Wanderer 421

Chapter 421 – Sovereign's Eye

Sitting on Micky's neck, Percy couldn't help but examine his familiar's body once more. More than fifty percent of it was made of ice by now, as the crow had suffered countless injuries over the last few months – some much more serious than others.

By the bird's own admission, the wounds didn't hurt in the slightest, nor did the chunks of living mana that had replaced them feel all that different from flesh and blood. After overcoming the initial shock of seeing his body gradually turn into a frozen sculpture, Micky had grown used to the changes.

'Thank Phoebe for that… I don't think his body will ever go back to the way it was… Not on its own at least…' Percy thought, flicking one of the pale feathers on his familiar's plumage and listening to the crisp ting as it bent under his fingernail.

Well, more ice meant less hunger and stamina consumption, so they welcomed it with open wings.

Sighing, he opened the pouch at his waist, tossing the now-empty spatial amulets in with the rest. Dozens of them at this point – more space than he knew what to do with. Sadly, the devices couldn't be nested inside one another, nor stored in his seal, their overlapping effects forcing him to carry them like this.

Taking a moment, he mentally tallied his total stash again, factoring in the newly looted elixirs. Curiously, most of the Blues they'd killed over the past year had carried some – even the Orange-borns.

Normally, this wouldn't have made much sense. Blue was the highest grade they could have ever hoped to reach in their lifetime, so continuing to cleanse their cores would have been a horrific waste of resources. The fact that their families had chosen to equip them with elixirs only spoke to their optimism that they would get their hands on some Aurora Dew one day.

In other words, Percy was the reason these people had elixirs on them to start with, and he was now benefitting indirectly from his own influence on Remior!

The exact amount each person carried varied – depending on how rich their family was. On average, Percy gained just over three months of unbrewed Aurora Dew for himself and his familiar from each group they took down.

‘Micky, our stash has gone up to seventeen years!’ he exclaimed.

Most of the elixirs still had to be brewed, of course, but he was converting his stash faster than he was growing it, and he was growing it faster than they were drinking it.

Percy had spent almost all his time working on the magical silk, with the occasional distraction every few days – whenever they had to fight or run from a group of Blues. He’d only set aside a couple of hours per day for alchemy, yet he’d still managed to convert just over a third of their stash into Aurora Dew.

At this rate, he’d be done in another year – though he might need Nesha’s clone to top him up on secondary ingredients once he returned from Twilight City. That shouldn’t take long now, since they were both getting close to his armour’s upgrade.

Regardless, Percy had already amassed enough spare Aurora Dew to deliver some to Sol the next time they met. Admittedly, he was starting to worry that she hadn’t reached out yet, but he kept telling himself that she and Doh were more than strong enough to make it home safely.

‘If they keep throwing Blues at us, we might not even need the wasp familiar!’ Micky replied in a joking tone.

Percy chuckled, though they both knew that wouldn’t be the case. Leaving his promise to Nephthys and his own desires aside, Percy would need that wasp egg at some point. Their current situation just wasn’t sustainable. Remior only had a few thousand Blues in total, and only a tiny fraction would ever come after them. Most of the ones who would, already had.

As early as a few months back, Percy had noticed that the groups hunting them had grown rarer – especially the smaller ones. It wasn’t until Nesha informed him of the increased bounties that more of them arrived in the region, most teams too strong for him and Micky to take on.

Percy had grown a lot stronger after fighting so many tough opponents.

He'd taken advantage of every opportunity to weave his Winding Corridor technique more seamlessly into his fighting style, using it to freely engage or disengage his opponents at a speed they could hardly fathom. He'd also grown better at preparing and unleashing his Thousand-fanged Maw, as well as fighting alongside his familiar without getting in each other's way.

That said, he still hadn't felt confident attacking a trio of Blues – at least until a couple days ago.

The problem wasn't just the number of opponents – it was also the number of domains. On paper, the addition of a single extra mage would raise the difficulty by a relatively modest fifty percent. In practice, it was more like going from a four to a nine.

Thankfully, one of his clones had returned with the answer, after being gone for half a year.

Looking at Micky again, Percy's gaze sank deep into the crow's channels, marvelling at the fine, ink-like strands swirling chaotically within the bird's mana. It wasn't Percy's first time seeing this, but he was still amazed by how prevalent one's willpower was within the substance.

Whistling in amusement, he couldn't help but pull up his Status again, his heart skipping a beat as he read the most recent additions for the hundredth time. Percy was already intimately familiar with the new entries, but he saw them in a new light after having experienced their effects in battle.

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Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

Domain:

Bloodline:

Blessing:

Mutations:

Spectral traits:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

Sure enough, the Decrees had completed their fusion without much trouble.

Percy had repeatedly tried to manifest his willpower in the same way he'd done on Gallimus, without much success. That had proved once and for all that not only would he be unable to transfer the "locked" domain between bodies, but also that awakening even a "nascent" pulse like Duwa's wouldn't be easy with just a couple of Yellow cores.

Not that he wouldn't try, but he wasn't in a hurry to waste his time with something that wouldn't make the slightest difference before his next promotion – over a century from now.

He should be able to unlock that power a lot sooner with his clones, while they possessed Micky or Nesha, though he didn't see much of a point in that either. The so-called pulse wasn't very useful in combat, and his companions wouldn't benefit from it even after their advancement – it would be the clones owning the improved domains, not his friends.

As for the clones, they might be able to manifest a stronger domain at Blue, assuming they remained in Micky or Nesha's bodies from Green until the end of time, but their efforts would probably go to waste the moment Percy retrieved and replaced them with new clones.

That didn't mean that his new Decree was useless, however.

Far from it.

The mere addition of the domain section to his Status had injected a ton of information into Percy's eyes – much more than the average spell or alchemic principle did. Percy likened it to when he first obtained the mutation, when the modified Decree had forced him to keep his boosting art active for three days and nights, gradually fusing both his Mana Sense and Soul Vision into his eyesight. Unsurprisingly, something similar had happened again, upgrading the mutation into the Sovereign's Eye.

Beyond the fancy name – which he didn't disapprove of at all – Percy could now perceive willpower directly. This was precisely what had allowed him to bridge the gap to the daring trio of Blues that he and Micky had slain earlier.

His biggest issue when fighting such powerful opponents was dealing with their domains – the invisible sneak attacks that he struggled to predict, the oppressive pressure constantly bogging him and his constructs down, and the tight defences that made it so much harder to land each hit.

Well… it turned out that most of those problems could be solved – or at least severely mitigated – by his new ability.

Domains weren't uniform – especially when spread across a wide area. Upon close examination, they were riddled with flaws ripe for exploitation. Through them, Percy had swiftly identified the cleanest routes toward and away from his opponents, bypassing many of the negative effects acting on him and his scythes.

Following the flow of willpower had also let him predict the domains' movements – finally covering the most serious blind spot in his Greater Foresight spell. Even better, he now had a fourth channel of information to tap into – alongside the shifts in his opponents' souls, the flares of their mana, and their physical movements – perfecting his glimpses of the future.

'I should still be more careful from now on though…' he reminded himself.

Despite his new advantage, three Blues were still a lot for him and Micky. The only reason they'd won so easily was their opponents' relative weakness. Recognizing the rival House's insignia and the common mana types they'd possessed, Percy had known not to expect a nasty bloodline or rare affinity.

Even so, things might not have gone as smoothly if the youngest of their opponents hadn't been so inexperienced. The poor guy had probably only been a Blue for a few months at most, not even knowing how to properly wield his domain. It was thanks to that – and Percy's decisiveness – that they had broken through their formation so quickly.

'Well, I don't regret it. That's one less family Galahad has to worry about. I doubt their patriarch will get any more funny ideas after this…'

Regardless, Percy was keenly aware that he'd have to grow even stronger if he wanted to deal with all those pesky trios of Blues looking for them. And he should probably hurry up, because their enemies would likely switch to groups of four once the rest of Remior heard about his latest victims.

Luckily, he was about to do just that – many of his and Micky's projects were nearing their tipping points.

'Time to start incorporating the new affinities into our spells.'

Chapter 422 – Bargain

Vast frozen plains stretched as far as the eye could see, jagged protrusions jutting out like icy fangs every mile or two. Nothing here was all that new to Percy – he'd traversed numerous frigid wastelands in the past – but he wasn't used to associating such vistas with his own world.

This was Remior's north pole.

It was common knowledge that the singular supercontinent humanity called home stretched to cover both of the planet's poles, though he wasn't sure whether there was rock beneath the glaciers, or just more ice.

Either way, it hadn't been his intention for him and Micky to travel this far north. They had originally planned to stick to the wildlands between here and civilization, taking the time to hone their spells as they hunted down the occasional beast unlucky enough to cross their path.

Sadly, their pursuers had been even more forceful than expected. Most of the groups searching for them were too powerful for Percy and Micky to fight, meaning that they had to spend a lot of time avoiding them. They could still outrun most Blues on Remior, so they didn't really have to worry about any lone team cornering them, but things hadn't gone as smoothly ever since their enemies started coordinating with one another.

The smaller Houses weren't interested in working together, as most of them wanted the bounties to themselves. The Great Houses, on the other hand, had let go of their pride at some point, probably realizing that they'd have to make some concessions if they wanted to succeed.

Advancing in unison, they had methodically pushed Percy and Micky farther and farther north, eventually forcing them all the way out here. And there was nowhere else to go, unless they decided to forgo the safety of having land underneath them, or they started risking their lives against the tougher groups.

'It doesn't matter. We were planning to do that anyway. If those bastards think we're at the end of our rope, they've got another thing coming…'

Not that flying over the ocean would be a horrible choice. There wasn't any large landmass on the other side of Remior, but there were plenty of tiny, uninhabited islands. Percy and Micky might be able to ditch their pursuers there, and maybe even grab a snack or two.

Based on the relatively minor damage the red pyramid inside Percy's soul had sustained so far, they should still have over a year left before they were forced to infiltrate the Spire. By then, they could grow a lot stronger, and it might even be worth going around the planet to invade from the south, to give themselves the element of surprise.

'It's something to consider. I could definitely use some peace and quiet when it's time to upgrade my armour.'

