Wanderer 391

Chapter 391 – First Parade (2)

So far, Percy hadn't varied the distance between his platforms much. It was more convenient to keep the gaps constant, as it allowed him to get used to the timing. He now realized that wouldn't cut it, however – it only made him more predictable. Another thing he could do, was to shift the angles of his scythes at the last second, altering his trajectory. It would make it harder to stick his landings, but it would also confuse his opponent.

Determined to give this a shot, Percy moved the next foothold much closer, rotating the weapons just before he stepped on them. He obviously had to twist his body to make this work, though he did manage to execute the manoeuvre in the end.

Naturally, he'd butchered the timing quite badly, but the sudden change in his movements did cause the Blue to raise an eyebrow. Percy ignored his opponent's shock, too busy dealing with another issue. Wincing, he noticed that jumping twice in quick succession only furthered the strain on his joints. That said, he didn't let the pain get to him, thinking of a potential solution.

'I can pour more mana into the force absorption runes to protect my legs…'

He'd have to be careful not to overdo it, as they would also sap some of his momentum away, but the increased frequency of his jumps would make up for it, allowing him to pick up more speed regardless.

This was promising – it could work!

Capitalizing on his idea, Percy spent a few minutes fine-tuning his movements again, as his opponent helplessly did everything in his power to stop him. His spells never connected, however – not as long as Percy maintained a safe distance.

Only when Percy felt confident did he attempt to close the gap again.

Leaping from platform to platform, he rapidly approached the Blue, nimbly evading the green crescents one after the other. His surroundings blurred again. Not only was he flying at his top speed, he was also

doing it in a most chaotic manner this time, zigzagging around the battlefield in all sorts of random directions.

Keeping his eyes locked onto his opponent throughout, Percy used the man's soul and mana core as his compass. It was both the target he desperately needed to reach, and the source of all the obstacles he needed to avoid. The dizzying tapestry of colours around him dimmed and darkened as he concentrated, leaving only the most important shapes visible in his sight. Those were mainly the man's spells – at least the ones on course to hit him.

But there was another thing.

A silver flame, shining brightly. Like the light at the end of a tunnel, it illuminated the way forward. It was naturally the man's soul. No, not quite. It was the projection of his soul – where the mage would be in the following second. That was the thing that Percy needed to sink his scythes into at all costs.

Jumping from scythe to scythe, he flew all over the battlefield, completely ignoring the violent hurricane trying to slow him down. Dancing in three dimensions, he chased after the silver flame relentlessly, the Blue doing everything he could to stop him.

Nothing worked.

Percy evaded the spells one after another, inching closer and closer to his target with each painful step. Just when the end was within reach – a single jump away – Percy caught a subtle flicker in his opponent's soul. Having fully expected it this time, he shifted the angle of his scythes at the last second, altering his trajectory.

He couldn't see the invisible blow, but he could tell he had just dodged another one of those nasty domain blasts, based on the scythes shattering in the distance, behind the spot where he had previously stood. With the danger now past, Percy was about to take the final step, when the man's soul flickered for the second time!

The domain around them disappeared entirely, even the hurricane itself falling apart, as the Blue gathered every drop of his willpower for another blast!

‘Shit, I should have expected this,’ Percy grimaced, shifting his trajectory once again.

Acton had been limited to a single shot, but it was a mistake to assume that somebody who had lived for over half a millennium would be subject to the same constraints. Hastily jumping to the nearest scythe, Percy barely managed to avoid the second blow. Or at least, that was what he believed.

Thinking he had just dealt with his opponent’s last-ditch effort, Percy was about to finally pounce at the bastard, when he noticed that the second blast hadn’t actually destroyed anything in its path, all of the scythes intact.

‘A feint?!’

Just as the realization settled in, the man’s soul flickered for the third time. Caught in an awkward spot, Percy knew he wouldn’t make the jump. Instead, he allowed the scythes beneath his boots to shatter, falling backward instead. The invisible blast whizzed mere inches above his head, sending a shiver down his spine. Had he been a fraction of a second slower, he would have eaten one nasty blow right to his face.

This wasn’t the time to worry about that, however.

Rushing after the man again, Percy picked up speed, having no intention of waiting for him to recover his willpower. Even without his domain, the man still had plenty of mana left, and he clearly wasn’t afraid to squander it – not if it meant buying more time for himself. The silver flame fluttered erratically, the green crescents shooting at Percy once more.

‘No, you fucking don’t!’

A hiss died in Percy’s throat as he took the final step. There were no more spells, nor any unexpected domain blasts. This was it. The silver light enlarged in Percy’s vision, as he slashed at it with both of his scythes. At the same time, the name of his new technique flashed in his mind.

Only, it wasn’t a notification from his Status, nor was it a new spell. It was merely a name he had picked for it himself – the crystallization of his blood and sweat. The first step toward truly mastering his boosting art.

'Carnival of the Savage Gods, First Parade, Winding Corridor'

His momentum carried him several metres forward, as the world around him regained its colour. Only then did Percy register that he was plummeting directly toward the ground. Evidently, he had attacked his opponent from above. He hadn't even noticed, unable to tell up from down, or right from left in that state.

Hastily pulling a pair of scythes beneath his feet to arrest his fall, he looked up. A headless corpse and a severed head fell past him, two fountains of blood spraying out of the stumps. Disbelief still shone in the Blue's eyes, though it was dimming away quickly.

Coating himself in a thin layer of mana, Percy shielded his body from the gore as he scanned his surroundings. Ignoring his opponent's mutilated corpse, he flipped the scythe in his hand, hooking an amulet with its shaft. The thin chain slid down along the grey construct, ending in Percy's hand. Hastily wearing the device around his neck, he allowed it to phase through his armour before shooting towards Micky.

'What's the situation there?'

The reply didn't come immediately. Percy was about to ask again when the clone finally answered.

'Not good. Micky's body is a mess, and this guy just got even more aggressive.'

'That's because his teammate is dead. I'm on my way to you.'

The clone didn't say anything else, but Percy felt the urgency on the other side of the cords. Pushing his new technique to its limit, his surroundings turned into a blur again, as his muscles ached and his bones creaked. Suffice to say, taking down the air mage had taken a lot out of him. Right now, his body practically begged him to take a break – a moment at the very least, but preferably a few hours.

Yet, he didn't care, knowing his friend's life was hanging by a thread.

Given his speed, reaching the other side of the battlefield couldn't have taken more than a few seconds, but to him they felt like an eternity. Only once the others appeared in his vision did he slow down, allowing the colours in his surroundings to settle into place once more.

Scanning the battlefield, he quickly identified both his opponent and his familiar. The former was only protected by a single azure ring this time, probably having realized that Micky wouldn't have an easy time landing a hit as long as he was kept at a distance. The rest of his mana took the form of six colossal serpents, currently in the process of harassing the crow.

Micky himself was a bloody mess. Several large holes marred his wings, some of his broken bones even sticking out, stabbing through both his torn flesh and his dirtied plumage. It was a miracle the bird had even stayed airborne – he had his air mana to thank for that, most likely.

The sight caused Percy's blood to boil, his gaze growing colder. Looking at the water mage again, he gripped his scythes more tightly.

'You'll pay for that, you bastard…'

Chapter 392 – Hydra

Percy was about to attack the water mage when the latter retracted the azure serpents of his own volition. The constructs fused into the ring coiling around his body, soon expanding to form a large bubble a dozen metres wide, the man floating inside.

Next, seven serpentine heads sprouted from the sphere. They looked similar to before, but they were much shorter, and they were attached to their caster. Percy didn't doubt that they were just as deadly, but he struggled to understand how the old man hoped to reach him or Micky from that distance.

'Is he giving up?' Micky asked through their cord for the first time since the start of the battle. His voice sounded strained.

Percy raised an eyebrow, also surprised by the water mage's actions. But he didn't get a chance to respond to his familiar, his opponent beating him to it.

“We approached you two prepared for a tough fight, but it appears we still underestimated you. To think you managed to kill old Besian…” the veteran mage said, his words crisp and clear as they reverberated through the hydra-shaped construct.

Next, he sighed, losing himself in melancholy for a few seconds before continuing.

“It really is a pity… that such a talented young man has to die. But that’s just how things go, I suppose…”

Percy frowned, struggling to make sense of this. How was his opponent planning to take them down while hiding in that shell of his? Micky wasn’t in the best state right now, but his life wasn’t in any danger. And even like this, both Percy and Micky were much faster than him. If they wanted to escape, he wouldn’t be able to stop them.

Yet, his eyes widened a moment later, as the realization hit him.

‘He’s not giving up. Just changing tactics.’

It was true that the water mage wasn’t in any position to kill them immediately, but he didn’t have to do that. Micky would have a harder time flying like this, and he might have to take a break sooner or later. Even Percy would have to deactivate his boosting art at some point, his body already strained from overuse.

Their opponent travelled much more slowly than either of them, but he was also in a much better condition. Worse still, he had the means to track them down. He could take his sweet time chasing them, attacking when they least expected it. Even if they managed to evade him for a while, he could just put pressure on them while waiting for reinforcements. Eventually, more nobles from the Root or other Houses would arrive, looking for Percy and Micky. This guy could just join forces with them when that happened, borrowing their strength while lending them his tracking ability.

‘How troublesome… These old Blues are so annoying to deal with,’ Percy clicked his tongue, before explaining his reasoning to Micky.

He and his familiar had spent the whole battle dancing like mice in their opponents’ palms. There was simply no comparing the old foxes to the likes of Acton or Femel. It wasn’t just about raw power either.

Granted, the two Blues had that in spades too, but their ability to pull one trick after another from a seemingly bottomless sack was far more irritating. Even though Percy had taken down one of them, it didn't feel like he had won.

'We can't have that. This guy needs to die here.' Micky replied, echoing the sentiment.

Percy nodded grimly, knowing his familiar was right. But it was easier said than done.

'Can you break through the constructs? Because I sure can't.'

