Wanderer 131

Chapter 131: Settling in

“Like… It’s not bad… but could you try again… maybe making the edges a little straighter this time?” Percy asked after Nesha handed him the misshapen slab of stone.

Over the past week, they’d split up their tasks, with him focusing on repairing the decrepit hut into something liveable. He wasn’t a carpenter, but he could lift a lot of weight, so patching the ceiling with a few planks hadn’t taken him too long. Whether the roof was properly sealed remained to be seen – they’d only know once it rained.

As for Nesha, he had asked her to build him his stone forge. The idea was that she could get some practice using her space mana, learning how to shape it and cut things with it, while also getting him the equipment he needed for his new venture. Though the results weren’t exactly ideal…

“Why? Isn’t this good enough?” she frowned. “It’s the best I’ve managed all week.”

“Well, I’d rather the charcoal stays inside the forge.” Percy replied, pointing at the gap between the poorly-attached stones. “I haven’t even finished fixing the house. I don’t want to see it burn down just yet…”

Nesha exhaled in defeat before manifesting some more of her mana, trying again on another piece. It was the last one she hadn’t ruined, so they’d have to go fetch some more if she messed up again.

Of course, both of them knew a space affinity could be used for a lot more than merely slicing things apart. Heck, Metatron’s Decree was the perfect case study of the heights one could reach with it. While Nesha was as far from a titaness as one could be, learning to form some smaller portals or crafting spatial amulets wasn’t out of the question.

‘When I do manage to get into the Vault again, I should try bringing back the runes for it.’ he decided.

Percy had grown to love his magical trinket. The sheer convenience of carrying a crate’s worth of items on him at all times was something he wouldn’t give up for the world. Though he did lament its relatively limited capacity. According to Nesha, it was already close to the maximum any enchanters on Remior

could craft. Perhaps, the very best ones might be able to make slightly larger amulets, but only the Great Houses had access to those people.

Once he was satisfied with his work, he took a break for a few hours, letting Nesha continue with her own end of the project. There was something else he wanted to do today.

'It's time for a new clone.' he grinned.

It was true he was a little tired from working on the roof all morning, but he'd grown much more proficient at using his bloodline by now. The last one he'd sent to Torui village had only taken him a few hours to prepare.

More importantly, Percy intended to send his clones out more frequently now. After all, Micky was hunting Orange and Yellow beasts in the swamp all day long, providing him with a ton of soul mana, letting him mend his soul faster than ever before. He also had to spend much less time brewing elixirs than during his gig with Nesha, so he could more easily tolerate the disturbance.

'About once a week sounds good.'

Percy expected it would take him multiple attempts until he found a good candidate to send to the Vault, but there was always the chance he might find something else of value in the process.

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It was dark outside by the time he was done. As always, his soul hurt a lot right after severing the clone, but at least he didn't pass out anymore. Tossing Nesha a glance, he saw her still working on the forge, a few more discarded chunks of stone lying next to her than the last time he checked. Evidently, she'd gone out to bring more at some point.

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'There's plenty of room for improvement. Though she seems to have taken my advice seriously…'

Nesha had stopped procrastinating as much, spending a lot more time honing her magic. Percy was planning to teach her Circulation too at some point, though she'd need several years of physical exercise to strengthen her body enough for it.

'Let's leave that for later. It's probably better to not push her too hard all at once…'

Leaving the hut to get some fresh air, Percy walked over to one of the shops, hoping it was still open. It wasn't – not exactly – but he did catch the owner taking some trash out of the door.

"Hi there!" he greeted the shopkeeper, a Yellow core seemingly in his early thirties.

"Oh, hi!" the man said. "You must be the new guy I've heard about. I was told you're trying to build a forge in your new house?"

Percy nodded.

"Yes. That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. You're Mr. Dylan, right? I was hoping to buy some pig iron from you to get myself started."

"Well, I don't have much to sell. There isn't a mine nearby, nor do we have a local blacksmith. We import all our tools from Greyquarry town to the north."

Percy frowned. That was the second town under House Tantalus's jurisdiction. He and Nesha had ignored it on the way here, as they needed the Grisly Bog for Micky to stay in. Apparently, this was going to make his life a little more complicated.

"Is it impossible to get some imported?"

"Look, I've only got seven ingots in stock – you can have those for two silver." the man took pity on him after seeing his disappointed expression. "I do have some friends over there, so I might be able to work out a long-term solution for you, but we'll have to see the quality of your work first."

Percy nodded. It was only fair. He doubted he could compete with Sengo anytime soon, but he was confident he could cook something of acceptable quality for the locals after a few attempts.

After completing the exchange, he bid the man farewell, carrying the stack of ingots back home. Each of the bars was a little larger than his foot, the entire set weighing hundreds of kilos. Even with his two Orange cores, the metal was heavy.

'It can't be helped. I can't use Circulation in the middle of the town…' he sighed.

Suddenly, he stopped, seeing a young girl approaching him. She couldn't have been older than ten. She was wearing simple linen clothes, her dark hair tied up in two short pigtails. Percy had no idea why her parents allowed her to roam the town so late – weren't they afraid of something happening? Then again, it was probably safe. Outsiders like him and Nesha rarely visited, House Tantalus's territory not being the most welcoming place. Carefully placing the ingots on the ground, he turned to her, to see what she wanted.