Percy had grown a lot faster at spinning the silk, but he would still need several days to prepare enough length. He'd need even more time to weave it into proper, enchanted clothing, and he'd rather not get distracted while doing it. Until the self-repair runes were in place the material would degrade rapidly. But that was a problem for later – Nesha's clone wasn't even back yet. For now, they had bigger fish to fry.

The frigid gales howling over the north pole would have been deadly to a Red – and quite unpleasant for even an Orange. To Percy, they barely registered as a gentle, summer breeze. He didn't just have his two Yellow cores or Micky's memories of Huehue's dark side to thank for that either.

It was hard to care about a relatively mild source of external cold, in the face of three networks full of volatile ice mana wreaking havoc inside his own body. Shivering, he helped the clone saturate every centimetre of his new channels with the soul-freezing ice the latter had prepared. In its corporeal state, the resource wasn't supposed to interact directly with his soul, yet Percy could swear that its insidious influence had somehow seeped through.

'Probably a good thing… if it's bothering me this much after working with it for so many months, my opponents are not going to have a good time…'

The clone had done most of the work on this project, figuring out how to fuse each of the three permutations of the ice, and using them to clear and temper the main body's channels. However, the last step would go a lot more smoothly if both of them participated, which was why Percy had taken a break from everything else.

The idea behind it was simple.

Between the two of them – three actually, including Micky – they had all the tools they needed to prepare and equip themselves with their latest weapon. Yet, there was one hurdle that they still had to overcome.

Supply.

With the Carnival active, Percy tended to saturate his whole body with his original fused mana. This was okay in most circumstances, since it was simply more efficient – a compact resource that he could fuel all his spells and runes out of, capable of anything his individual affinities could do.

In this situation, that wouldn't cut it.

The clone didn't want Percy's fused mana. He needed plain old soul mana – to fuse into the ice. The pure component would do nothing but get in the way. In theory, Percy could keep a portion of his mana unfused, to send to his companions. However, doing that would tip the delicate balance of power in his own body, leaving him with an equal amount of unfused pure mana that would just go to waste. Luckily, he already had the perfect solution for that.

His old Soul Conversion spell.

This was a spell Percy hadn't used in a long time. For the last decade or so, it had been gathering proverbial dust in some corner of his Status, having fulfilled its original purpose, and never found a new one.

Percy had first registered it as the Crude Self-bestowalspell, after studying the Vault's books on mana conversion. At the time, he had needed to get his hands on as much soul mana as possible, in order to attract his first spectral fiend to Remior.

He had found himself in pretty much the same position as today, having a lot of spare pure mana and nothing to do with it. Unwilling to let it go to waste, he had resolved himself to convert – at least some of it – to soul mana, bolstering his stash during the operation.

After practicing for months in Bogside town, and getting a better feel for the natures of his affinities in the depths of the Grisly Bog, Percy had slowly but steadily raised his conversion efficiency, eventually upgrading the spell to the Refined tier.

Sadly, he'd only used it once more since then.

When his familiar was on the verge of starvation, Percy had demonstrated the spell to Micky, teaching him how to convert his own air mana into beast mana. It had formed the foundation of the crow's Regulation and, later, Consumption– the bird's first Masterful spell and current iteration of his boosting art that he almost always kept active.

As for Percy, he just hadn't found any applications for it. While fighting, he was better off combining his mana types and working exclusively with the result. Situations where he needed one affinity more than the other simply didn't occur that often.

And yet, here they were.

'I'm ready if you are,' the clone said, getting a nod back.

They'd tried this before, but today they'd decided to go for the final push, to register the upgrade they knew was coming.

The original began the process by activating his boosting art. Strictly speaking, the Carnival wasn't a requirement for the new spell to work, but the whole point was to figure out how to effectively manage all those disparate flows of mana, without impacting Percy's ability to fight.

A few breaths later, Percy's body was full of his original fused mana.

As a side note, he had finally decided to give the resource a proper name. It hadn't been an issue before, since he hadn't had as many different mana types to juggle, but things were starting to get quite confusing. "Teal mana" was no longer a suitable name ever since the blessing had altered its colour, and "fused mana" wouldn't work either now that Percy had access to so many distinct flavours of affinity fusion.

Taking a page from his own Status, Percy had named it the phantom affinity – or phantom mana, interchangeably. He knew it wasn't a true affinity because it couldn't form its own cores or channels, nor could it be found in nature. This was the main reason he had even resisted naming it for so long.

Alas, such was life.

Percy discarded all the soul-freezing ice inside his body, making space in his new channels for a refill. Holding his cores back a little, he prevented them from fusing all the pure and soul mana into phantom mana, leaving traces of the original resources to swirl around his body.

Gathering the soul mana to his chest, he pushed it through the cord, but didn't stop there. He moved all the spare pure mana to his sternum, injecting it in his first core. Next, he used the organ to alter the resource's properties, converting part of it into a brand-new source of soul mana.

As early as when he and the clone had started working on this, he had noticed some positive side-effects of his boosting art. Teaching himself how to circulate phantom mana through both cores had improved the organs' ability to handle the foreign concepts, inadvertently raising Percy's conversion efficiency – despite the fact that he hadn't used the corresponding spell in over a decade.

Converting the cyan mana into its grey counterpart, Percy estimated that he had retained about a third of its volume, surpassing his previous best by a narrow margin.

'Good enough,' he thought, sending an additional trickle to the clone.

At the same time, a chilling sensation spread through him as a new flow entered his body via the second cord. There was barely any space in his soul channels, so he instantly moved the new resources into the other pathways he had emptied out earlier, turning them corporeal.

For a while, neither he nor the clone did anything else, trying to iron out all the kinks in the process. Namely, they concentrated on keeping their boosting arts at close to full power, while going through the motions to restock their reserves of soul-freezing ice as quickly as possible.

'Ten minutes,' Percy spat as soon as they were done, not feeling very happy about it. It wasn't a long time while idle, but it was an eternity in combat.

'Again?' the clone asked.

Percy responded by draining his channels and beginning the process anew.

'Eight minutes,' he said the following morning, having repeated the experiment dozens of times overnight.

As much as he wanted to keep going, he had already held the Carnival active for too long. Percy had grown a lot better with it over the past year, but he still couldn't maintain it perpetually.

Taking some rations out of his seal, he took a short break. He waited for Micky to kill and eat an Orange beast too – some kind of oversized polar bear. Still tired, he spent a couple of hours brewing some Aurora Dew – not the most relaxing activity, admittedly, but one that tired him in a different way. Only after he and his familiar had drunk their morning doses did he resume his efforts until noon.

When it was time to drink their second set of elixirs for the day, they still needed about eight minutes to replenish their stash, having not made as much progress. It wasn't until late in the following morning that they reached the next milestone, bringing the number down to seven minutes.

Percy's Status had remained silent.

Three days later, they hit the six-minute mark. Having grown a little more accustomed to the task, Percy could even imagine himself fighting while keeping the intricate exchange going. Though he'd still have to offload some of the effort to the clone if the battle got very heated.

Not satisfied, they kept going.

Another week passed, their daily gains having slowed down to a crawl. Percy understood by now that they weren't going to get much better than this. He could only spare a little bit of space in his channels, after all. The conversion rate inside his first core had already plateaued, and the clone's ability to fuse the mana and send it back was also about as efficient as it was going to be.

But Percy liked round numbers, so he pressed on until they reached a benchmark he could actually stomach.

Just after the end of the second week, it finally happened.

"Five minutes!" he, his clone and Micky cried out in unison, having shaved the last few pesky seconds off.

And Percy's Status rejoiced alongside them.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Soul Conversion – Refined -> Secret Art: Mana Bargain – Refined!]

Chapter 423 – Notification

Save for a few key moments, Micky hadn't participated as much in Percy or the clone's experiments with the new Secret Art. While Micky had also learned how to fuse the soul mana into his ice, he'd prioritized other things with his time.

Perched atop a frozen hill, he examined his wing, scrutinizing the glowing lines decorating his plumage. Having learned to circulate his ice mana – the non-soul-infused variants – inside all three of his networks, he had improved his boosting art slightly. Not enough to register an actual upgrade in his Status, but enough to make a tangible difference during a fight.

The air and water patterns on his body had lost their green and azure hues, shining in the same pale light as his original ice channels. The shape of the patterns hadn't changed – the mana still drew swirling gales and gentle waves as always.

As for his ice and beast patterns… he hadn't touched them at all. The former lit up in an intricate hexagonal grid, its vertices forming intersections between the three elements – or rather, the solid, liquid and gaseous states of the same element, now. The beast pattern still resembled a network of amber lines synonymous with his circulatory system. His mutations converted his ice mana into beast mana at about the same rate as before.

Overall, it wasn't a huge power-up, since Micky didn't feel any stronger physically. However, he did have a higher-quality fuel to pump into his spells. Had it not been for the additional sources of ice mana he'd tossed into his Freezing Tornado, he might not have pierced the Blue's defences as easily a couple of weeks ago.

'This is just the start anyway… I'll grow much stronger once I add that into the spell…'

Now that his companions had finished working on Mana Bargain, Micky was free to deactivate Consumption. He still needed to keep it running for as long as possible to preserve his stamina, but he

wouldn't be able to focus on his new project with it active. He knew Percy would have loved the chance to practice with the new tool some more but that could wait.

Taking a few deep breaths, he reactivated his boosting art, but not all of it. Ignoring the beast, ice and air mana entirely, he focused solely on his water channels. The wave-like patterns lit up again, this time in their original, azure colour.

Micky didn't stop there.

As soon as his channels were fully saturated, he expelled some mana from his body, letting it mix with the ambient mana in the air. Presiding over the external flow, he willed the loops to swiftly close into countless tiny bubbles floating leisurely, mere centimetres away from his feathers. Gradually, he pulled them closer, feeling them seep back into his body one after another, travelling a short distance along the wave-like patterns before getting ejected again. Every time that happened, they emerged smaller than before, containing less ambient mana and more of his own.

'Make them smaller. And more consistent. The ones under your belly aren't moving fast enough. The ones on your back are travelling too far within your body. Push them out sooner,' the clone coached him.

