Wanderer 541

Chapter 541: Turning point

The corners of Percy's lips curled up as he read the notification. It was his other body who had worked tirelessly to upgrade the spell, but it didn't really matter. Ever since the fusion, his cognitive prowess had grown enough that he could have each body focus on a different task while remaining perfectly aware of one another.

'Would you look at that? So, it's possible to reach Masterful through sheer complexity after all…'

Internal Runecrafting had been an extremely difficult spell to register, yet his Status had classified it as merely Refined. At the time, he'd hypothesized that Phoebe's Decree had been hesitant to give it a higher tier because it wasn't particularly useful.

Strictly speaking, the same was true with Internal Magiscript. Percy might be able to find a few niche applications for it here and there, but it was a rather impractical spell: all things considered. Evidently, the overwhelming difficulty in upgrading it had been enough to push it to the next tier despite its relative uselessness.

Regardless, the value of his new Spectral Art lied in his plans for the artificial advancement, not its current applications. He still had to spend a lot of time practicing before he could draw large unit cells inside his core, though this was something that his main bodies could work on while his clones researched the next steps in the Vault.

Sighing, he shoved those thoughts aside, returning to the task at hand. There were a few other things he needed to finish up on Remior first, to free up his cords.

Walking to the nearest Starry Commander, he hurled a few spinning scythes into its carapace, carving several deep incisions into its soul. This would have been dangerous had it been a human, but the creature's size and grade made it difficult for the reinforced mana to injure it too badly. Not to mention that Percy was proficient enough with his weapons to avoid harming the wasp irreversibly.

Obeying its grandmother's instructions, the insect didn't so much as flinch. Not wasting time, Percy grabbed a chunk of his own soul, using his bloodline to sever and stuff it into the cuts. He didn't stash

any mana into his wisp, as he could just provide as much as necessary through his boosting art and the cord.

Leaving the clone behind to stitch up the oversized bug, he moved to the next one, repeating his actions.

A swarm of Starry Drones and Workers dropped a mountain of green mushrooms onto the first Commander's enormous body by the time Percy reached the third insect. As soon as the creature's new core was done absorbing life mana from the fungi, the clone flew back into Percy's body, merging into his soul and allowing him to recycle the slot necessary for the fourth wasp.

It would take a few seconds longer for the potent phantom mana flowing through his channels to completely mend the injury, so he had to fashion the new clone from a different body part.

Falling into a trance, he passed the Moirais' Decree to one Blue wasp after the other, the previous ones marching out of the cavern to make space for more. Every step the colossal creatures took sent a tremor through the chamber, the occasional shard of glowing crystal falling and shattering on the ground.

Percy didn't mind, used to it by now. Averaging a clone every ten seconds, he granted second cores to over three hundred insects per hour, eight thousand a day, or two hundred and fifty thousand a month. Of course, he hadn't been nearly this fast when he first started, having gradually streamlined the process after weeks of painstaking efforts.

He'd already passed the Decree to half a million wasps in the past six months, leaving only a few left. At this rate, he estimated that he'd be done in a couple of weeks at the latest.

He wasn't planning to extend the same generosity to the Starry Knights. It would take much longer to go through all of them, while being far less impactful. Even so, he'd asked Nephthys and the Queen to teach Hibernation to all the Green and Blue wasps in the hive to further reduce their beast mana consumption and save him time. Any bug weaker than that was unfortunately too dumb to learn it.

The hive would hopefully start producing a lot of additional nectar as the creatures advanced their new cores and improved their conversion rates. They might never develop any mutations because they couldn't evolve past Blue, meaning that they wouldn't have a very efficient way to feed their second mana type into their beast cores, but even doing it inefficiently was better than nothing.

Percy didn't know how much their output would increase exactly, though he was optimistic that it would be enough to cover Remior's needs. After all, the hive consumed a lot more mana internally than the few drops the hunters looted from the weaker creatures sent to the surface, and much of it was tied up by the Blue bugs.

The Guild would have never been able to provide the Commanders and Breeders with half a million doses of elixirs per day, but luckily the wasps didn't need that. They could cleanse their new cores using their own beast mana, and they could even double their advancement speed through the cyan paste that the humans had already started mass producing.

It wasn't quite as effective as the Aurora Dew: which the creatures couldn't replicate on their own because they had no way to bond and deattune the crystallized pure mana to theirs: but it was several times cheaper.

'They should start advancing in a few months,' Percy thought, his lips parting into a grin.

When that happened, he'd move back to the surface and work with the alchemists to harness the additional nectar. It would be years before the Blue wasps reached their maximum output, but even a fraction of that would be a great start.

Percy's biggest worry was that the noble Houses would grow restless before he had results, though he assumed that nothing of the sort had happened yet, otherwise Orin and the elders would have informed him already.

The senior alchemists were currently busy upgrading the settlement and bolstering their ranks. Percy had even asked them to procure lots of secondary ingredients for later: not just the ones used in the elixirs. He wanted them for both his own use and because he intended to teach everyone many of the alchemic principles that he had mastered.

He hadn't slacked when it came to his own advancements either. While he had yet to take any royal jelly from the Queen or her daughter, he had consumed a lot of raw nectar with his beast core, drinking three doses of Aurora Dew per day with each of the others. He'd even grown quite proficient with the Cascading Cracks technique, though combining it with the Whirlpool of Four Streams was a work in progress.

On a different matter, Percy had granted new cores to the Queen, Archibald, Orin and Freddy months ago: before doing so for the Blue insects. The first two had been a little trickier due to their higher grade, but he'd still managed to pass them the Decree with enough preparation and caution.

His mentor had awakened a pure core, which he'd wanted to keep due to how convenient it was for producing the cyan crystals. Technically, there was no need to manually condense his mana when he could get as much as he wanted from other people, but Orin was an alchemist at heart. He was far more interested in having direct access to the miraculous material than increasing his personal strength.

Percy hadn't pressed his mentor on the issue, since it had made more sense to add a lightning affinity to his first core anyway, elevating fire to plasma and leaving the door open for a rare affinity in his second core.

Funnily enough, Archibald had also awakened a pure affinity, causing grandfather and grandson to burst into laughter at the irony of the situation. However, the old Violet hadn't been very distraught after receiving the same affinity that he had helped Percy obtain all those years back. Not in a rush to ditch the element for lightning, he'd been more than happy to learn the pure version of the Dance from Percy, as well as other spells like Reinforcement or Self-bestowal.

Archibald hadn't been the only one to express that sentiment either. According to Orin, a lot of people in the Guild had seemed quite interested in studying the cyan powder lately. Without realizing, Percy had changed everyone's opinion of the so-called "weakest" affinity!

Archibald was still in the hive, replenishing his long-destroyed army of clones and practicing his magic under Percy's sporadic supervision. He could already use Circulation with his new core, and he was currently working on elevating it to the next tier. Its grade was way too low to matter, but mastering one flavour of the Dance would make it easier to figure out the life version.

Percy had asked his grandfather to wait a little longer before returning home. He wanted to accompany him with his elemental body, not only for safety reasons, but also to bring the affinity-changing treasure to Elaine once his familiar no longer needed it.

In a strange twist of fate, Freddy and the Queen hadn't used it either, but for different reasons. The plump vendor had awakened a lightning core of his own. Technically, he could have still upgraded his fire core to plasma like Orin, but everyone had felt that it would be too much of a waste to consume such a valuable treasure just to end up with two instances of the lightning affinity in his body.

As for the Violet insect, she had developed an acid affinity like Galahad's: which already included lightning mana: causing Percy to fall deep into thought.

Only one in a hundred people was supposed to awaken a rare or composite affinity. Given how many hosts he'd passed the Moirais' Decree to, it wasn't strange that this happened occasionally, but he'd still felt that this hadn't been a complete coincidence.

Normally, sapients had a small predisposition toward the affinities of their parents, though it wasn't nearly enough to guarantee them inheriting a rare or composite mana type: unless of course there was a powerful bloodline or an Elemental Source involved.

However, Percy had started to doubt that this was true for beasts.

In the past, he hadn't repaired the Decree with enough beast hosts to study the phenomenon properly, though he'd still noticed a pattern. Was it through sheer luck that Micky: a bird: had awakened an air affinity, and the Starry Queen: a creature that already wielded acidic venom: had unlocked a core related to that?

Probably not.

Fortunately, Percy had experimented on plenty of test subjects of the same species over the past few months to confirm his suspicions. Sure enough, he'd quickly noticed that a disproportional number of Starry Commanders and Breeders had acquired the acid affinity.

It still wasn't guaranteed: only about one in three got it, the others seemingly being completely random: but this was already orders of magnitude more common than it should have been.

'I'm not sure if I should be happy or sad about this…' he'd thought.

Having some control over what affinity his future familiars and aspects would develop wasn't necessarily a bad thing, nor was Nephthys getting a composite affinity for free. It would save him yet another use of the treasure and likely get the familiar another three new mutations upon evolving.

Even better, he already knew the water version of the Dance to teach the royal wasps, as well as the lightning and acid patterns of Circulation. Perhaps, Galahad had even figured out the rest by now, which would allow Percy to relay the information to the bugs as soon as his elemental body reached the mansion.

However, he still held onto hope that the Princess would awaken a mind affinity to help him segregate his memories. It wasn't impossible to find a different mind user: hell, many of the Blue wasps had obtained the affinity: but he'd rather entrust the job to somebody skilled with it.

Alas, there wasn't much that he could do about it, besides being patient and hoping for the best.

Luckily, it didn't take him long to get his answers. About ten days later, the first strands of Yellow mana appeared in Nephthys's core. Once she completed her evolution, he would be able to place a clone in her body without worrying about destabilizing her soul.

It was great timing too, as there were only a few thousand Blue insects left to pass the Decree to. While Archibald was still some time away from mastering the Dance, this wasn't something that they had to stay inside the hive for.

As soon as Percy dealt with the Princess's advancement and everything it entailed, it would be time to send one of his bodies to the Camelot province and some clones to the Vault.

Chapter 542: Nephthys's evolution

[Congratulations! Your familiar's mana core has advanced: Orange -> Yellow!]

Percy raised an eyebrow upon reading yet another new type of notification. His Status had never informed him of his or his familiars' advancements before. Then again, this was the first time this had happened since obtaining Obatala's Approval.

Shrugging, he brushed the message aside, watching the former goddess's evolution with bated breath. Archibald had also taken a break from training to stand beside him, clearly not wanting to miss this. The old Violet may have been around for centuries, but he'd definitely never experienced the kinds of things that Percy showed him on a regular basis.

Munching on a pile of minced bugs, the Starry Princess's body swelled and squirmed at an alarming rate, each violent convulsion cracking her exoskeleton. It didn't take long for her to break out of her carapace, her frame continuing to grow for a few seconds before her skin hardened again into a second shell.