Over the course of their conversation, he had tried to penetrate the water mage's defences but, just like before, his scythes had failed to pierce into the domain-infused liquid. His only hope was Micky's Rending Tornado. Taking advantage of the crow's greatest weapon – his body – and fuelled by every drop of mana in his cores, it certainly packed much more of a punch than Percy's scythes.

This was why he had asked the bird to try his luck against the water mage in the first place. Judging from the man's unblemished clothes and Micky's sorry state, however, it didn't seem the crow had been particularly successful.

'I can, and I have.' Micky said, lighting up a spark of hope in Percy's eyes. 'But I've only managed to break through a couple of serpents at once, and he never let me get anywhere close to his body.'

Percy scratched his chin, contemplating his friend's words. Smashing through two or three of the constructs was a promising start, but they wouldn't win unless Micky pierced through all of them.

That said, things weren't that bad. Micky had previously been cautious not to consume too much mana in a single attack. With Percy having his back, the crow would finally be free to go all out. But even if he managed to peel the man's defences off, Percy might fail to land the finishing blow on their target. And both he and his familiar would be vulnerable after their attempt.

'As I see it, we have two options,' he said after a while. 'If you're confident that you can open the way for me, I'll do my best to kill him. But if we fail, we'll just make our situation worse. Alternatively, we can just fly away now and deal with the consequences later.'

Both choices were risky, so Percy figured he should let his familiar and his clone discuss this first. The two understood Micky's capabilities better than he did, having tested them against the water mage extensively already.

'I'll do it. Just make sure you time your attack properly.' Micky said after a while, already gathering his strength.

The glowing lines on his plumage shone even more brightly, as he pushed his boosting art to its limits. His feathers lit up too – the mutated ones, at least – as ice mana gathered around them. Transparent blood that looked like water gushed out of the holes in his body, but much of it froze on the spot, rapidly encasing his wounds in crystalline patches. His joints made popping sounds, as he increased the frequency of his flaps, ignoring his broken bones as they shredded his flesh. Finally, mana poured out of both cores, enveloping Micky in a thick pale mist, his muscles swelling with strength.

Throughout this whole thing, the water mage didn't do much. He probably understood that his best bet was to endure this one attack with everything he had. The serpentine necks coiled around the azure bubble a couple more times, the heads retracting even closer to his body. They opened their mouths, hissing quietly as they bared their long fangs at Percy and Micky.

Percy didn't remain idle either. He created as many scythes as he could, spreading them all over the battlefield. He didn't know which ones he would end up using as weapons, and which he would turn into platforms to step on. In fact, most would probably go to waste, but he wanted to give himself as many options as possible. He'd only kept a certain area clear of his weapons – a straight-line connecting Micky to their opponent – careful not to obstruct his friend's path.

Before long, the crow was done with his preparations.

With no warning, he dove right toward the water mage, rotating both his body and the mana around him as he picked up speed. Violent gusts of pale wind formed, though the attack looked quite different from the last time Micky went all out. He was a lot larger, and his mutations now covered an even greater proportion of his body. His cores had both advanced, he had upgraded his affinity, and he'd even spent a lot of time mastering Circulation. Finally, he had a clone to help him.

The frigid tornado spiralling toward their opponent admittedly made for a pretty sight, but Percy knew he didn't have time to marvel at it.

Leaping from platform to platform, he accelerated too, preparing his one attack. It already sucked that Micky had to put his body through the meat grinder to give him this chance, so he refused to waste it.

Soon, the crow reached the first of the azure constructs. It was impossible to make the bird's features out amidst the raging storm of mana. Yet, his offensive power wasn't a joke. He dug through the water serpent with ease, the construct shattering into powder after freezing and turning brittle by the spell.

The water mage didn't wait for Micky to break through his defences. The second and third serpents bit back at the crow. He still managed to break through both in the end, but Percy hadn't missed the wave of agony pouring through the cords, the curved fangs having inflicted new wounds on the crow's mangled body.

Gritting his teeth, he continued to bounce from scythe to scythe, his surroundings turning into a blur again as he prepared for his short window of opportunity.

Micky dismantled the constructs one after another, smashing through reptilian heads and serpentine necks alike. He ignored his worsening injuries and the inevitable pain they caused, inching closer and closer to his target with each violent revolution of his body.

At the same time, the screen of mana around him kept thinning. He appeared to slow down too, rapidly burning through the spell's power. At least, that was what Percy figured was happening, based on the fleeting glimpses that he caught.

But it was too late for them to back down now – they both knew that.

Eventually, Micky made it all the way through. The man had shifted within his bubble at the last second, narrowly avoiding getting torn to pieces, but the entire construct was in tatters, blobs of water and shards of broken ice crumbling around him. Percy couldn't make out his expression, but he could tell based on the erratic flares of his soul that receiving such a massive blow to his willpower at once hadn't been easy.

Not wasting any time, Percy took one of the quickest routes to his opponent, closing the gap separating them in an instant.

Just when he was about to connect, he noticed the water mage preparing what he assumed was another of those domain blasts. He didn't panic, however, having expected it.

Diverting his path to the nearest platform, he dodged the invisible projectile. Unwilling to get tricked again, he took a moment to ensure his opponent had actually released one this time, while also keeping his eyes open for the follow-up.

Sure enough, the man tried to stop Percy's movements four times in total, mixing real shots with feints. Fully leveraging both the true power of his sneak attacks and the threat that they posed, he bought as much time as he could for the water around him to restore the hydra to its previous shape.

In the end, he just about managed to keep Percy at bay long enough to recover his construct. Unfortunately, every time Percy paused, he needed a couple of additional jumps to build up the lost speed again, and his opponent had taken advantage of that to delay him.

But it didn't matter.

"Nice try," Percy said, not falling for the man's ruse.

The water mage winced, his eyes widening as he noticed two curved blades sticking out of his chest. Ever since he first formed the hydra, the man had fully retracted his domain from the battlefield and infused it to his constructs. As a result, Percy had had a tough time telling when the willpower in the water was exhausted. If it hadn't been for his experience fighting the air mage, he might have fallen for his opponent's bluff.

Luckily, he understood by now how costly those invisible blasts were. The old fox might have rebuilt his hydra, but his domain would take a bit longer to recover. And regular water couldn't possibly block Percy's incorporeal weapons.

Slicing through his opponent's soul for good measure, Percy looted the spatial amulet from the man's neck, before allowing him to plummet to the forest below.

'Such a pity to waste two Blue cores…'

It was a rare treat for Micky – though Percy expected it to grow more common in the coming days. Unfortunately, he didn't know how long it would take for the patriarch's mark to fade from his familiar's body, and he'd rather not risk adding another two.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Micky flew right under Percy, allowing him to land on his back.

Checking the bird's Status, Percy sent his familiar a mental message, announcing his latest spell upgrade. Of course, neither of them had the energy to celebrate, but that was probably all the more reason to do it.

'Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Wild Art: Rending Tornado – Refined -> Wild Art: Freezing Tornado – Refined!'

The crow didn't say anything, though Percy noticed a wave of contentment seeping through the cord.

Gathering as much strength as he could muster, Micky flapped his tattered wings, carrying them both away. At the same time, the countless scythes still flying around the battlefield exploded in unison, a cloud of grey dust scattering in the wind as Percy and Micky disappeared into the distance.

Chapter 393 – Pride and pity

The metallic bars bent and groaned, as Deimos violently slammed the door behind him. He'd just about managed to restrain himself too, otherwise it would have easily come off its hinges, and he didn't feel like having it replaced again.

'Stubborn old fool…'

Even after spending years inside the dark cell, Orin still refused to reveal the missing ingredient. Despite having been robbed of his freedom, his status, and even his dignity, the alchemist insisted that he had given his word to his mentee to keep the recipe to himself for twenty years.

It didn't help that Deimos had to be careful not to kill the Blue by accident. Unless they captured Percy or figured out the Aurora Dew by themselves, Orin was quite literally the only person on Remior who knew the secret for sure. There might be others – like Nesha – but it wasn't a certainty, and the girl was still in hiding anyway.

Of course, waiting for another sixteen years wasn't ideal, but the situation made the carrot a more preferable approach than the stick.

Deimos had offered the alchemist several deals, each more generous than the last. To pardon his crimes, to restore his status as a senior alchemist, and even to promote him to the position of the sixth elder of the Guild, despite him being a mere Blue… Yet, no matter what he had put on the table, the man hadn't budged, prioritizing his promise to his student above all else.

'How ridiculous…'

Shaking his head, Deimos walked through the dim corridor, hoping he'd have better luck with the other prisoner. Though he wouldn't get his hopes up. Picking the right key from his pocket was easy – he had long learned to identify each of them by touch, after all the times he had visited the two captives. Twisting it inside the lock, he waited for the mechanism to click before stepping into the damp cell. Raising his left hand, he allowed some lightning mana to crackle in his palm, illuminating the place.

The prisoner was sitting cross-legged on the ground, topless and barefoot, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts full of holes and covered in mud and caked blood. The man appeared to be in his late twenties, despite having lived dozens of times longer. His eyes were closed, and his expression peaceful. His beard was messy, as was his dark hair. Much of it was draped over his face, painting a stark contrast against the shaved scalp he'd sported back when he first surrendered himself to Deimos. He didn't seem bothered by the countless scars, scorch marks and wounds marring his body, many of the more recent ones still bleeding.

Given his grade and his affinity, he could have healed everything within minutes, if only his mana hadn't been sealed. In fact, everyone was aware that he was staying here voluntarily. The enchanted shackles on his wrists and ankles wouldn't last long if he genuinely tried to break out.

Runecrafting on Remior wasn't that bad – it was generally considered average among similarly developed worlds. But it wasn't particularly outstanding either. Even the White core in charge of House Etna would have been hard pressed to design a prison capable of holding a Violet against his wishes. Hephaestus was possibly the only one on Remior skilled enough to accomplished that, but this matter was way beneath the god's paygrade.

