Wanderer 471

Chapter 471 – Consuming the leaf

A rush of memories accompanied every painful throb in Percy's head. His trip to Thess'kala hadn't been his longest, but it had been densely packed with excitement, important knowledge and high-stakes battles. At least he'd grown a lot better at assimilating his clones, so he managed to wrap his mind around the key points fairly quickly.

Fully consolidating his gains would take a lot longer, since there were several things he had to deal with, and much of it had to be done in a very specific order. For example, passing the affinity-changing treasure to Nesha and Elaine had to wait until after he checked whether his wasp familiar needed it. And while the pyramid's deterioration would inevitably force him to attempt his infiltration of the Fungal Spire in the next few months, Percy wanted to complete all his other preparations first, to raise his odds of success.

He should also get better healing potions before attempting the dangerous body-strengthening ritual, which had to come after he registered the compression principle. Furthermore, he'd rather upgrade his cauldron before he switched to alchemy, which inevitably had to wait until he was done weaving his new armour – since his work on that was helping him improve his magiscript rapidly. Suffice to say, the next few weeks were bound to be quite busy.

'Why does everything have to be so complicated?' he wondered with a heavy sigh, though he understood this was ultimately a good problem to have.

Luckily, his most important prize from Thess'kala was one that he could use immediately. Tapping into the new seal the clone had just dumped into his soul, Percy pulled out a large, glowing object, grabbing it carefully the moment it appeared in his hands, to prevent the strong winds from carrying it away. Percy hadn't had the chance to examine it too closely during his frantic escape from Syrreneth's chamber, so he played with it for a few seconds, noting how light and flexible it was. Its texture resembled a gemstone's, but it bent as easily as a regular leaf.

Whether the treacherous snakes had told him the truth about its effects remained to be seen, but Percy liked his odds. The object looked too similar to the ones his family's jade tree produced, lending credence to Kassorith's story about the long-destroyed Elemental Source. Percy didn't think his host had made up the part about the Void Hand or the scattered saplings either.

‘The only thing they could have lied about, is on whether this specific leaf has come from a second-generation sapling, or one lower than that…’

He shrugged. There was only one way to know for sure. It would suck if it turned out they’d tricked him, but there was no sense in worrying about it pre-emptively.

Percy was trying to decide whether to swallow the leaf whole or chop it up into pieces first, when Micky’s voice rang in his mind. ‘Are you going to keep us wondering? Where did your clone go? And what’s up with that thing?’

Percy rolled his eyes. Technically, his familiar and clone could read his thoughts, but it wasn’t easy for them to follow the entire rush of memories that accompanied a returning wisp.

‘I’ll bring you up to speed later. Let me deal with this thing first before it goes bad or something.’

Percy didn’t think the treasure would spoil anytime soon, but it was too valuable, and he’d gone through too much trouble earning the artifact to risk it. Glancing back at the object, he realized it would probably fit in his stomach if he folded it, though he doubted he could get it through his throat. Cutting the leaves shouldn’t diminish their effects, since they were regularly consumed by lots of species of sapients that couldn’t stretch their mouths and necks like the Thess’kalans, but there was a faster and safer way to get it where he wanted.

Rolling and folding it into a cube as gently as he could – so that he wouldn’t damage it by accident – Percy stored it in his spatial seal, before summoning it directly inside his stomach. There was a chance he’d struggle to digest it without having chewed it first, but he could gather some pure mana to help the process along if that proved to be the case.

It soon became clear there wouldn’t be any need for that.

The object began to dissolve rapidly as soon as it touched the gastric acid, releasing enormous amounts of life mana. Percy felt bloated, waves of vitality rippling through every vein and muscle fibre in his body. He was instantly reminded of not only all the times he’d overeaten, but also every time he’d received healing – be it through his grandfather’s magic, or his own potions.

Yet, there was something more at play.

It wasn't his first time coming across a source of life mana this dense, but the substance seemed to possess an additional, unique quality that affected Percy far more deeply than his previous brushes with the affinity. Tiny scars that he'd never even noticed closed rapidly, kinks in his joints that he'd grown used to getting smoothed out. His heart thrummed a bit faster, his lungs feeling like they could expand a little further, as even the tension on his forehead eased slightly.

Percy suddenly felt years younger, though his body was still that of an adult. In many ways, the experience was reminiscent of a core advancement, though the effect was admittedly less pronounced, and wasn't accompanied by an increase in physical strength or mental clarity. Even so, the intoxicating feeling coursing through him left little doubt as to the leaf's effect. Evidently, the Thess'kalans had told him the truth – about this, at least – probably having not expected him to actually escape with the treasure.

'Woah! Don't tell me eating that thing did what I think it did!' the clone in Micky's body exclaimed, having shared Percy's senses.

'Sure did,' Percy answered the rhetorical non-question as the last traces of the leaf got absorbed by his organs, his lips parting into a toothy grin. 'To be precise, we've just doubled our remaining lifespan!'

A wave of shock rippled through both cords, his companions clearly struggling to believe what they'd just heard. Percy couldn't really blame them for it, since he was having a hard time accepting it himself, despite having just received all the memories of working tirelessly toward this exact goal for weeks.

If this was anything like an advancement, the feeling of euphoria would fade in a couple of days as he grew accustomed to the changes, yet the extra thousand or so years he'd just added to his lifespan should remain – closer to ten thousand after his next two promotions, assuming that he stayed on his current trajectory.

'Seriously? Just from eating a single, oversized leaf? Did you bring more by any chance?' the clone asked again.

Percy sighed. ‘Only the first of its type does anything, though there are better leaves out there that will be much harder to get. I would have brought some for Micky and the girls, but I was honestly lucky to obtain even the one.’

Nesha and Elaine weren’t a huge concern, due to their higher starting grades. In fact, Elaine didn’t need a lifespan extension at all, and while Percy hadn’t bothered to do the math for Nesha, he knew that she was also in a much better spot than him. Even if she wasn’t projected to reach the Clear grade just yet, she could definitely afford to wait until the next opportunity.

Micky was a different story, however.

He was technically a Red-born like Percy, and his base lifespan was probably several times shorter than a human’s – which was a problem. Thankfully, the crow had obtained his second core, started drinking Aurora Dew, and gone through several evolutions very early on, so he probably still had several centuries ahead of him. Due to his main affinity, time wouldn’t catch up to him nearly as fast, provided that he continued to consume high-grade cores regularly. Even so, bringing his friend a leaf would give Percy some peace of mind. Sadly, that would have to wait until his next greater spring.

Over the next few minutes, Percy gave Micky and the clone a brief overview of his time on Thess’kala. He did that mostly to get them off his back, but also to get more opinions on his gains and the ways he could take advantage of them.

‘Such a monumental change from eating a single leaf… and it’s not even from the original World Tree. Only a second-generation sapling,’ Micky mused, before voicing a question that Percy hadn’t even considered. ‘Do you think other Elemental Sources might have their own unique properties – besides altering the affinity of the sapients on their planets or granting them insight when they practice their spells?’

‘I suppose it’s possible...’ Percy muttered through the cord, raising an eyebrow as he contemplated his friend’s words.

Neither Mrs. Lia nor Zoris had mentioned anything of the sort, but it could be the case that only the factions in possession of the cosmic wonders got the opportunity to study them properly – keeping their discoveries tightly under wraps to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. Even the World Tree’s life-extending effect might have remained a secret if not for the calamitous war that had divided it and spread its pieces to dozens of greater springs.

‘And there’s a good chance that nobody but me, Zoris, and Sol’s people has ever been to the Mirror Lake!’ Percy reminded himself.

As knowledgeable as the former god was, he had hailed from merely a lesser spring – by his own admission – so he might not be privy to such high-level information. And despite the countless years he had spent living inside the Mirror Lake’s tranquil waters, there was probably a limit to what tests Zoris could have conducted without an actual body.

Granted, Percy had confirmed with the Melodians that drinking the water didn’t do anything special, but that was far from an exhaustive investigation. As much as Percy liked Sol and her people, he had to admit that they were largely ignorant of cosmic matters. They hadn’t been able to visit the Elemental Source very often either, nor did they possess the means or the time to examine the place properly.

What if they tried digging a pit in the lakebed to check if there was anything valuable hiding in the mud? Or if they cultivated more types of herbs around the Mirror Lake? And what if absorbing the fiends buzzing right above the Source somehow improved the spectral traits they granted?

‘The possibilities are endless. I should look into it the next time I visit,’ Percy decided.

He wanted to study more soul spells anyway, and he wouldn’t find better teachers than Zoris and the Melodians, nor a better place to practice than the Mirror Lake. Even if he failed to discover anything new about the Elemental Source, he wouldn’t be wasting his time.

With a heavy sigh, he mentally added yet another entry to his increasingly long to-do list. It would be years before he was free, but his next trip to Melodia was quickly shaping up into a rather interesting one. For now, there were more urgent things to focus on.

‘Nephthys’s time is running out and I have a dozen things begging for my attention…’ Percy thought.

He couldn’t afford to delay any longer. Tomorrow, he would begin the final push to upgrade his armour – to hopefully put an end to the main project that had completely dominated his life for over a year.

Chapter 472 – Cloak

Taking a break from weaving, Percy allowed his consciousness to drift into his familiar's head, following his companions' latest efforts. The crow had made significant progress with his boosting art, the Masterful spell now getting close to its most impressive upgrade yet.

The clone mainly assisted the bird with the Dance while devoting some time to a few projects of his own. He'd already taken advantage of Obatala's Approval and Micky's grade to awaken and lock a nascent domain similar to Duwa's. Everyone understood that the unimpressive pulses of willpower would barely make a difference in a high-level fight, and that all of the clone's efforts would go to waste as soon as the original Percy recycled him, but manifesting his willpower in the crow's body hadn't been that difficult anyway.

Other than that, he'd also worked on something that would hopefully help the main body coordinate with Micky whenever they fought as a team, though they hadn't had a chance to test it yet. A few minutes later, the clone and the familiar took a short break, diving into the restless waves in search of their next meal.

The small group no longer spent as much time travelling. Constantly being on the move had made sense on the continent – when they were being chased – but the sea was vast and mostly peaceful. They hadn't come across any enemies – or even traces of civilization, for that matter – in months. If anything, flying was more likely to draw unwanted attention than camping on the occasional deserted island or ragged rock formation.