She wasn't done yet, however, having only reached about half the size of a typical Yellow beast. Diving back into the morbid pile of her deceased nephews and nieces, she resumed her gluttonous feast, soon accumulating enough fuel to moult for the second time.

Only when she broke through her exoskeleton again did her body finally calm down, having reached a size comparable to a human's. Examining the familiar carefully, Percy felt that she was slightly larger than a Starry Soldier, though he didn't know if she had her royal lineage to thank for that, or any of her other mutations.

'How are you feeling?' he asked through the cord.

'Ecstatic,' Nephthys exclaimed, some genuine excitement spilling into Percy's soul. 'It's been a very long time since my last advancement, but this was on a whole other level. I never imagined that a beast's evolution would be so… intense. The sense of euphoria it gave me can't even be compared to a regular promotion.'

Percy's lips curled up into a knowing smile, fully aware of what she meant. Perhaps, the two of them were the only sapients: or former sapients, at any rate: in the universe who did.

Other than her size, Nephthys didn't look that different from before, clearly not having developed any new mutations. However, the grey colour had spread to the outer area of her mandibles, around her compound eyes, and even the part of her abdomen closest to the stinger.

Much like what had happened to Micky, the Soul Predator mutation would likely expand with each evolution, eventually reaching every corner of her body. That said, Percy doubted that it would be done before Blue or even Violet.

For now, her exterior appeared slightly glossier, the black regions looking even deeper, while the colourful dots and the golden watermarks had grown brighter. The stark contrast made her exoskeleton

resemble the night sky even more. If Nephthys had looked like a cheap imitation before, she was now closer to the real deal.

Through Soul Vision, Percy noticed that her wisps had merged almost completely. The silver ripples that had originated from the goddess's soul were still there, but they were now little more than thin markings seemingly etched on the surface of her much darker soul, serving as mere conduits of her Divine Spark mutation.

"Do you need help passing her the Decree?" Archibald asked, caution evident in his tone.

It was a little silly for him to worry about Percy granting a new core to a mere Yellow creature after having watched him do that to half a million Blue wasps without issue, but Percy didn't blame his grandfather for wanting to make sure. Nephthys was too important to risk harming her.

"It's fine," Percy replied with a chuckle. "I don't even need to injure her for this. My familiars don't reject my clones, and I have a ton of experience possessing Micky. I'll be done in a few seconds."

After confirming with the Princess that she was also ready, Percy repeated the same actions that he had practiced hundreds of thousands of times over the past few months, severing a chunk of his soul and wrapping it around her body.

Truth be told, he was a little anxious, but for a different reason than Archibald. He was less afraid about harming Nephthys and more worried that they might merge, turning her into another aspect before he'd even dealt with his fusion with Micky.

Not wanting his clone to remain inside her body a second longer than necessary, he gestured for the Starry Drones and Workers to bury her in a small hill of green mushrooms, watching the fungi shrivel and lose their lustre at a scary rate as torrents of life mana rushed into her abdomen.

At the same time, he pulled up her Status, focusing on the last section.

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Decrees:

[Moirais' Decree (Incomplete)] – Grants the seed of a second mana core. Requires potent life mana to germinate.___

'Okay, the mind mana requirement seems to be gone,' he thought, exhaling in relief.

He still wasn't sure whether it would return if he were to retrieve the clone before the new core was complete: he'd never bothered to check: but it didn't really matter, because he had no intention of doing this half-assedly.

Soon, the inert mushrooms crumbled into fine dust, Percy's clone rushing back to his body before the notification even got a chance to flash in front of his eyes.

[Congratulations! Your familiar has acquired a new mana core: Orange: ???!]

'Hmmm… even after two upgrades, it doesn't look like my Status can figure out the affinities without any data,' he realized, finally identifying a shortcoming in the evolved Decree.

Thankfully, it wasn't a big issue. It only took Nephthys about a day to clear the first few channels, though Percy's expression slowly darkened as he grew surer and surer about their mana type.

"Acid… damn."

Archibald patted his shoulder consolingly, prompting him to shake his head in response.

"It's fine. I shouldn't be complaining about a composite affinity," Percy said in the end.

He'd just have to find somebody else to help him split up with Micky. As for the missed opportunity in having the goddess regain the affinity that she was most proficient in: well… there was nothing they could do about that.

At least, she was probably going to get more mutations this way.

Percy didn't think that she would ever turn into an elemental like Micky, but if her water affinity gave her something like his old Thin Blood mutation, it would help with her stamina issues, further increasing her royal jelly output.

"What are you going to do with the extra uses of the treasure?" his grandfather asked, switching to a different topic.

"Right…" Percy muttered upon being reminded of that.

Having already granted the affinity to Orin, he'd only need to consume two of the four remaining uses for Nesha and Elaine. He didn't know whether to cry or laugh about it. Had he known that his familiar wouldn't need it, he might have done things differently.

He could have picked a treasure with fewer uses for the girls from an earlier round of the tournament and another full set of ritual ingredients from the finals. Then again, Orin would have drawn the short end of the stick in that case.

Alas, Percy couldn't have known.

"I don't have anyone specific in mind," he answered his grandfather's question with a shrug. "I suppose I can give one to Gawain. I still owe him for escorting me to my affinity test. As for the other, I'm happy to listen to you."

Archibald nodded. "We'll give it to one of our Blues. Let's discuss this after we get home."

Leaving it at that, Percy walked out of Nephthys's chamber to resume his duties of passing the Moirais' Decree to the Blue wasps. It would still be a few days until he was done, though his elemental body didn't have to wait. Meeting up with his grandfather, he returned to the surface.

Percy intended to use his time as efficiently as possible in the next few months. His human body would send out clones to the Vault as soon as he was done with the bugs. After that, he also wanted to play

around with the royal jelly for a while. The Starry Queen and her daughter had already grown proficient enough with Hibernation to noticeably boost their output, so sparing some shouldn't be an issue: especially as they continued to make progress with their spells and new cores.

Depending on how much of the rare resource they could afford to give him, and how easy it would be to incorporate into the elixirs, Percy might be able to double his own cleansing speed again!

In the meantime, Micky would work on Internal Magiscript while escorting Archibald home, while the latter would continue developing his boosting art under his supervision. Once the situation with House Avalon was settled and Micky gave Elaine and the others their new affinities, he was going to sneak back in Twilight City to meet up with Nesha.

Finally, he would return to the Guild. Both bodies could then split their time between pushing for their artificial advancements and helping the alchemists increase their output.

Just like that, House Avalon was about to thrive, Remior was already technically a greater spring thanks to the cyan paste and was on course to improving even further, and Percy himself was sprinting toward two separate: but fully stackable: types of promotions!

'I wonder what will come first... the natural advancements, or the artificial ones?'

A surge of excitement rose in his chest. No matter what, one thing was for certain. If everything went according to plan, all four of his cores would reach Blue in mere decades!

It was worth remembering that Red-borns weren't supposed to reach even Green. Even if they weren't limited by their lifespan, advancing to Blue with regular elixirs would take five thousand years!

'Okay, let's not get ahead of myself…'

All of these milestones would require a lot of time and effort. He also had a hunch that the situation with Machaon and the noble Houses would blow up before he was done. Still, once he overcame these challenges, the combination of his Blue cores and Extreme spell should grant him strength on par with a demigod's!

Chapter 543: Cosmic wayfarer

Percy was once again in the space between worlds, finally ready to return to the Vault. However, he wasn't in a rush to look for a proper host just yet, wanting to test something else first.

Seeping into the first injured body he saw, he found himself possessing some kind of Red critter. A cursory examination of the creature and its surroundings revealed that it was just a mundane animal: it didn't even qualify as a magical beast. It resembled a rodent that he estimated was small enough to fit inside a man's hand.

'I won't be completing any challenges with this guy, that's for sure…' He shrugged: about as well as his current physique would allow. 'Metatron can do whatever he wants with him after I'm done.'

Technically, his new pal was now a two-cored specimen that the titan was obligated to feed and treat well based on their previous deal, though Percy would be lying if he said he truly cared what happened to the equivalent of an alien rat.

Placating the creature so that it wouldn't move around too much, he forcefully suppressed the blessing in his soul, feeling his spectral traits about to run amok again. He stopped right before he injured himself, concealing the concept as best as he could.

Before fusing with Micky, he had yet to perfect this technique, though his elevated mental prowess had made things easier since. Of course, it was either this or maintaining an empowered connection to his main body: he couldn't handle both at once. At least, not without impacting his ability to undertake the challenges.

'There's also a chance that Metatron has learned about the blessing already…' he reminded himself.

While he'd done his best to hide it during his escape from Thess'kala, and while he'd barely spent a few seconds in the artificial world at the time, he might have failed to trick the titan. On top of that, Kassorith had seen all three of his spectral traits at work, so Metatron had everything he needed to piece the information together if he knew anything about the subject.

'Oh well… there's no going back now. Besides, it's not like I had a choice.'

He sighed mentally. The alternative had been to fall into Syrreneth's clutches, losing all his gains from the greater spring.

The good news was that he'd thought of an excuse since then, so even if the titan grilled him about the blessing, Percy might be able to keep the Mirror Lake and the Ring of Sacrilege secret.

Summoning a portal on the ground, he allowed himself to sink inside, landing on the cold, metallic floor of the artificial world. The critter panicked upon seeing towering humanoids walking everywhere around it, one even coming close to stomping the poor thing to death. Scurrying away, it searched for the nearest spot to hide from the giants.

Meanwhile, Percy had lost any interest in his host's shenanigans. The creature wouldn't have been alive without him, so coming here was just the price it would have to pay for its second chance. If it got lucky, it might even get pampered by Metatron.

Focusing on more important matters, he reached into the deepest recesses of his mind to activate Ludwick's Compass. Evidently, Percy could freely control the colour of the pyres too, so he ignited the nearest training cube with a blue flame to differentiate it from the amber marks that would hopefully lead him back to Robari one day.

Leaving the creature behind, he returned to Remior, doing his best to retain the location of the Vault as he did so. He had to bring the mark back to his main body, otherwise his other clones wouldn't be able to track down the artificial world.

After getting replaced by a new clone, he set out for the Vault once more. Reaching the blue flame suspended in the middle of nowhere didn't take long, though the "sight" that greeted his eyeless wisp made him frown internally.

'Success? Or not quite?'

In the distance, he sensed a world with sapient souls. There were fewer people than most other places he'd been to, though many of them were at the higher grades. It had to be the Vault, right? What were the odds that the mark had accidentally led him to another lesser spring with similar demographics? At the very least, this would suggest that his new mindset wasn't entirely useless.

Still, he wasn't in a mood to celebrate either.

The artificial world was quite far from the mark and was moving away rapidly. It hadn't been that long since he left: Percy had rushed to Remior and back as fast as he could have: yet he would have surely missed it if he'd taken any longer.

'Okay… I don't think the mark was off. Maybe the Vault is just constantly moving through the cosmos.'