The clone residing in Elaine's body had returned just over a month ago, bringing with him the complete knowledge of the water version of the Dance. Sadly, Galahad hadn't had enough time to figure out the lightning or acid variants yet, but he had still shown Percy the corresponding Circulation patterns. Not that he had much of a use for them at the moment, but expanding his library of patterns would make his life easier in the future. Especially once he resumed sending clones to the Vault.

Thankfully, the situation in the Camelot province had calmed down now that everyone understood that neither Micky nor Percy would be captured so easily. Most of the neighbouring families had apparently decided to play it smart and not make any rash moves, which was exactly what Percy and Elaine had wanted to see.

Either way, Micky didn't care that much about House Avalon or Remior's political landscape. As long as his partner and their loved ones were okay, so was he. More than anything else, Micky had been relieved to hear that Elaine had gotten her hand healed.

He'd even asked Percy to keep the clone there for a while longer, to watch after her – instead of rushing back to pass him the technique. However, Percy had insisted that the best way to help her and everyone else would be to grow stronger. Thus, they had finally lost touch with Percy's relatives, gaining the perfect tutor for Micky in exchange.

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Percy had chosen to replace the clone in Micky's body too.

They had all dreaded that moment, because they hadn't known how easy it would be to recreate the convenient, two-way connection afforded to them by Soul Harmony. Were they to end up stuck with the much simpler cord they'd had in the past, it would have been a colossal loss – especially now that they'd finally grown better at using the empowered Secret Art.

Unfortunately, it was a risk they couldn't have avoided forever.

Sooner or later, Percy would have had to absorb the clone back. Not only because he didn't think his clones could survive forever on their own, but also because he needed to consolidate their gains to use his future clones more efficiently.

Granted, the two had remained in touch over the past several months, but fusing had still been the easiest way for Percy to grow proficient with the soul-freezing ice, as well as the fastest way to teach Micky the Dance. Having his main body ponder over and consolidate all those distinct concepts under the influence of the Wiseman's Murmurs couldn't be understated either.

Luckily, their gamble had paid off.

It turned out that re-creating their intricate connection was just as easy as they had hoped. They had to use Soul Resonance to widen the two cords as the clone moved around Micky's body to roll them up again. Once the connection resembled its previous shape, they only needed to cycle some soul mana through it and wait for it to settle.

Thus, Micky had gained a tutor.

A few weeks ago, the new clone had started guiding him on upgrading the water version of the boosting art. Wrapping his mind around the Masterful spell had still been a challenge for Micky, but having somebody demonstrate the complete version in his own body had saved him a ton of time.

This was very different from what Percy had done with Sol and Elaine. In both of those cases, Percy had been the student as much as the teacher, learning alongside them as they strove to perfect the spell. That was why he'd needed the help of an Elemental Source or over a year to complete those projects.

Meanwhile, Micky only needed to observe his friend for a while, taking over once he felt confident in maintaining the spell by himself. At the rate he was improving, Micky would have likely perfected it weeks ago if they hadn't taken a break for Percy and the clone to work on Mana Bargain.

'Don't get cocky now,' the original Percy suddenly spoke. 'Learning the water Dance is just the first step. You still have to figure out the air and ice versions and then put everything together.'

Micky nodded, knowing his friend was right.

It would be tough, but doable. They had three masters of the spell working together, Percy and the clone having even figured out a whopping three affinities by now. Still, they hoped Micky would be done in the next year or so, which was bound to be difficult. Not that it would be the end of the world if they fell short, but the extra strength might make the difference between getting the wasp egg in time or not.

'For now, let's just get the first one down...'

Following the clone's instructions, Micky adjusted the flow around his belly and backside, closely monitoring the size and the movement of the bubbles. The clone didn't say anything else, which probably meant that Micky was doing alright.

He held the boosting art active for half an hour before deciding to try flying. The distraction caused him to make a mistake or two, but the clone promptly corrected him each time.

By sunset, Micky felt a lot more confident that he could keep the spell active while fighting. Of course, he wouldn't actually try that, because Consumption was still better. Leaving aside the fact that it kept

his hunger at bay, it utilized both of his cores and all four sets of channels, providing him and Percy with a better resource for their magic. It strengthened him more too.

Regardless, this was a huge milestone. He could start dipping his talons into the other two elements as early as tomorrow. Content with his achievement, Micky was about to let go of the spell, when something unexpected happened.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Dance of the Savage Gods – Masterful!]

Micky stared at the deep red letters in shock. Percy hadn't taught him how to read, but Micky could still understand the written language, thanks to his connection to Percy and the clone. More than the text itself, however, it was the implication behind it that left him speechless – for a while, at least.

'Percy! Are you seeing this?!'

It was a rhetorical question. With Soul Harmony active, they could easily access each other's senses. They no longer even bothered to filter each other out as much, now that they had grown better at handling the information. And Micky knew that Percy had been paying him extra attention today as he had worked on the spell.

In fact, before his friend even got a chance to reply, Micky noticed a second, similar message floating before Percy's eyes.

[Congratulations! Your familiar has mastered a new spell: Dance of the Savage Gods – Masterful!]

That confirmed that this wasn't just some random error that had occurred with Phoebe's Decree. They hadn't expected anything of the sort, but the evidence was undeniable. Maybe, this was related to some feature their Status had inherited from Obatala's Approval or, perhaps, this was something it had figured out on its own during its latest calibration.

Whatever the case was, one thing was for certain…

Micky could directly receive notifications now!

Chapter 424 – Needle

Thinking he wouldn't be able to pour another drop of power into the spell, Percy finally let go.

The gaseous portion of the soul-freezing ice he had compressed exploded soundlessly, propelling the object forward. The construct reached the blond, middle-aged man in an instant, encountering no resistance as it phased through every obstacle in its path.

Spinning rapidly, it left a trail of soul-freezing liquid behind it as it dug through the Blue's defences. The domain-infused wall of flames slowed the projectile down slightly, though it still sank into the man's tunic. Emerging out of his back, it kept going, disappearing into the darkness.

No surprise there.

Packing as much mana as three Yellow cores, the spell was in some ways equivalent to a Green's strongest attack. And that was without considering the unique properties it had inherited from the various mana types involved. The soul affinity not only allowed the spell to move several times faster than a corporeal construct would, but also made it much harder to detect and raised its lethality to a ridiculous level.

Even so, a wound this narrow wouldn't have been enough to kill the Blue.

The surviving mage probably had no idea what had happened, but Percy had seen everything clearly. The man's soul had turned brittle after getting pierced by the attack, shattering like cheap glass – a result that could only be attributed to the ice affinity.

The Blue's eyes dimmed as he stumbled backwards, falling over the edge. His body plummeted down the cliff, Micky diving after him. The crow barely snatched his meal just before it splashed into the dark waves crashing onto the glacier.

Percy didn't pay the bird much attention, focusing on something else.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Frozen Shards – Refined + Secret Art: Mana Bargain – Refined -> Secret Art: Soul-crushing Needle – Masterful!]

Reading the notification, he couldn't help but smile. His Frozen Shards spell was something he hadn't even been able to use before. He had first registered the Crude Concussive Blast on Felmara, using the air affinity he had borrowed from Leo. He'd upgraded it to Refined much later, while possessing his familiar. In both cases, it was his clones who had developed it, registering the only entry in his Status that he didn't have the right mana type for.

Thanks to their recent success with the soul-freezing ice, Percy had finally found a way to put the technique to good use.

Of course, the original spell had heavily employed pre-casting – which wasn't fully applicable in this situation. The clone did use pre-casting while producing the liquid and gaseous variants of the fused mana, but other facets of the technique – like the rotations – weren't as firmly embedded into the mana and wouldn't survive the trip through the cords. Even so, the resulting spell had clearly been powerful and intricate enough to reach the next tier.

Seeing that his remaining opponent showed no intention of attacking, Percy took a moment to ponder over the weaknesses of his new Secret Art.

It was difficult to use, due to his lack of resistance to the affinity. He'd only managed because of his boosting art practically turning his body into a furnace, helping him fend off the cold. Despite this, Percy would be lucky if he could bear the frigid resource coursing through his channels more than twice or thrice in a short amount of time. The first activation only took five minutes to prepare, but subsequent shots would take progressively longer as he dealt with the aftereffects.

Outside of the difficulties with the spell's preparation, it was also challenging to land.

Percy wouldn't have hit his opponent if not for his eyes. They had helped him predict the man's movements and even allowed Percy to aim at a weakness in the domain. Had Percy shot the Blue anywhere else, he might have failed to penetrate his defences, even if he hadn't missed.

In other words, the Soul-crushing Needle was certainly a potent weapon that could turn the tides of battle if used wisely, but it wasn't exactly the kind of guaranteed kill that Percy could fire without thinking.

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Happy with his assessment, he shifted his gaze to the third and final mage. The Blue had frozen in his tracks after seeing his companions die, probably realizing that the fight was over. He hadn't dared to move a muscle since, though his soul shuddered as soon as Percy's eyes landed on it.

"Mercy… I swear I will never come after you again. I'll tell the others in my family not to, either," he begged, his voice quivering. His expression was downtrodden, probably not expecting Percy to agree.

Suddenly, the giant silhouette of a bird shot up the cliff, a spatial amulet falling in Percy's outstretched hand. The ice splintered beneath Micky's talons with a heavy crack as he landed nearby. Throwing his neck up, the crow flung what remained of the mutilated corpse in the air, swallowing it whole – clothes and everything – with a heavy gulp that send a chill down even Percy's spine, let alone their opponent's.

"What do you think?" Percy asked out loud solely for the Blue's sake.

Micky shrugged.

"I don't need to eat a third Blue core today. Do whatever you want."

Percy sighed.

Had this been three or four months ago, he wouldn't have even entertained the idea of leaving a survivor behind. These people had come after his and Micky's heads willingly. And while he had indeed grown much stronger, it wasn't like he could start disregarding Blues entirely or leave everyone he fought alive. What if this person joined the others chasing them?

At the same time, the situation was a lot different now.

