Wanderer 481

Chapter 481 – Lesser

The Heartblood was naturally the first of the ingredients to take effect. It gave the saltwater a faint reddish hue, causing it to bubble violently. Entering Percy's body, it made his heart beat faster, the rapid throbs echoing in his ears reminding him of his trollsfury potion. Only, the ritual would last days, not minutes.

Things weren't as bad until the secondary ingredients kicked in. The Abyssal Moss caused the temperature of Percy's body to fall off a cliff, making him feel as if somebody had emptied a bucket of snow into his veins. Thankfully, it wasn't all that different from handling Micky's soul-freezing ice mana, so he could endure it – if barely.

The toxins were a hundred times more troublesome than Percy could have ever imagined, however. He had expected his body to go numb, much like Kassorith's had, but that wasn't at all what happened. Percy watched his arms and chest turn purple, his flesh swelling as dark lines branched through his circulatory system.

Some body parts had indeed gone numb, but waves of excruciating agony gripped others. It felt like a million needles were stabbing at him from inside out, trying to rip him to shreds. His skin dried and flaked off, dark blood spilling into the bath and changing its colour again. Percy instantly understood that this wasn't sustainable.

'Shit, I won't even last a minute like this!' he thought, gritting his teeth.

Knowing he couldn't afford to waste more time, he emptied the first of the Green healing potions from his spatial seal directly into his stomach. A wave of vitality spread out of the organ, washing over his mutating flesh, bringing him some relief.

This was Percy's first time ever drinking a potion of a higher grade than his own – he hadn't tried the Guild's potions until after reaching Orange – so it was quite a novel experience. On paper, the Green liquid contained as much life mana as nine doses of Orange potion, but it was a lot more effective in practice, because Percy's body was far more sensitive to the potent mana.

Even so, the brief healing failed to completely reverse the damage to his body. It merely slowed down the decay, though the itchy sensation it brought him was almost as unpleasant as the pain. That said, Percy didn't care how he felt – he was busy monitoring the effect of the potion, trying to calculate how long his stash would last.

'It's already about to fade. I'll need to drink two or even three doses per minute just to stabilize my condition. At this rate, I'll run out of Green potions in under two hours!'

His heart sank as he realized that the hundreds of twice-compressed doses he had painstakingly brewed wouldn't even last for five percent of the ritual's duration. The idea of enduring the dangerous bath for days with nothing but Yellow potions filled him with dread. Even though he'd prepared a lot of supplies in advance, it appeared that he had still underestimated how potent the demigod's blood was – especially to a Yellow specimen of a species the lineage had never been meant for.

'Do you want me to pull you out?' Micky asked, his voice tinged with worry.

'Don't,' Percy hurriedly said. 'It's too early to give up. I'm still in control.'

He forced himself to calm down, reminding himself that the ritual's effects were heavily front-loaded. If he wasn't mistaken, Kassorith had absorbed about eighty percent of the benefits during the first day. Percy had no idea how much the first two hours would do for him, but he hoped that the rest of the bath wouldn't be nearly as unpleasant.

Sure enough, Percy had to consume the Green potions much less frequently by the end of the first hour. Each now lingered inside his mutilated frame for close to a full minute before running out, which meant that his stash would easily last an additional hour over his earlier estimate – probably even more, if the trend continued.

Naturally, he was quite ecstatic about this development, and not only because he finally saw hope of surviving the ordeal. More importantly, the fact that his resistance to the ingredients had climbed so fast was definitive proof that his human body could actually inherit the Thess'kalan mutation – something he hadn't been sure of!

'I wonder how much of a boost I'll receive…'

Well, there wasn't any point in guessing. He'd have his answers soon enough.

The Green potions ran out about half an hour after daybreak, making Percy's situation a whole lot more dangerous again. The Yellow potions weren't nearly as effective, even when he consumed three or four of them at a time, and the odds of him and Micky getting discovered by an enemy had also risen together with the sun. Percy would have prayed to Phoebe to watch over him, but he was worried the titaness might actually hear the prayer, and he still wasn't sure she could be trusted.

Thankfully, the damage the alien ritual inflicted on his body had lessened enough by now that the weaker potions could keep him alive, though the process hadn't grown any less painful. Every second brought with it more agony than any other physical injury Percy had incurred over the years. At least, it still paled in comparison to the soul pain his bloodline and traits had regularly caused him, allowing him to endure it relatively easily.

Micky and the clone stood next to the container the whole time, carefully scanning their surroundings for any sign of an enemy. In theory, flying high would have given them a better vantage point, but it would have also raised the odds of somebody noticing them. Percy's companions hadn't said anything, though he knew they were both paying him close attention, their barely concealed anxiety gushing through the cords.

Everyone relaxed when the sun set for the second time, knowing that the worst of it was behind them. The dark blanket of night had enveloped them once more, shielding them from detection. Even the ritual was less dangerous by now. Percy's body was still a mess, but he felt like he could endure the rest of the bath even without the potions.

'I must have surpassed Kassorith's starting point already,' Percy guessed.

Opening his Status, he checked his mutations to see if anything new had appeared, though there was nothing but his Sovereign's Eye there. Shrugging, he drank a few more healing potions – mostly to relieve some of his lingering pain from earlier – as he continued to wait for the ritual to end.

The second day was as uneventful as the first one. Percy and Micky were less concerned, because they knew he had already absorbed most of the benefits. The water in the makeshift vat was nearly black, due to the toxins' effect on his previously unmutated blood, the stench of rot and decay filling the small island. Micky was forced to construct a thin dome around Percy to contain the scent, venting the air into the sea and funnelling some clean oxygen into the dome every few minutes.

During the afternoon, Percy started getting quite worried again. There was a lot to be happy about, including the fact that his life was no longer in danger, that it didn't matter as much if he got interrupted this late into the ritual, and that the bath had clearly enhanced his body a lot. However, it was looking increasingly unlikely that he would reach Kassorith's level. It had taken him most of the first day just to attain a body on par with the average Thess'kalan, and the second day hadn't imparted him with nearly as many benefits.

'Good thing I managed to bring an extra set of ingredients back…'

As the sun approached the horizon for the third time, Percy's Status finally spoke.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new mutation: Lesser Thess'kalan Physique!]

Reading the notification, Percy couldn't help but frown, feeling relieved and confused in equal parts. It wasn't that strange that he'd only inherited an inferior version of Kassorith's mutation, considering how much less effective the ritual had been on him so far.

However, he was somewhat surprised to see his Status notify him about the new mutation. Phoebe's Decree had admittedly been more active since its latest evolution, having announced the upgrade of his Sorcerer's Eye and the acquisition of the Scribing trait, but that didn't explain why it had remained silent when Kassorith had earned his version of the mutation on Thess'kala.

'Does it only care about things I can bring back to my main body?' Percy wondered, harbouring a random guess that he felt was close to the truth.

Granted, the clones' Status had registered spells that he couldn't use with his own body in the past – such as his recently acquired Instantaneous Formation – but that was different. The spells themselves had always followed him back to Remior, waiting for some breakthrough that would allow him to use them. Foreign mutations and bloodlines, on the other hand, were typically useless for him, and it appeared that Phoebe's Decree was smart enough to recognize that.

Regardless, the Status's whims weren't important right now. Not even waiting for the sun to fully set, Percy pulled up his page, reading the new entry.

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Mutations:

Chapter 482 – Thermal vision

Percy wanted to study the new entry some more, but he could do that after commencing the second ritual, to save time. Getting out of the vat, he crafted a new container with Micky's help, filling it with fresh seawater.

He wasn't above dumping the contents of the last one in the ocean, since the toxins inside the liquid had been consumed by him already, leaving only blood and dried flakes of skin to feed the fishes. Still, releasing the stinky fluid in the sea was an unnecessary risk that could wait until Percy was fully done with the island.

Jumping into the new container, he repeated his previous actions, emptying the ingredients into the bath. Percy hadn't bothered to brew new Green potions, thinking that even the Yellow ones were unnecessary at this point. Sure enough, the second round of purification began, this one already looking a great deal more manageable. There was no pain, swollen flesh or sickly colours – just the familiar cold and numbness that Kassorith had experienced, indicating that Percy's body was better equipped to handle the transformation.

'Hopefully that means that I'll absorb more of the benefits this time,' he thought.

Only once he had settled into what was going to be his seat for the next couple of days did Percy read the new entry again, focusing on the differences from his treacherous host's.

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The description was similar, except for a few missing "greatly"s before the verbs, suggesting that the effects of this lesser physique were modest – nothing too surprising.

‘Fingers crossed that I’ll get the full version by the time this is over.’

The second major change was the sentence pertaining to his resistance to toxins. If Percy wasn’t mistaken, Kassorith’s version had included a second part – something along the lines of “…and the potency of their venom.” Obviously, that wasn’t applicable to Percy at all, so his Status hadn’t included it.

However, what he found strange was the mention of a sharpened thermal sense – something that should have also not found its way into his body or his Status. Thinking about that, Percy’s heart skipped a beat. He couldn’t help but move his tongue around, trying to determine whether it still had the same shape as before – the last thing he needed was to end up with a forked tongue like a snake’s.

He relaxed upon failing to notice any obvious changes, sticking his tongue out of his mouth in an attempt to feel the temperature of his surroundings. Yet, he experienced nothing of the sort, other than a faint numbness caused by either the ritual or the cold air a few centimetres above the surface of the frigid water.

‘Weird… I wonder what that’s all about.’ Coming up with a different theory, he shifted his attention to his familiar. ‘Micky, can you move closer? I want to check something.’

Percy would rather not move around too much during the early parts of the ritual, to avoid diminishing his gains by mistake. The bird heeded his instructions, walking next to the side of the vat facing him. Thankfully, the container was shorter than a person since Percy had designed it with the expectation of remaining seated through the bath. Meanwhile, the crow stood at twice a man’s height – tall enough for Percy to scan much of the bird’s body.

Sure enough, he spotted a couple of things that he hadn’t noticed in the past. Outside of the silver and grey flames corresponding to Micky and the clone’s souls, the dense Green and Yellow mana permeating their cores and channels, the colourful plumage visible in Percy’s regular sight, and the ink-coloured threads of willpower coursing through the mana, there was something else that stood out.

Micky’s entire frame appeared darker than his surroundings, though a few spots were even darker than that. Namely, this applied to the patches of his body made of ice rather than flesh, the channels containing the three flavours of his ice mana, and the core in the bird’s abdomen, but not the one in his

sternum. In other words, everything even tangentially related to Micky's ice affinity was pitch black in some new part of Percy's vision.

Unable to resist the temptation, Percy glanced down at his own body, noticing that his flesh sported a dark blue hue in this same new sense. It was a couple shades brighter than his familiar's, but still rather dim. And he had the ritual to thank for that, no doubt.

'Holy shit!' the clone exclaimed, clearly having paid attention to the original throughout his investigation. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'It has to be,' Percy replied, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

His eyes had clearly inherited a form of thermal vision from the new mutation!

Percy wasn't sure whether the bath had directly affected his eyes, or whether they had simply acquired this ability by interacting with the other mutation registered in his Status – as they usually did – but nothing else could explain this phenomenon.

'Come to think of it, mutations seem to synergize a lot more with one another than spectral traits or blessings do.'

Granted, this was Percy's first time having multiple mutations – having just acquired his second one – but his familiar had possessed several of them for years now, and this was something they had noticed a while ago. The four mutations in the crow's body were deeply interwoven, with the crystalline feathers created by Ice Sculpture being even more compatible with the Wind Dancer mutation than the regular ones, and the Soul Predator mutation having already spread to nearly every corner of Micky's body. In fact, Percy was confident that Ice Sculpture wouldn't have even been possible without Thin Blood and Soul Predator.