Hopefully, regular worlds didn't do that: or at least not nearly this fast: otherwise he'd struggle to use Ludwick's Compass the way he wanted. This was something he'd have to investigate later, but he'd have to send his clones to the Vault the good old way for now.

Since he was here, he decided to take a peek at the artificial world from the outside.

'Hmmm… I can see mortals up to White, but no gods or demigods,' he concluded after a while, finding that odd.

Percy knew that Metatron had both under his command, so he had no idea what this meant. Had the titan enchanted the place to conceal its deities? Would he even bother to do that? And even if he did, why would he let the mortals remain visible?

No… a better explanation was that their top dogs happened to be away on missions. Whatever the case, it didn't look like Percy would be able to learn how much military might Metatron had under his control.

He scanned the Vault in search of a host. A local would be ideal, as they would be familiar with the challenges and have a body ready for Circulation. As a bonus, Percy wouldn't have to drop an outsider into the callous titan's tentacles.

Sadly, he found nobody on the verge of death even after waiting for several minutes. While the Vault was obviously a brutal place, its population was clearly small enough that they didn't have someone dying all the time.

He suddenly had the urge to chuckle. 'Wow… today is really not going my way, is it?'

First, the mindset hadn't worked as intended, then he'd failed to scout out the Vault's strength, and now he couldn't even find a local to possess. It might just be karma for the way he'd treated the critter.

'Whatever. No sense in crying over spilt milk.'

Since the artificial world was still within view, he was bound to find a host if he stuck in its vicinity for a couple of days, though the other clones would likely have to look for outsiders.

His goal for the next several months was simple. He wanted to possess a Yellow-born sapient at Yellow, while his siblings would pick an Orange Orange-born and a Red Red-born. This would allow each to access a different set of challenges, while their second cores would start at the same grade as their existing ones, giving them the greatest boost.

Percy had even packed enough food and healing potions into the seals to last him for several months of training, so that he could prepare the bodies for Synchronization. They were all going to be eligible for free sizian meat thanks to him, but he didn't want them consuming any beast mana and risking an accidental advancement if he could avoid it.

With that much fighting strength, the combat challenges would be a breeze. Thanks to the Scribing trait and his runecrafting practice over the past few years, the same should be true about the magiscript challenge.

'Let's aim to clear at least six waves for each level,' he thought.

He'd obviously try to get as far as possible, but he wanted to get all the bonus rewards at least. With over twenty thousand credits and nine additional prizes, he expected this to turn into one of his most profitable missions yet.

Most of the things he had his eyes on were related to magiscript: because of course they were. This was one of the best places in the universe to study the art, and it tied heavily into his future plans. However, there were a couple of additional things that he was interested in.

As for the Green challenges?

Well… Percy was confident that he could complete a few, but they were more problematic than the rest. Finding a dying Green-born to possess would be a pain, so he'd probably have to settle for a Yellow-born who had advanced once, ending up with a weaker second core.

Also, the magiscript challenge was bound to be an absolute bitch even after taking his recent progress into account, so he didn't know if he would be able to clear six waves.

'Either way, I only have three cords at the moment. It'll have to wait until one of the other clones is done.'

Thinking about all the valuables he was about to get, his non-existent lips parted into a grin. So far, Metatron had come on top of most of their trades. Sure, Percy had gained a lot from the Vault too, but the titan had basically taught Circulation to all of his subjects because of him.

Thankfully, all of that was in the past. Percy had finally amassed enough tricks up his sleeve to start getting a lot more out of his deal with the titan.

'Let's rob this place clean.'

Chapter 544: Cassiel

Percy estimated that about a week had passed by the time he'd found a decent-looking host. The Vault's residents died more often than that, but he was looking for a very specific body to possess.

He needed someone that had never advanced, which left a very brief window from the time they awakened their core until their first promotion. If this was anything like Remior, it should be about five years.

The situation was even worse due to him looking for a Yellow-born specifically: who generally had an easier time earning enough sizian meat from the challenges to make it to Green.

'It also means that this person will probably not have much talent,' Percy thought with a mental sigh, though he still chose this body in the end.

Part of him felt a little guilty about all the other dying people he'd ignored over the past week, knowing that he could have chosen to save any one of them if he'd wanted. This was nothing new, since his bloodline had always worked like this, but it hit differently to just sit by idly outside the Vault's vicinity, watching them perish one after the other.

Then again, he understood that it was silly to blame himself. How many quintillions of people had died in the universe since he discovered his ability? He'd never be able to save more than an infinitesimal fraction of them. Even if he'd picked someone else, he'd just be condemning this person.

Upon connecting with his host's soul, he was greeted by a wave of indescribable hunger: which frankly made sense. Dying inside the combat challenges was hard, because one could always end the wave if they found themselves in danger. Most casualties in the Vault had to be from starvation.

'If there's anyone to blame, it's Metatron,' he thought, reminding himself not to be too buddy-buddy with the titan.

While the god had treated Percy fairly so far, it was all due to the value he provided. The moment he stopped being useful would be the moment he met the same fate as these people.

His host's mind was present, but too weak to communicate much. Percy promised them a meal and a brighter future: which he fully intended to deliver as soon as he was done with his own challenges. Thankfully, that earned him the approval that he needed to begin stitching up their soul without having to resort to his Parasitic Connection spell.

Weaving one preservation rune after the other, he couldn't help but wonder how the other clones were doing. Given how long it had taken him to pick a body, they might have arrived here earlier.

Their job was admittedly harder, because they needed to look for barren worlds. It was the best way to find people who had never advanced. Also, it was important to pick hosts in desperate situations for whom life in the artificial prison would be an improvement, as he didn't want to condemn any unwilling sapients to this fate otherwise.

This meant that his other clones would have to try multiple bodies before they found a good match. The luckier candidates would end up with a stitched soul and the seed of a second core, left to resume their nearly-interrupted lives.

'Whatever. Let them focus on their mission. I've got mine.'

As soon as he was done, he dropped a few morsels of food directly inside the child's belly. He didn't give them too much, as he'd rather not shock their body after a long period of starvation.

'Kid, what's your name?' he asked through their connection.

'Cassiel…' the boy replied, a wave of contentment flooding his soul as he felt something in his stomach for the first time in weeks, presumably. 'Sir, thank you for helping me. Could you please let me chew on a bite of food as well? It's been so long.'

'Sure,' Percy replied, mentally berating himself for not realizing that the child would have appreciated that more. 'Let's wait a couple of hours… eh… that's about six thousand rits, give or take. It's best if we give your body a chance to process the first meal.'

Getting a mental nod back, he opened his host's eyes, finding the boy resting on a bed that barely fit him, despite being not only a child, but also one of those short, green-skinned people that he had seen before. His room was barely a quarter of Gabe's, and that was saying something. By Remior's standards, it might not even qualify as a closet.

He didn't rush to get up, opting to let the kid recover first.

In the meantime, he stretched out his arm, placing his palm on the wall before speaking in the Vault's language. "Cube. I want to claim my life mana. User ID: WANDERER."

Saying the nickname Metatron had given him out loud sounded weird now that his Status had granted him a similar title. Perhaps it wasn't that strange given his bloodline, though he couldn't help but wonder whether there was some deeper truth behind this "coincidence".

Thinking back to what he knew about runecrafting, if it was possible to create enchantments by drawing arbitrary symbols and infusing them with meaning, maybe even names and titles given to people might possess some inherent property that he wasn't privy to.

Percy's contemplation was cut short, however, when the runic circle flashing under his hand misbehaved for some reason. While it had lit up in a silver light as it usually did when he tried to access the Vault's system, it had remained like that for way too long. Eventually, its colour shifted to red as the cube spoke.

"Error. Unable to identify user. Please try logging in again."

Frowning, Percy repeated his actions a couple more times, making sure that he pronounced his ID correctly. Perhaps it was something about his host's accent that made it difficult for the system to recognize him?

Yet, his borrowed heart began to race as the cube kept denying him access.

'Fuck! Don't tell me that Metatron is punishing me for sending random shit through the portals…'

No. It couldn't be that. Percy hadn't even done anything too egregious. Sure, he'd used the titan's Decree to kill a sapient and a beast, but so what? Were a few bloodstains such a big deal? Besides, he'd paid him back in spades by giving him Kassorith and the critter. Or was it possible that Kassorith hadn't survived the soul damage after all, and that was what had pissed Metatron off?

Percy took a few deep breaths to calm down, realizing that he was scaring the poor boy. 'Let's not panic. If he wanted to cut me out, he would have just retracted his Decree.'

Come to think of it, there was a more plausible explanation. The titan had set up the cube to recognize his soul, but hadn't his soul technically changed slightly after his fusion with Micky?

Maybe this was a genuine malfunction that Metatron hadn't accounted for. He'd have to talk to him later.

For now, he decided to repair Cassiel's second core with his own means. It was a bit of a waste to consume his mushrooms when he was entitled to free life mana from the Vault, but it would be silly to cry over that expense after having cultivated and consumed so many fungi over the past few months.

For all intents and purposes, he had an infinite supply of them now, limited only by the space in his seals. Since he'd split up the storage into four parts rather than eight, each clone possessed eight times the previous volume as well, so he had more breathing room.

Summoning a pile of mushrooms on Cassiel's chest, he waited for the Moirais' Decree to drain them before storing away the inert powder and bringing out another batch. Had his host been a Starry Commander, he could have covered its massive frame in mushrooms and finished the task in mere seconds, though repairing the boy's core would probably take a few minutes.

At the same time, he examined Cassiel's first core, instantly noticing an affinity that he was intimately familiar with. The boy had even started clearing the channels for Circulation, though he'd clearly never managed to complete the spell in time to get further into the challenges and prevent his death.

Scanning his emaciated body, Percy frowned. Even if Cassiel had exercised to meet the requirements of the boosting art, all of his muscles had evaporated after his starvation.

'Oh well… if eating properly isn't enough, my healing potions will help him recover faster,' he thought, pulling up his Status.

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Cassiel (The Lone Wanderer's clone)

Mana cores:

[Mana core 1: Yellow: Pure][Mana core 2: Seed: ???]Domain:

[Pulse: Dormant]Spectral traits:

[Weaving]: Boosts one’s proclivity in manipulating one-dimensional structures.[Insomnia] – Eliminates the need for sleep.[Scribing]: Boosts one’s proclivity in expressing meaning onto any written medium.Mindsets:

[Ludwick's Compass]: Set mental checkpoints anywhere in the world. Instinctively track their location as you move away.Spells:

[Spectral Art: Parasitic Connection: Refined] [Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Thousand Whispers: Masterful] [Spectral Art: Instantaneous Formation: Masterful] [Spectral Art: Internal Magiscript: Masterful]Alchemic principles:

[Extraction]: Separate and condense an ingredient’s essence.[Pacification] – Delay an ingredient’s activation rate.[Redirection] – Adjust an ingredient’s effect.[Deattunement] – Prevent multiple conflicting ingredients from reacting with one another.[Bonding] – Enrich an ingredient with crystallized pure mana.[Restructuring]: Alter an ingredient's phase.[Scaling]: Brew a greater volume of ingredients at once.[Compression]: Elevate an ingredient to the next grade.Decrees:

[Phoebe’s Decree]: Grants access to your Status.[Moirais’ Decree (Incomplete)] – Grants the seed of a second mana core. Requires potent life mana to germinate.[Metatron’s Decree]: Open a one-way portal to the Vault of Magic at will.[Ea’s Decree (Modified)] – Augments and enhances your Status.[Obatala’s Decree (Modified)]: Augments and enhances your Status. Allows you to effortlessly deploy your domain in its strongest state.___

‘Figures. No bloodline or blessing. Just a pure affinity.’