"Mister! Do you want to buy this for a silver?" she spoke in a chirpy voice.

Percy looked down at the object she was holding. It was a small, hollowed piece of wood, with multiple holes lining its side. The main body of the object was oblong, though there was a narrower tube branching out on one side. An ocarina. It was crudely made, the holes not perfectly circular, with a few misplaced scratches or other dents throughout the instrument.

"Did you make this yourself?" Percy asked, getting a nod back.

If anybody else had tried to sell him this, he would have probably laughed them off. The misshapen instrument couldn't be worth more than three coppers, let alone a silver. Still, seeing the child looking at him expectantly, his eyes couldn't help but soften.

"Oh well… Freddy always told me to get myself a hobby… This is as good a time as any, I suppose." he chuckled.

Handing the girl the requested amount, he received his new ocarina in return. While he'd already filled his schedule with all sorts of things such as forging tools for the locals, practicing his own magic,

mentoring Nesha, sending clones and brewing elixirs, he'd promised himself to not overdo it as much as he had back in the Guild. Leaving some leisure time aside was good for his mental health.

Tossing the ocarina in his pocket, he picked the ingots again before finally returning home. Originally, he had wanted to visit Micky in the swamp too, but it was already getting late. He'd have to leave it for tomorrow.

Entering his new abode, he found Nesha sleeping on the floor. They didn't have beds yet, but they'd spent weeks camping out anyway, so they weren't too bothered. Still, his attention was drawn to the forge in a corner of the room. It was made of several pieces of stone, cut in a way such that they slotted into one another without needing any adhesive.

Percy was proud of the design, having come up with it himself. However, it wasn't his design he was currently admiring. The pieces had slid into each other better this time, not leaving much of a gap between them. There was still some, but it was too narrow to let anything pass through. Nesha had clearly busted her ass until she got it right.

Grinning, the young man placed the ingots on the floor before going to sleep himself.

'Tomorrow, I'll get started.'

Chapter 132: Monkey

Percy swam to the surface, desperate to take a breath. The moment he broke through, he coughed as much of the murky water out as he could, greedily inhaling air into his lungs.

'How the hell did you end up here?!' he asked his host in annoyance, seeing nothing but an endless expanse of greenish blue stretching as far as the horizon.

It looked like some kind of ocean, but this wasn't saltwater. It was closer to the swampwater they had in the Grisly Bog. At least it didn't stink as bad. The substance had an oily texture, with chunks of plant matter floating to the surface.

Receiving no reply, Percy swam over to a large piece of debris drifting a few dozen metres away. It was a cylindrical-ish block of wood – probably a broken tree trunk. Though it had clearly been out here for a

while, as it was half-rotten. It was covered in an exotic variety of algae and barnacles, but he ignored them as he climbed onto it. Only once his back was resting on the slimy surface did he finally get the chance to examine himself.

His body was vaguely humanoid. For the most part, it had the normal number of limbs and eyes, though he did have a tail. Lacking a mirror, Percy traced the contours of his face with his fingers, deducing that his host was either akin to a goblin or some kind of monkey.

‘I suppose the Status will have the answer.’

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Percival's clone

Mana cores:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

‘Monkey it is.’ he concluded after seeing his affinity.

Sensing for his core, he eventually managed to take control of his mana after a couple of minutes. Pushing it to flow faster, he felt his heartbeat quicken, his veins bulging as a series of amber lines lit up all over his body. His host protested by instinct as the feeling of their strength getting rapidly consumed wasn’t particularly pleasant.

‘No wonder beasts don’t use Circulation, despite how easy it would be to discover it…’

In the end, he acquiesced, deactivating the spell to conserve their stamina. At least, it was nice knowing he could tap into the technique in a pinch. His Status still hadn't listed it though, as his main body had already upgraded it to Synchronization.

In any case, this wasn't the first time he'd used the boosting art with one of his beast clones. He'd been able to do so ever since he and Micky figured out how it worked. Sadly, he'd never had much of an opportunity to get anything valuable out of it. The only time he had come close was back when the Starry Knight attacked them, though the Green bug had decommissioned his wasp clone before he had the chance to activate it.

"Tettig… tettig…" (Testing… Testing…) he tried to speak, the words coming out weird.

"Haow? Ih aewan eer?!" (Hello? Is anyone here?) he asked, switching things up, though it didn't sound much better.

'Ok. An Orange beast isn't ideal, but at least I have opposable thumbs and the ability to vocalize… somewhat.'

It wasn't perfect, but anything was better than staying in the middle of the sea. Percy hurriedly collected some seaweed from the water next to his make-shift boat, before tying it together into something akin to a skirt. Sadly, his host didn't have a single patch of fur on his pink skin, so the idea of meeting people while naked was a little embarrassing.

Only after his privates were covered did he focus on his memories of the Vault, trying to tap into a part of himself that he'd never dared to touch before. Ever since Metatron gifted him with his Decree, Percy had felt something lingering at the edge of his thoughts – an invitation he could always choose to accept.

