Wanderer 431

Chapter 431 – Unit cell theory

Nesha continued carving symbols into the construct's shoulder, the pseudo-enchantment gradually taking shape.

Each rune had a circular design, but the final pattern looked anything but round – thanks to the intricate ways she'd connected them. Some runes were nested inside others, forming concentric circles. Others had been fused side by side. A few even overlapped partially, with Nesha cleverly exploiting shared features to create a more compact arrangement.

By the time she finished, the pseudo-enchantment resembled a clover – roughly the size of her palm. They'd made sure it could just barely wrap around the shaft of Percy's scythes. It contained five distinct enchantments, each broken down further into multiple runes.

The first was the self-repair enchantment she'd started with, incorporating control, adaptation, memory, and growth runes.

The second was another big one – the structural reinforcement enchantment that they had studied from the most recent batch of books. It included two runes Percy had already been familiar with – the hardness and force absorptions runes that he'd been drawing on his armour for years – alongside the new integrity runes meant to unify and enhance their effects. Like the self-repairs, they'd also added control and adaptation runes to ensure it could accept foreign mana and be toggled on or off independently.

In fact, they'd done the same with the remaining three enchantments – which would have otherwise only consisted of a single rune each: preservation, concealment and lightness runes – classic staples of many magical items.

Percy and Nesha were proud of the monstrous pseudo-enchantment they'd spent months developing, knowing it would serve them well in the future. Percy intended to incorporate it directly into his armour, and even Nesha was considering designing something similar for her own use after he was gone.

Everything they'd included so far was universally applicable, so it could easily form the core of all their enchanted objects in the future. That said, they both understood they'd have to add more specialized components for certain applications.

For example, Percy would need to include sharpness runes for his scythes – naturally paired with their own adaptation and control runes. When it came to his cauldron, things got a lot more complicated, since he'd have to add heat, pressure and rotation runes as well as several more controls. He wasn't very thrilled about having to accomplish all of that by himself though…

'I'll worry about that later. At least, the new trait will help.'

'You know,' Nesha said as soon as she was done, wiping sweat off her brow. 'I still can't believe your main body got himself a runecrafting trait after we spent a year practicing without it…'

'Tell me about it…' Percy concurred. 'I'd wanna slap him too, if he wasn't me.'

Well… it could have been worse. Had Percy absorbed the Symbolon right after parting ways with Nesha, he would have still lacked a way to get the trait to her, and they would have spent the whole year frustrated about it.

Besides, he wasn't sure he would have been willing to trade Insomnia for Scribing. While he had yet to see how potent his new trait was, the previous one had also helped them plenty. Either way, they knew they hadn't wasted their time. Nesha would have needed to learn everything without the trait anyway, and the extra challenge had only pushed them to improve further.

Taking over Nesha's body, Percy stretched their fingers before replicating his girlfriend's actions. He began drawing a copy of the pseudo-enchantment next to the original. The second clover-shaped formation was mirrored, slightly rotated and shifted by a few centimetres. It was meant to be fused to the first one in several places and this was the optimal layout they'd discovered so far. It would allow them to pack the clovers as tightly as possible – hopefully fitting hundreds of them across the construct when all was said and done.

The clover was their unit cell – the building block of a much larger enchantment.

Some of the most sophisticated enchantments in existence – such as the one engraved on the gargantuan cube that contained the artificial world – were composed of trillions upon trillions of runes, if not more. No single person could hope to draw or even comprehend all those enchantments at once. Not even someone as powerful and talented as Metatron – the very titan who had invented magiscript.

The only way to handle something of that scale was to break it down into smaller, more easily digestible components.

Each unit cell could be as complex as the one engraving it could handle. Somebody like Metatron could probably fit thousands or even tens of thousands of runes into a single unit cell. In fact, that was exactly what the titan had done when he created Percy's storage seal.

Percy didn't know if that had been the titan's limit, but he did know one thing – Metatron hadn't used actual magiscript while crafting the artifact. The whole seal – advanced as it was – was nothing more than a single unit cell. Percy hadn't been able to tell at the time, but he had learned a lot more about the topic after reading the books.

Another thing he'd come to realize was that Metatron had designed the seal in such a way that it could easily be upgraded in the future, by simply linking it with an identical copy. Currently, its internal space was limited to a single cube ten metres across, and it could only be split in half up to three times – for a total of eight smaller seals as large as crates.

Fusing it with a second seal would double the cube's dimensions, or equivalently, allow it to be divided into up to sixteen of the smallest ones. Adding another two seals would double it further and so on.

'The bastard wants me to keep begging for more…'

Percy had to suppress a bitter chuckle. Back when he first obtained his seal, he'd thought he'd never run out of storage space again. The problem was that he'd been forced to split it into its smallest denominations to equip all of his clones, which was quite inefficient with regards to its volume.

Perhaps, the ancient god had expected Percy's clone capacity to increase. With a single move, the old fox had not only given Percy a reason to keep earning credits, but also given himself a way to monitor Percy's limits.

Shaking his head, Percy concentrated on the task at hand. His dealings with the titan weren't a priority right now.

In any case, linking multiple unit cells into a grid was a way for Percy to cheat his way to a much larger pseudo-enchantment. The end result would be a lot more potent than if he simply included the same number of clovers separated from one another, as joining them together would not only amplify their effects but also allow them to permeate each other more seamlessly.

If Percy hadn't horribly misunderstood the underlying theory, this would improve his armour in several ways.

The blind spots in his concealment runes should finally disappear, allowing him to completely hide his constructs from anyone below Blue. This would also eliminate the weak spots previously found in the gaps between the hardness and absorption runes, offering better protection. Finally, it should speed up the regeneration provided by the self-repair enchantments.

Obviously, there were still limits he couldn't overcome.

Doubling the number of runes or joining them better wouldn't double their potency. Runes were like whispers in the universe's ears, asking it to lax its rules slightly in certain ways. Having twice as many mouths whispering at the same time might affect the world's willingness to comply, but there were diminishing returns.

Still, this was good.

Between the new runes and enchantments, how much better Percy and Nesha had gotten at drawing them, and their ability to combine them, he was feeling confident he could have meaningfully upgraded his armour even without taking the silk into account.

Now, they just had to register that pesky spell upgrade that had eluded them for weeks.

A few minutes later, he was done, a second clover tightly joined with the first. Passing the reins to Nesha, he watched her draw the third one, before taking over for the fourth. Like that, they took turns adding more unit cells to the grid, slowly covering the statue's body in runes.

Every now and then, one of them made a mistake, forcing them to rely on the previously drawn self-repairs to erase the new symbols. They didn't let that get to them, however, being used to the process by now.

As soon as the last rays of sunlight seeping through the gaps in the curtains disappeared, they took a longer break for dinner. Nesha had decided to pause her information-gathering for the rest of the week, so they dove back to the project almost immediately after.

By the following night, they had engraved the construct's right arm and much of its chest with clovers.

Two days later, the grid had expanded to the rest of its torso, head and second arm.

It wasn't until the fifth afternoon that Percy managed to draw the final rune on the statue's left foot, plugging the last hole in the network. They didn't even get a chance to examine the enchantment to make sure the unit cell was functional when Percy's Status spoke.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Intricate Runic Grid – Refined -> Superior Runic Grid – Refined!]

Seeing the notification, his borrowed lips curled up.

'Did you also…?' he asked.

'Mhmm,' Nesha replied with a nod.

This was a spell they'd registered several months ago, and one that they had upgraded together every step of the way. They could both use it separately, of course – otherwise their Status might have not recognized their achievement – though each of them would need a lot more time to draw all the clovers by themselves.

The original spell – Fine Runic Grid – had been a Crude one. At the time, the unit cell had only contained a single enchantment involving a measly five runes – a huge victory at the time, but not that big a deal in

hindsight. In addition to their smaller scope, the first iteration of the enchantments had been even bulkier than today's clovers – Percy and Nesha had only been capable of fitting a fraction of them onto the same surface. Even worse, the resulting pattern had been flawed – riddled with gaps and mismatched connections.

Yet, Phoebe's Decree had still surprised them by registering their prototype as a proper spell.

Percy hadn't expected that, because his Status had never bothered to acknowledge his enchantments on their own before. Granted, many of his spells included runes, but the enchantments had always been part of something bigger – never the focal point of the spell. Evidently, that had only been a testament to Percy's previous lack of skill. Even in its imperfect state, the Fine Runic Grid had clearly packed enough punch to be recognized as a Crude spell, irrespective of what it had been drawn on.

After doubling the number of enchantments and runes, shrinking the unit cell further, and improving the quality of the grid, he and Nesha had elevated the spell to Refined. Though they hadn't stopped at that, knowing that there had still been room for improvement.

And today's notification had just proven them right.

'I suppose this is goodbye then…' Nesha said once they caught their breath.

'I suppose it is.' Percy sighed. 'Are you sure you'll be okay by yourself?'

'I've been by myself for months you know… Even if somebody had recognized me, there's only so much you could've done to help.'

She wasn't wrong. Percy could have informed his main body, though it wasn't like he and Micky could have broken into the city to rescue her. Hell, they'd been driven out of the damn continent. Not to mention returning to such a crowded location – watched by the Root and governed by over a hundred Blues.

Still, knowing how she was doing had given him peace of mind.

He wouldn't have that, moving forward.

Percy was also worried about Elaine, of course – especially after losing contact with her – but this was different. His cousin was a Blue and had their family to watch over her. Sure, House Avalon was in hot water too, but it was something.

Nesha had nobody but him.

'Be careful,' he said, steeling his resolve.

Only once she nodded did he start retracting his wisp from her injuries.

Leaving a host had never been as bittersweet. Over the past year, there had been several times when he'd wished he'd had a physical body to embrace her. Even so, he'd thoroughly enjoyed being by her side. Even ignoring their magical achievements, he was more than happy to bring these memories back to his main body.

Right as the cord was about to yank him away, Percy paused for a moment to examine the contents of his seal. Once he confirmed for the hundredth time that all the secondary ingredients the original had commissioned were there – including those sweet gravity plants that he'd been waiting for – he finally left his girlfriend's body behind.

His thoughts blended with another's the following instant.

Memories of close battles, numerous spell upgrades, and countless adventures on distant worlds flashed through his mind. They almost buried his time in Twilight City beneath a mountain of other experiences.

But he didn't let them.

Percy clung to their shared laughs and the feeling of his girlfriend's lips parting into a smile, his heart already thrumming with longing. Opening his eyes, he found himself on Micky's back – exactly where

he'd been the previous second – but also not. The clone's return had caused him to mess up the strand of silk he'd been working with, yet he didn't much care. He could spin more later.

