited as he was to get another trait, Percy couldn't help but turn to the wise god resting on his finger once more, asking him a few more questions about it as they waited for the fiend to take the bait.

'By the way, Sol told me the type of fiend each person can get is fixed. I'm guessing you know some way to control it?'

'The girl was right. Even if you forcefully absorb something you're incompatible with, you'll just end up with some debilitating injuries. If you're lucky, that is.'

Percy frowned, having expected the god to know of some way to bypass that limitation. If this was the case, it raised a new problem.

'Wait, so does that mean I'll just attract another Argalios – or whatever it's called? How would that even work? Is there any point to stacking the same trait three times?'

'You're unlikely to get the same fiend twice.' Zoris explained. 'Not necessarily impossible, mind you. I've seen it happen. But it's extremely rare. The way it works, each soul is compatible with exactly one type of fiend at any given time. However, absorbing a trait alters your soul at a fundamental level, which makes you compatible with a different one. As for what you get? It's up to luck. I've never heard of a way to change it.'

Hearing the god's words, Percy exhaled in relief. Though he was still a little scared he might draw the short end of the stick through some cosmic level of bad luck. Regardless, Zoris's explanation only made him more curious.

'Then what about Sol? If absorbing fiends is so peculiar, then how did she manage to get a trait from my clone?'

A wave of irritation soon flooded his soul. And Percy even sensed some undisguised traces of envy mixed with it.

'How should I know?! Do you think there's anything normal about that bloodline of yours?!'

Percy shrugged. He did have a few more questions for the god, but he didn't get the chance to voice them.

A bunch of silver objects glinted in the distance, approaching at a ridiculous speed. The globules still messed with regular sight and Mana Sense, but not Soul Vision. Though the grey mist around him obscured everything somewhat. Either way, his new fiend was clearly here. And sure enough, it had brought company this time…

Multiple tiny comets crashed into his soul, burrowing into his injuries. Percy winced as the creatures wormed their way through his wounds, and then his channels, tearing everything in their path.

But he didn't panic.

Moving his mana around, he clamped down on them, stopping each in their tracks. A whopping seven of them.

And they all looked and acted the same.

Chapter 364 – Second trait

Luckily, Percy's soul was several times sturdier than the last time he'd absorbed a fiend. If not, having so many of them wreaking havoc inside his channels could have been an issue. Pushing six of the creatures out of his pores, he allowed his mana to incinerate them completely, keeping only the last one inside his body.

'Be gentler with it, or you won't be able to absorb it.' Zoris advised.

Percy nodded. He had already discovered how destructive his mana could be to the fiends while he used his boosting art at full strength. If it hadn't been for that, he and Sol would have probably absorbed a whole bunch of fiends by accident while fighting atop the Mirror Lake. After all, they'd burned scores of them with the silver wisps, before circulating the same mana through their souls.

And since both their channels and the wisps temporarily functioned as extensions of their cores with the Dance active, it was entirely possible for them to inadvertently acquire a lot of traits they couldn't handle. Fortunately, it appeared the fiends couldn't pass their traits if they were damaged too thoroughly.

Deactivating the Carnival, Percy then dragged the captured creature to his sternum, trapping it inside his core. Only then did he get the chance to examine it more carefully. Unlike the spider-like Argalios he had absorbed before, this one vaguely resembled a moth. It was covered in long fur… No. It was more accurate to call it fluff. Not the kind of thing one would expect to see on an insect. Then again, these weren't insects, were they?

‘At least it’s a different one…’ he exhaled in relief.

That was by far the most important thing. As long as he didn’t get Weaving again, he was sure he’d find a use for it.

‘A Nyctovios… That’s the same fiend your Yellow-born friend has absorbed.’ Zoris explained.

Percy raised an eyebrow.

‘Latt?’ he asked, getting a mental nod back.

His heart skipped a beat. It was among those he had hoped for the most, along with Rei’s Composing trait. It sounded like a broadly useful one. That said, Percy had liked pretty much every trait he had ever heard of, so he knew he would have been just as excited about anything else…

Grinding the fiend down, he watched it squirm as chunks flaked off its body, the steady flow of mana soon disseminating its essence through Percy’s soul. This instantly gave him an itch from head to toe, as if somebody had emptied several buckets of ants inside his soul channels. It was accompanied by a wave of weakness, just like the last time. It didn’t hurt though – it was just a little uncomfortable – so he pressed on.

At least, that was the case at first…

‘I suggest you brace yourself.’ Zoris said once Percy was about 30% done. ‘Things are about to get nasty.’

Percy didn’t even get the chance to ask the god what he meant, when something changed. Numerous long hairs sprouted all over his soul, covering him in a layer of fluff only visible through Soul Vision. Seeing this, Percy couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. This was new. It hadn’t affected him much yet, other than intensifying the itching sensation slightly. But the god’s warning gave him a bad premonition.

Sure enough, a second change occurred just seconds later.

This time, a series of thin, spider-like legs grew among the hairs, flailing erratically in all sorts of directions. The two features appeared to coexist peacefully for the briefest of instants, but that didn't last. With little to no warning, the legs bent almost all the way, pointing at the roots of the hairs. Then, they plunged into Percy's soul, violently trying to dig their competition out. Seemingly in response to that, the hairs wrapped themselves around the appendices too, trying to pull them apart.

'Ugh! What the hell is going on?!' Percy cursed, falling to his knees.

It hurt even more than when he created his clones or used his boosting art. It felt like every inch of his soul was trying to eat itself.

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'Keep grinding away at the fiend! If you don't complete the process, the Argalios will win out, and you'll have to start over later!'

Percy grimaced.

'You know, you could have warned me about this…'

Gritting his teeth, he fought through the pain, resuming his work. It was hard to focus on just his core when his whole soul was crumbling from within, but he understood he didn't have a choice. It didn't help that the more he empowered the new trait, the more violently it fought against the old one.

At some point, Percy briefly registered that his companions had surrounded him, their blurry silhouettes standing by the corner of his eyes as their worried voices sounded muffled in his ears. He didn't have the mental capacity to spare them any attention, however, busy as he was trying not to waste his previous efforts.

It felt like hours had passed by the time he was done, though he knew from experience it shouldn't have been more than a few minutes. Even after he finished absorbing the fiend, the two traits continued to fight for a while longer, this time on equal grounds.

The conflict died down gradually, the two armies slowly accepting that neither of them would be claiming victory today. It wasn't until both the fluff and the spider-like appendices had fully receded that Percy allowed himself to heave a sigh of relief.

His soul was in tatters, and he really didn't feel like relying on his boosting art to heal himself any faster. Given the state he was currently in, the spell might even hurt more than it helped. Luckily, some soul mana soon gushed through the cord in his sternum, flooding his injuries. Micky had clearly found something to munch on.

'Thanks for the help.'

Opening his eyes, he saw Elaine and Nesha standing over him, their faces pale. Though some colour returned to them once the girls realized he was okay. Along with their relief, Percy spotted some unconcealed irritation, however, Elaine giving him a semi-playful kick to his side.

"And here I thought you were done pulling stunts like that!" she said.

Percy chuckled bitterly.

"Sorry for worrying you again. I promise I'll only do this one more time," he said, earning himself a few more kicks – this time Nesha joining too.

Outwardly, he was playing it cool, but he shuddered internally upon imagining how much worse it would be with three traits fighting inside his soul.

'No wonder you aren't supposed to try this without the blessing…'

'I suggest you wait a while before doing this again. Technically, it should be safe for you a couple months from now, but I recommend you give it a lot longer than that – just in case.' Zoris said.