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'Sorry to keep you waiting, I guess.' he shrugged, as a faint distortion appeared in front of him.

At first, it was mostly transparent, letting him see the vast expanse of the grimy sea through it. It soon began to expand, however, quickly turning into a circular portal wide enough to fit his whole body, its colour darkening into the familiar grey of the Vault's walls.

This was already Percy's third clone since settling in Bogside town. In theory, he could have waited for a sentient host, but he was already running out of patience. Who knew when he'd next possess a humanoid, or if the stars would align at the time?

Having made up his mind, he leapt through the portal, eager to visit his old friend.

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Travelling through the portal was a weird experience. Percy thought he could just take a step forward and find himself in the Vault, but it appeared crossing vast cosmic distances was a touch more complicated than that.

The moment he crossed the threshold, it was as if he had frozen in place, the next second stretching into days. Eventually, he plopped down on the cold metal floor, feeling his entire world spin around him, as a wave of nausea assaulted him. He wanted to puke but, luckily, his host hadn't eaten anything in a while. In the end, Percy just stayed there for a few minutes, waiting for his surroundings to stop spinning.

As soon as he could stand again, he found himself surrounded by all sorts of creatures. Some of them he'd seen before – the jellyfish like humanoids with the transparent skin that Gabe was a part of, the hulking people with two horns sticking out of their temples, the shorter green-skinned folks with pointy ears…

But there were a couple species he didn't recognize. Two people looked a bit like humanoid bats, though they didn't have any eyes, instead having an oversized pair of ears, each as large as their face. There was also what Percy could only describe as an octopus – or perhaps a pentapus, as it only had five tentacles.

That said, all these people had one thing in common. They were staring at him intently, shock and curiosity evident in their expressions.

‘Why are they so large though?’

All of them towered over him, even the relatively shorter green people being about half a head taller than he was. As for the horned ones, they were as tall as buildings. Apparently, his host was on the shorter side this time.

‘I suppose it makes sense. After all, I’m just an Orange beast…’

Shrugging, he stood up before speaking.

“Hai. Am Pessy. Naou beik it ap. Natig to si hia.” (Hi. I’m Percy. Now break it up. Nothing to see here.)

The giants didn’t seem to understand a word he’d spoken, however. They turned to each other, talking in a language he didn’t understand either, occasionally pointing at him as if he was some exhibit.

‘Ok. Maybe I didn’t think this through. Without my connection to Gabe I can’t even communicate with these people.’

Just when he was considering his best course of action, he noticed the pentapus say something, before a hole opened on the ground, spitting out a strange device. Picking it up with its tentacle, the pentapus then reached for Percy’s ear, hooking it around it, one side sticking to his head. Percy didn’t stop him, not sensing any malicious intent.

“Try that again.” the pentapus spoke in the same language as before, though Percy somehow understood it this time.

“Neat, how does this work?” Percy asked. His words came out broken again, but the locals looked like they had understood them.

“It just uses some runes and some mind mana to translate your thoughts.” the creature explained.

“Geez, really generous of you, wasting 5000 credits on this… beast.” one of the hulking humanoids said, his voice booming.

The pentapus didn’t say anything, only shrugging or something.

‘5000 credits?!’ the amount shocked Percy.

He wasn’t exactly an expert on the Vault’s economy, but from the time he’d spent with Gabe he could tell this wasn’t a trivial sum.

“So, what’s up with this thing?” one of the jellyfish people asked. “Did the gods bring a new race into the Vault?”

“No way. Why would they bring beasts to live with us?” one of the bat-people chipped in.

“Well, how else do you explain this?” the jellyfish person didn’t let up.

“Probably some weird experiment or something. Just look at it! It’s smart enough to talk!”

The arguments continued for some time, these people talking about Percy as if he wasn’t even there. Eventually, the pentapus approached Percy again, placing a tentacle on his shoulder before speaking.

“Why don’t you guys just ask him what he’s here for?” he said, putting the debate to rest. “You’re a ‘he’, aren’t you?” he asked Percy, glancing down at his skirt that had ended up uplifted at some point.

Percy hurriedly covered up again, some heat gathering in his cheeks before nodding.

“I’ve no idea how I ended up here.” he lied through his teeth. While he appreciated the pentapus’s help, he didn’t need to explain himself to them.

“I’m looking for a friend. He’s one of these guys.” he added, pointing to one of the jellyfish people.

“Well, whoever it is, there’s a good chance you’ll find him in the living quarters.” the pentapus said, seemingly buying his story.

Next, he slithered towards a certain direction, gesturing at Percy to follow.

“Hey, thanks for the translation device.” the latter said once they were alone.

“Don’t worry about it.” the pentapus waved it off. “I’ve got more credits than I know what to do with.”

‘He must be quite powerful.’ Percy speculated. ‘Even with a blessing and a bloodline, Gabe was struggling to get by…’

“Thanks anyway.” was what he said out loud. “Trying to communicate via gestures would have been a pain in the ass. Name’s Percy, by the way.”

The pentapus didn’t say anything, silently guiding Percy through the Vault. Eventually, they came across a massive cube that looked familiar. It was just like the building Gabe lived in, though he wasn’t sure if this was the one.