Watching Micky sink his talons into another fish dumb enough to swim close to the surface, Percy sighed. 'Months of seafood, after years of meat… Man, what I wouldn't give for an apple or a tomato right about now…'

The endless expanse of deep blues and foaming whites had been quite thrilling at first, but its novelty had long evaporated. Percy and his familiar longed to feast their eyes on some lush greens and wooden browns for a change. Even the sound of waves crashing, once calming, now carried a dull monotony that gnawed at his patience. If there was a silver lining, it was that the place was tranquil enough for them to concentrate on their training with no distractions.

'Better get on with it then,' the clone said through the cord. 'The sooner you're done, the sooner we can return.'

Percy nodded, agreeing with… well, himself. Shifting his attention back to the grey fabric in his hands, he allowed the spectral traits to transform the parts of his soul residing in his fingers, resuming his efforts to fashion the ethereal threads into a network of enchanted cloth.

He'd already spent way longer on the upgrade than he'd ever intended. It had taken him months just to perfect the material after Acton's death, and several more to increase his output to a somewhat reasonable level. Right when he'd thought he'd been ready to apply the new magiscript skills he'd developed with Nesha's help to his Phantomspun Silk, the third trait had complicated things further, forcing him to spend another half a year or so resolving the conflict between the two arts.

In fact, it would have probably taken him many times longer if not for the Wiseman's Murmurs floating inside his head, filling his mind with ideas. The influence of the exotic substance had been subtle and hard to pinpoint with any certainty, but Percy didn't doubt that it had been one of his primary sources of inspiration, and the main reason he'd been able to overcome so many hurdles so quickly. In many ways, his new armour was even more complex than the Carnival, so it could have easily taken him over a decade of relentless effort to complete by himself.

Pressing on, he allowed phantom mana to gush out of his pores, spinning it into thin threads and weaving those into intricate symbols. Over the past few months, he'd improved on several aspects of the process – he'd made the strings a little thinner and learned to produce them slightly faster. Any further gains would be minor and would require several more years, so Percy didn't feel like delaying the creation of his new armour to chase perfection.

He'd shrunk the unit cells even more, with each of the clover-shaped pseudo-enchantments now barely spanning two-thirds of a fingernail. Reducing them any further was currently impossible – not because Percy wasn't capable of drawing smaller runes with the help of his Scribing trait, but because the silk's thickness would prevent him from capturing the runes' more delicate features.

Percy had also played around with the enchantments he included in the unit cells, eventually adding heat runes augmented by control and adaptation runes. He knew that ice mana would pair well with them, reversing their effect to turn the mana even colder. He'd also learned during his brief stay at the Mirror Lake that soul mana interacted with the heat runes in a weird manner – even without the aid of adaptation runes – allowing them to repel spectral fiends.

In other words, Percy was confident that Micky's soul-freezing ice mana would synergize extremely well with the enchantments. Not that he had any intention of activating them while wearing the magical clothes and turning his own soul into a block of ice, but he didn't mind having the option of fashioning

the new armour into a barrage of deadly projectiles, should the need arise, much like he'd done with its previous iterations.

Finally, there was his crown achievement from the past few months – the method he'd found to address the conflict between his two traits.

Deciding on how to deal with the gaps in the symbols had been Percy's biggest issue. Runes consisted mostly of empty space, after all, but leaving big gaps between the flexible threads was the quickest way to destabilize not just the enchantments themselves, but also the structural integrity of the entire construct. At the same time, the empty space couldn't be eliminated entirely, because it was part of the symbols.

Percy had spent a lot of time racking his brain for a solution, eventually finding a way to weave multiple unit cells into one another, shifting each pseudo-enchantment by a few degrees until he settled on a stable configuration that made use of every millimetre of space in the fabric!

The gaps in one rune were now always filled by the silk from another – eight unit cells stacked together, on average, across the fabric. It made the cloth a little thicker than casual wear, but still thinner and more comfortable than even light armour, let alone heavy armour like his Phantomscale Regalia.

Hours passed, and then days, as Percy slowly wove the new construct, one strip at a time. The cloth was made of two layers – not because he couldn't fit all the enchantments on one, but because each layer served a different purpose. The inner layer functioned as a set of loose-fitting clothes, protecting Percy's body from harm, without inhibiting his movements much. Meanwhile, the outer layer took the form of a wide mantle and hood that he could either wear for passive protection, fold to guard his vitals from a powerful attack, or tear to shreds, rolling them into projectiles.

Not requiring any sleep, Percy took no breaks but the absolutely necessary ones – to eat, cleanse his cores and relieve himself – letting Micky and the clone take care of scouting, fishing, and cooking their meals.

As the construct approached completion, a new idea took root in Percy's mind – once again thanks to the Wiseman's Murmurs, most likely: 'Should I try sprinkling in a little extra from my Instantaneous Formation?'

Percy didn't think he would be able to merge his latest Spectral Art with the others, because he couldn't fully use it in his own body. His mana wasn't as malleable as Kassorith's, nor was he able to wield it – or his willpower – with the same finesse. On top of that, his months-long efforts were as far from 'Instantaneous' as they could be.

That said, he could perhaps draw some inspiration from the 'Formation' part of the spell. Much like he'd done against his final opponent in the tournament, Percy should be able to add some extra unit cells onto the clothes, far larger and coarser than the fingernail-sized pseudo-enchantments. These higher-level runes wouldn't be as numerous as the ones at the bottom level, but they would hopefully amplify their effects greatly.

This part wasn't even that hard – Percy just had to be careful when pulling everything together, to force the seam and the overall direction of the silk into the right shape, ensuring that the smaller runes came together to form the larger ones.

'Okay, this is the last change I'm going to make though. If I keep getting sidetracked by new ideas, I'll never finish,' he decided. Clearly, the Wiseman's Murmurs could be detrimental if someone overindulged in their endless advice.

It took Percy the better part of a day to make the necessary adjustments. Once he was satisfied, he resumed his previous work, this time taking the additional network of unit cells into account. A surge of excitement inevitably rose in his chest, the construct already looking like something a person could wear – the culmination of efforts stretching all the way back to his time in Bogside town, finally about to bear fruit.

On a fateful night, a few hours after Remior's sun had set, Percy pulled the last thread into place. He froze, doing a double take upon realizing there was nothing else begging for his attention. So immersed had he been on weaving the complicated enchantments, that he hadn't even realized just how close he'd been during the past few minutes.

He overcame his shock soon enough, however, pouring mana into the dense network of over a million runes, watching a ripple of grey light spread through the fabric. After a few cursory tests to confirm that all the effects activated as intended, and that the material was so strong that even a Blue would have to expend some effort to damage it, Percy allowed his old armour to shatter to dust.

The midnight winds brushed against Percy's naked body for a couple of seconds, sending a shiver down his spine until he donned the new construct. Once he was done, he took a moment to appreciate how comfortable it felt, and how much safer he was while wearing it.

After stretching his limbs for a minute or two, he pulled the hood up and closed the cape over his chest, his mind already racing with ideas as he considered all the ways it could be used in battle.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Spectral Art: Phantomscale Regalia – Masterful + Spectral Art: Phantomspun Silk – Masterful + Spectral Art: Supreme Runic Matrix – Masterful -> …]

[…Spectral Art: Phantomwoven Cloak - Masterful!]

Chapter 473 – Cauldron

Percy groaned as the spinning shards slammed onto his chest, grinding against the shirt. The fabric tensed, countless tiny runes flaring up near the impact area, robbing the constructs of most of their momentum and preventing Micky's attack from piercing through. Still, the blow sent Percy sliding back, his cloth boots carving a pair of narrow trenches across the wet boulder.

'Okay… I suppose it was never going to make me completely invincible,' he admitted with a shrug, before pouring some mana into the self-repairs to revert a couple of small tears on the exterior of the material.

Micky's attack had been on par with a Blue's casual blow, and it was clear that it could still damage the Cloak – or at least the person hiding inside it – with enough effort. Even so, it would probably cost his opponents a lot of mana and willpower to put a scratch on Percy. The barrage he'd just eaten hadn't so much as left a bruise, but he was sure it would have easily skewered his old armour. If the previous version of the spell had been on par with a Green's constructs, there was no doubt in his mind that the new variant was functionally as good as a Blue's.

As expected, the Instantaneous Formation spell hadn't fused with the others, but three Masterful Spectral Arts had already been plenty to push Percy's creation to the very top of the tier, sitting next to his boosting art. The fact that his Status had not offered to create a new category to distinguish his masterpieces from the rest of his spells was annoying as always, but Percy didn't let that get to him. Despite his list shrinking by two entries on the surface, he knew that he'd taken another massive step forward.

‘Are you alright?’ Micky asked with concern, landing next to him in a flurry of crystalline feathers and frigid gusts. ‘I think we should stop here, before I actually hurt you.’

Percy nodded. As much as he would have loved to play with the new spell some more, anything beyond their brief test would be dangerous. His healing potions weren’t nearly good enough to risk getting a frozen lance through his chest, nor could he afford to waste more time. While he had several ideas on how to leverage the Cloak in a proper fight, he’d have to wait until he encountered a real enemy to test them. His friendly spars against his familiar just weren’t the same.

‘By the way, how’s the pyramid looking?’ Percy asked, tapping into Micky’s vision as the bird glanced at the crimson shape floating inside his head.

It was bad. What little was left of Nephthys’s shrunken sanctuary was crumbling slowly, with three of the pyramid’s five vertices having already chipped away. Minute traces of a bright silver colour – the goddess’s damaged wisp – were bleeding through the cracks, dispersing inside the grey ocean that was Percy’s soul. At this rate, the structure would collapse entirely in a few months. Even if it lasted a little longer, there was a good chance the damage would start affecting the lingering souls of the Amenthei housed within.

‘Alright then. Let’s head back,’ Percy said, hopping onto Micky’s neck.

There were several things he still needed to do before they approached the Fungal Spire, but it would be more efficient to work on some of them while travelling.

‘Which way?’ Micky asked.

Gently taking control of the bird’s head, Percy shifted it to the west. ‘We’ll enter the continent from the eastern coast.’

If they were lucky, their pursuers still had no idea that they had their eyes set towards the Alchemists’ Guild. Some of the teams after them might have remained stationed by the northern edge of the landmass, waiting for them. Furthermore, there were multiple densely populated provinces stretching between their destination and the western or southern edges of the continent. Not that the path Percy

had chosen was pure wilderness, but it was still the shortest and safest route among the four cardinal directions.