Percy nodded. He was still a little mad at the god for not giving him a proper heads up, but he also understood Zoris didn't owe him anything. All the help the old deity had given him was kindness he had yet to earn.

Shaking the distracting thoughts out of his head, he then pulled up his Status, checking up on his new trait.

Spectral traits:

And there it was. For somebody who worked as hard as Percy, this was among the best traits he could have received. He would be able to sneak so much more training each day, and he wouldn't even need someone to protect him every night.

Even better, if this was anything like Weaving, he should be able to pass the ability on to all his clones – at least temporarily, while he inhabited their bodies – which made it that much more valuable. He was tempted to replace the clones in Nesha and Micky's bodies already, though he ultimately decided to wait a few days for his soul to heal some more.

'Not to sound too ungrateful – since I know how much this will help me down the line – but I think I'll miss sleeping every now and then.'

'You can actually learn to bypass the trait with some practice if you want.' Zoris said, getting his hopes up. 'But most people don't bother. You only think you enjoy sleeping because you are used to it. You've learned to appreciate the relief it grants you every night. This tends to go away pretty quickly for people with the Insomnia trait.'

Percy nodded, thinking this made sense. But the god wasn't done, asking him something else, seemingly out of the blue.

'Percy… why are you working so hard? Everything I've seen from you is more than impressive, but I can't help but wonder what your goal is…'

He frowned, not having expected Zoris to ask him that after all this time. The old god had given him the impression he didn't care. That said, he didn't mind answering – it wasn't exactly a secret anyway.

'Would you laugh at me if I said I want to become a god?'

‘I probably would have, if you’d told me this before… But a Red-born becoming a god sounds easier to me than a ring rebuilding its body… If I were to laugh at you now, I might as well give up.’

Percy chuckled, feeling some gratification. His companions supported him because they cared about him, but this was the first time an outsider as knowledgeable as Zoris – a former god – listened to his dream without dismissing it. It gave him hope it might not be as impossible as everyone said.

Zoris continued, however.

‘To be honest, I’m not sure if any Red-born can become a god, but I can tell you one thing after having watched you all these months…’

‘What is it?’

‘…if it’s possible, I can’t think of anyone better to pull it off.’

Chapter 365 – Splitting up

“Are you sure about this?” Percy asked Nesha upon receiving his clone’s memories, not even bothering to mask the disappointment in his voice.

She gave him a rueful nod.

“I’m gonna miss you too, but this is something I have to do.”

Percy sighed. Evidently, his hopes of spending some time with her after taking Acton down had been nothing but a pipe dream. His girlfriend had decided to return to Twilight City by herself, and he didn’t exactly fault her for it either.

Both she and Elaine had spent years risking their lives and training endlessly to help him and his familiar, putting their own goals aside. Of course, they had arguably been paid rather handsomely for their

assistance, receiving a lot of Aurora Dew, priceless knowledge that couldn't be found on Remior, and even their second cores.

That said, they couldn't just keep following him around wherever he went. They had their own lives to get back to. Nesha's mission had always been to uncover the reason for her family's destruction, and to enact her vengeance upon those responsible. Before meeting Percy, she would have been hard-pressed to accomplish that, but things had changed greatly.

Right now, she was strong enough to hold her own against anyone below Blue – possibly even some Blues. And she could probably escape from most of them. Furthermore, she had the means to continue growing stronger by herself, by advancing her second core, figuring out affinity fusion or the Dance, and getting better with runecrafting.

Most importantly, the Syndicate was actually the best organization on Remior for her to join. To solve a mystery concerning a Great House, she would need a lot of money and influence, and joining a noble House was completely unrealistic for a fugitive like her. It was much easier for her to accomplish all that from within the dark alleys of the black districts. There, she was in her element.

"It'll be dangerous. We won't be able to help you if you get caught." Percy warned.

"It will. But I'll be careful. I will avoid Alexander and all the people we involved in our business like the plague. I won't even set foot in the same districts if I can help it. I'll try to work my way up as a commoner. Maybe get close to another Lord or Lady."

"Okay."

As much as it hurt to part ways, Percy knew she would thrive there. She had already proven herself more than capable of navigating the murky waters of the underworld many a time. The fact that her recent promotion had finally fixed her eyesight completely would help perfect her disguise too, as she no longer needed her glasses.

Taking all his spatial amulets off, he started emptying their contents on a pile by his feet. In the past, he used to keep most of his stuff in the seal, but its volume had decreased a lot now that he had to split it with so many clones.

‘I should try to get a bigger one from Metatron at some point.’

He wasn’t looking forward to negotiating with the titan again. Not to mention, he would have to find a way to suppress his blessing before he returned to the Vault, else the god would find out about the Ring of Sacrilege. Based on what Gabe had shown him in the past, he knew it should be possible to forcefully prevent it from showing in his mana after some training. Perhaps, Zoris would be willing to coach him, as he was also invested in keeping his existence a secret.

But that was a problem for later.

Sifting through his belongings, Percy soon split the pile of vials into seven roughly equal parts, shoving two to his girlfriend. Contrary to his expectations, she only took a couple of spatial amulets, and her share of Aurora Dew for the next four or so months, leaving the regular elixirs untouched.

“This is plenty. The rest, you should keep for yourself and Micky. It’s harder to buy more while on the run,” she explained.

Last time, they had to amass a lot of money because they’d needed to brew over a decades’ worth of Aurora Dew, for several people, in a very short period of time. If it was just regular elixirs for her own use, it wouldn’t be difficult for her to earn enough money to buy a couple doses per day.

The thing she’d said about him being on the run was also true. She and Elaine might be able to lay low, but there was no hiding a giant crow as big as an elephant. Certainly not one famous for its two cores, and for having belonged to a now-dead Holy Child. Percy was under no delusion that his life outside the Valley would be peaceful.

“Your progress will slow down without Aurora Dew,” he reminded her.

“That’s okay. I’m not in a rush. I’ll take everything slow and careful, moving forward.”

“Alright. But do take these books.” Percy insisted.

Going through them, he picked out the ones that either he or Nesha had yet to read, passing them over. This included many that he'd bought from his last trip to the Vault which had been sitting mostly untouched in his seal for over a decade.

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"Don't you need them?"

He shook his head.

"I've been thinking… I'd like to give you another clone for a few months – if you don't mind. It'll let us stay in touch, and it'll give me some peace of mind to know you're okay. The two of you can work together to study magiscript, and he'll bring me the books back when you're done. Even better, my new trait will help you both."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Is it worth wasting one of your cords for me though?" she asked, clearly taken aback by his offer. "I know you have more of them now, but still, aren't you better off sending them away?"

He shrugged.

"I'm not just doing it for you. I've bought many of these books to upgrade my armour, though I never got a chance to read them. Now that I'm working on my mana threads, I'll need that knowledge pretty soon. Sadly, me and Micky will be busy with other things too, so delegating magiscript to one of my clones isn't a bad idea. Oh, but it would be nice if you could do it without the translation device. We only have one, and we can't keep passing it around. I plan to lend it to Elaine this time, since she's farther behind, and we all need to master the language anyway at some point."

Nesha nodded, rearranging her supplies inside the amulets. By now, they'd amassed a lot of them from all the people they'd killed over the years. It was handy to have the extra storage space – especially considering Percy's issues with his seal – but the amulets were getting a little annoying to manage. Percy had decided to keep eight of them to himself, splitting the rest between Elaine and Nesha.

As for what they did with them – he didn't care. They could use them, sell them, or exchange them with elixirs from his family. Their choice. Besides, he was sure it wouldn't be long until his enemies delivered him a fresh batch…

"I'm guessing you've made your mind up too?" he asked, turning to Elaine.

The girl was right there with them, having remained silent during their conversation.

