Wanderer 531

Chapter 531: Ostanes

“It’s pointless! None of this crap is going to work!” Ostanes yelled, flipping the table and watching his equipment shatter on the floor for the third time this month, the liquids spilling into a magical puddle. A few drops splashed onto his robes, but the self-cleaning enchantments caused them to roll down the violet fabric without staining it.

The sight of the broken glass only exacerbated his frustration. At least the cauldron and the gemstone vials had survived his outburst, though he’d have to get more tubes and ingredients later.

Alchemy was a field that required a lot of patience, and Ostanes generally considered himself a patient man: it would be strange if he wasn’t after having practiced the art for over a thousand years.

The problem wasn’t his: or the other elders’: inability to devote the necessary time and effort to figure out the Red-born’s recipe. The issue was mainly that they had people entirely clueless about alchemy breathing down their necks, forcing them to experiment with ingredients that they knew wouldn’t give the concoction the required properties. That bastard, Deimos, had even had the gall to berate them whenever they inevitably failed, as if they hadn’t kept warning him about that exact outcome.

They’d already tried adding every primary or secondary ingredient under the sun into the elixirs, and they’d even varied their approach in every way they could think of, yet the resulting brews had only ever damaged one’s core, rather than mending it faster.

Ostanes had kept telling that stubborn fool that whatever technique the boy had used to improve the recipe didn’t exist on Remior. The details of the Red-born’s bloodline were still a mystery, but the consensus was that he’d found a way to acquire knowledge from other places. How else could they explain the wide assortment of otherworldly abilities that he had demonstrated?

He sighed. ‘At least things have calmed down a little since that idiot got himself killed.’

A Blue venturing out of the settlement to fight a known Blue-killer without backup had been the epitome of stupidity. Judging from the chasm that their subordinates had found next to Deimos’s corpse, as well as the lack of news about Percival since, they’d concluded that the boy had tried to hide inside the hive after defeating Hermes’s son.

Another fool.

Defeating so many of Remior's elites must've gotten to his head. Even a healthy Violet would have been hard-pressed to survive in such a hostile environment for so long: let alone an injured… whatever the boy was.

Since then, Ostanes and his colleagues had been operating under the assumption that Percival Avalon: the fugitive who had terrorized their world for the past several years: was finally gone.

They'd still opted to err on the side of caution, waiting until they were certain of their conclusion before spreading it to the noble Houses, but nothing else made sense. Hopefully Orin would see reason and spill the beans on his student's secrets soon, sparing them this wild goose chase.

Of course, Ostanes and the other elders hadn't given up on deciphering the recipe yet. They wouldn't abandon their efforts until they received permission from the higher-ups in the Divine Root, but it was refreshing to be allowed to work more reasonable hours and from the comfort of their private labs, free from Deimos's suffocating supervision.

'Just a few more weeks of this nonsense and we can ask the Great Houses to reconsider our approach…' he consoled himself.

He was about to clean up his mess when somebody banged on his front door with reckless abandon, clearly forgetting that this was the residence of one of the Guild's leaders.

"Elder Ostanes!" a young female voice yelled.

"Kinin! Didn't I tell you not to disturb me while working? Figuring out this recipe is hard enough as it is…" he grumbled as he opened the door, though the edge in his voice tapered off as he realized that his apprentice was out of breath. "What happened?"

"Elder… sir…" the blond woman spoke amid pants, both hands plastered on her knees. It wasn't until a few seconds later that she recovered enough to form complete sentences. "He's here…! The Spectral

Reaper… the Red-born! He… he's entered the Guild through the east gate… he's strolling through the settlement as if he owns the place… he's heading here, sir! Nobody dares to get in his way!"

The colour drained from Ostanes' face before rushing back again with a vengeance. Shoving his apprentice aside as gently as his fury would allow, he bolted out of the estate, running straight toward where he guessed he would find the infiltrator.

He hadn't the slightest clue how the boy had survived inside the hive for so many weeks, but that was beside the point. How dare he step foot here after all the crimes he'd committed?! Was disrespecting the gods or butchering Holy Children no longer enough?! Did he wish to plunge one of the oldest and most important locations on Remior into chaos too?!

The elders had tacitly agreed to stay out of this mess and focus solely on alchemy and their responsibilities for as long as the Red-born behaved, but it appeared that the unscrupulous boy hadn't appreciated their generosity in the slightest.

Sprinting along the cobblestone path, Ostanes struggled to see more than a few metres ahead, his rage blurring his sight more than the rush of colourful motes did. Even so, finding Percival with his Mana Sense proved simple enough, the boy making no effort to conceal his Yellow cores, the robes brimming with mana of the same grade, or the even-stronger creature perched on his shoulder. It was a well-known fact that the Red-born's equipment had been enchanted to hide his mana signature if he so wished, meaning that flaunting it was a conscious choice!

'How insolent…!' Ostanes gasped.

Taking a sharp turn, he crossed a narrow alley in an instant, heading straight toward the boy. Upon realizing that there were too many obstructions in his path, he gave up running entirely, leaping above numerous buildings and using his domain to fly for the first time in decades.

He landed thirty or so metres in front of Percival with enough force to dig a crater as deep as his knees and send a ripple of cascading cracks across the whole street. Looking up, he carefully scanned the Red-born who had also stopped walking to gaze back at him.

He was wearing clothes made entirely out of his strange, bluish-grey mana, countless intricate runes densely woven throughout the magical fabric. The boy had lowered his hood, not bothering to hide his face, his long, dark hair and unkempt beard fluttering in the wind along with the ends of his robe.

His eyes didn't match their previous description exactly. His slit pupils were encased in grey irises, shimmering in a soft light that barely betrayed their magical nature. They stabbed into Ostanes's very soul like a pair of daggers: as did the similarly-coloured eyes of his infamous crow.

The bird didn't look anything like it was supposed to either. Its grades were correct, but its size and colour weren't. Ostanes felt something off with their scrutinizing gazes, though he struggled to put his finger on it. If he didn't know any better, he'd swear that he was being stared down by a single, monstrous entity: rather than a man and his pet. Wherever one looked, the other's eyes followed, their actions seemingly in perfect sync.

"Have you no shame?!" Ostanes asked, pushing his other questions aside for now. "You dare attack this place too?!"

The Red-born's lips moved, the boy clearly trying to come up with some excuse, but Ostanes didn't care enough to listen. Killing a few Blues had clearly emboldened him too much. It was about time that somebody knocked him down a peg. While Ostanes was no fighter, he was still a Violet. Rusty as he was, his domain should be plenty to put the boy in his place.

Allowing his willpower to gush out of his body, he shaped it into an invisible hand large enough to crush an entire house in its grasp. Reaching toward the Red-born, he tried to grab him.

Just when the colossal construct was about to pinch the boy between its thumb and index finger, Ostanes watched him tilt his head up. The Red-born's lips curled into a frown as his eyes appeared to spot the invisible hand in an instant!

'The rumours about him are true…'

Ostanes didn't even get the chance to consider the implications, when a series of howling winds and shrill cries emanated from the Red-born. A murder of cawing crows joined them, yet the bird on his shoulder hadn't even opened its beak!

It felt like countless blades sliced through the domain, dicing the giant hand into fine pieces. Whatever the boy had used to accomplish this most impressive feat, it wasn't mana. It felt extremely cold to the touch, giving Ostanes the impression that his willpower had frozen into a bunch of tiny ice cubes!

Furrowing his brow, he cautiously took a few steps back, buying time for his willpower to recover. Thankfully, the boy showed no intention of pressing on his advantage.

'No wonder he was able to slaughter entire groups of Blues. Does he have a way to counter our domains?!'

Finesse clearly wouldn't work on Percival, but Ostanes refused to believe that his opponent could match the full brunt of a Violet's willpower. Gathering his strength again, he unleashed his domain once more, this time launching a thick torrent of pressure directly at the boy, far stronger than his previous probe.

'Let's see you block th–'

Before he even completed that thought, the Red-born's eyes narrowed, something no weaker than Ostanes's domain meeting it head on. This time, there was no doubt: Percival somehow wielded one as well!

The two domains collided like tidal waves, distorting the very air between them. A booming shockwave sent all the glowing motes flying away, those in the Red-born's side of the battlefield turning grey in the process.

The entire settlement shook as a wide crater expanded outwards from the impact point, a thick layer of cobblestone peeling off the ground only to shatter halfway through, followed by layers of rock and dirt.

The pressure crashed violently against the nearest buildings, their windows breaking first before their walls cracked. The enchantments blinked repeatedly in a desperate attempt to repair the structures, but it was a losing battle. The runes would have never managed to undo the destruction even if the domains hadn't robbed them of their colourful fuel.

The first house collapsed a second later, followed by another the very next moment, and two more after that. Thankfully, their owners appeared to have evacuated the area, but Ostanes's heart still clenched at

the sight. Many of these buildings had stood tall for thousands of years, weathering the endless march of time for far longer than even one as old as him had been around to protect them.

'That bastard is going to destroy the whole Guild!'

Left with no other choice, Ostanes pulled air mana out of his core, causing a massive hurricane to form around him. He still had no idea how Percival had been able to match a Violet's domain, but there was no way he could overpower his spells too: not with their mana separated by three grades.

Seemingly in response to his actions, the crow's talons sank into the boy's robes, distorting the fabric into rags and causing it to grow outwards as the Red-born's eyes turned white. Ostanes didn't know what his opponent was up to this time, but he wasn't going to give him a chance to pull it off.

Yet, just when he was about to attack, he felt a firm grip on his shoulder.

"That's enough old friend," a familiar voice said.

The storm eased slightly, though it didn't disperse entirely. "Let go of me," Ostanes said, glancing at his fellow elder. He didn't know why his colleague was trying to stop him, but they couldn't allow this to continue. "Don't you see what he's doing to this place?!"

Flamel: the oldest among their ranks: shook his head, the silver strands growing on his temples reflecting the green sheen of Ostanes's mana.

"Look around. The only one threatening the settlement is you…"

Ostanes creased his brow, finding his fellow elder's words difficult to believe. Normally, Violets had great control over their willpower, but that flew out of the window during such an intense clash. After all, it should be impossible for one to unleash all their strength and still have the presence of mind to limit the damage they caused.

Even so, he heeded his friend's advice, allowing both the hurricane and the torrent of willpower to die down, only to be immediately surprised by the Red-born's apparent willingness to deescalate just as

rapidly. The boy's clothes returned to normal, as did his eyes, though they were looking back at Ostanes with unconcealed disdain. The crow popped out of the fabric again, back to standing on Percival's shoulder.