Compared to that, spectral traits didn't seem to tolerate each other nearly as well, with each absorbed fiend bringing Percy to the verge of death. If it hadn't been for the blessing, he wouldn't have even been able to acquire a second trait. As for the blessings themselves, there wasn't any way for two of them to coexist in a mortal's core – at least according to Zoris.

‘I wonder what will happen if I keep gaining new mutations…’

There didn’t seem to be an upper limit to the number he could have at once. And it appeared that the more he obtained, the stronger they would all become. Perhaps, they might all merge eventually, giving rise to something special. Of course, Percy would have tried to get his hands on more mutations anyway, since each of them was useful by itself, but now he had another reason to seek them out.

His future goals aside, he was extremely happy with his new thermal sense. His Status clearly didn’t think much of it, having not even bothered to change the name of Percy’s eyes this time. It wasn’t that strange, since thermal vision was arguably less useful than Mana Sense, Soul Vision, or the ability to perceive willpower. It wouldn’t necessarily help him much in a high-level battle, as it wasn’t easy to lay his eyes on an opponent’s body directly, and there were often many elements obscuring one’s temperature.

Alchemy was a different story, however. While Percy’s ability to see willpower had been useless while brewing, the ability to scan the temperature of a concoction would aid him greatly when dissolving the solid lumps, accelerating the reactions and improving his yield.

‘I can’t wait to put all of my recent gains into practice and see how much I can improve,’ he thought, though he immediately quashed the rising enthusiasm with a deep sigh. Alchemy would have to wait until after the mission to the Fungal Spire.

Other than his mutated eyes, Percy guessed his body had grown far stronger and hopefully more flexible, and that he could now handle Micky’s ice mana a little better. Sadly, he couldn’t test any of those things until the ritual ended, since he could hardly feel his limbs right now.

With nothing else to do, he waited for another two days to pass, occasionally tossing some food and healing potions into his stomach to undo the damage from the first bath. By the end of the final day, Percy received the notification he’d been waiting for.

[Congratulations! Your mutation has evolved: Lesser Thess’kalan Physique -> Greater Thess’kalan Physique!]

As soon as the stinky bathwater stopped bubbling entirely, Percy stretched his limbs inside the vat, realizing he could move again. Getting out of the container, he carefully peeled the outer layer of dead

skin off – the slimy, purple remnants of the first ritual that he hadn't bothered to remove two days prior – revealing the healthy skin beneath. Percy had tanned a lot after spending months under the sun, but the new skin was a couple shades paler – unmarred and unblemished, like a newborn's.

Throwing a couple of punches in the air, he noticed to his great joy that he was faster than before, his fists causing booming shockwaves that no Yellow human should've been capable of. Percy's joints felt like they could bend and twist a little farther, filling him with confidence that he could handle his Third Parade now.

'With the Carnival and a Yellow trollsfury tattoo, there shouldn't be a problem…'

Asking his clone to pump some soul-freezing ice into his channels, Percy soon discovered that the exotic resource didn't bother him nearly as much as it used to. He'd likely be able to unleash multiple Needles in a row without any additional downtime. Finally, even his new thermal sense felt a bit sharper than it had before the second bath.

Summoning and wearing his Cloak, he hopped on Micky's neck, asking his familiar to dump the vats and the pieces of the crystalline dome into the ocean before taking off. At the same time, Percy pulled up his Status, reading the modified entry.

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The three "greatly"s were back with a vengeance, the entry now reading almost the same as his former host's – save for the missing part about his venom. Perhaps, one of his future mutations might unlock that facet of his physique as well, though Percy didn't care about it too strongly.

Shrugging, he had the crow turn westward again, flying straight toward the Fungal Spire.

Taking his cauldron out, Percy set it on the bird's head, tossing a few doses of trollsfury ink and some gravity ingredients in. He hoped to get himself some new tattoos by the time they neared their destination, certain that he possessed the means to both brew them and handle them far better than ever before.

The past couple of years had been tough, but he and his familiar had achieved everything they'd set out to do. They were finally ready to commence one of their most important missions, the sleeping remnants of an entire civilization resting on their shoulders. There was no doubt in Percy's mind that many powerful mages would try to stop them, but he welcomed the challenge with open arms.

Chapter 483 – Late Autumn

Percy didn't even flinch as the grey needle pierced his skin for the thousandth time that day, injecting the green fluid into his body. Only when he was done drawing the fifteenth leaf on his lower forearm did he take a short break to catch his breath, carefully examining the tattoo. It was shaped like a vine, coiling around his left arm, all the way from his shoulder down to near his wrist. Each leaf represented a single dose of ink that would last for a while before degrading – unless he was forced to use it sooner, of course.

Compressing the healing ink wasn't very different from the potions. It required about the same amount of pressure, and only the slightest variations in the frequency of the pulses. The tattoos were more effective than the potions too, due to the nature of the mushrooms Percy had brewed them out of, so having a few Green-grade variants to fall back to in a pinch gave him some peace of mind.

On one hand, this was the most potent source of healing he could currently prepare for himself. On the other, he knew the marginal improvement from potions to tattoos wasn't worth the time or the resources when he needed to consume hundreds of doses in short order.

This was why he hadn't bothered to prepare any for the ritual, sticking with regular potions. However, he wasn't going to skimp on his safety when it came to a dangerous fight. In that case, quality generally beat quantity, as it would allow him to mend much nastier wounds, and to do so faster.

'I should still be careful. The tattoos may be potent, but I doubt I'll be able to regrow a missing limb or recover from a serious injury,' he reminded himself, suddenly feeling a little envious of his friend's mutation.

Storing the empty vials into his seal, he summoned a few filled with a brown liquid into his hands. This was naturally Yellow-grade trollsfury ink that he had also compressed. The recipe for it differed a little more, since it required an entirely different base ingredient from the healing ink. Even so, Percy hadn't had much trouble figuring out the correct setup, thanks to his eyes and the newly registered principle.

His yield was still abysmal – and would likely remain so until he got more practice – but he didn't care about it too much, because he only used the trollsfury tattoos in an emergency and didn't require too many doses. Taking the time to improve his efficiency only made sense for products that he needed lots of.

Percy hadn't even attempted to compress this flavour of ink a second time. Not that he couldn't, but he was more cautious when it came to these tattoos than the others. While he felt confident that his strengthened body could now handle the strain of tattoos matching his grade in tandem with his boosting art, he'd rather test that in battle before going a step farther.

About an hour later, Percy finished drawing the troll king's face on his chest. The tattoo generally looked better on his back, but it was harder to reach there by himself, and optics weren't a priority right now.

'The sun is about to set,' he noticed.

The past few days had felt a little longer for him and Micky, as they'd been flying westward at full speed, thus stretching both daytime and nighttime slightly. Regardless, their extended trip over the ocean was about to come to an end, as the coast was already within view. Tapping into his familiar's senses, Percy immersed himself in his surroundings, appreciating his final sunset out at sea.

Micky was flying pretty low to delay detection by their enemies for as long as possible. He was gliding as quietly as he could above the surface, the force of the frigid tornado swirling around his body propelling him forward more than the infrequent flapping of his wings did.

He allowed his talons to sink into the water, the liquid feeling as hard as stone at this speed. The crow's sharp claws still carved into the blue sheet with ease, spilling a trail of foam in his wake. Objectively speaking, the seawater was rather cold this far north, though to Percy and his familiar it might as well have been tea. A salty breeze assaulted their nostrils as they enjoyed the sun's gradual descent, the sky slowly shifting from one vibrant hue to the next as the star disappeared behind the mountains in the distance.

Every now and then, Micky flapped his powerful wings, planting a short-lived lotus in the water, its white petals sprinkled with icy powder that glittered beneath the fading sunlight.

Before long, the sea was replaced by sand, though that barely lasted a moment before they flew past the beach and into the vast stretches of grasslands that Percy knew would paint most of the ensuing journey. Hills and plains alike were covered in washed-up yellows and golds, the chirping insects having long gone silent as a few trees stood half-naked here and there, slowly shedding what remained of their withering coats.

Every now and then, a brown leaf drifted toward Percy, though it never got a chance to plaster itself onto his body, shredded into brittle powder by the violent gusts spiralling around his familiar. Still, the mana-rich wind didn't stop Percy from smelling the nostalgic scent of decaying plantmatter and wet dirt, or hearing the faint flaps of migrating birds flying in intricate formations in the horizon.

'I guess it should be late autumn…' Percy thought, having long lost track of the seasons. In his defence, there weren't many ways to tell in the ocean – other than counting days, of course.

Percy sure hoped that they wouldn't be discovered immediately, although he understood that it was only a matter of time. He was confident that he and Micky could outspeed most Blues with ease, so he wasn't as worried about being chased, but there were several bloodlines out there that could facilitate fast communication. If the wrong family caught wind of their movements, the information could easily reach House Asclepius or the Divine Root. From there, the rest of Remior would find out soon enough, and all the hunting parties would start converging towards them.

'Are you afraid they'll start sending more than four or five people after us at a time?' Micky asked.

'Hard to know, but that isn't a huge problem by itself,' Percy replied with a shrug.

'How so?'

'Well, on paper, a group of five Blues can hold their own against a Violet, but that assumes that the Violet sticks around to face them head on. In practice, battle power doesn't scale as neatly with numbers. A Violet can just escape from any group of Blues with relative ease, and the same applies to us, so gathering too many in the same location only makes them less effective.'

'Their stacked domains would still slow us down,' Micky protested.

‘They would, but only if they remain close to one another which, again, would lead to the same problem,’ Percy patiently explained. ‘Basically, unless they have more veteran assassins with space affinities to send, they’ll struggle to contain us.’

Micky tilted his head in confusion. ‘If that’s the case, then why are you stressing over being spotted?’

Percy sighed. ‘I’m not as worried about an ambush in a random location that we can easily avoid. However, it’ll be a huge problem if they figure out that we’re heading toward the Fungal Spire and fortify the place before we get there.’

Micky nodded in understanding, not saying anything else. Bringing a couple of Starry Commanders to the verge of death and planting soul clones in their bodies should be easy enough, but it would inevitably take some time. Not much time, but more than Percy would have while being chased by over a dozen Blues.

Thankfully, he didn’t think his previous movements had given his enemies any clues as to his goal, and he was confident that he and Micky could make the trip before their pursuers got the chance to organize.

‘Let’s prepare for the worse-case scenario though.’

Percy didn’t have any personal projects that would yield meaningful results in the little time he had left, but Micky’s boosting art could still use some work. The crow had already figured out all four of the spell’s patterns, so it was just a question of scaling the technique up to its limits – maximizing the flow and conversion of ambient mana and using it to fuel his fighting style as seamlessly as Percy had done with his own version.

Micky’s battle against the trio of Blues had been quite unpleasant, but it had provided him and the clone with valuable insight on how to iron out the last few kinks from the spell. Sharing his senses with the crow, Percy assisted his companions, thinking that a third mind might help them complete the looming upgrade that much sooner.

All of the bird’s spells already used the snowstorm spiralling around him as fuel – be it to empower his body, protect him from harm, accelerate his flight, feed his beast core, or deliver devastating attacks to

his enemies from near and afar. The only thing left was to maximize the efficiency of all of those tasks and elevate the spell to the next level.

Over the following few days, Percy and Micky passed over multiple lakes, forests and even a couple of small mountains, though it was still plains and hills for the most part. They saw a few towns and villages too, but they opted to circle around those, to minimize the odds of getting spotted.

Sadly, their luck ran out at some point.