She nodded. She'd also decided to leave him for now. Percy and Micky weren't entirely out of danger yet – in fact, the following days would arguably be more dangerous than ever – but they were strong enough to take care of themselves.

On top of that, Elaine had several reasons to return home. She had to get her hand fixed, and she missed her parents and brother, having not seen them for over a decade. It hadn't been as long for them, but she was still worried about their House. They still had no idea what had happened after they killed Jason.

Either way, Percy wouldn't insult her by expressing worry over her safety. He knew his cousin was easily the strongest Blue on Remior, so nobody would be able to lay a hand on her on the way home. Not unless a Violet geezer randomly decided to leave his family unprotected, to go around attacking random travellers. Even then, he might just end up being the one to suffer.

"I'll only take some Aurora Dew to get me started, like Nesha. No point in taking any regular elixirs from you, since I'll be able to get them easily once I'm back."

Elaine would only be allowed a single dose per day from their House, unless she revealed the existence of her second core. It was the same problem that had forced Percy to leave for the Alchemists' Guild back when he was a teenager. The difference was that Elaine was a hundred times stronger right now than he had been at the time. She had countless ways to earn an extra dose of elixir.

"How are you going to explain being away for so long?" Percy asked.

With any luck, nobody had drawn the connection between Elaine and the rest of them, so she might be able to return to her old life. That said, she'd left supposedly to go on a mission, and it had been over a year since then. Their relatives were bound to ask some difficult questions.

She shrugged.

"I'll figure something out. It wouldn't be the first time I take several hunting trips back-to-back. I'm sure Uncle Galahad and Grandpa will cover for me."

"Alright. But I'll craft you both a bunch of bandages before you leave. Remember that you need to hide both your cores now." Percy said.

Other than the obvious need to keep their second cores secret, Elaine couldn't let people know she had reached Blue nearly forty years ahead of time. If news of that spread, everyone would know she was either involved with the Aurora Dew or had snuck into the Thirsty Valley. Or, most likely, both…

Luckily, Percy was confident he could apply the same principles behind his cauldron to the bandages too, using controlled-concealment runes to partially mask her core's grade, so that it would look Green to an outsider. Between his fused mana and all the magical beasts in the Valley, getting some materials for the bandages shouldn't be that hard either.

Elaine would still have to be careful not to reveal her strength though – or leave any witnesses in case she was forced to. As for Nesha, this wasn't as much of a problem, since she was going to invent a new identity for herself again. Nobody would know she was "supposed" to be at Yellow.

"And one more thing. I'd like to give you a clone too."

Percy was also worried about their House, so he wanted to get news from them as soon as possible. On top of that, he'd need a way to retrieve the books and the translation device from Elaine once she was done.

Unlike him or Nesha, Elaine's ambitions with regards to magiscript were quite modest. She didn't have the patience or a suitable affinity for it, and the variants Percy had bought from the Vault didn't all work with her mana type either. So, he would only be giving him some of the earlier books on concealment

and preservation runes. She had made it clear she wasn't hoping to include them in her fighting style like them. For now, she just wanted to master some handy enchantments that could make her life easier here and there.

In any case, there was one more reason Percy wanted her to have a clone.

The Dance.

Elaine had yet to complete the water version, but she shouldn't be that far. And Percy had a vested interest in her success too, because his familiar shared her affinity. Between himself, Micky, Elaine, two of his clones, and even Galahad, they were bound to complete the spell sooner or later.

After that, it would be a lot easier for the crow and his uncle to figure out the spell for their other affinities. If they could give Nesha some valuable tips too, Percy might get to a point where he could use the spell with most of the common affinities and even a bunch of the rare ones.

Whether it was to strengthen his familiar, his friends and his House, to help his clones during their adventures, or to find some inspiration to upgrade his boosting art again in the future, this was definitely a great investment of his time.

'I'll only have two free clones for a while, but I should be back to four or five a few months from now…'

Chapter 366 – Innate pre-casting

One month earlier

Percy's main body was busy getting used to the Carnival and absorbing the blessing, while his second clone was discussing with Nesha and Elaine about their future plans.

But none of that had anything to do with him.

He was the version of Percy who had been inside Micky's body since before the battle, accompanying the crow through his advancement and subsequent evolution. And boy did they have things to work on…

‘First things first. Let’s try not to get stuck here in the process.’

Shifting his soul around a little, Percy wanted to make sure he wouldn’t fuse into his familiar’s body. From his previous attempt possessing Micky, he knew how risky this was. Luckily, he’d since thought of a way to prevent that from happening.

Having applied a thin layer of soul mana between his own wisp and the crow’s, he had managed to keep himself separate. It was a bit funny, actually. With his other hosts, he had to use his soul mana as a bridge to connect his own soul to theirs, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to even stay inside their bodies. Yet, when it came to his familiar, he had to use it in the exact opposite way, to fight against their natural compatibility.

But it was an effective solution. Over time, the souls still tended to approach one another, eating holes through the silver film and merging in several spots. Thus, he had to manually pry himself off every few days, and use some soul mana to repair the barrier. Luckily, it didn’t take much effort, allowing him to stay for a prolonged period of time.

‘All good.’ he spat in relief, the crow clearly echoing the sentiment.

Tearing his soul off Micky’s only took a few seconds each time, but it was rather painful for both of them. At least, it didn’t seem like they’d have to worry about that today. Turning his attention to other matters, he took a few minutes to observe the water mana feeding into Micky’s beast core through his veins.

‘I see you’re already getting better at this.’

The crow shrugged.

‘It’s the same principle as my other mutations. The only things that have changed are the body part and the affinity.’

Percy nodded.

‘Fair enough. But keep at it. Developing Regulation is always your number one priority.’

Based on how much beast mana the crow was currently generating, Percy was confident he would not only be able to deal with his hunger for the foreseeable future, but even have enough mana leftover to fight without worries. At least a few times per month, Micky should be able to go all out, using even the beast component of his boosting art without draining himself that much. It would help a lot once they left the Valley, as he fully expected them to get attacked pretty often by powerful enemies.

‘Other than that, it’s time we figure out what we can do with your ice mana.’

Fusing and breaking his affinities apart was second nature for the bird by now. But he had yet to put the new mana types to work. On top of that, Percy had a few things to teach his familiar too. Pre-casting would be most suitable for the crow, and the Dance was also something he hoped to pass on to him as soon as possible.

‘Wanna see where I’m currently at?’ Micky asked.

‘Sure.’

Not wasting a moment, Micky spread his now-massive wings wide. With a powerful flap, he took off, the gust tearing a layer of dirt off the ground. Scanning their surroundings – about as well as the drifting globules allowed him to – he flew for a couple seconds before landing in front of a medium-sized boulder a few dozen metres away.

‘Watch closely.’

Pulling some mana from his abdomen, he gathered it in the underside of his wings, before flapping them again. This time, several shards of ice shot forth, lodging themselves into the hard rock as if they were steel knives, frost spreading outward from the holes. Whether it was the sharpness of the constructs or the force behind them, it was more than enough to injure a Yellow.

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But Micky was only getting started.

Repeating his actions twice more, he fired a couple more permutations of the nascent spell. The first time, a spray of water splashed on the rock. The second, it was a gust of wind. But both attacks seemed just as cold as the daggers, each of them expanding the frost on the boulder's surface, soon coating the object in a thin layer of ice.

Percy would have raised an eyebrow if Micky had any.

This was already quite interesting. Micky had shown him his ice mana many times before, but this was different. Besides the obvious power-up due to the crow's higher grade and greater control, there was something else that didn't immediately make sense.