Scanning his surroundings carefully, Ostanes spotted over a dozen wrecked houses around him, even their foundations torn asunder. Yet, his eyes couldn't help but widen upon wandering to the other side of the battlefield.

Near and behind Percival, he couldn't spot a single pebble out of place!

Chapter 532: Eleazar

Eleazar reached the source of the commotion as fast as he could, raising an eyebrow upon examining the ravaged street and destroyed buildings. His heart clenched as he thought that Percival had attacked his colleagues on sight, though a closer look revealed that things weren't exactly like that.

The damaged part of the settlement was limited to Ostanes's immediate surroundings. As for the spot where the young man was standing, it was entirely untouched. More importantly, nobody was fighting right now, the colourful motes dancing around them without a care in the world, indicating that the situation had calmed down.

Exhaling in relief, Eleazar softly landed a few steps away from Anqi, right next to a long fissure that ran across what was left of the street, almost splitting it into two lanes. Hopefully there was still a chance that they could come to an amicable conclusion with Orin's student.

'I suppose I'm among the last to get here,' he realized, counting three other elders at the scene.

Percival and the Violets tossed him fleeting glances, though they didn't say anything, clearly waiting for everyone to arrive first. It wasn't until about a minute later that Paracelsus joined their ranks, completing the group. Ostanes looked like he wanted to speak, but Eleazar didn't let him, rushing to talk to the young man before his short-fused colleague made the situation even worse.

"Percival, I presume? It's nice to finally meet in person. We've all heard so much about you over the years," he said, wearing the warmest smile he could muster. "I admit that not all of it was positive, but there is no denying that you are an extremely talented young man. If only we could set aside our differences, I'm certain that our world would have a lot to gain."

Percival eyed him coldly, clearly not very interested in idle chatter.

"I… used to be your mentor's mentor," Eleazar added, awkwardly rubbing his beard. "In some ways, you could even say that we're connected."

His words appeared to soften Percival's gaze ever so slightly, but didn't entirely dispel his apprehension.

"You were Orin's mentor, yet you still allowed him to rot in a cell for years," the young man replied in a hoarse voice that made it clear that he hadn't spoken to another human in a while.

Eleazar saw many of his colleagues' features twist into grimaces upon listening to Percival's scathing remark. Fortunately, Flamel gave each of the others a meaningful look to diffuse the situation. Evidently, the most senior among the elders seemed to agree with Eleazar that negotiation was still preferable to violence.

"Your actions have placed everyone in a difficult spot," Eleazar continued. "I assure you that I've advocated on Orin's behalf many times. I've also visited him regularly and made sure that he was as comfortable as Deimos would allow. Your mentor spoke highly of you, so I want to believe that the image of you that the Divine Root has painted isn't entirely accurate."

Percy chuckled. "I don't suppose that you've extended the same generosity to my grandfather, have you?"

Eleazar's expression darkened, though he couldn't deny Percival's accusation. None of them knew Archibald that well, so they hadn't cared that much about him. Deimos had been a lot more heavy-handed toward the man too, since they didn't need him to reveal the Aurora Dew's recipe in the future. House Avalon's patriarch didn't even dare to resist, since the Root essentially held his family's future over his head.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat this," Flamel said, clearly deciding to jump into the conversation. "Many of the crimes you've committed are unforgivable, and I'm not even talking about murdering the Holy Children. Fortunately, the good things you can do for Remior are also unprecedented, so the gods and the Great Houses might just be willing to make an exception for you this time. I'll happily negotiate on

your behalf if you surrender without resisting and cooperate with our research. I presume that's why you've taken the risk to come here alone?"

To Eleazar's surprise, the young man shook his head. "I'm indeed tired of all the fighting, so I'm right there with you if you want to solve this peacefully. However, we're doing this on my terms. I've no interest in stepping into a cell and waiting for judgement."

Seemingly unable to suppress his anger any longer, Ostanes unfolded his domain, the motes between him and Percival shifting as a wave of force coursed through them. Paracelsus and Anqi wasted no time helping him, even Flamel soon joining them.

Sighing, Eleazar unleashed his willpower too, aiding his colleagues in pinning down the young man from five different directions. He still hoped that they could speak to Percival in a civilized manner later, but it appeared that he needed to be taught a lesson first.

A sixth domain rose from Percival's body to meet theirs, eliciting shocked reactions from everyone other than Ostanes and Flamel. The two had presumably been the first ones to arrive at the scene.

'Well… that certainly explains the destroyed buildings...' Eleazar thought.

Whatever means had allowed the young man to manifest a domain on par with a Violet's, it clearly wasn't powerful enough to resist two of theirs at once: let alone five. Revolving around him, Percival's willpower barely managed to form a small bubble that gave him some breathing room. Still, he shouldn't be able to take a single step from that spot.

Even so, the young man remained perfectly calm: almost as if he was still in complete control of the situation. Just as the elders were staring at one another in confusion, clearly racking their brains to understand where Percival's confidence was stemming from, Eleazar heard a faint hum in the distance.

The noise intensified as numerous shadows faintly appeared on the horizon. They grew larger and more defined, eventually settling into insectoid shapes bigger than houses, Blue cores burning brightly in their thoraces.

Many of the Guild's Blues flew to intercept the creatures: they might have lacked the guts to approach the infamous Spectral Reaper, but they were apparently more than brave enough to compete with a few oversized beasts.

Unfortunately for the mages, there was no end to the creatures, however. More kept flying from every direction, their domains stacking to stifle the humans' spells before they even formed, suppressing their willpower.

Thankfully, the giant wasps showed no interest in fighting back: otherwise the settlement would have easily been razed to the ground already. They merely converged towards Percival's position, somehow working in cahoots with the young man.

Before long, thousands of colossal insects hovered above the settlement, their dark carapaces blotting out the sky. They flapped their wings many times per second, though the deafening noise they emanated could no longer be described as "buzzing" at their size. It was closer to the sound a giant's sword would make as it violently sliced through the air.

Looking at his fellow elders, Eleazar noticed that their expressions were as pale as his own.

"Starry Commanders… But how?!" Ostanes asked, failing to mask his inner turmoil.

Everyone was probably wondering the same thing. There shouldn't be that many Blue creatures roaming the fifth level of the Spire: most of them must've come from the depths of the hive. Still, that didn't explain why the Starry Queen would break her ancient treaty with humanity to attack the settlement, nor why she would cooperate with Percival.

"Boy, how are you doing this?!" Flamel demanded, even the once-serene leader among the elders having apparently been pushed to his limits. "I swear I'm going to kill you if you don't stop this immediately!"

"Kill me? Try it if you can," Percy taunted, his cold gaze brushing over the Violets, lingering on each of their faces for the briefest of instants.

As if on cue, over fifty domains descended at once, tearing the elders' willpower to shreds. A Blue's domain was far weaker than a Violet's, but there was no way the five of them could compete with such numbers.

"Besides, none of you would dare touch a hair on my head," Percival added, once again eliciting confused reactions from Eleazar and his colleagues.

Answering their unspoken questions, a small creature emerged from the back of one of the giant beasts, flying toward the young man. This wasp was barely larger than a common fox, making Eleazar think that it was a Starry Worker. Strange, considering that the army didn't seem to contain any other beasts below Blue.

Upon closer examination, it became clear that the creature's lineage was far nobler than he'd first thought. Even if Percival had faked the golden watermarks rippling across its tiny exoskeleton, there was no denying the wasp's authority over the larger bugs.

The elders knew enough about the hive's secrets to understand what this meant. As if to settle any lingering doubt, the Starry Princess landed on Percival's free shoulder, Eleazar watching in horror as she folded her wings contentedly to stand opposite the crow.

The young man grinned. "Let's start over, shall we?"

Chapter 533: Flamel

It felt like the whole settlement was vibrating in tandem with the wasps' wingbeats, the ancient Guild that had stood at the foot of the Fungal Spire since time immemorial seemingly at the mercy of a lone Red-born. It wouldn't take more than a word from him to level the whole place, and that wasn't even the worst that the boy could do.

If he so wished, he could instantly crush the Starry Princess standing on his shoulder into pulp, forever dooming their world. In fact, he didn't even have to do anything to the insect directly. Flamel couldn't help but wonder whether the creature could survive long enough to reproduce without him.

"Is there nothing you won't do to further your goals?" Flamel asked in a low voice. "You'd stoop so low as to hold the whole planet hostage?"

Tossing a quick glance at his fellow elders, he noticed the same bitterness that he was experiencing in their own expressions. None of them spoke, letting him lead the negotiation.

Percival chuckled. “You misunderstand. I’m not threatening anybody. I’m merely presenting the facts, to prevent you and the Great Houses from doing anything stupid. I suggest that you all drop your old tactics of putting up bounties or sending assassins after me, trying to bully me into submission. I shouldn’t have to explain what will happen if I were to die. That said, don’t try to pin this on me: you only have yourselves to blame for this situation.”

Flamel raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by that?”

The young man shrugged. “The hive was already screwed long before I first set foot at the Guild. I’ve never endangered the royal lineage: quite the opposite, in fact. It’s only because of me that Remior even has a future. The Starry Princess standing on my shoulder isn’t the original: just a replacement that the Queen has begged me to help her give birth to. None of this would have happened if the lot of you hadn’t allowed Machaon of House Asclepius to steal the royal egg from right under your noses.”

Flamel’s eyes shook at the revelation, surprise and horror gripping his heart in equal measure. This couldn’t be true, could it? Scanning the others, he saw them react in a similar manner, though Ostanes was the first to speak.

“Lies! You expect us to believe that load of crap?!” the short man blurted out, clearly refusing to accept the young man’s story. “Machaon is a serious and respectable figure who has led one of the Great Houses for thousands of years. And what are you? Just an unruly brat: still wet behind the ears: who’s committed over a dozen crimes in as many years. Are we supposed to trust you over him?”

Percival’s cold gaze landed on Ostanes’s chubby figure, causing him to shudder. It was bewildering, really, that a boy this young could command such presence.

“Your misplaced respect is precisely what allowed him to play you all for fools. Fortunately, you don’t have to take my word for it. The old Queen is still alive: go ask her yourselves,” he said, before scratching the back of his head with his one good hand. “Ah, but make sure to bring someone with a mind or soul affinity to help with communication. Preferably somebody you trust.”

Flamel nodded. Now, that, was a reasonable request. He still found the Red-born's story difficult to accept, but it wasn't like they had any other options. If the young man ordered his minions to attack, they wouldn't be able to resist. Besides, Flamel was more than a little curious about this matter.

"Paracelsus, didn't you have an apprentice with a soul affinity?"

"I don't think she knows any communication spells," his colleague replied. "I believe Anqi and Ostanes have people with mind affinities working under them."