Besides, it wasn't every day that the leader of a noble House had to be kept captive. Typically, such figures would be executed on the spot, should they be unlucky enough to lose a war against a rival family. As for the cells the Alchemists' Guild possessed – they weren't meant to hold such powerful mages. They were only here to discipline Yellows or Greens when they broke a rule.

'Well, it doesn't matter. He knows better than to resist.'

Archibald had only surrendered to spare his family the consequences of his grandson's actions. Whether he was truly innocent, as he claimed, or not, he understood his hands were tied – both literally and figuratively.

Seeing that the man refused to even acknowledge his presence, Deimos spoke first.

"They finally found your grandson. Well, sort of…"

No response.

Deimos had to admit; Archibald was good. No matter what he said or did – what he threatened or offered – the old Violet never strayed even an inch from his script. He refused to admit that he cared for the boy, or that he'd known anything about Percy's involvement with the elixirs.

"Apparently, he's kept himself busy over the years. He snuck into the Thirsty Valley and murdered two Holy Children. All of their guards too – anywhere from ten to fifteen of them. He was last spotted flying north atop a giant, two-cored crow."

This time, Archibald finally opened his eyes, raising an eyebrow. Deimos didn't doubt the man's genuine shock, innocent or not. It really was quite unbelievable, after all.

"I suppose you're here to free me then?" the Violet suddenly asked, his voice hoarse but even.

"Free you? Why the hell would I do that?" Deimos asked.

Archibald shrugged.

“Didn’t you lock me up because you assumed that Percy needed outside help to escape from your subordinate? If what you’re saying is true, him killing a Green doesn’t sound so farfetched now, does it?”

Deimos chuckled.

“I hate to disappoint you, but you aren’t going anywhere. Not until you give me something useful. An admission of guilt, your grandson’s location, or the recipe – I don’t even care what at this point. But I won’t let you or your family continue to mock me.”

Archibald just looked at him in silence. Feeling slightly uncomfortable under the Violet’s gaze, Deimos continued.

“Nothing? Be glad I haven’t implicated your family yet… But don’t assume things will stay that way. In fact, I might not even have to do anything. The neighbouring Houses might get to them first. Two years without a Violet is a long time.”

The life mage sighed.

“Why are you here, Deimos? If you’re going to torture or kill me, just get on with it already. Haven’t you grown tired of wasting your breath?”

“I’m here to make a deal. This won’t end well for any of you, Archibald. Not for you, not for your grandson, and not for your House. They’ll catch him, sooner or later, and it’ll be too late for you when that happens. Why don’t you just try to salvage what you can?”

Archibald shook his head.

“I’ve already told you everything I know. That won’t change, no matter how you ask, or what you offer.”

Hearing him insist on the same old story, Deimos turned around, closing the door as he left the cell. He didn't even lash out this time, feeling more tired than angry.

He knew Archibald was lying, of course.

Of that, there was no doubt. Not that there was any hole in the man's words. If anything, it was impressive how consistent the Violet had been over the years, repeating the same lines after countless months of constant interrogation. He'd certainly done an admirable job controlling his expression too, always keeping the mask of the detached patriarch on, ignorant and innocent of his descendant's crimes.

But there was a clue that Deimos hadn't missed. Something that had been painfully obvious since the very first day they had talked. Anybody else might not have noticed it. It was an emotion, hidden deep inside the man's gaze. It flashed brightly, every time Percy's name came up. To Deimos, it was clear like the sun.

Why?

Because this was an emotion he had longed to see in his father's eyes his whole life. Hermes had never once looked at Deimos like that. And it killed him, to see that emotion somewhere else.

It was pride.

As early as a few days ago, Hermes had personally contacted a few select people, announcing the news on Percy. This time, the god hadn't wanted to raise a big fuss, so he'd only told the leaders of the Great Houses and Deimos – who was in charge of the investigation on the Aurora Dew. At first, Deimos had expected his father to punish him over his repeated failures. He'd been in the Guild for around four years, with nothing but a dead subordinate to show for it.

To his shock – and to his great relief – that hadn't happened.

Somehow, the god's demeanour had hurt Deimos even more, however. Hermes hadn't even bothered to visit him in person. He had merely relayed the same message to both himself and the others, his voice sounding cold and uncaring. There hadn't been the slightest hint of anger or disappointment in it either.

Only pity.

After telling them about Percy's exploits, Hermes hadn't even ordered them to hunt the Red-born down. It didn't seem like he even cared whether they did. In the end, they'd all assumed they were supposed to – because why else would he have given them Percy's physical description?

Still, something about this had rubbed Deimos the wrong way. It was almost like the god had no expectations for any of them. As if he was simply going through the motions, having given up on their mission entirely. As if their failure was already set in stone.

And it irked Deimos to no end.

'Why did the gods not involve themselves directly, even after all this time?!'

He couldn't understand it.

Why had they stopped caring about the Aurora Dew all of a sudden? After all the years he had wasted stressing over it?! Did they no longer want their Yellow-borns to attain divinity? What about their Green-borns? Did they not care that two of them had died? That their murderer was out there, spitting in the Order's face time after time?

'Well, I do.'

Deimos didn't care about the Order's image exactly, nor did he care about Remior as a whole. But he did want to get his hands on the Aurora Dew. He was a Yellow-born, after all, and a talented one at that.

His father might have treated him like a worthless pawn his whole life, but things didn't have to stay that way. With the miraculous elixirs, he had a real chance to become a god. Naturally, it would take several millennia, but at least the door was open.

As for the gods' wishes…

Well, he had no idea what they had in mind. Perhaps, a few years meant nothing to them, and they were happy waiting for Orin to reveal the recipe. Or maybe they had figured it out on their own already, and they no longer cared about the culprit.

Yet, it didn't matter.

Thinking back to the disrespectful runt who had wasted so much of his time, he smirked. Whether they cared or not, the gods hadn't forbidden him from hunting Percy down either, so he was free to press on with his mission.

Next, he glanced back at the cells behind him, thinking about the stubborn prisoners covering for their protégé. They might have refused to talk, but that didn't mean they were entirely useless.

'I wonder if he cares about you two as much as you care about him…'

Chapter 394 – Sculpture

"There. Looks like a decent spot."

Micky descended to the tundra below them, landing behind a small hill. They could have probably hidden themselves better in the forest, but it would have made it harder for them to detect a potential ambush too. Besides, they'd wanted to put some distance from the location where they'd killed the Blues, in case their opponents had informed others of their whereabouts.

As soon as he set foot on the ground, Micky finally deactivated his boosting art. Percy leapt off his familiar's back promptly, unwilling to burden him any longer than he had to. Given the crow's injuries, he would have loved to have carried him instead, but he knew it would have been slower and more awkward due to the size difference.

Unclogging their connection, Percy allowed his friend's feelings to seep through the cord, trying to get a better sense of his injuries. He wasn't looking forward to experiencing the crow's pain, but this would be faster than manually examining all the wounds one by one. Bracing himself for something quite unpleasant, he was a little surprised to realize that it didn't hurt that much.

“What the hell? I can literally see some of your bones sticking out. Shouldn’t it sting more?”

Micky shrugged.

“It was worse when we received the injuries, but still better than you’d think. And the situation has improved even more since then.”

Percy was happy to hear his friend hadn’t suffered that much. Still, this was strange, to say the least.

“Well, whatever. Let’s treat the most serious wounds first. We’ll figure it out later.”

His healing potions wouldn’t be very effective on a Green, but beasts recovered a lot faster than humans, merely by eating a few meals. Suffice to say, Percy wasn’t too worried about Micky. They just had to set all the displaced bones properly, to make sure they healed correctly.

Over the next couple of hours, Percy methodically scanned the crow’s body, snapping the broken bones back in place one after the other. Many of the wounds had already begun to close, so he was forced to reopen some of them, which did hurt quite a bit. However, there was something else he noticed while he did that – something that might explain why Micky wasn’t in as much pain as they would have expected.

“Is it me, or did all the holes in your body get filled with ice?”

Back when Micky unleashed all his mana against their opponent, Percy hadn’t missed the ice spilling into his wounds. At the time, he’d assumed it was just a side-effect of Micky’s latest spell. Upon further examination, the crystalline patches appeared both more extensive and more purposeful than that. The ice only covered the interior of the crow’s wounds, not a single flake sticking out. It was as if some invisible law had forced the material to replace just the crow’s missing flesh, and nothing more.

“You’re right. Is this what’s numbing my pain?”

Returning the last displaced bone to its rightful place, Percy fed Micky a handful of healing potions to stop his bleeding, before investigating the frozen patches again. This time, he focused on them more carefully, using his mutated eyes to read the mana flow beneath the surface.

“I think it does more than that. There’s a lot of ice mana there, but that’s just the start. The beast and water mana in your bloodstream are circulating through the frozen patches too. It’s almost like the ice has grown its own veins and arteries, connecting with the ones on your flesh. Can you try activating Circulation again?”

Micky acquiesced, the four sets of glowing lines appearing on his plumage once more. This time, Percy keenly noticed that they passed through the frozen patches too, treating them like regular body parts.

Ignoring the cold, Percy traced his fingers on the ice. It didn’t feel as smooth as he would have expected. It was rough, densely covered in tiny barbs. Examining the surface of the patches a bit more, he saw tiny amounts of air and soul mana gathering on the tips of the barbs, in a rather familiar ratio.

“What the hell?! Micky, I think you’re growing new feathers made of ice!”

Listening to Percy, Micky lifted his left talon a few inches off the ground, drawing Percy’s attention. The crow was missing its rightmost digit, having lost it during the fight. A chunk of ice was covering the stump, though Percy could swear it had grown a little since the end of the battle. It had already extended past where the joint was supposed to be.

Micky held the talon in that spot for a few seconds, apparently trying something. At first, nothing happened, but Percy heard some cracking sounds at some point. Letting his senses blend with his familiar’s, he soon realized what the crow was trying to do. Sure enough, they both felt the joint budge after a while, the frozen tip of the stump wiggling slightly.

Not missing a beat, Percy pulled up Micky’s Status, having a pretty good idea about what was happening.