During Micky's previous demonstrations, he had unleashed the spray of water and the gust of wind together. Percy had thought this was inevitable, since affinity fission broke the ice mana into two components. Keeping one in his body would create an imbalance, so it was simpler to just expel them in equal measures.

This wasn't what Micky had just done, however. Even more curiously, the wind and water attacks seemed to have retained many properties of his ice affinity, even when used individually.

'Can you show me again?' he asked, getting a nod back. 'Ah, and do it more slowly.'

Micky fired the attacks again, this time focusing on duration rather than potency. Percy ignored the manifested constructs entirely, shifting his attention to his familiar's core. He could tell that was where all the literal magic was happening. Sure enough, each of the three variants caused the ice mana to flow differently inside the organ. Percy had yet to fully understand what his familiar was doing, but he had picked up on a fascinating detail.

'You're not even using affinity fission! All three attacks are fuelled entirely by ice mana!'

Micky puffed up, a hint of pride seeping through their connection.

‘It’s a trick I discovered a few years ago. I don’t know if other composite affinities are like this, but for me, affinity fission was just the first step. There is a way to make my fused mana function like its components, while retaining many of its own properties.’

Percy remained silent for a while, pondering his familiar’s words. Indeed, it seemed the crow could force the ice to behave like water or air, without losing its coldness. Mastering this ability would make all of Micky’s spells both stronger and easier to execute. It could even directly upgrade one’s air and water spells. Not that the crow had many of those, but still…

‘How does this even work though?’ he wondered.

He suspected Micky’s little trick was related to pre-casting, even though he had yet to teach it to him. Had the crow stumbled upon some preliminary version of it by himself?

‘Okay, let me play with your core for a while. I want to see if I can wrap my head around what you’re doing,’ he said, eager to confirm his guess.

Over the next few hours, the two went back and forth, testing various things. Percy tried to use affinity fission and the trick Micky had shown him – with limited success. Naturally, he lacked the crow’s years of experience with the affinity, but he did have a solid grasp on affinity fusion and pre-casting, which were very related fields.

Consequently, he was quite good at peering inside his core and controlling the mana inside it. Learning to reproduce the bird’s attacks would take a while longer, but he did manage to understand what exactly was happening with Micky’s mana.

Percy identified two concepts at work, imposing a couple of conflicting behaviours on Micky’s mana at all times – even when the crow was idle. The first – which he could tell had come from the air affinity – caused the mana to move quickly and erratically, sending the core into turmoil. This was much like Leo’s mana, which he had played around with extensively inside the Wiseman’s Chamber.

The second concept had clearly come from Micky’s water affinity, resembling Elaine’s mana. It affected the substance more gently, causing it to flow in a slow and somewhat organized manner. It seemed

subtle at first – almost submissive to its unruly sibling – but that wasn't entirely accurate. It also felt much heavier, making it difficult for the flow of air mana to affect it.

Even without Micky doing anything, the flows collided against one another, slowing each other to a crawl. Percy was confident this was the reason behind the ice mana's coldness.

Yet, whenever Micky used the other variants of the technique, he seemed to instinctively favour one of the flows over the other, forcing its behaviour to dominate. The end result was an attack still fuelled by ice mana – half water and half air – but its properties were now skewed.

'How did you even come up with this by yourself?' Percy probed.

The crow shrugged.

'Splitting my mana up every time I wanted to use my Rending Tornado was annoying, so I tried to force it to work with ice mana. It was really inefficient at first, but I got better at it over the years. Then, I realized I could go the other way too.'

'I see… Great work there, buddy. This is a good foundation to build your magic on.'

Percy hadn't noticed it before, but the alternative variants of Micky's ice attack were slightly inefficient. The difference was small, but the crude way in which he manipulated his mana seemed to sap away some of their strength.

If he taught him how to use pre-casting properly, they could work to fine-tune the technique some more. In addition, he could teach Micky how to incorporate all the other tricks he had learned on Felmara into his attacks – the rotation and the pressure.

'Before long, we'll turn you into a living, breathing… flying blizzard.'

Chapter 367 – The path forward

'This time for sure…' Percy said, gathering some ice mana to Micky's wings.

With a violent flap, he sent a powerful gust crushing against the boulder, the force causing the cracks on the hard stone to expand some more. At the same time, several shards of ice drilled deep into the object, crystalline patches of white soon blossoming around the holes.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Concussive Blast – Crude -> Frozen Shards – Refined!]

Suppressing a grin, he walked closer, carefully examining the aftermath of his attack.

‘I win!’ he exclaimed. ‘These definitely pierced deeper than yours.’

‘You wish!’ Micky spat, clicking his beak in annoyance. ‘I could have done this too, if I had only used six shards. You have to beat me while forming eight, like I did!’

‘That was never part of the rules. Besides, my spell just upgraded,’ Percy said, showing his familiar an image of the notification.

‘That doesn’t mean anything!’ Micky protested. ‘You know my Status doesn’t give me notifications. I’m sure I got the spell earlier than you. Let’s check with your main body.’

Not even waiting for him to reply, Micky sent a message over to the original Percy, asking him to check his Status.

It had been well over a month since they started training, and a lot had happened since then. While the two of them had immersed themselves in their pre-casting exercises, the main body had internalized the blessing and even absorbed a second trait. Elaine and Nesha had already left the Valley a few hours ago, both equipped with new clones that didn’t need to sleep.

The clone inside Micky was also meant to get replaced later today, so, in a way, this was their last day training together. The two had had a lot of fun over the past few weeks, having turned their daily routine into a constant competition. They took turns firing ice projectiles from their wings, trying to use their mana as efficiently as possible, and to stack as many effects as they could onto the spell.

Right now, the best either of them could handle, was to split the ice mana into two parts. The first, they kept in its solid form, adding a rotation to the shards. The second, they turned into a compressed gust of wind that served as a propellant. There was still room for improvement, but they had clearly already crossed into the threshold of a Refined spell. Furthermore, they knew they could do even better by working together.

'Ah, right,' the main body replied to both of them, though his voice sounded strained, as if he was currently dealing with something rather unpleasant. 'There's a new spell there. Not sure when it appeared.'

'Come on! Do it properly!' the crow complained, causing the clone to chuckle. He could practically feel the original rolling his eyes by the other side of the cords.

'Fine… Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Frozen Shards – Refined!'

Not missing a beat, Micky shifted his attention back to him, a silent grin proudly oozing through their connection.

The clone sighed.

'Again, this was never about who registered the spell first… It was about who pierced the deepest holes… That would be me, by the way,' he reiterated, pointing at the boulder with his wing.

The two bickered some more over the next few minutes, before Micky forced him to admit defeat. Getting one over his stubborn familiar had never been the point of the exercise anyway. The spell was already good enough to be used in a fight, so Micky had another trump card to fall back to. Having a ranged attack in his arsenal would definitely help, though it was admittedly weaker than his Rending Tornado, since it didn't make use of the crow's mutations.

Then, there was Percy. His clones could help Micky cast a stronger version of the spell, but he wouldn't have an easy time firing the attack with his main body. Pre-casting was already difficult to use when it was his own core, let alone when he was controlling another's core from afar.

Regardless, both of them had grown a lot better at manipulating ice mana, so it was time to move to the next phase of their training.

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‘I’m coming back. We need to get me replaced as soon as possible. We can’t afford to keep sleeping every night.’ he told the main body. ‘I hope you’re ready for it.’

Not even waiting for a reply, he then pushed himself out of his familiar’s body, using the cord to return to his own. He didn’t even bother bidding Micky farewell – there wasn’t a point. From the crow’s perspective, they would meet again a few minutes from now.