"Good. Anqi, find your subordinate and head into the hive. The rest are staying here with me."

He'd deliberately avoided sending Ostanes, since the man was clearly too biased against the Red-born. He was the exact opposite from Eleazar in that regard. The others appeared to be a lot more neutral about it, so they'd probably approach the matter with a level head.

There was no official leader among the elders: the others held the same authority as him on paper, so it wasn't like he could boss them around against their will. However, everyone was generally happy to follow his lead in situations like this, trusting in his judgement. At over four thousand years old, Flamel was the most senior among them by far, having been an elder for longer than the others had even been alive.

The group was patiently waiting for Anqi to return with news from the hive, when Percival suddenly moved. Grabbing the side of his robe, he tore a strip off, feeding mana into its enchantments.

The hole closed in record speed, even the fabric in his hand swiftly growing into a new set of clothes. The Red-born didn't stop there, however, ripping the new construct to pieces and repeating his actions two more times.

Flamel silently observed him, wondering what he was up to. He didn't feel threatened by the young man's actions, since Percival didn't really need to resort to trickery under the circumstances.

Eventually, the Red-born tossed the pile of fabric by Paracelsus's feet, clearly startling him. "You, there. You have a pure affinity, don't you?" he asked, only to get a confused nod back.

Clicking his fingers, Percival caused the cloth to crumble into a cloud of bluish-grey motes that promptly scattered away in the wind, leaving a much smaller pile of same-coloured powder in front of the elder.

"That's crystallized pure mana," the young man explained. "Well… okay… it contains some soul mana too: hence its colour: but that doesn't really change its effect. Given your grade, I'm sure that you can compress your mana into crystals yourself, with very little effort."

"Why are you telling me this?" Paracelsus asked, voicing the question that was probably on everyone's mind.

"It's the secret ingredient," Percival said, cutting to the chase. Seeing Paracelsus still confused, he elaborated. "For the Aurora Dew. Add this to regular elixirs and then go through a final round of deattunement at a higher temperature. That's it."

Flamel's heart stirred again. Evidently, this was going to be a common occurrence when dealing with this particular young man. How many years had he and his colleagues wasted stumbling around in the dark, desperately searching for the very secret that the boy had just blurted out so casually?

And to think that it was such a simple answer, hiding in plain sight…

"Why tell us: after all the lengths that you've gone through to keep it hidden? Why now?" Flamel asked, still struggling to believe his ears.

The Red-born sighed. "It was never my intention to bring the knowledge to my grave. That's why I agreed to have Orin share it eventually. I just wanted some time to get ahead of my peers, and to find a way for Remior to take advantage of the information without running out of nectar and screwing all the low-borns. None of that is much of a problem anymore."

That… made sense, admittedly.

Now that Percival had apparently grown strong enough to compete with Violets, nobody weaker than that was much of a threat even if they advanced. Meanwhile, there were only about a thousand Violets outside of the Divine Order, and all of them were centuries away from White at the earliest. Even if they tripled their core-cleansing speed, none of them would close the gap anytime soon.

Besides, with the entire hive falling into his hands, the young man now held all the leverage to control what happened to their world moving forward.

The group fell silent again for the most part, the elders' expressions a strange cocktail of gloom and cautious optimism. Flamel was no different. Seeing everything that he'd ever cared about suddenly at the mercy of such a reckless boy was a hard pill to swallow.

However, there was no denying that Percival's potential was boundless. If they played their cards right, this could end up being the best thing to happen to their world in a very long time.

Paracelsus appeared more curious than the rest. He spent some time experimenting with crystallizing his mana, with the Red-born sharing the occasional tip to guide him along. The elder didn't have much trouble compressing a few crystals of his own, though it soon became clear that mass producing it at the necessary scale would be a challenge: especially if they had to rely on lots of pure users at the lower grades.

That was when Percival explained that they could get around that by exploiting self-repair enchantments, making the process as effortless as pouring mana into a bunch of runes. That way, they would essentially have a limitless supply of the miraculous ingredient.

'Genius… and he's used it outside alchemy too,' Flamel noted.

By mixing the powder with soft mana in a very precise way, Percival had clearly created a very versatile material to fashion his constructs out of. Adding the powerful enchantments that he'd drawn on it and numerous other discoveries that he appeared to have incorporated into his arsenal, and Flamel was starting to see how the boy had grown so strong in such a short time. Whatever he thought about his character, there was simply no denying his talent.

'No matter what the situation with the hive is, it's still in our best interest to try and work with him,' he realized.

Leaving aside the fact that they didn't seem to really have much of a choice in the matter, it was definitely better to accept the olive branch the Red-born had extended, and to deescalate the situation. Nothing good would come from continuing to oppose him.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the boy proceeded to explain that the powder could be used separately from the elixirs. Its effect would be weaker that way, and it would still double their nectar consumption, but it was enough to get Yellow-borns to the Clear grade while avoiding the losses during brewing.

This would certainly please the noble Houses: for a while at least: until they found a way to eliminate the resource bottleneck.

“I can teach you a cleansing technique to halve everyone’s elixir consumption too, so it will basically be like we’ve just doubled everyone’s cleansing speed for free. Later though…” Percival added with a shrug.

Flamel was about to ask something else, when Anqi finally returned.

“It’s true. The Queen has corroborated everything.”

The news caused everyone’s expressions to twist into grimaces again, though their bitterness was aimed at somebody other than the Red-born for the first time today. Had Machaon truly toyed with the very fate of their world?

“I’m still not buying it!” Ostanes insisted, though judging from the way the other elders were looking at him, he was probably alone.

“Are you calling Anqi a liar too?” Eleazar asked, clearly unhappy with his colleague.

Ostanes raised his hands defensively, rushing to patch things up. “Not at all. I’m just pointing out that we can’t trust the Queen either right now. Just think about it. Her daughter’s life is in the kid’s hands. Obviously, she’ll say whatever he wants her to.”

Percival chuckled again, drawing everyone’s attention.

“I don’t really care whether you believe me or not. I thought I’d do you the courtesy of explaining the situation, but your opinions no longer matter. From now on, I’ll be deciding the rules around here.”

The Red-born's bold words left everyone with their mouth agape: Flamel included: though he wasn't even done yet. Walking toward the centre of the settlement, the young man gestured at them to follow with his remaining hand.

"One of you be a dear and lead me to the prisoners. I'll worry about cleaning your mess up later."

Chapter 534: Empowered

Percy used to respect the Guild's elders a lot more, despite having never met them before today. He had embellished them in his mind as these almost mythical figures, and for good reason.

They presided over one of the most important locations on the planet and they had the same grade as his grandfather: the most powerful person he had ever laid eyes upon for a good chunk of his life. If that hadn't been enough, all of them were venerated alchemy masters, standing at the top of an esoteric field that Percy had spent so much time and effort to become proficient in.

Sadly, the past few days had greatly tarnished their image in his head. It had nothing to do with the fact that he had surpassed them in both strength and brewing yield, but rather about learning how they'd been duped by Machaon, failing at their most important responsibility of guarding the hive. The way they'd treated Percy during their meeting hadn't exactly helped their case either.

He sighed. 'Maybe I should cut them some slack… anyone could have found themselves in their shoes…'

The leader of House Asclepius was a figure even older and more powerful than them, deeply embedded in the political fabric of their entire world. On top of that, he had clearly spent a lot of time brewing his sinister plan: it wasn't that strange that he'd managed to outsmart the elders.

As for their apprehension towards Percy… well, he could certainly see how his reputation didn't make things easier. Of course, it wasn't his fault either that Deimos and his superiors had been slandering him for years, but he should probably give the elders a chance to get to know him better before judging them too harshly.

'That short guy is a real piece of work though,' he thought as he recalled Ostanes's stubbornness.

Thankfully, Eleazar had been the one to volunteer to take him to the prisoners, sparing him from having to deal with the hostile elder for a while. That said, Orin's supposed mentor didn't seem to be in the mood for chitchat either: Percy had given everyone plenty to think about, after all.

Shrugging, he contacted his new familiar. 'Nephthys, everything okay?'

'Good… back in hive,' the reincarnated goddess promptly replied, causing him to exhale in relief.

After his little demonstration, he'd asked the wasps to return to their underground home. He no longer needed to lord them over the settlement: his message was already loud and clear. Besides, the Princess had to resume her accelerated feeding spree to reach the next grade as soon as possible.

The good news was that Percy no longer needed to use his translation device. It had only been a couple of days since his new familiar had emerged from her cocoon, but she'd already grown used to non-verbal communication. Even better, she'd started working on Remior's language too, making noticeable progress every time Percy spoke to her.

It was a little scary how effective her mutation was. Or maybe this was just the inevitable result of a two-hundred-thousand-year-old mind goddess restarting her life.

'I should teach her Hibernation and Circulation later. I bet she'll have them both down in a day…'

The stronger versions of the spells would require a second affinity: which she wouldn't have for a while. In theory, Percy could send her lots of phantom mana to consume through her Soul Predator mutation if he wanted, but things weren't dire enough to warrant such drastic measures.

He was planning to help the other bugs too: their Queen included. It was a necessary step towards improving the hive's efficiency and boosting their nectar and royal jelly production.

The problem was that he couldn't exactly give second cores to tens of millions of wasps, and the bugs below Green were way too dumb to master any spells, forcing him to carefully consider his approach.

'Maybe I'll just pass the Decree to the Blue ones.'

They only made up a tiny fraction of the insects, but they probably consumed a disproportionally large amount of mana. Unlike sapients whose bodies only grew three times stronger with each promotion, beasts experienced much more drastic improvements, since their magic was fully concentrated on their bodies. This was one of the main reasons why they found it so difficult to keep up with their hunger.

Even the Blue wasps probably numbered in the hundreds of thousands, so giving each of them a second core would take a while, yet this would be much more manageable. Percy should be able to pass them the Decree in just a few months. The Queen would need to sacrifice millions of her weaker offspring to produce enough green mushrooms, but that was ultimately a small price to pay.

‘Hopefully, that’ll be enough to make a tangible difference.’

Then, there was the Queen herself.

Percy hadn’t given her a new core yet, for two main reasons. First, the organ would inevitably start at Orange, meaning that it would be a long time before it had any noticeable impact on her physique. Waiting for that hadn’t been an option before the familiar’s creation.

Secondly, Percy had never possessed a Violet host, and the Queen had been too weak and too important to risk it earlier for so little gain. With the Symphony at hand, he probably had more than enough soul mana at his disposal, but he wouldn’t mind having a powerful life user by his side as well, just in case.

Luckily, he was about to meet one.