Micky took off, clearly as eager as him to return. Percy didn't pay the familiar much heed, however, already moving to the next item on his agenda. His new armour was great, but he wanted to incorporate his improved magiscript into his weapons too.

Fortunately, the scythes were much simpler to replace. Percy fashioned the shaft out of a thick bundle of interwoven threads, taking great care to ensure that it was far more rigid than his clothes, while still being flexible enough to let him reproduce his Third Parade later – the technique he'd invented using Kassorith's body during the tournament's semi-final.

For the blade, he used regular reinforced mana instead of his silk, which lowered the difficulty to an extent, though he made up for it by adding sharpness runes to the unit cells and adjusting the matrix slightly. Neither the shaft nor the blade were wide enough to contain a second layer of enchantments, however.

The weapon was ready in less than a day.

Percy's Status remained silent this time, which wasn't very surprising. His Soul Harvesters had already fused with lots of other spells to form the Carnival, and there was no way a top-tier Masterful spell would register an upgrade just because he'd improved on one of its many facets. Still, that didn't mean that he hadn't grown stronger – the next Blue dumb enough to stand in his way was in for a nasty surprise.

Percy didn't even take a break before moving to yet another project.

This time, it was his cauldron that he wanted to improve, having no intention of using his Phantomspun Silk at all. Unlike his combat equipment, Percy wanted the tool's material to remain as plain, rigid and simple as possible. A wobbly surface would only mess with his brews, and the faint patterns of the fabric would inhibit his vision even after he turned them transparent. Not to mention that the concoction might just leak through the gaps. The fact that he would only be using reinforced mana didn't mean that he couldn't improve it, however.

The unit cells he drew on the cauldron were very different from those on his other constructs. He ditched the sharpness, lightness and adaptation runes entirely, keeping only the self-repairs, the structural integrity enchantments and the concealment, preservation and heat runes. Naturally, he also added all the alchemy-specific enchantments – the pressure and rotation runes, equipping all of them with controls.

And much like the previous iteration of his cauldron, he added multiple controls to the heat, concealment, pressure and rotation runes. Only, this time, he brought the number from five up to seven, allowing each of the enchantments to be carefully adjusted to within a one hundred twenty-eighth of its full effect. Counting everything, the new unit cell contained forty-one runes – nearly twice as many as those on his armour!

Even with Percy's new trait and after months of intense magiscript practice, managing to draw the monstrous pseudo-enchantments was a colossal challenge. In fact, he probably only succeeded because over three-quarters of the symbols were control runes.

Percy was also able to pack the unit cells a lot more tightly onto the cauldron's spherical surface. The previous version had only housed ten of each kind of alchemy-related enchantment, while this one could fit over two hundred unit cells – each containing all of the required runes.

The fact that he was capable of drawing much smaller runes certainly played a huge role, but that wasn't the only reason he was able to increase the number of enchantments so much. Percy also made the sphere larger than the last one, doubling its volume. The previous iteration had already been five times as large as a standard cauldron, having allowed him to take advantage of the scaling principle.

Thanks to the experience he'd accumulated during his time in Twilight City, and because of his improved tool, Percy felt ready to double his output again, without negatively affecting his yield.

He also made the walls of the container slightly thinner, relying on the higher grade of his mana and the tightly packed structural integrity runes to prevent the cauldron from cracking open from the internal pressure of his concoctions.

Once he was done, the corners of his lips curled up in satisfaction.

Other than handling more ingredients at once, the thinner walls should also interfere less with his vision, allowing him to observe the cauldron's contents with less obstruction after he activated the concealment runes. Finally, with twenty times as many runes of each type, a more uniform distribution of enchantments around the tool, and with the ability to control each of them with four times the precision, he was confident he was in for some major improvements to his craft.

At the top of the construct, he left a circular gap even wider than the previous one, taking some time to create a new Spiritforged Effigy larger than before, to use as the new lid. The task was laughably simple compared to the cauldron itself, his scythe or his armour, since it was purely decorative at this point.

He'd initially designed the spell as a way to mass produce the powder he needed for the Aurora Dew or his reinforced mana, but he could get as much of the now-grey dust as he wanted by replicating and shattering a couple of scythes – or hell, even tearing and regenerating a piece of cloth from his sleeve.

Finally, he took some time to forge a new stand for the cauldron, this time giving it four legs instead of three, for added stability – mostly so that it wouldn't shake as much when he placed it on Micky's head, brewing while the crow was flying.

Putting all the pieces together, Percy assembled the new construct. Unlike with the scythe, his Status was kind enough to announce the upgrade this time, clearly deciding that it was more meaningful.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spiritforged Cauldron – Refined -> Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Thousand Whispers – Masterful!]

Chapter 474 – Shaking the rust off

Reading his spell list, Percy couldn't help but crack a smile, some pride welling up in his chest as he took a moment to absorb the recent changes.

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Spells:

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The clone's whistle echoed through Percy's mind. 'Whoa. People will lose their shit if they see this.'

The original nodded, not disagreeing with that assessment. Percy's spell list was relatively compact right now – at least compared to other times – but the sheer number of Masterful spells he had accumulated was ridiculous. He had six, with two being of a far higher quality than the rest. It was worth remembering that Masterful spells were typically meant for Violets, Whites and demigods – not Greens or Blues.

Certainly not Yellows.

It was an easy thing for Percy to forget, perhaps, considering how often he'd been registering or upgrading them lately. The casual frequency of it almost dulled the weight of his accomplishments, even though a part of him understood how absurd that was. Then again, more than half of his newest entries were heavily reliant on his spectral traits and magiscript – and for good reason.

Percy's fight against the axe wielder had already proven that the Vault's runes were potent enough to compete against a damn blessing.That was true even when he hastily applied them in the heat of battle, let alone when he took his sweet time carefully preparing them. Even more importantly, the scope of Percy's enchantments was far broader than a blessing's – Metatron's magical language could be harnessed for countless distinct tasks, hence all of Percy's opportunities to diversify his arsenal.

In many ways, Percy obtaining the Scribing trait was like a tiger gaining wings. It had allowed all the hard work he'd put into studying runecrafting over the years to finally blossom at once, elevating the art to the same position as the Carnival in his fighting style.

'I find it funnier that he no longer has any regular spells in there,' Micky said, joining the conversation with a mental chuckle.

Right. Percy hadn't even noticed, but all the entries in the list were either Secret, Spectral, Wild or Hybrid Arts. He didn't recall this ever having been the case before, though it was perhaps inevitable that his bloodline, traits or mutation would have found their way into every corner of his magic at some point.

Currently, the only spell that involved both a spectral trait and his bloodline was his Core Bestowal. He couldn't help but wonder if a fusion of a Wild Art and a Secret Art or a Spectral Art would also be classified as a Hybrid Art. What if it involved all three? Could he fuse all his spells together one day?

'Well, whatever… It's not like I can impress our enemies to death by reading them my Status. Getting stronger is a better use of our time than ruminating over spells,' he replied with a shrug. 'Back to work. Both of you.'

He could practically feel his companions roll their non-existent or non-rollable eyes through the cords, though they heeded his instructions regardless, resuming work on Micky's boosting art.

The crow was travelling west, flying toward the mainland faster than most Blues were capable of – even when they rushed. More impressive still, was the fact that Micky had sustained this speed for multiple days already, with no signs of getting tired. A fortunate side-effect of his strong body and rapidly improving spell.

Percy followed his own advice too, ignoring the relentless torrents of wind gluing dark strands to his face, or his new hood fluttering behind his neck, commencing his next task. Even the violent flaps of the oversized crow's wings that might have distracted him a year or two ago were nothing more than a welcome rhythm by now, lulling him into a productive trance.

His hands brushed across the surface of his new cauldron, short-lived bursts of phantom mana injecting power into the enchantments. Percy carefully maintained as uniform a pressure and temperature as he could inside the construct, his mutated eyes remaining glued to the alchemical reactions happening within. Whenever a lump was about to form, he tweaked the nearest inputs to dissolve it, trying to preserve as much of the brew as possible.

Every few minutes, he removed the lid, a whiff of minty aroma barely passing by his nose before getting dragged dozens of metres behind the bird by the strong current. The fleeting freshness was oddly grounding, a reminder that there was still something gentle in the middle of all this intensity. Dipping his index finger into the green liquid in the cauldron, Percy stored it directly into the empty vials in his spatial seal to save time.

'Less than a thirty percent yield,' he estimated with a heavy sigh.

He owed his subpar performance partly to the fact that he'd grown a bit rusty after prioritizing magiscript over alchemy for months, and partly due to how unfamiliar the new tool felt. The Masterful-tier construct was bound to help him a lot down the line, but learning to use the exhaustive assortment of enchantments properly would take some practice.

Perhaps, it would have been more prudent to use his old cauldron for a few days – until he registered the new principle at least. However, Percy didn't care that much about wasting his green mushrooms or healing potions. Even as he consumed them ten times faster due to the increased capacity of his new cauldron, it would take several days before he put a dent in his sizeable stash. Besides, this was the fastest way to not only shake the rust off, but also to grow accustomed to his new tool.

'As soon as my yield passes sixty percent, I'll throw in the gravity ingredients and try to compress the potions…' he decided.

Sixty percent was still a couple of points lower than what he was normally capable of with this type of brew, but time was scarcer and far more precious than a few extra drops of potion at the moment. Especially since he had several things he needed to do before they reached shore.

Ideally, he wanted to register the principle and upgrade enough of his healing potions to safely undergo the ritual while they were still away from civilization. Each bath would take him two full days and nights, and there was a good chance he'd need to consume both sets of ingredients to get the mutation he needed. Suffice to say, he'd rather not do that in a populated area where enemies might interrupt him and waste his limited resources.

Tossing a fresh batch of ingredients into the cauldron, Percy closed the lid once more, beginning another session.

To him, his current efforts felt rushed and wasteful, but he understood that any other alchemist on Remior would be left with their mouths agape if they saw him. Percy began each attempt with forty portions of green mushrooms, ending up with twelve hundred drops – or twelve doses – of healing potions roughly six minutes later.

Even the most experienced elders in the Guild could only preserve a little over half of their nectar when brewing elixirs, or just over eighty percent of the ingredients when brewing potions, and their cauldrons only had a tenth of Percy's capacity. In other words, even Percy's currently inefficient output eclipsed theirs by over three times!