Percy sighed. The page was long as always, but most of the things in there had originated from him. The boy clearly wasn’t very capable, which explained why he’d had such a tough time getting through the challenges.

Over the next few hours, he helped Cassiel clear his channels, a precious surge of vitality invigorating the child once he managed to fill up his new core for the first time. Adding the food that Percy gave him and the healing potions he slowly emptied into his stomach, he was confident that they would build up the boy’s strength in no time.

The new affinity was fire. It wasn't one that Percy was too proficient in, but still one that he had used many times before. It would certainly help, especially since he couldn't reveal any of his most useful pure spells in the Vault. On the other hand, the boy's petit frame would prevent him from doing well in hand-to-hand combat, so the challenges might not be as easy as Percy had hoped.

'It doesn't matter. If they're anything like the ones we cleared with Gabe, Synchronization should be more than enough to power through the first six waves.'

He was about to go over their training plan with Cassiel and explain how they were going to help each other in the next few months, when their surroundings suddenly shifted. Percy found himself lying on the floor inside one of the smaller training cubes, a familiar pentapus standing a few metres away.

A tense smile formed on his lips. There were a lot of things that he had to hide from the titan, but also a few that he needed to talk to him about, so this meeting was unavoidable.

"Well, well… if it isn't my favourite mortal," the pentapus spoke first, a cold glint present in his eyes. "Are you done using my Decree as garbage disposal?"

Chapter 545: Extortion

Cassiel shook in fright upon realizing who the pentapus standing in front of him was. Unlike many of the other hosts that Percy had brought to the Vault, the boy was obviously aware of the titan's existence, even if he had likely never met him in person.

'Let me do the talking. He just wants to negotiate with me: we shouldn't be in any danger,' Percy said to placate the child, before turning his attention outwards.

"Don't even bother pretending to be angry. We both know that getting a Blue Yellow-born with an extended lifespan, a composite affinity, a bloodline and a second core is a bargain for you." Percy shrugged. "And just to be clear, if you don't want Kassorith, feel free to get rid of him. I've no interest in wasting my quota or including him in our deal. In fact, I might even be willing to pay you a few credits to kill him for me."

Metatron didn't press the issue, but that was answer enough. "Mind telling me why the cube is having trouble identifying your soul?" he asked, switching to a different topic.

Percy smiled. That not only confirmed that the titan hadn't locked him out deliberately but also gave Percy the opportunity to lay the groundwork to explain his blessing later.

"My soul has changed. A lot of stuff happened, and I ended up fusing with one of my hosts," he said, keeping things vague on purpose.

Raising a purple tentacle, Metatron rubbed a spot below his yellow eyes, seemingly in contemplation. "Interesting… Your ability keeps getting stranger the more I learn about it."

"Can you fix the authorization to let me in?" Percy asked, not hiding his irritation. "I was forced to use life mana out of my own pocket to give Cassiel his second core. According to our deal, you owe me a serving."

"Fine. I'll register your new spectral signature as soon as we're done here. You can claim the mana later."

Percy's borrowed heart skipped a beat. He still had plenty of healing potions inside his seal, but Clear mana was far more potent. If he rationed it well, they could vastly accelerate Cassiel's recovery and physical training, allowing him to master Circulation sooner.

'Or wait… maybe I'm better off relying on the potions and bringing the divine mana back to Remior?'

The best part about Clear mana was that it could be stored and preserved for a prolonged period of time. It would serve him well to have such a powerful source of healing at hand. He might even try including it in his brews, though he didn't think it would be that simple. His cauldron could barely handle Green potions, and any secondary ingredients he tried to mix with the divine mana would be too weak to affect it in any way.

Regardless, this was something he could decide later.

"Are my other clones here yet?"

They were all connected to the original, but not to one another. He could still sense their presence in his disembodied state if they were nearby, as they were the only souls that didn't reject him, but there was no way of knowing whether they'd reached the Vault now that he had already entered a body.

"Other clones? You're sending more than one?" Metatron asked back.

"Yeah. I'll have them complete challenges across grades. Please tell me this won't break the system again?"

Metatron shook his head. "Do you take me for a fool? This is something I'd accounted for since the very beginning. You can't blame me for not predicting your fusion though."

Percy nodded. "Great. If that's everything, I'd like to get started. Restoring Cassiel's malnourished body and priming it for Circulation will take a while. Time is precious for us mortals. As is food," he said, throwing a not-so-subtle jab at the callous titan.

Ignoring Percy's accusatory tone, Metatron let out a chuckle. "Not so fast. We have yet to address the main reason I summoned you here."

"Oh?" Percy raised an eyebrow, trying to mask his inner turmoil. Sure enough, the titan's next words were the ones he'd least wanted to hear.

"You can stop suppressing your blessing: you're not fooling anyone. Even if I hadn't noticed it during your previous visit, your scaled buddy would have clued me in about your spectral traits."

Sighing, Percy allowed the concept of permanence to flood his soul again, a wave of relief washing over him as the unruly fiends calmed down. "So, you do know about them…" he muttered.

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Unlike Circulation, this one wasn't his fault at least. The good news was that he would be able to fully take advantage of his traits in the challenges now. Weaving had never been particularly useful in the

Vault: other than with stitching his hosts' injuries up: but Insomnia and Scribing would be game changers.

"How did you get your blessing?" Metatron asked, clearly focusing on the part that interested him the most. "Don't tell me that you found one of the missing rings so soon?"

"Wouldn't that be nice? As much as I would have loved a spare ring to trade, I haven't got any," Percy replied, doing his best to maintain an air of nonchalance. He needed Metatron to believe that he'd only cared about hiding the traits: not the blessing or a ring.

"The person I fused with has the soul affinity and the blessing. Now, so do I," Percy added, choosing his words carefully so that they were true: if somewhat misleading. Technically, Micky did have the soul affinity and the blessing now, sort of, though they'd both come from Percy: not the other way around. He didn't know if the titan could detect lies, and he'd rather not risk it.

Obviously, the story he had come up with was a bit of a stretch, but he wasn't very worried that the god wouldn't believe him. After all, his bloodline truly had allowed him to fuse with his familiar and gain access to his cores: the evidence was standing right before Metatron, having been verified by his own creation already.

On top of that, this explanation was perfectly plausible. Had Micky had a soul affinity and the blessing, it really would have allowed Percy to increase his trait capacity without the ring. Of course, this would have required a god with a soul affinity on Remior: which Percy didn't think they had: but the titan didn't know that.

More importantly, this explanation was far more credible than the alternative: that Percy had found a sentient Ring of Sacrilege swimming inside the unclaimed Elemental Source of his main affinity.

"I see. What a powerful bloodline this is… infiltrating greater springs… stealing and passing the Moirais' Decree… and now even replicating Svarog's Decree in many ways," the titan said, creasing what Percy assumed was his forehead. "What are its limitations? Did your maximum number of clones go up after your recent promotion?"

Percy grinned upon confirming that Metatron had bought his story. "How about a trade? I'll humour your questions if you answer a couple of mine."

The pentapus nodded. “Deal, but I’ll be the judge of what questions I answer. If I don’t like it, you’ll ask a different one.”

Percy felt the urge to rub his hands. “I get a couple of new connections with every advancement, though I’m still in single digits. Fusing with my hosts permanently ties up those slots. It gives me access to their cores: among other benefits: but doesn’t boost the limit further. I’m still hoping that I can absorb more than three fiends.”

“Interesting…” Metatron muttered. “I take it this is what you want to ask me about?”

Percy didn’t deny it. Since the titan knew about spectral traits already, he might as well. “Do you have a way to test one’s capacity? To grant traits to non-soul users? Or to control what fiend you absorb?”

“That’s a few too many questions, but sure, I’ll answer them. Yes to the first one, no to the others. As far as I know, spectral traits can only be absorbed by soul users, and you get whatever fiend you get. Testing one’s capacity is normally unnecessary because it’s not exactly a mystery: regular soul users can only have one trait, those with the blessing can get three. But designing a test for it should be simple enough. I’ll enter one in the system later, though you aren’t getting it for free.”

“How much?”

It was the titan’s turn to get one over him, a sly grin finding its way into his eyes. “It won’t be sold for credits. You can use a bonus reward from the Yellow pool or higher to claim it. Keep in mind that the method to absorb the fiends is usually only available from Green and up, so you’re getting a bargain.”

Percy wanted to swear. Bargain? He didn’t need the absorption method anyway. Still, he couldn’t absorb a fourth fiend without being sure that his soul could endure it, so he needed that test. Bracing himself, he asked about something else that he wanted, fully aware that Metatron was going to extort him again. “Any chance you could make me another spatial seal or two?”

Metatron gave him a strange look. “Have you run out of space already?”

“Well, not exactly. It’s enough on most days, but it’s always handy to have more. Isn’t that why you made it so easy to upgrade?” Percy explained.

“I’ll sell you more at the same rate: five thousand credits for each one. And they can be combined with the one you have like its current denominations. However, if you want me to craft it slowly in front of you like the previous time, it’ll cost you another Yellow reward.”

Percy sighed, though this was only to be expected. Metatron needed to entice him with useful rewards to keep him coming back, but he also had to keep him wanting for more. Getting him to spend his credits and bonus rewards at every opportunity was a no brainer.

“Okay,” Percy spat. “I’ll reach out after I complete the challenges.”

While he would have loved to spend his rewards on other things, the seal and the evaluation were both worth it. Besides, there were plenty of grades in the Colour realm. Even if he ran out of bonus rewards after clearing all the sixth waves, he could always push for the twelfth, or even the eighteenth.

Would it be impossibly hard? Sure. But Percy was capable of fighting three grades above his own with his main body. If he wanted to turn one of his hosts into an absolute monster, he could do it: at the cost of revealing the Dance and his reinforced equipment to Metatron.

Then again, if Percy decided to come clean to the titan, he could probably just trade him the secret of the cyan powder, allowing him to turn the Vault into a proper greater spring. Something that valuable ought to buy him a lot of goodies. However, he’d rather try to earn whatever he needed while giving the least back to the titan. A scumbag like him didn’t deserve more power.