Severing himself from the bird’s senses, Percy plunged into complete darkness, but it only lasted a fraction of a second. Slamming into his soul, he felt welcomed in, as countless connections locked him in place, his memories blending with the original’s.

His separation with Elaine and Nesha… his conversations with Zoris… the blessing… absorbing the spectral fiend… his progress with the mana threads… It all mixed with his own memories of pre-casting and ice mana, his brain soon throbbing painfully inside his skull.

Opening his eyes, he found himself sitting cross-legged. He had barely managed to plop down when that idiot clone decided to return without much of a warning. He tried to stand, but his knees buckled, sending him face-first against the hard ground. His stomach churned, the colour draining from his face as he heaved out his breakfast.

He groaned, using some pure mana to wipe the acrid goo off his mouth.

The clone he had just retrieved hadn’t been away that long, so assimilating his experiences wouldn’t have been much of an issue by itself. The problem was that Percy had retrieved another clone from Nesha just hours ago, and he had yet to fully process that set of memories when the next one arrived.

He sighed.

‘I guess the human brain isn’t meant to juggle seven lives at once…’

Worse still, this was merely the beginning. It hadn’t been that long since he internalized the blessing, so the first batch of external clones had yet to return. Once he was outside the Valley and all his companions were done with their clones, Percy would have to send and receive many of them every single day. All these years, he had been looking forward to increasing his capacity, but he hadn’t fully appreciated what a toll it would take on him once he succeeded.

He shrugged.

‘Well, I’d better get used to it, since it isn’t going away anytime soon. Nor do I want it to…’

“Are you alright?” Micky asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

The giant crow was standing over him, looking at him with concern. Percy hadn’t even noticed him approach.

“I’m fine. I’m just having some trouble sorting through all these memories… Hopefully, the next guy I lend you will know better than to come back with no warning…”

The two sat side by side for a couple of hours, waiting for him to feel a little better. They did get attacked by a bunch of beasts at some point, nothing keeping the creatures at bay now that Elaine was no longer here. But it wasn’t a big problem either, as Micky made quick work of the poor things. By the time the crow was done, Percy was able to stand again.

“Alright. I guess I’ll pass you another clone now.”

“You sure you’re up for it?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem… as long as he stays there. Anyway, we don’t have any time to waste.”

They knew they had to leave the Valley soon. The season could change any day now, bringing a fresh wave of Holy Children with it. Percy and Micky should be able to handle a single squad, but they had no idea how many would enter the Decree.

At the same time, they didn't really want to leave. Acton's death would be discovered almost immediately once more people entered, and it wouldn't be long before all of Remior started hunting them down. They'd have to fly away from populated areas, and go into hiding until they grew strong enough to attempt some of their bolder plans.

Suffice to say, getting another month of free training before returning to normal time might make the difference later. Whether they stayed a little longer or left immediately, it wasn't without its risks, so Percy was essentially playing a game of chicken with the Divine Root.

'Better make these next few days count then…'

Going over all of his spells, he considered what the most efficient use of their limited time might be. The Carnival was easily his strongest trump card at the moment, and he had grown much better at maintaining it without resorting to his potions. He could already keep it active for over an hour straight, and he could even use it multiple times per day. It wasn't a lot, but it should be enough to last him through a fight.

On the flipside, he understood he wouldn't be improving upon the boosting art anytime soon. It was already quite a high-end technique. If he wanted to get stronger quickly, he'd have to look elsewhere.

His mana threads were coming along nicely – he was already using five mixtures of soft and crystallized mana along with the plain versions, and the threads were almost thin enough to be woven into a fabric. That said, perfecting them was taking forever, and he wouldn't have the time to upgrade his armour either, even if he somehow got them done within the week.

Leaving aside all his alchemy-related spells and everything else not directly applicable to combat, he knew his best bet was Micky. The crow was improving rapidly as he trained alongside his clones. Whether it was incorporating his third mutation into Regulation or perfecting his ice attacks, things were going great. Percy was confident Micky could hold his own against a Blue.

But he still wasn't happy with their progress, feeling there was more they could be doing.

‘Our collaboration… We need to work on that too. We’ve only ever learned to fight as two individuals. Never as a proper team…’

As early as when they had first arrived at the Fungal Spire, Percy had imagined himself fighting side-by-side with his familiar. Unfortunately, that dream had yet to manifest, even after so many years.

While they had learned to hunt the wasps down efficiently, they’d never really fought together against a difficult opponent. Given their powerful telepathic connection, and even their ability to share mana, Percy was sure they’d been wasting one of their greatest advantages.

Well, it was time to change that…

Chapter 368 – Long overdue

The giant crow landed next to Percy once more, the powerful rush of wind nearly knocking him off his feet. He could tell the bird was doing it on purpose, still not done flexing his new strength.

He rolled his eyes.

Percy had already equipped his familiar with a new clone, yet that was only a tiny facet of what they intended to do. Their cord had always provided them with a very convenient means of communication even in its original form, but they’d accumulated a few more tools over the years.

The first was the evolution of Percy’s Secret Art from Crude to Refined. The empowered cords afforded to him by Soul Resonance had promised to elevate his ability to work alongside Micky to the next level. Sadly, Acton had captured the crow soon after they registered the spell, robbing them of the chance to fully explore its limits. The second was Percy’s discovery that he could affix a clone to Micky, without losing a cord in the process. In other words, they could now establish a two-way connection – which they had also not truly tapped into.

That was why they had taken a break from their other projects today, whether it was the original Percy’s mana threads or the crow’s pre-casting exercises, to play around with their Secret Art.

“Is the area clear?” he asked.

“Should be.” Micky replied. “I haven’t spotted anything alive within twenty miles, and this is the third time I checked.”

Percy nodded. It had been some time since the Root dumped the latest shipment of beasts into the Valley, and many of them had already died. On top of that, Micky had gone out of his way to patrol their surroundings and cut their numbers down some more, to ensure they wouldn’t get attacked in the next few hours. After all, what they were planning to do might leave them vulnerable for a while.

Other than practicing with their spells, Percy thought it was an excellent opportunity to try and jog his friend’s memory some more. This was another important project the Holy Child had rudely interrupted. Helping his familiar remember his old life was something he had never given up on.

“Let’s begin then,” he said, activating his boosting art.

Fused mana rushed through his channels, two sets of greyish-teal lines lighting up on his skin, as wisps of the same colour danced around him, leaving long, burning trails behind them. Not even giving the spell a chance to reach its apex, he pushed a large bundle of mana through the cord on his sternum, sending it over to Micky. Unlike the other times, he didn’t even have to wait for it to arrive, however, sending a second just moments later.

While he was accumulating mana to send a third packet over, the first one returned, this time entering his soul from the other cord, near his abdomen. Evidently, one of the many advantages afforded to them by the twin link, was that it let them activate Soul Resonance much faster, since they didn’t need to send the mana back and forth through the same cord.

The Secret Art activated about half a minute later. Both the cords widened, allowing mana and thoughts alike to pass through them unimpeded. And Percy knew this would get faster still with practice.

Suddenly, he felt closer to Micky than ever before, the effect of two empowered cords far exceeding anything they’d experienced in the past. He and his familiar had always been able to point at each other’s direction, but this went beyond even that. Percy could actually tell exactly how far Micky was, even with his eyes closed. It was almost as if Micky’s body was an extension of his own.

At the same time, he felt two minds draw nearer – the familiar's and the clone's. Thoughts and feelings spilled uncontrollably through the cord, as the trio struggled to differentiate their own thoughts from the others'. In some ways, their connection was even more intimate than the one he shared with his hosts. Not just because of the cords – even with two of them, it wasn't necessarily a stronger connection than sharing one's body. But the three of them even shared the same soul – to varying extents.