“There are sixteen living cubes in the area. The rest are lined up behind this one. I’m not sure which one your friend lives in, but just tap their walls and say you’re here as a guest. The system will take care of the rest.”

Percy nodded, though the pentapus was already slithering away.

“I’m Ronnie.” he said before he was gone entirely.

Chapter 133: Reunion

Reaching the first cube, Percy placed his palm on its surface, much like he’d seen Gabe do before. A blue circle of runes lit up around it, though it turned red the very next instant.

“Error. Failed to identify. State your user ID.”

Percy didn’t panic, having expected this.

“I don’t have a user ID. I’m here as a guest. I’m looking for Gabriel.” he said, hoping the translation device worked on the system.

Honestly, he didn’t even know why there was an option to identify as a guest. Weren’t all the denizens of the Vault automatically registered users? But he wasn’t one to look a gift cube in the mouth.

“Authorization granted. Logging user in as ‘guest’. Contacting ‘Gabriel’. WARNING: Your identity as a ‘guest’ heavily restricts your access to most system features. You are not allowed to purchase items, start challenges or enter buildings without permission.”

Percy nodded, thinking this was only fair, if somewhat inconvenient. Next, he watched the red circle around his palm turn blue, two arrows appearing in its circumference as it began to revolve slowly. Nothing changed for a couple of minutes, making Percy wonder if his friend was even at home.

‘Actually, forget at home… is he even alive?’

Logically, the Vault’s gods wouldn’t have allowed their only specimen with two cores to die, but Percy couldn’t stop himself from worrying. Luckily, the circle flashed green at some point.

“Hello? What the hell is this? Since when does the Vault have guests?” a hoarse voice asked, apparently wondering the same thing as Percy.

The voice sounded different than Percy remembered, and not only because he was hearing it from the outside. The owner seemed to have some difficulty speaking, the words coming out strained. Still, he recognized him.

“Gabe? How are you doing man?” Percy asked.

“I have no idea who you are, but that isn’t any of your business. Just go away. I’m busy.”

“Gabe, it’s me! Percy!” he hurriedly said before his friend hang up on him.

“W-What? What did you just say?!”

“Percy! You know? The guy who gave you your second core!”

“Shhhhhhh!!! What the fuck are you doing?! You can’t speak about that out loud!! Is this really you?!”

Percy rolled his eyes.

“Are you going to let me in, or should I jog your memory some more?”

Gabe remained silent for a couple seconds, seemingly taking it all in.

“I don’t know where you currently are, but I live in cube #3. Just head over there. I’ll let the system know to guide you to my room.” he eventually said.

Percy nodded, though his friend couldn’t see him. He circled around the cube, guessing this one couldn’t have been the third. He skipped the next one too, before approaching the one after. It had to be either #3 or #14, depending on which end they started counting from. If it was the latter he’d have to walk some more, though that wasn’t what was going through his mind.

‘He seemed surprised when I mentioned his second core. Doesn’t he know the cat is out of the bag?’

It was strange. Had the gods not reached out to him? What were they waiting for? Percy would have expected them to do all sorts of experiments on Gabe by now. Why would they have left him in the dark?

‘Oh well… I suppose I can just ask him myself in a few minutes.’

Placing his hand on the cube, he quickly confirmed this one was indeed #3. The system allowed him to enter, a series of arrows flashing along the corridor's surfaces to guide him. Percy met plenty of natives on the way, scurrying around their legs. At least his petite body made it easier to trudge through the narrow pathways.

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'Can they not see the arrows? Or are they just ignoring them?'

Either way, it wasn't long before he arrived at his destination. However the system worked, it was really convenient. Percy was certain he wouldn't have remembered the way on his own. He was about to knock, but it appeared there was no need, as the indented metal parted by itself as soon as he touched it, releasing a burst of steam in the process.

Standing before him, was a tall man with transparent skin, his organs visible as they throbbed inside his torso. He was wearing simple brown shorts, an unassuming grey bandage wrapped a couple times around his abdomen, concealing the enchanted one Percy knew was there.

However, what stood out the most was Gabe's condition. The entire front side of his body was covered in nasty burns, his skin misshapen and – in many places – blackened. His left hand was missing entirely up to his wrist, and even his right one seemed to have lost some freedom of movement. This was Percy's first time seeing his friend's face, but his features were charred too, as a third bandage covered his eyes. Even Gabe's throat appeared severely injured – no wonder he couldn't speak properly.

'Wow, he looks even worse than I remember… And this is after a year of healing…' he thought, his expression grim.

Percy was at a loss, not knowing what to say to his friend. Luckily, the latter spoke first.

"Huh, is this how you normally look?" Gabe snickered, though it trailed off into a wheeze. "I guess that explains why you go around possessing people."

Glancing down at his half-naked body and his shoddy seaweed skirt, Percy remembered he was currently inhabiting the hairless monkey. Some heat gathered in his cheeks again, as he felt even more embarrassed meeting somebody he knew while in this state. And the worst part was, Gabe was only talking about his height. After all, he couldn't see much else through Mana Sense alone.

"I hope you don't actually think this is my real body!" Percy said a little more animatedly than he perhaps should have. "See? No second core!" he pointed at his abdomen.