Feeling the cool breeze licking his face, he couldn't help but compare it to the acrid stench of piss and excrement seeping into Nesha's room, or the stale city air that they'd been breathing for months. Strictly speaking, this was an upgrade – yet Percy couldn't help but focus on what was missing. Clenching his fists, he made a silent promise to himself…

'I'll reach out as soon as I can.'

Chapter 432 – Shady host

The clone had been searching for a new body for months. Percy had no idea whether his three counterparts had gotten any luckier, but he certainly hadn't found what he'd been looking for. He'd actually skipped half a dozen lesser springs during this trip, each missed opportunity like a stab in his severed little soul.

But it couldn't be helped.

Lesser springs were good, yet Percy understood he couldn't afford to get distracted every time he encountered one. Sure, there was always a chance – albeit a small one – that he'd find a new Decree or alchemic principle, but he knew he would be very unlikely to extend his lifespan or accelerate his advancements by relying on them alone. After all, if these worlds had what he was searching for, they wouldn't have been classified as lesser springs in the first place, would they?

That was why he'd decided to steel himself and reserve his time for only the most promising places in the universe. That wasn't to say he wouldn't visit more lesser springs in the future, but they had to truly stand out for him to bother – much like Gallimus did.

Or at least, that had been his goal at the start of his mission.

More than once, Percy had considered giving up and settling for the next lesser spring he saw. Perhaps, his criteria had been unreasonable to begin with. What if he never found a greater spring? Would he waste his whole life searching for a needle in a haystack? Maybe his best shot was to gather minor insights from lots of lesser springs instead, slowly building his own ladder to divinity, one plank at a time.

‘Get a grip, Percy! It’s only been a few months!’ he kept telling himself.

He’d always known it would be difficult to find one of the peak worlds. Besides, he hadn’t really wasted that much time yet. He could reconsider in a decade – or ten – if he kept finding nothing. On top of that, his main body had asked the clones to stay away for at least six months – unless of course they found something genuinely valuable. Percy was currently working on consolidating his gains and upgrading his armour, so he didn’t want to be interrupted too frequently. Thus, the clone had been forced to stick to his monotonous journey, endlessly scanning the sea of souls while counting the days to his return.

It was one day – or night… he couldn’t really tell – like any other, when it finally happened.

A giant world, several times larger than Remior appeared in the distance. Granted, Percy couldn’t observe the planet itself, but he could see the dense swarm of souls that stretched as far as his senses could reach. After a rough count, he estimated this world was home to over a dozen times Remior’s population. And that wasn’t everything – their average grade was much higher too. Greens and Blues were practically everywhere, and he guessed they had over a hundred thousand Violets, tens of thousands of Whites and thousands of demigods!

Most notably, they also seemed to have hundreds of gods! Their joint radiance made it difficult for Percy to even glance at the place, let alone examine his potential hosts carefully.

‘I’ll manage,’ he thought, his soul lighting up with greed.

This place was obviously teeming with danger – but also brimming with opportunity.

It had to be a greater spring, right?

Even if it somehow wasn’t one, it would still be the most developed lesser spring Percy had ever seen. Either way, he knew his main body wouldn’t blame him for taking his chances.

Unfortunately, he had yet to perfect his new skill. Percy wasn’t confident in fully possessing an unwilling host, though he estimated he would still have a few decent options even in that situation. Another issue

was that he hadn't kept the connection to his main body open, which meant that he was limited to his own stash. Healing a Blue wouldn't be easy with so little mana.

Well, it couldn't be helped. The original had been way too busy to keep four cords open for months on end. Perhaps, Percy would be better served going for a Green host, though he didn't want to be too restricted. On Remior, Greens did hold some status. But here? They were probably worthless – no more than commoners.

'Let's go for a Blue. I'd rather not find myself trapped in a tiny village. I'll just have to pick the one with the lightest injuries and hope I can fix them…'

Having made his mind up, Percy searched for a dying soul suited to his needs. After dismissing several choices, his gaze landed on one he found promising.

'Not too old, nor too young… Probably a Yellow-born who's lived for a couple hundred years…'

That didn't sound right.

If this was a greater spring, shouldn't a Yellow-born have advanced to Violet by that age?

'Have I made a mistake?' he couldn't help but wonder.

It was possible.

Though it was also possible that these people didn't have a way to accelerate their advancements, but instead a method to directly extend their lifespans. Something like that could also allow a Yellow-born to ascend past White, though Percy would be slightly disappointed if this was the case.

Ideally, he wanted a way to reach Green sooner. It would not only extend his lifespan, but also raise his fighting strength – something that he desperately needed, given how many enemies were waiting for him back on Remior.

‘Then again, this might be a good thing…’

For a while now, he’d been operating under the assumption that many of the greater springs had achieved their elevated status thanks to the same cyan powder that he’d incorporated into his Aurora Dew. It would make sense, considering how easy the resource was to produce. The problem was that the knowledge was now useless to him, so he couldn’t help but hope for something different.

‘Well… either way, there’s no point in guessing. I’ll have my answer soon enough.’

Not wasting any more time, Percy dove straight toward the soul he’d singled out. Other than looking for somebody more lightly injured, Percy had picked a Blue located as far away from the gods as possible, just in case. It hadn’t been easy, because the deities seemed to be scattered around the planet, but he had done his best.

Entering his host’s body, Percy was greeted with a wave of suspicion. Not that strange, but also not a great sign of things to come.

‘Who are you?’ a voice cold like a serpent’s hiss rang through Percy’s soul.

‘Unless you have a way to heal yourself, I’m your only shot at survival,’ Percy replied matter-of-factly.

His host didn’t respond immediately, seemingly taking a few seconds to evaluate their options.

‘Name your terms,’ the Blue eventually said, somewhat guardedly.

‘I know this is a greater spring. And I know what that means,’ Percy said, cutting to the chase. ‘I’ll heal you if you give me what I want.’

Had his host been a child like Enki or Duwa, Percy might have offered to help them for free. That said, he had no intention of giving his services away to everyone he met. This was Percy’s first greater spring since the Moirais’ world – which he’d only visited by accident decades ago – so he wasn’t going to walk away empty-handed. Besides, this person was a centuries-old Blue – they could afford to pay up.

Some hesitation bubbled up within his host's soul, though it didn't last long.

'Fine… I'll pass you my people's core cleansing technique.'

Percy thought he heard wrong.

He'd already surmised that he was dealing with a life-extension method – not a means of advancement. The Blue had also agreed a little too easily considering their initial reaction.

'Are they trying to screw me over?' Percy wondered, though he kept those thoughts to himself.

Outwards, he simply gave his host a mental nod before beginning to stitch their injuries. Either way, Percy knew he had all the leverage.

Manipulating the silver tendrils extending out of the Blue's wounds, Percy weaved them into preservation runes like he usually did. Only, this time, he added a little extra – he included a control rune in each enchantment, giving him the ability to freely turn their effects off later, in case his host tried anything funny.

Even without doing this, Percy could still cause a lot of damage on the way out, but that would destroy the preservation runes, and he didn't think he'd have enough mana to replace them.

This way, he would be able to freely flaunt his control at a moment's notice, forcing the Blue to back down. Temporarily deactivating the preservation runes wouldn't worsen his host's injuries, but it would accelerate the soul's degradation, possibly beyond its ability to recover.

'Hopefully, it won't come to that.'

As long as the Blue upheld their end of the bargain, all would be good. Still, Percy couldn't shake the gut feeling that his new host couldn't be trusted, and he'd rather not turn his back to the old monster.

He'd only managed to stitch about half of the man's – Percy thought his host was male – injuries when his mana ran dry. Perhaps, he could have done more if he hadn't wasted it on control runes, but he was confident he'd done enough for the Blue to survive – as long as he behaved.

Tapping into his host's senses, Percy felt their eyes opening, a grotesque scene greeting him…

Chapter 433 – Kassorith

Percy found himself surrounded by mutilated corpses – so thoroughly disfigured that even he, hardened by experience as he was, struggled to keep his gaze on them.

They seemed to belong to the same species as his host – mostly humanoid from the waist up, with their lower halves replaced by long, serpentine tails that stretched out for a couple of metres. White scales coated their bodies, two curved fangs jutting down from their upper lips. Their forked tongues hung limp, resting atop ground still wet with blood. Their crimson eyes, slit-pupiled and glassy, still held a fading spark of horror. The males were burlier than the females, their necks and the side of their heads flaring outward in cobra-like hoods.

'What the hell happened here?!' Percy asked, his opinion of his host having sunk to a new low.

'I got ambushed,' the Blue replied flatly. 'I fought to escape. I almost made it, but not quite.'

The man pushed himself upright and immediately slithered away, seemingly unwilling to let Percy examine the carnage a moment longer than necessary.

'Yeah… not buying it…' Percy thought to himself.

There were children among the bodies. Did that bastard expect Percy to believe the kids had attacked him too?

Clearly, only a couple of the man's opponents had been powerful enough to hold their own, rapidly dimming fragments of their Blue cores still visible via Mana Sense. The rest had to be Green or lower, the organs having crumbled already.

All of them had died the same way: impaled by conjured steel swords – constructs made of Blue mana. Percy's host was the only one sporting wounds of a different kind – a few burn marks, scattered and severe, some of them serious enough to have led to the man's death.

There was no question – he was the aggressor here, not the victim.

As they moved away from the centre of the massacre, Percy got a better look at the area. It appeared to be a town – or used to be, at any rate – some intact buildings still standing in the distance. Most of them had been reduced to rubble, however, smoking puddles of molten rock and hill-sized mounds of fine dust mixing in with the gravel. The air reeked of burnt flesh and spilled blood, the silence so complete it pressed down on the senses.

A ghost town. A graveyard.

Another thing Percy noticed was that his host had an extra sense – one that he'd experienced before, but only in beasts. Never in sapients. Every time the man's forked tongue flickered, Percy could feel the temperature of their surroundings in sharp, granular detail. Some parts of the battlefield still burned hot enough to incinerate flesh on contact. But the bodies?

Cold as ice. All of them.

For some reason – one that Percy didn't much care for – this sack of shit had decided to attack an entire town by himself, butchering every last inhabitant. The strongest among them had clearly put up a fight, just barely managing to drag their enemy down with their last breaths.

'And the bastard still has the gall to lie to me.'

The realization left a sour pit in his stomach. He couldn't help but question whether saving this man's life had been a mistake. Of course, it wasn't too late to change that. It would only take Percy a single thought to unravel all the stitches, and to tear the Blue's soul apart for good measure. He was really tempted to do just that – gains be damned.

But he hesitated.

Killing his host wouldn't bring his victims back to life. It would only rob Percy of the opportunities he'd travelled so far for. Sighing inwardly, he decided to wait. He wasn't in a hurry – he could end the Blue whenever he wanted. At the very least, he had no intention of letting him harm another innocent under his watch. But that didn't mean he couldn't wring what he wanted out of the old monster.