___

Mictlantecuhtli (Percival's familiar)

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Spectral traits:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

“Amazing,” he spat, before sharing the images with Micky.

They both ignored the obvious changes in the crow’s spell section, focusing on the fourth trait. The question marks had finally been replaced by actual text, confirming Percy’s suspicions.

“Do you think the wounds will close properly after a while? Or am I stuck like this?” Micky asked.

“Does it feel worse than your flesh?” Percy asked back.

“Strangely, no…” Micky shrugged. “The spots that have fully closed feel exactly the same. I bet I won’t even notice the difference once the new feathers and the missing digit are back… Still, it’s a bit weird – to be literally made of ice.”

Percy nodded, not disagreeing with his familiar’s assessment. At least, he couldn’t imagine having his own hand suddenly replaced by ice, no matter how natural it felt. It would definitely take Micky some time to get used to this – if he ever did.

“Well, if it doesn’t heal by itself, we can look for a life mage to do it for you,” he said.

Surely, if they were to forcefully carve the ice out and flood the surrounding flesh with life mana, it would close properly.

This was still a good thing in the short term. At the rate Micky’s injuries were healing, he would be back in fighting condition by tomorrow. And if they got lucky, the ice patches would consume even fewer nutrients than regular flesh.

‘I wonder if every beast with a second core and a composite affinity can mutate like this…’

Maybe not. Ice was quite unique even among composite affinities. Between ice mana itself and its components, Micky had all the ingredients to reproduce both the solids and liquids in his body. The only other affinities Percy thought might work like this were mud and lava.

‘Actually, I think the fact that Micky is a familiar might have also played a role…’

Percy hadn’t missed the silver tint on the frozen body parts, indicating that the Soul Predator mutation had also interfaced with the new one, breathing life into the inanimate material. Perhaps, this wouldn’t have been possible if Micky’s soul wasn’t as flexible and partially foreign to his body as it was.

In fact, his Thin Blood mutation – which came from his water affinity – had likely also helped. Lava was made of fire and earth, and Percy had no idea what mutations those affinities might produce. There was a good chance that only ice and mud familiars could accomplish something similar.

In any case, this was good news. Percy wasn’t sure whether Micky would grow comfortable with the new body parts anytime soon, but even if he didn’t, it was bound to be better than his hunger coming back. If the new mutation truly allowed him to sustain himself more easily, it might be a good trade-off regardless.

What were the odds of his wasp familiar getting an ice or mud affinity too?

Probably not high.

Shaking the pointless thoughts away, he turned back to his friend.

“For now, try to use Regulation with the ice patches. It should let you recover your stamina even faster. Obviously, you won’t be able to do it once your flesh regrows, but there’s no reason not to take advantage of this while it lasts.”

Micky nodded, before thinking of something else.

“What do you think the limit of this mutation is?”

“Limit?”

“Well, it says ‘missing body parts’, but it doesn’t really specify which ones can be replaced, or whether there is a maximum volume of ice I can sustain at once… Do you think it could replace an entire wing? Or my heart?”

“Hmmm… That’s actually a good question.” Percy said, scratching the back of his head. “Well, I doubt it can replace your cores. I’ve no idea how they work exactly, but I would be shocked if you could recreate them by hollowing out a piece of ice. As for the rest of your body… Let’s hope we never find out.”

Based on what they’d seen so far, most of Micky’s body should be eligible for replacement. Even his wings consisted mainly of blood, muscles, bones and feathers – all of which had already been replaced elsewhere, to smaller extents. Even his heart was essentially just a muscle, so Percy wouldn’t be shocked if Micky could replace it too. But he didn’t know about the rest of his organs. Certainly not his brain. And this wasn’t something he was willing to put to the test.

At any rate, Micky should be able to fly again. And they’d rather not spend too long here. The more distance they put between themselves and their recent battlefield, the safer they would feel. Hopping onto his familiar’s back, Percy was about to ask him to take off, when he noticed something shooting straight at him at a tremendous speed.

He was about to roll out of the way, but he caught himself at the last second, realizing this wasn't anything to be wary of. In fact, he might have noticed this sooner, if he hadn't been so busy dealing with Micky's situation.

One of his clones was back.

Chapter 395 – Trust

In the end, the most recent clone hadn't brought anything particularly interesting back. Having spent most of his time looking for – and failing to find – a sapient Green host, he'd possessed a beast instead.

Percy had found himself in the body of an avian creature that had looked a bit like a four-winged bat. He had searched for signs of civilization or rare herbs, only to come up empty-winged. Eventually, he had been forced to deem the trip a failure, returning home to try again.

The good news was that the clone hadn't brought many memories back either, so assimilating his experiences hadn't been particularly difficult. Half an hour later, Percy had sent a new clone outside, before resuming work on his projects.

Both his and Micky's recoveries were coming along nicely.

The crow's missing body parts had mostly been replaced by chunks of ice already, so he only had to deal with a minor stamina problem. Even with his mutations and his spells alleviating the bulk of his hunger, the fight against the Blues had taken a lot out of him.

They didn't stop flying, fully aware that they needed to stay on the move as much as possible. However, they did take things easy for the next couple of days. Micky kept himself busy applying Regulation to his new mutation, as well as scouring the wilderness for the occasional Yellow beast to munch on – all in an attempt to rebuild his reserves as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, Percy split his time between perfecting his mana threads and brewing some Aurora Dew to extend his stash. Both tasks were challenging to do while airborne, but he was getting better at them by the hour.

They didn't practice their coordination, nor anything else related to combat, however. Directly increasing their strength was definitely high on their list of priorities – the difficult battle they'd just barely survived had been quite an eye-opener. Still, they figured they should wait until they recovered completely before exerting themselves.

Eventually, a second clone arrived. And this one proved a lot more successful than his predecessor.

Burrowing in Percy's body, the grey wisp dumped yet another strange object in his soul. Unlike the black, disk-shaped seal he had purchased from Metatron, this one sported a deep red colour and was shaped like a pyramid. Through his clone's memories, he understood this was actually a tiny piece of a goddess's internal world. It contained not only her own soul, but also the souls of hundreds of her mortal subjects. They were all sleeping soundly inside the structure, floating next to his storage seal.

'What's left of them, anyway…'

Goddess or not, Nephthys had been forced to brutally mutilate her soul, her mind and her internal world, as well as those of her people. It was the only way Percy could have possibly carried them back to Remior. He still had no idea if any of them would ever recover, but he'd already promised her to try and help them.

That said, he wasn't going to half-ass things when dealing with an entity that had lived for hundreds of thousands of years. Certainly not one with the mind affinity. Turning to the other former deity – the one resting around his finger – he tried to make sense of Nephthys's circumstances.

'Wow, you've got quite a knack for getting into trouble.' Zoris mused after hearing Percy's explanation.

'Do you think that she might have brainwashed or manipulated me in any way?'

The irony of voicing this question to the same person whose own integrity he had doubted just over a year ago wasn't lost on him. But Nesha had already confirmed that Zoris had been honest with him, and that he didn't harbour any ill intentions. In his girlfriend's absence, the former god was his best shot at vetting the goddess's words.

Granted, with a clone inside Nesha's body, he currently had access to her Truthseeker bloodline. The problem was that he'd need a direct line from the clone to the goddess, as having his main body relay their words wouldn't work. Worse still, Nephthys was currently asleep, and would likely remain so for the foreseeable future.

'I doubt it,' Zoris said, before elaborating. 'Messing with your senses – sure. She could have shown you whatever she wanted inside her internal world. But even if she did, she shouldn't have the means to hijack your main body after the fact. Certainly not in her current state.'

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

'What about messing with my thoughts or memories?' Percy asked again.

Zoris mentally shook his head.

'I don't know what today's gods are capable of. I've been out of the loop since before this woman was born. But true mind-control goes a lot deeper than merely affecting what one sees or hears. To put this into context, let me give you an analogy regarding life magic. Altering your senses would be the mental equivalent of infecting or curing your body of a disease – a rather simple thing, that even a Violet or a White can do. Affecting your thoughts and memories, on the other hand, would be closer to giving somebody a bloodline. I'm sure you know enough about bloodlines by now to understand how much harder that would be to pull off.'

Percy nodded, the former god's words being in line with what Metatron had told him.

'And you're confident there aren't any gods who can do that?'

'I didn't say that. In fact, there used to be one, back when I was still active. His name was Baphomet, and he hailed from the world of Catharis – a rather high-ranking greater spring. But, even he, couldn't do this by himself.'

'What do you mean?'

‘He had cultivated a special order of mortals to help him. Over a hundred Yellow-borns and Green-borns, ranging from Violets to demigods. And they all had the mind affinity. They amplified his strength, allowing him to seize another’s mind entirely. He could even do it from afar, manipulating somebody from across worlds.’

Percy swallowed hard, imagining himself getting targeted by this spell. He’d lose control of his body in an instant, probably not even realizing what had happened to him. At least, he didn’t think he had the means to defend himself against such a powerful mental attack.

‘Can it affect gods as well?’

‘Thankfully, no. Even a strong mortal with a mind affinity might be able to do something about it if they noticed it in time. But don’t underestimate how much damage he could still cause to a rival faction. Imagine one of the strongest demigods on your world suddenly falling in the hands of a hostile god. There’s no telling what Baphomet might use them for.’

Zoris’s words sent a chill down Percy’s spine.

‘You think he’s still around? Or that there might be others like him, nowadays?’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s alive. Even the largest factions avoided messing with Catharis. It just wasn’t worth the hassle of making such a troublesome enemy. But I also doubt there are others like him. It’s not an easy spell to pull off. It takes a very talented god to serve as the core of the array, and that’s not even the hardest bit.’

‘The mortals?’ Percy guessed.

‘Indeed. He needs to keep finding and training more of them every few thousand years. Even for a greater spring that owns several planets, gathering so many powerful mind users all the time isn’t easy. This is just my personal guess, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they own the Elemental Source for the mind affinity.’