'Wow, this is pretty intense.' Percy thought.

Or maybe it was someone else – it was hard to tell.

'Can we even fight like this?' another voice asked.

'The two of you should have it easier, because you can split the work.' he thought – it had to be him this time, right? 'But I have to keep both the Carnival and two cords active.'

Micky shrugged, though Percy felt as if he had been the one to do that.

'Let's just try to stay like this as much as possible for the next couple of days. No point training with our other spells until we get used to it. We can figure out what else we can do after that.'

Percy nodded.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

'Alright. But I think we should still take the chance to try and jog your memories. It would be a waste of our preparations if we didn't. Just give me some time.'

Percy lit up a campfire. Well, it was more like a grill made of reinforced mana, with numerous heating runes carved onto it, since they didn't have any firewood. Though even something that simple proved quite a challenge, considering all the spells he had to maintain. But he didn't let that stop him. He thought of it as another challenge to overcome, pressing onward. Skewering a chunk of meat from his spatial seal on a reinforced construct, he placed it over the enchantments, letting it cook.

Taking out his ocarina, he played his favourite tune for the first time in years. At first, he was understandably quite rusty. All the other stuff clogging his mind didn't help much either. But nobody complained about the off-tune screeches. The others silently listened to him play the pine-cone instrument, waiting for him to get better as their dinner roasted over the soft glow of his mana.

Every now and then, Micky flipped the meat so that it wouldn't burn – at least not prematurely. The oversized crow was practically salivating over the Yellow buffalo's steak, struggling to focus on Percy's music.

Minutes passed, and then hours.

Eventually, Percy took a break, unable to keep the Carnival active for much longer. Micky took the chance to patrol the area once more while he rested, to make sure the scent hadn't attracted any unwanted attention. It wasn't until half an hour later that they activated their spells again, resuming their efforts.

The second round went slightly better. Occasionally, Percy felt Micky's soul stir. He knew he was still not playing as well as he used to back when he first upgraded the spell, but their intimate connection probably did a lot of the heavy lifting.

At some point, the meat was done cooking. Droplets of fat dripped onto the runes, an appetizing aroma filling everyone's nostrils as they sizzled. Micky almost pounced on it too, struggling to hold himself back. If it hadn't been for the clone stopping him, he would have probably succeeded.

But they weren't supposed to eat it quite yet.

Seeing this as his cue to take another break, Percy deactivated his spells once more as the others scanned the area again – just to be safe. By the time they returned, he had lowered the meat closer to the enchantments, hoping it would char a little faster. Wasting such a tasty-looking meal felt like kicking himself in the teeth, yet he understood sustenance wasn't the point of this. They already had plenty of rations, and Micky's spells allowed him to survive on about the same amount of food as a human.

More time passed, the crow practically sobbing as he watched the meal slowly darken into a piece of charcoal. Percy wasn't in the mood to make fun of him for it either, sharing the sentiment.

‘If you want to blame somebody, blame your ancestors… They’re the ones who came up with this. I just hope your mother used to feed you this stuff as a child…’

Having no other way to console everyone, Percy picked the ocarina up again, playing the tune one more time as he activated the spells. By now, he had improved noticeably, though the music was still a far cry from Micky’s version or his mother’s – let alone Rei’s supernatural talent. In fact, Percy was confident he had yet to even catch up to his own past performance. Shaking all the rust off would probably not happen in a day or two. Regardless, this should be good enough…

‘It sucks I didn’t get the right trait for it, but this should still do something.’

While he had played better the last time he prompted some of Micky’s lost memories to return, he’d also only had a single cord. This time, they had so much more going for them. Guessing the meat was just about charred enough, he picked it up, passing it over to the crow.

He chuckled as Micky hesitated. This was his first time seeing his familiar refuse food. Though that didn’t last very long – the bird’s hunger winning out in the end.

‘Remember not to eat it too quickly. Try to savour it…’ he said, before scratching his head. ‘As much as you can savour it…’

Technically, Micky was large enough to swallow the thing whole. And he clearly wanted to do just that, to spare himself from the atrocious taste. But it would have all been for nothing if he did that. The crow seemed to understand that too, only pecking a tiny piece off, grinding it in his beak.

Doing his own part, Percy lifted his gaze from the familiar, grabbing his ocarina again. Playing the instrument was even harder than before, as he’d grown quite tired by now. It was already his third time activating the Carnival, on top of the other spell. But he kept going, guessing his Insomnia trait was already showing its worth. At least, he imagined he would have been quite sleepy by now without it.

Micky continued to begrudgingly consume the burnt meat as he listened to the music. Percy frowned as he felt the bitter flavour inside his own mouth, neither the crow nor the clone making any effort to keep the unpleasant experience to themselves. It was a little distracting, but it was probably better than eating the food himself.

Left with no other choice, he poured his everything into his music, playing it about as well as he could manage.

'Come on… Anything… Surely, all this stuff has to amount to something…'

Sadly, there was no response.

Micky ate half the steak, and then three quarters. The meat was quickly running out, despite his compulsive efforts to make it last as long as possible. Percy's fingers shook from exhaustion, his lips feeling quite dry as the glowing lines on his skin flickered.

It didn't seem like it was meant to be…

But it was okay. They could just try again tomorrow. And the day after. However many times it took, until they saw some results. Percy would get better at playing the ocarina, and he'd keep feeding the crow burnt meat if he had to. If that didn't work, he could try upgrading his Secret Art to Masterful, or even beyond that. Maybe his third trait would be the right one. Even if it wasn't, he could look for a way to bring Micky to Melodia.

Either way, he knew from Rei's teachings that all his friend's memories still existed, buried somewhere deep inside his soul. And Percy would never give up until he found a way to dig them all out. Even the sky wasn't a limit for him, and he'd do whatever it took to fulfil his promise to his friend.

Luckily, it seemed the situation wasn't that dire, however.

Just as Micky swallowed the last piece of his meal, Percy felt their surroundings shift. He didn't panic, having experienced something similar once before. After all, this was exactly what he had expected – no, hoped – would happen.

Another of Micky's memories was about to unfold.

Chapter 369 – Heritage

Once again, Percy found himself standing on the frigid wastelands of Huehue's dark side, his – or rather, Micky's – feet buried a few inches deep in the snow. The only source of light were the cyan lines glowing on his skin, faintly illuminating his immediate surroundings, and no more than that. He was breathing hard; his lungs numb from the cold. But all four of his tiny fists were clenched tightly, the boy stubbornly keeping the boosting art going.

'He's even younger than the last time!' Percy realized. 'Is this the day he first managed to activate the spell? But who's teaching him?'

Percy knew from the previous memory that neither Micky's mother nor his sister were fighters. The two hadn't even made any effort to protect themselves when Mixcoatl attacked them.

"That's enough for now, son," a man spoke, his voice firm but gentle. "You'll get better at it with practice."

Micky had never mentioned his father, and Percy hadn't seen him with them last time either. They'd clearly lost him years before the rest of them got captured.

"I can… keep going…!" Micky chirped between pants, his child-like voice surprising Percy.

He couldn't have been older than seven. At what age did these people even awaken their cores? Learning a Refined spell so young, and in such a short time was quite impressive, even with a proper instructor.

The man walked up to the boy, evident by the rhythmic crunches of the snow beneath his feet. By the time he was close enough for Micky to see him, the boy had to crane his head up, barely reaching the man's waist. His father patted him on the head, his warm hand ruffling the fluff there for a couple seconds.

"A wise warrior understands when it's time to fight and when it's time to rest, Mic. Listen to your body when it tells you to take a break. Sometimes, our world can be even crueller than our enemies."