Percy had initially wanted to keep his abilities hidden for as long as possible, to maintain the element of surprise. Sadly, that ship had already sailed. Some of the powerful teams that he and Micky had been forced to escape from had seen their boosting arts and what the spells did to their bodies. They'd learned pretty much everything there was to know about their affinities and his constructs.

In fact, Percy wouldn't be surprised if their enemies had pieced together that they didn't need to sleep, or that the runes he had engraved on his weapons hadn't originated from Remior. This person wouldn't even be the first survivor they left behind, though the previous cases hadn't been intentional. More than once, their pursuers had interrupted Percy before he finished off one of the weaker groups. It was safe to assume that most of their tricks were common knowledge by now.

Of course, Percy would have preferred for his new Secret Art to not leak so soon, but he didn't feel like executing somebody in cold blood just to hide a single spell.

"Leave your amulet. Don't let me see your face again."

The Blue didn't waste a moment, tossing the spatial device over before scurrying away in a manner not befitting of his grade.

'I suppose we're at the end of our rope,' Percy told the others through their connection.

'Indeed,' Micky replied.

They weren't as worried about the guy they'd just spared as they were about all the other groups closing in on them. It had been another two weeks since Micky registered the Dance, and they had been driven to the northern-most edge of the continent.

Or was it the southern-most edge? They'd already left the pole behind them and crossed into the other hemisphere. That probably wasn't quite right either – there were plenty of shores south of here…

Regardless, there was nowhere else to go other than the ocean, and the nearest Blues would probably be reaching them in mere hours. In theory, Percy and Micky could try slipping through the gaps in their formation, but that would risk getting surrounded.

‘I guess we’re done here,’ the clone ultimately said. ‘With our latest upgrade, I feel a lot more confident killing groups of three, but I doubt we’ll be seeing many of those after today.’

‘Let’s lay low for a few months,’ Micky agreed, pointing toward the endless stretch of water with his beak.

Naturally, they’d return when they felt more confident. Percy didn’t think the Blues would follow them into the sea. Even if they did, he and Micky could just escape in pretty much any direction they wanted. They were bound to ditch the bastards sooner or later.

Having prepared for this eventuality, Percy had already stocked up on dried rations engraved with preservation runes. They wouldn’t last forever, but with so many otherwise-empty spatial amulets, he had the next couple of months covered. Besides, he was confident they’d find the bare minimum of food they would need to survive, swimming close to the surface or living on the islands. If things grew too desperate, he could ask Nesha to send them more food with the clone when she was done. As a last resort, they could even risk it with some alien food from outside Remior.

‘I don’t think it’ll come to that… At least, Micky can generate as much drinking water as we want.’

Leaving was probably the best option right now. It was about time for him to get his third trait and start working on the armour upgrade. Micky had to focus on the Dance…

Climbing on his familiar’s neck, Percy tossed one final glance at his surroundings, scanning the frigid wasteland they were leaving behind. Their small-minded enemies had chased them to the ends of Remior and beyond.

And for what?

Some money.

An elixir recipe that Percy had always intended to share with them anyway – if only they waited a few more years or offered to pay a fair price for it instead of threatening him and his loved ones.

Finally, to punish him for killing the Holy Children – the first, a psychopath who had enslaved his friend for decades and massacred half a town over nothing, and the other, someone dumb enough to help him.

At the end of the day, their motivations didn't matter. Percy had no intention of getting captured, so his enemies would eventually have to let him be…

…one way or another.

Chapter 425 – Out at sea

Micky was flying leisurely a dozen metres above the surface of the water, the peaks of the hill-sized waves occasionally washing over his talons. Though the bird wasn't wasting his time, doing a bunch of things at once.

Perhaps, the most important one was working on his new boosting art.

Only the green lines were currently decorating his plumage, as he focused on the air pattern of the Dance. Long whirlpools of the same colour extended out of his pores, resembling the original version of the technique that Percy had learned from Tlaloc. The ribbons certainly seemed to suit the air version of the spell better than burning wisps or floating bubbles.

However, there were a few differences. The whirlpools were much longer, swirling around playfully – partly to capture as much air and ambient mana as possible, and partly because their very nature demanded it.

Micky was still at the early stages of developing the new spell but, experienced as they were, Percy and the clone had done a decent job figuring out many of the key concepts unique to this affinity. Hopefully, it would save him a lot of time down the line.

Sadly, Micky couldn't keep the spell active constantly. He still had to alternate between that and Consumption. Given the relative scarcity of food in their surroundings, it was the only way to hold his hunger at bay and preserve his stamina. That was also why he was scanning the sea for his next meal and keeping an eye out for enemies.

Percy hadn't absorbed the new trait yet, because he wanted to make sure they weren't followed before he made the attempt. The last thing he needed was to end up surrounded by four powerful Blues with blessings and bloodlines right when he was at his weakest. Thankfully, it had been weeks since they left the continent, and it didn't seem like anyone had bothered chasing.

'We're probably safe. Let's stop on the next island we see,' he said, eliciting a round of agreement from his companions.

For now, he retracted his thoughts back to his own body, focusing on the task at hand. Ignoring the salty breeze colliding with his face, he stared at the thin mana thread intently. His fingers moved with otherworldly dexterity, adjusting and rolling the intricate ingredients that comprised his magical silk.

If an outsider was to look at his hands, they might notice a thin, grey layer coating his palms. To Percy, the colour appeared more pronounced. It wasn't mana – it was his soul, sticking close to the surface of his skin, even spilling outside here and there. It was denser near his fingertips, covered in lots of tiny appendices that resembled a spider's legs. Yet, their joints bent in all the wrong directions.

At first glance, the spectral limbs appeared to move erratically. On closer inspection, there was order hiding beneath the chaos – a faint rhythm to their movements as they brushed over the mana threads, working in tandem with Percy's conscious efforts to accelerate his production.

Before registering the spell, he hadn't been able to manipulate the fine materials this easily. He had designed the ingredients in such a way that they could latch onto one another with minimal input from him – the hook-like grains were meant to interlock into a grid around the central thread, while the rest of the materials would coat the sheet that wrapped around it. Percy had even developed specialized techniques to mass-produce these materials without having to forge each crystal separately.

Upgrading Reinforcement into the Masterful Spectral Art had changed everything.

Percy could now clearly perceive everything going on between his fingers. He'd also learned to cooperate with the Weaving trait seamlessly after months of arduous practice. He could produce the materials in real time, rolling them up into coherent and flawless strings several times faster.

Keeping at it for several hours, he hadn't glanced even once at the blueish-grey strand fluttering for dozens – if not hundreds – of metres behind him. It was growing by just over a finger's length per second, or roughly the crow's wingspan per minute. At this rate, Percy could produce enough for his project in a couple of weeks – a massive improvement compared to when he'd just started. If he got lucky, the silk might even survive that long without degrading.

However, that still wasn't enough. Spinning the silk wouldn't be the end – he'd also have to weave it into an enchanted fabric and shape it into something he could wear. That was bound to be a time-consuming process in and of itself, as well as one that he hadn't had the chance to practice as much.

'I suppose I have enough silk to do some test runs now…'

Just as he was trying to decide whether to keep spinning or to switch to runecrafting, a grey wisp slammed into his body, sinking into a hole in his soul located on his right shoulder. The collision itself only rattled him for a moment, but the influx of memories was more annoying to deal with.

He sighed.

'Time for a break.'

Now that Duwa and Elaine's clones had returned from their long assignments, Percy had a total of three wisps on constant rotation. In theory, having so many clones actively searching for opportunities was a good thing, but it did mean he had to deal with multiple interruptions per day.

Percy had grown a lot better at handling the clones – even when they arrived at an inconvenient time, such as while he was working on something mentally intensive, or during a dangerous fight. If he wanted, he could ignore the clone entirely and keep spinning his silk.

But he'd have to create a new clone sooner or later, so there was no sense in delaying the inevitable.

Summoning a broken piece of his scythe's shaft from his spatial seal, he wrapped the silk tightly around it before storing it away. He could try to weave some enchantments with it at some point. Next, he spent a minute to fill up another wisp with phantom mana, before using his bloodline ability to sever the bloated orb from his soul and watching it shoot away into the unknown.

Finally, he emptied two vials of Aurora Dew directly into his stomach, using his Whirlpool of Four Streams technique to cleanse his cores. Strictly speaking, Percy didn't have to use the modified version of the technique anymore. Now that he could passively fuse his affinities and circulate the phantom mana directly through both cores, two streams would suffice. By turning them corporeal, he could have them churn the contents of his stomach, mixing with the elixirs. Then, he could turn one of them ethereal and pull each to a different core.

But there wasn't any point.

Percy had already grown extremely familiar with the art after using it thrice a day for nearly two decades. It was an integral part of his routine – effortless and lossless – and he didn't see a reason to go through the hassle of changing his habits.

Other than clone creation and core cleansing, Percy had cut out all the other distractions from his schedule, so that he could focus exclusively – or as close to that as he could get – on the silk.

He'd even stopped brewing.

Percy wasn't in a rush to convert the rest of his stash, because he'd already prepared enough Aurora Dew for the next seven years. Even if he excluded the portion he was planning to give Sol, he and Micky would be okay for a long time. Besides, brewing would be wasteful right now – with so many upgrades on the horizon.

In the process of replacing his armour, Percy would inevitably improve greatly at runecrafting, which should allow him to upgrade his cauldron too. A bigger and finer cauldron would not only let him brew even more elixirs at once, but also raise his yield again.

On top of that, there was the compression principle that he had yet to register. He still wasn't sure that the strange plant he'd brought from Gallimus contained gravity mana, but he did know that Nesha and the clone had already bought a bunch of other ingredients for him. Besides making his potions and tattoos useable again, the new entry would hopefully boost his yield even more.

Everything considered, holding onto the elixirs was the smart choice for now. Percy would get more value out of his stash if he played his cards right, and he wouldn't even have to waste as much time and effort to convert it.

'All in due time… For now, the priority is the spectral trait. Micky, can you stop on that island?'

They'd waited long enough to be relatively sure that they were alone in the region. Even if they got attacked while he was vulnerable, the crow should be able to grab him and fly away. The safest option might have been to attract the fiend while sitting on his familiar's back, but Percy didn't think that would work. Saturating his surroundings with mana to lure the creatures over was a big part of the operation. Obviously, he wouldn't be able to do that while moving.

