Wanderer 581

Chapter 581: Willpower

“My domain?” Percy frowned, not having expected the burly elder’s remark. “But how? It’s not possible to infuse willpower into reagents.”

It was a well-known fact that willpower could only be added to one’s mana while it was being converted to their affinity inside their core. Alchemical ingredients generally didn’t contain any, regardless of their mana type.

Even if a mage possessed the same affinity, trying to consume the ingredients to add willpower to them would be beyond foolish and wouldn’t even work. Feeding raw ingredients into one’s core was harmful and would rob mana of other important properties that allowed it to exist in a stable state outside a person’s body, preventing it from being extracted and used in alchemy later.

This was also why it was impossible for Percy to shape his trollsfury tattoos into runes to amplify or modify their effect.

If there was an exception to the rule, it was that his crystallized mana still contained traces of willpower even after being ground to powder and bonded to elixirs, which was barely enough for him to turn it invisible or incorporeal. The grey dust: and potentially nectar: were the only ingredients where this was possible, because they weren’t harvested from magical plants.

However, Percy had never found any other way to benefit from this minor feature during the brewing process.

Paracelsus shook his head. “That’s mostly correct, yet directly altering reagents isn’t the only potential application of an alchemist’s willpower. If anything, the fact that your domain doesn’t react with the ingredients is a good thing, as it lets you do something different. Have you considered spreading it inside your cauldron to locate or eliminate the solid lumps?”

Percy couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. He genuinely hadn’t thought of that, and he wasn’t even sure why such an obvious thing had escaped his mind. He generally prided himself in his ability to think outside the box, having done a great job finding applications for the knowledge and techniques that his clones had brought back to Remior over the years.

Pondering over the senior alchemist's suggestion, it didn't take Percy long to recognize why he had instinctively ignored this approach.

"If it's that simple, why didn't I ever see any mention of this in my travels?"

None of the documents or alchemic lessons he had received in the Vault, Atlantis, Felmara, Nephthys's Sanctuary or anywhere else had so much as hinted at this possibility.

"I'm not surprised." Paracelsus shrugged before evening out a few creases along the violet fabric on his left shoulder. "Would you ever feel the need to remind a junior alchemist to use their eyes or hands while brewing? Of course not. It's a bit like that. Using one's domain isn't an alchemic principle or some profound technique: just something that comes naturally to a powerful mage."

Percy wasn't quite convinced.

"I don't know about that. Orin had to teach me to use my Mana Sense back when he was mentoring me. I would have probably thought of it at some point, but it could have easily taken years. What's second nature to a veteran clearly isn't as obvious to a student."

"Indeed." The elder nodded, his blue eyes regarding Percy. "However, there is a fundamental difference. Mana Sense is relevant to a junior alchemist, while domains are reserved for masters. Green-borns rarely bother with alchemy, and Yellow-borns have amassed centuries of experience in brewing or wielding their willpower by the time they reach Violet, so they don't need anyone to point this out."

"Violets? What about Blues? They're more common, younger, and less experienced, so they could probably use the advice," Percy protested.

"Correct. Sadly, this isn't applicable to them. While a Blue's domain is sensitive enough to be used in battle, it doesn't quite cut it for alchemy. You know as well as I do that the lumps we need to detect are tiny and have to be eliminated swiftly. Let me ask you this: do you recall ever seeing your mentor apply his domain to his brews?"

Thinking back, Percy couldn't say that he had.

Not that he'd possessed the means to detect Orin's domain during his apprenticeship, but Percy guessed that his mentor would have at least mentioned it at some point if it was something that he regularly used.

Like Paracelsus had said, by the time a Blue alchemist advanced to the next grade, they would be accustomed to whipping out their domain for pretty much every little task. In fact, they would hypothesize about this application decades before their actual promotion, giving them yet another reason to look forward to their advancement.

This simply wasn't something that needed to be taught, generally speaking.

Percy's situation was unique. He had unexpectedly obtained a Violet-level domain a couple of years ago, with little prior experience at wielding his willpower. Despite skipping centuries of practice as a Blue, he'd still done a decent job finding all sorts of ways to use it: be it in combat, to fly, scan his surroundings, lift heavy objects, suppress a bunch of arrogant elders, scare the occasional foolish wasp away, or draw runes faster: but he'd been too busy to fully explore its potential.

'I can't believe Phoebe didn't bring this up during our little chat,' he thought, clicking his tongue.

Having observed him for years, there was no way the titaness had missed his deficiency. Clearly, she'd intentionally avoided mentioning it to let him figure it out by himself.

Percy had no idea how long it would have taken him to come up with the idea if Paracelsus hadn't approached him, but the existence of this trick certainly helped explain Phoebe's confidence in his alchemy skills.

If he'd reached a brewing yield of sixty-one percent while unknowingly handicapping himself, it meant that he could do even better now that he'd learned about this. Interestingly, it also sounded like precisely the missing piece that he needed to upgrade his Wild Art a second time into something with "Sovereign's" in its name.

'It'll synergize extremely well with the spell,' he realized, rhythmically tapping his fingers against the wooden lectern in contemplation.

Sorcerer's Guidance already allowed him to peer a few centimetres beneath the surface of his concoctions as well as somewhat extrapolate what was going on deeper inside the cauldron, but it wasn't powerful enough to fully map the contents of the spherical container.

Its recent upgrade had improved the situation significantly while also allowing him to predict some of the lumps in advance, yet it wasn't perfect. Even worse, the spell inevitably grew less effective whenever he switched to a larger cauldron.

His domain wouldn't solve that entirely, because the information that it would provide him with would be less detailed than the multifaceted images captured by his mutated eyes. However, it was better than nothing. It would hopefully allow him to infer some of the missing information, pushing the boundary of his sight inward and improving the accuracy of his predictions.

On top of that, he could use his domain to interact with the ingredients. His willpower might not react with them in a magical way, but it could still exert a physical force on his concoctions, allowing him to stir them, compress them, or even heat them up through friction. In fact, the unique flavour of his Dead Winter domain would give him the option of cooling the liquid down too: something that the average Violet alchemist probably didn't have access to.

The enchantments on his cauldron could accomplish all of that, but they were limited to the surface of the tool. Having a second, more flexible way to interact with the ingredients near the centre of the container would add a new dimension to Percy's craft.

"Thank you for letting me know," he told Paracelsus, nodding in gratitude. "I'll work on this between the lectures and the mana-gathering formation that I'm planning to draw around the Fungal Spire."

Internally, he berated himself for being surprised by the elder's wisdom. Sure, Percy had a lot of things to teach Remior's alchemists, but he'd been a fool to underestimate a group of Violets who had been doing this since before his House existed. It only made sense that they would have a couple valuable tips of their own to share.

"Don't mention it, kid. It's the least that you deserve after everything you're doing for us," the elder replied, his sharp features morphing into a gentle smile as he patted Percy's shoulder. "About that formation… Orin told us that you're going to need some manpower from the Guild. When are you planning to start?"

“Today if possible,” Percy said. At the same time, he brushed his hands over his loose equipment, storing everything back inside his seal.

“Already?” Paracelsus asked, creasing his brow. “You’ve barely returned to the settlement.”

“Well, I’m not tired. The sooner we start, the sooner we can increase the mana density around here. But I can wait another day or two if you need more time to prepare.”

The Violet shook his head. “It’s fine. If you’re sure that you don’t mind jumping straight into more work, I’ll send a bunch of people your way later.”

Percy nodded. He didn’t know how long exactly it would take the clones in the Vault to return, but he’d rather get everything else done by then. Between the wasps, the Guild, and his own alchemy, he’d already wasted a lot of time that could have been spent on his artificial advancement.

Of course, a year or two were hardly worth mentioning compared to his current lifespan, and everything that he’d done in the Fungal Spire was necessary for both his own growth and the development of Remior as a whole, but he was itching to switch back to more interesting projects.

Chapter 582: Four months

Percy was used to juggling several different tasks, but he was less used to working with others and having to adjust his schedule accordingly. Had it been just one or two people, it would have been fine, yet he’d been teaching thousands of alchemists and collaborating with thousands more to arrange the mountain-encompassing formation.

He would have preferred to go through the planned lessons one after the other and complete the whole course in a week, but he knew that it was more efficient to give his students a couple of days between lectures, allowing them to absorb his teachings, attempt to put the new alchemic principles into practice and, sure, even get a little rest.

Not everyone could keep going without pause like him, so this was the only way to avoid having to give each lesson multiple times.

The labourers that he had borrowed from the Guild couldn't work without breaks either. The unit cells that they were helping him draw around the Fungal Spire were quite complex: not to mention downright massive. They didn't contain that many runes, but each symbol was wider than a house, requiring a lot of effort from his temporary subordinates to put together.

The good news was that the size of the intricate symbols made it difficult for the workers to get them wrong, even without any experience in magiscript. As long as they followed Percy's diagrams, the enchantments should activate just fine, even if the finer details ended up shifted by a few centimetres.

Percy still had to be the one completing each unit cell, washing the symbols with a wave of mana and willpower while infusing them with meaning. That said, he could outsource over ninety percent of the preparation, which was how he and his coworkers had completed most of the work in just a few months.

Percy merely had to fly along the perimeter of the mountain, magically stamping one unit cell after another into existence, joining it with its neighbours.

'Tsch. It's getting late again,' he thought, clicking his tongue as a carpet of dim, orange light covered his body, the setting sun bathing his surroundings in a crimson gradient.

Unlike Percy, the others had to sleep every night. If not for that, they would have completed the ambitious project a long time ago. As things stood, it would be a few more weeks. Alas, not everyone had a bunch of spectral traits infusing their soul with otherworldly abilities.

Obviously, Percy could have asked the elders to deploy more people to the task, splitting them into multiple shifts so that they could keep supporting him without pause, but he hadn't seen a reason to do that. It wasn't like his time was being wasted, as he had other things begging for his attention.

Outside of the giant enchantment and his lessons, Percy had to craft enough cauldrons for each of his students. Many of the senior alchemists still had a tough time preparing for his lectures due to lacking the necessary equipment.

They could get around the issue by lending the tools that he had already created to one another, but producing the rest was still a work in progress.

Once again, this was a task that Percy would have completed already had he focused exclusively on it, but he had no choice but to fit everything into his busy schedule. As a result, he averaged about a dozen or so new cauldrons per day, usually while taking advantage of the downtime between the lectures and waiting for his subordinates to prepare the giant runes.