Flicking his tentacle, Metatron sent Cassiel and, by extension, Percy flying out of the training room. They landed on their butt as the titan’s parting words echoed in their ears.

“Make sure you do. I want to discuss something else before you leave. Your scaly friend mentioned a ticket to the void tournament that I’m very interested in, and you should be too…”

Chapter 546: Preparing for the challenges

‘The ticket?’

Percy had swiped the amethyst emblem from Kassorith at the last second mostly to spite him for stabbing him in the back, not expecting to use it anytime soon. How was he supposed to infiltrate an event hosted by one of the most powerful factions in the universe?

With what he hoped would be a permanent source of royal jelly at hand, he technically no longer even needed a first-generation leaf to become a god. At the same time, he wouldn't say no to another lifespan extension if he could get it, let alone whatever else might be on offer.

'Let's not get ahead of myself. Maybe he just wants to sell the ticket to an acquaintance from the Void Hand or something. He hasn't said anything about sneaking into the tournament…'

Regardless, Percy's main goal during this trip was the knowledge of how to turn his runes into seals, plus whatever other secondary enchantments he might need for his artificial advancement.

All of his calculations to attack divinity hinged on this, as it would not only triple his remaining lifespan, but lower the number of natural promotions necessary by one, thus cutting the lifespan requirement by an additional factor of ten. This was the massive gulf that separated Red-borns from Orange-borns.

'Let's focus on that then. Everything else I get is just a bonus.'

He hadn't requested the information from Metatron earlier, as he didn't want to clue him in to his intentions. If he purchased the seal-crafting knowledge from the system, it would look less important to him, though he'd have to ask the titan for it otherwise.

'I'll wait until after I watch him craft my seals,' he decided.

That was the perfect excuse to spark Percy's 'curiosity' on the topic. Afterwards, he would try buying the knowledge himself and only bring it up to Metatron during their final meeting if he failed. That way, it would appear as a mere afterthought, rather than Percy's main goal.

The issue was that Metatron knew about Circulation and spectral traits already, and pre-casting wasn't so difficult to figure out even if he hadn't considered it before. Other than the Dance, he practically met

all the requirements to copy Percy's idea, and he would be able to complete the project much faster than him.

Thankfully, figuring out the external flow of the boosting art involved a great leap of logic, hopefully preventing Metatron from realizing the spell's potential. Percy felt tremendous pride in his ancestor: well, Micky's ancestor: the Second Hero, for coming up with the Dance all by himself, without even being a titan. Geniuses of such calibre were probably rare.

Metatron didn't personally have the Scribing trait either, though he might not even need such a crutch. As one of the universe's leading runecrafting experts, he could probably do everything without it.

'Maybe I'm reading too much into this,' Percy thought with a frown. 'Would the artificial advancement even do anything for a god?'

Deities had turned their cores into internal worlds. Percy didn't even know whether they had mana channels anymore, or if there was a grade of mana higher than Clear.

Obviously, they could still use some version of the regular Dance, as that was precisely what Micky's ancestors had relied on to fend off the invaders. This was how the spell had gained its name. However, what Percy was currently trying to do with his boosting art might not even be applicable to gods.

'It doesn't matter. Even if he merely spreads it to his people, that's bad enough…'

In any case, none of that was important right now. He had to complete the challenges to earn the rewards, and he needed his host to grow much stronger before he even attempted them.

First, he took a detour to the residential area, placing his hand on the wall outside his friends' place. "Cube, I want to see Gabe. Can you let him know I'm here? User ID: WANDERER."

Silver runes lit up beneath his palm, this time flashing green like they were supposed to.

"Authorization granted. Evaluating request…"

Listening to the system's cold, monotonous voice, Percy exhaled in relief. 'I've got to hand it to Metatron. Asshole or not, he works fast. It hasn't even been five minutes.'

Percy wouldn't be surprised if the titan had entered the spectral fiend test into the system too, like he'd promised.

"Evaluation complete. User 'Gabe' is currently unavailable. Would you like to leave a message?"

He frowned. Was his friend in the middle of a challenge or something?

"No, it's fine. I'll visit some other time. What about Noland, Leo and Tlaloc?"

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. Users 'Noland', 'Leo' and 'Tlaloc' are currently unavailable. Would you like to leave a message?"

Weird. Was it a coincidence that everyone was absent at the same time? Scanning his surroundings, Percy had to admit that the Vault looked a little less busy than usual. They couldn't all be in the challenges, right? There weren't nearly enough cubes for everyone to enter at once.

'Maybe most of them are locked in their rooms. Is it because I've taught them Circulation?'

That would certainly explain most of the Vault's residents being busy. It had only been a few years since the spell had spread, it took a long time to master, and it would open new doors for everyone. Whoever learned it would instantly be able to clear more waves in the challenges, improving their quality of life as a result.

'But if most people are practicing at home, how come the four of them are all missing?'

Thinking about it some more, Percy quickly identified the most likely culprit: their promotions. Gabe's second core should have advanced a couple of years back, catching up to his first one. It would have also made affinity fusion easier and opened the door for Synchronization.

To master the spell, he had two Circulation patterns to master, and he had just regained his eyesight the last time Percy visited. Obviously, the jellyfish-person had experienced many gains in a relatively short period of time, so it made sense that he was constantly in the challenges trying to push himself further.

The others' situations were similar. Both of Noland's cores should have advanced, and he'd had to master just as many patterns. Unlike Gabe, the man had never practiced runecrafting to Percy's knowledge, nor had he had to recover from any debilitating injuries, but he'd still had less time to get on top of everything.

Leo's second core should have advanced even more recently, and Tlaloc should have also reached Blue after receiving cleansing resources for the first time in his life.

'I guess it wasn't that urgent.' Percy shrugged.

He was a little bummed out that his friends were busy as he hadn't seen them in decades. He wanted to chat with Tlaloc about Huehue now that he had regained his memories of that place, but it would have to wait.

"Cube, is it possible to leave a message to myself?"

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. It is possible to leave a message for anyone in the Vault, including user 'Percy'. However, whether they will notice or receive it may depend on their personal settings."

"Can I put a condition on it? For example, to only be delivered once the recipient logs into the system with a Red core?"

Percy hadn't merely wanted to visit his friends to catch up, but also to leave a message to the other clones. Then again, reaching out to them through their shared access to the system might be faster and more convenient.

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. It is possible to place any arbitrary conditions you want."

"Great! I want to leave a message to myself. Send me two copies: one as soon as I log in with a Red core, and another when I do so with an Orange one."

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. WARNING: Invalid condition detected. User 'Percy' is already at Yellow. It is impossible to meet condition 'log in with a Red core'. WARNING: Invalid condition detected. User 'Percy' is already at Yellow. It is impossible to meet condition 'log in with an Orange core'."

Percy felt the urge to chuckle. What happened to "any arbitrary conditions you want"? Either way, he'd be the judge of what was or wasn't possible.

"Don't worry about that. Just send the messages. I want them to say: 'I've talked to Metatron. He already knows about the blessing and the spectral traits. I've bargained with him for a few benefits: leave that to me and focus on your own challenges. We haven't talked to the others yet. Kassorith is alive.'"

"Evaluating request…"

Communicating like this was less convenient than the cords, but it couldn't be helped. They might have been able to relay their messages to each other via their main body had they empowered their connections, but they were all supposed to have focused on concealing the blessing instead.

"Evaluation complete. Message sent."

Leaving the residential cubes behind, Percy returned to the area with the challenge cubes. Paying closer attention, he noticed a queue at each one, all of them longer than usual. People could stay inside as long as they wanted, so he had no idea when he'd get his turn.

Fortunately, he and Cassiel still had a lot of channels to clear and temper, and much physical conditioning to go through before they could use Circulation. Even better, they could focus on all that while waiting outside the cube.

One of the nicest things about the Vault was that it was self-cleaning, so one could relieve themselves wherever they wanted. This was something that Gabe had taught Percy during his first visit, and something that he had greatly appreciated every time since.

Of course, it was one thing to do that in the privacy of the training cube, and another thing entirely to do so while being surrounded by people. Thankfully, it was also possible to request a private stall around oneself pretty much anywhere. He'd never had to do that before, because he'd never spent too long waiting in the queues, but it would certainly prove handy over the coming days.

Shrugging, he picked the shortest queue in sight: one only five people strong: walking to the back. He stopped a few metres behind one of the hulking humanoids with the horns: the tallest people in the artificial world.

His host was on the opposite end of the spectrum as one of the short, green-skinned folks, and he was a young child to boot. Since Cassiel barely reached about halfway to the man's knee, Percy wanted to keep his distance to avoid getting the boy stepped on by accident.

'Start exercising. Push-ups, sit-ups, whatever… I'll give you food and healing potions whenever you get tired,' he said, getting a nod back from the child.

Percy doubted that any other eight- or nine-year-old would have agreed as obediently, but the residents of the Vault were probably all used to hardship. Letting the boy do his job, he resumed clearing their channels.

A surge of anticipation rose in his chest as he thought about the massive credit windfall on the horizon, making him salivate at all the runecrafting knowledge he'd be able to purchase.

Chapter 547: Yellow magiscript challenge

Percy and Cassiel improved at a rapid pace. The boy exercised twenty-four hours a day while waiting in the queue, eating from Percy's supplies and using life mana to recover quickly after each training session. His childish body was already looking a lot healthier; some muscle having slowly found its way under his green skin.

Unfortunately, Percy hadn't compressed any higher-grade potions after his infiltration mission and the Orange resources were far less effective on his host than Archibald's mana had been for him in the past. To accelerate Cassiel's progress, he was forced to consume some of the Clear mana that Metatron owed him.

Luckily, even the tiniest droplet was more than enough for a full recovery. Percy estimated that their body would be ready for Circulation before he used up even twenty percent of his stash, allowing him to bring the rest back to Remior.

The boy not having to sleep or clear his channels also helped. Percy was the one in charge of opening and tempering his host's pathways, being more experienced.

'We should be done in around four months…' he guessed.

He was going to run out of food sooner than that, though that wasn't a huge problem. Now that Cassiel was officially one of Metatron's precious, two-cored subjects, he was entitled to a lifetime supply of sizian meat. The boy would never be at risk of starving again, even after Percy parted ways with him.

They had deliberately avoided eating sizian meat so far, because it doubled as a cultivation resource full of stable beast mana. Percy estimated that the boy was around eight or nine years old: maybe even older: which meant that he wasn't that far from his first promotion.

Even if only some of the beast mana spilled into his channels and found its way to his core by accident, he could very easily advance before they attempted the challenges, placing them in a different level than the one they were preparing for.

Thankfully, Percy noticed that sizian meat nowadays appeared to contain half the concentration of beast mana that it used to. Asking Cassiel, he learned that Metatron had recently acquired a cleansing technique that allowed one to obtain the same results at half the cost.

After disseminating what Percy assumed to be the Cascading Cracks technique to his people, the titan had adjusted the production parameters of their rations so that they would contain the same amount of nutrition but only half the mana. This was perfect for him and Cassiel, as it further reduced the risk of an accidental advancement.