Despite their efforts to delay the inevitable, they eventually caught the attention of several passersby – be they merchants, messengers or even bandits. Had this been a few years ago, Percy might have hoped that they wouldn't recognize him, but he understood that was no longer a realistic possibility, given how infamous he and his familiar had gotten.

Somebody else in his shoes might have considered the unthinkable – to eliminate all the witnesses on sight before they got the chance to rat him out to the Great Houses. For better or for worse, Percy wasn't the type of person who'd stoop that low, however.

Not only did the idea of murdering a bunch of innocents to maybe prevent a fraction of them from inconveniencing him sicken him to his stomach, he knew it wouldn't even solve the problem. He didn't think he'd be able to kill everyone anyway, so the news of his return would leak sooner or later.

'Our best chance is to keep going,' he said, three waves of determination gushing through the cords.

Micky rose higher, since there was no longer a point to sticking close to the ground now that the cat was out of the bag. If anything, the cover would only make it easier for their enemies to sneak up on them. Without any further need for stealth, Percy also had his familiar fly even faster. That way, they could cover more ground, and pushing the boosting art to its boundaries was conveniently the quickest way to complete its upgrade.

Things remained peaceful for a couple more days, though everyone was aware that it wasn't going to last. Sure enough, the first group of hostile Blues appeared about a week into their journey on the mainland, blocking their path…

Chapter 484 – Three minutes

‘Do we fight or ignore them?’ Micky asked as the quartet of Blues loomed ahead.

Even from hundreds of metres away, the enemy mages’ faces appeared solemn – the poor bastards clearly understood the level of danger they were in, but their superiors had probably left them no choice but to try and get in Percy’s way. Of course, Micky was more than fast enough to circle around them and skip the fight entirely if necessary, but Percy was still trying to decide whether that was the best course of action.

‘I don’t want to kill more people than we have to, and I would rather not waste time on them. Still…’

The problem was that the groups Percy left standing might not give up. There was a good chance they’d chase after him and Micky, following them all the way to the Fungal Spire and drawing even more attention in the process. That would lead to everyone figuring out Percy’s goal even sooner. If that wasn’t bad enough, they would also constitute a hidden danger – should Percy and Micky face trouble at their destination, they’d have to worry about the additional Blues catching up from behind and placing them in an even tougher spot.

Sighing, he stood on his familiar’s back, knowing that dealing with the Blues here was the safest option. Four were a lot. It was on par with the previous group – the most he and Micky had ever faced at once. Thankfully, they would probably be much weaker without the dangerous assassin in their ranks. The sheer number of hostile domains would certainly be an issue, but both Percy and Micky had grown stronger over the past few days.

Summoning a pair of scythes from his spatial seal, he rolled his shoulders, taking a deep breath after another to push the Carnival to its limits. Grey flares of phantom mana danced erratically around him, painting a stark contrast against the pale backdrop of snow spinning around the crow.

‘Three minutes. That’s all the time we can afford to spend here. Any more and we’d be better off just escaping,’ Percy said, getting a round of mental nods back from his companions.

Peering ahead, he scanned his opponents carefully, trying to spot any clues that might help, though he came up empty-handed. The group appeared to contain mages from two different Houses – allied ones,

most likely – but Percy failed to identify them. Hopefully, they wouldn't have any troublesome bloodlines.

Two women were dressed in cyan robes, the badge pinned to the left side of their chests depicting either a stag or a tree, though it was hard to tell what exactly it was from that distance, the screen of icy mist partially obscuring Percy's vision not making things any easier. The other two – a lanky man and a woman dressed in yellow clothes – had insignias depicting the sun. Sadly, contacting Nesha wasn't an option at the moment, so Percy would have to go in blind.

There was no way to tell whether these people had been part of the previous manhunt from a few months ago, or if they'd recently been asked to join due to him and Micky roaming close to their families' lands. Either way, this was Percy's first time seeing any of them.

It was also clearly their first time seeing him – the famous criminal they had likely heard so much about. Despite their apparent advantage in numbers and information, the lanky man floating in the centre-left of the group swallowed visibly after meeting Percy's scrutinizing gaze. Evidently, he had hoped that the encounter wouldn't have devolved into a fight to the death. Sadly for him, that hope was quickly dashed as Percy chose to call their bluff.

Regardless, the enemy Blues didn't wait passively for Percy and Micky to attack. Instead, they seized the initiative when they were still about a hundred metres away. Two attacked from either side, violent torrents of water shooting at the crow and his rider. The others didn't sit idly either, launching a colossal boulder and a massive fireball that rolled together into a red-hot meteor, flying straight toward Percy's face, leaving a long, smoking trail in its passing.

Micky dove to avoid the powerful spells – something that the stacked domains made extremely difficult. The thick willpower felt like an ocean of honey, making even the slightest movement a monumental struggle.

'The sooner we bring one of them down, the sooner we'll have some breathing room,' Percy noted.

The crow spun, using the rotating sheet of ice mana imbued with his own willpower as a knife to shave off part of the hostile domains, Percy grabbing against his familiar's plumage firmly to remain glued to his back. Micky barely managed to fly beneath the oversized blasts in time, but Percy didn't care about that. He grinned, seeing an opportunity in the chaos.

The enemy group fired a second round of attacks, but Percy and Micky had an easier time dodging this one, knowing what affinities to expect at least.

Scattering broken shafts in his surroundings, Percy gathered as much soul-freezing ice mana as the clone had already provided him into his hand. Pointing his palm at a weakness he spotted in the walls of mana and willpower visible in his mutated eyes, he aimed at one of the silver silhouettes hiding behind the obstructions.

Then, he fired.

The Soul-crushing Needle phased through the aquamarine river shooting from his right side, drilling soundlessly through the inky-black lines permeating the magical liquid. The woman he was targeting appeared to realize the danger she was in at the very last second, her silhouette flaring with horror as she tried to dodge.

Percy never saw the attack land, having been forced by the apocalyptic explosion just over his head to duck on Micky's back. Still, it must've found its mark, judging by the woman's lifeless body plummeting toward the ground a moment later, her eyes glazed over. Just like that, the first of their four opponents had been dealt with, a quarter of the suffocating pressure vanishing right with her!

Percy didn't allow himself to relax, however, knowing that this was the best time to follow-up with a second blow to his opponents' morale. Leaping off Micky's back, he jumped from one pair of crossed shafts to the next, heading toward the lanky Blue – the fire affinity user.

The enemy mages looked shocked by their companions' sudden death, but that barely lasted an instant. Regaining his composure, the earth user tried to assist her male teammate in stopping Percy, while the surviving water mage was forced to attack Micky instead.

Percy found it difficult to build up momentum inside so many domains, though he managed to dodge most of the attacks flying toward him by slipping through narrow gaps in the willpower. Splitting their domains between two moving targets clearly wasn't easy for the Blues. Hovering a few dozen metres away from his target, Percy put as much pressure on him as possible to give Micky a chance to take another one down.

The crow spun faster and faster, the howling blizzard hugging his frame intensifying with each revolution. The pale winds connected with his oversized beak, increasing its penetrating power and range greatly as they propelled him forward.

Another river of compressed water shot toward the bird, but Micky didn't bother to dodge this one, meeting it head on. A grinding screech permeated the aerial battlefield, the magical liquid freezing and shattering into a cloud of fine powder that sparkled under the dim sunlight. The spell barely slowed the oversized bird, Micky's beak snapping shut around the woman's core a second later, ripping her body apart in the process.

[Congratulations! Your familiar's spells have merged: Dance of the Savage Gods – Masterful + Wild Art: Consumption – Masterful + Wild Art: Winter's Fang – Masterful -> Wild Art: Symbel of the Savage Gods – Masterful!]

Under different circumstances, Percy might have cracked a smile. His friend had finally completed his boosting art after decades of relentless efforts, merging all of his spells into a top-tier Masterful spell on par with the Carnival.

Unfortunately, he was somewhat busy with his own side of the fight at the moment – though he was about to get markedly less so. Tiptoeing around and through a barrage of stone javelins as thick as tree trunks, he rapidly approached his prey. The disappearance of another domain finally allowed him to pick up speed, rendering his opponents powerless to keep him at bay.

The lanky man tried to dodge, of course, but he was no match for Percy's speed. Clearly realizing that he was done for, he unleashed what was left of his reserves as Percy's scythes sank into his torso, probably trying to take his killer down with him. A tsunami of flames burst out of every pore in the Blue's body, incinerating his clothes in an instant before slamming onto Percy.

Percy didn't panic, however, believing in his own means to protect him. He pulled his hood down to shield his face, pouring mana into his Cloak's runes. The reinforced silk and the structural integrity enchantments negated most of the force. At the same time, he fed what little ice mana he'd been able to recover into the heating runes, relying on them and his freshly tempered body to resist the scorching flames.

The blast still sent him flying back of course. He took a moment or two to regain his balance, feeling like he'd been struck by a charging ram. Thankfully, his injuries were rather light, and his familiar had already attacked the fourth Blue to defend him.

The rest of the battle didn't hold much suspense.

The water mage appeared to realize that she didn't stand a chance, though she still fought to her last breath to delay Percy and Micky – if only by a few more seconds. Whether she was acting out of stubbornness, hatred over her relative's demise, a misguided sense of duty, or something else entirely, Percy didn't know nor care.

He and Micky cleaned up the battlefield as soon as she was dead, storing any elixirs they could find into his spatial seal while feeding the cores to the crow. Climbing onto his familiar's back, Percy instructed the bird to resume his flight, leaving Remior poorer by four more Blues.

It hadn't even been a full three minutes.

Chapter 485: Conductor

'I don't really know your father outside of that one memory of him that we've watched together but… from what little I have seen, I'm sure that he would've been very proud of you,' the clone said upon noticing his host's elation. The crow nodded contentedly, the warmth in his soul a poor match for the chill in his crystalline bones.

Sadly, Micky had been separated from both of his parents at a very young age, missing the chance to learn the second part of the Dance from them – assuming they even knew it. Even after decades of fighting for his life in the coliseum, he had failed to discover the external elements of the boosting art by himself, dying a gruesome death at Mixcoatl's hands.

Thanks to his second chance at life, he and Percy had finally amended that grave injustice, figuring out the rest of the spell. However, Micky's most recent upgrade constituted far more than a personal achievement. It was an important milestone for the people of Huehue as a whole, and proof of something beyond the original form of the boosting art.

Going a step farther than anyone before them, Percy and Micky had upgraded the technique to the Carnival and Symbel of the Savage Gods!

Granted, those versions were tied to their unique circumstances, requiring their specific affinities and mutations to work, among other things. Suffice to say, they weren't useable by anybody else. Even so, their ability to improve upon their Wild Arts to this extent had proven that Micky's heritage had been incomplete to start with – that Rhaziel and his greedy allies had devastated Huehue before Micky's ancestors managed to fully explore the limits of their grand invention.

If Percy was right, there was a lot more that could be done with it. Perhaps, he and his familiar would bring a more generalized upgrade of the boosting art back to the crow's homeland one day, teaching it to its enslaved inhabitants and driving their oppressors away.

'Let's focus on surviving the Blues and Violets here on Remior first, before daydreaming about challenging gods,' the clone thought with a sigh.

Turning his attention inwards, he resumed working on the same project that had kept him busy for the past few months. The clone had spent all his efforts trying to improve his Secret Art – at least whenever he hadn't been helping Micky with his own spell.

Now that both the crow and Percy's main body had reached the limit of their individual strength for the near future, it was time to finally perfect their teamwork. The two had already grown quite proficient at sharing their senses and fighting side by side without getting in each other's way, but that wasn't quite the same as fully leveraging the advantage of their intimate connection. That was why the clone had slowly developed a system that he hoped would allow his companions to cooperate better.

