Wanderer 451

Chapter 451 – Top sixteen

Percy couldn't – for the life of him – understand how reading Kassorith's shadows helped the plasma mage in this situation – especially since his host was constantly enveloped in a steel barrier that obscured his body's movements. Were the rigid shadows of the metallic shield and the flying greatsword enough to improve the man's predictions?

'Well, it's not just the shadow sense on its own – it's the combination of all these separate streams of information…'

Percy shook his concerns away, once again reminding himself that trying to understand the inner workings of someone's bloodline was nothing but an exercise in futility. It was a fact that the plasma mage had gone out of his way to cast as many shadows onto the battlefield as he could, and that the accuracy of his spells had shot through the roof as a direct consequence of that.

The rest was irrelevant.

Kassorith responded to Percy's discovery with a wave of confusion.

'I'm not sure what you think you've figured out, but I'm going to need some actionable steps soon. We're down to a third of our reserves.'

Percy nodded grimly. Seeing through their opponent's trick wouldn't mean much if they failed to execute an effective counterattack. Not wasting a moment, he seized control of some of the discarded metal melting off the surface of his host's barrier, shaping it into a couple of longswords. They were cruder than the ones Kassorith created, but Percy wasn't planning to enter them into an art competition. Commanding the constructs to spin rapidly, he fanned away as much of the mist as he could, trying to create a gap in the clouds.

Percy didn't know what their opponent's bloodline was called, but the name "Shadow Read" sounded apt.

'Let's see what happens when you have nothing left to read!'

Obviously, the plasma mage wouldn't just let them do as they pleased. The moment Percy's plan became clear, the man targeted the swords, destroying them with a few well-placed shots. That only emboldened Percy further, however. Their opponent's desperate move not only confirmed his suspicions, but also lifted some pressure off Kassorith.

'Divert some mana from the barrier to the weapons and help me blow the clouds away!' Percy yelled inwards.

'Are you crazy? He's going to turn us to cinders if we stop defending!' Kassorith protested.

'Just listen to me. We'll never give him the chance. If I'm right, the domains will be more than enough to protect us. Besides, your life isn't really at risk – at worst, the stadium's enchantments will save you, so stop being a fucking chicken!'

The Thess'kalan didn't seem very pleased to be bossed around – and by a guest in his own body, no less – but he ultimately complied, helping Percy along. The fog around them thinned, despite the plasma user's efforts to prevent that.

Sadly for him, he no longer held the upper hand. He directed most of the flares toward the spinning constructs, but collecting and recycling the purple motes of mana into additional attacks was a lot harder than it was for Percy and Kassorith to reshape the molten blobs of metal into new longswords.

Each affinity had its strengths and weaknesses, after all!

The few attacks their opponent could spare toward Kassorith didn't land nearly as often as before, giving Percy and his host plenty of time to rebuild and reinforce their barrier and produce even more swords. Just like that, the battle took a sudden turn, the plasma mage's previously insurmountable advantage evaporating like a snowball beneath the summer sun.

'What the hell's a chicken anyway?' Kassorith asked once his mana consumption dropped to a more manageable level, giving him and Percy a chance to catch their breath.

Percy froze upon realizing his blunder.

‘Just a type of horned fish I saw on some aquatic world. It’s known for its cowardice,’ he lied through his fangs, sending Kassorith the image of a random fish scurrying away under the gaze of one of his previous hosts.

Not that he expected chickens – of all things – to be famous across the universe. Hell, even if he told the Blue that he was a human, Kassorith would probably have no idea what that meant. Still, Percy reminded himself that Kassorith wasn’t his friend. He was at best a temporary ally, but one that couldn’t be trusted outside their mutual goal of advancing through the tournament. If he ended up dooming all of Remior due to something this dumb, Percy wouldn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Even robbed of his secret weapon, the plasma user was still a difficult opponent to pin down. Fortunately, the skilful use of his affinity and his domain weren’t enough to give him the edge over Percy and Kassorith’s combined strength. The two continued to fight while keeping the area around them clear of clouds, slowly closing the gap to their opponent’s reserves.

As it turned out, the man hadn’t been in a much better state than them to begin with. He might have dominated the first part of the battle, but it soon became apparent that he had only managed that by consuming his mana almost as rapidly as them. It didn’t take long for Percy and Kassorith to catch up and force their opponent on the backfoot – or back-tail? – leaving him no choice but to flee to the relative safety of the nearest clouds.

‘Now what? We can’t chase him there unless we waste more mana to clear the area, otherwise we’ll be back to square one,’ Kassorith groaned, a grimace marring his face.

Percy shrugged, not nearly as worried. ‘We’ll wait for him to come out of his own volition,’ he replied, taking a deep breath after another to replenish their reserves.

‘He’ll recover too if we give him the chance! We’ll have to whittle his mana down all over again!’ Kassorith protested, clearly unconvinced.

‘It doesn’t matter. He only has two options: Either he fights us on our terms, or he can stay over there, floating in his little cloud for the next few days. Everyone in the tournament knows who the champion of attrition is. No matter what he chooses, this one’s in the bag.’

Kassorith visibly relaxed upon listening to his explanation.

Sure enough, the plasma user eventually understood the situation too, coming to terms with his inevitable loss. Perhaps he could have tried his chances with an all-out attack, but their earlier battle had made it clear that neither side was capable of ending things quickly.

“I surrender,” he said a couple hours later, his voice soft and resigned.

Next, he flew back to the stadium, Kassorith leisurely floating behind him.

“Where did you even come from? I don’t remember seeing you in any of the previous tournaments,” the plasma mage asked once they were closer.

“I didn’t feel confident in the past. I experienced a major breakthrough with the way I wield my domain recently, so I decided to try my luck this year,” Kassorith replied in half-truths.

Percy knew his host wasn’t above lying outright, but the Thess’kalan had to be mindful of what he said, since people might have questions for him later.

“I look forward to facing you again next year,” the plasma mage said with a sigh.

“Ah, yes… me too. You fought well,” Kassorith awkwardly returned the man’s polite words as Percy struggled to stifle his laughter.

‘Good luck facing any of these people without my help. I hope they don’t strip your elite disciple status too soon!’

‘Screw you! They can’t force me to register again. Besides, even if they take my trim away, they can’t take my Greater Thess’kalan Physique! You should be more worried about yourself – you might kill yourself during the ritual!’

Percy remained silent, knowing this was a real danger he had to watch out for. Still, the risk wasn't going to deter him from trying – the priceless reward was way too alluring.

Soon, they reached the stadium.

Before they even entered the dome, they heard the crowd erupt with cheers, all of their adoration now aimed at Kassorith – a previously unknown contestant who had somehow emerged victorious from the preliminaries. Percy was in such a great mood that he didn't even feel like saying anything snarky, giving his slimy host a few minutes to wave at his new fans and revel in his unexpected triumph.

'How long is the break before the finals again?' he asked once Kassorith slithered away from the arena.

'Five days, I think? That's more than enough time for me to take that bath if you've reconsidered lending me the moss,' the Thess'kalan replied.

'Dream on,' Percy spat, not entertaining the idea for even a second.

With the main ingredient, he would now have everything he needed to undergo the ritual himself – if only an incomplete version. He wasn't going to throw all of that away on a gamble. Yet, there was something even more pressing on his mind than the Physique.

'Do you have a way to contact your master?' he asked again.

This was it!

Percy and Kassorith had made the top sixteen, as requested by Syrreneth! The elder now owed him one of the life-extending leaves that had elevated this entire planet into a greater spring. The only thing holding Percy back from taking the nearest teleportation platform to the Broken Fang Sect to demand his prize, was the fact that he wasn't done with the tournament quite yet.

'I do. The new spatial pin they gave me after my promotion functions as a communication device too. Let's grab that after we leave the treasury,' Kassorith said, his good mood making him a little more helpful than usual.

Percy couldn't help but rub his hands in anticipation. He just hoped the elder would uphold his end of the bargain…

Chapter 452 – Jade leaf

Percy watched with curiosity as Kassorith's new pin projected a glowing, circular screen, hovering a few metres in front of them. It was taller than a person, countless flashing colours swirling chaotically within it. They only lasted for a moment, before settling into the familiar image of Syrreneth's chamber, still thick with mist like the last time Percy saw it.

The process reminded Percy of the portals to the Vault of Magic he could summon through Metatron's Decree, but the colourful screen only allowed light and sound to pass through – it wasn't a gateway to a different world. He and Kassorith had picked up the device not long after claiming their fourth prize from the treasury. They'd sought out the privacy of one of the rooms available to the contestants during the intermission so that they could contact the elder.

"Well, well… If it isn't my most prized disciple…" the Violet mused, meditating atop his coiled tail as always, not even bothering to open his eyes.

The man's pin glowed brightly on the side of his tunic, just like their own. Percy had no idea if regular elders had access to the same premium devices as the elite disciples, or if Syrreneth's was only capable of receiving calls but not initiating them.

Either way, he couldn't help but feel a little envious of the Thess'kalans' advanced technology. With a few enchanted pins like these, Percy would have been able to contact Nesha or Elaine whenever he wanted, without having to keep clones stationed in their bodies.

Not that they didn't have anything similar on Remior, but the artifacts Jason and Deimos had used to communicate weren't widespread. Even worse, they seemed to require a very specific combination of affinities to function – one of them being among the rarest in existence. Needless to say, they wouldn't be usable by the general public unless House Etna made some major improvements to their design.

Percy would have considered grabbing a couple of pins before leaving Thess'kala, but he knew his spatial seal couldn't contain other storage devices. If he wanted his own, he would have to study how they were made in the Vault, or commission Metatron to incorporate that functionality into the seal.

‘It’s probably a bad idea,’ he thought, instantly deciding against it.

The darn thing was already a risk. While he had made the titan craft it slowly in front of him, there was always a chance that Metatron had secretly tampered with the artifact. Giving the god explicit permission to add communication features to it would be the dumbest move imaginable.