Pushing any thoughts about his plans for the magical hive aside, he focused on something else. He allowed his willpower to unfold, watching an ocean of ink spill out of his body, blending with his surroundings. This instantly turned his vision pitch black: but only in the channel corresponding to willpower. He could still see mana, souls, heat and regular colours just fine.

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Moulding the substance into various shapes, he marvelled once again at how potent it was, and how much control he could exert over it. Even a Blue's domain was rather easy to manipulate, let alone a Violet's.

Granted, Percy wasn't a true Violet, despite possessing the strength of one. He hadn't been able to wield his own willpower for long either, but he still had some prior experience with the domains of his clones. Being able to directly perceive it only made his job easier.

'It's just as powerful as I thought, and I can use it without fully activating the Symphony,' he noted, mentally replaying his short-lived scuffle with the elders.

It wasn't his first time experimenting with his domain after fusing with Micky: he'd played around with it extensively over the past couple of weeks: but this had been his first opportunity to push himself to his limits and study the domain properly.

He was more than satisfied with the results.

He'd long hypothesized that it wouldn't have lost a shred of power even after separating from Micky. Obatala's Approval was supposed to permanently lock one's domain in its strongest state, and it clearly worked exactly as advertised.

That said, domains weren't the end all be all. Percy would still need to have his bodies completely join forces if he wanted to fight at full strength, but that was too taxing to use often, so it was nice to have a cheaper alternative.

Before the fusion, Percy and Micky had each been able to handle a couple of Blues by themselves. With the domain's help, they should be able to handle four or even five at once without teaming up. If they worked together, they might even be able to beat a weak Violet: one weaker than Deimos: without having to resort to their Extreme spell.

On the flipside, the domain was shared between them. If one of them drew too much, the other would be left with nothing. They couldn't just split up and expect to fight five Blues each at the same time. Dividing their willpower would inevitably weaken it.

‘I wonder why it even got so powerful. This shouldn’t have happened until at least one of our cores reached Blue…’

Percy pulled his Status up again, his eyes lingering on the domain section.

___

Domain:

[Dead Winter: Empowered]___

By now, he had experienced enough domains to have an idea of how his twice-evolved Decree tended to classify them. The first phrase represented the flavour of the domain: not too dissimilar to a spell’s name.

Greens who could barely wield their willpower would only manifest a “Pulse”. Blues who could deploy a proper domain but not infuse any special attributes into it would instead develop a “Field”. That had been the case with Kassorith, and Percy was willing to bet that the same would have applied to Elaine, had he obtained Obatala’s Approval before possessing her.

His own domain was a special case, apparently carrying the same name as his Extreme spell.

The second part of the text was more important, however. It seemed to indicate the strength of a domain, in a manner more analogous to a spell’s tier. For Greens who had yet to awaken any semblance of a domain: or those even weaker: it would only say “Dormant”. Marnok was a recent example of that, as was Percy before the fusion.

Those like Duwa or the clone in Micky’s body who had cheated themselves to an early domain, would get a “Nascent” one: they could wield their willpower in battle, but it wouldn’t be too powerful.

Regular Blues like Kassorith who had not manifested their willpower before advancing would simply acquire an “Awakened” domain.

Finally, those who had unlocked a Nascent domain before Blue would get it upgraded to “Empowered” upon advancing: the very goal of Obatala’s Approval. Granted, Percy only had a single, unorthodox datapoint to consider: himself: but he felt that his guess made sense.

‘That still doesn’t explain why I got mine so early though…’ He frowned.

Even though he and Micky had fused with the clone who had manifested an early domain, they shouldn’t have acquired an Empowered one before reaching Blue. Yet, that had clearly happened.

Then again, what they had experienced while fighting Deimos was obviously a rather unprecedented transformation. They had a grand total of three minds, one Green and three Yellow cores, all boosted by one flavour or another of the Dance, working in perfect sync.

Going back to Duwa’s analogy, the Lone Wanderer hadn’t merely opened the metallic gate slightly in preparation for a future promotion: he had violently ripped it out of its hinges, chewed it up into tiny pieces and spat out the scraps!

‘Hmmm… maybe there are more invisible thresholds that even Obatala isn’t aware of,’ Percy reasoned.

Normally, mages only obtained their domains at Blue: that was the end of the story for the vast majority of people in the universe. The titan had discovered a way to achieve a preliminary awakening ahead of time, designing his Decree to fully take advantage of that. If Percy was right: and he clearly was: then it was possible to achieve even a complete awakening with enough effort.

Either way, this was phenomenal news. Not only did he have an Empowered domain sooner than anyone else, it should continue to grow stronger whenever one of their cores advanced! Between both bodies, they still had nineteen promotions to go through! That was before taking any future aspects into account!

Maybe they’d hit diminishing returns at some point, but he could hardly fathom how powerful their domain would grow by the time they were ready to forge their internal world.

‘I’ll need to figure out how the Moirai do it. Hopefully it’s possible to just fuse all of our cores and concepts into a single domain…’

Making a mental note to look into that in the future, he focused back on the present moment. Eleazar had brought him to a poorly maintained building, down a staircase that led to a barely illuminated dungeon.

Percy saw cobwebs everywhere, each footstep leaving a centimetre-deep impression into the dusty floor. Allowing his domain to unfold once again, he promptly examined all the prison cells on both sides of the corridor, searching for any sign of life. Most of them were empty: save for the occasional scurrying rat: which honestly made sense. Clearly, the Alchemists' Guild rarely had a reason to imprison anyone.

It wasn't until about halfway through the corridor that he finally spotted somebody. Percy scanned that person carefully with his willpower, trying to identify them. Was it a bit rude to use his domain this intrusively? Probably, but who could blame him for indulging in his new toy?

Judging from the prisoner's build and the strength of his own willpower resisting Percy's, he already had a pretty good idea about who the man was. Percy quickened his steps, eager to finally see his grandfather for the first time in years: decades, from his perspective!

His smile and his feet froze before he even reached Archibald's cell, however: an instinctual reaction after noticing a tiny detail that he hadn't expected.

To his horror, Percy realized that the man who had protected their family for as long as he could remember: the same one who had spent months helping him repair his second core and master Circulation: was gone!

The scarred figure sitting in chains on the cold, dirty floor was somebody else now: a mere shadow of his former self. Percy didn't even know what to call him anymore, any words he tried to muster dying in his throat.

Baldy… was no longer bald!

Chapter 535: Cooling off

It had been weeks since Deimos last visited. Initially, Archibald had welcomed the break from the constant torture and interrogation, though he was starting to worry that this might be a bad omen.

Why had Hermes's son given up on him all of a sudden?

The best-case scenario was that the man had simply grown tired of their pointless talks, finally accepting that Archibald wasn't going to share any useful information about his grandson. However, there was also a more chilling possibility that Percy had been captured: or worse, killed: and that Deimos just hadn't cared enough to inform him.

'No sense in stressing over it. It's not like there's anything I can do…'

He sighed, leaning back against the cold wall. His cuts and burns no longer stung, having scabbed a while ago. Not that they'd bothered him much even when they'd still been fresh, but they had made sleeping harder: which sucked even more since it was the best way to alleviate his boredom.

All things considered, Archibald hadn't minded his imprisonment too much: at least not from an individual perspective. In some ways, his time in the dark cell could be considered his first vacation in centuries. He had no work or responsibilities here: he could just sit all day, contemplating the great mysteries of the universe, with nobody to bother him but the guards occasionally bringing him food and water.

It obviously wasn't perfect, of course. The stench and the darkness irritated him, though he'd slowly grown used to that over time. Not having access to elixirs wasn't ideal either, but it was silly to worry about delaying his next advancement by a couple of years when he didn't even know if he'd survive this place.

By far the worst part of his imprisonment was that he didn't know how his family was doing. At the beginning, Deimos had allowed them to see him every now and then, though the visits had grown scarcer as time went on, Hermes's son probably punishing him as his patience waned. Thankfully, Archibald was confident that he had left his House in good hands. Even if Percy got captured, Galahad and Elaine should be powerful enough to hold the fort.

With nothing else to do, Archibald was about to try and fall asleep again, when something suddenly changed.

A tremor spread through the dungeon, howling winds somehow flooding the dark corridor. They were accompanied by shrill cries and cawing birds: eerie sounds that were arguably out of place in the world of the living, let alone the underground prison.

The noise appeared to have a strange rhythm to it, tying the disparate sounds together into a ghostly symphony. It grew louder as the tremor intensified, the bars in Archibald's cell shaking as a powerful domain spilled through their gaps, brushing over every surface in the room.

The potent willpower clearly belonged to a Violet: no Blue should be capable of something like this: yet Archibald struggled to recognize its owner. He was certain that he'd never felt this domain before, though a strange sense of familiarity crept into his mind.

The willpower wrapped tightly around his body, its cold touch sending a shiver down his spine. It was generally frowned upon for one to intrude into another's personal space like this, yet Archibald didn't feel any hostility from the newcomer.

'Just who…?'

He failed to think of any friendly Violet who would risk going up against the Great Houses to see him. Was it a Blue who'd recently advanced, then? He struggled to think of one of those too… At the very least, he doubted that it was anyone from their family.

Was it a neutral party perhaps? Deimos's replacement? Or somebody who had obtained permission to visit him for some entirely unrelated reason?

Whoever it was, the domain weakened momentarily as it examined Archibald's body, its owner seemingly shuddering in surprise. Archibald didn't know whether it was his numerous scars that had shocked the intruder, or whether they had been searching for a different prisoner altogether.

Either way, they clearly decided not to leave him trapped here.

They retracted their domain slightly, focusing it on Archibald's binds. He couldn't see the willpower, but he felt the enchanted metal on his wrists and ankles crack, the mysterious Violet taking extra care to shatter the shackles without injuring him in the process.

Archibald's benefactor was far less cautious about the cell, however. The bars groaned in protest as the door was torn off its hinges, screws and bolts popping off the ground and ceiling one by one. Finally, all the metal got violently twisted into a ball tall enough to reach a man's chest, before getting tossed carelessly aside, shattering the ground with a heavy thud.

Only now did Archibald register two series of footsteps drawing nearer.

Not wanting to risk offending the visitors before he knew what he was dealing with, he opted to scan them with his Mana Sense instead of his own willpower. The strongest one was at Violet, causing Archibald to assume that he was the owner of the mysterious domain.

What was the alternative? The other person clearly sported a much lower grade.

Examining the second person further, Archibald's lips couldn't help but curl into a relieved smile upon noticing the second Yellow core in his abdomen, and the two-cored creature standing on his shoulder. There weren't that many people on Remior who fit that description.

The newcomers stopped right outside the devastated cell.

He recognized the first as Eleazar: the friendliest among the Guild's elders, and someone who had visited him a couple of times before. Archibald was starting to doubt that the strange domain had come from the old alchemist, however.