'I'm ready to return,' he told the original, peeling his wisp off the surface of Micky's soul and unwinding the cords on the way back to his own body. His memories blended with the original's, two similar but not identical recounts of the past few months flashing before his eyes.

Weaving the intricate Cloak… slowly perfecting Micky's boosting art… eating half-roasted fish while gazing at the tall waves… his time in Thess'kala… registering the compression principle… chasing the slippery assassin… enduring the painful onslaught of his three subordinates… undergoing the dangerous ritual… returning to the mainland…

The clones Percy equipped Micky with were some of his longest-lived. Under different circumstances, assimilating half a year's worth of memories would have been a daunting and disorienting experience. Luckily, the process was made smoother by the fact that they'd shared their senses throughout the majority of those moments and had been largely aware of each other's thoughts.

Once his throbbing headache had calmed down a little, Percy pulled out another chunk of his soul, using his family's technique to fashion it into a thrumming blob of grey mana. He knew he had to act fast – not only because the next group of Blues might show up at any moment, but also because this was the last morsel of practice he would get at crafting his clones before the operation in the Fungal Spire.

Percy hadn't sent out any clones lately, opting to sacrifice a few weeks of adventuring to keep his cords available. He planned to possess as many Blue wasps as the situation would allow, to maximize his odds of getting his hands on the egg.

'There's still a good chance I'll fail, but I suppose I can always place Nephthys's soul in a different body and try again for a wasp familiar some other time.'

Shaking the unpleasant possibilities of failure out of his mind, he severed the grey wisp from the rest of his soul. All his senses went dark as a result, making him realize that he was the new clone. That state only lasted a moment before he found himself embracing his familiar's soul again.

Applying a layer of phantom mana to keep himself from merging with the crow, he allowed his wisp to spread along the silver surface, moving around one of the cords to wrap the second around it. As soon as the twin connections were tightly coiled together, he worked with the main body to widen them again, reactivating Soul Harmony – the spell that formed the very foundation of his ongoing project.

He and his companions then took a few minutes to clear their minds and get used to their new reality before continuing on their journey to the Fungal Spire. It wasn't until a couple of hours later, when everyone had fully calmed down and made peace with their shuffled thoughts, that they began working on the spell.

Strictly speaking, recycling the clone hadn't been necessary, because the main body's role in the new technique was minimal. The brunt of the work would be handled by the clone, who already understood what he was supposed to do, having spent months planning everything out. That said, bringing the original up to speed would only make everything easier.

'I'm starting,' the clone warned.

A soft melody rang in their shared mind – one that they all found intimately familiar. Naturally, it was the song that the original Micky had played on his kik'lit for Percy back on Huehue – the music that Percy had tried his best to replicate on his shoddy ocarina. The very same tune that had allowed him to inadvertently, yet successfully, restore some of his friend's forgotten memories on a couple of occasions, upgrading his Secret Art both times in the process.

Initially, the clone hadn't intended the song to form the basis of a third spell upgrade – he had merely wanted to help his friend. Seeing how his main body had been too busy with other matters to play the instrument for Micky, he had taken it upon himself to reproduce the melody directly through the connection, in an attempt to jog more of the bird's memories.

The intimate connection provided by Soul Harmony was already potent enough for the song to sound crisp and clear in everyone's minds – especially to Micky who even shared a body with the clone. In fact, the music currently sounded as if it was played on a real instrument by a master musician, since Percy could just ignore any physical limitations like his lacking pair of limbs or insufficient practice.

Of course, the tune was slightly different from the original, though that was by design. At some point, the clone had decided to play around with some variations, because he hadn't been able to dig any new memories out with the previous version in a while, and because the song had an additional purpose now. ʀÁNѲɃÊš

The main part of the tune was the one that Percy had never quite managed to reproduce on the ocarina – an uplifting melody, like something a mother would play for her child to cheer them up. Percy had given it some extra flavour, however, enriching the music further.

It was performed by the gentle voice of the whistling pines that Percy and Micky had spent their early days listening to, a healthy dose of added optimism forcefully injected into the song to remind the crow that he was no longer alone in the world. It spoke of a fresh start and a new family. Of camaraderie and a second chance at life. Of dreams and ambitions.

The second part had changed somewhat too, but not as much. The clone was playing it in the sound of the original kik'lit again, though it was more prominent than before, as if demanding an equal place in the composition as its louder counterpart.

It was solemn and melancholic, reminding Percy and Micky of all the hardships that they had endured – of all the challenges that they had overcome. It spoke of adversity and of the fight for one's place in the

world. Like a people cursed without an affinity, trying to protect their home. Or a boy with a Red core, looked down by all.

But it now also spoke of Remior's wrath, and of the frigid wastelands on Huehue's dark side. Of cruel gods, scheming titans, and treacherous allies. Of countless enemies seeking one's death, and of the tragic fate that had befallen one's family. Of decades spent imprisoned in a dark cell, or enslaved by a sadistic boy. Of longing toward an impossible goal, and a bitter race against time itself.

Micky had actually been the one to request many of the changes.

The crow had told the clone that he no longer sought to return to the person he'd once been. He did wish to recall his past, but to also retain his present – the new life he'd been given. And to fight alongside Percy, forging a new future for them both.

Fortunately, the melody's more balanced duality worked in Percy's favour too, given what he wanted to achieve with it. What had started as the clone's attempt to help Micky had transformed into something else – something just as important. He had realized at some point that this was the perfect way for his main body and Micky to coordinate in battle!

Like a conductor, the clone could push either part of the melody to the forefront, to signal the others to attack or fall back. Even better, the dense information contained in the rich song would allow him to convey more detailed strategies to his companions. By adjusting certain features – such as the tempo or the pitch of either tune – he could let the others know whether to group up or spread out, when to defend each other or put pressure on their enemies, or even when to change targets.

That way, the original and the crow could focus on their own battles for the most part, while the clone tapped into their senses, observing the entire battlefield from two distinct vantage points, and making the best decisions for the group.

'The best part is that they don't even need much practice to get this to work,' the clone thought, a hearty grin tugging at the corners of his borrowed beak.

The clone had spent a lot of time considering how to best communicate the information to the others, fine-tuning the strategy to its most fundamental and actionable building blocks. By sharing Micky's body, he could nudge the crow in the right direction until the latter got used to the spell. Meanwhile, by

feeding his memories to his main body, he had already taught him everything he himself knew – meaning that they were almost ready to put everything to the test.

Now, he just needed some volunteers to try the spell on. Luckily, Remior's elites didn't keep him waiting for too long, the second group of Blues barring his path the very next day.

Chapter 486 – Symphony

As Percy and his companions approached the Spire, the groups of Blues barring his path grew more and more frequent. Clearly, his pursuers had already started converging toward the region, having probably been informed by their superiors about Percy's movements. Percy was torn between rushing ahead at full speed or varying his familiar's flight slightly to throw his enemies off.

In the end, he chose the former option, thinking it would be safer.

At least, the bounty hunters gave him and Micky plenty of opportunities to test out his rapidly improving Secret Art. Under the clone's careful guidance, they took down one group of Blues after the other, never wasting more than a minute or two.

Initially, their teamwork was more than a little clunky. They both understood the theory behind the new spell, thanks to the clone's memories and constant handholding, but putting everything into practice during a heated battle still wasn't the easiest thing in the world. The situation slowly improved, however, as they gained experience.

Despite their growing strength, Percy and Micky were forced to steer clear of any groups with more than five members, knowing that they wouldn't stand a chance against them. Leaving so many of their pursuers alive to chase after them wasn't ideal, but there was nothing they could do about it.

When it came to groups with exactly five Blues, the situation was a little different. As Percy and Micky continued improving, the thought of facing such teams had started sounding more and more sensible. In fact, Percy was confident he could already win if he resorted to his trollsfury tattoo.

After carefully discussing it with his companions, he decided to delay such a gamble for as long as possible, however. Even if he emerged victorious, it wouldn't be quick, and he didn't have time to waste. Besides, he'd rather not use the tattoos before he absolutely had to. In the end, he and Micky opted to

only challenge groups with four members – the poor fools who had yet to realize the danger they were in.

Before long, Percy found himself flying over a region he recognized. It was his first time in the area, but he'd heard of the large, ring-shaped lake located a few days east of the Fungal Spire, indicating – to his great joy – that he was nearing his destination.

He and Micky had already killed over twenty Blues on the way, and that was without counting the assassin's group or the ones they'd slaughtered the previous year. Naturally, they'd also looted plenty of elixirs in the process, growing their stash. Percy hadn't bothered to count his gains, but the added resources were bound to last him for several more years – especially once he raised his brewing yield and mastered the Cascading Cracks technique.

'Assuming we survive that long,' he thought, reminding himself that his situation was still rather precarious.

Sadly, most of the remaining groups behind and in front of him were too strong for him and Micky to face. It had been a while since they last saw one with four members, and Percy doubted they'd ever encounter another – news of the eliminated mages had probably reached everyone's ears by now.

This was why Percy had finally decided to take a risk and engage the next group of five they met – a team that possessed strength on par with a Violet. It wouldn't be an easy fight, but Percy wanted to seize the opportunity to see where he and Micky stood. Furthermore, he felt that the clone was close to a breakthrough with the new spell, so a tough battle was exactly the kind of thing he needed. Either way, he was confident that he and his familiar were ready for the task at last, even without revealing his trump card.

Reality proved a little harsher than expected.

Five domains were clearly too many to endure at once, even when their owners weren't the most skilled at wielding them. Micky struggled to shake the pressure off, and Percy had a lot of trouble finding an opening to slip through his opponents' defences. It appeared that they were going to spend longer here than Percy would have liked.

Even so, he didn't give up.

While he vowed not to challenge another group this powerful anytime soon, he still welcomed the opportunity to test his and his companions' growing might. The clone was improving the fastest among them, having added more features to his mental composition over the past few days, steadily expanding the scope of the spell. As for Percy and Micky – they merely had to learn how to follow their conductor's instructions.

The melody shifted mid-battle, the cheerful tune dipping into a darker, resonant note that thrummed through Percy's chest. Without thinking, he used his Fourth Parade, the dancing duets of the cloaked phantoms defending his familiar from a barrage of stone shards. The projectiles stabbed into the reinforced fabric but never managed to pierce through it completely.

The song took on a lighter tone the next instant, prompting Percy to go on the offensive. Aiming his Soul-crushing Needle at the nearest opponent, he fired the spell, hoping it would land.

He wanted to press on, to try and circle around another enemy with his First Parade, but the clone stopped him. Micky's part of the melody grew louder, prompting the crow to fly in front of Percy, shielding him from a large fireball that he hadn't noticed. The blast exploded against the tornado of mist, singeing some of the bird's feathers, but didn't do much more than that.

Micky's body was almost entirely made of ice by now, with only his most important organs still intact. Curiously, the transformation had only seemed to make him stronger, though Percy still had no intention of investigating whether his friend could regenerate a damaged brain.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Micky continued towards an isolated water mage, as the tempo of both tunes sped up, signalling Percy to join the offensive. He used his Winding Corridor to pressure his previous target – who had apparently dodged the deadly Needle by the skin of his teeth.

Like that, the battle raged on for several more minutes, as both sides fought for every advantage they could get their hands on. At the same time, a song that only Percy and his familiar could hear echoed in their minds, guiding their every move.

Percy fought like a grim reaper shrouded in grey flames, dancing around the battlefield to pressure whomever his clone deemed necessary. He was nimbler than the crow, and had a wide assortment of offensive techniques to choose from – from the insidious Needle that he couldn't fire as often as he would have liked but which was guaranteed to kill whomever it so much as touched, to the First Parade

that had the least penetrating force of all his spells but was the hardest to shake off. From the Second Parade that required some time to execute but could break through almost any barrier, to the Fifth Parade that was extremely lethal but harder to use in the presence of so many opponents that would surely help their teammate peel off the suffocating strips of fabric.