In any case, Percy had more important matters to worry about than the convenient pins.

“You’ve been following the tournament closely, I take it?” he asked, cutting straight to the point.

Syrreneth nodded. “Naturally. The event is pretty fun to watch even when I don’t have a subordinate participating. I have to admit, you’ve surprised me more than once. The second domain wasn’t unexpected – given your circumstances – but I still have no idea how you outlasted the woman with the toxic steam or overpowered the lava mage. Even getting rid of the plasma user’s shadows was something I only understood after watching the match twice.”

Percy noticed that the elder was being mindful of his words, pretending to speak to Kassorith while avoiding mentioning Percy directly. He’d only talked about their situation in implicit terms. Perhaps, these communication devices weren’t as secure as they would have liked.

“What can I say? I live to entertain,” he replied with a shrug.

He saw no reason to explain how his Insomnia trait worked. As for his runecrafting, it would become a lot more obvious when he inevitably went all out during the finals. But Syrreneth would have to be patient like everyone else.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten our deal though,” Percy said, giving the elder a pointed look.

Syrreneth’s eyes finally opened, a faint smile forming on his lips – one that didn’t quite reach his slit pupils.

“Of course not!” he exclaimed in the most faux amicable tone Percy had ever heard. “You’ve delivered as promised, so you can rest assured I’ll honour our agreement!”

The man’s forced enthusiasm rubbed Percy the wrong way. He could practically feel the barely concealed contempt hiding beneath Syrreneth’s words, but he wasn’t sure what to say.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the Violet summoned something from his spatial pin, seemingly eager to demonstrate his sincerity. It was a crimson cushion embroidered with intricate, golden patterns. A strange object rested atop the cushion, somewhat resembling an oak leaf. However, it looked more like it had been carved out of the finest piece of jade than harvested from an actual tree. It was flat, its perimeter full of bumpy curves, the veins on its surface shimmering in a vibrant green light that pierced through the fog with ease, illuminating the dim chamber.

Percy’s eyes widened at the sight – and not only because of the artifact’s otherworldly beauty, or its importance to his mission. It only took a single glance for him to realize how closely it resembled something he had seen before – and at the most unexpected place to boot. Granted, the object sitting in front of the Thess’kalan elder was several times larger than its counterpart – about thrice as wide as a man’s palm – and shone with far greater intensity.

Percy had several questions about it, but he stuck to the most important for now.

“Was it difficult to get your hands on it?”

It would probably be a good idea to know if a bunch of angry demigods would come looking for the leaf later.

The Violet chuckled. “I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re asking. There was some pushback when I requested it, but not as much as I expected. Apparently, your success in the tournament has turned you into a star within the sect. The higher-ups seemed quite willing to accommodate you. Granted, they did ask why you want a second leaf, so I told them about that low-born relative of yours who needs it.”

Percy nodded. “You look rather pleased yourself. Are they treating you better than before?”

Not that he cared much about the elder's status – hell, he couldn't care less about Kassorith's either – but he figured that maintaining a good relationship with the Violet might improve his odds of getting what he wanted.

"As a matter of fact, they are!" the man replied, his smile widening. "I'm essentially a grand elder in everything but name. Keep the good work up and they might even make it official."

"Everything's fine then? Can I come back to the sect and collect my leaf right away if I want to? No tricks?" Percy asked again, finding this a little too easy.

"Most certainly – the leaf is yours!" Syrreneth exclaimed. "Ah, but I would advise you to take the next few days to rest, instead of travelling. There's no reason to ruin your chances in the tournament – your prize isn't going anywhere. You have my word."

With that, the elder pressed his thumb against the pin to end the transmission, not even waiting for a response.

Percy sighed. He still wasn't convinced things would go smoothly. On the surface, Syrreneth had been nothing but polite and helpful, but the Violet's gaze left a pit in Percy's stomach – the coldness in the elder's eyes making him feel like he was being stared at by a hungry beast rather than a person. No wonder Kassorith had seemed so terrified of his master when they first met. Despite the Violet's assurances, there was a good chance he had no intention of handing Percy the leaf.

'I'll cross that bridge when I get to it… Let's grab everything I can from this place first.'

Perhaps, it would have been more prudent to return to the sect right now and use his participation in the finals as leverage to demand the leaf. Threatening to drop out of the competition might force the Violet to keep his promise. The problem was that Percy wanted the tournament's sweet rewards as much as Kassorith and his master did – and they knew it too. He didn't want to get into a fight with the elder and end up fleeing Thess'kala empty-handed. Depending on how much these people valued the leaves, they might be willing to sacrifice everything else to keep them.

Turning his attention back to his host, Percy focused on something else.

‘You never explained where these leaves come from, or how they work.’

Kassorith had told him that eating one would permanently extend his lifespan, but not by how much. It was important information, as it would determine what grade it would allow him to reach – how much closer to his lofty goal of attaining godhood it would bring him, and how many more greater springs he would need to visit.

More importantly, Percy had noticed something strange during the meeting. The leaf looked nearly identical to those adorning the jade tree his family possessed!

Obviously, the two couldn’t have come from the same place. Their sizes were too different, and the Divine Order would have never gifted something that precious to House Avalon – not even to compensate them for producing a Green-born. Still, the resemblance was uncanny. Too much so to be a coincidence.

Kassorith answered with a question of his own. ‘Have you heard of the World Tree?’

Chapter 453 – World Tree

Percy gasped upon listening to Kassorith’s question.

As a matter of fact, he had heard of the World Tree during one of Mrs. Lia’s classes on Felmara. It was one of the examples she had given her students while teaching them about Elemental Sources, since it was one of the most famous.

It was a special case even among the others of its kind, as it manifested as a living being rather than an inanimate object. Perhaps that was only to be expected, considering that it was the Elemental Source of the life affinity. Scholars speculated that some of the other undiscovered Sources might work like that – including the one for the beast affinity that Sixiang was rumoured to own, or the missing Source of the soul affinity.

Well… having personally been to the Mirror Lake, Percy hadn’t detected any signs of life or sentience. Still, he hadn’t expected to find another Elemental Source so soon. Was the World Tree actually owned by Thess’kala?!

‘Wait, no… that can’t be the case…’ he thought, mentally shaking his head.

Based on what he had seen on Melodia, Elemental Sources tended to strongly influence the population living on their planet, giving sapients the corresponding affinity from birth – something that clearly didn’t apply here. In theory, it was possible that Kassorith’s people owned multiple planets, and that they imported their leaves from a different one, thus explaining why the residents of Thess’kala didn’t all have the life affinity. Or maybe, they had found a way to block the Source’s influence. But there was another reason Percy was convinced that wasn’t the case.

He knew that the World Tree no longer existed.

According to Mrs. Lia, it had been lost eons ago, after multiple powerful factions had fought desperately over it. At the end of the war, the World Tree had been destroyed, along with the very planet it had taken root on. In theory, Elemental Sources could reappear elsewhere if they got destroyed, but that didn’t seem to have happened with the World Tree, for reasons a lower spring like Felmara wasn’t privy to. None of the greater springs had made any moves to search for it after its destruction.

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ Kassorith said, clearly sensing his inner turmoil. ‘You may have heard about the original tree’s destruction, though I suppose the rest isn’t common knowledge yet. Long story short, the factions fighting over it managed to salvage many of its pieces, planting them on their own worlds. Most of them died, but a few of the largest ones took root, eventually growing into giant saplings. Thirteen of them in total.’

‘That many? Is that why a new World Tree hasn’t appeared?’ Percy asked.

‘Probably. This is all speculation – mind you – since this is the only documented case of an Elemental Source surviving in a fragmented state like this. The consensus among the wisest titans in the universe is that a new World Tree will only emerge after at least twelve of the thirteen saplings have died. Either they get destroyed and give the rest room to grow, or they consume one another to speed up the process. The last sapling should grow into the complete tree. If it gets destroyed too, a new tree will probably appear elsewhere from scratch.’

‘Is Thess’kala one of those factions then?’

Kassorith shook his head.

‘I wish. We aren’t ranked nearly that high among the greater springs. We do have a sapling on our planet, but it’s not one of the original thirteen. And we’ve only obtained it thanks to our allies.’

Percy remained silent, prompting his host to continue.

‘To understand our situation, you first have to understand the dynamics at play during the war. There were two sides fighting for the World Tree: The Moirai, and the Void Hand – a grand alliance formed for the sole purpose of opposing them. Thess’kala is merely one of the weaker members of the Hand.’

The revelation caused Percy’s borrowed eyes to widen. He’d always known that the Moirai stood at the very top of the entire universe, but he’d never realized just how wide the gap between them and the other factions was.

Their enemies had been forced to band together to compete with them!

And Thess’kala – this bustling world that put Remior to shame at every turn – clearly wasn’t even qualified to enter the inner circle of the Void Hand! Just how many members – how many greater springs – were part of this alliance?

‘What about Sixiang?’ he asked, suddenly remembering that the divine beasts were supposedly on par with the Moirai.

‘They’re powerful enough to rival our alliance and the Moirai, but they didn’t participate in the war. At least, not initially. Though you can rest assured that they didn’t miss out. Those gluttonous bastards swooped in after the fact, grabbing four saplings. Nobody was happy about that, but neither the Moirai nor our alliance was in any position to pick a new fight at the time.’

‘How did the other nine saplings get distributed then?’

Kassorith shrugged. ‘The Moirai got four as well, while we took the rest. Only five of the allied members were greater springs back then, so they each kept one. Though only four have survived to this day – the fifth of our founding members got wiped out at some point. Their sapling exchanged many hands, before eventually ending up on a neutral world that nobody can steal from.’

There was a lot of information there. Percy was quite curious about this fourth party that neither the Moirai, the divine beasts, nor this massive alliance could easily invade. However, he focused on something more relevant to his current situation.

'So, you're saying that Thess'kala wasn't a greater spring yet?'