His grandson was dressed in enchanted clothes: a set of grey robes covering him from head to toe, the fabric brimming with dense, Yellow mana. His eyes shone like the last time he had seen him, though they now did so in a less conspicuous colour.

Archibald raised an eyebrow, feeling like he was looking into a mirror. Percy had always resembled him more than his other grandchildren, though his shaved scalp and the young man's youthful features had differentiated them.

That was all in the past, however. In a strange quirk of fate, grandfather and grandson had both grown their hair out since their last meeting, albeit for different reasons. The decades that Percy had no doubt experienced inside Kronos's Decree had clearly left their mark on his expression too. Visibly, he hadn't really aged much, yet Archibald could already guess how many hardships the young man had endured.

There was something else that didn't immediately make sense: Percy's gaze almost gave Archibald the impression that he was looking at a different person entirely, though he couldn't put his finger on the exact reason for that.

It had been even longer since he last saw Micky, the tiny crow standing on his grandson's shoulder looking even more changed.

Archibald already had a million questions, though he shoved most of them to the back of his mind, focusing on the most urgent matters. He was about to speak when his grandson wrinkled his nose.

"When was the last time these bastards allowed you to take a shower?" Percy asked, tossing Eleazar a glare.

To Archibald's shock, the elder actually took a step back, raising his arms defensively!

"It wasn't up to us," the old alchemist protested. "The Guild has to comply with the Root's commands, much like your House does. You can blame this on Deimos."

'Since when are the elders scared of him?!' Archibald wondered with a frown as he watched the strange scene unfold. He'd lived for centuries, yet this was his first time seeing a Violet walk on eggshells around a Yellow.

"How convenient... You'll give him and Orin a place to stay later," Percy demanded, actually getting a respectful nod back from the old alchemist! Turning back to Archibald, he added, "Grandpa, I'll make sure to get you some proper clothes after you wash up. For now, this will have to do."

Archibald didn't get a chance to ask what his grandson meant when the crow opened his beak, releasing a stream of air and water that blended into a uniform drizzle. It doused him from head to toe, feeling

rather cold, though nothing too uncomfortable for a Violet. He welcomed the familiar's mana with open arms, allowing it to wash the grime off his scarred body. Honestly, he'd also rather talk to his grandson with some dignity, not souring their reunion by reeking like this.

A few seconds later, Percy ripped a piece of fabric off his robe, pumping mana into its enchantments to regenerate it into a second set of magical clothes, passing it over to Archibald. Then he gestured at him to follow as he resumed his stroll along the corridor.

"We have a lot of things to discuss, but first there's another prisoner than needs rescuing," the young man explained.

Archibald nodded in a daze, impatient to sit down with his grandson. It had only been a couple of minutes, yet every time Percy did or said anything, he only seemed to breed more questions. How did this grey fabric work? What had happened to Micky? To Percy's eyes? Was he the one who had used that domain earlier? And how was he here? Why was the violet-robed elder just following him around like his personal assistant?

Suppressing his bubbling curiosity once more, Archibald focused on something more important.

"Percy, you need to be wary about Deimos. It's just a guess, but his domain feels way too powerful for a Blue's. He's trying to hide it, but I think he might have advanced already," he warned, his tone grim. "Knowing him, he'll be royally pissed once he realizes that you've broken me out."

The young man stopped in his tracks, flashing Archibald a mischievous grin, not a trace of fear on his face. His next words caused the elder beside him to visibly shudder.

"You don't have to worry about Deimos. He's not such a bad person… once you give him a chance to cool off…"

Chapter 536: Soothing a tired soul

Stepping out of the shower, Percy borrowed some gaseous mana from Micky through the cord to dry himself up. His human body could also produce smaller quantities of ice mana with his boosting art active, but he didn't see a need to put that kind of effort just to wash up.

The elemental body had already returned to the hive to resume directing the mushroom production. They'd need a lot of life mana in the coming weeks, so it was best to start early. Besides, that was the perfect place to consume a lot of nectar, accelerating the beast core's promotion. Now that he had multiple ways to deal with his hunger effectively, there was no reason not to race toward Blue at full speed.

Once he helped the Starry Queen and Nephthys with their stamina issues, he was going to ask them to spare some royal jelly for his other cores, but he wasn't in a hurry to do that. His new familiar was still at a rather critical stage in her development, so he figured that it was best to wait until she reached Yellow, fully stabilized her soul and received her second core.

Percy didn't need any bodyguards either, as he was more than capable of wielding near-Violet strength by himself. It should be plenty if somebody foolishly attacked him, though he didn't see that happening anytime soon.

Standing in front of his bed, his gaze lingered on the folded piles of enchanted robes that Eleazar had gifted him. Percy had gotten rid of his orange clothes years ago, but that wasn't a suitable colour for him anyway. Not anymore. Orin's mentor had generously gifted him a set of every colour from yellow to violet, letting him choose how he wanted to present himself.

'Really thoughtful of him. The elders aren't that bad once you get to know them…'

Percy decided to put the previous unpleasantness behind him from now on, and to approach the old alchemists with an open mind. While he'd probably be able to get what he wanted by strongarming them into cooperating, things would likely be smoother if he tried to forge a positive relationship with them.

His fingers traced the runes embroidered on the robes, causing him to realize how primitive the enchantments were. Back in the day, he used to greatly appreciate the handy self-cleaning runes, though his recent progress with magiscript truly put their relative simplicity into perspective.

He could probably learn to design better robes in a day if he studied the right enchantments and put his mind to it: especially with the Weaving trait added to the mix. That said, there were far more urgent projects for him to devote his time towards, both at a personal level and for Remior as a whole.

Returning his attention to the robes, he recalled how often he used to daydream about reaching the next grade and qualifying for a new colour. At the time, he'd been impatient to wear something that wouldn't get him odd looks from his peers.

Remembering how insecure he used to be about his birth grade made him chuckle.

Nowadays, there wasn't anyone on Remior who would look down on him for being a Red-born. Love or hate him, everyone had been forced to acknowledge how far Percy had come. Whether he would become a god one day remained to be seen, but even the Green-borns didn't necessarily have much of an edge over him in that regard.

'Should I wear it?' he wondered, picking the yellow robe up.

Nobody would complain if he didn't don the Guild's uniform: he'd only be doing it for nostalgia's sake. Technically, he wasn't sure what colour he should wear either. Going purely by his actual grade, yellow made the most sense, but that would look silly considering that he was bossing the elders around.

In the end, he shook his head, opting to don his trusty Cloak instead. Leaving aside how weird he'd look in the robes given his current strength and status, there was no reason to leave himself vulnerable. His domain would make it exceedingly difficult for anyone to sneak up on him, but he'd still rather not forsake the protection his construct provided.

After all, it had already saved his life from one assassination attempt recently. Stripped of his Ultimate Art and domain, Percy was ultimately a Yellow. Even with two cores and the Greater Thess'kalan Physique, his body wasn't any tougher than a Green's.

Leaving his oversized bedroom, he decided to explore his new residence carefully, having not had a chance earlier. Overall, it greatly resembled his old place, though this one was twice as large. The living room was cleanly delineated from the kitchen, both rooms spacious enough to comfortably house a few guests if necessary.

Another notable addition was the door opposite the kitchen, leading to his own private lab: a convenience that was usually only afforded to senior alchemists like Orin.

‘Useful… if a little superfluous,’ he thought, awkwardly scratching his head.

He was certainly qualified for this treatment given his brewing yield, but he didn’t really need it. While he fully expected to be splitting his time between the settlement and the hive over the next few years, he was used to brewing in the wilderness or even on Micky’s back. He’d long learned to rely solely on his cauldron, mutated eyes and pure mana. The rest of the fancy equipment that other alchemists routinely made use of was a luxury he could do without.

Either way, he hadn’t seen a reason to turn the place down. The elders had extended the same generous treatment to Orin and Archibald. The former hadn’t been a surprise, since Percy’s mentor was a senior alchemist himself who used to live in a similar residence before his imprisonment, though giving one to Percy’s grandfather was a clear attempt to compensate him for the past couple of years.

Of course, Archibald didn’t need the lab either, nor was he planning to stay in the Guild for long. Eager as he was to return to the Camelot province and resume his responsibilities as House Avalon’s patriarch, Percy had convinced him to wait here for a while longer. Not only did he need his grandfather’s help with a few things, he genuinely missed him after not seeing him for so long: he’d rather not part ways with the man so soon.

Besides, Percy had yet to have a proper conversation with his mentor and grandfather. As impatient as all parties involved were to sit down and catch up, Percy had insisted that they took some time to recover first: wash up, eat some proper food, and maybe get a good night’s sleep. There was no longer any reason to rush things. Based on what the elders had told him, news of his return had yet to spread, but it wouldn’t be long. Soon, nobody would even consider laying a finger on his loved ones.

Other than his relief and joy at seeing Orin and Archibald alive and well, Percy couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt. He could blame Deimos and the Root all he wanted, but there was no denying that nothing bad would have happened to them if not for their association with him.

‘I swear I’ll make it up to them,’ he decided. Luckily, he had several ways to do that.

Filtering all the negative thoughts out for now, he left the house, eager to visit a certain place. Archibald and Orin weren’t the only ones that needed a rest. Percy might not have to sleep, but there were still a few things on Remior capable of soothing his tired soul: and Phoebe knew, he needed that after all the hardships he’d endured in the past few years.

Casually strolling through the settlement, he took deep breaths to appreciate the rich ambient mana. The Fungal Spire was no Thess'kala, but the mana density was still higher than most other places he'd been to.

Stone buildings lined either side of the street, their ancient walls covered in runes that glowed softly whenever one of the dancing motes seeped into them. Now that he didn't have an impending meeting with the elders to worry about, Percy was free to reminisce about his youth. His new residence was located at a different part of the settlement, but that did little to stifle the rush of memories from flashing through his mind as he traversed the familiar landscape.

'That's where I first bought the potions from…'

'Isn't that the shortcut I used to take to reach Orin's old place?'

'Ah, that's where Nesha's gambling den used to be!'

Percy wasn't alone in the street; the others having found the courage to emerge from their hiding spots in the past few hours. They still stared at the infamous Spectral Reaper in apprehension, steering clear of him on sight, though they appeared to at least realize that they were in no immediate danger.

Even so, his lips couldn't help but part into a sheepish grin. He almost regretted the excessive show of force from earlier, realizing how terrifying the army of Blue wasps must've looked to the average Guild member. Then again, putting his cards on the table had ultimately been the fastest way to get the elders to listen to him.

Undoing years of propaganda would take more than a day or two, though he was confident that everyone on Remior: not just his fellow alchemists: would come around sooner rather than later.