Micky nodded, begrudgingly letting go of the spell. The excess mana spilled out of his pores as a wave of weakness overcame him. His knees buckled, but the man grabbed him before he fell, embracing him

with his lower pair of arms. The boy hugged him back – about as tightly as he could manage, his tiny arms failing to fully wrap around his father's broad chest. He was already shivering from the cold, even his Yellow core doing little to help him right now.

"I'm proud of you, Mic. I think you're ready to get your tattoos… After we all get some sleep and some food, of course."

"Shouldn't we wait a couple more years for that?" a woman suddenly asked, approaching the two.

Percy recognized her as Micky's mother. It had been years since he experienced the previous memory, but the feeling of familiarity she gave the boy couldn't have been mistaken. That said, she looked a little taller to his pipsqueak friend this time.

She was currently holding a child too – a girl a little older than Micky. Though she was clearly doing a worse job keeping his sister warm, their Orange cores leaving both of them vulnerable to the elements. Their faces were pale, their chattering beaks barely audible amidst the howling winds. Pulling them both closer, the man embraced his whole family, trying to warm everyone up.

"I was about his age when my father gave me my tattoos…" he whispered, before gazing down at Percy. "What do you think, Mic? I won't force you, if you'd rather wait a little longer."

Smushed between his parents and sister, Micky looked up. He balled his fists once more, returning the man's gaze with a resolute one of his own.

"I'll do it! I'm ready for it!"

***

Percy watched as Micky's father squeezed the carcass of a small critter, extracting a dark ink-like substance from its beak into a hole in the snow. Its round body and long neck reminded him of a duck, but it clearly wasn't a bird. It was covered in fur – not feathers – and it didn't have any wings either. Instead, it had a bunch of short, stubby legs, all six of them ending in paws. Percy hadn't seen the man kill the small animal, having found himself in this memory fragment mere moments ago.

This book was originally published on Freewebnovel. Check it out there for the real experience.

The boy's mother was currently squatting a few metres away, spinning a cyan rod against a couple pieces of firewood, trying to start a fire as Micky's sister watched her. The family was inside a cave this time, the stone walls shielding them from the wind somewhat.

"Can't we just eat it raw? It's too bitter when it's burnt!" the girl complained.

Taking a break from her work, Micky's mother pulled her into her arms, flashing her what Percy guessed was a smile.

"Atzi, you know it's safer this way. You're less likely to get a disease from it. We would be doing it more often if it wasn't this hard to bring wood to the dark side. Besides, it's your brother's big moment. Don't you want us to celebrate with him?"

The girl nodded back reluctantly, not saying anything more.

Micky's father suddenly stood up, drawing Percy's attention. He was probably done extracting the ink from the creature. Walking over to his wife, he passed her the carcass, before returning by Micky's side.

'I guess that's what we're eating then…'

The woman manifested another construct, rubbing it against the wood once more. But Micky wasn't looking at her, his attention having shifted to his father. The man gathered some of his mana too, forming a cyan needle in each of his lower hands, pinched between his thumbs and index fingers.

"Are you sure you're ready, son? We can still do this another time if you want."

Micky swallowed hard, his gaze oscillating between the sharp points of the needles and the ink in the hole. His father chuckled at the sight.

“You don’t have to worry about wasting the ink, Mic. It wasn’t much trouble to collect it. Besides, we can also use it to season the meat if you don’t want your tattoos right now.”

But Micky shook his head.

“No. I’ll do it.”

Taking his shirt off, he placed it on the ground in front of his father, before laying on it face-down.

“Okay. I’ll need you to activate Circulation too. The lines will help me draw the symbols at the right spots.”

Following the man’s instructions, Micky took a series of deep breaths, slowly filling his channels up with mana. Percy could tell the boy still wasn’t very used to the spell, but it shouldn’t be that hard to keep it active for a while. As soon as the glowing lines lit up again, he noticed his father dip the needles in the hole by the corner of his eyes. The boy tensed, clenching his hands against the snow as he braced himself for the pain.

It didn’t take long for Percy to feel the cold tips press against his skin. At first, it didn’t hurt that much, the sting barely registering a couple seconds later. The pain built up over the next few minutes, however, as the man moved methodically across the boy’s back, carving one intricate symbol after the other into his flesh.

Even so, it wasn’t a problem for somebody like Percy, considering everything he had experienced over the years. Hell, Elaine’s tattoos had hurt a lot more, his cousin clearly not as experienced as Micky’s father. That said, it was still quite unpleasant for the boy, given how young he was.

‘No… Actually, he’s handling it well too, for his age. Not that surprising, I suppose, considering how tough his everyday life has been…’

“Let me know if it’s too much,” the man said at some point. “We’ll have to take a few breaks anyway, since I doubt you can keep Circulation active for that long.”

***

When Percy next came to, he was still in the same place, though he was sitting this time. He and his family surrounded the dying embers of the campfire, munching on the charred meat as its all-too-familiar aroma permeated the cave.

Admittedly, it didn't taste quite as bad as the one Tlaloc had prepared for him in the Vault, or the one he had cooked for Micky in the Valley. Whether it was the meat of the strange critter that was more suitable for this, or the boy's mother who was a more skilled cook, the food was a lot easier to chew, and its acrid flavour was somewhat muted.

Micky's upper back hurt quite a bit by now. In fact, the boy failed to resist the urge to touch his wounds at some point, his swollen flesh stinging as he brushed over it with his fingers, getting blood all over his lower-left hand.

"Don't mess with it," his mother said sternly, grabbing his wrist. "It'll heal slower if you do."

Nodding in understanding, the boy finished his meal in silence, before returning to the previous position, clearly not deterred by the pain. Percy hadn't missed the pride in his father's eyes, and he honestly shared the sentiment.

'You were one tough kid, weren't you, Micky?'

No, not just a tough kid.

Micky had always been like that – in both of his lives. It had been painfully clear when he risked his life to protect his mother and sister… Or when he threw everything in the trash for a chance to land a punch on Mixcoatl's face… When he nearly rejected Percy's possession, choosing a warrior's death over accepting help from who he thought was an enemy… Even after losing his memories, Micky had begged Percy to kill him, unwilling to let Acton feed him a bunch of innocents…

That said, his father seemed to realize this was a bit much for the boy, so he soon offered him a distraction.

“Mic, let me tell you the same story my father told me when he was drawing my tattoos. Atzi, you listen too. This story is part of our heritage – no less important than the Dance. Make sure to pass it down to your own kids in the future.”

“What is it about?” the girl asked.

“It’s about a person. A man who saved our ancestors from the brink of destruction, countless years ago…”

“…The Dying Hero.”

Chapter 370 – Legend of the Dying Hero (1)

“Weird name for a hero,” Micky replied, causing both his parents to chuckle.

“It is, isn’t it?” his mother asked. “But you’ll understand why we call him that, after you hear the story.”

“Do you know it too, mom?” the girl – Atzi – asked.

Percy caught the woman nod by the corner of his eyes.

“Everyone does. My mother told it to me when I was young.”

Percy could tell Micky was curious about the story, though the boy winced as his father moved closer to his spine. Probably noticing that as well, the man didn’t dilly dally any longer, promptly beginning his tale.

“This all happened long, long ago, before Huehue even got invaded by outsiders. But don’t let that fool you into thinking it was a peaceful time for our ancestors, as that couldn’t have been farther from the truth. If anything, life was even harder back then, as people had to deal with some serious threats everywhere around them… the beasts.”

“Beasts? Couldn’t they hunt them down?” Atzi asked.

Percy couldn’t see the man’s face, but he guessed he would have smiled at that.