'It wasn't. Back then, there weren't as many in the universe – only about a hundred or so. Sadly, our greedy allies refused – and still do – to share their original method of accelerating their advancements with us. We only managed to become a greater spring later, thanks to the leaves.'

Percy fought to suppress a smile. He wouldn't be surprised if at least some of those allies had earned their status due to the cyan powder. Kassorith's people had probably spent eons begging them to share their secret – they would lose their minds if they knew Percy could reveal it with a few words. But he kept those thoughts to himself.

'Where exactly did your tree come from? You said it's not one of the original thirteen.'

'It's not. Not long after the World Tree's destruction, we discovered that the first-generation saplings could produce more seeds and saplings of their own. There is no limit to their number, so our allies could have easily given us more than one.'

'But they didn't,' Percy guessed.

'They didn't,' Kassorith confirmed with a sigh. 'Our alliance is based on mutual interests – not love or friendship. The founding members want to bolster our strength so that we're more useful against the Moirai, but not enough that we challenge their authority. They're extremely mindful of what they give us.'

Percy felt the urge to swear. Not because he cared about the shitty dynamics of this alliance, but because he realized something else.

'Your leaves… Don't tell me that they're less effective than those of the first-generation saplings?!'

Kassorith smiled wryly.

‘Ours only double your remaining lifespan. The originals triple it.’

Percy wasn’t happy to hear that at all, but he still took some time to calculate what this meant for him.

Estimating one’s remaining lifespan wasn’t easy, because it varied slightly from one person to another. People on Remior operated under the assumption that the average Red-born would live about eighty years if they never advanced. However, some might die of old age at seventy, while others could easily make it to ninety.

Higher grades eliminated some of the discrepancy, because they made one more resilient against disease or other external factors. That said, the timing of their promotions added another variable into the equation. Some people were more prudent with their cleansing sessions, always drinking their elixirs without wasting a single moment. Others would occasionally miss a day for one reason or another.

Percy tried to fall into the former category as much as possible, but calculating his own lifespan was even messier than most – due to all the extra things he had to consider.

He had missed a lot of time as a child, because he’d only had access to the diluted elixirs, and hadn’t obtained his second core until his mid-teens. Even worse, every wasted year as a Red with a single core had been worth eighteen of his years now that he was a double Yellow. On top of that, he’d missed a year of cleansing his first core due to his injuries after Huehue, and wasted a lot more time before he earned enough money to upgrade first to the regular elixirs, and later to the cyan paste or the Aurora Dew.

‘When all’s said and done, I should have about eleven hundred years left – give or take a couple decades,’ he concluded after taking everything into account.

Of course, that was without considering his advancements. At his current pace, he should reach Green with both cores in about a hundred and sixty-six years, and Blue in sixteen hundred and sixty-six. He would get to live a little over five thousand years in total – assuming his enemies didn’t kill him sooner. That should take him less than a quarter of the way to Violet.

All of that was before eating the leaf.

If he managed to bring it home, he might live to fifteen thousand. The treasure would only double his current remaining lifespan, but it would effectivelytriple his eventual lifespan, because it would allow him to consume less of it before his next promotions, which would matter a lot more later.

It wasn't bad – not at all. Percy would be able to accomplish so much more with an extra ten thousand years.

'But it still won't get me to Violet,' he grimaced.

Chapter 454 – Jade tree

Percy double and triple checked his math, to make sure he hadn't missed anything. No matter how he reasoned about it, the result was clear as day, however. Even after eating the leaf, he'd fall short of reaching Violet by over three thousand years.

And the worst thing was the knowledge that this could have been avoided, if only he hadn't lost so much time during his childhood. Had Percy consumed a leaf, obtained his second core, and gained access to the Aurora Dew as soon as he awakened, he could have lived nearly twenty thousand years, reaching Violet with time to spare!

'No sense in crying over cracked eggs,' he decided, shaking the pointless thoughts out of his head.

He couldn't change his past any more than he could change his birth grade. Still, that didn't mean that all hope was lost. Percy was only thirty-seven years old right now, and he'd accomplished so much with his bloodline in so little time. There was no telling what he could achieve in the next fifteen thousand years.

It was a bit of a bummer that his first greater spring since the Moirai couldn't do enough to get him to the next grade, but it would still bring him so much closer. And there were hundreds of worlds as advanced or more for him to visit.

‘Let’s be real though… most of them are relying on either Crystallization or the saplings. I already got my second core from the Moirai and I doubt I can copy the divine beasts’ methods. I wonder how many discoveries are left that are still applicable to me…’ he reminded himself, tempering his expectations.

The good news was that Percy had a lead of his own to test. Between his boosting art, the compression principle, the Vault’s runecrafting and pre-casting, he still hoped to give himself an artificial advancement. Reaching that goal might require a lot of time or several additional insights, but he was confident that he could make it happen. After all, the Dance of the Savage Gods already did most of the heavy lifting.

If Percy succeeded, he would skip a grade and triple his lifespan without delaying his next advancement. For all intents and purposes, it would be like turning himself into a fake Orange-born, since all his future promotions would effectively require a tenth of their original cleansing time to reach. Even better, this would automatically give him the extra bit of time he would be missing toward his fifth natural promotion after eating the leaf. All of these effects would compound nicely, allowing him to reach White with ease!

Depending on how early he gave himself the artificial advancement, Percy might end up quite close to the Clear grade – just a step away from becoming a demigod, forging his internal world and attaining godhood. Thinking about that, he suddenly felt a lot better. Especially since his host had already provided him with another clue as to where he could get the final push he would be missing!

‘Those first-generation leaves that triple your lifespan… Will they still work on me after I eat one of yours?’

Kassorith shrugged. ‘They will, but don’t expect the effects to stack. You’ll only get the difference – an extra one-and-a-half times multiplier after the second-generation leaf.’

‘How do you know that if you don’t have them?’

‘It’s been tested extensively. Our allies might be stingy with their saplings and seeds, but they’re more than willing to reward our strongest demigods with one of the better leaves in exchange for exemplary contributions to the Void Hand.’

‘Is there a chance we can win one during the final rounds of the tournament?’ Percy asked, some hope finding its way into his voice.

Giving himself an artificial advancement was far from a certainty, but the combination of that and a first-generation leaf would actually be enough for him to reach his goal.

‘No way,’ Kassorith said, bursting his bubble. ‘Our leaders keep most of the leaves for their own people. Even the few they give us would never end up in an event meant for Blues or Violets – no matter how talented we are. In fact, don’t expect to find any of the second-generation leaves in the prize pool either. The organizers don’t bother to offer them, since all the participants have already eaten one by the time they are eligible to register.’

Percy nodded, not letting his host’s words get to him. He’d never expected this to be easy, but the path forward was clear at last.

His best bet was still to get the leaf from Syrreneth. After returning home, he would have to work on upgrading his boosting art as quickly as possible. Of course, that would have to wait until after he created his wasp familiar, since Nephthys’s pyramid had already started showing signs of decay – even before he set out for Thess’kala. Finally, Percy would have to continue sending out clones and searching aggressively for more greater springs, looking for one of the planets with a first-generation sapling – or something equally useful.

If he managed to complete all three of those steps fast enough, he would be on track to become the first Red-born god in the universe!

Forcing himself to calm down, he shifted his attention to something else.

‘Have you seen anything like this before?’ he asked, showing Kassorith an image of his family’s jade tree. Naturally, he removed the background and any other distinguishing features that might allow his host to link the strange plant to humanity or Remior.

‘It’s definitely a World Tree sapling,’ Kassorith confirmed, though his next few words smothered Percy’s growing enthusiasm right in its crib. ‘Third-…? No. Probably fourth- or even fifth-generation. I’ve never been to our tree before, but I’ve seen plenty of illustrations. They look almost identical – save for the size difference. Where did you find it?’

‘Just some barren world. I don’t know its name,’ Percy lied. Then again, that might be exactly where the Divine Order had found the plant, before bringing it back to Remior and gifting it to his family. ‘Would its leaves also extend one’s lifespan? Don’t tell me I should have grabbed a handful while I had the chance.’

‘You’re overthinking it. Only first- and second-generation leaves do that. Third-generation leaves only have some minor healing properties, but the one you showed me probably doesn’t even have that. It’s only good for meditating on life magic. Even then, its effect should be a far cry from a true Elemental Source’s. Lower-generation saplings have leaked to lesser springs and barren worlds a long time ago. By now, they’re pretty widespread, though I doubt many of the people living there know of their origin. It’s really not that surprising that you stumbled upon one, considering your bloodline.’

Percy sighed. This was only to be expected, though he wouldn’t have said no to a way of boosting his relatives’ lifespans – even slightly.

‘What about the original World Tree? Are its leaves more effective than the first-generation saplings’?’

Kassorith frowned. ‘Possibly. Nobody knows, since the war started almost as soon as the World Tree was discovered. By the time people learned of that effect, none of the original leaves remained. If you want to know the answer to that question… well…’

The Thess’kalan didn’t complete his sentence, but his meaning was clear. Percy would have to unite or destroy all thirteen of the saplings, allowing a new World Tree to emerge. Perhaps it was an impossible dream. The Moirai, the Void Hand and the divine beasts had all failed to do that – what hope did a lone mortal from some backwater planet even have?

Then again, Percy could go where nobody else could. Maybe there was a chance. And if his experiments with the Dance failed, this might become a necessity.

‘It’s something to consider if the opportunity arises and I run out of alternatives. For now, I should focus on the tournament and Syrreneth. No matter what, I can’t afford to leave this place without everything I want.’

‘If you’re done interrogating me, I’d like to grab something to eat,’ Kassorith suddenly said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Percy nodded, remembering that his host's body was still that of an adolescent. It hadn't mattered much during their fight with the plasma mage, but they had yet to regain their full size since they used their bloodline after the third round. And they would need a lot of food to give Kassorith the height and mass he was missing. Based on what the Blue had explained, consuming his own discarded body was by far the most effective way to recover, followed by eating the corpse of another Thess'kalan. Regular food barely even did anything.