Meanwhile, Micky's movements were more straightforward, though his contribution wasn't any less important. He spun through the air like a frigid comet, supporting his friend. Through his tough and easily repairable body, he could soak a lot of damage, break through a barricade with brute force, shred the Blues' domains using the violent winds spiralling around him, or simply pick off any opponent that strayed from the group.

It took a while, but the first of the enemy mages fell soon enough, the others quickly following.

An interesting fact about the clone's melody was that it wasn't static like the original. It was ever-changing, with each battle requiring its own variation to overcome. It made the song sound fresh and unique on every occasion, reminding Percy a little of Rei's treatment on Melodia. At the end of the day, weren't people the same? Each had their own personal song, serving as the key to their mind.

In fact, the numerous versions of the melody that he and Micky had listened to over the past few days had actually awakened a few more of the crow's forgotten memories. Most of them had been short-lived – momentary flashes – and today's was no exception…

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Micky's mother was dragging him and his sister through the blizzard, frozen tears chilling his cheeks. The children both resisted the woman's efforts, trying to rush back to their father, though her grip only tightened around their wrists as she struggled to keep them by her side, failing to suppress her own sobs.

The man's figure grew more distant by the second as the howling winds blocked Micky's vision, though he could still faintly see the cyan ribbons fluttering around his father's body – and around the three men besieging him.

'Micky's still as young as he was when he got his tattoos, give or take a few weeks…' Percy noted.

The memory he and his familiar had watched yesterday must've been rather recent too. In that one, the boy's father had promised to teach him the Dance once he was a little older, and to tell him the story of the Second Hero as soon as he mastered the spell – the story of the god who had died defending Huehue from Rhaziel's underlings before he got the chance to perfect the boosting art he had invented. Sadly, Percy knew that neither of the man's promises had ever come to pass.

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The memory ended, Percy finding himself kneeling on the crow's back. The flash had lasted a few seconds, but he hadn't been worried about plummeting to his doom. He'd already instructed the clone to take over the bird's body and keep them both safe whenever they tapped into a new memory.

Right as Percy was about to ask Micky how he was feeling, he saw the notification flashing before the clone's borrowed eyes.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Secret Art: Soul Harmony – Refined -> Secret Art: Soul Symphony – Masterful!]

Weirdly enough, while Phoebe's Decree had started letting Percy know whenever his familiar registered a new spell after absorbing Obatala's Approval, the convenient feature didn't extend to his clones. Even so, he could read the messages while sharing their senses, and he knew the upgrade would get listed in his own Status the next time the clone returned to his body.

The grade of the spell didn't surprise him much either. The concept behind Soul Symphony wasn't very complicated, but it did require not only his bloodline, but three minds and several months of planning to work. Besides, Percy's Secret Art had already evolved once while retaining its Refined classification, so it must've been close to the next tier to start with.

'Well, whatever. No time to worry about it…'

Percy shifted his attention to Micky, though the crow beat him to the punch.

'It doesn't look like I ever saw him die,' the bird said, some hope seeping into his voice. 'I know it's unlikely that he's still alive after all this time but… maybe there's a chance?'

Percy sighed, not sure what to tell his friend. In the end, he opted for honesty. ‘It’s possible. If they captured him instead of killing him, they might have taken him to a coliseum like the one I found you in, forcing him to fight for entertainment like you. But… Micky… that was decades ago. And it might be several more decades before we’re in any position to look for him…’

Feeling his familiar’s optimism evaporating, Percy hated himself for saying those words, though he didn’t regret them. It wasn’t healthy for Micky to delude himself with false hope – it would only make the eventual truth sting that much more. It was better to ground himself in reality.

‘It doesn’t mean that we aren’t going to look for him,’ Percy added. ‘No matter what, we’ll do everything in our power to find out what happened to your father, Micky. That much, I promise you.’

The crow nodded, though Percy could tell that his friend was still clinging to the unlikely possibility that his father was alive somewhere.

Technically, there was a chance that the original Micky had already learned what had happened to his father during his imprisonment on Huehue, but it didn’t look like they would be restoring any more of the crow’s forgotten memories with their current means.

Even after strengthening their connection and playing dozens – if not hundreds – of variations of Micky’s melody, digging out the memories had only grown harder. Percy knew they were still buried in there somewhere, but he would probably have to bring the crow to Melodia and request help from one of their soul healers before his familiar could recall the rest of his severed past.

Shaking his head, Percy shifted his attention to the tall structure in front of him. It was a nostalgic mountain covered in enormous mushrooms, their glowing caps shrouded in mist that was no less colourful than the fungi themselves.

At last, they had reached their destination. As much as Percy wanted to help Micky, there was another soon-to-be familiar that required his support far more urgently than the crow…

Chapter 487 – Return to the Fungal Spire

Percy took a deep breath, spending a moment to appreciate the familiar feeling of the colourful motes flowing toward him. It was hard to gauge their exact impact on his regeneration when his reserves were already full, but he estimated he could convert the ambient mana to his own affinities twenty percent faster than usual. The effect would be even more pronounced once he and Micky crossed the final stretch separating them from the mountain.

The environment here appeared to synergize better with the external part of his boosting art than Circulation did. The motes changed to a blueish-grey colour rather easily as they approached the burning wisps dancing around Percy's body, though some of them turned white instead when seized by the snowstorm spiralling around Micky's.

'It's barely been two minutes, and I already want to stay here forever…' Percy lamented, his lips curling into a bitter smile.

Unfortunately, he couldn't afford to spend too long at this place. He had to leave as soon as his new clones were ready. Hopefully, he'd be able to return a couple of days later to grab the egg from the wasps before leaving again, but even that wasn't guaranteed to succeed.

'Shouldn't you be more worried about those elders right now?' Micky suddenly asked. 'I don't think we can handle even a single Violet, let alone five.'

Percy sighed. 'Of course I'm worried. But at the end of the day, they're alchemists – not fighters. Who knows how many centuries it's been since the last time any of them stretched their limbs. Besides, their job is mainly to manage the Guild and guard the settlement – not to chase fugitives or babysit the Starry Commanders. Even if they've heard that we're heading toward the Spire, I don't think they'll be expecting us on the fifth level.'

Micky nodded, though the tension in the air was palpable. Percy wasn't exactly convinced by his own words either. As much as he wanted to reassure himself and his companions that everything would be okay, they all knew that there were a million things that could go wrong.

Even worse, Nephthys was almost out of time. Percy had already asked Micky to check up on the pyramid, and it wasn't doing great. The structure was covered in cracks, the goddess's lingering wisp slowly spilling out of the holes, shrinking by the hour. At this point, Percy wasn't even sure that he'd have time to look for a different body should he fail to grab one from the hive.

But he'd already rushed here as fast as possible. Even after spending all those months training, he and Micky had barely grown strong enough to handle the powerful groups they'd faced on the way. Attempting the mission any earlier would have only spelled their doom.

Percy was debating internally whether it would be better for the Amenthei goddess if he aborted the infiltration entirely and searched for a different host while he still could, when he spotted a tiny dot on the horizon. It rapidly grew into the silhouette of a person – just one – flying straight toward them.

'What the hell?! Discovered already? Please don't let it be one of the elders…' Percy prayed silently, a frown marring his face.

Upon closer inspection, he saw a faint Blue glint in the newcomer's frame, causing him to exhale in relief. In fact, Percy recognized the man not long after, despite having only seen him once in his life. He was tall, sporting a head of dull grey hair, his gaze intense and intimidating – though not as much as it used to be. He wore expensive-looking robes, a series of roots emerging from the underside of a cloud on his insignia, indicating that he was a member of Remior's leading Great House.

For Percy, it had been over a decade since their last meeting. He hadn't known the Blue's name at the time, only learning it years later. Even so, the man had made quite the impression, as he had been one of the strongest mages Percy had encountered up to that point, falling short of just his grandfather.

He was naturally Deimos – the son of Hermes, and the very envoy of the Divine Root who had sent Jason after Percy and Nesha!

'But why is he here by himself? He can't seriously think he can fight both of us without help. Or does he think that I'll spare him after all the crap he's put us through?'

Percy instinctively scanned his surroundings again, to make sure that Deimos was truly alone. After confirming that the Blue really was that stupid, Percy brandished his scythes, urging Micky to rush toward their opponent.

He knew the man had originally acted under orders from above, but Percy still wouldn't forgive Deimos for stripping Orin's status, imprisoning Archibald, and torturing both of them. Breaking them out of the Guild wasn't possible just yet – not without getting everyone into more trouble. However, avenging

them wasn't out of the question, now that their captor had so foolishly offered himself up on a silver platter.

Hurling the weapons, Percy willed them to shatter into dozens of pieces each, the burning fragments repairing themselves into new scythes. He kept a pair to himself, jumping onto another.

Percy's gaze sank into Deimos's frame, the clone's melody echoing in his soul as the crow appeared ready to attack. Killing a solitary Blue shouldn't be very difficult for them – no matter who it was – but Percy wasn't one to underestimate his opponents either. After all, he'd long lost track of all the mages who'd fallen by his hand after making that very mistake.

A human and a bird closed into their target, though Deimos kept flying toward them at the same leisurely pace, seemingly unconcerned.

"I knew you'd show up sooner or later," the Blue suddenly said, his voice oozing with ill-concealed mirth. "I'm still not sure whether you've come for your mentor, your grandfather, or just to steal more elixirs – as you seem to enjoy doing – but I never doubted that waiting for you here was the right call."

Percy ignored the man's ramblings, intent on eliminating him as quickly as possible. A dozen scythes spun toward Deimos, their edges not even disturbing the glowing motes as they phased soundlessly through the air. The violent winds disturbed them plenty, however, icy shards carving narrow paths through the colourful mist as they shot toward the Blue from every direction. Not waiting to see if their attacks landed, Percy and Micky were en route to meet Deimos, ready to finish him off if he somehow survived the barrage.

To his great shock, Percy watched the Blue dodge the attacks rather easily, twisting his body through a narrow gap between them. A few of the projectiles still found their mark, only to shatter harmlessly on Deimos's skin. Clearly, cutting through the thick willpower wouldn't be easy.

Luckily, Percy and Micky were ready. The former swung his scythes personally this time, their tips about to sink into his opponent's neck. The crow was drilling a path behind Deimos, about to turn the man into minced meat the second he took even a single step back.

The Blue surprised them yet again, spinning vertically to duck beneath the grey crescents aiming for his head, delivering a powerful kick on Micky with his heel. The bird's left wing shattered as a result, but

Deimos wasn't done. Before Percy even processed what had happened, Deimos landed a slap on his chest with his backhand, knocking the wind out of his lungs as the enchantments on his Cloak flashed, trying to absorb the impact.

Percy and Micky were sent flying in opposite directions, though Deimos merely floated in the same spot, clearly not in a rush to chase after them.

"The rest of Remior hasn't had the 'privilege' of talking to you in person – as I have – so they don't understand the sheer extent of your audacity," the Blue said, shaking his head. "But I do. I know that you have zero respect for authority. That nothing is sacred or off limits for you…"

Percy tuned out Deimos's words, still struggling to wrap his mind around the ease by which the Blue had dealt with their attacks and struck them back. Stepping on a pair of crossed shafts to arrest his momentum, Percy rubbed his bruised ribs with his forearm, checking up on his familiar. The crow had used his mana to stabilize his flight, his severed wing slowly growing back.

Overall, the damage they had received wasn't that bad, but Percy was still shaken to his core. 'How is he doing this? Some sort of bloodline? I don't think he's used a single drop of mana!'