“Atzi, our ancestors weren’t as strong as we are. Remember that the Dance hadn’t come to be until eons later. This was a time when the first gods had yet to emerge. People didn’t even know how to cleanse their cores. They were all stuck at the same grade they were born with… much like our family is, at the moment.”

He'd spoken that last part with a sigh, his sorrow clearly seeping through. Seeing that his daughter remained silent, he continued.

“The Hero was a man living in one of the larger villages on the bright side of Huehue. They had it better than those struggling in the cold, but that didn’t really mean much. His people still suffered from frequent attacks, losing many men and women each month as they struggled to defend their homes from the monsters.”

“He wasn’t an outstanding fighter. He only had an Orange core, and he wasn’t very talented compared to his peers anyway. I bet Mic will become a much better warrior than him when he grows up. Yet, the strength of one’s body isn’t everything.”

“The Hero did have a brave heart. A kind one too. He always threw himself at the front lines, risking everything to protect his friends and neighbours. It was by sheer luck that he even lived long enough to reach adulthood, given how recklessly he fought. The others respected him too, at leastat first. They acknowledged his efforts and his sacrifices. And the results he brought them.”

“Sadly, things weren’t destined to remain like that.”

“The villagers fought valiantly to fend the creatures off, time after time. But they were always on the losing side. For every beast they killed, there was another to replace it not long after. For every pack they destroyed, another moved to the region. The villagers had as many kids as they could, and they sacrificed as many adults as they could afford to, barely keeping their population from shrinking. But everyone understood it was only a matter of time until a nasty attack caused more damage than they could recover from. Their village wouldn’t be the first to fall like that either.”

“It wasn’t until after a rather bloody battle that the Hero noticed something strange. Some of the other villagers were busy burying their dead, while he was in the group responsible for harvesting meat, bones and fur from the fallen beasts. Carving out the inedible pieces from the carcasses, he thought their hearts had a funny colour – a deep amber. It would have made sense if their blood was like that too, but they had the same red blood as every other creature on Huehue.”

“Gimbhals?” Atzi interjected again, taking a guess.

“Ah, right. I taught her about them.” Micky’s mother said.

The man sighed.

“Yes… They were gimbhals. I suppose you already know where the story is going then. But don’t ruin it for Mic.”

Turning his attention back to his son, he picked up the pace, drawing the tattoos even faster.

“Son, gimbhals are large, six-legged animals with curved claws and sharp fangs. But they are famous on Huehue for something else. You’ll understand what that is soon.”

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

“In any case, our ancestors still knew enough about beasts to recognize the amber colour as a hallmark of their affinity. And the Hero was no exception. Even back then, people had guessed that beasts owed their ability to advance their cores and grow stronger to their unique mana type. But nobody thought it was possible for people to do the same. Even if they wanted to copy the creatures, it was impossible to harvest their mana, since their cores crumbled soon after they died. Even when they tried to eat them immediately, they just harmed themselves for nothing.”

“Yet, the Hero noticed the gimbhal hearts had retained their colour long after the attack. Excited, he harvested as many as he could, bringing them back to one of the most respected elders in the village. He told the man about his findings, speculating this might be the key to stealing the beast’ most fearsome power, making their own people stronger.”

“Unfortunately, the elder didn’t give him the response he had hoped for. He berated him for his foolish ideas, and for wasting his time with nonsense. He told him everyone already knew about the gimbhal hearts, and that people had tried to eat them in the past, but the results weren’t all that different from eating a beast core. Whoever had tried that had only injured themselves quite badly. Tossing the hearts in the trash, he told him to stop clinging to a bunch of naïve dreams, and to get some rest before the next battle.”

“Admonished by the elder, the Hero left his hut in shame. But he was a stubborn man, and the elder’s words hadn’t quite convinced him his idea was hopeless. Maybe all the people who had tried eating the hearts before had just done it wrong. Perhaps, there was still a way to succeed, if he didn’t give up. In any case, the impact he had as a single, Orange-cored fighter was laughable. Compared to his meagre efforts on the battlefield, his plan was a lot more promising. If this worked, it could change his people’s fates forever.”

“Having made his mind up, he waited for the elder to sleep. Sneaking around, he secretly salvaged whatever hearts he could from the trash, bringing them back to his own home. He was going to prove the elder wrong. To prove everyone wrong.Of course, the Hero was no idiot. He wouldn’t just ignore the elder’s warning. He would learn from it, and from those who had bravely risked their lives before, avoiding their mistakes.”

“Chopping one of the hearts into lots of tiny pieces, he picked up a fragment smaller than the nail on his thumb, grinding it into paste. Mixing it with some water, he swallowed it. It tasted bitter, and the Hero’s stomach churned. The legend says he felt as if somebody had set his whole body on fire, but he didn’t let that stop him. Gathering some mana from his core, he allowed it to blend with the beast mana. The two substances mostly eliminated each other, barely leaving some traces left.”

“Yet, that was plenty for him. He brought it back to his core, letting the mana go on a rampage there. It felt like the organ would fall apart, but it held. This had all been quite an unpleasant experience, and his core continued to burn a long time after that, but that was okay. He had survived. This could actually work. The Hero had no idea how long it would even take to see results, but he was more than willing to give up his own body to test this.”

“From that point on, he continued to eat more pieces of the gimbhal hearts whenever his core stopped burning. He tried to eat them sooner than that too, but he quickly learned that only made his core hurt a lot longer. He understood he had to be careful, or he wouldn’t live long enough to reach the end of his experiment.”

“That said, he still played around with the exact quantity he consumed. When he ate a slightly smaller piece, the burning sensation stopped sooner. When he took a larger one, it lasted longer. It wasn’t until a year later that he settled on the best dosage that would allow him to absorb the most beast mana in the long-term.”

“Of course, his stash of hearts had run out by then, many of the organs rotting away inside his house. Luckily, more gimbhals attacked the village every now and then. The Hero made sure to be assigned to the team harvesting their body parts whenever that happened.”

“Not everything was going well, however. The way the Hero consumed the hearts was quite crude, causing a lot of harm to his body. Before long, he couldn’t fight as well as he used to, and he experienced great pain. His demeanour changed too. He stopped taking as many risks as he had in the past. Not because he no longer cared about the others, but because he needed to see his experiment through to the end. He knew nobody else would continue in his stead if he were to die.”

“Every now and then, he tried to subtly hint at his idea to his friends, to see what their opinion was on the matter. But they were all as stubborn as the elder, refusing to torture themselves for years on end, with no guarantee they would get something tangible back. Thus, the Hero had no choice but to continue by himself, keeping his project a secret from everyone.”

“To their eyes, their once-valiant friend had turned into a complete coward. In the past, he hadn’t thought twice before pitting himself against Orange beasts – and sometimes even the Yellows. Yet, now, he often avoided fighting even the Red ones.”

“Many people started distancing themselves from the Hero, treating him coldly. His friends and relatives disappeared one by one, as his reputation swiftly fell down the drain. Of course, not everyone changed their stances toward him. Some of them simply perished in battle.”

“But the end result was the same.”

“A few years later, the Hero was all alone. All the others in the village were practically strangers, and they didn’t have that good of an opinion about him either. But it had been worth it. His caution had paid off, since he was still alive. Wasn’t he? He didn’t care what anyone thought, because he knew why he did everything he did. That was enough.”

“About a decade had passed since he started eating the hearts. His core had yet to show any signs of advancing. The Hero was already doubting it ever would. That was when he realized he wasn’t doing enough. He had to find a way to absorb the beast mana even faster, or all his sacrifices would have been in vain.”

“He soon began another round of experimentation. A different one. And sure enough, it yielded some results a few years later.”