'As for what comes later… we'll see…'

Having made his mind up, Percy was about to demand the cleansing technique he'd been promised, when the Blue suddenly froze in his tracks. Without a word, he removed his clothes – a loose, sleeveless tunic hanging open over his chest – before triggering some change within.

Percy felt their flesh squirm and their innards churn as a profound sense of wrongness overtook their shared body. Their scales instantly dried and withered, the man's jaw opening wide enough to swallow two watermelons side by side as Percy's perspective shifted.

Their surroundings faded to black, a wave of nausea rattling their brain. A moment later, Percy found himself wedged tightly inside a narrow tunnel. The air was warm and humid, stinking of rotten flesh. His host wriggled, pressing against the walls as he pushed forward. Their body expanded and grew stronger with each movement, the tunnel stretching and losing its integrity.

A flash of white appeared ahead.

The Blue reached for it with a now-tiny hand, grabbing at the end of the tunnel to pull himself outside. Blinded by the light, Percy couldn't help but squint for a moment, the colours around them eventually settling into those of the ruined town.

Percy looked down.

Their body had been reduced to that of a young child. Their scales were now fresh and unblemished, their previous injuries gone like a bad dream. The tunnel they'd just crawled through had been the Blue's own throat, the hollowed husk of their old body carelessly lying beneath them like a worn coat. Scooping the blue tunic up, Percy's host draped it over his new shoulders, the cloth now a few sizes too large. The man didn't seem to mind, however, having clearly experienced this many times before.

‘What a bizarre ability…’ Percy thought.

It was undeniably useful, but it raised a few questions. Had he misjudged the Blue? Maybe those “children” had been adults after all, killed while recovering from their injuries. Perhaps, the man hadn’t lied about the ambush.

‘No. There weren’t any discarded bodies near them. Besides, our grade hasn’t dropped, so there’s no reason theirs would have…’

Percy was almost certain those kids had been actual children.

Besides reevaluating his host’s morality, Percy couldn’t help but wonder whether this ability could be used to reverse a person’s age – allowing mortals to live longer, thus reaching a higher grade. Hoping for some answers, Percy pulled up his Status, though he made sure to keep the information to himself, still not ready to trust his host.

___

Kassorith (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:

Domain:

Bloodline:

Spectral traits:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

There was a lot to unpack.

As Percy had suspected, his host possessed the composite metal affinity. The blood-soaked constructs sticking out of the corpses, along with the three sets of mana channels coursing through Kassorith's body – earth, lightning and a third type Percy had never seen before – left no doubt that the Blue had been the one to slaughter all the townsfolk.

Evidently, Kassorith's Moult was his personal bloodline – not some species-wide trait. His victims wouldn't have shared it unless they'd all been related to him by blood – something Percy considered not only unlikely, but also disturbing in its own right.

'They couldn't have all been at Blue, or he wouldn't have stood a chance,' Percy reminded himself.

Yeah… the kids had probably been kids.

This man was a complete monster.

Other than that, Percy had access to a domain – just the standard version that every Blue got by default – as well as his spectral traits, alchemic principles, and whatever spells he could cast from this body. That said, he'd already exhausted his reserves of phantom mana, so he wouldn't be able to do much. If Kassorith's bloodline was the result of a Decree – and it probably was – it didn't show in Percy's Status. Percy could still activate the ability while possessing his host, but it didn't look like he'd be bringing it back to Remior.

'I hope it wasn't just because of this Moult bloodline that their world turned into a greater spring… What a waste of a trip that would be…'

The good news was that Percy didn't feel like activating the bloodline had extended their lifespan. If it had, the effect wasn't nearly as dramatic as what happened when somebody advanced. This filled him with hope that Kassorith's people had found something else to rely on. Then again, it was possible that the bloodline's effects only accumulated after repeated use.

Oblivious to Percy's thoughts, the man – no. The boy – tore a chunk off his discarded flesh, rolling it into a ball the size of an orange before swallowing it whole with a wet gulp. Percy gagged internally. This was the second time today his host had nearly caused him to throw up. Though he didn't say anything, curiously watching the changes unfold.

Kassorith kept at it, devouring the withered body parts piece by piece, the gnarly chunks dissolving rapidly inside his stomach as the Blue grew taller and stronger with each passing second. By the time he was done, he'd regained most of his missing height – only falling a few centimetres short. Scanning their surroundings, he made his way to the nearest corpse, repeating the process to recover the rest of his mass.

Percy shuddered.

Thankfully, the body had belonged to an adult, since he didn't think he could have stomached the sight of his host cannibalizing a dead child – certainly not while sharing his senses.

'I think I'm done watching you do all these fucked-up things,' Percy said, finally losing his patience. 'I've upheld my end of the bargain. Time for you to pay up.'

A flicker of protest rose in Kassorith's soul – but he stifled it quickly.

'Alright,' the Blue said. 'I suppose it's time for my daily cleansing anyway.'

Chapter 434 – Cascading Cracks

As fed up as Percy was with his host, he couldn't help but feel a sliver of excitement at the prospect of learning a greater spring's cleansing technique. Strictly speaking, he was already using one of those – the modified version of the Whirlpool of Two Streams that the Vault's researchers had somehow stolen from the Moirai. However, it did nothing more than allow someone with two cores to cleanse both at the same time – saving a few valuable minutes per day. Percy had no idea what Kassorith's technique did, yet he didn't doubt it would be valuable.

The Blue reached for an emblem pinned to the upper-left side of his tunic – Percy hadn't even noticed it before. It depicted the image of a coiled snake, a single fang jutting down from the right side of its mouth. The object was made of a dark mineral, countless dots glittering like stars along the edges.

'Dimensional marble?' Percy guessed, recognizing the material.

Sure enough, the moment his host touched the pin, a second object popped into existence inside his free hand. The spatial pin was clearly easier to use than the amulets they had on Remior – though it wasn't quite on par with the spatial seal Metatron had personally crafted for Percy. He had no idea how the pin's storage capacity compared, but he wouldn't be surprised if it fell somewhere between the two extremes.

'Watch carefully, because I'll only show you once,' Kassorith said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Coiling his long tail a few times, the Blue "sat" in the middle, tossing the object he'd extracted from the pin into his mouth. Percy barely caught a glimpse of the tiny, transparent pill, its volume only about half of an elixir's. This was quite surprising, since the dosage for core-cleansing resources was generally fixed across worlds. After all, the mana cores of sapients typically came in a standard size and could therefore endure about the same amount of beast mana during each session.

Evidently, that didn't apply here.

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Percy carefully observed his host's actions. Kassorith allowed his mana to mix with the dissolving pill inside his stomach, before drawing some of it back to his sternum. So far, he hadn't done anything out of the norm.

It wasn't until the mana entered his core that the Blue finally did something strange with it. Instead of allowing it to freely spread within the organ, he first compressed it into a tiny sphere in its centre, before letting go. The cleansing mana slammed violently against the core's walls, making Percy fear that the organ would crack open like an egg. That didn't quite happen – at least not yet – but several tiny cracks did form along the crystalline walls, stinging as the beast mana seeped into them.

'What the hell?! Is he trying to kill himself?'

Not that Percy cared about the man's well-being that much, but he'd rather not return to Remior so quickly. Luckily, his host appeared a lot more careful the next time he moved the beast mana to his sternum. He still didn't allow it to freely interact with the organ, but he didn't repeat his reckless approach from before either. Instead, he gathered a much smaller quantity of mana, sending it into the cracks with surgical accuracy. The beast mana gnawed at the walls of the cracks, causing them to widen and deepen, the burning sensation in Kassorith's sternum growing in intensity. The experienced Blue didn't seem to care, however, sending one wave after another into the cracks.

The cleansing session was over fifteen minutes later.

It wasn't that surprising, considering the low dosage. Yet, Percy felt like their core burned as much as it was supposed to – if not slightly more. Examining the organ carefully, he tried to wrap his mind around what his host had done. The first wave of beast mana had been way too forceful, but that seemed to have been on purpose. It had revealed the weaknesses – the impurities – in Kassorith's core.

Those were exactly the spots that a mage needed to get rid of, in order to strengthen their core over time. The following rounds had been gentler, but they had targeted the same spots far more accurately, causing the cracks to gradually expand in a very specific way. Kassorith had purged the weakest sections along the crystalline walls, leaving the rest of the organ intact.

Overall, the damage to the core wasn't any more severe than what a regular cleansing session would have accomplished. Percy guessed the cracks would still heal by tomorrow, reforging the inner layer of the organ stronger than ever. Only, the Blue had achieved the same results while spending half the time and resources.

'This is the Cascading Cracks technique. I hope I don't have to explain why,' Kassorith said.

Percy nodded, pondering over the implications. His host had made it look easy – which wasn't all that surprising, considering the fact that Kassorith had probably been doing this once a day for centuries. However, Percy would have to practice a lot to master it, since the initial burst of pressure was exceedingly dangerous.

Had Kassorith drawn a single additional drop of beast mana to his core, or unleashed the wave even a touch more forcefully, he could have seriously injured himself. Even if he hadn't, he could have easily delayed his subsequent recovery, missing tomorrow's session. On the flipside, if he'd used less power,

he might have failed to reveal all the impurities. In that case, he wouldn't have targeted them later, which would have made the cleansing session less effective than normal.

During the subsequent waves, things hadn't been nearly as dangerous, but concentrating the beast mana in so many spots was also quite a challenge. After all, the cracks were minuscule – nearly imperceptible – and there were dozens of them. Not to mention that controlling mana inside one's core was much harder than doing it externally, and the mana wasn't even solely Kassorith's – since it was mixed with the foreign beast mana contained in the pill.

If Percy failed to control the mana properly, it could easily target the healthy sections of the organ – the ones that didn't need cleansing. The damage would still probably heal by the following day, so it wasn't inherently dangerous, but it would be a waste of the beast mana, eliminating the primary benefit of the technique.

'Still, if I can learn this, I'm going to save so many elixirs down the line,' Percy thought, his borrowed heart skipping a beat.

He and Micky had already accumulated enough resources to last them seventeen years, and that was without taking into account his brewing yield which was bound to increase once he upgraded the cauldron and registered the new principle. The Cascading Cracks technique could theoretically allow him and his familiar to consume half as much Aurora Dew during each session, effectively doubling their stash. After all was said and done, it might last them for nearly forty years!

'Well, that's assuming that the regeneration brought forth by the cyan powder doesn't interfere with it… I'll also have to modify it to work with my current technique, or I'll end up having to spend twice as long for both cores…'

Figuring the specifics out would take a lot of work, but the impact of this technique couldn't be overstated. Percy wasn't just thinking about himself, but Remior as a whole.