'Nobody will give a shit about a dead Holy Child or two when they've all got Aurora Dew spilling out of their ears…' he reasoned.

Reaching his destination, he found a familiar-looking stand right where he'd last seen it all those years ago. It was operated by a plump man lighting a stove with fire magic: the first guy Percy had seen today wearing an orange robe. He looked a bit older than the average Guild member too, seemingly in his mid-

thirties. His short hair sported a vibrant ginger colour, his features soft. Most notably, a bright smile was plastered all over his face, making him look quite approachable.

At the same time, Percy caught a whiff of a rather sweet scent emanating from the stove, turning his own grin more genuine. Archibald and Orin weren't the only people in the Guild he'd wanted to visit.

Now, he just had to figure out how to get himself a Honey Roll without giving his old pal a heart attack…

Chapter 537: Freddy

The commotion caught Freddy's attention, making him lift his eyes from the sweet pastry that he was preparing, to look at the cloaked figure walking toward him. The crowd parted in the man's passing, everyone stepping away from him in fright.

Members were supposed to wear the Guild's robes, though it wasn't impossible to find somebody dressed in other clothes every now and then, since merchants and visitors were allowed into the settlement for various purposes.

Security had been strict in the months following Hermes's announcement, though it had relaxed somewhat over the years. That said, outsiders were still rare near the entrance leading to the Fungal Spire, since they had no business in the hunting grounds.

Everyone knew that the newcomer was technically a member of the Guild, of course, but nobody dared to complain about him not wearing the proper uniform. The man's long hair fluttered erratically in the wind, his pupils sporting a dull, almost-metallic sheen. They ignored everyone else: Yellows, Greens, or even the occasional Blue: focused entirely on Freddy, who returned the gaze with a complicated one of his own.

Stopping just a couple of metres away, the cloaked figure's smile gradually shifted into a confused frown as Freddy remained silent.

"Freddy? It's me. Man… don't tell me you've forgotten your number one customer after a few years?"

Freddy sighed, before forcing a smile. "Hey… Percy. I know who you are. You're… a hard person to forget: especially nowadays. If anything, I'm more surprised that you remember me. You've changed."

Percy hadn't aged that much physically but, to Freddy, he looked like an entirely different person. The clueless teenager who used to bust his ass every day, leaving the settlement early in the morning only to return late at night covered in wasp blood, was long gone.

The changes weren't bad per se. Perhaps, Freddy should be happy about his friend. Percy looked more confident than ever, his fame having reached every corner of the planet years ago. The boy who used to chat with him while munching on Honey Rolls every night had turned into a figure capable of shaking the earth and splitting the sky. The Great Houses watched his every move with bated breath, hanging by his every action.

In some ways, Freddy had experienced his monumental transition more starkly than anyone else on Remior. Looking back, he realized that he'd never truly known Percy. Up until the day that news about his involvement with the Aurora Dew had spread, Freddy had thought of Percy as another Red-born just like him, doing his best to get by.

Granted, Percy had always been the most driven and hardworking person Freddy had ever met, but he could have never imagined him accomplishing even a fraction of the things he'd done in the past couple of years.

"You just vanished one day, without even bothering to say goodbye," he muttered, failing to hide the accusation in his voice.

Percy's frown deepened. "I'm sorry about that. I had to leave in a hurry, because the Divine Root was onto me. Besides, telling you anything would have only put you in danger. I'm sure you've heard what happened to my mentor and grandpa."

Freddy shook his head. "I get that, though I don't think you understand what it was like for me. I'd no idea that you were involved in such a high-stakes political game. I thought you'd just gotten yourself killed while hunting the wasps one day."

"I di–"

"I spent months looking for you!" Freddy yelled, not giving Percy a chance to utter a word, his outburst surprising even himself. All this time, he hadn't realized how much he'd kept tucked in. "I searched

every square centimetre of the first and second levels by myself! At some point, I even started begging your mentor to help me search the higher levels! He refused multiple times before giving in!"

Percy's expression darkened, some unmistakeable traces of guilt finding their way into his eyes. "Orin didn't mention that earlier… I suppose we didn't get to talk for too long. I'm sorry, Freddy. It was never my intention to do that to you. You deserved better."

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Freddy noticed that he had clenched both fists at some point, his hands drained of all colour. Listening to his friend's apology, he couldn't help but feel a little silly about lashing at somebody who had threatened five Violets into submission mere hours ago. Forcing himself to exhale, he relaxed as much as he could.

"No… it's fine," he said. "It's not fair to pin everything on you. I know that you had plenty on your mind. Besides, you never asked me to go looking for you: that was all me."

Reaching over the counter with his one good arm, Percy patted Freddy's shoulder.

"Why'd you do it? Don't get me wrong: I'm flattered that you cared enough, but we were never that close. I just bought Honey Rolls from you for a couple of years. That meant a lot to me because I'd never socialized much with anyone else: and because your Honey Rolls are awesome: but I shouldn't have been more than another customer to you."

"That's exactly why I did it," Freddy said with a shrug, causing Percy to raise an eyebrow. "Nobody cares if a Guild member goes missing. You didn't have any other friends either. I thought that it would be too sad for you to disappear without anyone knowing or caring. I'd hoped to get some answers and maybe send a letter to your family or something. At least, that's what I would have wanted someone to do for me if I'd been in your shoes: or, well… what I'd thought had been your shoes, at least."

They both fell silent for a few seconds, until Freddy asked something else.

"How much of the things you used to tell me was true? I know you didn't just go from killing a dozen Starry Workers a day to slaughtering entire groups of Blues overnight."

“Most of it was true,” Percy hurriedly said. “I just downplayed my fighting strength a little. I had to keep things like my second core or my familiar secret. I really wasn’t that much stronger than a regular Orange back then: only maybe twice or thrice as strong…”

“Only twice or thrice, he says…” Freddy stared back at him in disbelief, before chuckling. “I suppose that’s really just a drop in the bucket, all things considered…”

“If it’s any consolation, I’ll be a lot more honest with you from now on. I no longer have to worry that much about my secrets leaking. In fact, I’ve got some pretty crazy stories to share if you promise not to spit in my Honey Rolls.”

“I make no such promises,” Freddy joked, only now remembering the pastry he still had on the stove.

The thing had already turned into a piece of charcoal, a burnt smell now permeating the area. Scraping it off the pan, he was about to throw it away and start a new one, when Percy grabbed his wrist.

“What kind of monster would throw away a Honey Roll?”

“It’s ruined.”

“Your number one customer will be the judge of that. As long as I’m in the Guild, no Honey Roll gets trashed. Besides, you’d be shocked by some of the things I’d eaten over the years…”

Freddy shrugged. If Percy insisted on poisoning himself, who was he to stop him? He was about to pass him the burnt Honey Roll, when Percy summoned a gemstone vial seemingly out of thin air, placing it on the counter.

“What’s this?” Freddy asked, picking the finger-sized container up.

“An elixir,” Percy casually replied, taking the pastry from Freddy’s hand and biting off a chunk.

“Are you crazy?” Freddy asked, clenching his teeth. “You know I only charge a brown chip for the Rolls: a dose of elixir is worth four thousand times as much! I can’t accept that.”

He tried to give the vial back, but Percy wouldn’t take it. Only after swallowing did he speak again.

“It’s not a big deal. I’ve honestly got more elixirs than change on me right now. Besides, your Honey Rolls are more than worth it. This is what I’ll be paying you from now on. In fact, I’d have given you Aurora Dew, but it’s probably dangerous for you to be carrying it around before it spreads.”

Freddy’s features twisted into an expression that not even he could recognize. The reason he’d even entered this business was that he’d given up on trying to earn four hundred contribution points per day to buy his daily dose, resigning himself to drinking diluted elixirs. He’d still reach Yellow at some point, but it would take an additional fifty years, costing him a century off his lifespan. Getting such easy access to the elixirs would be a dream come true, solving the problem entirely.

On the other hand, the idea of accepting a handout from Percy was borderline insulting. Was his fellow Red-born doing this out of guilt over the things that he’d said earlier? Freddy wasn’t going to accept someone’s pity.

Seeing the sheer joy on Percy’s face as he dug into the burnt pastry, Freddy’s expression couldn’t help but ease, however. For the first time since the start of the conversation, he caught a glimpse of that teenager from all those years ago, making him realize that his fellow Red-born had spoken every word from the heart.

Freddy sighed, deciding to accept his friend’s kindness. “I’ll hold you to your promise. Better start sharing those crazy stories now.”

Percy grinned, some honey spilling into his beard. “I hope you don’t have anywhere to be tonight. Better start making more Honey Rolls too. We’ll need a lot of snacks tomorrow.”

Chapter 538: A small price to pay

Orin leaned back on the couch, watching Archibald pour mana into his grandson’s stump. The sheer speed by which Percy’s flesh was squirming and regrowing under the Violet’s efforts was frightening.

This wasn't Orin's first time seeing a healer restore a severed limb, but it was his first time observing such an experienced and powerful life mage at work. Percy's body being merely at Yellow only made the process faster. It had barely been half an hour, but the grandfather and grandson duo had already reached Percy's wrist.

'What's more impressive is that he hasn't winced even once,' Orin realized.

Even regrowing a finger was a downright agonizing ordeal: let alone an arm. On top of that, the faster it grew, the more it was bound to hurt, yet Percy had appeared entirely unbothered. Orin didn't think that his student was putting on a brave front: he must have experienced far more painful things in his life.

The corner of his lips twitched as he watched Percy use his domain to casually lift his third Honey Roll from the heated plate on the table, bringing it to his mouth. The young man had already eaten half the stack by himself, and this was with him obviously holding back to leave some snacks for the others, though nobody else had indulged.

Oddly enough, Freddy was here too, sitting next to Orin. The poor Red-born looked about as out of place as one might expect, though Percy had insisted on gathering all of them to his grandfather's new residence, saying that the meeting concerned everyone.

"Before we continue, I want to thank you all again for everything that you've done for me in recent years," Percy said after swallowing. "It was slightly different for each of you, but you've all suffered a lot because of me. The first thing I want to do to compensate you for your trouble, is to pass you the Moirais' Decree. Now that everyone on Remior knows about my second core, there's no reason to be overly cautious."

Orin's eyes widened, not having expected such generosity from his mentee. Freddy was the first to speak, however. "It's too much! Even paying me elixirs for the Honey Rolls is more than I could have ever asked for!"

Percy shook his head. "The elixirs aren't as big of a gift as you may think. Once I'm done with this place, I expect everyone on Remior to have access to as many elixirs as they need. Hopefully, that will include the Aurora Dew. Don't be surprised if their price plummets in the near future. Besides, giving you second cores isn't that hard. It's the least I can do after getting two of you imprisoned and tortured and the other scouring the Fungal Spire for my corpse."