Luckily, the tournament held a banquet for the participants during the intermission – both the winners and the losers were allowed to join. Kassorith didn't even wait for a response, already slithering out of their private cavern. Summoning one of his flying greatswords, he rode it toward one of the neighbouring pillars – the same one where the finals would be held – before entering a tunnel near its mid-section.

It was time for them to unwind a little.

'Go on then,' Percy said. 'I'm not sure how much restoring your body will help, but we'll need every advantage we can get. I bet our next fights will be a lot tougher…'

Chapter 455 – Fifth round

Kassorith – and, by extension, Percy – stood at the side of the arena, waiting for the battles to begin. The pillar they were on looked identical to the other seven, both inside and out. The stadium had the same number of seats, all of them filled with cheering spectators. The air trembled with the collective hum of thousands of voices, a living tide that ebbed and swelled with every movement on the stage. The faint scent of hot oils from snack vendors drifted between the rows, making Kassorith's mouth water.

For the most part, everything felt the same as the preliminaries.

Percy knew this was an illusion, however. Most people were watching from home, the countless eyes previously scattered across the eight blocks now converging upon them. On top of that, the second phase of the tournament would likely draw even more attention, and the fights were now spaced farther apart to give everyone a chance to watch them all. Alas, there was nothing he could do about it – other than grit his host's gums and do his best to win the prizes.

Kassorith was scheduled for the first match, but they still had some time before it started – time that they were using productively.

Well… sort of.

‘Careful! Less pressure! You’re going to shatter my core!’ Kassorith’s voice cracked in Percy’s mind, edged with panic.

Percy drew mana from his host’s stomach, guiding it to his sternum. He paused for a fraction of a second, aiming at the hairline cracks the initial burst had revealed, then sent the elixir-augmented mana into them.

‘Calm down.’ Percy rolled their eyes. ‘I’m not an idiot – I wouldn’t risk crippling you right before our fight. Look closely. I’m going slower than you showed me. The real risk here is wasting the pill, not damaging the organ.’

He’d been on Thess’kala for several weeks now, with plenty of opportunities to watch Kassorith’s so-called “Cascading Cracks” technique in action. They hadn’t missed a single session either – except during their first fight which had lasted five days. Percy’s proficiency was climbing nicely as a result. It was a tricky technique to learn, but experiencing Kassorith’s mana flow directly made all the difference. Percy had even pressured his host into letting him try it by himself a few times – much to the Blue’s dismay.

At this rate, Percy was confident he’d master the technique within a month after returning to Remior. Incorporating it into his current core-cleansing method might take a bit longer, but that was ultimately a small price to pay to essentially double his stash of Aurora Dew. Micky would have it even easier with just a single core to cleanse – the clone would pass him the knowledge in no time once they reshuffled.

For Percy, the Cascading Cracks technique was among the least impactful things he’d found on Thess’kala – which only spoke volumes to how rich greater springs truly were. If he compared it to most of his other adventures, the cleansing art was quite the haul. Still, it fell short of the life-extending leaf or the body-strengthening ritual. That only applied to him as an individual, however. Neither of those things could be used by a large number of people, so the cleansing technique was by far the most important thing to bring back to Remior.

‘You speak as if wasting my cleansing session is a small matter!’ Kassorith snapped, though he sounded less tense now that he realized he wasn’t in danger.

‘What’s the big deal?’ Percy shrugged. ‘You’re a Yellow-born with a doubled lifespan. Missing a day – or hell, even a century – won’t stop you from reaching the Clear grade.’

Kassorith clicked his tongue. ‘Becoming a demigod isn’t everything. Sure, attaining divinity doesn’t require a fixed amount of time like the earlier grades, but that doesn’t mean you can do it instantly. Need I remind you that most ancestors in the universe run out of time in the end?’

Okay… Percy had to admit that his host had a point.

Even among Green-borns, only a tiny fraction made it to godhood. Comprehending a concept and forging one’s internal world was a monumental challenge. The most talented demigods achieved that in mere centuries, but others exhausted their remaining lifespan – often tens of thousands of years – only to fail.

For someone like Percy – who’d been told his whole life that he’d never reach White, let alone Clear – even a slim chance of becoming a demigod was cause for joy. Even if he only got a few years left in that grade, he was determined to make them count. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to plan ahead – to ensure that he gave himself some leeway. Especially since he had a hunch that his promotion to godhood would be a lot messier than the average demigod’s.

“Greetings, ladies and gentlemen,”a booming voice said, drawing everyone’s attention.

The sound rolled through the arena like a struck gong, resonating in the chest more than the ears, and the crowd responded in kind – slapping their tails against the ground, clapping, even hissing sect chants that tangled together into an electric chaos. The announcer was another elderly White with a trim, but not the same one as before. Percy was once again reminded of how lucrative this tournament was – they had over a hundred such powerful figures serving as mere presenters each year.

“Today, we gather for the tournament’s main event: the finals!”

The man paused, letting the crowd’s roar crest before continuing.

“Every elite disciple in the tournament is a remarkable mage – the pride of our world. This applies as much to those eliminated early as it does to the chosen few standing before me. To all the defeated contestants – I wish you luck with your training – we hope to see you again next year. That said, some of our young talents have climbed higher than their peers. It is them that we are here to celebrate.”

The elder turned toward Kassorith and the others, his gaze lingering on each of them for a moment.

“The first match of the fifth round will be fought between veteran of sixty-seven tournaments and three-time champion, Laathsalath of the Tall Pillar Sect, and this year’s rising star, Kassorith of the Broken Fang Sect! May you compete confidently, and honourably – remember that all of Thess’kala is watching!”

Percy swallowed hard. This was exactly what he was worried about. But it was too late to back down now.

Oblivious to his thoughts, his host and his opponent slithered onto the stage, stopping a couple dozen metres apart. Laathsalath bore a long vertical scar over his left eye – a wound he could have healed easily, yet had clearly chosen to keep. It was likely a memento from some old battle. Or a cliché fashion statement.

Percy hadn’t seen him fight, since they’d come from different blocks. Luckily, Kassorith knew a few things about him, as the man was quite famous. Like Kassorith, he had an innate metal affinity and fought similarly.

But Laathsalath had… something else that his host didn’t…

“If both contestants are ready…” the announcer said, receiving two nods. “…let the match begin!”

A silver bloom of liquid mana erupted from each fighter’s body. One rapidly condensed into a flock of flying longswords, the other into a storm of throwing axes. Neither side wasted any time, hurling their constructs against one another. The crisp ting of metal filled the arena alongside a spray of silver fragments and orange sparks. Gasps and shouts rippled through the stands as the first collisions rang out, though Percy and Kassorith tuned them out, used to the crowd by now.

Both combatants remained glued to the ground, knowing that this match would be decided by the quality of their constructs, the efficiency by which they forged them, and the skill with which they manipulated them – not their ability to fly away.

Unfortunately, this was a contest that Kassorith was bound to lose.

He wasn't bad in any of these areas – his opponent was simply better. Percy quickly noticed that his host's swords shattered more easily, each axe slashing through two or even three before breaking. The scarred man's domain pressed forward, pushing against Kassorith's in lockstep with his weapons. Within seconds, Laathsalath seized control of two-thirds of the battlefield, driving Kassorith to a corner. As far as Percy could see, his host was forced to burn through his mana twice as fast just to keep up.

'What an absolute monster…'

It wasn't hard to see why. On closer inspection, faint patterns covered the axes. These weren't deliberate enchantments like Percy's – they resembled natural ripples engraved into the steel in shifting shades of grey.

This time, there was no doubt about it – this truly was the result of a blessing.

If its effect wasn't obvious enough, the intel they'd gathered before the fight sealed the deal. Unlike Gabe's blessing of heat – which only affected his fire affinity, thus making it difficult to incorporate it into his light spells in a balanced manner – Laathsalath's blessing was one perfectly tailored to his metal mana, greatly elevating the strength of his constructs.

Percy sighed.

'I guess there's no avoiding it. We'll have to go all out…'

Chapter 456 – Clash of steel

'Just how lucky do you have to be to end up with both a composite affinity and the right blessing for it?!'

In theory, it was possible to acquire both with the right treasures and a matching Ring of Sacrilege, but Laathsalath's background was already known. It was clear he'd been born like this, having inherited everything from his mother who was a goddess. Of course, Percy had expected to meet prodigies of this calibre in the finals, so this didn't surprise him that much.

All things considered, he wasn't as worried about the fight, since he knew his magiscript was potent enough to get him and Kassorith through the fifth round. It was something else that gnawed at him.

'I hope your mommy isn't watching us right now,' he thought with a sigh, grabbing a fragment of Kassorith's longswords flying toward him. The shard clanged against his palm with a faint vibration, the lingering heat from the collision still permeating the broken weapon.

It was about a quarter of the construct's blade – taken from the lower mid-section, closer to the base than the tip. Percy held it horizontally with both hands, shaping his domain into a rune. If he helped his host fight back against their opponent's domain, he could probably slow down their mana consumption, but not enough to outlast Laathsalath. Percy was confident that enchanting the weapons was the best use of his willpower.

Ignoring Kassorith – who was still spewing liquid metal from his pores and fighting desperately to hold back the throwing axes – Percy used his Instantaneous Imprint spell to stamp the first enchantment into the shard. He didn't stop after one, soon adding a second, and a third. Eight runes in total for each of the simplified unit cells. And half a dozen unit cells on the fragment – three on either side of the blade.

The pseudo-enchantments were twice the size of his fingernails, but contained less than half the runes he was using on Remior. It was a necessary compromise – if he wanted to apply the enchantments fast enough to matter. He left wide gaps between them too, spacing them precisely to allow for four times as many unit cells later. Not easy for an amateur – but Percy was no longer one. He'd already drawn millions of runes in his life before this trip to Thess'kala, so he knew what he was doing.