Currently, his people only had enough elixirs for a fraction of the population – unless they diluted them of course. That number would drop even lower as soon as the secret of the Aurora Dew spread. This was one of the reasons why Percy hadn't been in a hurry to share the recipe with everyone. If things got handled poorly, a lot of people would suffer – Red-borns and Orange-borns predominantly, but lots of Yellow-borns too.

The Cascading Cracks technique wasn't enough to fix everything by itself, but it was a start. If Percy also taught his alchemic principles to the rest of the Guild, helped everyone upgrade their cauldrons, and looked for more efficient ways of extracting nectar from the wasps alongside his new familiar, they would be that much closer to a complete solution.

Still…

'Do you take me for a fool?' Percy suddenly asked, turning his attention back to his host.

'What do you mean?' Kassorith asked in response, clearly playing dumb.

'It's a useful technique, but you know damn well this isn't what I asked for. This is a greater spring, isn't it? How is your little trick going to accelerate my advancement speed or extend my lifespan?'

'It won't.' The Blue shrugged. 'I'm sorry to break it to you, but the only reason we have so many gods is due to my bloodline. Every time we use it, it adds a few years to our lifespan. We've spread it to all the powerful sects, and our titan's Decree makes it easier for parents to pass their bloodlines down to their descendants. It's a real shame, but there's nothing I can do to help you.'

Kassorith's words sounded sincere, but Percy had dealt with hundreds upon hundreds of hosts by now. He might not have his girlfriend's bloodline, but he still took pride in his ability to sniff out bullshit from a mile away.

'Try again with something more believable,' he snarled. 'I've experienced enough advancements to tell that shedding your skin earlier didn't add a single day to your lifespan, let alone a few years.'

The Blue's poorly concealed smirk froze on his face, his expression turning cold. Percy expected the man to lie again or try to renegotiate the terms of their agreement, but Kassorith turned out to be even more shameless than he'd expected.

Rather than honeyed words or offers of valuable resources, it was a wave of rejection that slammed into Percy's soul, forcefully unlodging him from many of his host's injuries. Remior's pull instantly strengthened, inadvertently helping the Blue along.

Kassorith was trying to get rid of Percy!

Chapter 435 – Thess'kala

'Good luck with that, you bastard!' Percy yelled through their rapidly fading connection.

Willing all the controlled preservation runes to deactivate, he instantly slowed his host's recovery speed to a crawl, but he didn't stop there. Percy's soul squirmed and shifted, over a dozen claws digging back into Kassorith's injuries, carelessly ripping many of the stitches apart as he tried to grab hold of the Blue.

His host intensified the efforts to evict him, of course, but Percy wasn't having it. Countless spider-like limbs and long, flailing hairs sprouted along the surface of his wisp, allowing the claws to dig even deeper, and to forcefully latch onto the Blue's soul.

'I'm not going anywhere until you give me what I want!' Percy said.

Their connection had already weakened dramatically – it was like shouting through a wall – but he knew his host had heard him.

Percy wouldn't have been as forceful if the Blue had been more honest. There was a chance that the means Kassorith's people used to extend their lifespan were genuinely difficult for Percy to obtain, but the Blue could have just said that directly and made his case – instead of trying to stab him in the back. Either way, Kassorith was clearly a piece of shit, so Percy didn't feel an ounce of regret over his actions. If anything, he felt quite pleased with himself for having had the foresight to prepare for this.

'Fine! Just stop trying to kill me!' the Blue hissed, his voice dripping with venom.

The wave of rejection slamming against Percy weakened, though it didn't disappear completely. Part of it was instinctual, and it was pretty clear that his host didn't actually want him to stay.

Regardless, this was workable. Burrowing back into the Blue's injuries, Percy reactivated the enchantments. He'd been careful not to damage too many during the conflict, though the man's survival still hung by a thin thread.

‘I’m warning you now, so you don’t come crying to me later. If you try this one more time, you’re dead,’ Percy said, leaving no room for debate. ‘Tell me how I can extend my lifespan, and don’t even think about lying again.’

The Blue clenched his fists in response to the threats, his soul boiling like a volcano about to erupt. But he swallowed whatever he was about to say, probably knowing he wasn’t in a position to decline.

‘I may have lied about my bloodline, but I genuinely meant it when I said I can’t help you. The leaves we consume to extend our lifespan are limited – there aren’t enough even for all of our Yellow-borns – let alone anyone else. There are long queues to obtain one.’

Percy grimaced. The main advantage of the cyan powder was that anyone with a pure affinity could learn to produce it. This pretty much guaranteed that every lesser spring could evolve into a greater spring, as long as they knew the secret. The last thing he needed was to depend on some obscure resource he couldn’t even acquire on Remior.

‘How often do you need to eat these leaves for them to work?’ Percy asked.

Kassorith’s response filled him with hope.

‘Just once in your lifetime. The effect is permanent.’

‘Once?!’

Percy broke into sardonic laughter. On one hand, he was elated to hear that he only needed to get his hands on a single leaf to bring to his main body. On the other, the information only infuriated him further.

‘And you thought you were better off lying to me and trying to screw me over instead of helping me get one?!’

Kassorith shook his head.

‘It’s not as simple as you make it sound. The tree produces fewer leaves each year than the number of new Yellow-borns. Our leaders are naturally quite peculiar about who gets them.’

Percy nodded inwardly, though he wasn’t deterred in the slightest. All he heard was that there was a chance. He’d overcome much worse odds in the past.

‘This queue… is it just first-come-first-served, or are there other criteria?’

‘Having a good bloodline or a rare affinity moves you closer to the front. Bribing the people in charge works too, but that’s beside the point. I already got mine when I was young – I can’t ask for a second.’

‘Then find me someone who can,’ Percy insisted. ‘I don’t care who it is, or what they want in return – I’ll find a way to make it worth their time. You’d better start treating this seriously, Kassorith, because I’m not leaving your planet without a leaf.’

Percy hadn’t told his host about the Moirai Decree yet, but there was no doubt it was worth more than the life-extension resource. Kassorith’s people had already wasted one of their leaves on him – and he was someone with both a bloodline and a composite affinity. In other words, Percy had already preserved their investment merely by saving the Blue’s life and even increased his value by giving him the seed of a new core.

Kassorith sighed in defeat. ‘I’ll have to ask my master…’

Percy shrugged, not giving a damn who his host had to talk to, as long as he got what he wanted.

Drawing some metal mana out of his core, the Blue manifested a greatsword taller and wider than he was, the oversized construct slamming into the ground with a heavy thud. Kassorith wrapped his tail around the hilt a few times, leaning on the blade with his elbows before willing the weapon to shoot toward the clouds.

Percy tried not to dwell on how disturbingly similar his host’s method of flying was to his own, choosing to focus on more pressing matters.

‘The ambient mana is so thick!’

He hadn’t realized it earlier, but refilling his core here would take half the time it did on Remior. He didn’t know if it was a property of the planet or a specialized Decree cast by one of the local titans, but training and fighting would be incredibly convenient. It was a pity he couldn’t stay – or take the ambient mana back with him.

Another thing that stood out to Percy was the absurdly high altitude of the town they’d just left. The moment they took to the skies, he saw clouds everywhere – above, below and around them. The town itself had been perched atop what at first seemed like a flat, rocky plain. No… An island. Its perfectly circular perimeter was bound by a steep cliff.

‘A mountain? More like a stone pillar…’ Percy thought as the ruins receded behind them.

It wasn’t the only one either. More pillars loomed ahead, faint outlines piercing through the veil of clouds. They all shared the same narrow, cylindrical shape, but varied in height. Some vanished into a dense ceiling of mist above, their peaks way too far to make out. Others were even shorter than the one Percy and his host had left behind. As for their bases… they were too deep to see. Percy couldn’t help but wonder what lay down there – solid land, or a vast body of water?

‘It’s an ocean. Large enough to cover the whole planet,’ Kassorith muttered, having clearly guessed his thoughts. Though he sounded more annoyed than informative. ‘Now, will you please stop gawking at everything? It’s distracting.’

‘How do people below Blue travel from pillar to pillar if they can’t fly?’ Percy asked, undeterred. He was going to get his free tour one way or another. ‘Don’t tell me they have to climb down, sail across, then scale the next one…’

That sounded wildly impractical. From what he could tell, most pillars were tens of kilometres apart and just as tall – if not taller.

Kassorith rolled his eyes. ‘If two pillars are close enough, people build bridges. The major cities and sects have teleportation platforms. Some factions own flying vehicles for the lower grades, or hire Blues for escorts. But for the most part, Greens and below tend to stay put…’

Percy nodded, fascinated by what he was hearing. Teleportation platforms? Flying vehicles? Was this the norm in other greater springs too?

These were things he would have expected from the Vault, though the artificial world wasn't nearly large enough to require them in order to function properly. Evidently, the technology that other peak factions possessed didn't lag as far behind Metatron's as Percy had originally thought.

Kassorith wasn't the only Blue flying in the area. Hundreds of others flitted through the clouds, each using a more ostentatious method than the last. One rode atop a glowing four-winged horse sculpted from pure mana. Another floated inside a sleek carriage powered by a lattice of colourful runes pulsing in unison across its wooden frame. It seemed that here, travel wasn't just about getting from place to place – it was a performance.A symbol of status.

'You never told me where you're from,' Kassorith suddenly said.

'Nor will I,' Percy replied.

'Come on, what's the harm? This is Thess'kala. See how easy that was?'

Percy stifled a chuckle. His host had done an admirable job trying to mask his sinister intentions, but he clearly lacked experience in interacting with another's soul.

'Do you take me for a fool? I thought I'd made it clear enough that I don't trust you any farther than I can throw you. Just shut up and fly to your master.'

Percy held all the leverage as long as the Blue's survival depended on him, but he clearly understood that he couldn't afford to as much as hint at his origin. This place – Thess'kala – could probably crush Remior with ease if he made a mistake.

'It was worth a shot,' Kassorith replied, not appearing to care in the slightest that his intentions had been seen through. 'Don't think that threatening me will end well for you, country bumpkin…'

Percy grinned.

‘We’ll see…’

Chapter 436 – Elite disciples

Percy had more questions, but he didn’t get a chance to voice them. Diving toward one of the shorter pillars jutting out of the clouds, his host landed on a less-crowded spot near the edge, carelessly tossing the greatsword into the depths behind him.

This place seemed to be some kind of teleportation hub – judging by the organized chaos of platforms scattered over its surface. They were sculpted from dimensional marble; each etched with ornate insignias mixing seamlessly with glowing runes.

Kassorith slithered through the crowded summit, making his way toward the centre of the pillar. There, Percy saw a platform depicting the image of a coiled serpent, a single fang descending from the right side of its gaping maw. Percy recognized it immediately as the same insignia that adorned his host’s spatial pin.