Following his instructions, the bird descended upon the "island". It really was just a rocky protrusion sticking out of the water, its sharp tip piercing through the surface of the ocean like a colossal caveman's spear. Dropping Percy off on a somewhat flat spot by the boulder's side, Micky took off, patrolling their surroundings for potential threats.

Pushing his boosting art to its limits, Percy commenced the familiar procedure for what he hoped would be the last time. Inflicting a series of small incisions on his soul, he poured the mana out of his injuries, lacing it with thoughts of fear, injury and death.

Internally, he was a lot more excited than he showed, however.

'Fingers crossed for a good one…'

Chapter 426 – Zoris's past

Waves hurled themselves against the rocks below, each one breaking apart in a crash of white foam. Just beyond the spray, Percy sat cross-legged at the cliff's edge. If he'd let his legs dangle, the sea would've washed over his feet every second or third wave. As it was, only the cool mist reached him – sharp bursts of brine that salted his lips and left crusted traces in his hair. He ignored that, as well as the irritating sting of the numerous cuts still marring his soul, and the dense grey fog surrounding him.

'Should I switch back to phantom mana?'

He'd used Soul Conversionagain, turning all his pure mana into soul mana in the hopes of maximizing his output. Had he stuck with the fused resource, the volume would have decreased, but the fiends might have found the gourmet meal more appealing or something.

Unable to decide, Percy had alternated between the two types of mana with each fresh attempt. He and Micky had stayed here for a couple days already, Percy having tried to lure the creature several times – without much success.

He shook his head.

'No… this is fine. It worked for me the first time, didn't it? I just need to be patient.'

Some failures were only to be expected, really. They weren't in the Thirsty Valley anymore, so Percy's output was back to a twentieth of what it used to be under the influence of Kronos's Decree. On top of that, Micky didn't have access to any powerful souls to break down for him.

In some ways, Percy was even less prepared for this attempt than he'd been in the Grisly Bog. Sure, his grade was higher and his boosting art stronger, so he wasn't as worried that the creature would elude him forever, but he understood it might take a few more tries.

Sighing, he began the process anew.

'You seem to be looking forward to your new trait,' Zoris suddenly said, causing Percy to raise an eyebrow.

The god rarely spoke unprompted, often remaining silent for entire weeks or even months. Sometimes, Percy almost forgot that he had such an ancient entity wrapped around his finger. Not that he was very surprised by the god's behaviour. Deities lived for eons – to them, a few months passed in the blink of an eye. This was especially the case for Zoris, who had spent Phoebe-knew how long in isolation, never interacting with another soul.

'Shouldn't I be?' Percy asked back. 'The other two have served me well so far.'

‘Well, you should… but I don’t think you appreciate just how painful absorbing it is going to be. I’ve seen people give up halfway through the procedure, deciding that two traits were enough for them, after all.’

Percy chuckled, thinking the god was joking. But Zoris wasn’t laughing.

‘Wait, you’re serious? Are you telling me there are genuinely people out there who would let this opportunity go to waste just to avoid hurting for a few minutes?’

‘Like I said, I don’t think you fully appreciate just how painful this is going to be. Having three fiends wreaking havoc inside your soul is very different from just two.’

Percy swallowed hard, choosing to believe Zoris. Of all the painful things he had endured over the years, absorbing his second fiend had easily topped the list. If the former god insisted this would be even worse, Percy didn’t doubt it.

Still, he wasn’t going to back down.

‘Is it definitely safe?’ Percy asked.

‘It is. Either you grit your teeth and make it to the end, getting your third trait, or you pass out from the pain and have to start over. At least, I’ve never seen anyone with the blessing get permanently injured from just three fiends. Don’t even think about getting a fourth though.’

Percy nodded, latching onto something the god had said.

‘You speak as if you’ve seen many people with multiple traits. But soul affinities should be rare outside Melodia, and the Melodians don’t have any gods or blessings…’

The former god sent him the mental equivalent of a shrug.

‘I’ve lived for a very long time and travelled far. Soul users are rare, but they exist. Not many make it to godhood, yet the ones who do will often sire hundreds or even thousands of kids. Inevitably, a few of them inherit both the affinity and the concept.’

Zoris’s words only made Percy more curious, but he held himself back, thinking that what he wanted to ask might be too personal. Noticing his unease, the god chuckled.

‘You don’t need to walk on eggshells around me, Percy. My skin is thicker than most,’ he joked. ‘To answer your unspoken question, I’ve fathered plenty of kids myself. So many, in fact, that I never even bothered to count them. I’ve personally guided some of the most promising ones into obtaining their traits…’ he added, his voice trailing off.

Zoris sighed before continuing.

‘You know… I hadn’t given this much thought before meeting you, but I now realize that I wasn’t a good father.’

‘How so?’ Percy asked just to be polite, though the answer was abundantly clear, given how the former god had even talked about his children.

‘I didn’t mistreat them, but I did disregard them – or even neglect them. At least the ones I didn’t see as talented. Not that you aren’t plenty gifted yourself, but spending so much time with you reminded me that I never did that with my kids. I didn’t ask them about their dreams or aspirations… I never bothered to… you know… be a father to them…’

Hearing the sorrow in the god’s voice, Percy wasn’t sure how to console him.

‘Do you think any of them might still be around?’

‘No. My world was only a lesser spring, and none of my children was a Green-born. We did have a few friends among the greater springs, but they tend to be quite tight-lipped about their secrets – especially the ones pertaining to their faster advancement speed.’

‘What about their descendants?’ Percy asked. ‘One of your great-great-great-grandkids might have made it to godhood or something. Maybe your world became a greater spring after you left.’

‘My world was destroyed, Percy. Long before I got turned into a ring.’

‘Oh…’

‘”Oh” indeed…’ Zoris mentally shook his head. ‘You don’t have to cheer me up. These are things I’ve already made peace with. Just… I do wish I could go back in time and do things differently… I’ve written so many of my Red-born and Orange-born children off without even giving them a chance. I only saw my sons and daughters as potential assets – loyal people that could strengthen my world. I judged them based on things they couldn’t control, such as their birth-grades or their affinities… And look at me now – I’m a ring! I’m stuck at an even lower starting point than any of them, yet I haven’t given up on myself, despite having been so quick to abandon my children.’

Feeling the god’s guilt through their connection, Percy knew there was nothing either of them could do about that. The man’s family was long gone, so he wouldn’t even be able to apologize to them. Left with no other choice, Percy tried to change the topic.

‘Do all the large factions know about spectral traits?’

‘Some do. Since soul users only make up a tiny fraction of the population, there aren’t as many people experimenting with such obscure uses of the affinity. Even fewer would do something as crazy as trapping a fiend in their core and grinding it down. But someone did discover this at some point, and the secret eventually spread through wars, trades and espionage… All of this happened before I was born, mind you…’

Percy frowned, noticing a discrepancy.

‘There are hundreds of greater springs that have managed to hold on to the secrets of their advancement, but they couldn’t keep the information about the spectral traits to themselves?’

‘It’s not the same. The former is the kind of thing that elevates the entire world, allowing them to produce more gods – it’s the very key to their power and status, so they can’t afford to leak it. The latter

is something that only a sliver of the population cares about – soul affinity users. Rather than thinking about their planet, they are better off banding with other soul users across the universe and working together to develop new techniques to give them an edge over their rivals. The scope of the secret is different, as are the motivations around guarding it.'

'Did nobody ever find a way for people without a soul affinity to absorb a fiend?' Percy asked.

This was something that had been bothering him. He would have loved a method to grant Nesha, Elaine and Micky their own traits. Right now, they only shared Percy's, and only as long as his clones inhabited their bodies.

'I don't think it's possible. Having a soul core is paramount, because the way you absorb the fiend is related to the way the organ converts ambient mana into your own, but also to the resistance to your own mana type that it grants you. I know you are used to achieving the impossible, but I wouldn't risk experimenting with your friend's lives if I was in your shoes.'

Percy fell silent, contemplating the god's words. Though he didn't get the chance to think about them for too long. A silver object glinted in the distance, its faint glow barely piercing through the dull grey fog surrounding Percy as his lips curled upwards.

It was finally here…

His third spectral fiend.

Chapter 427 – Third trait

Writhing atop the jagged stone platform, Percy clung desperately to the rock, trying to keep himself from sliding into the sea below. His nails split and his palms tore under the pressure of his grasp, blood mixing with the salty spray. But the sting on his hands was ultimately nothing – a mere tickle – compared to the agony ravaging his soul from within.

'Zoris wasn't kidding about this!'

The second trait had indeed hurt a lot. But this? This belonged to a different category of suffering altogether.

At first, everything had seemed manageable. The fiend had been small and round, just compact enough to fit inside his core with ease. Even if it had been larger, Percy was certain he could've forced it in. Its carapace had been glossy but not smooth, covered in etched markings – otherworldly symbols that had defied comprehension. Stranger still, the engravings hadn't been static. They'd kept shifting at irregular intervals, pulsing in and out of existence like some maddening poem too wrong for a mortal's brain to comprehend.

Percy hadn't wasted a second before beginning the process of grinding the creature down, disseminating its remains along his soul. He hadn't even stopped to ask Zoris what the trait actually did – because it didn't really matter. Whatever ability the fiend was about to grant him, he wanted it. And the sooner he got through the torture, the better.

Or so he'd thought.

As soon as the ever-shifting symbols had appeared on the surface of his soul, his existing traits had reacted with violent hostility. The spider-like limbs of the Argalios and the long, flowing hairs of the Nyctovios had sprouted like weeds, lashing out in fury.

The limbs had stabbed inward, clawing at the "tainted" regions of Percy's soul, trying to peel them away like infected scabs, more than happy to flay him alive to destroy the intruder if they had to. Meanwhile, the silken hairs had coiled tightly around the crumbling flakes, trying to yank the symbols out before they took root.

The engravings hadn't taken this without a fight either.