Percy exhaled in relief upon hearing that. He still made a mental note to stay clear of Catharis for the foreseeable future. He didn't doubt it would be full of amazing treasures, but it wasn't worth the risk. Not when there were hundreds of other greater springs he had yet to explore.

'So, what's the worst thing Nephthys can do to me? I admit, I'm still a little nervous to have a mind goddess sleeping inside my soul.'

'The first thing you need to remember is, that thing inside you is not a goddess. Not anymore. The fact that she managed to set foot on Remior is proof enough that she can no longer be considered one.'

Zoris sighed at that, probably comparing her to his own situation. Percy didn't say anything, waiting for him to continue.

'Anyway, that's not to say that everything she told you was the truth. She could have still lied or held something back – the good old way.'

Percy nodded, knowing that his only options were to either trust her based on the limited information he had available, or to break his promise to her and let the Amenthei perish.

'At least, I don't think she lied about the condition of her people…'

Percy had clearly seen the poor state of their souls before entering her internal world. There were only a few of them left, and they were all dying slowly. That much, he didn't think she could have faked. Of course, she could have still twisted the truth in all sorts of ways when showing him her world's past…

He sighed.

Blindly believing someone he had just met wasn't ideal, but he didn't want to doom an entire race of people due to his suspicions. This was why he had agreed to her terms in the first place. And she clearly understood that too, which was why she'd placed her hopes on him.

'Well, what's done is done. I just hope this thing lasts long enough…'

Examining the pyramid again, Percy noticed it was rising through his soul, slowly making its way to his head. The object's properties felt a little contradictory. On one hand, it was extremely light – probably thanks to Nephthys's efforts to help him carry it home. On the other, it felt exceptionally hard. Apparently, even the tiniest sliver of a deity's soul wasn't the kind of thing Percy could damage easily with his current means.

'I bet I wouldn't be able to leave a scratch on the pyramid even if I went all out…'

Of course, that didn't mean he was powerless to deal with the object. The structure could only exist under the protection of its owner's soul, which, in turn, could only survive within Percy's. If he wanted to harm Nephthys or her people, he could easily expel the pyramid from his body, and watch it crumble away in no time. Obviously, he had no intention of doing anything of the sort, but knowing he held all the power in this situation went a long way toward proving Nephthys's sincerity and desperation.

Finally, there was another thing he'd noticed as soon as the object had entered his soul. Something that caused the corner of his lips to curl up, filling him with greed.

'Whether she lied to me or not, at least I won't end up empty-handed…'

Chapter 396 – Side-projects

As soon as the object entered Percy's soul, ideas had started sprouting in his mind one after the other. The effect had initially been weaker than the Wiseman's Dust, but this was rapidly changing as the pyramid rose closer and closer to his head.

By the time it reached his brain – or at least the part of his soul resting inside it – and once he resumed working on his spells, Percy was confident the effect would far surpass it. After all, he currently had a lot more of it in his possession than he'd had on Felmara, and his connection to the substance was far more intimate too.

'Do you think it's safe to use?' he asked Zoris, still trying to wrap his head around the goddess's intentions.

'Absolutely. Mental and spectral versions of the Wiseman's Dust are well-documented – though most factions haven't bothered to give them a different name. Even for gods without a mind or soul affinity, there are several ways to collect and disseminate it. The fact that she still has hers so many years after

her ascension only lends credence to her story. It'll be a huge help to you, so make the most of it while it lasts.'

Percy nodded.

He knew he wouldn't be able to use up the entire stash in the limited time that he had. Sadly, he'd somehow managed to place himself under another strict deadline. Originally, he had intended to take his sweet time infiltrating the Fungal Spire. Due to Nephthys's situation, he'd have to greatly expedite his plans, however, getting his hands on a wasp egg within the next couple of years. It was either that or placing her soul in a different body, which wouldn't be ideal.

'Micky, have you felt any different since my clone returned?'

The crow shook his head, the passenger in his body soon echoing the sentiment. Evidently, the two of them wouldn't be able to benefit from the so-called Wiseman's Murmurs either. Despite their powerful connection and their close physical proximity to Percy's main body, it seemed the effect of the substance was limited to within the confines of his own soul.

At least, whatever was left of it wouldn't necessarily go to waste. Once he placed Nephthys's soul inside the wasp egg, she would essentially be reborn as a mortal. The resulting familiar would inherit whatever was left of the pyramid and, by extension, the substance. Whether it retained the goddess's memories or not, the Wiseman's Murmurs should help the creature with its development, allowing it to catch up to Percy and Micky sooner.

'Or not… These are essentially her own impurities that she expelled during her ascension… Will they even work on her?'

Percy shrugged. This wasn't the kind of question anybody could answer, since he was pretty much in uncharted territory.

Thinking of something else, he turned back to Zoris.

'Do you have any idea why she stayed on her planet until the very end? She claimed she was stuck, but I was under the impression that gods could travel in space.'

‘Generally speaking, they can.’ Zoris said, before elaborating. ‘It’s a little trickier for mind and soul gods like us though, since our internal worlds are initially incapable of housing physical objects. And one of the most important requirements to survive in space is having air to breathe.’

Percy raised an eyebrow, not expecting a deity to be constrained by something so mundane.

‘Seriously? Is there no way around that?’ he asked again.

Somehow, he struggled to imagine a powerful titaness like Phoebe stranded on Remior due to her affinity.

‘There is.’ Zoris confirmed. ‘You can use external means, like a starship or a storage device that can recycle air for you. But it doesn’t sound like her people were advanced enough to build either. That said, it’s possible to turn our internal world corporeal, allowing us to store air and even plants inside it. That’s the most popular option, as it gives us the ability to traverse the cosmos with our own body, but it also takes some time and knowledge to get there. It’s something a fledgling goddess without peers or access to the outside world would have struggled to discover by herself.’

Percy nodded. This was pretty much in line with what Nephthys had told him. Of course, it still wasn’t definitive proof that she’d been honest with him.

‘Couldn’t she have faked all of those details to trick me?’

‘Sure, but it sounds farfetched. Why would she allow herself to get eaten by a demonic infestation if she had a way out? And why would she agree to become your familiar if it wasn’t her last resort? No offense to you or your crow buddy, but I just don’t see any god willingly giving up their divinity to be reborn as a low-born beast – two cores or not.’

‘Fair enough.’

Suffice to say, Percy was more than happy with Zoris’s analysis. Obviously, even if Nephthys had told him the truth about everything, it still didn’t mean that she was a good person, or a suitable familiar candidate. Yet, he figured she’d at least earned herself the benefit of the doubt.

‘Besides, I can interrogate her again with Nesha’s help after she wakes up. If it turns out she’s up to something, it won’t be too late to take her out.’

Robbed of all her strength, she wouldn’t be able to resist if Percy decided to kill her. Losing his wasp familiar would suck, but he could always create another one.

‘Anyway, that’s for future me to worry about. Right now, I should focus on making the most of the next two years.’

Activating his boosting art, Percy spent a few minutes mending the most recent batch of soul injuries, while sorting through the clone’s memories. At the same time, he went over his ongoing projects once again, taking the new variables into account.

Originally, he had intended to focus on three main things.

The first, was his newly upgraded Secret Art and, by extension, his collaboration with Micky. This was something they had started working on since before leaving the Thirsty Valley. Unfortunately, they had a long way to go before they could freely share their thoughts, their senses, and possibly their mana.

Next, was his armour. With the Murmurs helping him, he was bound to complete his mana threads in no time. However, he would have to wait for Nesha and his clone to finish reading through the runecrafting books before he could proceed with the final step. Luckily, his girlfriend had already made it back to the city safely, and she was currently trying to rebuild her life. Things were going well, but it would be months until he was done with this.

Finally, there was the Dance. Micky would have a much easier time figuring it out with the clone’s help, but he had anywhere from three to four versions of it that he needed to master – depending on whether the beast variant was even capable of extending outside his body. Luckily, everything would progress much faster once Elaine perfected her own version, but Percy’s cousin had yet to even reach the Camelot province, so they had no choice but to wait.

Percy sighed.

Each of these tasks was not only time-consuming but also filled with countless hurdles. Then again, it wasn't that surprising, considering that he and his familiar were currently working on a bunch of Masterful spells. At the end of the day, he'd just have to be patient and hope that they got everything done on time.

He shook his head.

'That's still not good enough.'

Now that his deadline had moved up by several years, he'd have to fully take advantage of all five of his clones. The ones currently with his friends were already doing the best they could, but that still left two that he wasn't using efficiently.

Percy had planned to have them look for Blue hosts sooner or later, to help him in his search for the greater springs. Not to mention the Starry Commander he needed to possess to actually get his hands on the wasp egg.

The problem was that creatures at such a high grade were inherently difficult to deal with, whether they were sapients or beasts. If the two mages he and Micky had just taken down were anything to go by, Percy would be hard pressed to placate a bunch of wise old monsters – let alone getting them to potentially betray their factions. Even worse, they'd all be more knowledgeable about cosmic matters, so one mistake on Percy's part could easily lead to his secrets leaking to the wrong pair of ears.

Consequently, he had no choice but to take certain countermeasures before he even attempted to seek them out.

Up until now, he hadn't been in a hurry to dive into all that, partly because he'd been busy with other matters – such as his escape from the Valley or his training with Micky, and partly because he was still adjusting to the constant influx of memories from all these clones.

Yet, it didn't look like he had the luxury to keep wasting time.

'Oh well… I can just let my clones worry about this…'

Percy found himself inside the body of a Green armadillo-esque creature. His vessel was large, round, and covered in lots of hard, chitinous plates. That said, he didn't much care about the beast's physical appearance right now. He was far more interested in his host's soul, as well as the very process of possessing it.

Convincing the creature to let him in hadn't been difficult. The promise of patching its soul up and saving it from the verge of death had been alluring as always, the beast being more than smart enough to understand his intentions. But that only made him feel a little guilty over what he was about to do.