At just under a hundred tools per week, he estimated that the whole project would take him about half a year in total: of which four months had already passed.

Finally, Percy spent his nights on yet another task: this one entirely for his own benefit. It was precisely what he was planning to do right now as he casually flew back to his residence in the settlement.

The wind parted before him as the colourful motes drifted aside mere centimetres before rushing into his face, his eyes shielded by the same invisible barrier of willpower holding him up.

Percy could have flown faster, but he didn't mind spending a few minutes every now and then to appreciate the scenery. The ancient settlement looked especially dazzling from above, the expansive shadow of the Fungal Spire contrasting nicely with the vibrant motes falling like snowflakes from above, illuminating the cobblestone streets and the picturesque buildings.

He began his descend the moment he spotted his house, his feet making a muted thud as he landed softly by his porch. Activating the enchantment on the door, he let himself in, making his way to his personal lab. He'd never really needed it, but he might as well use it since the elders had so kindly bestowed him with one.

At the same time, he took one deep breath after the other, the colourful motes gathering in his lungs before flowing to his cores to be converted to his affinities. A grey star lit up in his sternum as a cyan one did so in his abdomen, though they both rapidly shifted to the greyish-teal colour of his phantom mana as his boosting art fully came into effect.

The channels branching out of his first core spun into a violent maelstrom centred around his chest, as the second set branched out of his stomach into countless orderly lines that reached every corner of his body.

The excess mana spilled out of his pores, extending into numerous blazing ribbons that danced wildly around him, helping him absorb ambient mana even faster as a chorus of spectres filled the house with their cheerful cries.

'It's good to have some privacy,' he thought.

He had to be mindful of using his boosting art in public, as this was one of the few things that he had yet to share with the rest of Remior. It was common knowledge that he possessed the spell, since many Blues had survived the chase a couple of years earlier, but he didn't want to make it too easy for his enemies to master the technique.

Unlike the other things that he had disseminated, the Dance could potentially allow someone like Machaon to grow a lot stronger in a short amount of time, making it harder for Percy to close the gap separating them. This was especially problematic now that Phoebe had dumped the responsibility of bringing the disgraced patriarch to justice onto Percy.

Having to hide the Carnival was annoying: especially because Percy was trying to make the spell effortless to maintain. Micky had accomplished that years ago with his own version out of sheer necessity: because it had helped with his stamina issues: though Percy hadn't had a reason to pursue that result as aggressively at the time.

Before the fusion, he had already grown comfortable enough to keep the technique active indefinitely, but it had never become entirely effortless for him. Following the fusion, he had obviously benefitted even more from his former familiar's experience, though the unique shape of his mana network and the combination of his affinities made his version of the spell slightly different.

'I'll have to figure it out by the time I'm ready for my artificial advancement,' he reminded himself.

If he wanted to permanently raise his grade, he couldn't have the spell activating and deactivating all the time. He guessed that it might be possible to maintain the increased mana density without the external part of the Dance, but he was certain that his cores alone wouldn't be enough to support the necessary pressure, so he would definitely need to keep Circulation running for the rest of his life.

Fortunately, some of the runes that he was planning to incorporate into the enchantments would help guide the mana to and from the correct channels, but learning to passively maintain the technique would only make the whole endeavour easier.

Either way, this wasn't the sort of thing that he could rush. He had to slowly accumulate thousands: if not tens of thousands: of hours of experience maintaining the boosting art over the next few years: much like Micky had done inside the Thirsty Valley during his prolonged captivity.

Sighing, Percy shoved any thoughts of his long-term project aside for now, focusing on the task at hand. His boosting art wasn't the main thing keeping him busy every night: just another spell that he could conveniently work on while being holed up in his lab.

Pulling his equipment from his spatial seal, he set everything on a counter, filling his cauldron up with the most recent batch of royal jelly that Nephthys and the Queen had sent him, as well as the first set of secondary ingredients.

Activating the enchantments on the construct, he turned the heat up, watching the ingredients as they began to meld together.

Ever since his chat with Paracelsus, Percy had been working tirelessly to upgrade his Wild Art again. Progress had been slow at first, but he had improved over time. In fact, he'd felt that the spell was on the cusp of evolving for the past few days: something that had obviously filled him with excitement.

'I think tonight is the night. Let's make it happen,' he thought, gleefully activating the Wild Art.

Chapter 583: Encroachment

Using his Wild Art, Percy watched the first group of cancerous projections emerge inside the oversized container, most of them concentrated near the exterior of the cauldron that his mutated eyes had an easier time observing.

Pouring his willpower into the spherical vessel, he allowed it to spread evenly across its volume, rapidly covering his previous blind spots. Almost immediately, he felt two separate channels of information flow into his mind.

The first was coming directly from his eyes. It was far more detailed than the other, encompassing the temperature gradient of the liquid, the different grades of the ingredients captured by his innate Mana Sense, as well as their affinities that he could recognize through his regular vision.

The second channel was barebones by comparison, as it only informed him of the physical locations, shapes, and sizes of the solid lumps: much like a three-dimensional sense of touch. However, his domain covered the entire cauldron: not just its exterior.

It was like two kingdoms splitting the liquid world into an inner globe and an outer spherical shell: the first one bland and monochrome, the other rich with more colours than the average person could even fathom.

At the boundary between the two kingdoms, a third, thinner layer existed, its contents populated largely through inference. There, Percy's Wild Art reigned supreme. Taking advantage of both streams of concrete information, his brain tried to passively fill in the gaps in his knowledge.

Fuelled by the virtuous feedback loop between Percy's mutation, his Status, and the spell, the colourful region slowly encroached upon the monochrome kingdom, imparting new information into the very depths of the cauldron that were supported solely through deductions and calculations rather than direct observation. Those deductions then rippled back outwards, allowing even the projections in the outskirts of the coloured kingdom to grow more accurate.

Every now and then, Percy made a mistake, or a part of his concoction followed a route that didn't conform to his predictions, forcing him to discard many of his guesses and assumptions. Whenever that happened, the monochrome region snapped back with a vengeance, its volume expanding as the outer shell lost some of its colour.

Like a pair of competing armies, the two territories fought a constant tug of war of colour and knowledge, the boundary oscillating back and forth with every new development in the concoction.

A few minutes later, Percy was done pacifying the beast mana.

Seeing as his Status had yet to register the upgrade, he twisted the lid off his cauldron, tossing the redirection ingredients in before beginning the second step of his brew.

In the first few weeks following Paracelsus's advice, Percy had struggled to incorporate his domain into his concoctions, though he had slowly improved since. The trick had been to take things one step at a time.

Percy had stopped trying to actively manipulate the ingredients with his willpower, using it only as a way to sense the contents of his cauldron. It wasn't until two months later that he'd felt confident enough to move on.

The next thing he'd tried had been to stir the liquid with his domain, only attempting to compress the ingredients a couple of weeks after that, and finally to cool them down or heat them up by the third month.

He'd also discovered that manipulating the ingredients with his willpower wasn't as simple as he'd imagined. Apparently, it was still easier to use the enchantments on his cauldron whenever he could, because pouring mana into a rune took less effort than to manually induce a precise current of physical force with his domain.

Consequently, Percy had been forced to navigate a delicate balance between relying on his cauldron's runes for most actions and reserving his willpower for only a select few spots in the very depths of the concoction that were harder for the enchantments to affect.

'This might be it,' he thought, holding his breath as the colourful kingdom advanced deeper into the cauldron than any prior attempt.

Sorcerer's Guidance did more than provide Percy with information. It allowed him to eliminate multiple potential lumps at once, gently steering the entire brewing session toward a more desirable path: hence the spell's name.

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

Meanwhile, his current method was a lot more aggressive. Equipped with far more information about the concoction: be it in the exterior, the interior, or even in the future: as well as many additional tools at his disposal, Percy attacked the cancerous masses by the dozens, methodically eliminating entire groups of them with unprecedented ease. Years of experience informed his actions, always pushing him toward the most effective choices as he brute-forced his way to the end of the brewing session.

He couldn't be certain, but he felt that redirecting the royal jelly had taken less than five minutes. If he was right, it meant that he had just surpassed his fastest brewing time. Even so, Phoebe's Decree remained silent, prompting him to move on to the next step: the first round of deattunement.

A new battle commenced as another pair of coloured and colourless kingdoms formed inside the cauldron. Both regions were far smaller than before, since Percy had fewer ingredients to work with.

The amount that Nephthys and her mother sent him every day wasn't nearly enough to fill up the cauldron to begin with, which was why he generally waited a couple of days to amass enough ingredients before commencing a brewing session. The extra doses that he had accumulated over the past few months had given him enough leeway to manage his time more effectively.

That said, the losses that he had inevitably incurred during the previous alchemic steps had reduced the liquid's volume to the point that it didn't even fill up three-quarters of the cauldron.

The good news was that this played in Percy's favour. The smaller battlefield allowed him to peer deeper into the concoction. The synergistic effects of his developing spell caused the coloured region to advance farther and farther toward the centre of the container, threatening to fully annex its monochrome counterpart with every violent wave.

It also seemed to finally push the Wild Art past some invisible threshold, his Status notifying him of his success.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Wild Art: Sorcerer's Guidance: Refined -> Wild Art: Sovereign's Encroachment: Masterful!]

The faintest hint of a smile formed on Percy's lips, though he didn't let himself get too distracted, as the brewing session was still ongoing. Even so, he couldn't help but spare a sliver of his attention to think about the upgrade.

'Finally! The Wild Art has basically caught up to my eyes,' he thought with glee. He would probably need to find another Decree and get his Status to evolve again if he wanted to find inspiration to elevate the spell a third time.

On another note, he was a little surprised that his Wild Art had jumped straight to Masterful. Especially since it had previously evolved to Refined in a single step. Usually, his spells got stuck on at least one of the two tiers for an additional upgrade.

Then again, Sovereign's Encroachment was the culmination of not only Percy's alchemic principles, magiscript and mutation, but also the equivalent of a Violet's domain. Viewed from that angle, anything below Masterful wouldn't have made sense.

Regardless, he shoved those thoughts to the back of his mind for now, focusing on completing his brew. As happy as he was about his accomplishment, there was no reason to waste a perfectly good batch of royal jelly.