‘If the situation with my bounty ever gets resolved, I can try teaching them a bunch of new tricks, though I don’t think it’ll be possible for them to use the scaling principle without the eyes…’ he thought. That said, elevating his world’s alchemic standard was at the bottom of his long list of priorities right now.

Hour after hour, Percy continued to brew potions, slowly pushing his yield back to normal. He already had more Orange healing potions than he’d realistically be able to drink in a long time, but that was okay, because they were the very ingredients he would be using later, as he attempted to register the new principle.

By the following morning, his yield crossed the fifty percent mark, and by nightfall, it reached just over sixty percent.

‘Good enough. Let’s hop onto the next phase.’

Percy had no idea how close they were to the continent, having lost track of their exact position months ago. Suffice to say, he didn’t recognize the geography here either – the scarce islands and sharp rocks occasionally jutting through the water’s surface looked no different than elsewhere. Still, he guessed they couldn’t possibly be too far, given how fast Micky was flying.

Taking a few deep breaths to relax his tired mind, he added more finished healing potions to the cauldron, raising the level of the liquid to the halfway point, before filling the rest with some of the herbs he’d procured with Nesha and Duwa’s help.

It was time to commence his first attempt at compressing a potion to a higher grade!

Chapter 475 – Yellow potions

It had been over a year since Percy read – or skimmed, really – the information in Nephthys’s Sanctuary. Luckily, he’d long burned the key points to his memory, eagerly waiting for a chance to put them to practice. He would have started months ago, of course, if perfecting his Cloak hadn’t consumed so much of his time.

In many ways, the compression principle was more important than both scaling and restructuring. Other than boosting his brewing yield, the benefits of the two principles he had mastered in Twilight City were somewhat modest. Admittedly, mass-producing potions and elixirs helped when he was pressed for time, and turning his potions into tattoos improved both their efficacy and practicality, but neither of those things could compare to high-grade potions.

And that was without even taking into account the most important application of the new principle – Percy's ambitious plan to incorporate it into his boosting art, to give himself an artificial advancement.

Regardless, that was a project for later. Right now, his priority was to brew a few Yellow healing potions so that he could acquire his new mutation as safely as possible.

'Let's see… I'm supposed to apply rhythmic bursts of external pressure to the cauldron, to help the gravity ingredients do their job.'

The hundreds of runes he'd engraved onto the construct would allow him to control both the amplitude and the frequency of the pulses with great precision. Still, Percy had to be methodical, as he couldn't afford to squander his ingredients. He'd bought a lot of them with Nesha's help – more than the pitiful scraps he'd collected on Gallimus – but not nearly enough to match his enormous stash of green mushrooms.

Setting the enchantments to about a quarter of their maximum intensity, Percy induced bursts of pressure lasting half a second each, interspaced by just as long. The fluid bubbled up as lumps formed, prompting him to stir and heat the concoction up to get rid of them.

About a minute in, he'd yet to see any trace of Yellow mana in the cauldron, having accomplished nothing but wasting a portion of the ingredients. Not one to get discouraged so easily, Percy maintained the same amplitude and duration, changing just the interval between the pulses to three-quarters of a second. A minute later, he increased it to a full second, then to five-quarters, and so on. Before long, there were only inert dregs at the base of the container.

'Alright. I guess it was never going to be that easy, or the principle would have been a lot more widespread in the cosmos…'

Beginning a new session, Percy reduced the intervals back to half a second, this time incrementing the duration of the pulses to three-quarters, planning to repeat the previous steps from a slightly different starting point. If it didn't work, he would keep changing the duration, and later the intensity of the pulses. If that wasn't enough, he'd have no choice but to break the numbers up to even smaller fractions, which would inevitably consume more time. It wouldn't be ideal, but it might be the only way to home into the correct configuration…

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'Percy, look ahead!' Micky exclaimed, the distraction causing Percy to turn the heat up a little higher than intended, ruining the concoction a few seconds sooner than he otherwise would have.

Sighing, he lifted his eyes, spotting a few mountains on the horizon, their faint silhouettes biting into the straight line that separated sea from sky. They were about to reach shore.

'Stop at the nearest island,' he instructed his familiar.

It pained him to delay their arrival when land was in sight, but they weren't ready to re-enter civilization yet. Percy had actually made some progress with the new principle, yet not nearly as much as he would have liked.

After reducing the duration of the pulses to about three-eighths of a second, the pressure to about three-sixteenths of what the cauldron was capable of, and the interval to about five-eighths of a second, Percy had finally witnessed the first strands of Yellow mana appearing in the liquid.

Sadly, they'd been short-lived, barely lasting a moment before collapsing back into Orange mana. Even worse, Percy had already consumed about a tenth of his gravity ingredients to make it this far. Unless he picked up the pace, he'd run out of materials long before he amassed enough potions to undergo the ritual.

'Well, three days to reach this point isn't that bad,' he consoled himself.

It sucked that the process was supposedly unique to each type of brew, however. Percy would probably have to start over when he switched to trollsfury potions. In fact, he didn't even know whether ink

would require a different configuration from a similar potion, or whether compressing Yellow mana to Green would.

He shook his head. ‘One step at a time. Right now, I only need a bunch of Yellow potions. The rest can wait.’

Micky landed on a small island with a few tall boulders to hide them from anyone that might patrol the coastline in the coming days. They had enough food to last a few weeks, so the crow wouldn’t need to go fishing anytime soon. Percy welcomed the newfound stability as he set his equipment on the rocky ground, resuming his work.

He continued to experiment with the pulses, fine-tuning the configuration some more. It was a lot easier now that he knew how to manifest at least a few Yellow strands, since he no longer had to wander in the dark. With a benchmark to compare each of his attempts to, he could determine whether he was moving closer or farther from his goal.

Sure enough, he managed to retain some Yellow liquid a couple of days later. By now, he had optimized the process a lot, already counting the amplitude, duration and interval of the pulses in sixty-fourths.

‘Just how the heck did the Amenthei figure this out by themselves?!’ he couldn’t help but wonder.

He doubted their cauldrons were as good as his, and they didn’t have his mutated eyes either. Then again, adjusting the duration and interval of the pulses didn’t require complicated runework – just good timing. As for the intensity, it could be controlled in any number of ways, from including fewer enchantments on the cauldrons, to feeding less mana into them. It wouldn’t have been as precise or easy to use as Percy’s new tool, but it was more than doable.

‘Either way, my yield is crap,’ he thought, clicking his tongue with irritation.

He’d only been able to preserve about seven percent of the ingredients at best. Since the compression principle involved converting three Orange potions into one Yellow potion, it meant that he’d only ever collected a little over two percent of the liquid he’d started with. Considering the capacity of his oversized cauldron, two percent was still a lot – almost a full dose from each brewing session – but not enough for his Status to register the principle, nor for him to brew all the doses he needed before he ran out of ingredients.

‘I must be doing something wrong. Is there another step I’m missing?’

It was possible. Percy had been in a hurry when he studied the principle – even keeping his eyes open had been a challenge. While the gravity ingredients and the external pressure had already led him to some interesting results, there was clearly another important piece of information he must’ve skipped.

In theory, he could try varying the amplitude and frequency of the pulses some more, but he didn’t think that was the answer. The previous round of optimization had barely increased his yield, the Yellow strands already appearing about as often as they were going to. Unless they drifted close enough to merge, they tended to collapse back to Orange, ruining his efforts.

‘Close enough to merge… that’s similar to what happens inside a mana core during a promotion, isn’t it?’ he recalled, having experienced that multiple times.

The best way to replicate that would be to add more ingredients halfway through the brewing session, replenishing the lost mana and causing more strands to emerge. It would be the equivalent of a mage breathing in more ambient mana during their advancement to raise the pressure in their core – something that Percy’s enchantments only partially accounted for.

But this wasn’t a good solution to his current problem, as new ingredients would mess with the uniformity of the concoction, greatly lowering his yield. There had to be a better way.

‘If I can’t cause more strands to appear, maybe I can try grouping them up somehow…’

Percy’s eyes widened as an idea took root in his mind. Emptying the cauldron, he replenished the ingredients, beginning a new session. At first, he applied the same configuration of pulses as before, the first strands of Yellow soon forming in the concoction.

‘So… what if I do this?’ he wondered, pouring a lot of mana into the rotation runes.

For this type of brew, he mostly kept the heat and rotation runes available to use whenever he needed to dissolve the solid lumps in the liquid. This time, he pushed the latter to their absolute limit, however, stirring the mixture with reckless abandon, causing something interesting to happen.

The violent rotations pushed the denser Yellow strands closer to the walls of the cauldron, the lighter Orange mana inevitably getting pushed to its centre. Gathered together, the strands latched onto one another much faster than before, slowly coalescing into a thick film that coated the crystalline walls of the construct. It grew thicker with every passing second as the Orange mana was slowly consumed, until only Yellow mana was left.

Exhaling deeply, Percy deactivated the enchantments, allowing the film to splash down, filling about a tenth of a container – indicating that he had achieved a thirty percent yield. There was still room for improvement, but this was already a result he could work with.

Especially since his output was about to receive another notable boost.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new alchemic principle: Compression!]

Chapter 476 – Interruption

Percy's heart skipped a beat as he read the notification. Not wasting time, he pulled up his Status, his gaze landing on the relevant section.

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Alchemic principles:

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Okay… there was nothing particularly illuminating there, the new entry merely telling him what he already knew about the principle. Still, this was great news. If his previous experience was anything to go by, his eyes should allow him to improve much faster now.

'About time,' the clone said. 'Can you take that ritual bath so we can go back?'

‘Almost there,’ the original replied with a sigh. ‘Just let me brew a few more potions first – unless you don’t mind me poisoning us to death.’

‘Is it actually that dangerous?’ the clone asked.

Percy shrugged. ‘For a Thess’kalan, no. But I don’t think a human body was ever meant to be injected by that many toxins.’

The clone said nothing more, allowing Percy to return to his alchemic endeavours. As soon as he commenced a new brewing session, he noticed some interesting changes. More solid lumps appeared beneath the surface of the concoction. Or rather, it might be more accurate to say that he could now spot more of them.

Pushing the rotation runes to their limit had allowed him to solve the main issue he’d been facing – helping the Yellow strands band together a lot faster. However, that had come at a cost. First, it had robbed Percy of one of the tools he’d been using to dissolve the lumps, leaving him only the heating enchantments to work with. Secondly, the thick layer of Yellow mana grinding against the crystalline walls of the cauldron had greatly accelerated the formation of new impurities. Finally, the violent currents of liquid had obscured many of the smaller lumps, preventing Percy from addressing them effectively.