Once finished, he pulled a sliver of metal mana from his host's core, pouring it into the self-repair enchantments. At the same time, he willed the fragment to snap into four pieces, making sure each contained at least one functional unit cell. Regenerating the fragments into copies of the original, he lined them up and fused them, melting the steel at their edges. A hiss of vapor escaped as the molten seams cooled against the arena's chill air.The sections near the tip were supposed to be narrower, so he reshaped the weapon slightly, taking extra care not to distort the enchantments or the spacing.

Flicking the self-repairs off and on again, he had them memorize the new template, before passing it to Kassorith. He didn't even bother to add a hilt to the weapon – it wasn't necessary.

'All done. Use this to make more,' he said, getting a nod back.

Unlike the improvised tactics they'd employed to get through some of the previous matches, this was something they'd practiced extensively before the tournament.

Smashing the sword into pieces, Kassorith funnelled mana into the runes, producing multiple copies of the enchanted longsword. The air shimmered faintly around the forming weapons, the heated metal warping the view of the battlefield beyond. The process slowed his output slightly, giving Laathsalath even more ground. By now, the blessed Thess'kalan controlled over three-quarters of the battlefield and still had over half of his mana reserves left, while Kassorith was down to a third.

Still, Percy didn't panic, knowing that conceding another step now would be worth it later.

Soon, Kassorith had a stockpile of new weapons to throw into the fray. They cut through the air like crossbow bolts, colliding with the spinning axes in an instant. Unlike before, most of the swords survived the first impact, allowing Kassorith to reuse them. The sharp metallic crashes echoed across the arena, each hit sending sparks scattering into the dust-filled air.

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Laathsalath still advanced, but did so much more slowly. Kassorith's mana drain eased too.

'It's working! Do it again!' the Blue exclaimed, his heart skipping a beat.

Percy didn't need to be told twice – or even once for that matter. Before handing over the first longsword, he'd kept an extra fragment for himself. While Kassorith fought, Percy had been busy adding more runes to it.

'There. Switch to this one,' he said a few seconds later, passing Kassorith a longsword with twice as many runes as before, starting work on the next one.

Worried as he was about someone recognizing the Vault's enchantments, Percy would be lying if he said he wasn't excited about this battle. Without the blessing, Laathsalath was probably still stronger than Kassorith, but not by much. This was the perfect opportunity for him to test how his magiscript stacked up against an actual blessing – with everything else being about equal, more or less.

Once Kassorith replaced his constructs again, he saw another significant improvement. For the first time since the start of the battle, his swords began winning against the throwing axes, surviving more clashes and pushing their counterparts back. Progress was modest at first, but the tide was turning.

Laathsalath seemed to notice that too.

Whether or not he saw the intricate unit cells empowering the longswords, he clearly realized that Kassorith was up to something. Not willing to give him another chance to upgrade his attacks, he added more pressure into his own. Like Kassorith, Laathsalath could split lightning mana from his core to superheat his constructs. The arcs of electricity snapped like whip cracks, briefly illuminating the steel storm between them.

It generally wasn't a good idea to do that unless one wanted to end the fight quickly. While it added to the weapons' offensive power, the charged blades were less mana efficient than regular steel. Still, the blessed disciple probably understood that he had to forsake some of his mana advantage to stop Kassorith before he grew even stronger.

Percy's host responded in kind, infusing his longswords with lightning too. In theory, both sides burned their reserves at the same rate now. If anything, Kassorith was slightly ahead. Had this been the start of the battle, this would have been a great place to be. Only, it looked like Kassorith's core would still dry up first, thanks to the existing gap between them. Should that happen, the battle would be over.

Gritting his gums, Percy was forced to interrupt his enchanting session halfway through, giving Kassorith a half-baked construct. It was better than his current swords, but he hadn't managed to add as many unit cells as he would have liked.

Acting fast, Kassorith spent some time to replace his weapons again, easing up on the lightning infusion. This lowered his mana consumption to a more bearable level, at the cost of yielding more ground to Laathsalath. Still, everyone involved understood that was only a temporary setback.

As soon as the third wave of constructs was ready, Kassorith pressed forward again. His opponent was forced to spend even more mana just to keep up. Eventually, he realized it wasn't sustainable, giving up a lot of territory to preserve his mana.

Unfortunately for him, Percy had already resumed working on the enchantments. The fourth round took a bit longer, as he also had to fit the unit cells he'd been missing from before into the longsword. Still, Laathsalath could do nothing but watch as Percy perfected the construct, passing Kassorith a weapon densely covered in runes. Even holding it felt different this time – the steel faintly humming with layered enchantments as flashes of mana coursed through the intricate grid of unit cells, further amplifying their effects.

'There you go. Just put that bastard out of our misery,' he said.

Their opponent's attacks grew even more erratic. Likely realizing that he no longer had any hopes of winning a frontal contest, Laathsalath spread out his axes in search of an opening. Kassorith wasn't an idiot, however, adjusting the formation of his own constructs to intercept them.

The battle was already over.

A new flock of decorated longswords smashed through the spinning axes with ease, advancing through the aerial battlefield. Shards of steel and sparks rained down, tinkling against the floor in a steady metallic drizzle. To his credit, Laathsalath fought until his last drop of mana, until the final steel fragment under his control got violently knocked down to the ground, and until his domain got whittled down to nothing.

Was it stubbornness, or persistence driving him? Or simply the pride of a spoiled son not accustomed to losing?

Percy didn't know which one it was, nor did he care. With his runecrafting task now over, he was free to pile his domain onto Kassorith's, seeking to end the fight a moment sooner. There was no point dragging it out – everyone had already seen everything he and his host could do. The stadium's enchantments flared, halting the swords before they skewered Laathsalath. The sudden stillness felt almost unnatural after the relentless clash of metal, like the air itself was holding its breath.

The fifth round was over – Percy and Kassorith would advance to the quarterfinals. Even better, Percy's enchantments had proven themselves – against both a blessing, and an opponent of arguably superior skill. Neither he nor his host felt much joy in their victory, however, for a very simple reason…

'That was the last of our trump cards.'

Chapter 457 – Bath

'So what, do we just empty the vials into the water?' Percy asked.

'I guess. That's all the instructions say,' Kassorith replied, retrieving the three ingredients from his spatial pin.

The organizers had spaced out the matches in the second phase of the tournament more – partly to give the participants a chance to rest, and partly to milk the audience as much as possible. There was a three-hour break between fights, and another two days between rounds.

Since Percy and Kassorith had fought in the very first match, they had plenty of time to go through the ritual now that the latter had gathered a full set of ingredients. They already had a fair idea of who their next opponents might be, so they knew the enhanced physique was unlikely to help much during the sixth round, but there was a good chance it would during the semifinals.

After forging a large, cylindrical tub out of steel mana, they flew to the base of the pillar, collecting cold water from the ocean. They'd even asked around beforehand, to make sure the salt in the seawater wouldn't mess with the ritual. Returning to their room, they soaked into the frigid liquid. The Thess'kalan sea was always cold – especially this far from the equator – but it didn't feel too bad. Percy credited that to Kassorith's grade and the diluted traces of his ancestral physique – the very thing they were about to improve.

He once again suppressed the temptation to snatch the vials from his host's hands. Now that Kassorith had a full set, Percy could potentially undergo two rounds of the ritual if he brought the ingredients back to his main body. Still, it didn't make sense to burn bridges with the man at this point. Sighing, he watched Kassorith uncork the gemstone containers, emptying them into the bath.

The effect was immediate.

A faint red glow spread in the water, causing it to bubble. At first, Percy was afraid it would boil away at this rate, long before the two days were up. He soon realized that the liquid wasn't flying away from the bath, however, but inwards – trying to seep into Kassorith's body. The man's scales did nothing to stop the substance, the magical mixture aggressively finding its way through the gaps between them. Kassorith's heart started beating faster, violently pumping blood through his body. It made Percy feel quite hot, but that didn't last very long.

An indescribable chill gripped his host's bones the very next instant – thanks to the Abyssal Moss, no doubt. It reminded Percy of Micky's soul-freezing mana. Only, the feeling wasn't restricted to certain mana channels this time – it freely permeated every centimetre of flesh. Then came a third sensation – a wave of numbness that caused their muscles to alternate between tensing and relaxing, leaving Percy and Kassorith weak and unable to control their body.

'The instructions didn't mention how unpleasant this would be,' the Thess'kalan groaned.

At least, they'd had the foresight to keep the water level low enough to avoid drowning. It was barely deep enough to cover their face if they ducked, but they could easily breathe by leaning back against the wall and keeping their nostrils above the surface.

'Suck it up,' Percy said. 'There are millions of people out there, watching your fights with envy. I bet they all wish they could be in your shoes.'

'The fuck's a shoe?' Kassorith asked.

'Now you're just messing with me. Surely you know that most sapients in the universe have feet,' Percy replied, rolling his eyes.

His host chuckled, not denying it.

'Say, what happens if you go through the ritual twice?' Percy asked, changing the topic.

He wasn't going to complete his first set of ingredients until after their next victory, and he was planning to spend his last reward on the affinity-changing treasure for his friends. This meant that a second bath wasn't a realistic option. Even so, he couldn't help his curiosity.

'The more you do it, the stronger the effect – that's how the leaders of the Ancestral Lineage Sect built up their physiques to their current level. But the closer your body is to the person you're inheriting from, the smaller the gains become,' Kassorith explained.

Percy frowned.

'How much smaller?'

'A lot.' Kassorith shrugged. 'A second bath would only give me something like five percent of the first one's benefits. A third would do even less. Once your body surpasses the source of the Heartblood, the gains become insignificant. Why do you think the ancestors have only made it this far after thousands of generations?'

Percy nodded in understanding. For people like him and Kassorith who lacked the Ancestral Lineage Sect's bloodline, undergoing a second ritual didn't make much sense. Without the ability to preserve the purity of their blood, they'd only be wasting valuable ingredients. It would take several rounds to see any notable improvements past the first bath, and most of that effort would be lost on their kids.