Up until now, he'd always had to walk on eggshells around his hosts, because they all possessed absolute authority over their souls and bodies, and could evict him at a moment's notice if their goals didn't align. Obviously, his unique ability to save their lives gave him a lot of leverage when negotiating with them, but this advantage was ultimately constrained by their intelligence, their honesty and their willingness to strike or uphold a deal with him. If his host would rather die than let him stay, Percy was – generally speaking – powerless to do anything about it.

That was why he had asked Zoris to coach him on a few simple techniques that would help him cast a stickier vote – so to speak – moving forward. He didn't expect to reach a point where he could just disregard his hosts' wills entirely or seize their bodies by force, but he hoped to obtain the means to stand his ground if they tried to bully him around.

'Sorry mate. I won't let you suffer too badly. Consider it my payment for saving your life.'

Percy knew this wouldn't be a pleasant experience for either party, yet he also understood he needed to get some practice before he could truly add this new tool to his arsenal.

Stretching his wisp, he allowed it to brush over all the cracks in the armadillo's soul, getting a feel for even the smaller ones that he hadn't bothered to fix. Instantly, he sensed his host's unease at his actions, but the creature shook its worries off, ultimately choosing to trust the person who had just saved it.

Smiling bitterly at this display of undeserved trust, Percy chose a pair of cracks that crossed into one another, forming an X-shape. Thinking the landscape would give him good purchase to latch onto, he turned his soul into a hand, slipping his spectral fingers into the narrow gaps. Applying some pressure, he slowly strengthened his grip on the creature.

It didn't take him long to be met with some resistance, a wave of force washing over the armadillo's soul, unlodging his tendrils one after the other. Naturally, his host hadn't appreciated his forceful approach, and it was kindly warning him to stop whatever he was doing.

Percy sighed.

He would have asked Micky to let him practice on him – had it been an option. Sadly, his familiar's soul was way too compatible with his own. If he tried to injure the crow and inject his soul in the wounds, he wouldn't be able to separate himself later – at least, not without a ton of pain.

Elaine and Nesha weren't great options either. The girls might be willing to let him experiment on them – since he wasn't planning to do anything particularly damaging – but there was another problem. His clones were supposed to stay in their bodies for several more months, so they wouldn't be able to return and bring the knowledge back to the original anytime soon.

Left with no other choice, Percy doubled down on his current test. Identifying a few more cracks like the first one, he tightly grabbed against their ragged walls, careful of the amount of strength he exerted.

As early as during his first meeting with Micky, Percy had learned how easy it was to further damage an already injured soul if he wasn't careful. Luckily, he'd gained a lot of experience over the years. He understood how to tread the fine line between a grip firm enough for him to hold his ground, and a touch gentle enough to preserve his host's integrity. The fact that the creature was at Green and in a better condition than Micky certainly helped too. His prospective Blue hosts would be even tougher in that regard.

Despite his relative finesse, Percy was still at a severe disadvantage, however.

The overwhelming wave of rejection pried his ethereal digits off the armadillo's soul one after the other, slowly pushing him out of its body. The beast was clearly done playing around, having finally decided to evict its rude guest for good.

'Not so fast,' Percy spat.

Before embarking on this quest, he had asked Zoris for tips. Obviously, the former god didn't have much experience with possessing another's soul, but he still knew a lot of nifty tricks that Percy might be able to employ. Recalling the strange state he entered whenever he used his spectral traits, he caused his wisp to transform.

His soul squirmed and bubbled up, countless tiny legs sprouting all over its nebulous surface. The spider-like limbs dug into his host's soul, strengthening his grip on the hostile soil. At the same time, a series of thin hairs appeared. Flailing around for a moment, they all homed into the nearest protrusions, wrapping and coiling around them.

The beast's soul thrashed about, hell-bent on getting rid of him.

But Percy held his ground just as stubbornly, refusing to budge. This back and forth continued for a couple of minutes, as neither side appeared willing to compromise. That said, what Percy got out of this tussle was rather limited.

While he had successfully overstayed his welcome against his host's will, his connection to the creature's mind and senses had been severed entirely. Even though the armadillo failed to shake him off, Percy still couldn't retain his access to the beast without its permission.

'Oh well… Let's take it one step at a time… This is already good enough for the first attempt…'

Eventually, some of the cracks expanded. Unable to take the pressure any longer, the armadillo's condition started to worsen, the ethereal tendrils holding the preservation runes in its injuries snapping one by one.

'I guess that's my cue to leave.'

Not wanting to hurt the creature, Percy stopped fighting back. The transformed features on his wisp soon reversed, as the armadillo finally pushed him out. Technically, Percy could have stayed longer if he wanted, but he'd already gained plenty from this trip.

Not that he was above killing a beast as part of his training – he'd already slaughtered hundreds during his stay in the Valley – but this still felt rather icky. Healing the creature only to stab it in the back ten

minutes later just rubbed him the wrong way, so he didn't want to go too far. Besides, there were plenty of other hosts in the universe waiting for him.

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Finding himself inside the body of a flying beetle, Percy didn't attempt a forceful possession this time. Having a host with the ability to travel relatively quickly, he didn't want to waste it on his new project. After all, he had plenty of other goals, no less important.

He still tried to find a Green sapient whenever possible, as the value of a lesser spring couldn't be overstated, but those were rarer. Thus, he was more than willing to spend some time doing other things whenever the situation called for it.

Buzzing around the sprawling forest, Percy ignored the wildlife as he scanned his surroundings for magical herbs. Most of the creatures ran away upon noticing him, as Green beasts were typically at the top of the food chain on most barren worlds.

Over the next few hours, he did come across several plants rich in Red or Orange mana, but he wasn't interested in most of them. An Orange ingredient with a rare affinity might let him invent a new potion, but there wasn't much of a point in doing that when his potions were already losing their effectiveness on him.

His current priority was to find a secondary ingredient rich in gravity mana, so that he could try to register the compression principle he had read about in Nephthys's Sanctuary. If and when he did that, and once he had the means to elevate all his potions and tattoos to a useable level again, he could consider branching out in more directions. As things stood, he'd rather not fill his spatial seals with junk.

Of course, even if he stumbled upon the correct ingredient, it wouldn't be easy to identify its affinity. Unlike the vibrant colours that ingredients rich in karma mana tended to have, gravity mana was colourless and otherwise subtle. Without his mutated eyes to help him, Percy was forced to take a gamble on any Red plant the affinity of which he couldn't immediately recognize. Storing a few specimens of each one, he hoped to examine them more closely when he returned home.

There was also the question of whether he would even be able to cultivate these alien plants on Remior. The environment might not be suitable – not to mention that he was currently on the run. But even if he

couldn’t, just adding the new principle to his Status was more than worth his time. It would boost his brewing yield and get him more Aurora Dew out of his supplies. Furthermore, it would enhance his eyes, hopefully helping him find other gravity ingredients more easily in the future.

Searching for alchemical ingredients wasn’t his only mission, however. As always, he had kept his compound eyes open for signs of civilization or another source of stable beast mana – two things that often led to something interesting.

And there was another thing – something he could work on by himself, while flying. All thanks to some more helpful advice from Zoris.

Chapter 398 – Concept suppression

Holding his ground inside a hostile body wasn’t the only ability Percy wanted to master before looking for a Blue host. Ideally, he also wanted to learn how to hide his blessing, to avoid having to answer any difficult questions about its origin.

Of course, soul affinities were rare to begin with. Even on a greater spring, most of the younger and weaker mortals might have never seen one. Blues were typically much older and enjoyed an elevated status, however, so Percy couldn’t count on their inability to tell that something about his mana was amiss.

Naturally, finding a Ring of Sacrilege wasn’t the only – nor even the most common – explanation for a mortal with a blessing. That said, he’d rather not have to lie to everyone he met about being the son of a god. He had no way of knowing how they might react to such a peculiar claim. Some might grow more guarded toward him, while others might ask him follow-up questions that would inevitably expose him. No matter how he thought about it, it was just better to keep this knowledge to himself.

Finally, there was Metatron.

Unfortunately, the titan was already aware that Percy didn’t have any divine parents, so the lie wouldn’t even work on him. In fact, he was the very person who had introduced him to the idea of acquired blessings in the first place. Naturally, Percy couldn’t afford to return to the Vault without first learning how to suppress his blessing.

Not that he planned to go back to the artificial world anytime soon. He had already purchased all the runes he would need to upgrade his armour, and he was busy with a dozen other things at the moment. Then again, opening a portal to the Vault was essentially his only way out of an impossible situation – as his trip to Felmara had already proven. He didn't want to lose access to that option entirely, just because he hadn't bothered to prepare for it.

Luckily, the solution was relatively straightforward – Zoris had already taught him how to work on it.

Doing so while in another's body was trickier, because he only had his limited stash of fused mana to draw from – some of which he had already spent while healing his host. It would have been much easier to try this with his main body, taking advantage of the practically limitless supply of soul mana.

'It can't be helped. The original has a ton of other things to worry about. It's best to have the clones pitch in with whatever they can…'

Grabbing a sliver of grey from his stash, Percy tried to alter its properties – to revert it to its original nature. For several minutes – perhaps even hours – nothing happened. But he didn't let that get to him, continuing to scan his surroundings for gravity ingredients as he worked on the blessing. He hadn't really expected this to work on the first try anyway.

The idea behind this trick was simple enough, but it didn't mean it was going to be easy.

According to Zoris, mortals were inherently ill-equipped to handle concepts. They could wield them – much like a barbarian could swing an axe around – but that didn't mean they could truly comprehend them in any deep way. After all, understanding a concept was the hallmark of divinity.

As for those below that threshold, they could barely tap into the concepts they'd been lucky enough to be born with, or those they had otherwise acquired – be they the ones tied to their original affinity, ones they had obtained later in life like Micky, or their blessings.

To make things worse, some concepts were even harder to grasp than others. For example, Gabe's blessing of heat was a lot simpler for anybody to wrap their minds around, as it was part of everyone's daily life. Of course, mortals would still find it impossible to comprehend it in a deep way, or to infuse it in their mana without the corresponding blessing, but its owners didn't have as difficult a time muting its effects.