Luckily, that was all in the past now.

His newfound understanding of the compression principle seemed to resonate with his Sovereign’s Eye, allowing him to peer a few centimetres deeper into the concoction, spotting many of the hidden lumps. Activating the heat runes closest to them, Percy methodically eliminated the magical cancers gnawing at his precious potion, allowing more of it to coalesce. Six minutes later, he bottled up the result.

“Forty percent already!” he exclaimed, drawing a sharp breath.

It was still much lower than he should be capable of with more practice, but this could already be considered somewhat efficient. Over the next four days, Percy consumed half of his gravity ingredients to compress all his healing potions to Yellow, accumulating a few thousand doses. By the time he was done, his yield had passed sixty percent, almost on par with his usual proficiency.

He would have loved to spend a little longer to close the remaining gap, but he had used up all the Orange potions. If he wanted, he could brew more, since he had plenty of green mushrooms left, yet he knew that wouldn't be the best use of his time.

Especially since his time had just run out.

Right as he was trying to decide whether to undergo the ritual with what he had, or play it safe by preparing a few Green potions first, he caught something strange by the corner of his eye. It was an inky-black line, no thicker than a strand of his magical silk, though it didn't seem to contain even a drop of mana. Recognizing what the line was made of took him a couple of seconds, because of how many different channels of information his mutated eyes tended to perceive.

'Inky-black? Willpower?'

The line stretched for hundreds of metres – so far away from the island that Percy struggled to locate its source. One end was approaching slowly, however, pointing straight towards him. It stopped just a few metres away, giving him an ominous feeling. Percy was about to jump out of its path, when he realized that Micky was standing right behind him. Whoever was responsible for this phenomenon had cleverly aimed it towards both of them.

'Enemy attack!' he warned the others through the cords, though he didn't wait for a response. Hurriedly grabbing two ends of his Phantomwoven Cloak, he used his willpower to tear a couple of wide strips, squeezing them into a messy, melon-sized sphere in front of his chest.

And just in time too.

An arrow whizzed along the line at a tremendous speed, ripping into Percy's clumsy barrier. The enchantments lit up to block the projectile, though the fabric still exploded into a storm of grey shreds, the force sending Percy crashing into his familiar.

Thankfully, Micky and the clone had already caught up, extending one of their oversized wings to arrest Percy's momentum, helping him to his feet. Glancing at the damaged rags draped over his forearms and the pieces of torn cloth littering the ground around him, Percy realized – to his great horror – that the attack had penetrated about two-thirds of his folded-up cape.

‘What the hell?! Micky had such a tough time piercing through a single layer with his shards!’

A trickle of cold sweat ran down his back as he realized how close he had come to losing his life. Had he spotted the attack a fraction of a second later or acted less decisively, the projectile could have easily skewered both him and his familiar. Clearly, their enemy possessed a very troublesome affinity. Thinking back to the construct, Percy tried to identify its mana type.

‘It was pitch black like the line, but it contained more than just willpower…’

The projectile had sported a dark colour even in his regular vision, reminding him of Nesha’s spells. Was that what it was? Space mana? Only, unlike his girlfriend’s constructs, the arrow had shone in a deep Blue light in Percy’s Mana Sense.

“Impressive,” a male voice suddenly said, breaking him out of his thoughts. “I’ve heard rumours that you could perceive one’s domain, but I didn’t expect you to see my willpower so clearly. Only a handful of Blues have ever survived my opening blow, and only because they had powerful sensory-type bloodlines.”

Percy scanned his surroundings in search of the assailant, though there was nobody in sight, nor could he tell where the sound was coming from. At least there weren’t any more of those black lines coming after them just yet.

“Who sent you?” he asked, hoping to gather some information about his opponent, or to at least buy himself some time. He was already taking one deep breath after another, filling both his channels and his Cloak’s self-repair runes with phantom mana.

“You don’t really need to know that, do you? Since you’re about to die and everything,” the man replied, before sighing deeply. “If it’s any consolation, this isn’t personal. You only have yourself to blame for pissing so many people off – the bounty on your head is just too high to ignore.”

Not bothering to chat with the would-be assassin any longer, Percy hopped onto his familiar’s neck, asking Micky to take off. The Carnival was almost done activating, but he wouldn’t be able to fight an opponent he couldn’t see, and staying put wouldn’t be wise.

As soon as the crow gained some altitude, Percy spotted three Blues, each approaching from a different direction. The space mage didn't seem to be among them, however, as three new lines manifested, extending toward Percy and Micky from elsewhere.

It was quite impressive that the space user could stretch his willpower so far from his body – which spoke volumes about the man's experience and skill. The purpose of the lines was either to guide the projectiles with greater precision, to accelerate them massively, or to boost their lethality. In fact, Percy was willing to bet that they did all three.

Sharing Percy's vision, Micky and the clone barely managed to dodge two of the arrows. There wasn't enough time to avoid them once fired, and Percy was the only one who could perceive the space user's domain – thus predicting the trajectory of his attacks a moment earlier.

Even so, evading all of them wasn't easy. The third construct punched a fist-sized hole through a patch of living ice in the crow's wing. At least it didn't hurt, nor did it slow his movements much, yet they all understood how easily the projectile could have turned Micky's brain into minced meat.

'Just great…' Percy spat, his features twisting into a grimace.

Four Blues were already bad news – even without their leader being a veteran assassin with a space affinity. Escaping from such a person wouldn't be easy, since he could probably travel faster than him or Micky and harass them repeatedly from afar.

But it didn't matter.

Percy had no intention of escaping. Doing so would only give their enemies a chance to team up with another group of bounty hunters. As long as the space user drew breath, Percy would never be able to undergo the ritual in peace.

So, he had to make sure that his opponent suffocated…

Chapter 477 – Fourth Parade

In theory, Micky could fly much faster than the three lackeys, though shaking them off proved impossible. The problem was the space user, who clearly had no trouble keeping up with the crow.

Percy and his familiar had yet to actually see the man, but the insidious black lines never stopped shooting at them, making their life harder. The assassin's domain didn't travel in straight lines – it took sharp turns every dozen or so metres, creating a zigzagging network of willpower to guide the deadly arrows. Percy and his clone did an admirable job steering the crow away from the projectiles, but a few still found their mark. Even those that missed played a decisive role in slowing the bird down.

'Any ideas?' Micky asked.

If nothing changed, they might still escape, eventually – once the Insomnia trait allowed them to outlast their pursuers – but Percy wasn't happy with the idea of leaving a hidden danger of this magnitude alive in the area.

'I've been trying to map out the limits of his spells,' he replied.

'And?' the clone asked, joining the conversation.

'You have the same mind as me, you know,' Percy said, rolling his eyes. 'You could try helping me come up with a solution instead of waiting for me to spoon-feed you everything.'

The clone sent a mental shrug back. 'I'm not the one with a pile of Wiseman's Murmurs swirling inside my head. Hell, I don't even have a body of my own. Come on, don't keep us in suspense.'

Percy was about to respond when Micky dove to evade another barrage, one of the projectiles narrowly missing the bird's neck, causing Percy's heart to skip a beat. Only when their flight stabilized did he resume his explanation.

'The farther he has to stretch his domain, the longer the interval between his attacks seems to be, and the weaker they are.' He wasn't just guessing – Percy had long noticed that the assassin's onslaught tended to ease slightly whenever Micky picked up the pace or changed directions abruptly. 'The same is true when he increases the number of projectiles. I think that's the reason he's never gone past three.'

It was easy to see why the space user's opening blow had been so much more sudden and powerful than his subsequent attacks. He had probably hoped that a single arrow would have been harder for

Percy to spot, and that it would have been deadly enough to penetrate his defences. And, well… he'd nearly been right on both counts.

Since then, it had made more sense to fire three arrows at a time, however, to put more pressure on Percy and his familiar. Any more and they might not be strong enough to pierce Percy's armour or the crow's heavy frame from that distance.

'That's great, but this doesn't really tell me what I'm supposed to do,' Micky protested. 'We don't even know where he is, and we can't risk fighting the other three while avoiding the arrows.'

Percy nodded, scratching through his beard as he tried to think of a solution. He wanted to help his friend block the attacks, but he wasn't sure how to do that. He doubted he'd be able to stop the blasts with his scythes – they were too thin to intercept the projectiles, and the window to do that was way too narrow. Not to mention that Percy's weapons were far flimsier than his armour.

'The armour…!' he thought, raising an eyebrow.

The Phantomwoven Cloak was equipped with just as many self-repairs as his Harvesters – several times as many, actually. And, unlike his old Regalia, it wasn't comprised of dozens of little pieces. Percy should be able to replicate it rather easily. Of course, the assassin would still be able to pierce through the constructs with enough effort, but it would cost him a lot of mana and willpower.

'Micky… if I stop him, do you think you can keep the other three busy for a while?' he asked, worried about his friend.

The crow had never tried fighting more than two Blues by himself – not even briefly. And Percy had no idea how long he would need to take the space user out of the picture. At the same time, he understood that this was their best bet, and that Micky had grown a lot stronger over the past few months.

The bird didn't reply immediately, taking a couple of seconds to discuss the plan with the passenger in his body. Eventually, he nodded, a wave of determination gushing through the cord. 'Just… don't take too long…'

Percy began working immediately. He tore a few strips of fabric from his sleeves, already drawing ambient mana to regenerate them. Seemingly realizing that he was up to something, the assassin intensified his efforts to harm Micky, his attacks growing more frequent and violent by the second. Percy guessed that his opponent had drawn nearer to facilitate this change, but he still struggled to locate the Blue.

Either way, he was finally ready to do something about those pesky projectiles. Letting go of the four Cloaks fluttering in the wind, he allowed them to fly straight to the nearest guiding lines, the enchantments lighting up in dim flashes of grey to stop the attacks.

The space user tried to move the black lines around the obstacles, though two of the constructs still managed to intercept an arrow each. The first got stopped entirely, while the second made it through the fabric after losing most of its momentum, ultimately failing to put more than a scratch on Micky's plumage. As for the third and final projectile… it was far easier to dodge in isolation.

'Slow down,' Percy said once he was certain his plan could work.

The other three Blues seized the opportunity to shrink the gap, but Percy didn't care about them. His priority was to put an end to the space user's constant harassment.