Come to think of it, the portions that Cassiel and his previous hosts were using had also felt a little smaller than the ones that Gabe had eaten during Percy's first visit in the Vault, though they'd still contained enough mana for a single core each. Was this a similar adjustment that Metatron had made so that his two-cored specimens wouldn't get fat from overeating?

'Interesting. I wonder how they manage to adjust the beast mana ratio so easily…'

Perhaps this was the result of another alchemic principle for him to study. This time, he'd have more than enough credits in his hands to look into the Vault's alchemy, so it was probably worth checking.

A few days after Percy's arrival, the other clones also made it to the Vault. Receiving his message, they soon found him waiting outside the challenge cubes, asking him for a more detailed recap of his meeting with Metatron.

The clone in Cassiel's body would be the one in charge of all the purchases from the system and trades with the titan, to avoid claiming the same rewards twice. That was not to say that the others would be lazing around, however. They both had their own jobs.

While the combat challenges would be equally difficult for everyone, the magiscript challenges should be easier at the lower grades. The Red and Orange clones would hopefully climb much higher and finish sooner, freeing up time to begin studying the new runes as soon as the Yellow clone bought a few books.

Their purchases would be made under their shared user ID, meaning that they could all access the books from their personal library and get as many copies printed as they wanted, without even having to physically meet one another.

'Hmmm… doesn't this mean that we can completely bypass the Vault's restrictions on sharing resources?' Percy wondered.

He'd already verified that he was allowed to teach or give his current host whatever he wanted without incurring a penalty. The system didn't crack down on them because they shared a body, so it was difficult to differentiate what belonged to each of them.

It even allowed him to give things to his clones. While they occupied different bodies, the cube apparently perceived the trades as "Percy" giving an object to "Percy", having nothing to say about that. Capitalizing on these loopholes, he could even have his hosts indirectly give things to one another.

'So, if Gabe wants to give something to Leo in the future, all I have to do is to put a clone in each of them at the same time…' he reasoned.

It was a little weird that Metatron had left such an obvious loophole open. The titan was clearly capable of drawing enchantments to detect, recognize and interact with Percy's soul, give him spatial seals that he could carry even in his disembodied state, and even pass him his Decree. Surely, he could have found a way to fix the issue if he wanted.

Perhaps, this was intentional. The crafty pentapus had found yet another way to incentivize Percy to keep sending clones to the Vault.

In any case, the Red and Orange clones could begin studying the new runes as the Yellow clone worked on the harder challenges. That way, they would not only save their main bodies time later: which was important given how busy they were: but also quickly identify any gaps in their knowledge, asking him to buy the required books. As a result, the three of them would spend their time here as efficiently as possible.

After agreeing to the plan, the other clones found their own queues, copying his approach of preparing their hosts for Circulation while waiting. Thankfully, their lower grades made the healing potions more effective, sparing the rest of Percy's Clear mana. Their healthier bodies also gave them a higher starting point than the emaciated child, though they had more pathways to open and temper.

Percy saw Leo and Noland on separate days. Just like he had deduced, his friends had apparently been busy with the challenges lately. He failed to meet up with Noland, as the fur-covered guy didn't notice him yelling, though Leo did, giving them a chance to catch up.

The Felmaran boy had already grown up, his second core having reached Yellow. Leo had even mastered Synchronization and made good progress on the combat challenges, having completed the fifth wave in both.

He'd even studied magiscript over the years, though he was very much a novice still. The Yellow level of the challenge wasn't very welcoming for beginners either, so Leo was struggling at the second wave.

"Well, keep at it. It gets easier with practice," Percy advised his former host, getting a nod back.

After learning about the others from Leo: they were about as busy as he had expected: they went their separate ways. Or… well… Leo went his separate way, returning to his room while Percy and Cassiel kept waiting in the queue. He'd asked the Felmaran to help him arrange a proper reunion with the others at some point, but everyone had their own things to worry about at the moment.

The queue barely budged, each person spending several days in the cube. The first two took about a week each, though the third remained inside for nearly a month.

Percy didn't mind them too much, since he and his host weren't done preparing yet. He finished clearing the channels before the child's body was ready, so he couldn't fully temper them. Taking a break from that, he started working on the fire pattern.

It was the only common affinity that he'd never discovered in the past, but he had so much prior experience with different versions of his boosting art that figuring out the correct flow was a breeze.

'I should still ask the others for their patterns later if the cube allows it. If I can learn their composite affinities or Noland's gravity mana it'll save me a lot of time in the future,' he decided.

It was about three months into the trip when their turn finally arrived. Cassiel looked much healthier, though he could still use some work before he could sustain Circulation for a prolonged period of time: let alone Synchronization.

'It doesn't matter. I'll start with the magiscript challenge. You can resume exercising whenever I take a break,' he told the boy.

With the Scribing trait and a pure core at hand, Percy was confident that he was about to destroy the first few waves.

“Cube. Start the ‘magiscript’ challenge. Yellow level. User ID: WANDERER.”

“Authorization granted. Restarting ‘magiscript’ challenge, Yellow level. The user has already cleared wave 1. Do you wish to resume at wave 2?” the soulless voice echoed through the room.

“Yes,” Percy said, not missing a beat.

“Choice confirmed. Wave begins in 18 rits.”

Walking to the podium erected in the middle of the cube, he sat atop the elevated cylindrical platform beside it, the two constructs promptly adjusting themselves to his host’s height.

“Wave begins in 12 rits.”

Reading the instructions flashing on the surface, he stretched Cassiel’s arms and cracked his knuckles as he stirred the Scribing trait inside his wisp. It was probably overkill, but the Yellow waves lasted several hours each, so going all out would save him a lot of time.

‘Draw any forty enchantments 5000 times in total, in under 40000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn at least 100 times. At least twenty different enchantments have to contain multiple runes.’

Percy nodded, the once-daunting task now little more than a nuisance. Forty thousand rits should be over thirteen hours, but he doubted that he’d need nearly that long.

“Wave begins in 6 rits.”

Technically, he didn't know forty different runes, but he was quite proficient at combining any pair he wanted into an enchantment or pseudo-enchantment. He could easily produce thousands or even tens of thousands of combinations.

Having about ten seconds to prepare each enchantment while being allowed a five percent margin of error only made the challenge more straightforward. The trait wouldn't even allow him to botch the symbols, so he just had to breathe meaning into the enchantments correctly.

"Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!"

Chapter 548: Five digits

"Congratulations! Wave 2 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

Percy grinned. He'd never worried about failing the early waves, though he was still quite pleased with how quickly he had completed this one.

'Just under an hour: for a challenge with a time limit of over thirteen!'

"Awarded credits: 600. Current balance: 889."

Originally, he'd planned to take a break after each wave to relax his mind and give Cassiel a chance to exercise, but it would be better to just get the first few over with.

Thinking of something, he didn't rush to jump into the next one, instead spending some time to complete a couple under Cassiel's name. The boy had never delved into magiscript before, so Percy might as well give him a helping hand.

In the past, it hadn't been as important to do this for his hosts. He hadn't even cleared that many waves with their bodies, so all of them had grown capable enough to catch up and surpass his previous efforts by themselves.

However, Cassiel was never going to climb as high as Percy was planning to during this trip: certainly not in the few months he had left before reaching Green: so these would be lost credits if Percy didn't help

the boy claim them. Once he'd brought his host to his own level, he logged into the system with his own name again.

"Cube, is it possible to count the waves for both of us from now on, so that we don't have to clear them twice?"

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. Challenges may only be undertaken by a single user at a time."

"But there's already two of us in here," he replied, placing his hand on the floor and letting it scan his soul. "User IDs: 004528131799 and WANDERER."

The silver runes kept spinning around his hand longer than usual before flashing red.

"Error. Multiple users have been detected inside the challenge cube. Unable to commence challenge until one user evacuates."

"Where's the second user? There's only one person here," Percy replied with a shrug.

The cube remained silent for a while before flipping out again. This time, it wasn't just the runes under Cassiel's hand shifting colour, but all the runes around the room.

"Critical error. Only one user is present inside the challenge cube. User is registered under multiple user IDs. Unable to proceed."

Percy could swear he heard a soft sigh echoing through the metallic chamber, causing his lips to curl up. The enchantments returned to their usual colours a moment later, as if nothing had happened.

"Cube, we want to resume the 'magiscript' challenge. Yellow level. User ID: 004528131799 and WANDERER," he said, trying to bully the system into compliance once more.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it sang a slightly different tune this time.

“Authorization granted. Restarting ‘magiscript’ challenge, Yellow level. Users have already cleared wave 2. Do you wish to resume at wave 3?”

“Do it,” he said with a grin. He should probably tell the other clones to do the same later, in case they didn’t think of it by themselves.

“Choice confirmed. Wave begins in 18 rits.”

Reading the instructions, he compared it to the previous wave.

‘Draw any sixty enchantments 7500 times in total, in under 50000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn at least 100 times. At least thirty different enchantments have to contain multiple runes.’

‘Hmmm… fifty percent more enchantments, but only twenty-five percent more time to draw them.’

“Wave begins in 12 rits.”

To somebody who had barely cleared the second wave, this seemingly minor step up in difficulty would have likely proven insurmountable, but it was still far below Percy’s current capabilities.

“Wave begins in 6 rits.”

Gathering mana in his fingers, he pressed their tips against the smooth surface of the podium, grinning as he watched the cyan lines seep into the enchanted screen with ease. The pure affinity might suck when it came to the combat challenges, but it was by far his favourite for magiscript.

“Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!”

***

“Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 900. Current balance: 1789.”

“Awarded credits: 900. Current balance: 1800.”

The second balance was naturally Cassiel’s. The boy had obviously run out of money before Percy met him, having spent the last of his credits buying sizian meat. Thankfully, his account was already looking a lot better. Percy didn’t pause, already beginning the next wave.

***

‘Draw any eighty enchantments 8000 times in total, in under 60000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 100 times and contain multiple runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 4 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 1200. Current balance: 2989.”

“Awarded credits: 1200. Current balance: 3000.”

***

‘Draw any 100 enchantments 10000 times in total, in under 60000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 100 times and contain multiple runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 5 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 1500. Current balance: 4489.”

“Awarded credits: 1500. Current balance: 4500.”

***

‘Draw any 200 enchantments 20000 times in total, in under 60000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 100 times and contain multiple runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 6 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 1800. Current balance: 6289.”

“Awarded credits: 1800. Current balance: 6300.”

“Wave 6 is a special milestone. Bonus reward is available. Please voice your request. NOTE: Bonus reward is limited to the Yellow grade.”

There it was. His first bonus reward since his time with Gabe. Though he wasn’t in a rush to claim it.

“Can I make my mind up later?”

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. Bonus rewards can be claimed at any time. User ‘Percy’ has 1 bonus reward pending. User ‘Cassiel’ has 1 bonus reward pending.’