Whenever the older traits had succeeded in shaving away a marked layer of his soul, the symbols had formed themselves again on the next one, stubbornly etching themselves even deeper. Worse still, they'd forcibly rearranged Percy's soulscape in the process, shoving the limbs and the hairs aside.

That had only enraged the older traits further, however.

In their fury, they'd even turned on one another, the tentative truce they'd reached and maintained over the past year all but forgotten. Each of the three traits had fought against the other two in a complete free-for-all, turning Percy's soul into a battlefield. The chaos hadn't stopped at the edge of his

vision either. Percy had felt the battle raging beneath the surface, stretching to the deepest recesses of his soul.

Gritting his teeth, Percy cried out to his familiar.

‘M-Micky! Pin me down before I fall in the water!!’

He didn’t get a reply. At least, not immediately.

Then, he heard it – a splash, loud and sudden. Percy twisted his head in the direction of the noise just in time to see a great bloom of white foam erupt in the distance. A massive beak broke through the surface a moment later, Micky gasping for air.

‘Can you stop this?!’ the clone snapped, irritation cutting through the cord. ‘You’re sending us your pain!’

Percy blinked.

He hadn’t even realized. Unconsciously, he’d used the connections as an outlet, flooding them with raw emotion. Sure enough, another surge of protest arrived from Nesha’s end.

‘Damn it…’

Forcing himself to clamp down, Percy sealed away his broadcasted anguish, thanking the gods his other three clones were currently away from Remior – well outside his range. There was no reason to ruin their day too. Especially since they’d all bring him the memories back eventually, forcing him to relive this hell another five times.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Percy watched his familiar freeze a lump of ice into his surroundings before using it to climb out of the water. Percy sure hoped they wouldn’t get attacked in the next few minutes, or they’d be sitting ducks.

Left with no other choice, he did his best to hang onto the cliff by himself as he turned his senses inward, accelerating the fiend's disintegration. At this point, it wasn't even about the trait anymore. He just wanted this to end. And he had to succeed, because he really didn't feel like starting over. This was torment he wouldn't even wish on his worst enemy…

Acton and Rhaziel's faces popped up in his mind.

'On second thought… maybe I would.'

Before he could spiral deeper into his delirium, the world began to whiten at the edges, his vision blurring as his thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind.

'No. I have to stay awake.'

Percy used the pain to slap himself back to his senses.

'Percy. Focus on my voice,' Zoris said, his calm words echoing through Percy's soul. 'Stop thinking about the pain. Let's talk about something else – anything else.'

'Easy for you to say! You're not the one being eaten alive!'

Percy resisted the urge to swear, reminding himself that the former god was only trying to help. And to be fair, Zoris had warned him.

'Think about the trait you're going to get,' the god urged. 'I promise it's a useful one… especially for you.'

'You recognized it?' Percy forced himself to ask.

Though he still found it difficult to get excited, any bubbling traces of enthusiasm buried beneath the suffering. All he wanted now was to vomit the half-absorbed fiend out of his core and black the fuck out.

Ignoring the edge in Percy's response, the god nodded.

'The fiend is called a Symbolon. It will help you with runecrafting.'

This time, Percy's ears perked up. Clearly noticing that, Zoris chuckled before elaborating.

'It'll help you with the grunt work – you will be able to draw even the most intricate symbols as easily as breathing. It doesn't even matter what tools or medium you use – ink, paint, chalk, carvings… it applies to any kind of writing. Ah, but it won't help you express meaning into your enchantments. Visualizing their effects is something you'll still have to do by yourself.'

Hearing that, Percy's feelings were mixed. On one hand, this was excellent timing, since he was planning to shift his attention to runecrafting for the foreseeable future, and any edge would help. In some ways, this was his luckiest trait yet. Not that he was dissatisfied with Weaving or Insomnia, but their effects had been pretty random by comparison – especially the first one. Finding applications for it had taken him a while.

On the other hand, he couldn't help but feel a little underwhelmed. It sounded like the new trait's effect was somewhat modest. Drawing the runes was only a small part of the craft. Visualizing their effects was the real challenge – especially once he delved into more complex enchantments involving multiple runes.

'It could have been worse. I get to have three, different and useable traits. That's more than most people can say.'

Percy still hoped the trait would be worth all this pain though. Suddenly, he found some newfound respect for those people who stopped after their second trait. Perhaps, they weren't as lazy as he'd initially assumed…

The war within his soul dragged on for several more agonizing minutes. The ghostly appendages cannibalized one another with wild abandon, while thin, glowing cracks webbed across the grey flame inside him. They reminded Percy of the early injuries he had endured as a teenager – back when he'd misused his bloodline.

That said, this was a lot different.

The cracks were much shallower – less life-threatening. Percy didn't think his soul was in any danger of falling apart entirely and killing him. He probably had his blessing to thank for that. Shallow as they were, the cracks were still more numerous, however. They densely permeated his soul from head to toe, making every moment excruciating.

By the time the process ended, Percy was a wreck.

His traits had finally receded into dormancy, leaving behind a battered husk. His soul throbbed and burned, his body shaking with exhaustion. He sure hoped that none of his clones returned in the next few hours, since he wasn't in any condition to deal with them. Blood and sweat soaked his tattered clothes, still oozing from the countless tiny cuts his spasming had inflicted.

He didn't even have the strength to celebrate what he could only describe as his greatest victory to date. Thankfully, his Status did that for him.

[Congratulations! You have absorbed a new spectral trait: Scribing!]

Percy struggled to raise an eyebrow, too tired to be surprised.

'What the hell? That's new…'

His previous traits hadn't triggered notifications. In fact, very few things did. Originally, his Status had only acknowledged new spells, adding alchemic principles to the list after Atlantis. Evidently, its latest upgrade had done more than just extend its features to Micky…

Winning over his exhaustion, his curiosity prompted him to pull up the whole thing, his eyes landing onto the new entry.

Chapter 428 – Conflict

Whenever Percy powered up – be it through a trait, a mutation or a spell – he was usually eager to explore his new limits.

Not this time.

After gulping down a few healing potions to patch up the scratches on his skin and relieve the worst of his fatigue, he took a break for a couple of days. This was one of those rare moments when he genuinely wished he could still sleep. It wouldn't have accelerated his recovery or anything – the whole point of the Insomnia trait was that it gave him the benefits of resting while awake. Yet, sleep would have helped him ignore the lingering ache in his soul.

Alas, he'd never bothered learning how to overcome the trait's influence.

Worse still, his missing clones returned one by one during his downtime, each drop-kicking new memories into his already throbbing mind and exacerbating the damage to his soul. Percy wasn't in a rush to replace them either, opting to give himself a chance to fully recover first – his sanity demanded it.

The silver lining? Micky had fared a lot better. Leaving aside his short-lived flying accident, the crow hadn't had much trouble hauling Percy on his back and resuming their travels mere minutes after the operation. Not that it mattered – even after everything, they'd yet to spot any sign of their enemies.

It wasn't until a week later that Percy finally felt ready to test his new capabilities.

After drinking his morning doses of Aurora Dew and deploying a fresh trio of clones on interstellar expeditions, he paused for a moment to admire the sunrise. This wasn't the kind of view people on Remior got to see often, so Percy tried to claim small victories like this whenever he could. Light spilled over the ocean, painting the horizon in vibrant hues that bled sky into water.

'Being on the run has its perks, doesn't it?' he asked with a chuckle.

'Sure does,' Micky replied, gleefully scooping up a large fish dumb enough to swim close to the surface.

They didn't know what it was called, but it was a decent catch. The poor creature was large enough that it barely fit inside Micky's oversized talon. It squirmed desperately, trying to break free from the crow's iron grip.

Its Red core wouldn't do much for the familiar, but it did pack a lot of meat – it would make for a fine breakfast even shared between them. Not feeling like eating dried rations today, Percy took a few minutes to grill his portion on a construct adorned with heating enchantments. As for Micky, he was more than happy to eat the fish raw.

Once they were done sharing the peaceful meal, the crow resumed working on his boosting art, as Percy finally took a grey slab from his spatial seal. He'd forged the reinforced construct before acquiring his blessing, but the material had subtly changed colours over time, darkening after repeatedly drinking his phantom mana during its maintenance.

'Let's start simple… I can play with the silk later. Assuming it's even survived the past week…' he thought, scratching the back of his head.

Not wasting any more time, he gathered some mana to his finger, carving a concealment rune into the slab's smooth surface.

Percy was rusty.He hadn't focused on runecrafting that much over the past few months. Still, his current task was easy enough that he completed it without issue – and without noticing any changes to his soul.

'Try something a little more challenging,' Zoris advised. 'The trait won't show itself if you're just messing around.'

Nodding, Percy poured his mana into the self-repair enchantment on the back of his trusty learning aide, rapidly erasing the concealment rune on the front. Then, he decided to draw a different symbol – this time going for one of the most intricate pseudo-enchantments he'd carved onto his armour.

That was when it happened.

The moment he pictured the elaborate shape in his mind and pressed his finger against the slab, he felt his soul squirm. His hand moved by itself, carving the complicated symbol with unnatural precision. Even

better, mana seemed to gush out of his cores on its own, mixing and providing a steady flow of ink for his finger to work with.

Realizing that the process didn't require any conscious input from him, Percy spared a fleeting glance into his body. The grey silhouette of his soul had shifted, the same otherworldly patterns that had adorned it during the fiend's torturous absorption having appeared once more.

'Close your eyes,' the former god suggested.

At first, Percy creased his brow, thinking this was a bit much. Still, he followed the elder's advice in the end – it wasn't like he had anything to lose. Even without him watching, his finger continued uninterrupted, tracing the runes' contours with ease.

Percy felt like an outside observer in his own body, almost getting the sense that his hand would keep going even if somebody chopped it off. Though he knew it wasn't like that at all. He was still deeply connected to the process – perhaps even more so than before. He could tell exactly how much of the enchantment he had drawn and how much was still missing.

'Fascinating… this might be more useful than I thought it would be…' Percy realized.

He'd been disappointed to hear that the trait wouldn't help him infuse the effects into his runes. However, he may have vastly underestimated how valuable the ability to draw them effortlessly would be.