The assassin didn't seem happy about that. Clearly unwilling to let go of his advantage so easily, he straightened the black lines further, making the trajectories shorter but more predictable. He drew nearer too, a faint silhouette of a man finally appearing in Percy's vision, a few hundred metres behind the trio of henchmen.

In exchange for betraying his position, the space user was able to increase the number of attacks to five, and even shrink the delay between the guiding lines and the arrows slightly. He said nothing, but Percy still caught the unspoken challenge underlying the man's actions: 'So what if you can see me? Can you get past my men to reach me?'

Well… Percy had every intention of trying.

Watching the powerful mages approach, Percy took a moment to consider how to bypass them. Summoning his newest scythe, he broke its shaft into pieces, letting a strip of cloth wrap tightly around

each one. Then, he stood on Micky's back, gathering as much strength as he could muster and hurling the constructs forth. He didn't stop there, however, already preparing a second wave, and a third.

The shattered constructs spun soundlessly through the air, torrents of greyish-blue mana rushing into the self-repair enchantments to regenerate them. The shafts grew into complete scythes as the cloth turned into cloaked phantoms clinging to the weapons.

Some of the constructs fell within the Blues' domains, soon getting destroyed by their violent spells. Many flew around them, however, as Percy sought to intercept as many of the black lines as possible. Of course, the assassin only had to adjust their trajectories slightly to aim at Micky again, but blocking the spells wasn't Percy's only goal.

'I'm counting on you, buddy,' he said, getting a nod back from Micky.

Clenching two scythes tightly in his hands, each wrapped in several strips of grey fabric, he leapt off the crow's back, stepping on a pair of crossed shafts. The constructs bent under his feet, launching him toward the next pair.

Step by step, he picked up speed, soon entering the three domains. The stacked willpower slowed him down slightly, but he mitigated that somewhat by aiming for the spots were the ink-coloured cloud was thinnest.

By the time the trio registered what was going on, Percy had already flown past them, his surroundings turning into a blur as he homed into the space user. The only things still visible to his eyes were the man's soul – a bright silver flash betraying his location – and several zigzagging lines already moving to stop Percy.

Through the senses he shared with his familiar, Percy caught a glimpse of the Blues turning around to chase him, but he knew the crow was about to reach them. Percy filtered everything out, trusting Micky and the clone to keep the assassin's underlings at bay.

He was tempted to head straight toward the space user, but he ultimately chose to halt his steps, standing on a makeshift platform some distance away from his opponent. Even with his First Parade, catching a Blue with a space affinity wouldn't be easy. Trying to approach half-assedly would only give the man a chance to ignore him and attack Micky from behind.

‘Before I move any closer, I need to make sure he can’t get past me,’ Percy decided.

The assassin had already manifested a new round of black lines – seven of them from this distance – sending three at Percy and four around him, aiming at the crow. Releasing the batch of cloaks wrapped around his scythes, Percy intercepted the lines heading toward his familiar while dodging the ones threatening his own life.

The space user didn’t give up after the first barrage, however. He was now close enough to attack a lot more frequently. Realizing that he didn’t need as many arrows to put pressure on Percy, he only aimed two of them at him this time, sending the other five after Micky. As long as a single blow landed, they both knew it would distract the bird enough to give the other Blues a chance to finish him off.

“In your dreams!” Percy hissed through gritted teeth, his constructs breaking and reforming one after another as he scrambled to keep all the projectiles away from his friend.

At first, the cloaked phantoms were just a hindrance for the space user – obstacles he had to bypass in order to strike the crow. Identifying the real Percy wasn’t very hard for the assassin, and neither was harassing him. That slowly changed over the course of the battle, however, as Percy got used to his new constructs.

In the past, his illusions had been easy to see through – an experienced Blue wouldn’t have needed more than a cursory scan to tell them apart from the original. Things were different now, since each of the phantoms wore the same exact clothes as him, their fleshless bodies concealed beneath the same layer of dense, Yellow mana.

The only weaknesses in their disguise were the exposed “skin” on their faces and their lifeless movements – both things that Percy had an answer for. Spreading his minions around the battlefield in pairs, he had each of them tethered to another through a shared scythe, using the back of their Cloak to hide their partner from the assassin’s senses. Percy mixed with the crowd of ghostly figures, the entire army of phantoms dancing to the mournful tune of their own wails.

The spinning Cloaks bloomed like grey roses plucked from a graveyard, the torn pieces of their fabric scattering in the wind like withered petals. The assassin lost track of the real Percy entirely at some point. Probably realizing that it would be pointless to waste his mana shooting down the phantoms one by one, he focused entirely on Micky, trying to sneak all seven lines past the ghosts.

Sadly for him, getting through the blockade was impossible at this point, as dozens and then hundreds of crying phantom turned the battlefield into their private ballroom, blocking every single opening leading to the others.

The assassin tried to circle around them, of course, but the phantoms multiplied rapidly, and Percy strategically moved the wall of constructs along with his opponent, never giving him a way through.

Faintly hearing the assassin click his tongue in irritation, Percy struggled to suppress a grin of his own, the name of his new technique softly leaving his lips:

“Carnival of the Savage Gods, Fourth Parade, Masquerade.”

Chapter 478 – Fifth Parade

More dancing phantoms formed, the assassin struggling to locate the real Percy amidst the chaos.

Unfortunately, even with the soul mana and his boosting art doing a lot of the work for him, there was a limit to the number of constructs Percy could maintain at once. His priority was to prevent his opponent from sneaking off to attack Micky, so he couldn’t exactly move the ghosts to try and surround the assassin either.

Drawing even closer, the space user could now split his domain into eight concurrent lines, each guiding an arrow with enough power to punch a hole through Percy – Cloak and everything – should he be unlucky enough to get hit.

‘I won’t win this merely by hiding and blocking. I need to kill him, and I need to do it fast,’ Percy reminded himself.

The problem was that his newest technique – the Fourth Parade – was purely defensive. Of course, he had plenty of other moves to rely on, but most of them had their own limitations. The Third Parade was better used as a counterattack, in case his opponent was dumb enough to approach, though Percy wasn’t confident he’d even be able to use it without undergoing the ritual. The Second Parade was one of his deadliest attacks, but it needed time to prepare and couldn’t easily be used against an agile opponent.

‘That only leaves the Soul-crushing Needle and my First Parade...’

It wasn’t much, but it would have to do. The clone had already filled up his spare channels with soul-freezing ice mana, so the Masterful Secret Art was definitely on the table. Still, landing the attack wouldn’t be easy, and Percy wouldn’t get more than a shot or two, so he wasn’t in a rush to try it. Instead, he decided to try his luck with the Winding Corridor technique, thinking it had the best chance of working.

Leaving the safety of the dancing phantoms behind him, Percy jumped on a pair of nearby scythes, betraying his position. Leaping to the next platform, he rapidly built up momentum as the assassin instantly shifted his sight toward him, eight guiding lines clawing at him in a dense, zigzagging network of certain death.

The normally-black lines manifested as white obstacles in Percy’s tunnel vision, each turning, folding and unfolding several times in response to his movements. With every pair of shafts he stepped on, he moved closer to his target, allowing the assassin to increase both the number of guiding lines and the frequency with which he fired the dangerous arrows along them.

The two sides fought a tug-of-war over space itself, one party trying to approach as the other attempted to punish him for it. Percy felt like a fly trying to navigate a cavern covered in ever-changing spiderwebs, knowing that his life would be forfeit as soon as he so much as touched one.

That said, the more Percy observed the assassin’s attacks, the more his eyes adjusted to his opponent’s style, allowing him to slowly close the gap, and to avoid the spells with more breathing room.

Every now and then, the space user tried an attack similar to Nesha’s butterfly spell, forsaking the thin lines entirely in an attempt to teleport a construct directly inside Percy’s body. The latter didn’t panic, however, having already learned a lot about the rare affinity from his girlfriend.

Teleporting things took a lot more time, effort and mana than merely compressing or expanding space. Consequently, Percy’s rapid movements made it a nightmare for his opponent to catch him off guard. If that wasn’t enough, teleporting objects still left faint traces of willpower that Percy’s mutated eyes could pick up on, and that was without even mentioning the fact that he could predict the assassin’s intentions better with every passing second.

Eventually, the space user gave up on that entirely, focusing solely on the guiding lines and the far-cheaper arrows. Despite his efforts, Percy advanced at a steady pace, his prey already a couple jumps away.

'This is the most dangerous part, but I'll have to brave through it.'

Gritting his teeth, Percy leapt twice more, narrowly twisting his body through numerous gaps between the deadly obstacles, crossing the last stretch in an instant. Yet, just as he was about to finally sink his scythes into the man's torso, the silver flame bent like a rubber band, appearing dozens of metres away. Seeing his opponent slip through his fingers gave Percy the urge to swear, though part of him had expected it.

Why wouldn't a seasoned assassin know a simple Refined spell like Nesha's Twisted Dance?

Regardless, the assassin didn't give him a chance to think about it too hard, already trying to leave him behind to attack Micky. Percy used his phantoms to block the new guiding lines, stepping on another pair of scythes to chase after the space user.

The same situation replayed itself time after time – with very minor permutations. Percy repeatedly made it within an arm's length of his slippery target, only for him to escape. At least, the pressure stopped the assassin from going after Micky, but Percy understood that he needed to hurry up.

Occasionally, he had a few cloaked phantoms separate from the group in an attempt to catch the space user off guard, but the man appeared to have excellent awareness of his surroundings, always dodging the clumsy sneak attacks with ease and blasting the constructs to shreds.

Every so often, he even came close to landing a blow on Percy, but the latter had more of his phantoms jump in to protect him, slowly filling the battlefield with tattered rags and dull shards.

"It's over," the man said at some point, once he managed to put some distance from Percy. "If we keep this back and forth for a few hours, I've no doubt you'll catch me. Sadly, your pet won't last that long."

Percy halted too, not in a rush to continue the pointless game of tag. Only now that they'd stopped moving did he get a better look at his opponent, though it was difficult to make the assassin's features out through the drifting pieces of torn silk. The space user was surprisingly short, standing on a pair of black discs barely wider than his soles. His dark hair glistened with sweat, a few stray strands glued to the sides of his face and neck. Evidently, he'd found their scuffle just as exhausting as Percy had.