Following the spell upgrade, he found it even easier to force the colourful region deeper into the cauldron, though he still failed to cover its entire volume. Perhaps he could have done that with a smaller tool, but he preferred to use cauldrons at the very edge of his capabilities, so that he would constantly push himself to improve.

Along with the expansion of the coloured region, his predictions of the future also grew more accurate, though they still weren't as reliable as the shadows that Greater Foresight produced in combat. Consequently, Percy had no choice but to keep addressing multiple solid lumps at once, directing the entire concoction toward more favourable outcomes instead of getting hung up on any individual projection.

Soon, he completed the first round of deattunement, the liquid stabilizing into a batch of potentially drinkable elixir: albeit without the benefits of the crystallized mana that would later elevate it into Gloomy Dawn.

Percy could have paused here as the elixirs could be stored for later, but he opted to complete the entire recipe, partly because he needed to replenish his dwindling stash, and partly to get used to the Masterful spell.

Two more alchemic steps later, he felt that he had grown even faster, and that he had ended up with a few extra drops of Gloomy Dawn, though the difference was negligible. Obviously, it would take a few more days for him to reach his new limit.

Shrugging, he went back to work.

It took his brewing yield a little longer to stabilize than he would have liked, because he couldn't focus exclusively on alchemy. He could only devote his nights to it, as his days were spent on his lessons, the magical formation and the knockoff cauldrons.

Not letting his eagerness get the better of him, Percy fell back into his routine, slowly progressing toward multiple goals. It wasn't until two weeks later that his brewing yield stopped climbing at around sixty-four percent.

The improvement was admittedly modest, but he wasn't deterred.

He knew that Phoebe had to be grinning from ear to ear if she was still spying on him, because he had just surpassed her highest yield as a mortal. At this rate, he might genuinely cross seventy percent by the time he became a god, eventually competing with the very best to master the mysterious concept of alchemy.

'For now, I can strike another task off my checklist,' he thought.

He could start spending his nights on the cauldrons. The mana-gathering array and his alchemy course were almost finished too. However, the next development came not from his projects on Remior, but from the last of his clones in the Vault.

Chapter 584: A new goal

Percy was strolling along the quiet streets of the Alchemists' Guild, on the way back from one of his lectures. As much as he would have liked to resume working on the formation, it was already late in the afternoon, so his subordinates had probably stopped for the day.

'I'll head there a couple of hours earlier tomorrow to finish up the previous batch of runes before they get started on the new ones,' he thought.

As he was planning out the rest of the week while enjoying the scenery, the Green clone reached out.

‘We’re ready. Send out the new guy.’

‘Alright. I’ll be home in a minute,’ the human body replied with a mental nod.

His counterpart had already informed him about the deal he had struck with his host, asking him to reserve the final use of his lightning-granting treasure a little longer. With it, Gabe would be able to upgrade both cores, and they could also hopefully help Elaine and a couple of others in the process.

Fortunately, Percy’s third wisp had returned from its most recent adventure a while ago: albeit empty-handed: so he had kept the cord available for precisely this purpose.

After entering his residence, he coordinated with the other parts of himself to complete the interstellar exchange. He still had to wait a little longer for the Green clone to finish talking to Metatron, but all the wisps eventually fused back into the main part of his soul, concluding one of his longest and largest joint operations to date.

Most importantly, the clones had brought yet another treasure trove of rewards back.

Leaving aside the things that they had done for their friends, there was a lot of stuff for Percy to be excited about. He had apparently spent as many as three Green bonus rewards and a colossal sum of credits on a set of unique artifacts known as ‘Zelesian beads’. Going over the associated memories, Percy couldn’t help but rub his hands in anticipation.

Charging the three marbles would take him around twelve days and nights, which was admittedly quite tedious, meaning that he should avoid activating them often. Even so, he was glad that he would be able to equip his future clones with such a powerful trump card.

Other than that, Percy had bought several new books and printed even more copies of the ones that he’d already owned. He’d even managed to merge the pieces of his spatial seal into its new maximum size: something that he hadn’t been able to do the previous time because his clones hadn’t arrived together.

Of course, the device wouldn't remain in this state for too long. It would have to be split into smaller denominations once he resumed his adventures, but at least he could take a moment to marvel at his warehouse-sized internal storage, while also managing its capacity more efficiently from now on.

Percy had spent the fourth Green reward: or well… technically the second, but he wasn't going over them in purchase order: on another set of Thess'kalan ritual ingredients that Metatron had presumably taken from Kassorith. Once again, this was something that Percy would ignore for the time being, though he looked forward to obtaining the means to explore the ritual's mysteries.

The final Green reward, however, was the most important one by far. He had used it to purchase the seal-crafting books necessary for his artificial advancement: the primary objective of this entire year-plus-long mission.

Everything else that he had done: be it the five clones that he had left in the artificial world for several months each, the many other short-lived clones that he had used to create the portals, search for potential hosts or transfer resources, the countless challenges that he had completed, and all the other rewards that he had earned: had all been secondary.

Holding the short stack of tomes in his hands, Percy caressed the spines of their synthetic covers fondly with his thumb, a massive weight lifted off his shoulders.

'Great! Once I wrap up my other responsibilities, I can hole up for however-many years it takes to complete the project!' he thought, his heart racing with excitement.

As long as nothing unexpected happened during his seclusion, he should be able to raise all four of his cores to the next grade, obtaining the power necessary to go after Machaon.

Percy had a hunch that the disgraced patriarch wouldn't just sit idly, waiting for his death, but the man probably had no idea that Percy was so close to yet another colossal boost to his strength. If he acted swiftly enough, the old mage might not see him coming.

After putting down the monster that had ruined his girlfriend's life and placed the whole planet at risk, there would be nobody left to oppose Percy. At least, nobody on Remior. Phoebe had mentioned her plan to eventually welcome him into the Divine Order, and he obviously had far more powerful enemies: like Rhaziel or even a Cardinal Devil: waiting for him out there in the cosmos, but that was fine.

With his lifespan problems solved and without any local threats breathing down his neck, Percy would finally be free to cultivate peacefully for decades or even centuries at a time, advancing repeatedly, developing his spells, and resuming his otherworldly adventures.

'That's a matter for later though…' he thought, considering the final item that his clones had brought back. This one wasn't a tangible reward, but rather some information and a proposal from Metatron. 'The Void Decree… I can't believe I actually have the opportunity to get my hands on yet another mana core…'

He felt the urge to laugh. While he had maintained a couple of empowered connections to his clones and could have theoretically talked to them at any point, neither side had seen a reason to share every single titbit of information before their reunion, so the knowledge they had brought back had still caught him by surprise.

Unbeknownst to either him or his clones, they'd each had a pretty illuminating conversation with a different titan. The human body had learned about external concepts and the various stages of the Concept realm from Phoebe, while the Green clone had chatted with Metatron about the Void Hand, collaborative Decrees and multiple mana cores.

Putting everything together, Percy now understood just how valuable the opportunity to acquire a third mana core would be.

'Well, okay… it's not like I wouldn't have wanted it in the past…' he reminded himself with a chuckle.

Regardless, Phoebe's explanation about the Elemental Acquisition stage had put everything into context. In the Colour realm, having a third affinity and another fifty percent boost to his physical strength and lifespan was nothing to scoff at, but it was hardly worth mentioning compared to the possible impact of the Decree after reaching the Concept realm.

If he managed to obtain another rare affinity, he would essentially gain the ability to climb to a higher grade than any other god!

Funnily enough, Percy could also get his hands on more concepts by simply using his bloodline to create more familiars and aspects, but that approach wasn't without its own cost. His ethereal cords were

finite, and there was something to be said about inviting additional strangers into his soul, even after Phoebe helped him segregate their memories, so he was planning to do it sparingly.

Besides, there was no reason not to try and stack the two methods.

‘That settles it. I have to participate in that tournament at all costs.’

Percy had to ensure that Metatron’s plan was foolproof before committing, but this opportunity was a hundred times more valuable than he had realized during his meeting with the divine pentapus.

The thought of infiltrating one of the most powerful factions in the universe still made Percy shudder, but he knew that this was practically a once-in-a-lifetime chance to reach the stars in one fell swoop.

‘Let’s take it one step at a time though.’ He exhaled, forcing himself to calm down.

Metatron and Kassorith would need years to prepare everything, and Percy had plenty of things to deal with on his end as well.

First, he had to wrap up his tasks in the Guild. Fortunately, he was already close to doing precisely that, and he had even taken steps to set the Starry Wasps and the alchemists up so that they wouldn’t require any input from him moving forward.

Percy had placed both the hive and the settlement on a trajectory to keep increasing their nectar and elixir production for the foreseeable future, and he’d even spread his runecrafting knowledge across the planet, so Remior’s technological level would slowly start improving. On top of that, the situation in the Camelot province had also stabilized, with Machaon being the only potential wild card out there.

‘Sounds good. There’s only a couple of lectures left until the end of the course, and the formation should also be done soon. After that, I can absorb my fourth fiend, get the mindset from Phoebe, and then go into seclusion…’

The mindset wouldn't directly boost his strength. Admittedly, separating his memories was just a matter of personal preference. However, the spectral trait was a different story. If he got lucky, it might help him strengthen Kassorith in the competition.

The void tournament was bound to be extremely challenging and, while Percy had many means at his disposal, there weren't that many that he would dare to reveal to the peak faction.

'If the trait isn't enough, maybe one of my clones will stumble upon something useful in the next few years.'

Other than using his bloodline, most of his time would be spent working on Internal Magiscript, slowly preparing for his artificial advancement. The moment it looked like he was close, it would be time to return to the Vault and coordinate with Metatron to begin the mission.

There were about a million things that could go wrong, but one thing was for certain. The ensuing decade promised to be an interesting one…

Chapter 585: Wrapping up

Percy was hovering a few dozen metres above a giant unit cell, suspended in the air by his willpower. The enchantment only contained a couple dozen runes. It wasn't very complex given his current magiscript skills, though handling so many symbols at the same time would have been an insurmountable challenge a mere half decade ago.

Not having to form the colossal runes out of his own mana certainly made his job easier: especially because his capacity wasn't even remotely sufficient while hiding his boosting art from his coworkers. Each symbol was wider than a small house, so the entire enchantment spanned an area over fifty metres across: and it would have been even larger if there hadn't been so many overlapping runes.