Seemingly remembering something, Kassorith paused just before he stepped onto the platform. Without a word, he opened his mouth and pinched his left fang, ripping it out with a sudden jerk. The pain tore through Percy like a jagged bolt, punching through his host’s skull with the subtlety of a meteor strike as the taste of iron flooded their mouth.

To his credit, Kassorith didn’t so much as wince.

‘What the hell was that for?!’ Percy asked, trying to dam the pain behind a wall of mental effort. It wasn’t easy, because two lines of blood trickled down the Blue’s face – the first rolling down his chin, the other swallowed by his throat – offering Percy a constant reminder.

At the same time, Percy recalled that the Blue’s left fang had been missing when he first found him – at least until their moulting regenerated it. Percy hadn’t thought much of the missing fang, assuming it had been another of the many injuries Kassorith had sustained while massacring the villagers. Clearly, there was more to it than that.

His host answered with a flicker of wry amusement. ‘The Broken Fang Sect demands that new members rip out their left fang as tribute – proof of loyalty and conviction. Naturally, healing it is easy, but doing so is frowned upon.’

The Blue finally stepped onto the enchanted platform, brushing his fingers across the pin on his tunic. The runes below his tail ignited in response, weaving a new constellation of light. Evidently, the spatial artifact was more than just a storage device.

Then, the world blinked.

They reappeared on a second pillar, this one quieter, with fewer teleportation platforms. But they all bore the same symbol this time – the one belonging to Kassorith’s sect. There were fewer people too, all of them wearing the same style of clothes – a loose tunic draped over their shoulders, its colour matching the grade of their cores. Most were Blues, a few escorting Greens. A solitary Violet stood out, popping into existence atop a platform a few dozen metres away. Some Blues wore noticeably finer clothes, their tunics embroidered with serpentine patterns that gleamed with violet silk, giving their attire a unique trim.

Percy tilted his host’s chin slightly in their direction. ‘What’s up with them?’

‘Stop that! Don’t even look at those people! Do you want to get us both killed?!’ Kassorith snapped at him with a silent hiss.

Percy bit back the sarcastic retort at the tips of their forked tongue. He didn’t really care about the Blue’s survival, but he didn’t want Kassorith to die before he got the life-extending leaf. As much as he hated his host’s guts, Percy understood that he had to play nice until that happened. In the end, he remained silent until Kassorith reached the far edge of the pillar. Conjuring another greatsword, the Blue took off again, disappearing into the haze above. Clearly, this place wasn’t their destination – only a waystation on the journey.

‘I’m still waiting for an answer to my question,’ Percy said once it became clear his host had no intention of replying.

‘Why do you even care about our clothes? You just want to get the leaf and go, don’t you?’

Percy rolled their eyes. ‘I care, because you said that getting one wouldn’t be easy. I need to understand your sect if I’m going to negotiate with your master.’

A sigh escaped Kassorith, sharp and resigned. ‘The violet trim marks them as elite disciples. On paper, it means they can fight someone above their grade.’

The Blue’s words gave Percy pause. Back on Remior, the idea of jumping grades was all but unheard of. At least, until Percy came along. Some talented mages – like Rambert, Jason or Galahad – did stand out among their peers, but only within the narrow confines of their own grade. Even somebody with a blessing and a bloodline couldn’t easily bridge the gap to the next one.

Perhaps, it wasn’t so strange that this place was different though. It was a greater spring, after all. Thess’kala had more people… more gods… more of everything, really – Decrees, bloodlines, blessings, ambient mana, advanced runecrafting, longer lifespans… It stood to reason that a few lucky individuals would be born with enough advantages to leap ahead.

‘What do you mean “on paper”?’ Percy asked, catching the caveat in his host’s explanation.

‘Fighting above one’s grade is still quite uncommon. Nine out of ten elite disciples “earn” their elevated status by having connections or flattering the right elder. Even so, I’d rather not mess with them.’

Percy nodded in understanding. As advanced as Thess’kala was, it appeared that corruption was a universal truth.

‘What about other grades? Can they get trims too?’

Kassorith hovered for a moment, his eyes scanning the horizon before responding. ‘Kind of. Most sects don’t accept disciples below Green. And Greens obviously can’t jump grades no matter how talented they are, because they don’t have domains. So, really, you’ll only see elite disciples among Blues.’

Percy felt the urge to compare himself to the residents of the greater spring. It appeared that somebody like him – who could not only bridge a gap of two grades but also kill Blues without having a domain – was a rarity even here. Not surprising, maybe, given all the advantages he’d woven into his arsenal over

the years, but the thought still caused the corners of his borrowed lips to curl up. He wondered if the same was true for factions ranked even higher up the cosmic hierarchy – like the Moirai or Sixiang.

Either way, he couldn't help but picture himself in a yellow tunic with a blue trim – something he would have been eligible to wear if he lived here. It wasn't the most aesthetically pleasing combination of colours, but it was possibly one that no Thess'kalan had donned before.

'What about your Violets or Whites? Can't any of them fight against stronger opponents?'

'Some can,' Kassorith replied, before elaborating. 'But they're no longer disciples. Regular Violets – like my master – become sect elders. Those with a white trim are grand elders. Reaching White turns you into a deputy sect master. The strongest Whites – the ones who can stand against demigods – get a golden trim. They get to compete for the sect master's seat.'

'And your actual demigods? I've seen thousands of them scattered across the planet while searching for a body.'

Kassorith shrugged.

'They're called ancestors. Once somebody ascends to that level, they stop getting involved in mortal affairs. They aren't even allowed to help their sects unless they are defending against an invasion. They spend most of their time in seclusion, trying to attain divinity. As for a trim… it's meaningless to them. None of them can fight a true god on their own anyway, nor do they care about past achievements or talent. At that level, there is only one thing that matters – you either become a god, forever etching your name onto our world's history, or you fail and end up forgotten.'

Percy mulled his host's words over. Aside from the sheer number of people at the higher grades that Thess'kala boasted, he was struck by how integrated they remained within their society. Unlike Remior, they didn't seem to corral all their Whites and demigods into a special organization like the Divine Order – at least, not before they actually attained divinity.

That was only to be expected.

On a lesser spring, only the Green-borns could reach such heights. With so few of them, it made sense to gather and protect them to the very end. But on a greater spring, even Yellow-borns could ascend to godhood, making it impractical to isolate them. The more sensible approach was to simply let everyone be – until they crossed the final threshold and shed their mortal coils.

Kassorith came to an abrupt halt, snapping Percy out of his thoughts. Another pillar loomed ahead, tall enough to pierce the ceiling of fog. Unlike the others, its surface was pocked with holes that grew wider and farther apart toward the top. The ones near the bottom weren't very busy, but countless Blues swarmed in and out like bees around the mid-section, while Violets did so higher up.

'We're here,' the Blue said, angling toward a cavern relatively high up. Most of the people flying at that height were Violets, so Percy assumed Kassorith was heading straight to his master's residence, and the man's next words confirmed that.

'Oh… I should warn you – he has quite the temper. Let me do the talking.'

Chapter 437 – Syrreneth

As soon as Kassorith stepped into the cavern leading toward his master's residence, Percy felt the ambient mana grow even thicker. The air outside had already been about twice as rich as Remior's, but it climbed by another thirty to forty percent in here. It was a modest improvement, yet one that was bound to pay dividends if Percy spent years training in this environment.

'Is it because of the runes?' he wondered, examining the colourful symbols shimmering along the walls and ceiling of the narrow corridor.

This wasn't his first time coming across a large-scale, mana-gathering array, but the one they had in the Alchemists' Guild couldn't compare in quality. Percy was tempted to ask his host to pause so that he could jolt the enchantments down on a piece of parchment, to take back with him.

But he knew there was no point. The runes would lose most of their power if he drew them without understanding the Thess'kalan language. Besides, the enchantments were incompatible with his own, and he could probably get better runes from the Vault.

'Let's leave it for now. It's not like I have a use for the array while my main body is on the run…' Either way, Percy had more important things to worry about.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Kassorith slithered through the dim tunnel, eventually reaching a vast hall. The temperature seemed to plummet the moment they entered, a dense mist lowering visibility.

Deep inside the room, a single man sat atop his own coiled tail, meditating silently. To Percy, this person looked no different from the other male Thess'kalans he had seen on the way. Still, the man's Violet core, matching tunic, and the passive aura of authority he radiated left no doubt as to his identity. If those things weren't enough, Kassorith sealed the deal by standing quietly by the entrance, not daring to make a sound without his master's permission.

Percy was taken aback by that, not used to seeing his host so respectful. It didn't take long for him to understand why Kassorith was acting like this, however. Evidently, the elder was the type of person who left his disciples waiting. What wasn't as obvious was whether this was just the man's style, or if he was punishing his subordinate for something specific. It wasn't until about an hour later that the elder finally deigned to speak.

"You're late," he said, slowly opening his eyes.

They cut through the mist like ruby daggers, though the Violet didn't even bother to turn his head, not sparing his disciple a single glance. Even so, Percy felt like he was being stared at by a hungry beast, the air freezing in his lungs.

'Meh… Baldy can probably beat this guy. Hell, I bet I'll be able to do that too – as soon as I reach Green,' Percy reassured himself to dispel some of his nervousness.

Obviously, there were plenty of powerful Violets on Thess'kala – capable of fighting above their grade – but this person wasn't one of them. Like Kassorith had said, his master's tunic was woven out of a plain violet fabric, lacking the characteristic trim of a grand elder.

Percy's host still cupped his fists politely, before responding. "I ran into trouble. The town had more Blues than our intel suggested and–"

"Silence," the Violet spat, the disappointment in his voice sending a chill down the Blue's spine. "I've no interest in your excuses. You are a trained disciple of the Broken Fang Sect, sent to kill a bunch of nobodies. Can't you even accomplish that without issue?"

“I-I did! They’re all dead! It just took me a little longer than expected!” Kassorith said with a stammer, his agitation palpable.

“A little longer?” The elder chuckled, though his eyes narrowed, devoid of humour. “How many times do I need to explain that your poor performance reflects badly on me? As a newly promoted elder, I’m only allowed up to five disciples. The number of missions you complete each month affects my ranking in the sect. Do you understand?”

The elder’s scathing words made Kassorith swallow hard.

As for Percy… his feelings on the matter were mixed. On one hand, he didn’t like his host. Leaving aside the fact that Kassorith had slaughtered a bunch of innocents, the bastard had even tried to double-cross him. So, part of him enjoyed watching him chastised by his master.

On the other, he couldn’t help but think that the Violet’s treatment of his disciple was a little unfair. Percy’s host had won against at least two Blues – maybe more – as well as several Greens. Even if the townsfolk had been untrained, Kassorith had to be stronger than most of the Blues Percy had faced on Remior to have defeated so many opponents. Maybe he wasn’t quite at the level of an elite disciple, but he was likely very close.