Percy exhaled in relief. This time, the challenges had actually pushed him a little. Waves four to six had clearly been on a whole other level compared to the ones before. Simple runes had no longer been allowed at all, the cube accepting only composite enchantments. Their number had also grown rather steeply.

‘Hmmm… it doesn’t look like the time limit will ever go beyond sixty thousand rits though,’ he realized, having spotted a pattern.

Frankly, that made sense. That was already about twenty hours, so anything more would be too unreasonable.

Percy had mixed feelings about this. On one hand, he was happy that the challenges wouldn’t grow any longer, as they were mind-numbingly boring. The shorter they were, the better for his sanity. On the other, he felt a little bummed out after being cheated out of one of his major advantages.

Thanks to his Insomnia trait, a long duration was less of an issue to him than other people, so it was objectively bad for him that the challenges would focus more on testing his skill than his endurance from now on. That said, he understood why they’d been designed this way.

Starting to feel a little tired, he decided to take his first break. Tomorrow’s waves would likely push him closer to his limits…

***

‘Draw any 1000 enchantments 100000 times in total, in under 60000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 100 times and contain at least five runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 7 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 2100. Current balance: 8389.”

“Awarded credits: 2100. Current balance: 8400.”

***

‘Draw any 1000 enchantments 100000 times in total, in under 40000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 100 times and contain at least five runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 8 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 2400. Current balance: 10789.”

“Awarded credits: 2400. Current balance: 10800.”

***

‘Draw any 1000 enchantments 100000 times in total, in under 20000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 100 times and contain at least five runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 9 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 2700. Current balance: 13489.”

“Awarded credits: 2700. Current balance: 13500.”

Percy plopped down weakly, his host’s chest heaving up and down.

In a strange twist, the latest batch of challenges had started scaling in a new way. The number of required enchantments had remained fixed at a hundred thousand, though each wave had forced him to draw them under a stricter time limit.

By the ninth wave, Percy had had to draw five unit cells per second for seven hours straight, each containing a minimum of five runes!

‘Man… this is brutal. I would have probably failed this one without the trait,’ he realized.

It made sense. Percy had deduced during his past visits that the first wave of each level was somewhere between the third and fourth of the previous level in difficulty. If this trend continued, it meant that each grade was offset by about three waves.

In other words, the wave that Percy had just completed was almost on par with the first wave of the Violet grade!

‘Is there any point continuing?’ he wondered.

He’d probably have more credits than he’d know what to do with, once all of his clones were done, and he doubted he’d clear the twelfth wave of the Yellow level to reach the next bonus reward.

Starting the challenge, he peeked at its instructions before aborting it.

‘Draw any 500 enchantments 5000 times in total, in under 1000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn 10 times and contain at least thirty runes.’

Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. The requirements were indeed much steeper. He still had to draw five enchantments per second to finish in time, but the complexity of the unit cells had jumped massively.

Before, he'd only been required to include five runes, so he'd just drawn otherwise simple enchantments with lots of control runes. This time, he would have to draw some genuinely profound unit cells with thirty runes each.

Technically, some of his equipment involved even more complex enchantments than that, so this wasn't entirely out of the question, but Percy had never drawn them this fast.

'Coming up with five hundred variants that I can draw fast enough is also going to be tricky. I'll need to spend a lot of time planning them out and practicing before I even attempt it…' he thought with a frown.

He still wanted to try at some point.

Even if he cleared it, he'd never get through the eleventh or twelfth waves during this trip, but it would be great magiscript training. He'd need to improve a lot before he could complete his artificial advancement, so he might as well have his clones push themselves as much as possible before returning.

The good news was that the challenge had stopped caring about endurance entirely. A thousand rits was nothing: barely twenty minutes. He could try the wave as many times as he wanted, and he was even allowed to botch a good twenty-five unit cells on each attempt.

'Fine. No harm in giving it a shot after I'm done with everything else. Let's focus on the combat challenges for now.'

Those scaled differently, so he didn't expect to get nearly this far with any of his clones, but the sixth waves should all be within reach. Once everyone was done amassing credits, he'd go on a massive shopping spree, buying the others their books and figuring out what to do with the bonus rewards.

Checking his balance again, his borrowed heart couldn't help but skip a beat.

‘Over thirteen thousand credits already!’

He’d been too preoccupied to notice earlier, but he’d already reached a five-digit balance for the first time under his own name. And he’d only attempted one type of challenge with a single one of his clones so far. If he kept going like this, he would vastly exceed his previous target for the trip!

Chapter 549: Completing the challenges

The obsidian golem spun like a cyclone of death, its six blade-shaped arms making shrill sounds as they sliced through the air. Skidding atop the black liquid, its dark frame blended with the bright yellow glow of its enchantments, turning it into a blur. Riding up and down the waves that its own violent movements stirred, it chased Cassiel around the cube, trying to cut him to pieces.

‘Shit, we’re about to get hit!’

Gritting his host’s teeth, Percy focused a chunk of pure mana on their chest, barely preventing the golem from splitting Cassiel in half. The boy still ended up with a nasty diagonal wound across his torso, causing him to wince.

The soft cyan mana made for a fragile barrier, but that was the price that Percy had to pay to keep Reinforcement secret from Metatron. In the ‘swarm’ challenge, he’d at least been able to use Self-conversion to refuel his host’s second core, giving them more literal firepower to unleash on the smaller constructs.

Here, its best use was keeping them alive.

Emptying a few healing potions into the child’s stomach, Percy resumed the chase, carefully studying his opponent’s movements in search of an opening. This wasn’t the first time they’d attempted this wave, but getting a read of the golem’s erratic attacks was a million times harder without his mutated eyes. Then again, without a soul to examine, even the Sovereign’s Eye might have not been nearly as effective.

‘There! Whenever it’s about to catch up, it speeds up for a few seconds, but it has to slow down afterwards.’

Taking a deep breath after the other: as deep as he could manage without causing the cut on Cassiel's chest to widen, at least: Percy pushed the boosting art to its absolute limit.

The boy's muscles swelled as his veins squirmed beneath his reddening skin. The straight, cyan lines leading to his sternum shone brighter, as did the flame-like orange lines spreading out of his abdomen.

Sadly, Percy's host was held back by more than his primary affinity. His petit stature made him way too physically weak for his grade, the human-sized golem before him looking like a towering monstrosity.

Luckily, Cassiel was just as agile as he was supposed to be. More, even.

Pumping pure mana into their second core, Percy converted it into additional fire mana, using a few pre-casting exercises to spin and compress the flames. Dancing atop the roiling lake of tar, he gracefully evaded the construct's deadly swings, biding his time.

The moment he saw the golem's attacks slow down, he slipped through a gap between the weapons, leaping to his opponent's chest. Placing both hands on the construct, he finally unleashed all the fire mana he'd been preparing, the skin on Cassiel's palms blistering under the heat and pressure: despite his resistance to the affinity.

The golem was sent flying back, crashing against the wall with a deafening boom, cracks spreading all over its body. The runes blinked several times as it tried to stand, though its job only got harder as it slid down the dented surface and into the liquid metal.

The substance rushed to repair it, but the damage was too extensive. Crumbling faster than it could recover, the enchantments on the golem's body finally went dark as the cube announced Percy's victory.

"Congratulations! Wave 6 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 1800. Current balance: 37009."

"Awarded credits: 1800. Current balance: 24300."

“Wave 6 is a special milestone. Bonus reward is available. Please voice your request. NOTE: Bonus reward is limited to the Yellow grade.”

“Just… save this one for later too…” Percy said amidst pants as the black swamp got drained into the floor, all the scratches and indentations on the walls of the cube being undone in real time.

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. User ‘Percy’ has 11 bonus rewards pending. User ‘Cassiel’ has 3 bonus rewards pending.’

Finally.

It had been six months since he arrived at the Vault, all three of his clones and hosts having worked tirelessly to reach this point.

Everyone had made it past the sixth waves of the combat challenges. In fact, the others had had an easier time, since their hosts possessed air and water affinities respectively, which they were more familiar with. However, none had dared to attempt the seventh waves, as the jump in difficulty would inevitably be too high, and the risk too real.

That said, the Orange and Red clones had managed to climb much higher on the magiscript ladder. The former had cleared the twelfth wave, just barely getting to the second bonus reward, while the latter had even cleared the fifteenth.

This was the kind of achievement that Percy doubted any of the Vault’s residents could boast of, unless they somehow discovered their own method of cheating their way into the lower grades like him.

According to the Yellow clone’s estimates, the waves that had stumped his siblings should be on par with his own in difficulty. Based on what they had told him, where the Yellow level demanded more complex enchantments, the lower grades focused on a greater volume of runes, though the end result was the same.

‘Alright. I think this is about the most we can realistically hope for,’ he thought.

He still wanted to try the tenth wave of the Yellow magiscript challenge later, and the others probably wanted to push for an additional wave as well: considering that they shared his personality.

However, the weaker clones had finished the bulk of their challenges earlier than him, so they’d been waiting for him to buy them some books for a few days already. It would be inefficient to delay them any further, plus he was eager to spend some of his earnings.

Before he began his shopping spree, there was someone that he had to check up on, however.

‘Cassiel? How are you doing?’ he asked his host. ‘I know the past few months have been intense, but you’ll be able to buy whatever you want for a very long time with so many credits.’

The boy had never complained, no matter how boring the magiscript challenges had been, or how dangerous and painful the combat ones did. He’d obviously accumulated fewer credits than Percy, but he’d still amassed nearly as many as Gabe had had, back when Percy had first met him, despite his lower grade, lack of a blessing or bloodline, and having a pure affinity.

‘I’m doing great sir,’ a childish voice rang inside Percy’s soul. ‘A little tired, but I’m eternally grateful for the opportunities you’ve given me.’

Percy shook his head. ‘Don’t thank me. If anything, it was selfish to force this on you for my own benefit. I’m glad that I was able to compensate you for your help though. Be careful not to spend all your credits and bonus rewards at once. I suggest you take a few weeks to think carefully before buying anything.’

The boy nodded. Percy wasn’t going to touch his host’s rewards, even though they could technically share. He’d earned more than enough stuff on his own, so he wouldn’t even entertain the idea of taking advantage of the kid.

Pressing his hand against the wall, he watched a rectangular exit form with a burst of compressed air. Leaving the challenge cube for the first time in a while, he found a long line of people waiting for their turn outside, their expressions marred by irritation and impatience.

“Sorry about that!” he hurriedly yelled, bowing his head apologetically at the glaring giants.

In his defence, he hadn’t slacked a minute inside the cube. He’d just had too many difficult challenges to complete. The magiscript ones had only taken him a few days, because he’d been proficient enough to clear them with relative ease, but the combat challenges had required several attempts each.