"Shhhh!!!" Gabe got all jumpy again. "Will you stop saying – you know what – all the time?! Why did you even make me spend my credits on the bandage if you're just going to keep shouting it out to the world?!"

Percy frowned.

"You really don't know?"

"Know what?" Gabe asked. "And how did you even return here? I'm pretty sure I've never seen any beasts like this in the Vault."

"I'll explain everything in a second, but first tell me how you've been over the past few months. Honestly, you look like you've had a tough time." Percy said, sitting on the bed.

He knew the room was rather small, but it sure looked a lot larger than he remembered, thanks to his current perspective. Gabe grimaced upon seeing a grimy monkey on his bed, prompting Percy to smell his armpit. Honestly, he stank quite badly, but only part of it was due to his host's non-existent hygiene. The majority had to do with the fact he had just swam out of a swampy ocean.

"Well, there isn't much to tell. My situation is about as shitty as you can see. I've made a lot of progress with my… affinity." Gabe eventually said, pointing at his eyes.

Percy knew his friend probably meant his affinity fusion, but the latter was still conscious about speaking of his secret openly.

“Sadly, I can’t complete another combat challenge in this state, so I had to delve into magiscript.” he added. “But hey, it’s probably for the best! Fighting would just raise the odds of people finding out about… yeah.”

“Gabe… I hate to break it to you, but it’s a little late for that.” Percy finally said.

“What do you mean?”

“How do you think I got here? Metatron gave me his Decree on the way out. I would have visited sooner, but I had to wait for the right opportunity.”

Gabe’s jaw slackened at the revelation. A moment later, he shuddered as the words sank in.

“You’re joking, right? I would have known… The gods would have chopped me up to pieces by now if that had been the case.”

“Evidently not.” Percy shrugged. “And honestly, why should they? You’re clearly motivated enough to keep improving to heal yourself. They can just sit on the sidelines and watch you practice with your air and light affinities. Why intervene with an experiment that’s already giving them everything they want?”

“No way…” it was Gabe’s turn to plop down on his bed, wiping the cold sweat off his forehead. “What happens when they have all the data they want?”

Percy shook his head, not having an answer. It was true the gods hadn’t bothered Gabe over the last year, but that wasn’t guaranteed to remain the case. Maybe they’d move on to more aggressive experiments at some point.

Gabe pointed to himself and then traced a circle in the air with his finger. Percy assumed his friend was asking him to use the Decree to take him out of the Vault, but he was afraid to say the words out loud, in case they were being monitored.

“I doubt it’ll work.” he sighed.

The Status specifically said “one-way portal”. Percy didn’t think it would allow people to exit the Vault. Even if it did, there were many other problems they’d have to solve. First of all, Percy didn’t know where exactly the portal opened. Was it a specific place inside the Vault – the very one where he had landed? Or was it randomly picked each time? How would Gabe know to use it before anybody else did?

One thing was for certain. Percy didn’t dare to open a portal on Remior. He couldn’t risk Metatron or the other gods forcing their way to his homeland. Even if he and Gabe decided to try this, they’d have to bring the latter to a different world – assuming his clones found a suitable one.

“Gabe… I really don’t know how to help you man… But I promise I’ll do my best to find a way.” Percy said, getting a reluctant nod back.

This was the same thing he had promised the last time too, and he had kept that promise. Though their problem was admittedly a little harder to solve now.

“Oh, and one more thing…” Percy added, his friend perking up.

“Can I crash here for a few days? I’m kinda homeless…”

Chapter 134: Runecrafting

“Percy… are you sure you don’t want to go out for a walk or something?” Gabe suggested, pinching his nose. “You haven’t left my place even once since you got here…”

It had already been a couple of weeks since Percy arrived at the Vault. By now, his host’s peculiar odour permeated the humble room, the thick stench of sweat and spoilt eggs causing its owner to gag every few minutes.

“So much for hospitality…” Percy rolled his eyes. “You know my time here is limited, right? I need to make the most of it.”

The monkey hadn’t been too injured when he found it, his fused mana being more than potent enough to patch the Orange beast’s soul for a while. If he really wanted, he could probably remain here for several months. That said, he couldn’t accomplish too much in this body so, in the end, Percy had decided to not stretch his stay for too long.

Unable to start a challenge or do much else by himself, he relied on Gabe's generosity to dip his toes into magiscript. The stingy jellyfish had initially been hesitant to buy him food or reading material, though he had come around after some pleading.

Fortunately, Percy had no interest in cleansing the monkey's core. That meant he didn't need much sizian meat to get by, thanks to his smaller frame. Gabe also saved some money on the magiscript books by lending him the ones he had already purchased for himself. Of course, he'd still needed to pay a few credits for a written version, as he personally had the material narrated to him due to his blindness.

'Everything I've read so far doesn't sound too different from what we have on Remior.' Percy noted, diving back into his book.

At least, the translation device conveniently worked on the text too, making his life easier. Still, he put some effort into learning the Vault's language, as he knew it would help him moving forward.