‘I guess they have higher standards than us…’

Kassorith clenched his fists, his soul boiling with indignation. But he didn’t dare to show it. “I understand. It won’t happen again.”

“Very well.” The Violet nodded. “I’ve had the details of your next two assignments sent to your chamber. Go. I want them both completed in half the indicated time.”

Kassorith turned around, seemingly about to leave. Percy didn’t let him, however. Upon realizing that his host couldn’t summon the courage to reveal the true extent of his failure to his master, or negotiate on his behalf, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

“Would you like a more useful disciple?” he asked, taking over the Blue’s mouth.

‘What are you doing?! Are you trying to get us killed?!’ Kassorith asked in shock.

Percy ignored him. It was too late to debate this with his host anyway – his words had already caught the Violet’s attention. The elder was staring at them in confusion, his brow creased.

“Kassorith died during the mission,” Percy explained. “He’s only alive thanks to me. You don’t look like you’d give a shit if he had stayed dead, but I might be able to do something to increase his value in your eyes.”

“Who are you?” the Violet finally asked, his curiosity clearly piqued.

“You first. Kassorith never mentioned your name, and I’m not going to call you ‘master’.”

The Violet didn’t seem to take Percy’s straightforwardness that well. A powerful domain descended upon him, slamming him face-first into the cold floor. Perhaps, they could have resisted the pressure somewhat if they had deployed their own domains, though Kassorith clearly had no intention of defying his master, and Percy didn’t want to pour more oil in the fire either. He could tell the Violet was only probing him. The elder could easily release more power if he wished to harm them.

“Are you done?” Percy asked, his voice still as a lake.

Kassorith wasn’t nearly as calm, however.

“Master, please hear the outsider out! He’s stitched up my soul to keep me alive – he can kill me with a thought!”

Percy smirked upon listening to his host. Kassorith had spoken in a desperate, arguably even pathetic, tone, seemingly advocating Percy’s case. In reality, that was just an act. The Blue had merely seized the opportunity to inform his master about Percy’s abilities, probably hoping that the elder would save him. Regardless, Percy didn’t much care about his host’s ploys. He was still confident he could strike a deal with the Violet.

“My name is Syrreneth. I take it you’re here for Thess’kala’s life-extension method?” the elder asked, unperturbed by his disciple’s words. His domain continued to press down on Percy and Kassorith with the weight of a mountain.

“I’m Percy. I’d rather talk to you face-to-face,” he replied, having no interest in conversing like this.

The Violet shrugged, finally withdrawing his domain.

“You’re braver than my spineless disciple, I’ll give you that. You’d better have more than that though, if you wish to make a deal with me.”

“I’m indeed here for that leaf,” Percy admitted, rolling his host’s shoulders and stretching his arms. “I can turn this sack of shit into one of those fancy elite disciples. Is that good enough?”

“Oh?” A spark of interest flared inside the Violet’s slit pupils. “And how are you planning to accomplish that?”

“That’s my business,” Percy replied non-committedly.

He wasn’t ready to share any of his secrets with Syrreneth. He didn’t know if the elder had any sinister intentions toward him, but he hadn’t forgotten that the elder was the one who had sent Kassorith on that mission to massacre those people. But that wasn’t the only reason he’d given the man a vague response.

Frankly, Percy had yet to decide how to strengthen his host. He’d already passed the Moirais’ Decree to Kassorith, but the second core would be useless in the short-term. The man was a Yellow-born, so the new organ would be two grades lower than his first one, providing him with a negligible boost. Circulation wasn’t on the table either. Percy had no intention of sharing the boosting art with these people. Even if he did, tempering Kassorith’s channels would take time. Suffice to say, Percy’s options were rather limited. In any case, he could worry about delivering his end of the bargain after Syrreneth agreed to his terms.

“What do you say?” Percy asked again. “I imagine that having an elite disciple will look good on you.”

Percy felt his host's soul flare up with greed. Clearly, Kassorith was also interested in getting stronger. But nobody in the room cared about the Blue's opinion.

"It will," the elder admitted, before shaking his head. "Yet, it's not enough to warrant the kind of reward you want. Our sect does get a few extra leaves per year, but they're highly sought after. Our grand elders and deputy sect masters want to get one for their less talented descendants. The cost of getting involved in the conflict is too high."

Noticing the Violet's phrasing, Percy couldn't help but smirk. The man hadn't declined outright – he was simply haggling for better terms.

"I don't care what you need to do. Just tell me what you want in return."

The Violet smiled too.

"I like talking to someone smart. Kassorith will take the evaluation ten days from now. Make sure he gets his trim. After that, you'll be eligible to enter the regional tournament. If you place in the top sixteen, I'll get you your leaf."

"I can do that," Percy replied, not having the slightest clue what this tournament involved. Worst-case scenario, he could always leave and let Kassorith deal with the mess. "Though I'm a bit surprised you're this open to getting me a leaf. I expected more resistance."

Syrreneth didn't reply immediately. His forked tongue flickered a couple of times, his eyes scanning his disciple from head to tail, seemingly searching for something. Eventually, he gave up.

"That's because you don't know much about the leaves. They're valuable for sure, but each can only be used by a single person, so we don't really care if a couple leak outside Thess'kala."

Percy nodded. He still had plenty of questions about both the leaf and the tournament, but he could ask Kassorith later. Returning control of the body to the Blue, he stifled a laugh as he watched Kassorith slither away in a hurry, seemingly unwilling to remain in the Violet's sight a moment longer than necessary. Yet, Percy's amusement barely lasted a second. Remembering the steep terms he had just agreed to, he let out a sigh.

‘Ten days… I need to find a way to make Kassorith a lot stronger by then…’

Chapter 438 – Blue beasts

‘Have you any idea what you’ve done?!’ Kassorith snapped once they were alone. ‘He’s going to gut us alive if you fail to deliver!’

Percy shrugged. ‘No. Just you – he can’t get to my guts. So, you’d better start training.’

‘And how the fuck am I supposed to do that?! You think I’ve been stuck at my current level for decades because I’m lazy?!’

‘You tell me. How far exactly are you from a Violet’s strength?’

Kassorith sighed. ‘Not very. I can already hold my own against three regular Blues. But the remaining gap is impossible to cross. I don’t have a blessing and, while my bloodline is useful, it doesn’t help in combat. I’ve only made it this far thanks to my composite affinity and sheer skill.’

Percy nodded, slightly impressed. Composite affinities were indeed superior to the common elements – thanks to their versatility and raw power – but the difference wasn’t that large. Tripling one’s fighting strength relying on nothing but that took real talent. Maybe Kassorith wouldn’t even lose to Galahad – at least, not until Percy’s uncle used his boosting art.

‘Show me,’ Percy said. ‘Do you have a place we can practice?’

His host summoned another greatsword and took off without a word. This time, he flew straight upward, ignoring the countless caves lining the pillar’s sides, shooting directly toward the ceiling of fog. The air grew colder the higher up they climbed. Thinner too – making it harder to breathe or replenish their mana, though Kassorith appeared unbothered.

When they burst through the clouds, Percy gasped. It was his first time seeing Thess’kala’s clear blue sky. A golden sun blazed overhead, sitting at its apex. Only the tallest of the heaven-piercing pillars reached this high – including the cylindrical mountain belonging to Kassorith’s sect.

They landed near the edge of the summit.

Others were here, but very few of them were people.

Colossal beasts roamed the plateau – the mere sight of them causing Percy's eyes to widen. Each was easily the size of a small house, even while on all fours. Dark scales shimmered like obsidian daggers along their bodies, painting a stark contrast against the milky white skin of the Thess'kalans. The beasts looked like reptiles, though their heavy frames were built closer to a buffalo's – complete with a pair of horns that curved upwards.

Blue beasts.

The first Percy had ever seen.

Even stranger, the creatures weren't rampaging, as he might have expected. Some lounged on the ground, others strolling around leisurely, each thunderous step sending a tremor through the plain. But they weren't attacking. Or… well… a few were, but they only seemed to clash against a Blue or Violet Thess'kalan in single combat, clearly engaged in something closer to a friendly spar than a true fight to the death.

'How is this possible?!'

Not just on Remior, but practically everywhere Percy had been, beasts above Red – let alone Blue – were considered untameable. That was one of the primary reasons Micky's existence had caused such a stir back home.

'Magical beasts grow hungrier and more violent with each promotion, but also smarter,' Kassorith explained. 'Blue is a bit of a sweet spot. By then, they're intelligent enough to know what's good for them.'

Percy nodded slowly. That tracked. From the countless beasts he'd killed in the Thirsty Valley and on Melodia, he knew that Greens were still too dumb. They understood fear and strength, yet struggled to resist their hunger or put down their pride – often throwing themselves to their death as a result.

On the flipside, beasts above Blue were as intelligent as sapients, so they didn't have much trouble controlling themselves. Creatures that strong faced a different problem, however – they simply needed way too much food to sustain themselves, which prevented them from coexisting peacefully with others.

'I guess that only a greater spring has both the resources to feed so many Blue beasts and the strength to keep them in line…' Percy realized.

Raising one or two on Remior might not be impossible, but it wouldn't be worth the cost. Most noble Houses only had a handful of Blues, so handling the monsters would drain more manpower than it provided.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Kassorith slithered toward the nearest lizard. The creature appeared even more terrifying up close. The man barely reached the midpoint of the beast's forelimbs. The creature tilted its head to look at them hungrily, sticky rivers of saliva gushing between its massive fangs, forming wide pools after splashing on the ground.

'Don't worry. It won't attack unless we hit it first. They're here to serve as our sparring partners. Besides, I'm strong enough to handle it,' the Blue said after seeing Percy remain silent for so long.

It wasn't fear that had left Percy stunned, however. Gazing up at the towering abomination, he couldn't help but think back to his familiar. Was Micky going to grow this large after his next advancement?

Percy had always known this, of course, but actually seeing a Blue beast in person just hit differently. Micky was already hard to fit in places built for people. Was the crow doomed to spend the rest of his new life hiding in the wilderness, exiled from civilization?

'The Starry Queen – whose egg I'm planning to steal – has to be even larger than these things,' Percy reminded himself, swallowing hard. He suddenly felt a lot less confident in his plan to provoke such a monster.

But he shook the distracting thoughts away. Now wasn't the time to dwell on his familiars. He had less than two weeks to turn his host into an elite disciple, or he could kiss the life-extending leaf goodbye.

‘Alright,’ Percy said, turning his attention back to the Blue. ‘Show me what you’ve got.’

Kassorith didn’t hesitate. He unleashed his domain, the beast responding in kind. The collision of the two waves sent the air between them in turmoil. Barely any of the creature’s willpower reached Kassorith’s body, but it was enough to give Percy a feel. He didn’t have his mutated eyes to examine its flow carefully, though he still managed to glimpse some information. The domain felt rowdy – almost erratic – as if each strand had its own will, barely submitting to its owner’s control. Percy felt itchy, as if his host’s body had been immersed in a sea of ants trying to eat their way through his scales.