The unit cell he was currently flying over had been cast out of a tough metal that glistened with a fiery orange light. Over ninety-five percent of the construct had already solidified in place, with only a small section near the bottom missing.

Percy nodded at his subordinates on the ground, prompting them to pour the molten material into the grooves that they'd dug in the dirt. Due to its inclination towards the fire affinity, the metal had a much higher melting point than other minerals, but heating it up to the correct temperature still wasn't very

difficult for a group of Green and Yellow mages. The other materials that they'd used in the colossal array had their own peculiarities, though it was nothing that Percy and his men couldn't handle.

Not wanting to miss his chance, Percy poured some of his mana into the giant unit cell, spreading it evenly across the metallic lines. At the same time, he allowed the full brunt of a Violet's domain to unfold: at least as much of his willpower as he could spare without falling out of the sky: forcing the enchantment to activate.

Unlike the other unit cells that Percy had connected to the network over the past few months, this one was linked to neighbours on both sides: it was the final piece to complete the mountain-spanning array.

As soon as he breathed life into the final set of runes, Percy felt their influence spilling over to the adjacent enchantments and vice versa. Every part of the formation synergized with the rest, an immeasurably thick current of willpower and meaning rushing around the Fungal Spire to amplify the effect of every single unit cell.

Percy nodded in satisfaction as his eyes traced the distant symbols, confirming that his masterpiece worked as intended.

Each enchantment sported a different colour, alternating between over twenty variants. He had forged them out of all kinds of minerals abundant in the hive, so that he wouldn't exhaust any specific material: in case he needed it for some future project.

The mana-gathering runes were simple enough, and could work with most metals, though the ones with an inclination towards a certain affinity would exert a slightly stronger influence on ambient mana with a similar bias. This was the second reason why Percy had opted to use a variety of materials: to ensure that the overall effect of the array was neutral. According to the books that he had read, an enchantment this massive could easily affect the weather in the region if he introduced a large imbalance in the ambient mana.

'Finally… it's done.' He exhaled, wiping the sweat off his forehead as he gently descended to the ground.

His subordinates were cheering and patting each other on the back, clearly just as happy as him to have completed their arduous task. That said, none of them approached Percy to include him in their celebrations.

It couldn't be helped. While Percy had arguably done a lot for the Guild and even Remior as a whole, a few months were hardly enough to bridge the gulf separating him from the average person. In the eyes of his subordinates, he had been a dangerous criminal until recently: an unscrupulous monster dozens of times more powerful than he had any right to be, with inhuman eyes and no need for sleep.

It would take more than a few months for people to start treating him as one of their own, but the ambitious magiscript project and his recent alchemy course had definitely made for a great start. Besides, it didn't really matter. Percy had never been the most social person, but he still had plenty of friends that appreciated him for who he was. Even if most people on Remior only saw him as a benevolent monster, Percy was bound to win over those who mattered in due time.

Bidding his subordinates farewell, he decided to patrol the mountain one last time to ensure that there weren't any major flaws in the enchantment that he had missed. Taking off, he flew closer to the ground this time, scanning the metallic symbols carefully for defects.

As he travelled along the magical circle, he noticed that the mana density in his surroundings had already started to change. The difference was still barely perceptible, partly because of the scale of the enchantment, and partly because of the less potent runes that Percy had chosen for the job.

It would be weeks: if not months: before the area reached its new equilibrium. Even so, Percy was confident that the colourful motes flying inside the circle were slightly more numerous than they had been before.

Many of the vibrant particles would always spill out of the enchantment: even after it achieved its full power: and some would inevitably be consumed by the runes themselves so that they could function. However, the ambient mana in the settlement should still be thicker after all was said and done.

'The effect will be weaker inside the hive, but there's nothing I can do about that at the moment…' he thought with a helpless frown.

The influence of the enchantment would naturally be more apparent on the surface. If he wanted to further improve the environment of the Starry Wasps, Percy would have to draw several concentric rings no smaller than the one that he had just completed, forming a three-dimensional boundary around the underground hive.

Unfortunately, that was a far more ambitious project. Even if he borrowed manpower from the Guild, it would be years until he finished. Getting the insects to help with the runes would also be much harder than the humans, even with the royal wasps directing them, so Percy wasn't going to bother with this anytime soon.

Perhaps the Alchemists' Guild might collaborate with House Etna in the future: after the Great House was done incorporating the Vault's magiscript into their craft: or Percy might revisit the idea if he found a way to work on it faster.

As things stood, he had better uses for his time.

Once he was certain that the giant network was in a good enough condition to survive for centuries with minimal external maintenance, he made his way back to his residence in the settlement.

He was done with the alchemy course too, having given the final lecture two days earlier. Unfortunately, nobody but Percy could register the new principles in their Status, even if they mastered them. This might change once Phoebe upgraded her Decree, though that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Even if the alchemists had registered the knowledge, they didn't have a mutation to funnel their understanding into their eyes to assist them in their endeavours.

That said, many of Percy's students had still reported some direct improvements to their craft. After being exposed to his teachings and gaining access to new cauldrons, most senior alchemists had managed to break through their previous bottlenecks.

This included the elders who had all seen their brewing yield climb by at least two percent. It might not sound like much but, at their level, the seasoned Violets typically needed centuries to experience even the slightest increase.

The others had reported even more dramatic changes. Orin's yield had apparently increased by three percentage points, with some of the younger alchemists having achieved four. It wasn't like they were more talented than the Violets. If anything, Paracelsus and his ilk had probably benefitted more from Percy's lectures than anyone else. However, improvements greatly slowed down as one's brewing yield increased.

‘Two percent is impressive without my mutation or Wild Art,’ Percy thought.

In fact, when he stopped to consider his own situation, the fact that his recent spell upgrade had boosted his yield from sixty-one to a whopping sixty-four percent only spoke volumes as to the potency of Sovereign’s Encroachment.

He shrugged. Either way, he no longer had any matters tying him to the Guild, so he could finally focus on himself. That said, he still had no intention of moving out of the Fungal Spire, as it made for an excellent base of operations.

Here, he had access to all the nectar, royal jelly, alchemical reagents or magical minerals that he might need, in addition to unlimited manpower from the Guild. He even had plenty of disposable test subjects in case he needed something to experiment on: in the form of the Starry Wasps.

If that wasn’t enough, the Fungal Spire was also one of Remior’s central trading hubs, as well as its most important and fortified location. The ambient mana made it easier to practice one’s magic too, and Percy could get some privacy inside the hive or his house in the settlement. Finally, his familiar couldn’t leave this place, so he figured that it was better to stay by her side.

‘I suppose that this is my kingdom now: as much as it is Nephthys’s,’ he realized with a grin.

It was a crazy thing to admit: especially since it had never been his intention to claim sole ownership of the mountain. However, his fate had essentially been set in stone the very moment he had shoved that piece of his soul into the royal egg.

The Fungal Spire would essentially remain Percy’s property until his familiar produced a new Starry Princess whose survival wasn’t tied to his own: something that was still a long time away. Even then, it was debatable whether he would lose access to the hive entirely.

‘I’d better make sure to take care of it properly then,’ he decided, the weight of responsibility feeling heavier than ever on his shoulders.

Reaching his residence, he found Orin waiting for him in his living room, sitting on a couch. Percy had obviously given his mentor access to his home months ago, as there was nobody in the Guild he trusted more, and he no longer had that many secrets from the old alchemist.

As for why Orin was here right now?

Well… Percy had expected to complete the giant formation today, so he'd invited the man to his house. He needed somebody to watch over him as he attempted something exceedingly dangerous.

Tonight, he was finally going to absorb his fourth spectral fiend.

Chapter 586: Percy's fourth fiend

"Are you sure about this?" Orin asked.

The senior alchemist was sitting opposite Percy, dressed in his usual blue robes. There was a decoration resembling a pot of tulips on the table separating them, the wooden flowers partially obscuring Percy's vision.

He sighed. "Kinda. Metatron's test said that I could absorb one more. I'm sure that he would have told me if he wasn't confident."

The titan didn't exactly have Percy's best interests at heart, but he most certainly had his own. He had nothing to gain by recklessly causing Percy's death. Then again, the god's intentions weren't the only thing at play. Metatron could have just as easily made a mistake since Percy was about to attempt something unprecedented, so he could never be a hundred percent certain that it would work.

'I wish Zoris was here,' he thought, smiling bitterly.

Percy missed having the ancient ring wraith by his side. Sure, he could always consult with Nephthys, but the Amenthei goddess wasn't nearly as knowledgeable about the broader cosmos or matters of soul affinities and spectral traits.

Phoebe might know more than Percy's new familiar. Sadly, she had yet to show up after their previous meeting. He didn't think that she would go back on her word regarding the mindset, but the titaness must have genuinely not kept tabs on him. Segregating his memories would have to wait until she checked up on him: which he guessed would happen in a few weeks at the latest.

This was why he'd decided to absorb the fiend first. It was something that he genuinely dreaded, and not just due to the uncertainty involved, but also the inevitable pain.

Technically, Percy did have the option of returning to Melodia to discuss the matter with Zoris, but it sounded like too much trouble for something that even the former deity might not be able to help with.

'Well, I do need to bring Sol more Aurora Dew at some point. Not today though…'

The Melodians had probably finished drinking the previous batch already, reaching the next grade. Originally, Percy hadn't planned to send them more elixirs, because he'd been on the run and short of resources, but things had changed greatly since then.

With Remior's entire supply of nectar at his fingertips, brewing enough Aurora Dew to last a few dozen Green-borns for a couple of years wouldn't be a big issue. That way, Melodia would obtain a lot of Blues to push back against the army of invading beasts. Meanwhile, he could supply Sol and Doh with over a decade's worth of elixirs, to get them to their second advancement.

However, Percy's friends had yet to request his assistance, meaning that their situation was still stable. Sol and her people were probably still busy trying to absorb the blessing, so it was too early for him to retrieve the Ring of Sacrilege.

Sol had kept broadcasting her signals periodically, giving Percy a way back to her planet in case he wished to return, though he hadn't sensed any urgency so far.

On the flipside, Percy couldn't always be available either. In fact, he'd recently spent several months without checking the signals during his long mission to the Vault, since his cords had been occupied.