Strictly speaking, Percy hadn't delved into magiscript proper just yet, as the field was too advanced for a beginner. Magiscript involved the combination of multiple runes into complex enchantments that could achieve a lot more than their individual components. What Percy was currently learning about was merely runecrafting – the formation of single runes, each of which could achieve a very specific, simple, effect. However, even this lesser branch was plenty useful for him. Plus, it was the foundation for everything else.

'So, it's all about using one's mana to draw a symbol and then aligning their intention with the symbol's meaning...'

Evidently, the enchantments could be written in any language suitable for runecrafting. Though there were a few rules as to what constituted one. Certain enchantments worked better with specific symbols. For example, geometrical shapes with lots of angles could more easily convey the meaning of "sharpness", while looping shapes correlated with "completeness" and "repetition". A good runecrafting language was designed to capitalize on all these nuances. Furthermore, a user could more easily resonate with a language they were intimately familiar with, which made it a little harder for Percy to learn the Vault's runes.

Finally, some languages were just better for magiscript, having been specifically designed for this purpose. For example, the Vault's written word involved circular symbols with multiple segments, which

could easily be overlapped atop one another, or chained in a sequence. This gave enchanters a lot more freedom when combining them. Apparently, Metatron had personally devised this language to facilitate the development of magiscript. By contrast, Remior's runes were much cruder and nearly impossible to link together, as they hadn't been designed with nearly as much foresight.

'Asshole or not, there is no question the guy is a genius…' Percy admitted.

Next, he drew some of his teal mana from his stash, focusing it on his index finger. He tried drawing a symbol on a piece of parchment, careful to make the lines as neat as he could, constantly visualizing the rune's intended effect in his mind. Slowly but steadily, he seemed to be going well, as he made fewer mistakes than his previous attempts. The rune might even work this time!

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Sadly, it wasn't meant to be. At some point, he noticed his reserves were about to run dry, forcing him to stop about halfway through. Staring at the incomplete rune, he couldn't help but click his tongue in annoyance.

'I just wish I had some more mana to practice with...'

Unfortunately, the monkey's beast mana couldn't leave its body, and Percy had a limited supply of his own teal mana. He hadn't been able to practice nearly as much as he would have liked. For now, his main goal was to simply memorize a few symbols and their meaning, so that he could try them out with his main body once he returned home.

Many enchantments could be crafted with any affinity, as was the case for the one Percy was currently working on. Knowing his and Micky's bandages weren't going to survive for much longer, he figured it would be a good idea to master the 'concealment' rune, so that he could more easily protect his secrets in the future. Luckily, Gabe had shared that view – at least before Percy told him Metatron already knew about him – so information on this rune was something he had already purchased.

Still, there were plenty of enchantments that could only be crafted with specific mana types. The ones typically drawn on spatial amulets fell in that category. Suffice to say, Percy had spent quite some time convincing his friend to buy him a book on that one, to teach Nesha about.

“What about the materials?” Percy suddenly asked. “I’m guessing you can’t just draw the runes anywhere you want…”

Gabe shook his head.

“Technically, you can. But there are materials that are far better for most runes in general – and specific runes in particular. They resonate with some or all mana types, amplifying the effect of the enchantments.”

Percy thought back to the strange dark cube with the glittering stars his spatial amulet was made of. Clearly, that material was suitable to be paired with space mana, though he had no idea where to get more of it.

“So, in theory, I could draw the runes on the ground?” he asked again, catching the caveat in Gabe’s words.

“Yes.” the latter nodded. “They won’t be as effective if you draw them on plain dirt, but it can work depending on what you’re trying to do.”

Percy nodded. In any case, this was the best he could accomplish right now. Without any more mana to practice, and having pretty much memorized the runes, the only thing left was to wait until he returned home to test them out some more.

“Ok then. I suppose I’ll listen to you and go for a walk.” he chuckled. “To give you a chance to deodorize the place.”

“And how exactly am I meant to do that?” Gabe frowned.

“Can’t you get the cube to ventilate the room?” Percy shrugged.

“Yes. For a credit…” Gabe didn’t sound very happy.

“Well, just use your mana or something. Between fire and air, I’m sure you’ll work something out.” Percy said, heading towards the door.

“Do you want me to come with you? To give you a tour of the Vault?” Gabe asked.

But Percy shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll explore a little on my own. And… Gabe…”

“Hmmm?”

“I haven’t forgotten about my promise. I know it sounds impossible, but we’ll figure it out.”

Percy walked through the narrow corridors, vaguely remembering the way to the exit. Still, a few seconds later, multiple arrows lit up on the walls and ceiling, helping him along. As soon as he was outside, he took a deep breath, having also grown a little sick of the stale air in the room.

‘Not that it’s much cleaner out here…’ he smiled wryly.

Strolling around the futuristic city, he spotted many other buildings of various sizes – but not shapes, all of them being cubes for some weird architectural reason. He had no idea what their purpose was, but they were all decorated with countless interlocked runes of various colours, shimmering or pulsating in set rhythms. While Percy was still a novice in runecrafting, his recent studies only made him appreciate the sublime art even more.

Many people walked past him, flashing him curious glances. Though nobody stopped him or talked to him, despite his minute stature and lower grade making him an easy target. Evidently, the gods in charge of the Vault had taught their children better than to stick their noses in matters that didn’t concern them.