Most notable were the assassin's eyes, each sporting a different colour. That could have easily been caused by some purely cosmetic birth defect, though Percy was confident it was the result of a bloodline. It would explain many things – such as how the space user and his henchmen had located him and Micky in the first place, how the man could attack his opponents from such vast distances, and how he could dodge Percy's sneak attacks without even scanning the phantoms with his domain.

Smirking, Percy responded to the man's lazy taunt with one of his own, his voice soft but confident.

"I've already caught you."

The assassin furrowed his brow in confusion, though it didn't take him long to understand what Percy meant. Ambient mana rushed to his body, flowing to certain spots scattered all over his clothes. Tiny pieces of grey fabric that he clearly hadn't even noticed greedily drank the substance, spreading like an infection to cover him from head to toe.

Panicking, the man tried to peel the expanding pieces of silk off. There were too many, however, the insidious constructs latching onto the assassin's robes like a demon's claws, wrapping themselves tightly around his limbs. In fact, they didn't stop there, phasing through the mundane clothes and even his skin to anchor themselves to his very soul!

Out of options, the space user released costly bursts of mana and willpower, blowing his own clothes off along with some of Percy's silk. Still, he failed to get rid of everything, the constructs continuing to encroach upon their unfortunate target.

Desperate, the assassin formed a wall of willpower around his body to block the flow of ambient mana altogether, probably thinking he could stop the Cloaks from growing. He was right about that, of course, but Percy had no intention of watching him do as he pleased.

Seizing the opportunity, he went after the assassin again, forcing him to withdraw the wall of willpower, allowing the enchantments to breathe again. Even as he stretched and twisted his body to escape through the aerial arena, the space mage found it impossible to shake the grey mana off, Percy's silk following him wherever he went.

As a last resort, the man attempted to teleport away, despite the cost. Percy saw vast quantities of mana disappear from the assassin's sternum as he emerged dozens of metres away.

This time, he did manage to rid himself of some of the magical cloth, leaving an empty husk behind and giving himself a chance to breathe again after freeing up his mouth and nose. Unfortunately for him, that didn't last long. The lingering pieces hiding beneath his skin soon expanded again, turning corporeal as they resumed their unwelcome embrace.

Not giving up, he teleported away a second and a third time – he had to know it wouldn't save him, but he was clearly scrambling to buy as much time as he could. By the fourth warp, his core was almost empty. Percy spotted a few dregs, but probably not enough for his opponent to risk teleporting a fifth time.

The assassin plummeted toward the ocean, powerless to stop the silk that had already covered every square centimetre of his skin. More of the drifting pieces joined the ambient mana, enveloping the assassin in an airtight cocoon several times wider than his body by the time he splashed into a towering wave.

Percy's gaze followed his opponent's sinking frame for a while, his mutated eyes allowing him to peer rather deep into the dark waters. Eventually, the man's figure faded entirely from view, leaving only the faint feedback of his diminishing struggles against the soft – yet impregnable – prison.

Soon, even that came to a halt as the assassin met his end, Percy whispering the name of his second new technique today:

"Carnival of the Savage Gods, Fifth Parade, Dead Man's Shroud."

Chapter 479 – Fang

A few minutes earlier

The appearance of Micky's boosting art had changed greatly after replacing the common mana types with the equivalent flavours of ice mana.

The Circulation patterns on his plumage had remained almost identical because the liquid and gaseous variants of his composite affinity still flowed through the same channels as before. Only the colour of the glowing lines was different, having turned from green or aquamarine to white.

The external flows, however, were almost unrecognizable, due to the way the mana interacted with the environment. The bubbles of water seeping in and out of Micky's body had shrunk into a cloud of pale snowflakes. Their smaller size and even lazier movements could fool somebody into thinking that Micky was absorbing less mana than before, though that couldn't be further from the truth. Each snowflake contained more water mana than any of the previous bubbles, in addition to an equal amount of air mana.

The long, erratic ribbons had also changed outside of their hue. They had grown even longer, yet somewhat calmer. They drew huge volumes of ambient mana with each graceful loop, synergizing rather well with the other flavours of the spell by cooling the air around Micky and aiding the conversion. This allowed the snowflakes to form faster, guiding them towards his body.

Finally, a layer of frost coated his plumage – thin and brittle, shattering and reforming with every flap of Micky's wings so as to not impede his flight in the slightest. It gathered and stored a lot of solid ice mana – the original form of the affinity. A pale hexagonal grid pulsed faintly through the crystal as it exchanged mana with Micky's similarly-shaped channels. The coat didn't hinder the other flows at all – if anything, it bolstered them, both the snowflakes and the ribbons pouring into and out of his body more rapidly where the three networks intersected.

All the feathers except for those on Micky's underbelly glowed brightly thanks to his mutations, lighting up his plumage in white, with traces of blue, green and even silver as they fed the amber lines branching out from his heart. Much of his body was now made of ice, the artificial patches shining even more intensely than the rest of his flesh.

Suffice to say, Micky's boosting art was shaping up into an extremely complicated and potent spell – one that he would have never managed to develop so quickly without Percy's help. Every version of the Dance relied on the same underlying principles, so mastering a new variant was only a question of slowly uncovering each affinity's peculiarities and adjusting the spell accordingly.

Even so, it was still very much a work in progress. Micky didn't think he'd be registering the upgrade during this battle, though even incomplete as it was, his boosting art was admittedly the main reason he'd been able to last this long against three Blues. Flying inside their domains was already tough – let alone protecting himself while ensuring that none of them flew away to bother his partner.

The fact that they kept varying their tactics only made things worse.

Sometimes, they ganged up on Micky, forcing him to avoid their joint barrage by the skin of his beak. Other times, two of them teamed up to keep him busy, trying to give the third one a chance to sneak away to support the space mage. Whenever they changed their approach, Micky was forced to eat a lot of nasty blows to stop them.

Thankfully, his Consumption spell allowed him to fight without holding back for an extended period of time, using his Freezing Tornado to outspeed and outmanoeuvre all three of his opponents even while resisting the hostile domains. However, there was no doubt that he was quickly approaching his limit.

'Careful! Javelin incoming!' the clone warned, helping Micky bank to his left to avoid the worst of it.

The stone construct still stabbed into his chest, punching a fist-sized hole through Micky's left lung, though it luckily missed the core in his sternum by mere centimetres. Since the acquisition of his new mutations, his injuries hadn't hurt as much. Even when Micky's remaining flesh got mutilated, the pain was much duller than it should've been.

The effect hadn't been as pronounced right after Micky's promotion to Green, but it grew stronger every time he recovered. It was almost like his body understood at an instinctual level that losing a piece wasn't a big deal – that the damaged organs could easily be replaced.

More than half of Micky's body had already been made of ice by the start of the battle, the ratio only continuing to climb as his opponents' attacks kept finding their mark. Mana rushed to fill the holes, forming new organs – lungs, kidneys and even a stomach. Micky and the clone did everything they could to minimize the damage – as this still wasn't a pleasant experience even with the reduced pain – taking extra care to protect what they believed were their vitals.

'Losing your heart might not be an issue, since it's ultimately just a muscle, but we can't afford to risk your brain or cores,' Percy reminded him.

The former was a far more delicate and important organ than the rest – one that they weren't sure could be fixed. As for the latter, they were the very reason Micky could survive in this horrific state in the first place, and there was a good chance he would lose his ability to regenerate entirely if they got damaged. Furthermore, growing a new mana core was something that generally required one of the rarest and most powerful Decrees in the universe, so they had no intention of testing whether a lowly mutation could accomplish the same.

'Easier said than done,' Micky replied, flying around a pillar of pressurized water wide enough for a fully grown bear to stand inside. 'Is your main body done with the space user?'

In theory, Micky could check the state of the other battle by himself, through the senses he shared with his partner, but he was too busy hanging on for dear life. The clone appeared to do just that, mentally shaking his head a second later, much to Micky's disappointment. 'It appears that I've found a way to prevent the assassin from coming after you, but it doesn't look like I'm any closer to killing him.'

In many ways, Micky was essentially held hostage by the trio of Blues, putting a mountain of pressure on Percy's main body to hurry the hell up. Then again, it could be argued that the opposite was also true. The space user had no choice but to stick around and fight Percy to the death. If he tried to escape, Percy could turn around and help Micky finish his opponents off.

'Alright then. We need to do better if we want to buy your main body enough time,' Micky said, getting a silent nod back from the clone.

The gap between where Micky was and where he needed to be was rather small. He was already fast enough to dodge most attacks, tough enough to endure the rest, and capable of reversing most of the accumulating damage. Just a couple of incremental improvements here and there should be plenty to solve the problem. Micky simply had to dig deep into his small arsenal of spells to find what he needed.

His boosting art aside, Micky's Freezing Tornado was the bread and butter of his fighting style. Having evolved from his original Acceleration spell, the Wild Art had always allowed him to fly faster than what an avian beast of his grade should've been capable of, leveraging his Wind Dancer mutation, his abundance of mana, and his outlandishly powerful body.

After reaching the Refined tier, the spell had allowed him to push himself even further – achieving immense but momentary spikes in speed at the cost of exhausting his reserves quickly. More recently,

the improvements to his boosting art had helped him overcome most of the spell's drawbacks, letting him use it somewhat freely without worrying about his expenditure as much.

It was more than a mere movement spell too, as the violent gusts of freezing winds revolving along his body provided him with an extra layer of protection, and his immense physical strength allowed him to execute deadly attacks from up close.

If there was another downside that he had yet to fully overcome, it was the fact that he couldn't use his Wild Art from a distance. That was part of the reason why he had developed his Frozen Shards spell to compensate, giving himself a weaker and cheaper long-ranged option.

It could be argued that each of the spells represented one distinct side of Micky's abilities. The Freezing Tornado was his main trump card as a beast, making use of his bulk and mutations, while the Frozen Shards were a spell more typical of a normal mage, leaning heavily into his elemental mana and pre-casting.

'But I'm not a dumb beast, nor am I a regular mage…'

Perhaps, what he needed to do was to explore the untapped potential lying between those two extremes. To link the spells more seamlessly, and to search for a way of amplifying their effects.

The three Blues continued to harass Micky, hurling powerful projectiles at him from every direction. They must've realized by now that there was no way he would let them escape anytime soon, yet that didn't seem to bother them much. They appeared content to take their sweet time killing Micky before assisting their leader.