Sadly, Percy's blessing fell on the opposite end of the spectrum. After all, he hadn't even heard of the concept of permanence until just over a year ago. Soul affinities were already relatively obscure to begin with, let alone an even more exotic variant.

The good news was that he didn't needto fully understand his concept to do what he wanted. Merely suppressing it – preventing its effects from seeping into his mana – was apparently among the most basic forms of concept manipulation, much like affinity fusion and affinity fission that he was already familiar with.

Recalling the former god's explanation, Percy tried to figure out what he was doing wrong.

According to Zoris, these three techniques had one thing in common. They relied on the relationship between two or more concepts, using each as a focus point to move closer or farther away from.

When it came to affinity fusion, one had to move from the two source elements toward a third. With affinity fission, it was the opposite. Concept suppression, on the other hand, relied on a similar yet different dynamic, as it played on the relationship between the parent concept – like fire or soul – and a derivative one – such as heat or permanence. It basically involved temporarily undoing all the changes that had occurred during the acquisition of the blessing.

'Actually, I should have an advantage there…'

Somebody like Gabe, who had been born with his blessing, had never actually experienced the default state of his element. Meanwhile, Percy had spent most of his life wielding regular soul mana, so it was a lot easier for him to differentiate the properties that had originated from the blessing from those that predated it. Approaching the task with renewed confidence, Percy attempted to cleanse his mana from the blessing's influence once more.

Hours passed, and then days, without much progress.

Even worse, Percy's beast hosts didn't have Micky's second core, nor his mutations. Consequently, they were all slaves to the same bottomless hunger that plagued every beast in the universe. Suffice to say, Percy had been forced to take several detours to appease his host, which greatly inhibited his ability to search for the gravity ingredients he needed.

It wasn't until about a week later that he achieved any semblance of a positive result. He hadn't found many candidate plants to bring back – only a handful of different types that he didn't think stood much of a chance of possessing the right affinity.

But his efforts to suppress the blessing did do something.

Borrowing a pair of legs from the beetle – the creature had plenty of limbs anyway – Percy was playing with his last sliver of fused mana when it happened. The grey colour brightened by a couple shades, the substance feeling slightly lighter for a moment. Of course, the change didn't last long, but this was promising.

'It's just one step of several though…' he reminded himself, not wanting to get carried away by the first hint of success.

Obviously, he would need to scale this up massively, until he could fully rob his mana of its new properties. Not only that, but he had to learn how to do it passively, to his entire stash, and for an extended period of time.

Finally, his blessing came with its own set of challenges. It wouldn't be enough for him to mask the nature of his mana, because the concept had already affected his soul as well. Somebody like Metatron might still pick up on that if he was careless.

Luckily, Zoris had mentioned that he could suppress the changes to his wisps in a similar manner. It would be even harder, of course, and he'd also have to be more careful with it. If he went too far, his clones would lose their ability to support multiple spectral traits, which would have catastrophic consequences. Percy had to achieve a delicate balance between hiding away all the superficial changes to his mana and soul and retaining some of their most important functions.

Mentally sighing, he withdrew his clone from the beetle's body, knowing that he wouldn't get anything else done here. Having exhausted his mana and worn the creature's patience thin, he was better off trying his luck elsewhere. Of course, he could have tried to forcefully possess the beast too, getting some practice with that, but he figured the poor thing had helped him enough already.

Speeding back to Remior through the infinite realm of darkness, he couldn't help but lament how busy the following months would be. On top of having so many things for his main body to work on, his clones had somehow gotten their hands full with all sorts of side-projects of their own.

They had to search for gravity ingredients, master the forceful possession technique, learn to suppress the blessing, and, of course, continue his eternal search for lesser and greater springs.

'But it's good to be this busy, isn't it?' he thought, nodding with determination.

With five clones, a mountain of Wiseman's Murmurs stored inside his main body's head, and the Insomnia trait eliminating the need for sleep, anything less than this would have been a waste of his potential.

Chapter 399 – Silk

Percy was sitting against the boulder, using it as cover from the howling winds. It was slanted, shielding him from the snow, though a few flakes still made their way to him every now and then. They formed three small mounds – one on his head, and another on each shoulder.

The cold itself didn't bother him much – it would have been strange if it did, with two Yellow cores filling him with strength. Yet, he did have to release a burst of mana every couple of minutes to shake the snow off. It was annoying, and what he was currently working on required his utmost attention.

Micky wasn't with him right now.

While they had tried to remain on the move as much as possible, they'd made an exception today. After all, they hadn't seen any humans in days, and the blizzard lowered visibility even more. Percy figured they could afford to take a short break – for a couple of hours, at least. They both needed it, as the monotonous journey had started to grate on their nerves.

That was not to say that they had lowered their guard, however.

Micky was flying leisurely around the mountain, scanning the frozen slopes for a quick snack – or any signs of an enemy attack. In fact, Percy felt every little detail his familiar experienced. From the rush of wind pressing against his wings, to the taste of iron in his beak. A few droplets of blood from Micky's

most recent meal rolled down his neck, soaking the feathers there. Percy felt the urge to gag every now and then, almost forgetting that this wasn't happening to his own body.

He even heard his clone and his familiar chatting incessantly inside his head, the two idiots not giving a shit that he was busy with something important. They were talking about something dumb too – some kind of contest. They were taking turns controlling Micky's body, competing to see who would hunt the most critters.

'Can you two shut up for a few minutes? I'm at a critical juncture!'

Two waves of annoyance seeped through the cords. The bastards had the nerve to act as if he was the one disturbing them.

'Need I remind you that this was your idea?' the clone snapped back.

Of course, he didn't have to voice his thoughts. Given the intimacy of their connection, Percy could easily read what was on the clone's mind, as if he'd been the one to think it. Naturally, the opposite was also true, which only made this worse. The two had clearly been aware of Percy's bubbling irritation all along – they'd just chosen to ignore him until he lashed out.

'Sure,' he sighed in exasperation. 'But we both know you're being extra annoying on purpose.'

It would have arguably been more prudent of him to keep the connection blocked off for a couple more days. At least until he was done with the mana threads. However, he figured this was actually a great opportunity to practice with Soul Harmony.

After all, sharing his mind with Micky wasn't that hard when they were idle, but it wasn't as beneficial for them either. The whole point of the spell was to let them cooperate during a fight, so they had to learn to keep it active while doing something mentally intensive.

'I'm happy to swap places with you, if you'd rather train with Micky.'

Percy rolled his eyes.

‘You know that’s not how our bloodline works…’

He shook his head, not saying anything else. Doing his best to ignore his irritating partners, he glanced down at the grey thread in his hands. Tugging at it a few times, he applied progressively more force, trying to gauge how strong it was.

It held for a while, only snapping once he started to exert himself. This was already a little better than his regular reinforced mana, on top of being dozens of times more flexible. And he wasn’t even done yet. Not only did the threads have more room for improvement, but Percy should also be able to pack them more tightly into his new armour, doing away with its previous modularity. If everything went according to plan, he would be able to fit more enchantments on it too, but that was a project for later.

‘Let’s focus on perfecting the material for now…’

Percy was already happy with the six variants of reinforced mana he’d settled on. They all looked very different from the rudimentary materials he had invented back in Bogside town, and he’d designed each one with a very specific purpose in mind. In the end, he’d ditched the original forms of his soft and crystallized mana entirely – at least as far as his mana threads were concerned. The “alloys” he’d come up over the years were plenty to achieve his goal.

Over the past week, he’d made a few last-minute modifications to his materials, improving them even further. He had the Wiseman’s Murmurs to thank for that, as they filled him with new inspiration. Having settled on the final variants already, he only needed to play with the exact ratios, fine-tuning the configuration of the construct until he was happy with it.

Taking a few handfuls of fused mana from his seal that he’d prepared beforehand, he set them on a piece of cloth by his feet.

Then, he grabbed a long thread from the first pile, stretching it between his hands. It was even thinner than the eventual mana thread would be. It was made of mostly soft mana, with only traces of grey powder mixed. Consequently, it was extremely flexible, but not very strong. It was meant to serve as the core of the mana threads, giving them their shape.

He tentatively referred to this variant as the “guide”.

Next, he willed some mana from the second pile to float toward the “guide”. At first glance, the mana looked like a pinch of fine dust. If one was to examine it more closely, they would notice that the individual grains sported a rather peculiar shape. Each one curved twice, making it look like a pair of hooks fused together at their base, their tips pointing in opposite directions.

Unlike the “guide”, these grains contained a much higher percentage of grey powder, and very little soft mana. It made them extremely hard, at the cost of having no flexibility whatsoever. Percy couldn’t make them any larger without compromising their strength either. Not that he would want to do that, as it would just make the final threads thicker than they had to be.

He called them the “hooks”.

Willing the “hooks” to swirl around the “guide” for a few seconds, he waited until over half of the tiny constructs had latched onto the thin thread. The remaining ones, he rotated by a right angle, before repeating the process. He didn’t stop until most of the “hooks” were interlocked either with the “guide” or with one another. The result was a slightly thicker thread that was almost as flexible as before, but dozens of times stronger.

Of course, Percy wasn’t done yet. The current configuration was strong and flexible, but extremely unstable. If he were to shake the thread even a little, most of the “hooks” would fall off.

He drew the third ingredient from the cloth. This time, it was some kind of grey paste. Unlike the version he had used years ago to mend his cores – before inventing the Aurora Dew – this one didn’t contain a single drop of water.

Percy had spent a lot of time looking for a variant he could produce exclusively out of his own mana – one that would also have the right properties. It contained soft and crystallized mana in equal parts. Initially, the mixture took a solid form, but it was soft and brittle. Crushing it into powder, Percy ended up with something similar to the dust he brewed into his Aurora Dew, albeit far stickier.

He had named it, the “glue”.

The purpose of the “glue” was to hold the “hooks” in place, so that they wouldn’t fall off the “guide”. But he didn’t rush to apply it to the thread just yet.