Eventually, he managed to reach the area with the challenge cubes – after asking a few passerbys for directions. Placing his hand on one of them, he tried to enter it as a guest, only to get rejected.

‘It was worth a try…’

The system had already warned him he wouldn’t be allowed to do this without permission, but Percy couldn’t help himself. He really hated imposing on Gabe, so he hoped to earn his own credits during his future visits. Sadly, it wasn’t meant to be.

“Hey, it’s you.” a familiar voice said. “Did you find your friend in the end?”

Percy turned to his right, only to see the pentapus creature “standing” some distance away, its purple tentacles and yellow eyes giving it a slightly intimidating appearance. Using Mana Sense, he spotted a Blue core thrumming in its… somewhere.

“I did! Thank you again for your help, Ronnie!” Percy smiled.

“Or would you prefer me to call you Metatron?”

Chapter 135: Metatron

“Oh? What gave me away?” the pentapus replied, its entire demeanour shifting.

Not a trace of mana leaked out, but Percy couldn’t help but feel a chill roll down his spine. It was as if a giant beast was staring at him, contemplating whether to squish him like an ant with a brush of its finger. While he’d long had a hunch about Ronnie’s identity, getting it confirmed by the titan himself shook him to his core.

Still, he tried his best to maintain his outward calm, not willing to show the ancient god any weakness he could pounce on. After all, he wasn’t here with his main body. Metatron clearly didn’t have all the power here, and they both knew it. Percy guessed the god could probably destroy his clone’s soul if he wanted, but he seriously doubted he could do anything to his real body back on Remior. If he could, he would have done it already.

“Besides the name, you mean?” Percy asked. “There were a bunch of clues. For one, I was surprised you invited me to the Vault but didn’t bother keeping an eye on me once I arrived. Unless you did. I admit you did a great job blending in with those mortals, but it wasn’t perfect. I’ve recently met a pretty powerful Blue core who failed to contain his aura half as well as you.”

“Huh, I suppose it’s been a while since I last spent some time among mortals.” Metatron chuckled, narrowing his eyes playfully. “It appears their control is even shoddier than I remembered.”

Following that, Percy watched the fake Blue star dissipate into nothing inside the titan’s body. There wasn’t anything else visible in his frame either, making Percy wonder if gods even had cores like mortals and he just couldn’t perceive them, or whether they no longer needed them. But Percy pressed down his curiosity, continuing.

“The mortals were my next clue. I’ve seen plenty of different races walk around the Vault, and they all had one thing in common… There were multiple of each species.”

Unlike all the other mortals, Metatron was unique in that he was the only pentapus Percy had encountered since coming here. That had struck him as quite odd.

“Clever. Indeed, by the time the Vault expanded enough to sustain the lives of mortals, my home world had already been destroyed, my species having gone extinct eons ago. I’m the last one.” Metatron spoke in a sombre tone.

Though Percy was convinced the titan cared more about his inability to sire children for his sick experiments than the actual demise of his people.

“What do you want from me?” Percy decided to ask bluntly.

“What else?” Metatron shrugged. “I don’t know which remote corner of the universe you come from, but I’m sure you understand just how special your bloodline is by now.”

“So what? Do you want to steal it from me or something? I’m sure I can’t mate with any of the people here.”

Metatron chuckled.

“You’re a smart kid, Percy. Both for figuring my identity out, and for coming here with a clone. Had you brought your real body, I’d have been disappointed. You see, I prefer working with smart people. But no, I don’t have the ability to steal your bloodline. Nobody does, as far as I know.”

Percy nodded, all of this being in-line with what he knew. Of course, it was possible the titan was lying, but he doubted this was the case. After all, if it was that easy to steal somebody’s bloodline, the gods wouldn’t be relying on random mutations and countless generations of mortals to cultivate bloodlines to their liking. Not here, and not on Remior.

“Then what else is there?”

“While I admit I’m not above taking something by force when possible, there are many other ways to get what I want – and not all of them are bad for you. You see, I want to collaborate with you.”

This time it was Percy’s turn to laugh.

“Collaborate with me? A titan, working with a mortal? I wasn’t even born the last time you blinked, and I’ll be gone by the next one. How would this even go?”

Metatron shrugged.

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

“What does mortality or divinity have to do with this? You can do something I can’t. Something valuable – and I want that. Hell, you’d be more useful to me than half the gods in my service.” **R**

Percy fell in thought, contemplating the titan’s words. If Metatron was being honest, it could indeed be extremely beneficial for him. He could end up treated as a god, receiving all the benefits the rulers of the Vault had access to. And why not? Would it really cost Metatron too much to give him some knowledge and resources, in exchange for using his bloodline? There was definitely a way for both of them to profit.

“Can you help me ascend to godhood?” Percy asked, focusing on his most important goal.

Anybody else would have laughed at this question. Despite all his achievements, whether it was his growing strength, his second core or the Aurora Dew, he had barely taken a step towards this ultimate goal – the pinnacle of magic. Percy might be able to grow further than he would have as a normal Red-born, but he was still behind those like Archibald or Elaine, let alone the chosen ones recruited by the Divine Order. Could Metatron give him what he really wanted?