He knew that domains could turn tangible, of course, and that they could be shaped into some nasty attacks, but flying solely through one's willpower was quite difficult. It wasn't just a matter of producing enough force to support a person's weight – the problem was doing it for an extended period of time, while accelerating and decelerating rapidly.

Until today, Percy hadn't thought it possible for a Blue to wield their domain with such finesse – let alone while retaining enough spare willpower to fight back. As much as he despised the man, he had to admit that Deimos was the most talented Blue he'd seen on Remior. At the very least, the space assassin wouldn't have survived the last attack.

'It doesn't matter. I don't have time to waste on this asshole,' Percy reminded himself, his soul lighting up with resolve.

Perhaps, he and Micky could beat Deimos once they figured out how his bloodline worked, but that would only give the other Blues time to catch up. Or worse, the elders to crawl out of their labs and put an end to Percy's invasion.

Besides, Deimos was the son of a god – there was a non-zero chance he possessed a blessing too, among other trump cards. No matter how Percy reasoned about it, his best course of action would be to go all out to end this quickly.

Pouring mana into the tattoo on his chest, he forced the brown ink to seep into his bloodstream. The liquid reached his heart in an instant, causing it to beat loudly. Each violent thrum rattled his bones, causing his veins to bulge, his muscles to squirm, and his frame to swell with power.

Already, the Yellow trollsfury tattoo appeared as effective on him as the Orange one had been before his advancement. However, the strain was a lot more manageable this time, thanks to the new mutation. Percy grinned, knowing that he could probably try a Green one in the future, though that would have to wait.

Shrugging, he pushed more phantom mana into his channels, forcing his boosting art to its new limit. He even asked the clone to add some additional soul-freezing mana into his spare networks, having more space for the resource than a second ago.

Grey wisps flared around him erratically, dancing in wide arcs, almost in sync with the clone's Symphony. Their mournful faces sang to the tune with renewed passion, their shrill cries filling the aerial battlefield.

Micky didn't let himself fall behind either. He might not have a potion or a tattoo to fall back on, but he still pulled in as much mana as his crystalline body could contain – more, really, his frozen fresh cracking as plumes of white spilled forth, the howling winds joining the melody.

Percy and Micky circled around Deimos, a storm of icy shards and enchanted weapons doing the same. The scythes kept breaking and reforming into more copies, the few strips of cloth that Percy had inadvertently shed during Deimos's counterattack now drifting toward the weapons. They joined them, cloaking their ghostly wielders, forming a flock of armed phantoms that glared at the Blue with cold disdain.

Then, they moved.

Chapter 488 – Sixth Parade

Lifeless figures attacked Deimos from every direction, though Percy and Micky kept their distance for the time being, intent on fighting more cautiously.

The Blue handled the situation just as well as before, dodging the charging phantoms with ease, still not drawing even a drop of mana from his core. Scythes spun toward him by the dozens, a rain of sharp icicles joining them, but neither the burning crescents nor the frozen projectiles ever came close to putting a scratch on him.

Percy used every trick under the sun to land a blow. His Thousand-fanged Maw spanned a wide enough area to surround the Blue once ready, and enough force to bite through the thick layer of willpower protecting him. Sadly, it took time to prepare, allowing Deimos to avoid it well in advance.

Percy tried to suffocate the Blue by slipping a few strands of silk through his defences, hoping that his Fifth Parade would work just as well as it had done against the assassin, yet Deimos never allowed a single strip of cloth to approach.

Every now and then, Percy resorted to his Winding Corridor technique, trying to cut off Deimos's escapes, but the Blue's spatial awareness was downright frightening. He nimbly dodged all of Percy's blows, always landing a nasty counterattack in response, his hits leaving painful bruises beneath the Phantomwoven Cloak.

At some point, Deimos began firing his own projectiles – blasts of concentrated willpower that Percy's dancing phantoms struggled to block. Several attacks landed on him and Micky, leaving their bodies battered and aching.

'Just how the fuck is he doing this?! Does he have a bloodline that amplifies his domain?!' Percy cursed, nearly biting his tongue.

The situation was even more ridiculous as he considered the quintet of Blues he and Micky had recently defeated, without even having to resort to his trollsfury tattoo. Granted, their opponents hadn't been the most talented of their grade, but they had still probably possessed enough combined strength to keep a weak Violet busy for a while.

It just didn't make sense that a lone Blue would be capable of doing so well by himself. This was the kind of thing Percy would have expected to see on a greater spring like Thess'kala, yet Remior simply didn't

have any elite disciples like the ones he and Kassorith had faced in the tournament – not to his knowledge, at least.

Even if a second prodigy had emerged on his world unbeknownst to everyone, it wouldn't explain the sheer ease by which Deimos was handling him and Micky. The man was still holding back too!

'Maybe he isn't,' the crow suddenly suggested. 'What if there's some price he has to pay to fight like this?'

Percy raised an eyebrow, thinking that his friend might be on to something. Perhaps, Deimos wasn't playing around as much as he appeared to. What if not using his mana was actually a requirement to strengthen his domain to this extent? Well, Percy sure hoped that was the case, since his trollsfury tattoo wasn't going to last much longer.

He was about to risk everything into an all-out attack, when Deimos seized the initiative for a change. An ocean of ink spilled out of his body, covering a colossal sphere of space that contained Percy, Micky, and all of their constructs. Suffice to say, Percy had never seen so much willpower gathered in one place. Then again, he hadn't had his Sovereign's Eye for that long either.

"You know… in the beginning, I wanted to wring the recipe out of you so badly. Not only was that my mission – the reason my superiors deployed me to the Alchemists' Guild in the first place – it also aligned with my personal interests. After all, which Yellow-born wouldn't dream of a path to divinity?" Deimos said, his voice reverberating through the domain in a manner that reminded Percy of Hermes's transmissions, albeit at a far smaller scale.

"But it's pretty clear that the gods don't care about getting the recipe from you anymore. Either they have already figured it out, or they don't mind waiting a bit longer for your mentor to spill the beans. And honestly, I'm done caring too," the Blue continued.

The air around Percy grew thicker, vibrating violently. To his horror, his scythes shattered one after the other, though the cloaked phantoms seemed to absorb the shocks a little better than the weapons. A grating noise ruptured his eardrums, causing him to wince, two warm trickles rolling down the sides of his face. His bones shook, though his armour and enhanced physique kept them from breaking. Micky was doing even worse, his crystalline body cracking and regenerating constantly as he struggled to remain afloat.

“Waiting a decade is starting to sound like a small price to pay for the privilege of killing you with my own two hands. I wonder if Orin will feel the need to keep the knowledge to himself once you’re dead. And what will Archibald think when your family’s neighbours are no longer afraid to burn your House to the ground?”

Percy couldn’t hear the shrill cries of his phantoms anymore, nor the howling winds around them. He knew that he partly had his damaged ears to thank for that, but Micky’s worked just fine, yet the only thing either of them could hear was a constant buzz – except of course for the Blue’s taunts that appeared to bypass Percy’s disability entirely. Deimos’s domain affected more than the physical world, however, somehow reaching into Percy’s mind to stifle even the clone’s Symphony.

Gritting his teeth, Percy forced the ambient mana to flow toward the fragmented weapons, igniting them. Restoring the army of phantoms was a struggle, but he knew he would need them if he wanted to end the fight before his boost expired. Micky seemed to agree, doing his best to shake the hostile willpower off.

Deimos smirked as he watched their desperate efforts. He aimed his palm at Percy, firing a storm of projectiles, forcing him to dodge by the skin of his teeth. The ink-coloured blasts moved fast and blended into the same-coloured background extremely well. If that wasn’t enough, Percy found it difficult to predict Deimos’s movements. The Blue wasn’t using his mana, providing Percy with fewer channels of information to study.

Not wanting to fall into his opponent’s rhythm, Percy broke three of the leaves on his forearm, allowing the potent Green mana to flood his body, relieving some of his fatigue.

Stepping on a nearby pair of scythes, he began building momentum, circling around Deimos while dodging his attacks. Slowly, he increased his minions’ numbers again, spreading them like a grey blanket around the battlefield, trying to block his opponent’s vision.

‘We only need to land one good attack. That’s all it’ll take to bring the fucker down!’ Percy thought.

No matter how powerful he seemed, Deimos’s soul was just as vulnerable as any other Blue’s. A single strike would kill him, though there were two obstacles standing in Percy’s way.

The first was his opponent's speed. Even while enveloping the entire battlefield with his domain and firing a flurry of powerful attacks, Deimos appeared to have enough willpower left to manoeuvre extremely well. Thankfully, this was a relatively easy problem to solve. Percy was confident he could create an opening with Micky's help.

The second obstacle was greater. Deimos's defence was clearly difficult to breach. Percy wasn't sure any of his attacks would be powerful enough, except perhaps for his Second Parade, but he doubted he'd ever land that one against such an opponent. The next best thing was his Soul-crushing Needle, but it might never make it through the wall of willpower.

'It doesn't matter. If none of my attacks are good enough, then I'll just have to come up with a new one,' he thought, turning to his companions. 'Give me as much soul-freezing mana as you can muster. Fast. We'll only get one shot.'

The tattoo would probably last a bit longer than that, but refuelling his spare channels took time, and Percy didn't think he'd be able to charge multiple blasts.

Micky and the clone nodded through their connection, already borrowing his excess mana to fuse with their own. Percy had no space for it in his body, but he was about to make some.

Moving the exotic resource along his arms, he shuddered as an indescribable chill seeped into his bones. The cold substance was much easier to bear after the ritual, but not when concentrated in a single body part. Percy's muscles and joints stiffened, the blood in his veins slowing to a crawl as his fingers grew numb.

Some of the frigid resource spilled into his Cloak, inadvertently activating a few of the adaptive enchantments in the unit cells. The wrong mana type twisted the shape of the fabric, distorting the intricate network of runes. What was normally an orderly weave of enchantments became unrecognizable, the cloth on Percy's sleeves now resembling a bunch of tattered rags, fluttering in the wind. He was forced to pour some of his phantom mana into the self-repairs to restore the Cloak to its normal shape, the two mana types fighting a tug-of-war over ownership of the construct.

Most of the soul-freezing ice flowed toward the weapon, however. Percy had discarded one of his scythes, clenching the other with both hands as he poured the substance into its shaft. Much like with his clothes, he pumped phantom mana into the construct as well, trying to keep its shape intact. As powerful as the soul-freezing ice was, he wouldn't be able to deliver it properly if the weapon fell apart.

‘Not enough. Send me more!’ he told the clone as he emptied his spare channels.

Over the next minute or so, Percy dodged Deimos’s attacks while multiplying his phantoms and fuelling his weapon. He was certain the scythe was humming with unprecedented power, though his damaged ears still couldn’t register any sound besides a constant buzz, along with the Blue’s occasional words.

Cold flames danced around the blade as a layer of grey frost formed over its surface, a row of jagged teeth made of ice sprouting along its burning edge. Only when Percy was certain that it couldn’t contain another drop of mana did he stop, lifting his gaze toward his opponent.

‘Here goes nothing,’ he thought, guiding the others toward Deimos.

Micky and the phantoms moved, closing into the relaxed Blue. Seemingly unbothered, the man withdrew much of his domain, before sending a violent shockwave outward to fend off his attackers.

Everyone got pushed back, many of the constructs breaking in the process. Still, Percy and his companions didn’t give up. His surviving minions resumed their offensive, flowing toward Deimos like a tide of grey fabric, pushing against his domain with brute strength.

The Blue condensed his willpower into a bubble around his body, navigating the tumultuous ocean of magical silk and reinforced blades, blasting holes into the mourning figures’ ranks in his effort to not drown among them.