Moving past the grumbling crowd, he found an isolated spot to sit, relaxing for a few minutes so that he wouldn’t browse the database with an exhausted mind and make any avoidable mistakes. Only once he was more or less back in shape did he dare to get his rune index printed again, skimming through it for inspiration.

Percy had come here with several, very specific runes and enchantments in mind, but it wouldn’t hurt to broaden his horizons. While he was far more proficient in magiscript than someone his grade had any right to be, he understood that he had several shortcomings to overcome.

He’d specialized in certain enchantments that he regularly used in combat or alchemy, but his scope was embarrassingly narrow. To this day, he didn’t even know the runes for lots of simple, everyday objects that they had on Remior.

This included things like the weighted clothing that he’d used in his youth, the enchantments the Alchemists’ Guild used to trap much of the excess ambient mana from the Fungal Spire inside the settlement, or the self-cleaning enchantments on their robes.

‘That’s all in the past. By the time I leave this place, I’m going to be a well-rounded master…’ he decided.

Other than that, there were plenty of interesting rewards he wanted. The spatial seals would massively expand his storage capacity, and the test might allow him to safely absorb an extra fiend once he returned home.

That would only cost two of his eleven bonus rewards!

Percy had yet to decide what to do with the rest. Finally, there was also the seal-crafting knowledge he needed, the potentially new alchemic principle that he wanted to look into, the issue of the void

tournament to discuss, and another thing that he wanted to learn more about. Thinking about all of that, his borrowed lips couldn't help but part into a wide, toothy grin.

'The hard part is mostly over. Time to enjoy the fruit of all our labour!'

Chapter 550: Shopping spree

Percy's plan was multifaceted as he went through the index. Thinking back to everyday items on Remior, he made a list of runes and enchantments that he could bring back to upgrade everything.

'Gathering runes… flow runes… these will be handy if we want to retain more ambient mana in the hive and settlement. They should also help with my artificial advancement,' he thought.

He would need the enchantments inside his core to fully automate his boosting art: among other functions: which meant replicating the Circulation pattern in his channels and pulling ambient mana into his body. Other than that, these runes would also allow him to fuel all sorts of enchantments passively.

'Transmission runes… sound conversion runes… signal propagation runes… reception runes… communication enchantments…'

These should allow him to replicate some of the functions of Kassorith's spatial pin, though it would still take a space affinity to combine them with a storage device or enhance them to the point that they could transmit high-quality images in real time.

That said, there was no doubt in Percy's mind that they would be much better than the shoddy artifacts that Deimos and Jason had used to call each other in the past. If everything went well, communications on Remior would never be the same once these enchantments spread.

'I wonder why Metatron is so open to selling me his runes…'

Was the titan so confident that nobody in the universe would ever catch up to his magiscript prowess? Not even after they studied his own language? Or was he still hiding all the good stuff from Percy?

Well, it didn't matter. To a lesser spring with subpar runecrafting like Remior, even the basics were pretty much "the good stuff".

Shrugging his pointless concerns off, he continued browsing for things to buy. Considering how many credits he had earned, he had no intention of being thrifty this time. He wasn't going to throw money away, of course, but he was more than happy to splurge on anything even remotely useful.

Taking inspiration from things that he had seen in his travels, he thought back to the enchanted weapons that had been offered in the tournament's prize pool on Thess'kala.

'Hmmm… what were those enchantments called again? Amplification and… lightning resonance?'

Going over the index, it didn't take him long to find some information on the topic. Amplification and resonance runes had similar but distinct functions. The former could be used to supercharge pretty much every other enchantment.

There were various other ways to do that, but there was a limit to what could be accomplished with each of them before one ran into diminishing returns. More importantly, all these approaches could be stacked for even better results.

Many of them, Percy was using already. For instance, he could draw multiple copies of the same enchantment, linking them side by side, or overlaying them into intricate formations. This was the whole idea behind magiscript, unit cells and his Instantaneous Formation spell. Another method was simply to fine-tune the runecrafting language itself, to design runes that were more effective at certain tasks.

Both were approaches where Metatron's language excelled.

Amplification runes were also rather common throughout the universe, though they worked in a slightly different way. If runecrafting was like whispering in the ears of the universe to gently convince it to behave in a certain manner, magiscript was the equivalent of having multiple people whispering at the same time, bullying the universe with sheer numbers. Having a potent runecrafting language was more like speaking clearly.

Meanwhile, amplification runes allowed one to essentially yell their commands out instead of whispering.

According to the material that Percy was reading, there was no point in going overboard with any of these approaches. Perhaps, Metatron could have further fine-tuned his language if he'd spent tens of thousands of years more, but it would have hardly made a difference.

Percy had also experienced this, which was one of the reasons he hadn't tried to fit even more runes into his Cloak, or why he'd never attempted to draw a formation with over three layers.

Well, that, and the fact that his magical silk wasn't thin enough for smaller runes, nor could he easily produce enough mana to fuel formations with so many layers. Even if he overcame those issues, the benefits would be small.

By the same token, this explained why the demigods on Thess'kala hadn't bothered to include more than three amplifications on the weapons. Not only would a fourth rune not help as much, but it would also take space that could otherwise be used to draw more copies of the enchantments, so it was ultimately a balancing act between various approaches.

'That makes sense… I guess those people aren't as stupid as I thought. But this is still useful knowledge for me, since I wasn't using amplification runes before.'

It would definitely be worth his time to upgrade all his equipment in the future. The difference wouldn't be huge, but these would be some rather easy gains. At the very least, he most certainly wanted to include the runes in his cores during his artificial advancement.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Resonance runes, on the other hand, didn't target other enchantments, but rather affinities. They worked by drawing out the latent potential of each mana type, making it even better at the things that it was already good for.

It wasn't anywhere close to the level of a blessing, but the effect was broader. For example, a fire resonance enchantment would make fire mana slightly hotter, but also brighter, and allow it to spread

more easily. It would make earth mana heavier, firmer, and more durable, air mana sharper, softer, and faster, and so on…

'Now, these, will be even more important to include in my artificial advancement!' he realized, nearly causing Cassiel's eyebrows to jump off the boy's forehead.

What better place to empower mana of a certain affinity than inside the corresponding core?

After incorporating both runes into his entire arsenal, Percy estimated that he would grow about ten to twenty percent stronger. The benefit wasn't huge, but his equipment was already phenomenal, and he was capable of comfortably fighting against people two to three grades higher: depending on whether he counted his Green beast core or not.

Adding the runes onto his mental checklist, he kept browsing. He didn't stop at simple runes, searching for interesting enchantments as well. Funnily enough, he didn't know that many: other than self-repairs and structural integrity enchantments.

His unit cells were mostly full of pseudo-enchantments, allowing him to tightly pack multiple distinct runes, but without really creating that many additional effects. It was quite inefficient, in fact.

Finally, there was one other area where he wanted to focus.

In the past, Percy had only bought one or two variants of each rune. After going over his affinities and intended applications, he'd selected the most suitable variants to master, never bothering with any others.

It was understandable given his previous circumstances. He used to lack the required credits, time, or experience to spread himself too thin, so he'd focused on the best enchantments for his arsenal.

However, this was the hallmark of a novice, not a true magiscript master. It wasn't an accident that the Vault had hundreds: if not thousands: of variants of every single rune. They differed in all sorts of ways, from the mana types that they could be fuelled with, to the way they were drawn, the runes that they could more easily be paired with, and even the details of their intended effect.

Runes that could only be fuelled by their creator's mana: and out of a single affinity to boot: were more potent than those powered by multiple affinities, or any mage. The ones that accepted ambient mana were even weaker, but far more broadly applicable.

The self-repairs on Percy's equipment, for example, were perfect in battle, as they allowed him to regenerate and replicate his constructs rapidly. However, they couldn't absorb ambient mana directly.

Percy had found a way around that by converting ambient mana to his own through his boosting art and the soul affinity's special properties, but he still had to be present for that to work.

Meanwhile, the self-repairs in the Alchemists' Guild were far more modest, but infinitely better at passively maintaining the buildings in the settlement for thousands of years, running purely on ambient mana and the dust in the air.

The same was true when he compared his own cauldron with the general-purpose ones that could be used by anyone.

Thankfully, there was a way for Percy to have his cake and eat it too. He simply had to buy a bunch of variants for each rune, and pick whichever was best at a given task.

He still wasn't going to get every single variant in the Vault: that would be overkill. Besides, he didn't have nearly enough credits for that, nor the time to study them all. However, it was worth his time to identify four or five variants that covered the most important bases, broadening his options.

Going through the index with a fine-tooth comb took hours, but Percy eventually felt happy with his selection. He'd picked around fifteen new enchantments, forty-three new runes, and over two hundred variants of both the new runes and those that he'd already mastered in the past.

"Cube, how much do these cost?"

"Evaluating request…"

“Evaluation complete. The user has selected 238 items. Total cost: 7430 credits. Current balance: 37009.”

Percy’s borrowed heart bled at the sound of that. In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if his fellow clones and his main bodies had also felt something across space and time.

Sure, he had tons of credits now, but this was still a huge sum to spend at once. Especially since he was also planning to buy three new spatial seals from Metatron. Spending another fifteen thousand credits on that was a lot, but he felt that it was an efficient use of his bonus rewards.

Percy needed his seals to be multiples of two, so that he could combine all of them and maximize their capacity if necessary. This meant that he either had to buy one, three, or seven.

One wasn’t enough, and he didn’t have credits to purchase seven. He could always just grab one and come back later for more, but buying them in bulk might save him two bonus rewards if the titan decided to charge him only once for the demonstration.

‘It’s fine. After this trip, I won’t need any new runes or storage space for a very long time,’ he consoled himself.

“Do it, but don’t print them for me just yet,” he told the system. “Also, send me a message informing me of the purchase the next time I log in with a Red core, and another with an Orange core. And skip the warning: I don’t care.”

“Choice confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 29579.”

Hearing the reduced balance felt like a second stab in his chest, but there was no helping it. In any case, he’d done his job. The first part, at least. It would be up to the others to start absorbing the knowledge.

Mastering even a single new rune used to take several days, but he was no longer the clueless teenager who had first visited the Vault by accident. By now, he was experienced enough to learn new enchantments several times faster, and this was without even bringing up his trait or increased mental prowess. Finally, there would be two of him working on this task for the next few months.

He didn’t expect the other clones to read everything. Some of the more obscure variants, he’d only brought just in case he needed them in the future. He was going to bring many copies of the books back to Remior to refer to later, or share with others.

However, the more knowledge he internalized, the more versatile he would grow as an enchanter and the more options he would have in his projects.

‘I still have a lot of credits left…’ he thought.

It wasn’t like he got a kick out of spending it: quite the opposite: but he knew that it wouldn’t do him much good sitting in the Vault. He was going to keep his distance from the artificial world for as long as possible after he advanced, so it wouldn’t be a bad idea to browse the system for anything else that might be useful.

‘Let’s get the things I know I need first. I’ll decide what to do with the remaining credits and bonus rewards later.’