Multiple baths were only worthwhile for those with the bloodline. Leaving aside the fact that they could pass all the benefits over after their death, their kids were also more likely to inherit the bloodline themselves, thus giving the original owners of the physique another avenue to preserve their lineage.

Still, Percy was an outsider.

He wasn't planning to stay on Thess'kala much longer, nor did he care about using the ingredients efficiently. Even if the ritual worked on a human, there was a chance it wouldn't be very effective. With a lower starting point, and a body less compatible with the physique, he might need multiple baths just to receive the same benefits as Kassorith. Perhaps it wouldn't be a terrible idea to look for a second set of ingredients, should the opportunity present itself. If he didn't find an affinity-changing treasure that he liked by the end of the tournament, it might be worth claiming a second vial of Heartblood.

In any case, Percy and Kassorith said nothing more.

The uncomfortable sensations intensified over the course of the first day, peaking around midnight. Neither Percy nor his host were having a great time, but they'd chosen to spend their time thinking about their next match instead of complaining about the ritual.

Technically, their opponent was still up in the air, since they hadn't stayed in the stadium long enough to watch the fight after theirs. However, the odds were heavily stacked in favour of a certain gravity user. Suffice to say, they were operating under the assumption that they'd be fighting him.

The man was supposedly good at deflecting hostile spells and throwing his opponents off balance without spending much mana. If the rumours were true, they were in for a tough fight – especially since the gravity user would now know not to give them enough time to enchant their constructs.

Percy had some ideas on how to counter him, but nothing concrete yet.

The ritual stopped torturing them by the dawn of the second day – evident by the scarce rays of sunlight reluctantly spilling into the dim cavern. Their body had already begun to acclimate to its new state, over eighty percent of the ingredients having been absorbed. In theory, they could already end the ritual without missing out on much, but nobody in their right mind would consider wasting even a drop of the priceless materials just to save a few hours.

Not long after nightfall, Kassorith grew a little impatient. The ritual wasn't over yet, but he shifted slightly inside the container, testing his body. Percy perked up too, curious about the changes.

Flicking their forked tongue, they realized they could perceive the temperature of their surroundings much more accurately than before. The walls of the cavern felt warmer the closest they were to the tunnel's entrance, due to bathing under the gentle sunlight the whole day. The difference was barely worth mentioning, but it was quite telling that Kassorith was now capable of detecting it.

Even the bathwater felt less cold, albeit for a bunch of different reasons. The liquid itself had warmed up due to their body temperature, while their flesh had grown colder after the ritual. At the same time, most of the Abyssal Moss had been consumed, and their resistance to cold was now heightened.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, Percy experienced a surge of strength now that the numbness was starting to fade. It was hard to tell exactly how much stronger they'd grown, but he felt they could rip their previous self apart with their bare hands if they wanted. As for the potency of their venom, they had nothing to test it against, but Percy didn't doubt it had also risen to a whole new level, along with their resistance to it.

There should still be a few hours left until they exhausted the lingering traces of the ingredients in the bath – and nobody had come looking for them yet – so they weren't in a rush to end the ritual. That said, Percy couldn't help but pull up his Status, wondering if it had anything to say about Kassorith's new body.

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Mutations:

Chapter 458 – Sixth round

To nobody's surprise, the gravity user had prevailed against his previous opponent, earning his place in Kassorith's sixth match.

He was one of the strangest mages they'd faced in the tournament. His attacks weren't lethal – or even that dangerous, however. He simply fired the occasional blast of concentrated force, mostly to keep Kassorith under pressure while conserving his own mana.

Most of his efforts went into veering Kassorith's longswords off course – he accomplished that using short bursts of gravity mana seamlessly integrated into his domain. They allowed him to shove the constructs away whenever they were about to hit, sending them plummeting into the mist-shrouded depths below.

But he didn't stop at defence.

Every now and then, his domain expanded, exerting a strange influence that somehow permeated both Kassorith's domain and Percy's. It applied opposing forces on Kassorith's body and the greatsword he was using to fly, threatening to unseat him. More than once, the man succeeded, knocking Kassorith off the construct and forcing him to waste mana to forge a new one. At the same time, the latter had to guard against the inevitable rain of gravity blasts that always seemed to accompany the man's attempts.

That alone wasn't enough to harm Kassorith, but it was extremely effective at gnawing at his reserves. Even worse, the gravity user always seemed to time his disturbances whenever Percy tried to enchant a longsword, never giving him a chance to recycle his winning strategy from the previous round.

'How annoying!' Kassorith spat mentally, clicking his tongue as he clawed his way onto what felt like his twentieth greatsword since the start of the battle. 'We can't keep going like this. My consumption isn't as bad as the last fight, but he's spending even less mana than the guy with the scar!'

'Well… I've got an idea, but you're not going to like it,' Percy said.

'Go on,' Kassorith replied, though he sounded guarded.

'What if I stamp a few lightness runes directly into our body?'

Percy didn't bother to explain his reasoning, Kassorith's silence indicating that he understood him. Their opponent didn't seem to knock them off their greatsword by applying an external force on them. His domain appeared to simply amplify Thess'kala's existing gravity while randomizing its direction. If it worked like Percy thought it did, there was a good chance the lightness runes would negate most of its effects.

If Percy planted the metallic seals directly into their skin, their opponent wouldn't be able to remove them, allowing Kassorith to remain on his greatsword long enough for them to upgrade their weapons too. Percy could apply lightness and sharpness runes on the longswords, allowing them to fly fast enough to reach their target before he managed to deflect them.

'Sounds painful,' Kassorith said, a grimace marring his face.

'It will be. But think of the sweet rewards. Besides, the damage isn't permanent. We can use your bloodline to fix everything after the fight.'

Kassorith didn't seem happy at all. Percy didn't blame him for it, as he wasn't looking forward to mutilating himself either. Still, this was the only semi-viable plan either of them had come up with.

The next time their opponent pulled the greatsword from underneath Kassorith's tail seemed to seal the deal, causing the latter to give Percy a mental nod.

'Do it. Just make sure to beat the bastard.'

Not wasting any time, Percy drew some liquid metal from his host's sternum, along with some additional lightning mana to superheat it. Between Kassorith's resistance to his own affinities and his new mutation, Percy knew it would take a lot of heat to brand the symbol through their fortified scales. Gathering his domain into the red-hot liquid, he allowed his spectral trait to take over, pressing his palm against Kassorith's chest.

The pain made him wince – or was that Kassorith's doing? Either way, their muscles sizzled, the acrid smell of burnt flesh stinging their nostrils as a wave of agony rippled through their body. Their ribs cracked and their lungs cooked, but Percy didn't pause until he felt the controlled-lightness rune click in his mind, responding to his will.

Kassorith's eyes watered, but they still managed to catch their opponent's frown through a film of tears. The man clearly realized they were up to something. Knowing they were swiftly running out of time, Percy used both hands to brand another pair of runes – the first on the other side of his host's chest, the other on his belly.

The hostile domain locked onto Kassorith, trying to pull him away from his greatsword. The latter tightened his tail's grip on the hilt, clinging on for dear life. At the same time, Kassorith fired some of his flying longswords against the gravity mage, pressuring him into halting his assault. Sure enough, the man was forced to withdraw his domain, using it to deflect the projectiles.

'Just a couple more,' Percy said, more to reassure himself than his host. 'I think they're helping.'

The effect of the enchantments was subtle, but this was the first time they'd managed to resist their opponent's efforts to throw them off – Percy didn't think that was a coincidence.

Kassorith remained silent, buying as much time as he could for Percy to brand the next few runes. Bracing himself, Percy did just that, the gravity mage's domain growing less effective with every new lightness rune they suffered. Before long, they found themselves able to stick to the greatsword with

relative ease. Not wanting to leave things up to chance, Percy still grabbed the opportunity to engrave a few lightness runes onto the greatsword too, just to be sure.

'Let's end this farce already. I'm so done with this bastard,' Kassorith said.

'Agreed,' Percy replied, already beginning to stamp one unit cell after another onto a longsword.

The rest of the battle held no surprises. The gravity mage had done an admirable job preparing a counter to Percy's runecrafting before the fight, but he didn't seem to have a response to Percy's solution. As expected, Kassorith eventually gathered enough enchanted constructs to fight back, his opponent no longer capable of deflecting them as effortlessly as before. That was not to say that the gravity mage was entirely out of options, but he no longer had any good ones.

He was forced to apply his gravity mana more directly, wrapping it around his body into a dense, invisible force field. The spell was far harder for Percy and Kassorith to penetrate, buying the man a few minutes. However, it also cost several times more mana to maintain. A while later, the gravity mage's reserves looked like they were about to dry up. With a deep sigh, he voiced his surrender, clearly unwilling to plunge into the cold ocean.

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Three days later, Kassorith stood in the arena face-to-face with his seventh opponent, waiting for the semi-finals to begin. It was a female Thess'kalan – the one they'd been expecting to fight ever since they saw the brackets. Interestingly, she was a disciple of the Ancestral Lineage Sect – the very organization that had generously donated this year's main reward!

However, she didn't possess the special bloodline that made her sect famous across Thess'kala, but a different one – one that nevertheless synergized with her enhanced physique just as well, if not better. In fact, Percy had been shocked to learn about it, since this was easily the most powerful bloodline he'd ever heard of – save for his own, of course.

It was called Mana Lock.

It exerted a powerful effect that spread across a wider area than a domain cast by a mage at the same grade and could simultaneously affect multiple opponents. Anyone under its mysterious influence would find it almost impossible to draw mana from their core! With enough effort, they could still pull out a trickle – enough to fire a single, weak spell, or to defend themselves against one. Still, it wasn't easy to fight under these conditions. If it caught somebody off-guard while flying, it could even send them to their doom. In other words, this bloodline could rob even the most powerful mages of all their weapons!