This was something that he and Sol had discussed during his previous visit. Percy couldn't afford to reserve a clone for years on end, and Sol might also need to skip one of her weekly invitations occasionally. They both had to be careful not to end up in a desperate situation.

'I should leave a mark on Melodia using Ludwick's Compass at some point, so that I'm not fully reliant on Sol's trait…' he realized.

Percy didn't want anything bad to happen to his friend, but it wouldn't hurt to be careful. The Mirror Lake was more important than ever now that he understood how much it would help with his divine ascension. He was also the only source of external help for the Melodians. Staking everything on the survival of a single person wasn't ideal.

Regardless, that was a matter for later. Percy wasn't going to send a clone right now just to deliver a few elixirs, place a mark and have a chat with Zoris.

'Let's stop postponing it then,' he thought, getting off the couch and sitting cross-legged on the floor.

He gently kicked the nearby furniture away to avoid breaking anything or staining his stuff with blood and sweat if things got nasty. Next, he pulled several gemstone vials from his seal, forming a messy pile next to him.

The small vessels contained Green healing potions: the highest grade that he could currently brew. Physical healing wouldn't help that much if his soul got torn to shreds, but it was better than nothing. He'd long learned that mending one part of one's existence had a positive impact on the rest.

Percy had asked around for Orange plants with a soul affinity, hoping to brew something more potent. Sadly, it didn't sound like anyone on Remior cultivated them, and he wasn't going to embark on a quest to find ingredients that might not even exist, nor waste weeks inventing a new alchemic recipe.

"If the healing potions prove insufficient, you can use these," he told Orin, passing the Blue another set of vials as he sat by Percy's side. A similar green fluid swirled inside them, but the life mana in this batch didn't register in Percy's Mana Sense.

This was naturally the divine mana that he had brought from the Vault: Percy's compensation from Metatron after being forced to repair Cassiel's second core with his own means due to the deficiencies in the artificial world's system.

The senior alchemist nodded, though his gaze remained tense. Percy couldn't blame his mentor for being worried. It was a huge responsibility that he'd dumped onto the poor Blue. Percy would have also been anxious if it had been one of his loved ones about to do something this crazy.

That said, Percy and Orin weren't planning to attempt this by themselves.

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Micky sat crossed-legged inside his humble hut, waiting for his counterpart to begin the operation.

He'd spent the past year helping his relatives stabilize their new territory. The neighbouring families had been wary of him from as early as when he was slaughtering Blues left and right, but forcefully seizing control of the Alchemists' Guild and freeing his grandfather had naturally tuned the nobles' concerns up to eleven.

Following Archibald's triumphant return, the other Houses had meekly returned the stolen towns to House Avalon. They'd even gone so far as to willingly offer up some of their own land to sweeten the pot, as compensation for their shameless transgressions.

Even if they hadn't been afraid of Percy or Archibald: which they most certainly had been: anyone with a functioning brain would have wanted to ingratiate themselves to Remior's rising star. Whether they got their hands on Aurora Dew this century hinged on that.

Micky had spent most of this time travelling around the Camelot province, helping his relatives rebuild their towns: both the ones that they had originally owned, as well as those that used to belong to House Tantalus.

Those with the Clone bloodline provided labour, while Micky contributed in his own way: either through his magiscript skills, or his knowledge of building concrete houses. This was something he had learned from Sengo years ago, but never had a chance to put into practice.

Elaine had overseen the operation: partly for security reasons, partly as an excuse to hang out with him, and partly to work on her boosting art under his guidance. His cousin had already taught Galahad the water version of the Dance, and the veteran Blue had passed them the acid and lightning patterns of Circulation, which he had promptly relayed to the Starry Queen and Nephthys.

However, the external flow for the lightning and acid affinities was still a work in progress. Galahad, Elaine, and the royal wasps were jointly trying to figure it out, offering each other tips and ideas with Micky's help.

Most recently, his cousin had acquired an earth and mud affinity as well: on top of three additional composite elements that she should be able to develop later: but the new mana types would have to wait for now. The good news was that they already knew the earth pattern of Circulation thanks to Nesha.

Perhaps, Micky would be able to learn the external flow from her too: if she had figured it out in his absence. He had to head to Twilight City pretty soon anyway, because his lightning-granting treasure was close to expiring.

Either way, Elaine was currently by his side. The hut they were in was one that Micky had personally built in Bogside town, right where his old home used to be. He'd done his best to make the new house resemble the previous one as closely as possible, though he'd built this one out of concrete.

His cousin was mostly here for moral support: since there wasn't much that she could do if anything went wrong: but she luckily wasn't alone. Archibald had also left their mansion the day before to join them, in case his grandson needed help.

A patriarch leaving his home was generally ill-advised, as it could leave a noble House open to an invasion, but Galahad was more than powerful enough to fend off most threats. Besides, it was silly to worry about Archibald's absence after the old man had spent the past few years missing. His grandfather would have never returned in the first place if not for him.

"I'll try to heal you if necessary, but I'm not sure how effective life mana will be on a body made of ice," the Violet said.

Micky sighed. “I know. Hopefully, I’m just being overly paranoid and won’t actually need any help. At most, the two of you might have to hold me down so that I don’t hurt myself.”

Elaine swallowed hard, clearly worried about him. Truth be told, the elemental body wouldn’t do much, as it didn’t possess the soul affinity. However, his soul was shared between the two bodies, so there was no way that he wouldn’t be affected.

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“I’m ready if you are,” Percy told Orin, getting a nod back from his mentor as his counterpart in Bogside town did the same with his relatives.

Activating his boosting art, he gathered some phantom mana to his fingertips, inflicting a series of narrow but deep incisions across his soul. This was already difficult to tolerate for the average person, though it was nothing to somebody half as experienced as him.

It was the next part that he dreaded.

Percy only injured the piece of his soul currently inside his human body. It should be more than enough to attract a fiend. The last creature that he had summoned had taken a while and his mana output hadn’t increased much since then, but he didn’t mind spending a few days on this if necessary.

Allowing the grey mana to spill out of his wounds, he laced it with thoughts of pain and fear, trying to present himself as an injured animal. He even withdrew his domain to avoid scaring the fiends off, having no idea how his powerful willpower would affect them.

Thus, he began the arduous process of luring his fourth fiend to Remior.

Several hours later, he was forced to take a break. He wasn’t working alone this time, and the others needed sleep. Resuming the operation the following morning, he kept at it for the whole day before stopping late in the evening again.

Every day, he saturated the area around his residence with more soul mana, using a hastily-drawn mana-gathering array to retain as much of it as possible overnight. His neighbours had probably realized that something strange was going on, and they had likely even connected it to the boosting art that everyone on Remior knew that he possessed, but it was fine as long as he didn't openly demonstrate the spell to strangers.

Thankfully, his target finally arrived an hour or two before he gave up for the day.

The fiend burrowed into one of Percy's open wounds, worming its way through his channels. It wasn't the most pleasant experience, but he didn't mind that much.

Using his phantom mana, he pinched the spectral entity in place, softly probing it with his willpower to discern its shape. His findings caused his expression to twist into a grimace, however. This was practically the worst-case scenario: other than dying of course.

"What's wrong? Is it a useless one?" Orin asked, clearly having noticed that something was off.

Percy didn't immediately respond, scanning the ethereal creature a second time to make sure before saying anything. It resembled some kind of spider, with over a dozen frail legs flailing erratically, their joints bent in all the wrong directions.

An Argalios.

"Worse than useless," Percy spat, his heart sinking. "I've already absorbed this one."

Chapter 587: Useless trait?

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Percy swore, struggling to come to terms with this development.

This was the one outcome that he hadn't expected. Admittedly, Zoris had mentioned that it was possible to get a duplicate fiend, but he'd also said that it was exceedingly rare.

Sure, it was Percy's fourth attempt, and each trait he absorbed permanently worsened his future odds. Even so, there were too many types of fiends out there. He didn't know how many exactly there were, yet this shouldn't have happened without some truly horrible luck.

"Now what?" Orin asked. "Are you still going to absorb it?"

Percy frowned, genuinely unsure. As far as he could tell, there wasn't any benefit to acquiring a second instance of the same trait, and this was a lot of pain to go through over nothing.

At the same time, absorbing a fiend was the only known way to reshuffle his compatibility. If getting more aspects kept increasing his limit, he would eventually have to absorb an Argalios into his fourth slot if he wanted a chance to get something else for his fifth.

"I suppose there's no reason to put myself through this for some undetermined future gain," he said with a sigh. "If my capacity does increase, it won't be too late to absorb both fiends."

He'd be lying if he said that he wasn't disappointed, but he knew that with three unique traits as well as a faint hope of eventually gaining more, he was already better off than every other soul affinity mage in the universe.

Having made his mind up, he was about to deactivate his boosting art, when a silver object phased through the ceiling of his living room, shooting toward one of his wounds. Another fiend. Percy hadn't planned to lure more, but his surroundings were still saturated with soul mana, and he had yet to stitch up his injuries.

Hastily blocking the invading creature with a wall of willpower, he wrapped his domain around it, trapping it inside a transparent bubble. Expelling the Argalios from his body too, he nearly got rid of both fiends when he noticed something that made him hesitate.

"The second one is different!" He gasped.

It was among the smaller fiends that he'd ever seen, tiny enough to fit comfortably on the fingernail of his pinkie. It looked a bit like a chubby ant, though it had four heads. Thinking back to his conversations with Sol, he realized that it was the one his friend had originally wanted to absorb before meeting him.

Percy had asked her about it during their expedition to the Mirror Lake. Apparently, it was called a Synergio and would grant the Multitasking trait. Sol hadn't elaborated on its exact effect, but it did sound like it would be quite useful to somebody as busy and with as many bodies and clones as him.

That said, he didn't rush to absorb the creature, knowing that something fishy was going on.

"How could I have attracted two different fiends?" he asked: mostly himself: though he did instinctively toss his mentor an uncertain look. Orin shrugged helplessly, clearly unable to offer any answers.

Each person was supposed to only be compatible with a single type of fiend at any given time. In fact, Percy distinctly remembered having attracted multiple creatures during one of his previous attempts, and they had all been identical to one another.

As ecstatic as he was to have found a way out of his predicament, Percy wasn't going to put anything inside his soul until he figured out what the hell was going on.