“Are you confident that you can do it?” Orin asked. “It’ll take a colossal amount of nectar.”

Even giving regular elixirs to everyone on the planet would require several times the hive’s current output. Once they made the switch to Aurora Dew, the cost would go up by another factor of six due to the brewing losses and consuming three doses per day. The new cleansing technique that Percy was going to spread would help a little, but this was still a daunting project.

“Leave the hive to me.” The young man shrugged. “I’m more worried about the Guild. A lot of things will have to change if we want to process all that nectar efficiently. Grandpa? How long do you think we have before the noble Houses start getting impatient?”

The Violet creased his brow, appearing to ponder over his grandson’s question. Archibald had shaved his scalp again since the last time Orin saw him, and he’d even mended the scars on his skin, leaving no evidence of the past couple of years on his body.

“It’s hard to say. It’ll largely depend on the Order. In a world that made sense, the gods would have apprehended Machaon already, brought the kidnapped Princess back, and worked with you on this. If they did that, nobody else’s opinion would even matter.” He sighed. “Sadly, I don’t think things will be that simple.”

Percy nodded, clearly agreeing with his grandfather’s conclusion. He’d already given everyone a brief overview of his experiences over the past few years, so they’d all noticed the inconsistencies in the gods’ behaviour.

They’d allowed the Root to go after Percy, but they’d avoided attacking him directly. They’d been willing to let him or his crow die, yet they hadn’t interfered with him infiltrating the hive or creating his new familiar. The gods clearly had some plan for him, though it was difficult to guess with any certainty what exactly it involved. It was entirely possible that they’d sit this out, letting the mortals fight it out between themselves.

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“There should be peace for a couple of years at least,” Orin said, drawing everyone’s attention. “The cleansing technique and the cyan paste will double everyone’s advancement speed at no added cost, which is especially enticing to the Yellow-borns who will suddenly have a path to divinity. Mastering the

technique should also keep them busy for a while, and getting access to cheaper elixirs should placate them for even longer. On top of that, nobody will be in a rush to pick a fight with you now that the hive and the Guild are under your control, nor will they openly ally with Machaon."

"That won't last forever," Archibald said.

"Indeed. It'll only buy us time." Orin nodded in agreement. "The excitement over the cyan paste will gradually die down. The knowledge that there is something even better out there will eventually rekindle everyone's greed. Percy will have to figure out the Aurora Dew situation before that happens."

"Even if he fails to deliver, would anyone risk attacking him directly?" Freddy asked, though he swallowed hard once everyone's gazes landed on him, the poor Honey Roll vendor clearly regretting jumping into the conversation as soon as the words left his mouth.

Orin patted the plump Red-born's shoulder to calm him down before answering. "Not at first. However, I expect the lesser Houses to grow bolder the longer Machaon remains unpunished. Eventually, they'll assume that either Percy has lied about his crimes, or that the gods don't care. They'll ally with the Great Houses and start putting pressure on us."

"Do you think they'll risk attacking the Guild?" Percy asked. "They'll still need our elixirs, and the hive's future ultimately rests in my hands."

Orin shook his head. "They won't do anything too drastic, but our leverage isn't as one-sided as you think. We need them to keep supplying us with secondary ingredients as much as they need our elixirs, so everyone will be forced to keep up the appearance of an amicable collaboration on the surface, but they'll be scheming in the shadows to reclaim control of the planet. Perhaps they'll threaten your family or try to establish a new hive with Machaon's help."

Percy frowned, clearly not thrilled about any of those possibilities. A couple of minutes later, Archibald was done healing his hand. The young man clenched and unclenched his new fist a few times before putting it to the test by plundering the fourth steaming-hot Honey Roll from the enchanted plate.

"Okay. Here's what we'll do. I expect to be busy with the hive and my own personal projects over the next year or so. We'll need more nectar before we can do anything else, and I also need to keep working

on my artificial advancement since my lifespan won't wait for me to get the situation on Remior sorted out. Orin, can you work with the elders to make some preparations around here?"

"What preparations?"

"Train more alchemists: ask the noble Houses to send more people to the Guild, expand the settlement, build more labs, give everyone free lectures. I'll figure out a way to get us nectar directly, so we won't have to actively hunt the wasps. That should free up more people to practice brewing."

Orin furrowed his brow. "I'll do my best, but I'm not sure how much success we'll find in a single year."

"That's fine," Percy said. "Producing Aurora Dew for everyone won't happen overnight, but the cyan paste is already enough to turn Remior into a greater spring. As long as we show constant growth in our output, the nobles will be forced to shut up and wait. Try to get a dozen thousand new apprentices to a brewing yield of around ten to fifteen percent by next year. Even if it's inefficient at first, we'll probably have more than enough nectar to squander if everything goes to plan."

Orin nodded, tossing his former mentee an appraising look. To think that the boy who had learned to brew under his supervision would grow to this extent in just a few years… Percy was planning to completely revolutionize the field of alchemy as a whole, and to restructure the entire planet into something that worked better, for everyone.

'It appears I've made the right call to teach him and keep his secrets,' Orin thought, suddenly realizing that suffering a little in Deimos's hands had ultimately been a small price to pay.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Percy turned to Archibald next.

"Grandpa, I'll need your help too. Our House needs to grow stronger so that they don't get any thoughts of bullying us. After I teach you the Dance and give you a second core, you won't be any weaker than a White. Do you think that you can reclaim the rest of our province and expand our influence?"

"I'll make it happen," the Violet replied, his voice brimming with confidence.

“Great!” Percy exclaimed, his lips parting into a grin. “Then, that only leaves one final item on the agenda.”

He summoned a strange object seemingly out of thin air, using his willpower to keep it suspended above his palm. It was an indigo ball about as large as a peach, covered in thin hairs that stood on end like needles, sparks of electricity jolting between them.

“It’s like the Lotus of a Myriad Rivers, though this one grants a lightning affinity and can be used on much fewer people,” the young man explained, answering the obvious question hanging off everyone’s tongues. “When I got this, I hadn’t expected to return to the Guild this soon, so I only wanted a treasure with three uses left. Luckily, I ended up getting one with five, so we’re only one use short if we include the original recipients I had in mind, plus everyone in this room.”

Orin’s eyebrows shot up, having not expected his student to surprise him yet again.

“You can leave me out,” Freddy hurriedly said, clearly terrified to receive any more benefits from Percy. “The second core and the elixirs are more than enough!”

The latter chuckled. “It might not be necessary to skimp on any of you. Let’s wait a few days and see if any of you awakens a lightning affinity naturally in your new cores.”

Chapter 539: Magiscript (1)

Micky spared a sliver of attention on the conversation happening in Archibald’s new residence, and another on directing the Starry Wasps.

He was currently in his human form, sitting on a rocky protrusion by the wall of a vast cavern, watching a swarm of Starry Drones pluck the green mushrooms from the hollowed-out carapaces of a bunch of Workers.

Behind them, a wave of Knights consumed what was left of their lesser kin to make space for more, while a third group of Soldiers was preparing rows of freshly slain Orange insects farther back. Finally, another swarm of Red bugs was flying over the remains and scattering new spores. The smaller insects were too dumb to follow detailed instructions for long, so someone had to check up on them every now and then.

The room Micky was in was one of many, similar situations playing out throughout the hive. There was a second type of rooms that functioned as warehouses to store the prepared mushrooms, as well as hatcheries where the Starry Breeders were working overtime to replenish the ranks of their consumed children. Thankfully, the Blue creatures at least were smart enough to fulfil their roles without supervision, leaving fewer areas for Micky to oversee.

Killing and breeding so many low-level insects was quite costly for the hive, yet the Queen had begrudgingly agreed to sacrifice a lot of her stashed nectar to make this possible, with the understanding that this would lead to greater prosperity for her species once Micky was done empowering her strongest descendants.

The good news was that he didn't have to patrol the hive too often: just checking up on each room once every day or so was more than enough to minimize the losses. None of his duties were mentally intensive either, allowing him to devote most of his efforts towards something equally important.

'Almost there,' he thought, drawing the third rune in his second core.

He'd stacked the symbols over one another, preserving the circular shape of the enchantment as it spun in three dimensions inside the spherical organ. He focused not on the physical runes themselves, but rather the static projection in his head, working alongside the Scribing trait to maintain its shape and activate its effects.

The moment the final detail fell into place, the structural integrity enchantment began exerting its influence on the core, its crystalline walls instantly feeling firmer as a result. Micky didn't rush to get rid of it, holding the enchantment in place for a good fifteen minutes to ensure that he was in complete control before allowing the mana to disperse.

'I guess I'm ready to move to the next step,' he thought with a sigh. 'Stacking the runes inside the same circle is a great start, but drawing a proper unit cell will take more than that.'

Technically, he'd reached his current level as early as during his training on Robari, though he'd had to spend the past few days adapting the Spectral Art to the ice affinity. It felt somewhat different from plain air or water mana, because the two interacted extensively inside the organ. In theory, the colliding flows should have made things simpler by slowing each other down, but the convenience was offset by how heavy and chaotic their product was.

All things considered, practicing Internal Runecrafting with ice mana was about average in difficulty. Earth might have been easier, but he wasn't as familiar with it, nor did he have any available hosts right now, so this was about the best he could do.

'Let's draw them side by side this time.'

Keeping things simple, he tried to shape his mana into a pair of concealment runes next to one another, overlapping slightly while sharing some of their features. The enchantment wouldn't really do anything special: other than amplifying the effect a little, but he hadn't picked these runes randomly. Concealment enchantments were the first he'd tested the new spell on, as well as the ones that he'd spent the most time drawing, so he figured that it was a great place to start.

Sadly, it didn't take long for him to run into the first issue.

Micky didn't even finish forming the outline of the enchantments before the chaotic flows ripped it apart. It was inevitable that his initial attempts would fail, of course, but he still hadn't expected to do so this badly. The problem was that he had to shrink the runes to fit them both inside the circular cross-section of his core, their shape no longer hugging the crystalline walls as tightly.

The enchantment now resembled the number "8", the gaps near the middle allowing the unbound mana to freely flow around the symbol, accelerating to a speed he could hardly fathom.

In theory, it wasn't a bad thing that the flows now had a way to bypass the enchantment without slamming into it, as it relieved some of the pressure acting on the intricate construct. However, the symbol was rotating in three axes, so it didn't take long for a momentary misalignment to occur, the violent current ripping the runes apart a fraction of a second later.

'Alright. This will never work if I keep approaching it in the same way,' he realized after several more failures.