‘How bizarre…’

It was impressive that the creature had learned to incorporate properties of its affinity into its domain. Not every Blue sapient was capable of that – let alone an oversized animal.

But the beast didn’t give him a chance to think too hard about it. The monster moved with shocking speed, reaching them in an instant. It tried to stomp on Kassorith, the man barely leaping back in time to avoid getting flattened. At the same time, an ocean of liquid metal gushed out of his pores. It surrounded him like a tide, enveloping him in an opaque blob of silver.

Percy’s surroundings went dark as a result. Neither his eyes nor his Mana Sense could peer through his host’s construct, and he didn’t have enough phantom mana to activate Soul Vision either. Left with no other choice, he unfolded his own domain, using it to feel his way through the mana. That said, he didn’t rush to aid his host just yet, still intent on evaluating Kassorith’s performance.

The beast charged again.

Kassorith twisted the makeshift shell into a solid spring, launching himself into the air. A greatsword formed beneath his tail once he was high enough, turning into a floating platform. Hovering several dozen metres above the pillar, he watched the beast below.

Neither moved.

The lizard could probably reach him if it jumped, but it probably understood it didn’t stand a chance of catching him in the air like this.

‘I see… so Blue beasts are at a severe disadvantage against mages of the same grade – unless they have wings.’

They were too large and too heavy. Unlike sapients, they didn’t have a way to fly using their mana either. This was another barrier standing between them and the pinnacle of magic. Perhaps, their domains would grow powerful and stable enough to solve the problem at Violet or White, though Percy wasn’t sure.

Luckily, neither Micky nor the Starry Wasps had to worry about this.

Nor did Kassorith.

More mana spilled out of the Thess’kalan’s body, coalescing into hundreds of longswords that floated beside him in an orderly manner. Their sharp edges glinted under the sunlight, their smooth blades reflecting the blue sky and the roiling sea of clouds in the distance.

As for their tips?

They were all pointing directly at the poor beast.

With no warning, the weapons shot forward in unison. The monster roared as its hide was peppered with steel, broken scales flying left and right, blood pooling beneath its bulk.

But it didn’t fall.

It didn’t even buckle.

The swords had barely pierced a few centimetres into its thick hide. Growling in pain, the beast glared at Kassorith with burning eyes, seemingly daring him to descend. Its domain surged for a moment, pushing against the Thess’kalan’s, though it didn’t get far.

‘I’m not allowed to injure it too seriously, so I’ll only show you one more attack,’ Kassorith said.

Not waiting for a response, the Blue prepared a second wave of swords. Less than a third of his reserves remained by the time he was done, twice as many constructs floating beside him.

But he didn’t stop there.

The sky lit up in a flash of indigo, sparks of the same colour crackling along the blades. They began to vibrate, the metal glowing red, then white-hot. Percy could practically taste the heat with every flicker of his host’s forked tongue, as the scent of ozone filled the air.

‘This is the best I can do right now,’ Kassorith said. ‘It’s probably not enough to injure a Violet, but I bet I can force them to take a step back.’

Then, he let go.

Chapter 439 – Imprint

Apocalyptic.

That was the best word to describe Kassorith’s attack.

Countless glowing blades pelted the ground with the speed of lightning bolts, leaving trails of twisted air still crackling with electricity in their wake. The constructs shattered on impact, flashes of light, booming shockwaves, and tiny shrapnel flying everywhere.

By the time the Blue had exhausted the last drop of mana from his core, a cascade of deep craters and broken stone surrounded the beast. Numerous still-intact runes lit up around the devastated area, however, slowly putting everything back together.

The creature had only survived due to Kassorith’s restraint – over ninety percent of his attacks had intentionally missed their mark. The few that hadn’t had inflicted some debilitating injuries – a severed forelimb, a broken horn and three deep holes in the beast’s torso, the nearby flesh too scorched to

bleed. The sect's healers – or animal handlers – or whoever was responsible for the monsters – clearly had their work cut out for them.

Either way, Percy didn't care about the beast as much as he did about his host's fighting strength.

'Not bad… I'm not sure I would have survived this with my main body…'

In terms of raw firepower, the spell definitely bordered the next grade. Sadly, a single use had exhausted the Blue's reserves and might not be enough to take a Violet down. Kassorith would be screwed if he unleashed this kind of attack and failed to end the fight with it. Percy already had some thoughts on how to help, but he wanted to evaluate the rest of his host's abilities before suggesting a training plan.

Landing back on the platform, Kassorith took some time to refill his core. The beast didn't attack him again, probably realizing that their little bout was over. Though it did toss them a hateful glare every now and then.

Once the Blue had recovered, Percy asked him to demonstrate the rest of his skills. Kassorith clicked his tongue in irritation but ultimately complied. He probably understood that Percy was the only one who could save him from his master's disappointment.

It soon became clear that Kassorith preferred to manoeuvre in battle atop the same greatsword he used for long-distance travel. The moment he stopped conserving his mana, Percy's host turned faster than most of the Blues he had faced on Remior.

Provoking another beast and flying within reach, Kassorith also showed Percy his defensive capabilities. Whenever he was about to get hit, he allowed a layer of liquid metal to gush out of his pores, mixing it with his domain to cover his body. This was one of the areas where Kassorith's affinity excelled – its defensive power didn't lose to earth mana, but it was quicker and far more versatile than the common affinity. As an added bonus, it appeared that Kassorith could reshape the substance into an attack at a moment's notice – something that even Percy's reinforced mana couldn't do.

After watching everything, Percy nodded thoughtfully. Admittedly, Kassorith's fighting style was disturbingly similar to his own. Didn't he also move and attack mainly by relying on a flock of flying weapons?

Granted, there were a few differences. Percy could only control and maintain so many constructs due to the special properties of his soul affinity and the increased mana regeneration afforded to him by his boosting art. Meanwhile, Kassorith had raw power and control brought about by his higher grade, as well as centuries of experience to lean back on.

Comparing himself to the creep wasn't pleasant, but Percy did have a few ideas on how he could help the Blue grow stronger.

'I can lend you a second domain while inhabiting your body. It won't be as good as yours, but it'll catch your opponents by surprise.'

'It'll help,' Kassorith agreed, but did so with a frown.

He didn't seem particularly happy with a temporary upgrade that would disappear the moment Percy left. Still, their priority was to get through the evaluation and the subsequent tournament. Besides, Kassorith didn't know this yet, but he could awaken his second core and reach Blue with it after a few decades of cleansing. That ought to bridge the remaining gap and truly give him the strength of an elite disciple.

Of course, Percy hadn't brought this up yet. He didn't much like his host, and this wouldn't help them in the short term, so he had decided to let the man figure it out on his own later – assuming he survived the next few weeks.

'What else have you got?' the Blue asked, oblivious to Percy's thoughts. 'The domain might get me through the evaluation and the first round of the tournament if we use it well, but our next opponents will be stronger and aware of it.'

Percy sighed, knowing that Kassorith was right.

The problem was that most of his other advantages weren't applicable here. Leaving aside the absence of the second core, the boosting art and his mutated eyes, he didn't even have enough phantom mana to fuel his spells. That only left his spectral traits, alchemy and runecrafting.

‘Are you allowed external resources? Potions? Enchanted items?’ he asked, some hope finding its way into his voice. ‘I might be able to brew you a little boost if you get me some good ingredients. I can also upgrade your swords if we have some time to prepare.’

Percy hadn’t registered the compression principle yet, but ten days might be enough. This was more of a last resort, but a few doses of trollsfury potion could save them in a pinch – assuming he could brew at least a Green equivalent of that.

Runecrafting was even more reliable, Kassorith’s affinity practically being perfect for it. A few hardness and sharpness enchantments would greatly elevate the lethality of the Blue’s swords, and Percy wouldn’t even need any external materials to make this happen.

To Percy’s dismay, however, Kassorith shot both ideas down with a shake of his head. ‘We’re allowed nothing but plain clothes during the evaluation. Same rules for the tournament.’

Percy felt the urge to swear. ‘Why?! Isn’t that unfair to people skilled in runecrafting or alchemy?’

Kassorith shrugged. ‘Neither of those things is considered effective enough when fighting others at your grade. Realistically, they would only make a difference if you had somebody much stronger – like a White or a demigod – prepare high-level equipment for you. The organizers have decided that it’s simpler to just ban external means altogether, than to monitor all the fighters for several days leading up to the competition to make sure they crafted everything by themselves.’

Once again, the Blue’s words reminded Percy of how potent the Vault’s magiscript was. Evidently, enchanting one’s constructs for use in battle was viewed as impractical even on a greater spring. The Thess’kalans didn’t seem to have discovered the compression principle to improve their potions either.

‘How annoying…’

He couldn’t find a fault with the logic behind those rules, but they did inconvenience him greatly. After all, he was certain that his enchantments were powerful enough to matter.

‘It’s such a pity that I can’t draw them on the fly…’

He paused, creasing his brow.

'…or can I?' he wondered, a new idea suddenly taking root.

Percy almost dismissed it out of hand, thinking it was too preposterous to even entertain. But the more he considered it, the more he realized he couldn't find any flaws with it. Instinctively, he summoned his Status again, his gaze lingering on his trait's description for a long moment.

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'"…any written medium,"' he read, suddenly feeling a lot more confident about this. 'Zoris did say that it encompasses everything – paint, ink, chalk, carvings... mana… What about willpower? Could this actually work?'

Well… there was only one way to know for sure.

'Kassorith.'

'Hmmm?'

'Create one of your swords. I want to try something.'

The Blue complied, a splash of silver manifesting in his palm, soon reshaping itself into a fine longsword.

Percy didn't say anything. He examined the construct for a few minutes, occasionally swinging it and gauging its weight and sharpness. It was definitely stronger and harder than anything he could forge out of his own mana – at least before drawing any runes on either. Then again, the two materials were separated by just as many grades. And while Kassorith's steel constructs were easier to create and reshape, Percy doubted they could be given a form that was simultaneously as strong and flexible as his magical silk. Regardless, that wasn't important – he wasn't going to fight the man anytime soon.

Lifting the sword up, Percy began to carve a rune onto its flat surface. Only, he didn't bother to pull any additional mana from his host's core like he usually did when drawing his own enchantments. There was no need – since the weapon was already made of mana, and the material was malleable enough to be reshaped freely without losing its structural integrity.

Instead, Percy used something else to carve the symbol – his domain. A sliver of willpower gathered to the tips of his borrowed fingers, cutting smooth lines into the magical steel.

He didn't think willpower could be used to fuel the enchantments – it would fizzle out the moment he stopped concentrating. The runes still had to be powered solely by Kassorith's mana. However, Percy's control over the domain would give him an excellent tool to draw the symbols – one that he hoped could be used in a vastly different way to what he usually did.