Its only downside was that it affected its owner as much as her opponents, but that was probably why the Ancestral Lineage Sect had accepted the woman into their ranks. They clearly thought that their legendary physique was the perfect match for her ability, since a stronger body was as lethal a weapon as any under the bloodline's effect.

'How good are you in close combat?' Percy asked.

'Not very,' Kassorith replied. 'Why the hell would a Blue bother learning how to fight with their hands?'

Percy pointed at the woman with his chin, causing his host to sigh.

'Thoughts?' Kassorith asked.

'Leave this one to me.' Percy shrugged. 'Just support me with your domain. Assuming it still works.'

Luckily, Percy was used to physical fights. Granted, he'd never done it in such a powerful body – not just a Blue's, but a mutated one as well. He most certainly wasn't used to fighting without feet. That said, he'd possessed enough weird creatures over the years that he'd grown proficient at adapting his fighting style on a whim, learning to wield all sorts of foreign body parts and unfamiliar appendages. On top of that, he'd spent enough time in Kassorith's body that he understood it well enough. Of course, their opponent probably had centuries of experience fighting like this, so Percy didn't think this would be an easy fight. Especially since her bloodline wasn't the only thing they had to worry about.

'Well, whatever… I already got my complete set of ingredients. Worst-case scenario, I fail to get Nesha and Elaine's affinity-changing treasure.'

It would suck for the girls, but Percy could look for another one in the future. That was not to say he wouldn't do his best to win, however. Taking over Kassorith's body, he assumed a fighting stance. He was about to pounce as soon as the announcer declared the start of the battle, though the woman caught him off-guard by raising her hand first.

"Wait!" she yelled, causing even the gold-trimmed elder to stop in his tracks. "Before we begin, I want to propose a wager!"

Chapter 459 – Wager

"I'm listening," Kassorith said, the curiosity in his soul matching Percy's.

"Do you still have any of my sect's ingredients that you haven't used?" the woman asked. "I'll bet mine against yours. Anything you have, as many as you have – both the primary and the secondaries. One for one, winner takes all."

Kassorith creased his brow, though he didn't rush to answer. He'd already used his own ingredients, so they only had Percy's. Naturally, it was up to the latter to decide whether to gamble his hard-won prizes away. The announcer and the crowd didn't press them for a decision either. If anything, the spectators only grew more excited, appearing as invested in the wager as the participants. This was exactly the kind of drama that they craved.

But Percy didn't care about anyone's opinion except for his own – it was his precious ritual on the line. On one hand, accepting the wager would be reckless and arguably unnecessary. He'd already won both the bath ingredients and the life-extending leaf – his main reasons for signing up to the tournament in the first place – so he didn't care about the final two rounds as much. Even if he lost to the woman – something that was quite possible – it wouldn't really affect his gains from the trip. Viewed that way, refusing was a no brainer.

Then again… the ritual might not work as well on his human body as it had on Kassorith's. A second helping might fix that. Even if the additional bath proved unnecessary, Percy wouldn't say no to a smaller boost, or to the possibility of gifting the ingredients to somebody else. At the end of the day, it all came down to how confident he felt about beating her.

"Why are you gambling for ingredients anyway? Can't you just request more from your sect?" Kassorith asked, clearly buying time for Percy to make his mind up.

The woman shrugged. “I did ask – obviously. It’s no secret that my fighting style depends heavily on my physical strength, but my elders still refused to give me another set, since I don’t have the right bloodline to preserve the lineage. They told me to try and win as many as I can from this year’s tournament, like everyone else.”

“Whether you accept is naturally up to you,” the announcer interjected, his booming voice cutting through the arena. “However, I should remind you that wagers like these are a sanctioned tradition of the tournament. Should you agree, I will personally ensure that both sides honour the result.”

Kassorith swallowed hard. Externally, he nodded at the gold-trimmed elder, though he sounded more worried inwardly as he addressed Percy. ‘I’m not going to tell you what to do with your own stuff, but can you please not run away if you lose the bet? I’ll be the one in trouble.’

‘Who do you take me for?’ Percy shot back, offended.

Truth be told, the thought had crossed his mind, if only because his back-stabbing host had it coming. But the woman hadn’t done anything to deserve being cheated, so Percy was going to uphold his word. Still, it was a good thing he had the option of fleeing. It would prevent Kassorith from screwing him over.

“I accept,” he said at last, taking control of his host’s mouth. “I’ll wager a complete set of ingredients,” he clarified, his borrowed heart clenching as the words left his lips. He wasn’t certain he would win, but he’d overcome worse odds in the past. Besides, he wasn’t planning to return to Thess’kala anytime soon, so this would probably be his only chance to secure additional ingredients. And he hadn’t made it this far by letting precious opportunities slip through his fingers.

“Very well,” the announcer acknowledged, before turning to the crowd. “The first semi-final will be fought between Jethsethi of the Ancestral Lineage Sect and Kassorith of the Broken Fang Sect. In addition, each side has wagered one vial of Greater Thess’kalan Heartblood, one vial of Abyssal Moss and one Conflux of a Thousand Toxins. Let the battle begin!”

The stands roared with boiling anticipation, as Percy rushed to draw as much mana as he could before his opponent’s bloodline took hold. He barely managed to summon a blob of liquid metal in his hand when a suffocating feeling gripped his host’s core, choking the flow to a halt. It felt like wax forced through narrow pipes, each drop demanding extreme effort.

‘I’ll focus on protecting our body with my domain and forcing more mana out,’ Kassorith said. ‘Do with it what you will.’

Percy nodded internally, stacking his own domain on top of his host’s, wrapping it around their flesh and the metal in their hand. Normally, mages could use their domains in all sorts of ways to complement their magic, but spreading their willpower thin didn’t make sense in a simple melee like this.

The woman seemed to agree – at least Percy hadn’t felt her domain anywhere near him. Not wasting time, she pressed her thumb and index finger through her upper lip and into the base of her fangs, causing her scaled cheeks to puff up. Then, she spat a mouthful of purple liquid onto both hands, the venom dripping from her long, sharpened nails. The droplets hissed where they landed – Percy knew that the Thess’kalans’ venom wasn’t corrosive, but it did evaporate rapidly when exposed to air. An acrid stench filled the space, sharp enough to sting Kassorith’s nostrils and tighten his throat.

The woman must’ve managed to draw some mana out too, judging from the increased concentration sitting in her head. The substance wasn’t visible through anything but Mana Sense yet, but Percy was already aware of the female disciple’s affinity. He was also confident she’d gathered even more mana than him and Kassorith – an impressive feat, considering that her bloodline had probably affected her a fraction of a second sooner.

She pounced toward Percy, who’d barely managed to shape the fluid in his hand into a steel dagger. The weapon would give him some extra reach – though not as much as he would have liked – along with more piercing power. However, he’d probably have to extract more mana before it had a real impact on the battle.

‘Scary,’ he thought as the woman’s gaping maw snapped right where his throat had been, her clawed hands missing the scales on his host’s chest by mere millimetres.

Percy had fought many Thess’kalans over the course of the tournament, but never from this close, nor while being in full control of Kassorith’s body. Seeing his opponent’s mouth stretch wide enough to swallow a person whole, her eyes burning with cold ferocity, and the unnatural way in which she slithered across the tiled floor, he felt he was fighting a woman-shaped snake more than a mage.

The scrape of her claws against the stone released a deeply unsettling screech that set Percy on edge. Cautiously moving back, he tried to give himself space, brandishing his hastily forged dagger more as a

deterrent than a genuine weapon. He first had to adapt to the woman's speed before he even considered attacking.

The female disciple knew how to capitalize on her advantage, however. Right when Percy thought that the threat of his steel blade had brought the woman's lunge to a halt, she surprised him by pressing on, allowing the dagger to stab right into her throat! Percy felt some resistance as the metallic tip met the hardened scales. Still, the weapon sank into her flesh easily enough. Warm blood gushed forth like a fountain, wetting Kassorith's fingers.

Percy didn't feel happy about his apparent victory, knowing full well what his opponent was capable of. Sure enough, a spark of amusement lit up in the dying woman's eyes, her fatally-wounded body soon growing transparent. In less than a second, she faded away completely, as did the injured flesh holding Percy's dagger in place, and the sticky liquid dirtying his hands. At the same time, he felt two series of deep lacerations burning on his host's body – one by Kassorith's waist, the other below his armpit. As for the woman who had injured him, she stood a few metres away, licking the blood off her fingers, before spitting more venom onto her claws.

'When? I didn't even realize that I was affected,' Percy thought with a groan.

He'd expected this to happen at some point, of course, having watched her previous battle. As powerful a combination as her physique and bloodline were, she wouldn't have made it this far into the tournament without her mind affinity. Unlike Percy's illusions on Remior that he tended to fashion out of mana for everyone to see, the woman's illusions only existed in his own head.

From the crowd's perspective, Percy looked like he'd lost his mind – there shouldn't be anything on the arena besides the two contestants. To him, the illusions were far harder to see through. They tricked all the senses – mundane and magical. Up until the last second, Percy had felt he was stabbing a real person, complete with a Blue core shining brightly in her chest, body heat spreading outward from her blood vessels, the thick stench of iron spilling forth from the wound, and even a soft pulse sending its rhythmic beats through the knife.

Percy had no idea whether his main body's eyes would have seen through the falsehood – perhaps the woman would have struggled to trick his Soul Vision without understanding it. Either way, Percy didn't have access to his favourite mutation at the moment, so he was entirely at his opponent's mercy.

His only solace was the fact that the female disciple couldn't do this very often. Each short-lived illusion appeared to consume a ton of mana. Gathering the limited resource under the influence of her

bloodline was as difficult for her as it was for him. In fact, he was confident her move just now had exhausted everything she'd accumulated since the start of the battle.