Micky joined the fight with little regard over his safety, entire chunks of ice crumbling from his body as he clashed with Deimos’s barrier to force him to stay put.

Meanwhile, Percy continued to build up speed, jumping from one pair of shafts to the next, his empowered weapon held tightly in his grasp. His new technique was based on his Soul-crushing Needle, but the enchanted scythe should boost its penetrating force even further, the adaptive heating enchantments raising the lethality of the exotic mana.

And Percy was going to deliver the blow himself, to make sure it connected.

Scanning the space carefully, he waited patiently for the clone to signal that Deimos had slowed down, the ghost army having finally overwhelmed him. Of course, the Blue had still done an admirable job guarding his body from their scythes, and Percy knew this fleeting opening would be gone in a second.

Even so, it was enough.

Some of the phantoms moved aside to open a path for their master, as Percy shot toward his opponent. The colours in his vision blurred as he closed the gap in an instant, his scythe mere metres from Deimos's silver silhouette.

This was it!

Deimos was admittedly quite agile, but there simply wasn't enough room left for him to dodge as the dancing crowd swarmed him. Furthermore, Percy just couldn't imagine any Blue blocking such a powerful attack!

'Carnival of the Savage Gods, Sixth Parade, Winter's Edge!' he tried to yell, though no sound escaped his lips. Even so, he swung the weapon with all his might.

The violent impact stopped Percy in his tracks. The enchantments on his Cloak lit up to protect him from the shock, though he still felt like his arms had turned to mush, his previously numb palms suddenly registering a wave of searing pain.

At the same time, the scythe exploded into shrapnel, clearly unable to withstand the blow. A small shard lodged itself beneath Percy's right eye, nearly blinding him as colours returned to the world, revealing the aftermath of the attack. Percy ignored the pain in his limbs, watching with bated breath for the result.

His heart skipped a beat upon seeing Deimos hovering in front of him, alive and well, a sly smirk plastered all over his face. A grey shard covered in cracks was pinched between the man's thumb and index finger, its tip mere centimetres from his chest!

Percy's eyes widened in horror as he realized that his opponent had actually survived the attack – blocking the most powerful spell he had ever unleashed with ease. Examining the man carefully, it wasn't very difficult to figure out how this had happened, however.

Mana was finally flowing out of Deimos's core, blending with the willpower in his hand, dispelling Micky's optimistic theory that this shouldn't be possible. If that wasn't bad enough, Percy finally understood why his opponent's domain was so much stronger than it had any right to be. It had nothing to do with a willpower-strengthening bloodline or any cheap tricks like that. The true reason was far simpler.

A Blue star was still glowing brightly in Deimos's sternum, but the mana flowing down his arm wasn't Blue.

The man's smirk widened into a proper grin. Grabbing his robe with his free hand, he tore a patch off his chest, revealing a set of bandages wrapped tightly around his core. Percy hadn't studied Remior's runes as well as the Vault's but, these, he recognized. After all, he'd used something similar in the past.

'Concealment runes!'

Beads of cold sweat formed on Percy's forehead, as he registered at last how dire the situation was.

Deimos was a Violet!

And not just a weak Violet with a common affinity that he and Micky might be able to barely win against – or flee from.

No.

He was a Violet with a sound affinity – a composite mana type known primarily for its speed – and quite possibly a blessing too!

“That’s the one! The horrified expression I’ve waited so long to see!” Deimos exclaimed, his gleeful voice slamming into Percy along with a wave of Violet mana and ink-coloured willpower, piercing through his damaged ears like a series of needles.

Percy was sent flying back, a bloody cough escaping his lips as his opponent continued. “I have to admit, you’ve fought quite well. Far better than I could have ever expected from a Blue – let alone a Yellow. I suppose all those bounty hunters you’ve taken down weren’t as useless as I thought. If I hadn’t advanced three years ago, I would have probably died by now. Then again, I wouldn’t have stayed in the Guild waiting for you in that case.”

Hardly in a position to process the Violet’s words, Percy landed on something cold and hard, feeling it buckle under his weight. Through the connection to his companions, he could tell that it was his familiar who’d cushioned his fall, at the cost of another broken wing. The crow was already doing his best to carry him away from their dangerous opponent, relying mainly on the cold mana spiralling around him until his missing limb was done regenerating.

Percy didn’t hesitate to consume another five leaves from his tattoo, leaving less than half of his initial stash left. The potent life mana washed over his body, mending his cracked bones and restoring most of his fighting strength.

Even so, he was under no illusion that they could win against Deimos. Percy and Micky had overcome plenty of challenging situations in the past, but the current gap was simply too vast to bridge. After going all out, they’d barely forced their opponent to start using his mana. Clearly, their only option was to try and ditch him – as impossible as that seemed.

The Violet expelled a shocking amount of mana and willpower from his feet, visibly distorting the air behind him as he shot toward the fleeing bird.

“Luckily, I had the foresight to conceal my new grade, otherwise my superiors might have moved me to a different post. Sometimes, I can’t help but wonder what they even expected from me… that I would just walk away with my tail tucked between my legs after getting humiliated by you over and over again? For half a decade? Or that I would sit around waiting for you to grow strong enough to kill me too? More fodder for your ascension?!”

Deimos chuckled, but it sounded hollow.

Percy moved all his surviving phantoms in the Violet's path, supplementing them with strips of cloth that he tore off his sleeves. Ambient mana rushed to ignite them, repairing them into a fresh wave of spectres as Percy desperately tried to slow his opponent down.

The constructs piled onto the advancing sound mage, hugging him into a massive ball of grey silk. It barely lasted an instant, before Deimos punched right through it, resuming the chase.

Percy never stopped adding to the army, buying time for his familiar to escape. Micky's wing was done regrowing a moment later, allowing him to pick up speed.

But it wasn't enough.

Deimos was hot on their tail, drawing nearer by the second. Once he was only a few dozen metres away, he swiped his right arm, sending a barrage of concussive blasts at Percy. Unlike the projectiles he had fired earlier, these contained a lot of mana to reinforce the dense willpower, flying faster than before. Each left holes on multiple phantoms before running out of power.

The platoon of dancing spectres that Percy had painstakingly produced got ripped apart in an instant. Still, he didn't give up, and neither did Micky. More silk tore itself off the rest of his burning Cloak, the enchanted cloth shrinking faster than Percy could regenerate it. His scythes broke and reformed into half-baked copies, as they joined the twisted phantoms and the swirling gales of cold wind flying behind Micky.

At the same time, Percy's mind raced to come up with a way out of their predicament – as was his heart, albeit with the instinctual understanding that there wasn't one.

"I'm not an idiot, you know… Everyone with half a brain must've realized by now that the gods have your back. Of course they do! There's never been another monster like you on our world," Deimos's voice boomed again, his smirk fading as his tone grew colder. "The rest of us mean nothing to them. My own father didn't even bother to stop me from hunting you. If anything, he's fine tossing me aside like garbage – just another target dummy for you to practice on. But he isn't here to save you now, is he? None of them are!"

'Is this it? Don't tell me I have to resort to that,' Percy thought, fear gripping his heart.

More shots continued to pierce his constructs, the barrage already about to reach Micky. Gritting his teeth, Percy grabbed the nearest pair of scythes, standing as firmly as he could on the crow's back, ready to try his best to intercept the attacks.

The shafts rolled along his limbs, his joints bending and twisting in unnatural angles as the crescent blades turned into grey blurs. The projectiles smashed the scythes into powder, many of them having enough strength left to punch through the structural integrity enchantments on Percy's tattered robe, leaving his flesh purple and swollen.

Still, he persisted, drawing more scythes from his surroundings – two… four… eight… fifteen… thirty!

Each construct barely withstood a single hit – most of them not even that – as Percy scrambled to minimize the damage he and his familiar received. The weapons got replaced the moment they broke, a zone of grey snakes forming around Percy, slithering to their deaths to protect him and Micky.

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This was Percy's Third Parade – the Serpents' Den!

Under other circumstances, he would have been ecstatic to see that his enhanced physique and the lingering influence of his trollsfury tattoo had allowed him to reproduce the technique in his own body. Sadly, this wasn't a great time for celebration. ℞𝒶Ɲổ₿ĚȘ

Left with no other choice, Percy reached into the deepest recesses of his mind, willing Metatron's Decree to activate.

Soon, the last of the phantoms barring Deimos's path got torn to shreds, once again revealing the Violet's cruel figure. A powerful blast shattered Percy's remaining scythes, drilling into his barely clothed sleeve with enough force to pulverize his elbow in a burst of blood and bone fragments.

Luckily, the few leaves remaining in Percy's tattoo had been drawn on his upper forearm, barely surviving the brutal amputation. He consumed all seven of them while he still could, though most of the life mana rushed to seal the stump, stopping the bleeding before Percy's brain even registered the pain of his missing limb.

‘Open a second portal in front of you, just in case,’ Percy ordered the clone.

The first one was meant for Deimos to fall through. Given the man’s momentum, they might be able to send him to the Vault by himself if they got lucky. Opening the gate on Remior wasn’t something Percy had ever wanted to do, but forcing their otherwise-insurmountable opponent there was the best-case scenario under these circumstances. However, there was a good chance Deimos might dodge the portal in time, leaving them no option but to enter the second one themselves.

Percy really hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

He had no idea what surrendering his main body to Metatron might mean for him and Micky… or Nephthys, for that matter. Or Nesha, Elaine, Archibald… and the rest of his world. Hell, he didn’t even know if he’d ever get a chance to see Sol or Zoris again, or if he’d be able to free his other friends from the Vault once he joined them.

‘It doesn’t matter. Most of these people will be screwed anyway if we die here…’

The priority now was to survive. Everything else, they could worry about later.

Deimos prepared another barrage as Percy waited with bated breath for the space in front of him to twist, and the familiar colours of the artificial world to pop into existence.

‘Come on… do it faster!’ he begged, the distortion taking an awful lot longer than usual to manifest.

The Violet’s soul flared with unconcealed malice as his arm shone with raw power, yet the portal was nowhere to be found. Only then did Percy realize that something was wrong!

‘It won’t activate!’ the clone’s panicked voice said, echoing the same issue.

Some unknown influence appeared to have blocked Metatron’s Decree entirely, leaving them stranded, and at their opponent’s non-existent mercy! Even this most dreaded trump card that Percy had reserved

for the worst-case scenario – the same move that had saved his ass twice in the past – had somehow been taken from him when he needed it the most!

Micky spun all the way, tossing his passenger off to protect him from the incoming missiles. Percy plummeted toward the ground, watching with horror as his familiar's body got pelted by a rain of destruction, shattering into a dozen pieces. The crow had guarded his head and torso as best as he could, barely leaving his vitals intact. He'd lost both wings in the process, however, along with the lower half of his body – talons, tail feathers, all of it!

Drawing what little mana he had left, Percy tried to regrow enough silk to arrest his momentum, though his still landed rather painfully on the hard dirt, leaving a deep crater and raising a cloud of dust. Micky hit the ground next to him even harder, what little was left of his frame now riddled with cracks.

As for Deimos, he landed gracefully a few metres away, the colourful motes in the area illuminating the savage grin on his expression. Only now did Percy register that the sun had set at some point during the battle, the moonlit sky suffusing the battlefield with its faint glow.

The Violet walked leisurely and soundlessly toward Percy, his suffocating domain causing the ringing in his skull to intensify.

'I'm sorry our adventure had to end so soon, Percy…' Micky's strained voice barely echoed in Percy's mind, speaking words that he'd never wanted to hear. 'I want you to know that I'm grateful for the second chance you've given me. It wasn't always perfect, but it was more than most people in the universe could ask for. Even if we never got to achieve all of our goals, we had a lot of fun together! I'm glad I met you!'