Sending the duplicate Argalios away, he held onto the trapped Synergio for now as a potential candidate. At the same time, he pushed his boosting art to its limit, expelling phantom mana from his body. The fastest way to get some answers was obviously to attract more fiends and see which ones arrived.

Orin and his relatives in Bogside town watched patiently as he resumed the arduous task of luring the creatures to Remior. Elaine and Archibald hadn't seen any of what had just happened to his human body, but he'd still informed them about it to sate their curiosity. It was the least that he could do given their support.

Unlike the previous days, Percy asked everyone to bear with him well into the night, wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. He didn't want to have to keep the fiend trapped for days, nor to lose the phantom mana that he'd already accumulated.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for more creatures to attend the faux buffet. Weirdly enough, there was no Synergio or Argalios among them this time: in fact, every single one was from a different species!

Percy waited until he caught over a dozen fiends to be certain. He even found a three-winged cricket: a Synthetis, like the one that had given Rei her Composing trait: and another fluffy moth: a Nyctovios, like the one that had granted him his own Insomnia trait: along with many others that he didn't recognize.

"Now they're just messing with me…" he muttered, unable to make sense of this.

Maybe he should be happy that he got to choose what trait to absorb, but this went against everything he knew about spectral fiends. Did his fusion with Micky somehow change his soul at a fundamental level, removing the restriction that plagued every other sapient in the universe entirely? It sounded like a stretch, but he had no idea how else to explain this.

Thinking of something, he got rid of all the duplicate fiends, keeping only the new ones trapped to lessen the strain on his mind. Next, he pulled out a book from his spatial seal, rereading the title on its synthetic cover, written in the Vault's language.

'Index of Spectral Fiends'

He'd bought it during his most recent shopping spree. It had been dirt cheap, and he'd thought that it might help in case he had a tough time figuring out what his new trait did. Admittedly, he hadn't expected to refer to the tome before even absorbing the fiend.

Flipping through the pages, he skimmed through its contents in search of clues. He wasn't sure whether the information on any given creature would shed light on his situation, but he had no idea where else to turn to.

Before long, he found mentions: and even illustrations: of all the fiends suspended in his domain. He didn't know if the index was complete, but it hadn't missed a single one so far. Some of the associated traits sounded quite interesting, so he wasn't sure which one he would pick if he truly got to choose whatever he liked.

'No… I'm thinking about it all wrong. If I do get a free pick, there's no reason to limit myself to just these few. I can take my sweet time browsing through the book and even consulting with Zoris to decide what the best trait for me is, and keep luring fiends until I get one!' he realized, the possibilities making him salivate.

Reality was a cruel mistress, however. About two-thirds into the tome, Percy stumbled upon a peculiar entry that offered a different explanation to his situation. It depicted something akin to a slug with numerous wriggling appendages. It looked nothing like any of the fiends that he had captured, yet Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow the more he read about it.

'Amorphos: Grants the Mimicry trait. This creature rarely appears in its true form, instead preferring to imitate the shape, size, texture, and even behaviour of other spectral fiends. Countless soul affinity mages throughout the universe have experienced the tragedy of luring the spectral fiend of their dreams, only to be disappointed by their manifested trait. Amorphi reveal their true colours under extreme discomfort.'

Not wanting to jump to any conclusions, Percy wanted to confirm his suspicions first. Luckily, the index had told him precisely how to do that.

'Hmmm… extreme discomfort…'

Borrowing soul-freezing ice mana from his elemental body, he fed it into the invisible bubbles. He was careful not to use much, as the resource was extremely potent and the creatures fragile.

Sure enough, the slightest sliver caused the spectral fiends to shiver uncontrollably, their frames twisting and melting like wax. The tiny ones expanded rapidly while the larger creatures shrank like deflated pufferfish, all of them eventually ending up just small enough to fit inside a strawberry.

Their new forms were difficult to pin down: even more so than other fiends: though Percy was confident that they resembled each other and the entry in the index closely enough.

"Figures…"

He chuckled, though perhaps he should be crying. In the span of a few hours, he'd gone from planning to absorb an unknown fiend, to fearing that his fourth slot would get wasted, to thinking that he could freely pick whichever trait he wanted, and finally back to being locked to a single new fiend: much like he had originally expected. Regardless, this outcome made more sense than anything else he'd considered.

“I suppose that the torture session from hell is back on the table,” he told the others, bringing everyone up to speed.

Now that he knew that the trapped creatures were the same, he didn’t need multiple, nor did it matter which one he picked. Getting rid of all but the first that he had summoned, he forced it back into his channels, carrying it to his core.

Once Orin and his relatives confirmed that they were ready to support him in case something went wrong, he finally began grinding the creature down, scattering its microscopic remains across his soul.

Feeling his three existing trait stir from their eternal slumber, he rolled a strip of cloth and bit on it so that he wouldn’t break his teeth. Balling his fists, he braced himself for the worst.

And… well… the worst didn’t disappoint.

Chapter 588: Hollow victory

Everything turned into a blur as Percy lost any connection to the outside world. Still, he held onto his lingering traces of lucidity for as long as he could, unwilling to pass out. The only thing worse than enduring the fiend’s torturous absorption would be to mess the process up and have to start over.

He wanted to tell himself to hang on for a few more minutes, but he honestly had no idea how long it would be until his suffering was over: or even how long it had been up to that point. Alas, there was nothing he could do but wait until he saw the notification.

Percy’s soul had turned into little more than a ravaged battlefield for the four spectral creatures to wage their war on. Unlike the previous times, he struggled to even follow the changes, because his whole soul felt like it had been turned inside out.

Pain had faded into background noise. That was not to say that it had dulled or that Percy had grown used to it: it was still every bit as intense and unpleasant as it had been from the start. However, he could no longer tell which body part was hurting as the all-encompassing agony had become his default state of being.

‘Elaine must be freaking out right about now.’

This was the only stray thought that briefly crossed his mind amidst his suffering. Archibald and Orin could probably handle the gruesome spectacle just fine, but Percy's cousin had always been repulsed by the most painful of his soul experiments. In hindsight, it had probably been a bad idea to let her watch this, but Percy had selfishly wanted people he trusted by his side.

Thankfully, the fated moment arrived about an eternity later.

[Congratulations! You have absorbed a new spectral trait: Mimicry!]

Obviously, Percy wasn't in any condition to open his Status or study his new ability. Relieved to have finally succeeded, he gave up all resistance, allowing himself to fall asleep. Everything else could wait.

When he next opened his eyes, he was resting on something soft, crunchy, and unbearably cold. So much so, that the skin on the back of his neck felt like it would peel off if he tried to sit up too abruptly.

Darkness stretched in every direction, making it exceedingly difficult to examine his surroundings. He could still see quite far due to his mutation and higher grade, but there wasn't much to see. Just a vast snowy plain unfolding all around him like a colossal blanket, its folds and creases forming tall hills and deep valleys.

There were other, brighter structures in the distance, though their light didn't reach him unless he specifically focused on them: and only for as long as he did. The Symphony of a Dead Winter also echoed in the background, though it was somewhat muted.

It didn't take Percy long to realize that he was once again on the dark side of Huehue: or at least the version of it that existed in his mind.

'I guess I've passed out again,' he thought, a wry smile forming on his lips.

Zoris had mentioned that one could teach themselves to bypass the Insomnia trait if they wanted, though Percy had never tried to do that, having grown to appreciate the extra time that it gave him every day.

Evidently, extreme mental trauma made for an excellent shortcut. His fusion with Micky had also knocked him out, though the absorption of the Amorphos had been even more brutal.

The frigid winds were quite unpleasant as they bit into his skin, as was the snow underneath his body. However, he knew that he wasn't in any real danger of hypothermia, because all of this was happening inside his head.

Percy sighed, not in a rush to move. He figured that he'd earned himself a few moments of respite after what he'd just gone through.

'Do I even want to absorb more traits in the future?' he couldn't help but ask himself.

Percy rarely questioned his willingness to suffer a little for the sake of growing stronger, but acquiring his fourth trait had been an eye-opening experience. Zoris had mentioned that many soul affinity users with the blessing of permanence opted to stop after their second fiend, unwilling to undergo the brutal operation a third time: let alone a fourth.

Percy had shattered that record by becoming the first person in history to soldier through this kind of pain. However, even if his capacity kept increasing, he was beginning to reevaluate whether it was worth it.

'Why am I even doing this again?'

From as far back as he could remember, Percy had always wanted to become a god. In his childish mind, the pinnacle of magic had represented the ultimate freedom: freedom from aging or disease, or from those who sought to oppress or harm him. Freedom to traverse the world, soar through the clouds, and even space, to explore the universe.

For the most part, Percy's motivations had never changed.

If anything, awakening his bloodline had only given him the opportunity to pursue his dreams. Everything that had happened since had only reinforced his ambitions. The places he had seen had

opened his eyes to more possibilities, and the powerful enemies that he had made along the way had only deepened his yearning for strength.

However, thinking back to the sheer agony that he had just experienced, he had to seriously consider whether there was any point. After all, Percy knew how dying felt, and it wasn't nearly this bad. Perhaps, in his efforts to protect himself from the horrors of the world, he had subjected himself to something even worse…

Sighing, he pushed himself to his feet, trudging through the frozen expanse that represented his mindscape. As always, this place was a jigsaw puzzle of various locations from his past. Before returning to the real world, Percy decided to take some time to explore the area while gathering his thoughts.

Somewhere in the distance, he spotted a colossal building bathing under the dim glow of a crimson star, its colossal visage cutting through the darkness. The ancient coliseum wasn't looking good today. It was crumbling. Whatever pieces were still standing were riddled with cracks.

Elsewhere, he saw a replica of the Whistling Woods, though the forest looked like a hurricane had just torn through it. Half the trees had been uprooted, the rest having been stripped of all their leaves.

In a third location, the Fungal Spire pierced through the dark clouds. The colossal fungi sprouting along its steep slopes had lost their usual lustre, their once-vibrant caps now shrivelled and riddled with holes.

'Wow… this place is such a mess today…'

Worried that he had suffered serious mental damage, Percy thought back through his lives, trying to discern whether there were any important memories missing. It was only after failing to find any noticeable gaps that he exhaled in relief.

'I guess I'm just a bit shaken from the experience. Hopefully, it'll be back to normal in a few days.'