Unfortunately, the damage was already done…

Chapter 460 – Seventh round

The wounds weren't that troublesome, but the toxins spreading through Kassorith's veins were a lot harder to deal with. A wave of nausea slammed into Percy's borrowed head, causing his surroundings to turn blurry as insidious tendrils of weakness seeped into his muscles. The ritual had elevated his host's resistance to the substance, of course, but it had raised the potency of the woman's venom just as much. In fact, Percy was willing to bet that his opponent had undergone more rituals than Kassorith.

Not waiting for him to regain his bearings, the female disciple was already upon him again. Percy didn't think he'd have to worry about a second mind blast this soon, but the venom had still left him in a bad place. Adding what little mana his host had been able to gather, Percy extended his weapon's reach slightly, hoping it would help.

His wild swings did appear to give the woman pause, keeping her at bay. Percy slithered closer and closer to the edge of the arena, doing everything he could to buy time, knowing that strengthening his weapon was his best shot. Still, he understood that his opponent wasn't in a rush either – she was clearly happy to let her venom do its job as she accumulated more mana, opting for caution over unnecessary risk. The more Percy focused on the battle, the more the crowd's cheers dimmed in his ears, leaving only the rasp of his own ragged breaths to anchor him.

'You're going to lose all your ingredients at this rate,' Kassorith's voice rang through Percy's soul, carrying a hint of poorly concealed glee. At least the Thess'kalan hadn't made any efforts to actively sabotage him, but Percy could tell that his host didn't much care if they got eliminated this late into the tournament.

'Just do your job and let me worry about the wager,' Percy spat, not bothering with Kassorith.

The fight wasn't going as well as he would have liked, but he hadn't given up yet. As difficult as it was to handle the woman's illusions and venom, Percy had his own advantages to rely on. Unlike his opponent – who had to exhaust her mana whenever she produced a new illusion – Percy could keep pouring metal into his construct, slowly building his strength up over the course of the battle.

At the same time, his host's body was working overtime to purge the toxins, and Percy was rapidly adapting to both the woman's movements and his own physical capabilities. Whether he would last long enough to tip the scales in his favour was still up in the air, but he hadn't bet his hard-earned resources on nothing.

A few breaths later, the woman left herself wide open again. Percy realized it was a trick as soon as she allowed his dagger to sink into her exposed torso, but it was already too late. Once more, his opponent's injured flesh vanished rapidly as his host's brain registered the new wounds on his tail. At least Percy had been careful to guard Kassorith's throat from every angle – else they might have lost already.

Even so, the fresh injection of venom was most unwelcome. Percy swayed back and forth, struggling to stay upright as the woman's attacks grew more aggressive. By now, his dagger had reached the size of a shortsword, which definitely helped against his unarmed opponent. Still, it wasn't enough to bridge the growing gap between them – especially since the weapon felt heavier in his grasp with every passing moment, each swing a monumental challenge.

'I need to do something fast, or I'm really going to lose,' he thought in alarm, racking his brain for anything that might help.

Adding an enchantment or two onto the construct would make it a lot easier to wield, but his Instantaneous Imprint spell was difficult to cast in this situation. His thoughts were a complete slog thanks to the venom, and the woman kept him under a lot of pressure. In theory, he could give Kassorith control of their body for a few seconds, but the man had made it clear that he didn't have much experience fighting like this. They might lose before Percy drew even the first unit cell onto the blade.

'It doesn't need to be a complete unit cell,' he reminded himself.

The structural integrity enchantment wasn't necessary, as the woman would struggle to damage the weapon with brute strength alone. Regular Blue-grade steel wrapped in a couple of domains was plenty for this kind of battle. Percy only needed sharpness and lightness runes to wield the sword better, along with controlled self-repairs to replicate the enchantments.

'Just two unit cells, with five runes each,' he thought, before mentally shaking his head. 'No. Not even that.'

Only one of the unit cells had to contain everything. The other could be a simple self-repair, without even a control rune. As long as he managed to copy the larger unit cell once, he'd have everything he needed to produce as many of them as necessary. So, really, he only had to draw a total of seven runes on the construct. Could he do it? While defending against the woman's relentless onslaught? Maybe not. But it wasn't like he had an alternative. If this failed, he'd lose anyway, so it wouldn't hurt to try.

'The sword is large enough for now,' he told Kassorith. 'Stop adding to its bulk.'

'Do you want me to pass you lightning mana instead?' the Thess'kalan asked.

'No. Keep gathering metal mana – we're going to need it later. But use it defensively for now. If you can block some of her attacks, it'll help a lot.'

Percy didn't wait for a response, splitting a sliver of his attention and just as much willpower to stamp the first rune onto the base of the blade. The woman didn't miss the chance to slash at him again, though Kassorith reacted just in time to gather some liquid steel onto their forearm, a blooming patch of metal stopping two of the claws. Still, enough venom found its way into their circulatory system to dull Percy's senses by another step.

At least, the lightness rune was fully functional, making the construct a touch easier to swing. Happy with the trade off, Percy continued to plant one enchantment after another onto the weapon as more tiny shields appeared on Kassorith's body. Most of the woman's slashes still found their mark, since it was impossible to accurately predict her attacks. Her mind mana – which she happily used whenever she accumulated enough – didn't make things any easier.

Every few blows, she spat more venom onto her hands, giving Percy a chance to draw an extra rune. Before long, his host's pale body was a mess of reddish-purple cuts and metallic patches, but at least the initial set of enchantments on the shortsword were complete. That was only the first part of his plan, however. If he wanted to win, he'd have to scale the runes to cover the whole weapon. Only then would they have enough of an impact on the battle.

'She'll never give me the chance to do it slowly. I'll have to streamline the process…'

During their earlier matches, Kassorith had bought him enough time to copy the enchanted fragments and fuse them together, but the current situation didn't allow for that. Knowing he was swiftly running out of time, Percy liquefied the sword completely, taking extra care not to distort the magical symbols even slightly. If he made a mistake, the enchantments would easily lose their effect, and his opponent would never give him a chance to replace them.

Moving the two unit cells apart, he allowed the metallic patches on Kassorith's body to flow to the weapon. Flooded with mana, the smaller self-repair soon produced a copy of the larger unit cell where the first one had been. Percy promptly dragged the new enchantment away, making space for more.

The woman seemed to realize he was up to something.

Changing tactics, she now aimed her attacks directly at the liquefied weapon, trying to destroy it before it solidified. Percy used his own body to shield the construct. He knew suffering more damage wasn't ideal, but losing the sword at this critical moment would be even worse.

The pain and dizziness caused him to mess up a few of the new unit cells, wasting some of his efforts. Still, he maintained enough mental clarity to guard the existing ones with everything he had. Even better, the Scribing trait reacted violently to the woman's attempts to ruin the enchantments, sending a ripple of cold fury through his soul that sobered him up slightly. The absorbed fiend's influence accelerated Percy's efforts, letting him feed more metal mana into the self-repairs, the unit cells doubling and quadrupling in record pace.

Soon, the whole sword was covered in unit cells, but Percy didn't stop. He gathered all the metal mana coating his body, along with the excess that Kassorith was still providing him with. Percy even dragged the steel from the blade's interior to the surface, changing the whole construct into a writhing blob of enchanted liquid. Before long, he had more unit cells than he knew what to do with, his desperation causing something to click in his mind, a new idea taking root.

'What I'm doing… using the self-repairs to replicate my runes… isn't that a form of writing too?'

It was, wasn't it? Percy had been using his enchantments like this ever since he invented his Spiritforged Effigy. It was just a trick he'd come up with to save time, and it had served him well once he incorporated it into his weapons.

But it was so much more.

The liquid mana was just another canvas he could draw on – albeit a somewhat inconvenient one. The self-repairs were merely a tool to draw with – another quill he could dip in his mana, not that different from his regular method of drawing runes, nor the Instantaneous Imprints he applied using his borrowed domain. And as with every other type of writing, his spectral trait was the steady hand holding everything together, forcing its rigid standards onto Percy's work.

As the realization dawned on him, the unit cells flowed along the liquid surface unbothered, moving closer to one another. The symbols interlocked, the intricate runes now feeling more like a part of the material itself – an inseparable feature of its texture.

The woman continued to attack, landing blow after blow. At some point, she stopped reapplying venom to her claws, clearly deciding that it was better to interrupt Percy's forging at all costs, than to further mess with his senses. Meanwhile, Percy protected the ever-shifting blob as best as he could, guarding his throat with his free elbow. He even helped Kassorith draw more mana from their core, covering the weapon in enchantments inside-out.

Deciding he'd gathered enough, he allowed the construct's shape to settle at last. The countless lightness runes robbed the weapon almost entirely of its weight, allowing Percy to wield the enchanted steel as if it was an oversized feather. A flash of silver spun around his borrowed hand, the elongated lump of metal slicing through the air faster than it had any right to.

The female disciple realized what was happening a moment too late. By the time she leapt back, Percy had landed his first true counterattack since the start of the battle – and a rather debilitating one at that. A chunk of flesh hit the ground with a wet splotch, a pained groan escaping the woman's lips. Percy's vision was blurry – his other senses not doing much better – but he still scarcely registered the blood spraying from his opponent's left shoulder, and the thick scent of iron filling the arena, drowning out the acrid tang of venom.

In his hand, the weapon's rotation came to a halt, revealing its shape. He was holding a long, cylindrical shaft, the texture of the delicate engravings feeling familiar in his palm. Percy used the construct like a cane to stop himself from collapsing, his surroundings spinning as the sting of his countless wounds made even standing a challenge.

Still, he couldn't help but smile, feeling at ease beneath the crescent blade, the crimson light reflecting off its blood-stained edge a clear sign of things to come. Naturally, it wasn't a longsword – or any type of

sword – that he'd forged this time. Rather, it was a weapon he was far more comfortable wielding. Even with his opponent now missing an arm, Percy knew that the odds were heavily stacked against him. Yet, he somehow struggled to imagine himself losing with the powerful scythe firmly in his grasp.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spectral Art: Instantaneous Imprint – Refined -> Spectral Art: Instantaneous Armament – Refined!]