One of them wielded earth mana, the second water, while the third used mud. Micky had no idea whether his opponent had been born with his affinity or acquired it from a petal like him, but the resemblance to that bastard, Acton's, magic pissed him off to no end. He knew the shared mana type was probably just a coincidence, but every single blob of mud aimed at him reminded him of the sadistic brat that had enslaved him for years.

'We'll make sure to take them all down,' the clone consoled him.

Micky had drawn the short end of the stick today. Percy was in no less danger than him, as a single mistake against the veteran assassin would spell his doom just as easily, but at least he wouldn't have to suffer in victory too. Then again, they both understood this was necessary. They'd never rest easy until the space user was dead, and Percy was the only one who stood a chance of catching the slippery bastard. Micky had to do everything in his power to make that possible.

Focusing on his magic, he allowed his body to spin again, a powerful rush of cold wind helping him do so much faster. Even incomplete as it was, the boosting art provided him with an abundance of mana to work with, several layers of pale mist spiralling around his accelerating frame. The boost allowed him to barely avoid another round of projectiles as he headed toward his prey. With the clone's help, Micky prepared some rotating mana in his abdomen, adding it to the flow around his plumage.

But he didn't stop there.

As the Blue moved out of his path to avoid getting turned into a brittle pile of minced meat, Micky forced several chunks of solid mana to condense around him, leaving a spiral of frozen thorns in his wake. Micky's extended reach seemed to catch his opponent by surprise, biting into his domain and carving a deep, diagonal gash across his torso. It was nothing too debilitating for a Blue, though it proved that Micky's offensive spells could be merged.

The trio resumed their onslaught, this time remaining vigilant as Micky attempted to strike them with every chance they gave him. Using well-timed bursts of mana, he propelled himself forth even faster, while taking advantage of the extra layer of mana for both offense and defence.

In fact, it didn't take him long to discover that he could allow the spiralling thorns to keep flying even as he halted, passing the lost momentum to his constructs as they scattered through the battlefield. That way, he could increase the lethality of his ranged attacks as well, without risking his safety. Moreover, the clone pitched in with his own domain, giving the thorns an extra push whenever they were about to land, or increasing their toughness when Micky used them for protection.

Sadly, Micky and Percy failed to draw more blood, despite their valiant efforts.

Holding their own against three experienced Blues was already a monumental achievement, but their opponents never lowered their guard again. Having each other's back, they kept their distance from Micky at all times, intensifying their attacks whenever he tried to single one of them out.

Fortunately, it didn't really matter.

Winning had never been Micky's goal. All he'd wanted from the very start had been to buy Percy time. Enduring the pain of his crumbling body, he continued to hone his new spell with every metre of air that he crossed and with every drop of mana he expended, trusting in his friend's ability to win his own fight and support him. It didn't take long for his status to recognize his efforts either.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Wild Art: Freezing Tornado – Refined + Frozen Shards – Refined -> Wild Art: Winter's Fang – Masterful!]

Chapter 480 – Ritual

'I'm sorry you had to go through all of that,' Percy said once he was back on his familiar's neck.

Dealing with the three Blues hadn't been that difficult after taking their leader out. Percy and Micky had already cleaned up the battlefield, feeding the four mana cores to the crow and looting about half a year's worth of unbrewed Aurora Dew from the fallen mages.

Had they been luckier, they could have collected even more, but Percy hadn't been able to locate the last amulet. Fishing out the space user's body had been relatively easy, since the corpse had still been wrapped inside a cocoon of Percy's mana, and the seabed wasn't very deep this close to the shore. That said, the man had clearly dropped his spatial device during his desperate efforts to rid himself of the enchanted fabric, and locating the small artifact had proven impossible.

Either way, Percy wasn't as concerned with their dead opponents or their possessions at the moment. He was busy examining his familiar's injuries and lamenting the dangerous situation he had been forced to place his friend in. There were few things he hated more than asking Micky to act as a target dummy for Blues, yet he understood that they wouldn't have won the battle without the crow's sacrifice.

No matter the reason, the fact remained that over three-quarters of Micky's body had been replaced by ice. Outside of a few scarce patches of flesh here and there, only the bird's head and cores had remained completely intact, due to Micky's deliberate efforts to protect those organs.

'Don't sweat it,' the crow replied with a shrug. 'This has always been a team effort – we're both just doing what we can. Not making the most of my mutations would have been a waste.'

Percy wasn't ready to let go, however. 'This is all happening because I picked a fight with all of Remior.'

The crow shook his head. 'No. Much of it is happening because you were forced to kill a Holy Child to save me. I'd be ungrateful to blame you for the consequences.'

'It's not your fault you got captured and enslaved by a psychopath,' Percy insisted.

'Nor is it yours. It's fine. Really. You know how little my injuries hurt nowadays, and I'm already used to my changing body. If anything, I'm starting to appreciate how convenient it is. Even without Consumption, it doesn't need nearly as much food as it used to, and I can't overstate how good it feels to be able to regenerate a missing limb in mere seconds. I'm not going to claim that it's perfect, but I'm not sure I'd even want to go back to a flesh body – no offense.'

Percy nodded, knowing that saying anything more on the topic was useless. Besides, Micky wasn't wrong. They were a team, having long resolved themselves to doing whatever it took to accomplish their shared goals. If anything, today was a time for celebration, since they'd just overcome one of their most dangerous challenges yet.

'What now?' the clone asked. 'Do we head straight for the Fungal Spire before more people come after us, pick a different route entirely, or stick with your previous plan of going through the ritual first?'

That was a great question.

Percy didn't think that the assassins had informed anyone of their location, or others would have already jumped at the opportunity to attack them. Staying put for a few more days would be risky, but delaying the magical bath wasn't a good idea either – it wasn't like Percy would get a better chance in the coming months, and he needed every advantage he could get.

'Micky, put more distance from the coast, just in case. I'll spend the rest of the day brewing some Green healing potions. Then, we'll stop at the first island we see, staying there for anywhere between two and four days – depending on how the ritual goes. As soon as I have the mutation, we'll fly straight to the Guild without pausing. Anyone who tries to get in our way dies.'

In theory, they could try approaching their destination more cautiously than that, but they knew that haste was their friend. As soon as their enemies figured out where they were headed, they'd be able to set up a proper ambush. Furthermore, Nephthys's pyramid wasn't going to last much longer.

'Sounds good,' Micky said, turning away from the landmass and picking up the pace. 'Didn't you want to brew some trollsfury ink too?'

'I'll do that on the way to the Spire. Having a couple of tattoos might help, but it's not worth delaying our trip.'

Percy would have undergone the ritual on Micky's back too, had it been an option. Sadly, it would be inconvenient for the crow to carry a massive tank filled with water, and they'd both be completely defenceless if somebody attacked them halfway through the bath.

Having settled on a plan, they put some distance from the continent as Percy resumed his alchemic ventures. This time, he used some of the Yellow healing potions he'd brewed earlier, along with the remaining gravity plants, trying to compress a few of the potions to Green.

To his great joy, registering the principle seemed to have made his life a lot easier. His eyes now picked up on even the faintest traces of Green mana forming inside the concoction, helping him home into the correct configuration for the pulses much faster, saving him countless ingredients and several days of trial and error.

Even better, the frequency of the pulses didn't seem to change from one grade to the next, meaning that Percy only needed to increase the pressure he exerted on the mixture.

'Makes sense, I suppose. I'll probably have to change the frequency when I move to a different potion or ink. Either way, my eyes should help with that too.'

Percy did run into a different problem that he hadn't expected, however, though he probably should have. Compressing Yellow potions to Green appeared to be the limit of his current cauldron. He was already using the enchantments at close to their maximum output, and faint cracks that he constantly had to repair kept forming on the tool during the brewing session.

In hindsight, it wasn't all that surprising – it would have been unreasonable to expect a Yellow alchemist with a cauldron crafted out of his own mana to compress potions all the way to Violet or White. If anything, it was a miracle Percy was even able to brew Green potions with his current setup.

Thankfully, his newest potions were already of a higher grade than him, so they were bound to be quite effective on his body. Anything better would have to wait until his next promotion, or until he improved his magiscript skills again.

Micky eventually landed on a small, rocky island, this one not visible from the mainland at all. The sky was dark, which was a welcome bonus. Percy liked the idea of beginning the ritual in the middle of the night – it would make it harder for any nearby enemies to spot him, giving him until daybreak to absorb a good chunk of the ingredients' effects into his body. Even if he got interrupted afterwards, he wouldn't be losing everything.

Not wasting time, he had Micky craft a person-sized container out of ice mana, filling it up with seawater. The construct looked rather crude, its surfaces uneven and its walls lopsided. Then again, the fact that the near-cylindrical structure didn't have any holes was already pretty impressive, given that it had been crafted by an oversized bird without hands or fingers.

Percy took a moment to casually carve a few concealment runes and structural integrity enchantments on it – just cause. The former might make it a little harder to spot from afar, while the latter were mostly there to prevent it from collapsing on itself. Realistically speaking, none of this would matter much if a hostile Blue flew nearby, but it was a cheap investment anyway.

'I've got over three thousand Yellow potions left, and a few hundred Greens. Good enough,' Percy thought, storing his Cloak into his spatial seal – so that it wouldn't mess with the ritual in any way – and jumping into the cold water.

It might have been more prudent to compress the rest of the Yellow potions before starting, but he figured he'd be okay. The Green potions should last him a few hours if he kept chugging them down, while the Yellow ones wouldn't run out before the end of the ritual.

Even if Percy was right about this being more dangerous to a human, soaking in the bath for a few hours should allow him to acquire some preliminary resistance to the cold and toxins, easing the strain on his body greatly. If not, then there wouldn't be any point in continuing anyway, because it would mean that the inheritance was entirely useless on him and all of his efforts on Thess'kala had been for nothing.

‘If you end up turning into a snake, can I stay in Micky’s body indefinitely?’ the clone asked, mostly to lighten up the mood.

‘If that happens, I might start looking for a way to join you,’ Percy joked back.

Then, he pulled out the first set of vials from his seal, pinching the main ingredient’s cork with his thumb. Only once he leaned back on the frigid wall of the crystalline container, ensuring that he was sitting in a secure position – submerged up to his chin, with little chance of falling over and drowning – did he dare to empty the vials into the seawater.

As soon as the first foreign sensation seeped into his skin, Percy felt immensely grateful for his paranoia. This was already looking like it was going to be far more unpleasant for him than it had been for Kassorith…