A few seconds later, the sharpness rune was complete. The enchantment was laughably simple, so the effort hadn't even woken up the spectral fiend hiding within Percy's soul. That was fine for now – the creature was bound to wake up sooner or later, since what Percy had in mind was going to be a great deal more challenging. But he had to make sure the enchantment worked when drawn like this before trying anything else.

'Can you check whether the sword is any sharper?' he asked, giving control back to Kassorith.

The man swung the weapon a few times, before slashing at the ground. He even made sure to strike with the part of the edge closest to the rune, to hopefully maximize its effect. Percy did think that the construct had dug a little deeper than expected, though he waited for his host to confirm it, the Blue being a lot more familiar with his own spells.

'It definitely did something, though the difference was barely worth mentioning.'

Percy nodded, not that surprised to hear that a single sharpness rune hadn't changed much. But this was still good news – proof that his idea had merit. Holding the longsword up again, he gathered some more of his willpower, yet he didn't rush to draw another rune. This time, he didn't even lift a finger. Instead, he allowed the domain to coalesce into a dense sphere, floating right next to the weapon. Picturing the sharpness rune in his mind, he allowed the willpower to slowly shift, reshaping itself into an intricate symbol. It was hard, because the substance was invisible, and even a Blue's control of their domain wasn't sufficient for such a delicate task.

Not by itself, at least.

Struggling to whip the willpower into the correct shape, Percy felt something stir inside his soul, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips as a result. The Scribing trait's influence soon spread over him, a new set of instincts now aiding him in his difficult task. Before, he had wielded the domain with all the sloppiness befitting an amateur who had barely spent a few months borrowing a Blue's body. Yet, in just an instant, the substance seemed to fall in line, turning into an exact replica of the image in his mind.

As soon as he felt happy with the result, he slammed the tiny domain against the blade, letting the mana split beneath the willpower as he focused on the enchantment's intended effect. Seeing the shallow dent located a few centimetres below the previous rune, its shape identical to the first, Percy's grin widened. He was about to ask his host to test it again, when his Status beat him to the punch.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Spectral Art: Instantaneous Imprint – Refined!]

Chapter 440 – Regional tournament

'Wow… it looks like there's more I can accomplish with my traits than I originally thought…'

It wasn't like Percy had slacked back home. He had already incorporated his new ability into his runecrafting, elevating it to the next level. As soon as his clone had returned from Twilight City, his main body had quickly upgraded his Superior Runic Grid – the Refined spell he had developed with Nesha's help – into a Masterful Spectral Art.

He hadn't added any new enchantments, largely because he didn't know any. He hadn't been in a rush to return to the Vault and buy more either. However, he had managed to shrink the palm-sized, clover-shaped unit cells further. Their current iteration was small enough to fit on a fingernail, meaning that he could probably include more than ten thousand of them on a single layer of his new armour – once he finished crafting it.

Since the eventual piece of enchanted cloth was bound to contain multiple layers, and due to each unit cell involving eighteen runes, the final construct would probably include over a million runes in total! It was a daunting project, requiring him to find the right balance between his two traits – a goal that Percy's main body was still working on. Changing his approach slightly, he had decided to spin the silk

directly into an enchanted fabric, as it was the only way to preserve the material long enough to reach the end.

That said, the fundamental way in which he drew the runes hadn't changed.

Whether he carved them into his reinforced mana or wove them out of the grey silk, Percy had always prepared the enchantments slowly, putting great care into every single line – every stroke of his runes. Speed and simplicity had never been a priority, because he usually had as much time as he needed to prepare his constructs before a fight.

'Well, I suppose not having a domain didn't make things easier for me in the past,' he reminded himself.

He couldn't wield his mana with as much finesse as he could his willpower in a Blue body, so stamping finished enchantments into his constructs would have been nothing but a pipedream.

'Colour me impressed,' Kassorith suddenly said, snapping Percy out of his thoughts. 'I won't ask you how you've accomplished this, but it's still not enough – a couple of runes won't make a difference. Hell, even if you cover the sword in enchantments, a single weapon can't get us through the tournament…'

Percy nodded, his brain already racing at a hundred miles an hour as he considered how to best leverage his new spell. The most powerful enchantment he could currently produce was naturally his Supreme Runic Matrix. Unfortunately, even with the ability to imprint a rune – or a bunch of them – in an instant, it would take him several hours to enchant a single sword. There was no way an opponent would give them that long – certainly not one as powerful as a Violet.

'I'll have to simplify the unit cell a lot, and draw much fewer of them…'

His host didn't need concealment runes. His metal mana couldn't turn invisible anyway, and all of their opponents would be skilled at using their domains. Adaptation runes weren't necessary either, since they weren't planning to use any mana types other than Kassorith's. Finally, Percy could probably ditch the preservation runes too. He'd have to destroy all the constructs at the end of each battle anyway, to reduce the risk of somebody recognizing the Vault's language. Kassorith hadn't said anything about it, but Percy didn't know if the spectators at the tournament would be more knowledgeable.

This was a greater spring, after all.

In any case, all of Percy's other runes would be useful here. The sharpness, lightness and structural integrity enchantments were the key to improving the constructs – the whole point of this project. The controlled self-repair enchantments were also indispensable, as Percy and Kassorith would be relying on them to replicate their empowered weapons. That way, Percy would only have to enchant a single sword, and that would instantly give them the means to produce a hundred of them.

'Actually, I might only need a piece of a sword…' he realized.

Once again, he was being led astray by his preconceived notions. He was used to his own reinforced mana which was much more difficult to work with – Percy had to give it the right shape before enchanting it, and he couldn't easily alter it afterwards.

But Kassorith's mana was a lot more uniform and malleable. In theory, Percy should be able to draw a few unit cells on a piece of the blade, using the self-repair enchantments to create more copies. Then, he could deactivate the enchantments to reset their memory, turn the edges of the fragments liquid to fuse them together, tweak the lump of metal into a proper sword, and then reactivate the runes to memorize the new shape.

'I might be able to draw a somewhat dense grid after all…'

It wouldn't be nearly as dense as what he was trying to do with his silk, but he could still fit dozens of unit cells on each construct. The sharpness, lightness and structural integrity enchantments would be fine without control runes too, so each unit cell would only need a total of eight runes – fewer than half of the original. That should make them even easier for Percy to prepare in real time.

The only downside was that they wouldn't be able to fuel the swords out of ambient mana without the Carnival. Kassorith would have to manually pour mana from his own core into the weapons every time he wanted to repair or replicate them. It wasn't ideal, but it was more than manageable.

'I can do this in stages. There's no reason to draw all the unit cells at once.'

Percy could probably prepare a coarse grid within twenty to thirty seconds, giving Kassorith a template to use for a few minutes. At the same time, Percy could slowly fill in the gaps with even more runes, passing his host progressively stronger versions of the longsword in regular intervals. Once he couldn't improve them any further, Percy would be free to jump into the fight with his domain, giving the Blue one final trump card.

Having to slowly build up power over the course of the battle wasn't great – especially while getting besieged by a Violet-level mage. However, it was already a miracle Percy had found a method to strengthen his host in such a short time, and with his hands practically tied behind his back.

He doubted he'd find another.

'It sounds promising,' Kassorith admitted after listening to Percy's explanation. 'If the runes are as potent as you claim, the elder in charge of the evaluation might give us the trim. But I'm more worried about the tournament. I don't know if our opponents will give us a chance to prepare – especially after they learn about the runes.'

'We'll figure it out. Try to win the first battle with that attack you showed me earlier. We won't reveal our second domain until the next fight. And we'll hide the runes until the one after. Then, I guess you'll just have to keep your distance from them to buy time for me.'

Admittedly, this wasn't the best plan, but Kassorith was faster than most Blues. Percy hoped that would be enough.

'What's the deal with that tournament anyway? Why does your master want you to participate so badly?'

'These regional tournaments are pretty important for my people. There are generous rewards for every victory – for both the participants and their sects. It's also a great way to gain fame and prestige.'

Percy perked up. This sounded like a bigger deal than he'd initially thought.

'Do we have to compete against mages from all over Thess'kala though? How does Syrreneth expect us to make the top sixteen?'

‘It’ll be really tough, but not impossible,’ Kassorith said, before elaborating. ‘The competitions are segregated by grade, so we’ll only have to fight against other Blues. We have over a million of those on our world, but only about fifty thousand are elite disciples. And only a tenth of them are truly deserving of their status. The rest won’t even consider joining.’

Percy swallowed hard. He wasn’t sure if they even had five thousand regular Blues on Remior, let alone ones capable of fighting Violets. Not to mention that Thess’kala had over a hundred thousand actual Violets.

But his host wasn’t done. ‘The good news is that they’re not all competing at the same venue. There are ten regional tournaments happening at the same time, so we’ll only have to deal with five hundred elite disciples at most. Not even that, in fact, since many are training in seclusion, are out on missions, or otherwise occupied. It’s an elimination-style tournament, so there will only be a total of eight rounds if we’re lucky. And we’ll make the top sixteen if we win four times in a row.’

Percy frowned. Their odds weren’t terrible, but defeating the equivalent of four Violets wasn’t going to be easy.

‘That bastard… was that why he was smirking?’ he wondered, thinking back to Syrreneth’s expression.

The Violet had set him up, probably not expecting him to meet his demands. Either way, Syrreneth and Kassorith had nothing to lose. As long as Percy got his host a trim and won a couple of rounds in the tournament, the Broken Fang Sect would get showered in rewards – as would the Blue’s master.

As for Percy reaching the top sixteen and earning himself a leaf?

Even on the off-chance he succeeded, the rewards the Violet would earn would probably be more valuable than the life-extending consumable. However, the elder had gravely miscalculated. For one, Percy had no intention of leaving Thess’kala empty-handed. So what if he got eliminated early? He’d stick around and look for another way to get what he wanted. Besides, the idea of earning a valuable reward after every victory filled him with greed.

‘Top sixteen? What a joke. I’ll win this thing if I can.’

Eight rounds meant eight rewards!

Of course, Percy had already benefited from this trip. Leaving the leaf aside, just his new spell and the cleansing technique his host had shown him would already help a lot down the line. But if he played his cards right, participating in this tournament might be one of his most profitable ventures yet. There was a good chance Kassorith would try and hoard the rewards, but whether Percy would let him keep anything would ultimately depend on how useful the prizes were for him…

‘Can you stop daydreaming about the tournament?!’ the Blue asked in annoyance. ‘We haven’t even passed the evaluation yet. Are you sure you can get this spell – the one you’ve literally just invented – into a useable state in the next ten days?’

Percy shrugged. ‘Have I mentioned that we don’t need to sleep?’