He'd have to come up with a new trick to deal with this.

Not in a rush, he decided to take a short break to relax his mind and tend to his other responsibilities. Getting up, he walked to the next three caverns on his schedule, confirming that everything was in order. It wasn't until the fourth that he spotted a minor problem.

The Starry Soldiers hadn't placed enough dead Workers to cover the floor entirely, so the Drones had only planted about eighty percent of the required mushrooms. It wouldn't be the end of the world, but there was no reason to be wasting valuable time. The plan was to start granting second cores to people and wasps alike as early as tomorrow, so he was going to need all the life mana that he could get.

'We'll need more remains and spores over here,' he sent to Nephthys, who presumably relayed the message to her mother. The familiar still wasn't strong enough to tap into the whole network by herself.

Only when two new groups of insects arrived to patch the inefficiency up did Micky resume working on his own project. The background rumble of buzzing and stampeding creatures used to be quite distracting, though he'd slowly learned to filter it out after staying underground for weeks.

Commanding the mana inside his abdomen again, he decided to vary his approach slightly.

While practising on Robari, he had quickly learned that he couldn't stifle the flows too much, as that would only put more pressure on the enchantment, making it impossible to maintain. This was why he'd come up with a way to project the shapes into his mind and focus solely on them, without directly observing the physical symbols spinning inside the organ.

Allowing the mana to rampage freely wasn't a scalable solution either, however. Opting for a healthier middle ground, Micky was hoping to leave an outlet to relieve the pressure without affecting the enchantment as much. As soon as the symbol began to form, he pinned down the two points where it touched the core, restricting its rotation to a single axis.

The mental load instantly shot through the roof, because he now had to draw and maintain the enchantment while also paying attention to the rotation. On the flipside, the physical load on the runes plummeted, making it a little easier to keep them from crumbling.

'Promising, but not perfect,' he thought after playing with the new configuration a few times.

Adjusting to the mental effort would only take some practice, but the construct itself was still falling apart relatively quickly. The pressure it was under wasn't uniform, as it was much lower near the gaps and higher by the fixed points at the top and bottom of the symbol.

'Hmm… I need to force as much of the mana to pass through the gaps as possible to minimize its impact on the enchantment,' he realized.

Over the next few hours, he focused on precisely that, only taking a short break to watch how the wasps were doing every now and then.

The better he got at it, the more concentrated the mana grew, eventually forming a narrow ring that spun around the enchantment at a tremendous speed. It resembled one of the basic pre-casting exercises he had mastered years ago while learning to add rotations to his spells, though keeping it going at the same time as drawing the enchantment was a daunting task.

The runes were spinning in the same direction as the ring, though they did so much slower, because their rotation was driven solely by the leaked mana that Micky failed to rein in. It was impossible to prevent that entirely, which was why he had to go through so many hoops to control the rotation in the first place.

Micky got better with every attempt, managing to activate some short-lived enchantments by the following day. Percy eventually entered the hive with Archibald, taking over his duties of overseeing the wasps and leaving this part of his mind to focus solely on the spell.

Hours turned to days, Micky slowly improving enough to keep the pair of concealment runes active indefinitely, though he still failed to find much joy in his success.

'This is a great trick when dealing with only two identical runes, but it relies on the vertical symmetry of the enchantment…' He frowned.

Would this even work once he added a third rune into the mix?

Chapter 540: Magiscript (2)

As expected, Micky ran into another problem as soon as he moved up to an odd number of runes.

The two simplest ways to arrange the symbols would be to either place them in a straight line, or to spread them out into a faux-triangular formation. Both options had their advantages and disadvantages, but Micky estimated that the first one was markedly worse.

By keeping the symbols in a straight line, he could maintain the vertical symmetry of the enchantment as he pinned it into place at the top and bottom of the core, allowing him to continue stabilizing it with a perpendicular rotation: a narrow ring that spun around the runes.

The issue was that this was the least scalable solution, as it didn't make proper use of the core's cross section. The size of his runes would have to shrink linearly as their number grew, until they became too tiny to draw or manipulate with any precision, and too flimsy to survive the pressure inside the organ.

Of course, Micky would still need to find a way to shrink them later if he wanted to draw enough of them to enchant his core, but he wasn't anywhere close to that level yet. Ultimately, he decided to go with the second approach, spreading the runes out into the most densely packed arrangement possible. That way, the size of the symbols would shrink more slowly as their number grew.

Sadly, this solution came with its own issues.

At first, he had to keep at least two of the three runes identical. This wasn't going to be useful in a real application, but it helped during training by allowing him to retain the vertical symmetry of the enchantment. Even so, it was no longer possible to pin the runes down at both the top and bottom, since the axis of rotation only passed through a single contact point with the core.

As a result, Micky ditched one of the connections entirely, greatly increasing the strain on the other one. The enchantment could still spin, but it required more caution to prevent it from detaching and rotating freely.

With a heavy heart, he commenced a new round of training, slowly experimenting with various combinations of runes while improving his control over the flow. Growing proficient enough took another three weeks, and that was while sticking to symmetrical enchantments.

It wasn't until the end of his first month practicing full-time that he felt confident enough to try with three different runes.

He chose to start with a structural integrity enchantment. This was one that he'd mastered before, though he'd previously used a version where all three of its runes were stacked on top of one another: in the same circle. That was arguably a more efficient way to achieve the same result, yet spreading the runes out and attaching them next to each other was good practice.

'Okay… it's not as bad as I was expecting,' he thought, scratching his head.

Micky had kept the integrity rune in the middle, attaching it to the top of his core. Meanwhile the hardness and absorption runes served as the two "legs" of the triangular formation. He'd done his best to keep their shapes, sizes and degree of overlap as close as he could to avoid making the enchantment too lopsided.

It wasn't perfect, because they were fundamentally different shapes that had to be joined together through their shared features. The enchantment inevitably ended up being a little bulkier on one side, making it harder to stabilize. Fortunately, the difference was just about small enough that Micky should be able to overcome it with enough practice.

'Hmmm… I can probably get this done in another week or two, but the difficulty will keep growing as I add more runes…'

Eventually, the unit cells would become completely unbalanced. He'd have to find another trick to deal with this when it happened.

Shrugging, he decided to take it one step at a time. Diving back into practice, he focused on keeping the connection between the enchantment and the core as firm as possible so that it wouldn't snap under its angular momentum. At the same time, he continued trying to compress the flow into an even narrower ring, keeping it as far away from the runes as possible to minimize the pressure on them.

Over the first few days, he improved slower than he had expected, which didn't bode well for the future. However, that all changed when a small accident occurred by the end of the week. His control over the spinning ring loosened at some point by mistake, causing it to drift lower by a few millimetres. Micky gritted his teeth, thinking that it was about to throw the whole organ into disarray and ruin the enchantment.

And, well… he was right about that, but the exact manner in which the runes fell apart was odd. Raising an eyebrow, Micky replayed the accident in his head, trying to wrap his mind around the sequence of events.

‘The moment the ring shifted, the physical load on the enchantment plummeted…’

The new position had obviously been better aligned with the lopsided symbol, supporting it. The only reason it had still collapsed was because the flow hadn’t moved evenly, introducing a new component of pressure perpendicular to the axis of rotation, snapping the enchantment off its connection and ripping it apart.

This was interesting.

Perhaps, Micky could compensate for the poor balance of the construct by lowering or elevating the ring to a better spot. It wouldn’t be easy, because the mana clearly “preferred” to flow by the middle of the core where its cross section was widest due to its high speed. Keeping it rotating elsewhere would take some effort.

‘It’s the only idea I’ve come up with so far. It’s worth a try at least,’ he decided.

Doubling down on this promising new direction, Micky kept at it for another three weeks, eventually managing to draw not just the structural integrity enchantment, but several others involving three runes.

Each arrangement had a slightly different shape, which required him to adjust the position of the ring. Fortunately, he slowly developed a sense for it after experimenting with different enchantments, eventually growing more confident that he could draw and stabilize any trio of runes he wanted.

By the time that happened, he’d been working on the spell for about two months. His human body hadn’t remained idle either: he’d already granted new cores to Archibald, Orin, Freddy and the Starry Queen. He’d even made good progress passing the Moirais’ Decree to the Blue insects, though this part of Micky’s mind didn’t concern himself with that, concentrating solely on magiscript.

‘Time to add a fourth symbol,’ he thought, tossing a control rune into the mix. Control runes were simple enough that they could easily be stacked on top of any other rune, but that wasn’t the point of his current training, so he chose to draw it next to the others.

With an even number of symbols, Micky realized that he could have the enchantment attached in two spots again if he wanted. However, that would require him to draw and join them in a suboptimal manner, manipulating their sizes, shapes and positions to align both extremities of the formation with the same axis.

Ultimately, he saw no reason to do that, since this fix wouldn’t even hold once he added a fifth rune into the mix. Instead, he stuck with a single connection, opting to balance the enchantment’s rotation by playing with the spinning ring.

The new shape was even more lopsided than before, to the point that he failed to stabilize it regardless of how much he varied the location of the flow. Luckily, Micky had already thought of a solution during the previous month, having anticipated this exact problem.

Splitting the flow into two streams: another pre-casting exercise that he’d mastered a long time ago: he willed them to form a couple of independent rings, placing each at a different spot.

It took a lot of trial and error to optimize the configuration. Controlling multiple flows while drawing and activating so many runes was mentally taxing, but he kept at it until the enchantment was stable enough to survive indefinitely.

Succeeding with the first combination of runes took a full month, while adapting the trick to any arbitrary quartet of symbols took an additional three months.

Eventually, a toothy grin found its way onto his face.

For the first time since he began practicing Internal Runecrafting on Robari, he felt confident that his approach was fully scalable to any unit cell he might want to draw!

Adding more runes would still increase the difficulty, of course, but he’d already overcome some of the most serious problems. From here on out, it was just a question of patience, perseverance, and lots of

practice. Once his unit cells started containing dozens of runes, he would probably have to increase the number of rings, but he doubted that he'd ever need more than a handful.

Overall, drawing the enchantment inside his core was always going to be much harder than doing so outside his body, but meeting the requirements for his artificial advancement was looking more likely.

'Let's not get ahead of myself,' he thought, suppressing his bubbling enthusiasm.

There were still some key roadblocks to clear. Namely, he had to learn how to turn his enchantments into permanent seals from the Vault, master a few new runes, and also figure out a way to shrink the unit cells as he drew them, so that he could fit enough of them along the walls of his cores.

However, there was no denying that he'd already reached a very significant milestone: something that his Status promptly confirmed with a celebratory announcement.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spectral Art: Internal Runecrafting: Refined -> Spectral Art: Internal Magiscript: Masterful!]