'No! We aren't done yet! I'm sure we'll find a way out of this! We always do!' Percy tried to scream but the sounds still refused to leave his mouth, even as his throat ached with despair.

He tried to stand too, but his legs wobbled, a wave of weakness keeping him stuck to the ground as the trollsfury tattoo's lingering influence finally left his muscles.

"The gods might think highly of you, but they aren't here to save you. I'm sure they'll be unhappy about your death – but this can't be blamed on me. After all, I'm only doing what they've allowed me to do. If

they wanted you alive so badly, maybe they should have paid more attention," Deimos said, uncaring about their inner turmoil.

The Violet raised his hand toward Percy, torrents of mana gathering in his palm. "Once you're gone, guess who will suddenly earn some overdue attention! I'd always deserved it too! I'm more talented than half the Green-borns in the Order! My strength never mattered to the gods before, because I was doomed to remain a mortal my whole life. It was supposed to be different after the Aurora Dew came along – but they were too busy gawking over you. Well… it's going to be different, as soon as you're yesterday's news!"

'Goodbye, Percy!' the crow said, his voice sounding warm and sincere.

The rest of Remior only knew Micky as the monstrous bird that had devoured dozens of powerful mages – a statue of living ice that couldn't be reasoned with. But Percy knew the truth about his friend.

Micky had always been a gentle soul – someone who would rather die than to give his body up to a wicked person. Even after losing his memories, the crow had chosen to suffer in Acton's hands instead of laying a single talon on the innocents of Goldenfield town. Whether it was the gladiator or the familiar, Micky had only ever wanted to spend time with his friends and family. To free his enslaved people and travel by Percy's side… flying… training… and laughing together.

The crow used what little mana he had left to leap in the way of the blast aimed at Percy. The latter's blood froze in his veins, the world slowing to a standstill as he felt his friend's skull break – the last spot in his body still hiding flesh. Ice, gore, and almost-transparent blood splattered across the dirt and all over Percy's face, as the crow's headless torso fell limp in front of him with a muted thud.

His eyes remained glued on his friend's cores. The blizzard of ambient mana spinning around them didn't show any sign of stopping. If anything, it only seemed to intensify, giving Percy hope that Micky could still recover from a missing brain.

That hope died the following instant, however, as a notification flashed before Percy's eyes, making him curse having Phoebe's Decree for the first time in his life…

[Your familiar has been destroyed: Mictlantecuhtli.]

Chapter 490 – Death

“You don’t have to look so sad about the bird – I’ll be sending you to join your little beast soon enough!” Deimos said, his mocking voice slamming into Percy’s skull with savage glee.

Of course, Percy couldn’t care less about the Violet’s threats or insults at the moment. All he could manage was a blank stare at his friend’s mutilated carcass. He tried his utmost to disregard the Status’s morbid notification as he prayed for the crystalline body to start regenerating.

Something shifted, causing his heart to skip a beat.

Sadly, it soon became clear that it was just the wisps trying to return – further evidenced by his cords shaking violently, as they often did when a clone was on the way back. The first and oldest among them was located just below Percy’s sternum, the other a bit lower.

Sure enough, a blob of silver and grey soon left Micky’s body, shooting toward Percy. It slammed into his chest, the wisps trying to burrow into the spots they’d been severed from. Only, things didn’t go very smoothly this time.

Micky had been a familiar – not a clone. The part of Percy’s soul inside him had already merged with the stillborn crow’s and fallen gladiator’s souls a long time ago, making the resulting wisp slightly foreign to Percy. To complicate things further, the barrier of phantom mana that the clone normally used to keep himself separate from Micky had collapsed upon their death, causing the two wisps to mix on the way back.

The gloomy blob wanted to enter Percy’s body through two different wounds. As a result, it pulled and twisted his soul, threatening to rip him apart from within and plunging him into a world of untold agony.

Gritting his teeth, he ignored the pain, trying to savour the ocean of memories rushing into his head. There were countless times more memories than any of his previous clones had ever brought back. They flashed before Percy’s eyes too rapidly for him to process, though he scarcely registered that they spanned his friend’s whole life on Remior – from the day he hatched, all the way to his death.

In many of them, Percy saw himself through the crow’s eyes, experiencing Micky’s feelings and reliving much of their shared past from a new perspective. His eyes burned, welling with tears as the back of his

mouth tasted bitter. A pit formed in his stomach, his head pounding from the influx of information, turning his thoughts groggy and impossible to sift through.

Even so, he tried his best to claw himself back to the present moment. Lifting his gaze with difficulty, he saw Deimos's blurry silhouette preparing another blast to finish him off, though he was certainly taking his sweet time. Clearly, the sadistic bastard was enjoying himself.

'Is he grinning?!'

It was hard to tell for sure, but that sounded right in line with what Percy had seen of the Violet's personality. Cold fury burned through Percy's veins as he tried to get back up and fight Deimos to the very end. He knew he'd probably lose, but he owed Micky to die on his feet, trying to avenge him. Unfortunately, Percy's muscles refused to so much as twitch.

Something else did twitch, however.

Once again, the movement came from the crow's shattered carcass – which should have gone completely inert by now. Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow upon realizing that the blizzard of ambient mana spiralling around the cores had only intensified instead of dying down!

'What the–?'

He didn't even get to complete his thought when the icy body exploded soundlessly, sending frozen fragments everywhere. Most of them didn't really matter, but the two intact orbs shooting toward Percy did. One shone in an amber light, the other pale – Green and Yellow in his Mana Sense. They landed onto the torn fabric trying to regenerate on his chest, sinking into the shifting strips of silk. The cold storm followed right behind them, collapsing upon Percy.

Deimos must've fired his spell, judging by the lingering traces of Violet mana fading around his hand, though Percy hadn't even seen the projectile. Thankfully, he hadn't felt the blow either, his head still attached to his shoulders – the only explanation was that something had blocked the attack, but he wasn't sure what.

The wisps danced wildly around him, carving burning trails in their path. They blended with the frigid winds to form a twisting cyclone, strips of silk and chunks of ice joining them into a chaotic maelstrom of grey mana.

The pain in Percy's soul intensified, his flesh now beginning to fight against him too. Soul-freezing ice rushed into his spare channels with renewed vigour, some of the substance even spilling out of the pathways to reach other body parts. It slowed down the flow of blood in his veins, sending an uncomfortable chill deep into his bones.

His muscles squirmed as the cold found its way into his other mana networks, causing even his soul to grow brittle. Tendrils spread out from the blob still roiling on his chest, expanding like roots to fill every corner of Percy's body. It felt like his very being was restructuring itself, in a manner far more intrusive than even when he'd absorbed his third trait.

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The pain intensified further, leaving Percy unable to think about anything else. If it hadn't been for the blessing of permanence, the Insomnia trait, and the decades of experience he'd had experimenting with his soul, he would have passed out already. Even with all those accolades under his belt, he soon found himself unable to hold on, his consciousness receding into the confines of his mind.

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Suspended within a vast, gloomy ocean, a single structure was spinning slowly. It was shaped like a pyramid, sporting a deep crimson colour. The object had certainly seen better days. Its formerly smooth surfaces were now riddled with cracks, its previous radiance having dimmed greatly.

The interior was in an even worse condition. The symbols on its ceilings and walls were distorted and faded, to the point that even their authors would have struggled to read them, the rich history they'd once depicted now lost to the annals of time.

Many souls lay slumbering within the pyramid, though they were smaller than grains of sand by now – tiny sparks of silver on the verge of going out. Even the much larger wisp embracing them all – the very owner of the structure and the one responsible for the others' survival – wasn't doing much better than

her people. Like everyone else, she was asleep, her damaged soul having slowly leaked out of the cracks over the past few years, leaving barely a fraction of its original volume left.

But there was something else here, besides the slumbering souls.

A desert of colourless powder littered every floor in the structure, filling the rooms and corridors closer to its base entirely. The quantity of the exotic substance was so great that a single mortal would have needed decades – if not centuries – of restless consumption to exhaust it all. Some of it had been used up over the past few months – and it had even happened a little faster than normal. Still, most of the dust was inside the pyramid, showing no signs of running out anytime soon.

Or, at least, that had been the case until now.

Seemingly out of the blue, the scattered dust ignited, transparent flames spreading through the structure. For the first time in hundreds of thousands of years, the powder began evaporating at a frightening rate!

Colourless plumes spilled out of the holes in the pyramid's walls with such force that they even drowned out the leakage of the goddess's soul for a while, buying her a little more time!

But neither she, nor the person responsible for this development had the slightest clue that this was happening. In fact, seeing the powder consumed so quickly would have shocked every single god in the universe. For better or worse, however, there was nobody here to witness the change…

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When Percy came to, the pain was still there, though it was slightly more bearable. He found himself resting face-down on a pile of snow, the cold wind sending a shiver down his spine.

More importantly, he finally had enough strength in his body to move around. Getting up, he noticed that his surroundings looked quite familiar. A vast, snowy plain expanded in every direction, mostly flat with the occasional mound, a moonless sky stretching over his head. Many places in the universe probably fit that description, but Percy had only felt this cold a few times in his life, and most had occurred while experiencing another's memories of a certain planet.

‘The dark side of Huehue…’

Unlike his previous visits, flashes of colourful lightning lit the sky up, drawing faint images upon the dark clouds that Percy was only now noticing. Whenever the heavens rumbled, the same pictures burned themselves directly into his head. He wasn’t even done assimilating the crow’s life yet, when a new tale sprung into his tired mind.

This one was about a young boy who had spent his early days scavenging for food alongside his parents and sister, struggling to survive the harsh weather of his world. Later, it told of the boy’s separation from his family, and his relocation to a new home – one that was simultaneously warmer and far, far colder. Finally, the images depicted the young man’s struggles to keep himself alive as he fought countless battles, suffering for the entertainment of his treacherous kinsmen.

‘It’s too much!’

Percy was forced to bury his face in the snow, desperate to cool his head off. The first set of memories had already been almost impossible to endure – he sure hadn’t been ready to absorb another. There was simply no way he could possibly process all this information by himself!

Luckily, it didn’t seem like he was by himself.

A crunching sound caused him to jerk his head to the right. He saw a person approach, his silhouette familiar. He wore nothing but a pair of shorts, a series of tribal tattoos faintly visible on his bare chest and four arms. His features were mostly humanoid, except for a mouth and nose fused into a long beak, and short, dark hair that resembled the fluff one might see on a newborn chic.

It had been a long time since Percy saw this person’s appearance reflected by the murky pond in his cell – and through the man’s own eyes at that. Even so, there was no mistaking him.

With every step the newcomer took, Percy’s heart thrummed violently, causing the entire plain to shake. The memories grew easier to bear too – almost as if somebody was helping him carry the burden.

More sounds reached Percy's ears, making him appreciate that he could finally hear something other than Deimos's grating voice, or the irritating ringing of the Violet's domain.

The shrill cries of Percy's phantoms filled the air, mourning one's untimely death. Winds howled furiously, promising vengeance on the one responsible, as a murder of crows cawed excitedly, seemingly celebrating their upcoming feast. Percy had no idea if this savage melody was coming from the real world, or merely his own mind. He wasn't even sure that the two were mutually exclusive.

There was another, gentler tune. Anyone but Percy would have probably missed it – how could they not? Like a soft whistle, it spoke of a simpler time, reminding him of happier days – of a past he cherished greatly.

The four-armed man drew nearer, stopping by Percy's side. He extended his lower-right arm, offering to help him up right as the music reached its crescendo. Its triumphant notes resonated with Percy's thoughts, singing of victory against impossible odds and…

…the reunion of old friends.