Turning back to the ruined coliseum, he willed himself to approach. A blink later, he was standing inside its vast arena. The stands around him were mostly destroyed, with even the sections of the building leading to the underground dungeon being inaccessible.

Ignoring all of that, he walked to a familiar spot. Granted, the whole place was familiar, since Micky had spent decades fighting here every single day, but there was a certain patch of bloodstained dirt that held a special meaning in his heart.

'This is where we died…'

Plopping down, he picked up a handful of sand, letting it trickle through his fingers. If it hadn't been for Percy's bottomless ambition and his eternal quest for power, he and Micky would have never met. The latter would have died quietly in his cell, and his story would have ended right there.

Sure, the past few hours had been several times more painful than either of Micky's deaths, but what about the last couple of decades that he had lived on Remior? What about his dreams of defeating Rhaziel and freeing Huehue from its oppressors?

Wasn't that worth something?

There were plenty of others too. Enki, Duwa, Gabe, Leo… They would have all died if not for Percy. The Melodians would have gone extinct, and so would the Amenthei. Perhaps humanity too: if Percy hadn't restored the royal lineage of the Starry Wasps.

'I'm such an idiot…' He chuckled. 'It's worth it. Of course it is!'

Sure, absorbing spectral traits grew increasingly painful, to the point that nothing else he had experienced over the years came close. That said, it only lasted a few hours. To a god, that was as short as the blink of an eye.

No. Not just a god. Percy had already multiplied his potential lifespan manyfold. Even if he failed to ascend in the end, he could easily live for thousands of years longer than he would have. Besides, even if he died young, it didn't mean that his efforts had been for naught.

Percy had already helped a lot of people. Their lives mattered as much as his own ambitions and dreams, and his spectral traits had played a huge role in that. Leaving aside the Phantomwoven Cloak that he was so fond of, Percy might have failed to rescue many of his past hosts if not for Soul Stitching: a spell that was only possible due to his Weaving trait.

How many hours of extra training had his Insomnia trait provided him over the years? Hell, if not for his resistance to the Slumber, Percy might have lost a clone to the demonic infestation on Amenthes, costing Nephthys and her people their second chance at life.

And that was without even mentioning how many doors the Scribing trait had opened for him. Without it, he would have failed to obtain even half the rewards from Thess'kala or the Vault. Even worse, his artificial advancement would have never been on the table, so Percy would have had to keep searching for ways to extend his lifespan.

'It's worth it,' he reiterated, a trace of his usual optimism finally worming its way into his heart.

For the first time since he began grinding that Amorphos inside his core, he even felt a sliver of anticipation to study his new trait. The others had been immeasurably valuable so far, so he was certain that Mimicry wouldn't disappoint either.

'I'll do it. No matter how much it hurts, I'll just have to grit my teeth and absorb as many fiends as my soul can endure,' he decided.

If Percy wanted to climb higher than everyone else and carve his own will onto the very fabric of the universe, he had to be willing to sacrifice more than anyone else. A surge of newfound resolve rose in his chest as he opened his eyes: his real eyes: waking up.

Chapter 589: Family troubles

Percy's human body was resting on the floor of his living room, covered in dry sweat. Opening his first pair of eyes, he found Orin sitting by his side, clearly waiting for him to wake up. The old alchemist was visibly relieved to see him alive and well, though he said nothing, giving Percy a complicated look.

'If even he is looking at me like this, I'm definitely going to hear it from Elaine…'

Thankfully, he hadn't destroyed his residence during the fiend's long and torturous absorption: in large part because he'd barely had the presence of mind to focus the brunt of his willpower on the other side of the ethereal cord, where his relatives must've had an easier time resolving it if it lashed out violently.

Reaching into his second body, he quickly realized that it was in a far sorrier state. He'd clearly been less careful with it, knowing that it could recover from even the most serious injuries.

He had shrunk to the size of a regular crow, though his shape was still strangely humanoid, having shifted into a twisted mix of his three forms. He had a single right arm and two left ones, while his legs were half as long as they should've been, his feet replaced by talons. His mouth had turned into a short beak, yet two rows of misshapen teeth lined up his stiff lips.

Pushing his boosting art to the limit, he drew ice mana from his surroundings to rapidly grow to human size again, restoring Percy's appearance and inflating his borderline-empty Cloak in the process.

The moment he began tinkering with his frame, he instantly noticed something different. He was hyper-aware of his shape, instinctually knowing the exact location, dimensions and even texture of every single body part: down to the last crystalline hair. He felt that he had a lot more control over his transformation too.

The source of the sudden changes wasn't a huge mystery, but he wasn't in a rush to explore his new trait. Placating his relatives and recovering from his exhaustion took precedence.

Examining his surroundings, he exhaled in relief upon confirming that the concrete hut was still standing, though it wasn't in a good condition. There was a hole in the ceiling wide enough for an adult to comfortably crawl through, a series of cracks branching outwards from it.

At least the walls were intact. The fact that the small building hadn't collapsed entirely meant that Elaine and Archibald had done a passable: if imperfect: job containing his domain. Strangely, only his cousin was currently by his side.

Having obviously noticed that he was awake, her expression had turned into a stern grimace.

"Where's Baldy…?" Percy asked, having a bad feeling.

"I asked him to leave us alone," Elaine replied, her voice hoarse. "I wanted to speak with you."

Percy sighed, knowing what she was going to say. Ever since he first discovered his bloodline and affinity, his cousin had been against him paying its painful toll. Over the years, she'd slowly come to accept how important it was both for his own goals and their family's future, and she'd even supported him in his endeavours, but she'd never truly approved of its riskier aspects.

She hadn't complained as much about it recently, yet there was no question that the gruesome scene that she had just witnessed had rubbed her the wrong way.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, but it was something that I needed to do," he muttered. "There aren't that many people I can trust by my side when I'm this vulnerable."

Watching her soul flare up angrily, Percy saw the slap coming a full second before it landed, though he made no attempt to stop her, choosing to let her vent.

Her hand slammed onto his cheek with enough force to crack his frozen skull and knock several teeth out. Clearly, Elaine hadn't shown any restraint, fully aware that his elemental body could easily undo the damage. By the time she retracted her palm, his 'injuries' were already halfway mended.

"I understand that you have to take some risks every now and then, but enough is enough. When are you going to start treating yourself better?" she asked, her voice cracking with accusation. "It hasn't even been two years since you fused with Micky. I'm still trying to get used to that, and you're already finding new ways to torture yourself."

Percy was tempted to joke about the slap, but he held back, knowing that it wasn't the best time. His next thought was to say that he was fine, yet that wasn't entirely true. After all, it was just moments ago that he'd personally had similar doubts inside his mindscape. He may have justified the experience to himself in the end, but it wasn't like he could take back the past however-many hours of suffering he had endured in front of his loved ones.

Rather than blurting out the first cheap excuse that came to mind, he opted for honesty. It was the least that Elaine deserved after everything she'd done for him.

"I'm not going to pretend that I'm totally fine. I'm still quite rattled by the experience, but I can tell you that I'll be better in a few days. All things considered, going through a rough day is a small price to pay for something that will help me for the rest of my life."

Elaine looked like she wanted to say something else, but he raised his hand to stop her.

“Even the issue with our memories is temporary. Like I told you before, I’ve been looking for a way to split our minds up so that we can function as individuals again. Phoebe has actually offered to help us, so it shouldn’t be long now.”

His cousin shook her head, seemingly unconvinced. “Be that as it may, I don’t like where this is going. It feels like you keep becoming less and less…” Her voice trailed off as she bit her lip, clearly not wanting to complete that sentence. Even so, it didn’t take a genius to tell what she was trying to say.

“Less human?” Percy asked, finishing it for her.

She clenched her fists, looking down at her feet as the corners of her eyes glistened with tears. Her vibrant aquamarine-coloured hair was messier than usual, a few loose strands casting thin shadows over her features.

Percy placed his left hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently. “Elaine… no matter what happens to me on the outside, I’ll always be the same Percy you grew up with,” he said, bringing his free fist in front of his chest and tapping his thumb against his sternum. “In here… where it counts. The only difference is that I might also be your favourite crow at the same time… every now and then.”

That got her to chuckle. Lifting her head slightly, Elaine looked into his eyes. “Do you promise?”

“I do,” he replied without a moment of hesitation.

They regarded each other silently for a few seconds before she nodded, her hands visibly relaxing as the tension in her shoulders disappeared.

Exiting the hut, Percy and his cousin found their grandfather directing his army of clones as they upgraded the town’s buildings. It was highly atypical for the patriarch of a noble family to engage in grunt work like this, but Archibald had clearly decided to help since he was already here.

Over a hundred clones swiftly moved around the small town, each strong enough to shatter boulders with its bare hands. Some were carrying buckets of liquid concrete, while others were pouring the material inside wooden moulds that the townsfolk had prepared under Percy's guidance.

His younger relatives had previously helped with the reconstruction, but Archibald's army of clones was dozens of times more efficient than his weaker and less experienced subordinates.

Elaine bid Percy farewell to resume her responsibilities of managing the town's security while he walked up to his grandfather.

"How are you feeling?" the Violet asked upon seeing him approach.

"Better," Percy said. "Can I ask you something?"

Archibald didn't reply, but Percy knew that counted as an invitation to continue.

"Unlike Elaine, you didn't seem very bothered when I first told you what had happened to me and Micky. Do you honestly not mind, or were you just putting on a front?"

His grandfather shrugged. "Your cousin is still relatively young: as are you: so it's understandable that we see things differently. In my view, your fusion with Micky is the equivalent of my grandson suddenly acquiring a few decades' worth of new memories, and vice versa. To somebody who's been around several times longer than both Percy and Micky combined, that doesn't sound like a big deal. It's not like you stopped being my grandson."

Seemingly thinking about something, he added, "besides, Micky isn't a bad person or anything. He was practically a part of our family already. As long as you're fine with this, I don't see why I shouldn't be."

Percy felt an unexpected surge of validation upon listening to his grandfather's approval. Still, he couldn't help but push back a little. "I still think it's healthier to build up some boundaries between our minds, otherwise it'll make my relationship with Nesha needlessly weird. I've already arranged for someone to help with that."