Not having to waste time worrying about getting the symbols right was huge – it would let him concentrate fully on the second part, indirectly allowing him to draw much more complex enchantments. Even out of practice as he was, he felt confident he could stick an extra control rune onto all of them in a couple of hours. That said, he didn't have any interest in upgrading his equipment right now. He'd rather wait for all the chips to fall into place.

'Let's try this with the silk.'

Resetting the slab, Percy stashed it away before bringing out a piece of grey shaft wrapped in threads that shimmered with the same colour. After weeks of spinning and another spent in storage, the

material wasn't looking good. It had stiffened and frayed in places, breaking here and there even under his careful touch. Thankfully, he still managed to salvage a few long segments in decent enough condition to work with.

Selecting one of the better strands, he wove it into a square patch, sewing a single rune into it – a preserved handkerchief. Like before, the enchantment had been way too simple to trigger the Scribing trait's instincts, yet the Weaving trait was a different story. Tapping into his memories from Bogside town, Percy channelled his inner tailor, countless tiny limbs sprouting over his fingers to help him along.

Weaving the silk into clothes was arguably the easiest part of the project – something even a regular person could accomplish. At the very least, it couldn't be compared to the arduous experimentation that had gone into developing the material – a Masterful spell in its own right – or the months Percy had spent learning to mass-produce it.

Percy knew that he could upgrade his Phantomscale Regalia in a day if he wanted.

By keeping the same modular approach as before and simply replacing the components with cloth equivalents, he would be able to craft something just as strong, yet much lighter and more flexible. In fact, its decreased bulk would probably let him add an extra layer or two, making the final product stronger and packed with more enchantments.

But he didn't want to do that.

Half-assing the final step would only be a disservice to all the effort he'd already put into this. No. If he was going to do this, he'd do it the right way. Percy wanted to weave the whole thing out of a single strip of cloth, and he was also planning to massively overhaul the very way in which he drew his runes.

Eager to try something more ambitious, Percy grabbed another piece of string, beginning work on a second handkerchief. This time, he decided to go with the same pseudo-enchantment as before, knowing it would trigger the Scribing trait.

Yet, that was just the start.

Sewing the runes after the fact like he'd just done was no different to how he normally engraved them into his armour. That wouldn't cut it. Percy wanted to work them directly into the weave itself – to make them an integral part of the structure. He knew this would not only let him fit even more of them in a tighter space, but that the enchantments would exert an even stronger influence onto the material.

Two traits stirred within his soul this time, as Percy focused on both his desire to produce a structurally sound fabric, and a flawless enchantment. For now, he ignored the actual effects of the runes, his priority being to get the construct right.

That was when he ran into a new problem.

Separate instincts tugged at his thoughts, pulling him in opposite directions. Whenever his fingers moved away from the runes' elaborate shapes to strengthen the seam, his Scribing trait recoiled in disgust. The ever-shifting patterns on his soul grew more erratic, shoving the Argalios's limbs aside. Whenever Percy gave in to his new trait's demands instead – compromising the quality of the fabric to improve the enchantments – it was the Weaving trait that protested.

Walking on a tightrope between the two impulses, Percy tried to keep the peace within his soul – without much success.

Eventually, the traits seemed to lose their patience entirely. More appendices and engraved patterns spawned on his soul, covering the rest of his hands and part of his forearms. Thankfully, they stopped at his elbows, but Percy didn't like where this was going.

Sure enough, the two traits attacked one another almost immediately, beginning their battle anew. Luckily, the pain wasn't worth mentioning compared to a week prior, and the Insomnia trait hadn't deigned to join in. Still, Percy found it impossible to focus on the handkerchief like this.

'What the hell?! Is this going to happen every time I do this?'

Zoris sighed.

'With practice, you'll learn how to navigate the space between the two traits. Don't look so disappointed though… this is ultimately a good thing.'

Percy frowned.

‘Good? How?’

‘What you are experiencing is known as a spectral conflict. It occurs when two or more traits overstep in each other’s territory. Naturally, they’re not going to be happy about it, but you’ll be able to compound their benefits once you resolve the conflict.’

Seeing him remain silent, the god continued.

‘Think of it this way. Each trait grants you skills that cross into the supernatural. That said, a sufficiently talented craftsman might be able to accomplish similar feats even without the traits. After all, there’s only so much you can do with a piece of string or a blob of ink – very few tasks are challenging enough to truly push a fiend’s abilities to their limit. But what happens when you have two of them battling it out for control?’

‘The difficulty spikes, I guess?’ Percy asked back, once he realized Zoris’s question wasn’t a rhetorical one.

‘Indeed. The difficulty spikes. And with it, the potential you can pull out of your traits spikes too. It’s like a new field – the intersection of tailoring and runecrafting – that nobody but you is even qualified to study… Well, you and everyone else with the same combination of traits, of course…’

Percy nodded, suddenly feeling a lot more optimistic about his ongoing project. There were still a few areas to improve on of course – such as learning to spin the silk even faster, teaching his traits to behave, and incorporating the new runes once the clone on Nesha’s side was done – but he was confident about one thing:

‘Once I’m done upgrading the Regalia, I’ll have a second Masterful spell on par with the Carnival…’

Chapter 429 – WANTED

Nesha wrinkled her nose in disgust as she kicked the rotten banana peel away, trying to make out the faded text on the soggy flyer by her feet.

Initially, she hadn't been thrilled at the idea of operating in the 121st district – the place was downright filthy. Sadly, it wasn't like they'd had too many choices. They knew they couldn't return to the places they'd been to before, and this was among the best for information gathering.

Sighing, she read the details on Percy's new wanted poster, along with the others still plastered over the wall. The dim light of the nearby establishment barely illuminated the otherwise dark alley, but it would have to do.

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WANTED BY THE DIVINE ROOT

Name: Percival Avalon, the Spectral Reaper

Status: Noble (Former)

Affiliations: House Avalon (Disowned)

Grade: Yellow / Yellow (Two Cores)

Affinity: Soul / Unknown

Bloodline: Clone (Mutated)

Age: Late Thirties (Estimated, Red-born)

Last Seen: North Pole

Other features: Glowing teal eyes, Invisible equipment, Accompanied by Green crow, Suspected to not require sleep

Crimes:

Caution: Extremely dangerous. Engagement not advised unless accompanied by a minimum of four Blue-cored mages.

Bounty: 75,000,000 CP (Confirmed Kill) / 150,000,000 CP (Captured Alive)

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WANTED BY THE DIVINE ROOT

Name: Unnamed Crow

Status: Mutated Beast

Affiliations: Percival Avalon

Grade: Green / Yellow (Two Cores)

Affinity: Beast / Ice

Age: Unknown

Last Seen: North Pole

Other features: Body partially made of ice, Tamed, Suspected demi-human-level intellect, Capable of conventional spellcasting, Always accompanies its master, Suspected to not require sleep

Crimes:

Caution: Extremely dangerous. Engagement not advised unless accompanied by a minimum of four Blue-cored mages.

Bounty: 75,000,000 CP (Confirmed Kill) / 150,000,000 CP (Captured Alive)

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WANTED BY THE DIVINE ROOT

Name: Nesha Veritas

Status: Noble (Former)

Affiliations: House Veritas (Destroyed) / House Avalon (Suspected)

Grade: Yellow

Age: Mid-Twenties (Orange-born)

Last Seen: Camelot Province

Other features: Spectacled

Crimes:

Notes: Bounty on kill retracted. Only wanted alive.

Bounty: 80,000,000 CP (Captured Alive)

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Nesha clicked her tongue in annoyance, realizing the numbers had gone up again. Even her own – albeit not as much as the others'.

'You two are dragging me down with you…'

She hadn't been seen with Percy and Micky since before the Thirsty Valley, yet the Root had kept increasing her bounty all the same – doing so whenever her friends committed another crime. Worse still, their pursuers seemed to have finally realized that they wouldn't be catching Percy or Micky anytime soon, so they'd clearly decided that their best hope at learning the recipe would be to capture her alive.

Nobody knew that she could hold her own in a fight, but they did know that she wasn't travelling with the others at the moment, so she was viewed as an easy target by the bounty hunters. This had forced her to be even more cautious than she otherwise would have been.

'Well, excuse me for not handing myself over to the Root,' Percy replied, his voice oozing with sarcasm.

Shaking her head, Nesha walked away calmly – but quickly. With her shorter hair, the lack of eyeglasses, and her higher grade, people would be hard-pressed to connect her to the girl in the picture. That said, the last thing she needed was to be seen reading her own wanted poster.

Tonight had been another waste of time.

Thanks to Percy's Insomnia trait, she didn't need to sleep – for now at least, though she wasn't looking forward to bidding the clone farewell. The extra hours had served her well thus far, allowing her to spend her days practicing runecrafting with him, and her nights investigating the destruction of her House.

Sadly, the latter task wasn't going as well as the former.

The only thing she'd managed to gather so far, was that the leader of House Asclepius – Machaon – had acted somewhat suspiciously in the years leading to the disaster. The old White core had developed a sudden interest in alchemy, seemingly overnight, spending a brief tenure in the Guild. It hadn't lasted long – he'd only stayed there for a few months, learning the basics of the art and hunting a few Blue wasps atop the fifth level of the Spire at his leisure, before returning home.

People hadn't thought much of it. Older nobles – especially the ones hailing from the Great Houses who didn't really have any enemies or rivals to worry about – often picked up new hobbies to break the monotony that came with their extremely long lives. It wasn't every day that somebody at the very top of the ladder did that, of course, but similar things had happened in the past.

Nesha hadn't been as quick to dismiss this seemingly unimportant detail, however.

On one hand, she knew that nobody would have dared to mess with a family associated with the Great House without Machaon's explicit approval. On the other, she found the timing too odd to have been a coincidence. Unfortunately, she lacked the connections to learn more.

Her enemy was the very person in charge of Remior's entire information network, after all. The whole point of destroying her House had probably been to keep some incriminating truth buried, and this had all happened several years ago.

But she wasn't one to give up this easily.