First, he drew the fourth material from the cloth. It was a fine dust again, made mostly of hard mana. In fact, Percy had used the same ratio for it that he used for the “hooks”. The only difference was in the shape of the individual particles. They resembled grains of rice, although they were a hundred times smaller than that.

Percy called it the “stuffing”.

‘This time, let’s go with 10% more “stuffing” than before.’

Mixing it with the “glue”, Percy finally applied it to the thread, letting it fill the gap between the “hooks”. While the “glue” was there to hold the structure together, the “stuffing” was added to make the thread even stronger.

Happy with the spine of the mana thread, Percy then grabbed the fifth ingredient from the cloth. It was made of the same material as the “guide”, but it was two-dimensional, shaped like a thin sheet.

He called this one the “skin”.

Mixing more “glue” and “stuffing”, he coated one side of the “skin” with them, but he didn’t stop there. Next, he grabbed the sixth and final ingredient from the cloth. This time it was a bunch of small, flat plates of mana that resembled scales.

Percy called them the “shields”.

They had actually been the trickiest of the six “alloys” to invent, because they had to be both hard and flexible. Everything else – the “hooks” and the “guide” that formed the spine of the mana threads, as well as the “glue”, the “stuffing” and the “skin” that were meant to hold it in place – was there to maximize the tensile strength of the construct.

The purpose of the “shields” was different, however.

One weakness that Percy had luckily foreseen, was that an opponent could easily sever the threads by slashing at them laterally with a sharp spell. These scales had been designed precisely to prevent that, by guarding the core of the thread from external attacks.

The only problem was that the scales themselves couldn't simultaneously be both as strong as the "hooks" and as flexible as the "guide", so Percy had spent a lot of time scrambling his brain to achieve the right compromise.

Spreading the scales on the sheet, he allowed them to mix with the "glue" and the "stuffing". Then, he placed the spine of the mana thread on one end, before tightly rolling the "skin" several times around it.

The final product was a grey string a few times thicker than a human hair. Thankfully, it was still thin enough to be woven into a fabric, however. That was something that both Percy and his spectral trait had been very peculiar about, after all.

Heaving out a tired breath, Percy then examined the fruit of his labour.

Tugging at both ends once again, he gradually increased the force he exerted on it, mentally comparing its strength to his previous attempt, and the ones before it. Seeing the thread refuse to break even after surpassing his previous best by a decent margin, he couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

At the same time, something deep inside him seemed to wake from its slumber. It was the remnants of the first spectral fiend he had absorbed, scattered throughout his very being. Noticing his achievement, his soul trembled with glee. The part of it inside his hands bubbled up and squirmed, extending outside his skin. It formed countless tiny legs that flailed in all sorts of unnatural directions.

Guided by instinct, Percy couldn't help but trace his fingers over the grey thread, allowing the spider-like limbs to brush against the construct, sending waves of contentment rippling through him one after another.

This was it!

He could tell he wouldn't have to test another configuration anytime soon, his trait finally approving of the material pinched between his fingers!

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Reinforcement – Refined -> Spectral Art: Phantomspun Silk – Masterful!]

Chapter 400 – Consumption

Percy's heart skipped a beat upon reading the notification. Any new spell was cause for celebration – even the Crude ones. Due to the way Phoebe's Decree worked, registering anything in his Status meant that it was sufficiently different from his other spells to open up new doors for him. Even if the spell in question wasn't that powerful at first, it could always be upgraded or merged with others in the future.

It was especially so for a Masterful one – the highest tier Percy had heard of. And it was a Spectral Art at that. Obviously, it wasn't the first Masterful spell he registered – not even close – but it was the first one he'd ever worked on, making this a satisfying little conclusion to his restless efforts over the years.

'It's such a pity that I can't use it yet…'

He sighed.

It wasn't just due to his lacking magiscript knowledge – there was another problem currently preventing him from weaving anything worthwhile out of the blueish-grey thread pinched between his fingers.

While the construct was just as strong and flexible as he'd intended – stronger, really – he didn't have much of it. Only a single, tiny piece. It was shorter than his finger, and he would need hundreds of metres of it before he could craft himself a new set of armour.

'Though, I suppose it makes more sense to call them clothes at that point…'

In any case, this wasn't just a question of time and effort. Sure, if Percy put his mind to it, he could prepare more strings over the next few months, slowly accumulating enough for his purposes.

However, joining lots of small pieces would be the quickest way to compromise the structural integrity of the material. Unlike the powder he used in his alchemy, or the magical alloys he fashioned his

weapons and tools out of, the threads needed to be continuous, to fully exhibit their strength. Anything short of that would just waste all his previous efforts.

Unfortunately, that came with its own set of problems.

Percy understood that he couldn't cheat his way to a limitless supply of threads using something like his old Spiritforged Effigy spell. The controlled self-repair enchantment could only replicate something he'd already crafted. It couldn't extend it. If he were to tear a piece off the thread, he would be able to regrow it, but that would only get him two separate strings – not a single, longer one.

The issue was that he couldn't just weave a kilometre-long piece of thread in one sitting. He simply lacked the mental capacity to manipulate such a colossal volume of ingredients with the necessary precision.

Luckily, not all hope was lost.

Percy had foreseen this problem, and he'd taken some countermeasures to deal with it while designing the mana thread. While he couldn't possibly spin the entire length at once, he could slowly extend one end, growing some of the materials and adding others as he rolled them together.

Four of the six variants of fused mana he used didn't even have to be continuous. Namely, the "hooks", the "glue", the "stuffing" and the "shields" were already made in lots of tiny pieces, so he could just keep adding more as he went.

The only two variants that had to be uniform were the "guide" and the "skin". That was why he'd specifically made them as simple as possible, so that he could keep growing more of them. The strength of the threads wasn't even dependent on these two components, since their only purpose was to give everything else the right shape. Thus, even if his efforts resulted in a few imperfections here and there, it wouldn't compromise the material at all.

Of course, it would still be mentally intensive and time-consuming. Even the tiny piece he'd already spun had taken him several minutes, and that was without accounting for the time he'd spent preparing the six piles of fused mana beforehand.

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‘At my current speed, it would take me over a year of non-stop crafting to get enough…’

Percy shuddered at the thought. Leaving aside how monotonous it would be, this was time that he simply couldn’t afford to waste. Worse still, the threads wouldn’t even survive that long.

None of his reinforced mana variants would last without preservation or self-repair runes. The problem was that he couldn’t even weave the threads into runes until he was done, or it would mess with his crafting. This meant that he had to complete the whole thing as quickly as possible. He couldn’t afford to waste more than a week or two on it, or his silk would start degrading.

‘It’s fine. I’ll just have to get… like… fifty times better at it. No big deal…’

Percy was only half-joking.

He really was confident that he would improve a lot, very quickly. Merely by virtue of having registered the spell, his eyes would be better at perceiving the minuscule components of the structure, allowing him to work on it much faster. His trait would help him too, now that he had a satisfactory material for it to play with. Beyond that, it was just a question of practice and repetition.

‘I’m sure I’ll be ready by the time Nesha and the clone are done with the runes.’

The biggest challenge would be balancing his time between this, training with Micky, and brewing the rest of his elixirs into Aurora Dew. He also had to absorb another fiend at some point, continue sending his clones out, return the ring to Sol, keep evading or fighting against the people looking for him, and prepare for the infiltration mission…

He shrugged.

‘Yeah, I think I’ll take the rest of the day off… I can worry about all that tomorrow.’

All his excitement over the new spell had almost made him forget about his familiar and clone. The two were still sharing his mind, though they'd mercifully stopped chatting at some point, sparing him some of the disturbance.

'Congratulations on the new spell,' Micky said upon noticing his attention.

'Thanks. I see you haven't been slacking either.'

While the two tended to turn everything into a competition, it didn't mean they were playing around. They hadn't received a notification – because they didn't get those in the first place – but they'd still made a ton of progress over the past couple of days. Micky was a lot better at using Regulation with all four of his mutations. By now, he'd recovered his lost stamina already, and he'd even discovered something new.

Given how much beast mana he was producing at the moment, he could keep all four instances of Circulation active, even while idle. Gone were the days when he and the clone had to conserve part of their strength, to keep their hunger at bay.

Suspecting that Micky's boosting art had crossed the upgrade threshold, Percy quickly opened his familiar's Status, soon confirming his guess.

'Congratulations, guys! Your spells have merged: Circulation – Refined + Wild Art: Regulation – Refined -> Wild Art: Consumption – Masterful!'

Percy felt two waves of pride and contentment rush through the cords. He didn't blame them for getting excited either. This was indeed massive. After all, it was Micky's very first Masterful spell!

As a branched evolution of Circulation, Percy couldn't help but compare it to his old Synchronization spell. He wasn't surprised that Micky's version had been given a higher classification, however. The spell was fundamentally different – and far more complex.

The reason the crow hadn't been able to register Synchronization himself, was partly because of the mismatch between his cores' grades, and partly because he couldn't absorb ambient mana with his first core to overcharge his channels. That meant that a significant fraction of the boost had always been

capped by the strength already lingering inside Micky's flesh, preventing him from tapping into the virtuous feedback loop that Percy and Nesha enjoyed.

The addition of Regulation, the mutations and the extra sets of channels had changed that. Right now, Micky had reached a new balance – different from his companions'. He produced a lot of extra beast mana on the fly, finally allowing him to push his body past his previous limits. Reaching this point had taken him a long time, but the results spoke for themselves.

'Once you learn the Dance too, you should be able to get yourself a top tier Masterful spell on par with the Carnival…'

Micky was about to say something in response, yet the words died inside his mind. A wave of alertness rippled through everyone's souls the very next second. Noticing that something was wrong, Percy allowed his senses to blend with his familiar's, soon catching sight of the reason behind the bird's unease.

On the slope beneath the crow, there was a trail of footprints leading up the mountain. It had to be recent – barely a couple minutes old – or the raging blizzard would have erased it already.

And it was heading straight toward Percy…