Archibald nodded. “It’s for the best. Either way, I trust your judgement. Don’t get too hung up on what your cousin says. She’s just worried about you and your fusion took her by surprise. She loves both of you dearly, so I’m sure she’ll come around sooner or later regardless of what you end up doing.”

Percy sighed, knowing that his grandfather was right.

“How long are you staying?” he asked, switching to a different topic.

“Just until my clones are done with their current tasks. There’s no reason to delay now that I know you’re okay. How about you?”

“Same. I need to deliver that affinity-changing treasure to Nesha before it expires. I suppose I’ll stay here for a few more days to study my new trait and maybe give Phoebe a chance to show up.”

Archibald raised an eyebrow. “Phoebe?”

Percy nodded. “She’s the one who’s going to help with my memories. Apparently, she’s been following me for a while: like we suspected.”

His grandfather remained silent for a few seconds, before speaking again.

“Be careful out there. I know that you’re strong enough to take care of yourself, but there are still plenty of people on Remior who are strong enough to harm you and irrational enough to try. I’m not even talking about Machaon. I also have no idea if the gods will step in to save you if you get in trouble.”

“Of course,” Percy replied.

He’d never let his guard down just because he’d beaten Deimos and claimed ownership of the Fungal Spire. At the same time, he wasn’t going to spend the rest of his life cowering within his territory.

While he could probably do things more cautiously here on Remior, a day would inevitably come when he would have to step foot on hostile worlds with his main bodies, so he didn't think that shying away from danger would serve him well in the long run.

Bidding Archibald farewell, Percy allowed his grandfather and cousin to resume their own jobs, returning to his damaged hut. As soon as he patched the hole in the roof up, he was going to finally study his new trait.

Chapter 590: Mimicry

Percy stood in front of a large mirror in his bedroom, examining himself. Orin had already left upon confirming that he was fine, so Percy had decided to finally study his new trait in earnest. Honestly, he wasn't exactly in the mood to do that, as he was still quite rattled by the unpleasant experience of acquiring Mimicry, but that was all the more reason to distract himself with something fun.

Before focusing on the trait, he pulled up his entire Status, taking a moment to marvel at all the recent changes.

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The Lone Wanderer

Aspects:

[Percival][Mictlantecuhtli]Mana cores:

[Mana core 1P: Yellow: Soul][Mana core 2P: Yellow: Pure][Mana core 1M: Green: Beast][Mana core 2M: Yellow: Ice]Domain:

[Dead Winter: Empowered]Bloodline:

[Clone]: Create a copy of yourself. Effect varies by affinity.Blessing:

[Blessing of Permanence] – Enhance the durability of your soul.Mutations:

[Sovereign's Eye] – Draws from the cumulative knowledge listed in the Status to enhance one's vision, allowing them to discern details previously unseen.[Greater Thess'kalan Physique] – Greatly enhances one's physical strength and the toughness of their body. Greatly enhances one's resistance to high or low temperatures and sharpens their thermal sense. Greatly enhances one's resistance to toxins.[Dead Winter Elemental] – Uses ice mana to regenerate, shapeshift and sustain one's body. Allows every part of one's body to interact with souls.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.[Mimicry]: Boosts one's awareness of their physical appearance, as well as their ability to maintain or modify it.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: Internal Magiscript: Masterful][Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Myriad Screams: Masterful][Spectral Art: Instantaneous Formation: Masterful][Wild Art: Sovereign's Encroachment: Masterful][Hybrid Art: Core Bestowal: Masterful][Ultimate Art: Symphony of a Dead Winter: Extreme]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.[Consolidation]: Infuse multiple similar ingredients into a concoction while eliminating the redundant alchemic steps.Decrees:

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

As was customary by now, Percy's page had once again grown longer than the last time he read it. Even after all these years, he was still amazed by the wide assortment of strange abilities that he'd developed or otherwise acquired during his travels.

Leaving his new trait aside, the most recent additions had been those related to alchemy: the consolidation principle, his improved cauldron, and his twice-evolved Wild Art. The upgrades had occurred in quick succession, each having contributed to him registering the others, catalysed by external stimuli like his need to brew royal jelly into elixirs or pass his alchemical skills to his students.

Ludwick's Compass and Internal Magiscript were less recent. Percy had worked on both after acquiring them: improving his understanding of the former while increasing the number of runes he could handle simultaneously with the latter: though his Status had yet to reward his efforts with another upgrade.

'All in due time,' he thought, shifting his attention back to the task at hand.

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[Mimicry]: Boosts one's awareness of their physical appearance, as well as their ability to maintain or modify it.___

Reading the description again, he couldn't help but frown.

'Is this even useful to the average person?'

It sure seemed like a dud. Luckily, his situation was a bit different, because his elemental body could theoretically transform into any shape he wanted: something that he had admittedly underutilized due to how difficult it was. Hopefully, Mimicry would synergize extremely well with his Dead Winter Elemental mutation.

In fact, Percy had already noticed the trait's supernatural influence during his brief chat with Elaine earlier, and he had plenty of ideas on how he could potentially leverage it.

'First things first… let's see if there's anything my human body can gain from it.'

Scanning his reflection from head to toe, he allowed the fiend's influence to permeate his mind, helping him absorb all the tiny details in his appearance that he normally overlooked.

He felt folds forming on his skin as he creased his forehead in contemplation, as well as his slit pupils narrowing slightly as he examined himself. Tiny beads of sweat spilled out of his pores, gathering into larger ones or rolling along the short hairs across his body.

His frame wasn't entirely static either, despite his efforts to stand still. His chest rose and fell slowly with every breath, his whole body pulsing even more subtly: yet more frequently: with every heartbeat.

Interestingly enough, his hyper-awareness extended beyond his flesh.

Percy keenly registered the way in which his Cloak shifted with his slightest movement, the tightly woven strands of magical silk bending and wrinkling, mostly near his joints. He even identified a few spots where the grey fabric had started to fray.

It hadn't been that long since he'd last poured phantom mana into the self-repair enchantments to maintain the construct, but all his thrashing about during the fiend's absorption must have caused some invisible damage to accumulate.

'I suppose my clothes are also a part of my appearance,' he reasoned. 'Still, this is relatively useless. I wonder if there's anything more interesting I can do with it.'

Coming up with a few ideas, he concentrated on his eyes again, trying to feel not only the shape and colour of his irises and pupils, but also the various factors affecting them.

Nearly imperceptible streams of phantom mana and willpower constantly flowed through his mutated eyes, fuelling their innate Mana Sense, Soul Vision, and even his ability to perceive domains.

However, that wasn't everything. There were two additional inputs that simultaneously felt natural and out of place. The first was his blood flow: which he probably shared with every living thing with eyes. Even so, he couldn't help but think that more blood rushed into his eyes than normal.

It was strange that he could tell, because he hadn't possessed the Mimicry trait before acquiring his mutation, meaning that he didn't have anything to compare his current situation to.

'I guess the increased blood flow is a part of how my Greater Thess'kalan Physique supports my innate thermal vision.'

The second mysterious flow was linked directly to his brain. This was another feature that he probably shared with any living creature that possessed eyes, but Percy knew that his Sovereign's Eye was more deeply connected to his mind than most people's due to the way in which it interacted with his Status.

'That still doesn't explain what any of this has to do with my appearance or the new trait.' He frowned. 'Unless…'

Wanting to try something, he reached into the flow of phantom mana, cutting it off entirely. Almost immediately, his passive Mana Sense and Soul Vision deactivated for the first time since he obtained them in Bogside town. At the same time, the grey light that had dominated his irises after his fusion with Micky faded away to reveal a deep crimson colour, unsettlingly similar to Kassorith's eyes.

'Huh… This should be what my eyes would have looked like if not for the other features being more prevalent.'

Emboldened by his success, Percy spent the next few minutes experimenting with his eyes some more. He couldn't stop the blood flow entirely because they needed it to function, but restricting it slightly removed the red hue as well, reverting his irises to their original, magicless, grey colour.

Reducing or cutting off all the other flows made his slit pupils return to normal, essentially suppressing his ocular mutation entirely. Allowing pure mana to feed into his eyes while preventing just the soul mana from contributing gave them a pale colour like the Atlanteans'.

This was merely the beginning of his tests, however.

Percy quickly discovered that he could withdraw the influence of his blessing from his eyes even more easily than he could from his mana or soul, brightening their dull grey hue and causing them to return to their previous teal colour.

He could even control the extent to which these factors contributed, mixing the colours to shades of pink, deep blue, silver and pretty much anything in between. Even better, he realized that he could achieve all of those surface-level modifications without tampering with the flows too much, essentially allowing him to control the appearance of his eyes without sacrificing any of his magical senses.

Moving on to other body parts, he found that he could control how his other mutation affected him as well. If he focused on his skin, he was able to make it up to a few shades paler, or even introduce a faint scale-like pattern.

He was also strangely aware of how quickly his hair and nails were growing. He was more limited in the way he controlled that: it wasn't like he could shave and regrow his beard in an instant: but he might be able to accelerate or decelerate the process notably if he focused on it for multiple days.

His ability to modify his appearance extended to less obvious things like his posture, or even the properties of his clothes: albeit within reason. Much like his eyes, he found that he could freely change the colour of his Cloak to pretty much any shade bounded between cyan, silver or grey.

Furthermore, he could fold, stretch, twist, or crunch up any section to make the construct look like an entirely different set of clothes. The fact that he could selectively turn parts of it invisible also helped with the disguise.

All things considered, his new capabilities weren't without limits. For instance, Percy couldn't change the colour of his eyes or clothes into something completely unrelated to his mana types: like yellow or green.

Mimicry: much like his other traits: didn't directly affect the physical world. It merely allowed him to accomplish something that had technically been entirely possible before: if impractical without his new instincts.

'Well… it's not the worst trait to have… but isn't it a little too late for this sort of ability?' he asked himself, feeling somewhat disappointed.

Mimicry might have been handier a few years ago while Percy had been on the run. A few minor cosmetic changes wouldn't help him hide his identity given how famous he was now, nor did he need to disguise himself nowadays.

More importantly, it didn't seem like controlling how often he needed a haircut would make him or his hosts any stronger: which was the main thing he wanted out of his traits.

'It is what it is. Maybe I'll find more ways to use it in the future.' He sighed, though his wry smile eventually morphed into a proper grin. 'The good news is that my other body should benefit a lot more from the trait.'