If she didn't have the means to pry any deeper, she just had to expand her influence. If that wasn't enough, then she'd grow strong enough to knock on that bastard's door one day and interrogate him

herself. Percy had given her all the tools that she needed to break past her limits. Compared to his ambitious goals of becoming a god, what did a lowly White amount to?

'Maybe I should ask my handsome boyfriend to take care of this for me,' she joked.

'Five minutes ago, you were complaining that we got your bounty raised. Now you're asking me to assassinate the leader of House Asclepius,' Percy scoffed.

She shrugged.

'By the time you're strong enough to do that, people will have forgotten about me anyway…'

It was still dark out when they reached the 108th district where their inn was located. The quality there was piss-poor – literally, in fact – she'd spotted the same drunkard emptying his bladder in the corridor multiple times this month alone, and he wasn't even the only one. At least, her room was liveable. It sure helped that she didn't need to use the bed.

Kicking the door shut behind her, she tussled the sheets a little to give any potential snoopers the impression that she'd spent the morning sleeping. Next, she grabbed a half-stale loaf of bread from her nightstand, munching on it as she undressed. A quick shower and a more comfortable change of clothes later, she sat on her prized chair – the cleanest one she'd found in the room. Not that she'd eat off it, but it was the only one that lacked the questionable stains the others had.

They were about to begin their runecrafting practice – they'd been working even harder lately, since they knew Percy's main body would be needing the injection of knowledge pretty soon – when she spoke.

'I'm gonna miss you when you're gone.'

'You know you're free to visit, right?' he asked with a chuckle.

'Got an address by any chance?'

‘What do you take me for? An amateur? Sail to the northern seas and look for the tree-shaped cloud, then follow the waves to the fifty-third uninhabited island to your right. We’ll be there for another hour or so.’

She laughed, shaking her head.

‘Seriously though, I’ll miss you too,’ Percy continued with a sigh. ‘I suppose we’ll have to stick with the long distance for a while.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s my fault – I should have stayed with you and Micky… It sounds like you two could have used the hel–’

‘Don’t,’ he cut her off. ‘We both have our own things to focus on. Besides, you’re helping us plenty as it is. I wouldn’t have wanted to see you getting chased by Blues all over Remior anyway.’

Clenching her fists, she nodded, a silent understanding settling between them. The best way for her to help Percy and Micky was to assist the clone with his current task. His main body would have to replicate their success on his own later, but it would hopefully be easier the second time around. Especially if they managed to register the spell upgrade before the clone left.

Gathering mana from both of her cores, she allowed them to blend between her hands, merging into something new. Nesha hadn’t found time to work on the Dance – drawing so much ambient mana inside the inn wasn’t very practical anyway. However, she had made a lot of progress with affinity fusion.

Motes of black clung to the earth mana, the brown substance turning darker and folding rapidly onto itself, before eventually settling into something denser. As soon as the mana calmed down, Nesha willed it to manifest into a construct, a pitch-black orb seemingly cast out of obsidian forming between her hands.

She didn’t stop there. Preparing more of the substance, she added to the sphere, slowly moulding it into something larger and shaped differently. An hour later, a glossy statue stood in the middle of her room, as tall as she was. It was humanoid, though its features weren’t very defined. According to Percy, it somewhat resembled the golems he had faced in the Vault’s Yellow combat challenges, though its purpose was very different.

This was the object they'd be carving their enchantments onto.

Chapter 430 – Dimensional onyx

Percy marvelled at the human-shaped construct for a second, once again reminded of how handy his girlfriend's fused mana was.

The glossy stone – which they'd dubbed dimensional onyx – greatly resembled the material their spatial amulets were made of, though there were a few key differences. Nesha's creation lacked the bright, star-like specks scattered across the surface of the amulets. More importantly, this wasn't a naturally occurring mineral but a material fashioned out of a mortal's mana, meaning it wouldn't last indefinitely by itself.

Even so, it was remarkably practical.

It was easier to produce than Percy's crystallized mana – at least before he'd started cheating with his Spiritforged Effigy. It also survived much longer – a couple of months even without preservation runes. Finally, it drastically boosted the power of Nesha's enchantments.

Still, its temporary nature meant that they couldn't use it to craft true spatial amulets. Not unless they were fine with the artifacts collapsing one day and dumping their contents in some random location – or worse, destroying them outright. Even if Nesha equipped them with self-repair enchantments – which she had already learned how to draw – they wouldn't function properly with anyone else's mana. Sadly, Percy and Nesha understood how hard-pressed they would be to find a second person with her unique combination of affinities, even among the Moirai – let alone somebody capable of fusing them in the same way.

If they wanted to craft more permanent spatial amulets, they'd need to acquire dimensional marble – the very material that had inspired the name of Nesha's fused mana. The problem was that the resource was heavily monopolized by House Etna, and they were currently wanted fugitives.

Other controlled resources – like elixirs – weren't as difficult for them to obtain. Elixirs were thousands of times cheaper per unit, and they exchanged hands in massive quantities across Remior. After all, a huge percentage of the population needed to consume them on a daily basis. Compared to that, there were very few spatial amulets around, and they were reserved for the elites at the top of the noble families. As for their raw materials, very few outside the Great House even had a use for them.

‘Thank Phoebe we don’t have a shortage of storage space anymore…’ Percy thought.

Nesha had originally learned runecrafting with the hopes of crafting more of the useful artifacts for the group, but they’d luckily outgrown that need. Even better, she had found several other uses for both the esoteric art and her fused mana.

Specifically, the material was perfect for her traps.

She couldn’t store them inside the amulets because their enchantments were fundamentally the same – intentionally unstable pocket runes meant for killing or maiming rather than storing or preserving. Still, Nesha could pack a lot more power into the dimensional onyx than she could on regular stone.

By adding self-repair enchantments and concealment runes into the mix, she could maintain the traps and unleash them onto her unsuspecting victims a lot more easily. The only reason she hadn’t filled her room with traps was because she’d rather not have to explain herself to the innkeeper should he decide to stick his nose into her business one day.

Regardless, Nesha’s affinity fusion wasn’t the point of their current project – just the convenient material that they’d been using for a while.

In fact, Percy and Nesha had gone out of their way to ensure that all the enchantments involved could function irrespective of one’s affinity. They were much more interested in the underlying theory than any individual application, and Percy needed all the new skills and knowledge they acquired to be transferable to his main body – who possessed an entirely different set of mana types.

‘I’ll go first,’ Nesha said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

They typically took turns drawing the runes, the short breaks helping them rest and consolidate their gains.

Nodding internally, Percy watched his girlfriend fuse some mana around her finger before engraving an intricate enchantment onto the statue. It contained control, growth and memory runes – the building blocks of Percy’s own controlled self-repair enchantments – but that wasn’t everything.

There was a fourth type – the adaptation runes.

Adaptive self-repair enchantments differed in that they could accept foreign mana types. This was meant to somewhat mitigate the issues Percy and Nesha were facing, though it didn't solve them completely.

Enchantments like this would behave in all sorts of unpredictable ways when infused with the "wrong" mana type. The exact results would depend on how the new affinity interacted with the runes or with the original mana types that were supposed to be fed into the enchantments.

For example, injecting ice mana into an adaptive heating enchantment designed to be fuelled by fire mana would either weaken its effect severely, or even reverse it entirely in some cases, causing the runes to sap heat instead of emitting it. These interactions weren't universal, however, and had to be tested on a case-by-case basis.

Adaptive self-repair enchantments fed with the wrong mana would usually still do what they were supposed to, though they would introduce flaws during the regeneration. If done repeatedly, the constructs in question risked falling apart. In other words, Nesha would still find it difficult to craft spatial amulets for others. Repaired with other affinities, the devices might last a little longer than they would if left alone, but they would still crumble in the end.

The same was true for Percy's scythes.

Given how he fought, his weapons tended to shatter and regenerate hundreds of times during the span of a battle. There was no way they would survive something like that if he fed them with the wrong mana. Even worse, others wouldn't be able to use his constructs either, and not just because of this incompatibility. Without access to Percy's soul affinity or the willpower embedded in the weapons, they'd also be missing out on the scythes' autonomy.

That didn't mean the adaptation runes were useless, however – had that been the case, Percy wouldn't have bought the books on them.

Repairing a construct with a different affinity often infused it with unique properties. There was typically a sweet spot where an object could be altered in a beneficial way without its structural integrity being compromised.

Thankfully, it was always possible to reset the constructs to their flawless state by simply repairing them with the correct affinity. If Percy was careful, he hoped he could channel Micky's soul-freezing ice into his scythes at key moments to increase the lethality of his attacks, before flooding them with phantom mana to restore them to their original form. He had no idea what the exotic resource might do to his armour, but he was interested in exploring that too.

Outside of that, he also hoped his clones would be able to maintain the scythes longer like this. Normally, their finite stash of mana wasn't enough to get them far, but the adaptive enchantments would let them borrow mana from their hosts. Of course, the clones would still have to use the weapons sparingly. Not to mention that the scythes would have a much lower impact whenever Percy possessed Greens or Blues.

That said, having more options was never a bad thing.

As soon as Nesha was done adding the fourth rune into the enchantment, she paused for a moment to examine it. Only once she confirmed that it worked as intended did she continue. The first controlled self-repair enchantment was always the most crucial, because it would allow them to undo any subsequent mistakes – at least within its range of influence.

However, their project was a lot more ambitious than this.

What they'd been trying to master over the past year wasn't any individual rune or enchantment – no matter how complex or useful it might be. Sure, they'd done that too – they'd learned the Vault's written language and read all the books back-to-back multiple times. They'd grown proficient with all the runes they had access to and even learned to combine them in various interesting ways. They'd even developed a large pseudo-enchantment involving eighteen different runes – the one that Nesha was currently drawing on the statue. The intricate self-repair enchantment she'd already carved was nothing more than a small part of a greater whole.

But there was something else that had consumed most of their time.

Something much more difficult, and downright fundamental to the art of magiscript. It had to do with the way an enchantment could be drawn repeatedly and linked unto itself to amplify its effects and expand its scope. In fact, after having studied this topic deeply, Percy was confident that this was the very requirement that differentiated those capable of undertaking the Green level of the Vault's magiscript challenge from those who weren't:

Unit cell theory.