"Impossible." the titan said, dashing his hopes. "Together, we can achieve many things. Unimaginable things. The Decree you've snatched from the Moirais is but one of them. With my guidance, we can get treasures you can barely even dream of…"

"But it won't be enough." Percy completed his sentence for him.

"No. It won't be." Metatron nodded. "If you were a Yellow-born, or hell, even an Orange-born, there might have been a chance. We could have used all sorts of tricks to stretch your lifespan and accelerate your advancement for you to barely reach the thresholds. But frankly, I doubt all the resources in the universe are enough to turn a Red-born into a god."

Silence persisted for several minutes. Percy didn't speak, and Metatron didn't rush him either. For a second there, the young man even forgot he was standing face-to-face against a possibly hostile titan, seeking to exploit him. Only the god's words rang in his head, as well as the grim realization they had delivered.

Ever since he discovered his bloodline, Percy had harboured hope of breaking through the suffocating shackles of his fate. And everything he had experienced since had watered and germinated that hope, helping it flourish. But something about Metatron's verdict sounded final. This was a man who stood at the pinnacle of all existence! A researcher famous across the cosmos for his power and wisdom! And he believed that Percy didn't stand a chance of achieving his dream!

"Why the long face, kid? Do you know how few people ever ascend to godhood? I didn't say you cannot reach Violet, or even White. Those goals are far more realistic – with my help. You'll be showered with resources for millennia, and you'll live a long life of luxury and wealth. Is that not enough?"

"No. It's not. I plan to find a way to reach godhood, with or without your help." Percy said, lifting his head to look the titan in the eyes defiantly. "But that's beside the point. I don't blame you that I was born at Red. Still, how can I trust you?"

“Obviously, you can’t.” Metatron casually said. “Trust is something to be earned. I don’t expect you to decide right now. You aren’t close to the end of your lifespan, are you?” he asked, Percy shaking his head in return.

“Good. Then, from now on, I’ll demonstrate my good will towards you. You are allowed to visit the Vault with your clones whenever you want. I’ve registered you as a user, so you can even undertake the challenges and purchase resources. However, until you accept my offer and join the Vault with your main body, you will be treated as a mortal, and you’ll have to earn every single credit on your own.”

Percy’s eyes widened at the titan’s generosity. This was all he wanted! He could keep coming here without risking his life or his freedom, learning the Vault’s secrets a little at a time!

“How will the system even recognize me every time I come here with a new body?”

Metatron shrugged.

“Normally, it relies on various vital signs such as retina scans and fingerprint scans to identify you. Obviously, none of that is applicable in your case, so I have personally worked tirelessly over the past year to incorporate a new set of identification features into it. These ones rely on your soul. You’ll be able to sign into the cube with any body. Your user ID is ‘WANDERER’.”

Percy’s heart skipped a beat, but he quickly quashed his rising enthusiasm, remembering who he was talking to.

“Why are you doing this? What’s in it for you?”

“I already told you. It’s a sign of good will. Besides, the rewards you can earn from the Vault as a mortal are peanuts compared to what the two of us can get by working together. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can move on to the really interesting things.”

“That can’t be all.” Percy insisted. Perhaps pushing the titan was ill-advised, but he couldn’t shake the thought that Metatron was leaving something out.

“Hahaha! Smart indeed. That’s right – even with this lesser arrangement, I have plenty to gain.” the pentapus admitted. “You see. Before today, I didn’t even know beasts could receive the Moirais’ Decree. I wonder what affinity this creature will unlock?”

Percy’s eyes widened as he realized what had happened. In his rush to return to the Vault, he had delivered Metatron yet another valuable specimen! And he would continue to do so, every single time he visited.

‘Shit. What happens if I use Circulation inside the challenges? Or if I show him Crystallization?’

Metatron didn’t really need him to agree to his terms to milk his ability for everything it was worth. He merely had to wait for Percy to hand him all his trump cards of his own volition, one spell at a time.

If he wasn’t careful, he might inadvertently give Metatron the power to take over the entire universe…

Chapter 136: The Tale of Svarog

The tension in the air was palpable as Percy stared at the grinning pentapus, contemplating how he’d been played. He didn’t doubt Metatron truly intended to win him over eventually. Still, the ancient titan had plenty to gain even in the meantime.

‘Should I destroy the monkey’s soul before I go?’

Percy was certain Metatron could repair his host’s body and soul if he just abandoned the creature at the verge of death like he usually did. Though he could probably prevent that, by actively using what little fused mana he had left, intentionally tearing the soul to shreds.

But he shook his head.

‘It’s best to not antagonize him directly.’

Metatron wasn't dumb. If Percy did this right now, the titan might take it personally. At best, he could ensure his future hosts died 'accidentally' inside the challenges, and that he didn't use anything too sensitive while inside the Vault.

'Actually, is that why he admitted he wants the monkey? So that I wouldn't dare destroy it?'

The realization sent a chill down Percy's spine. It appeared that no matter what Metatron did, there was always a deeper meaning behind it. Regardless of what Percy chose, the titan would come out ahead.

"Don't beat yourself up too much, kid." Metatron spoke, breaking him out of his thoughts. "I've been around for a while longer than you have. Just say the word, and all my knowledge and experience will be at your disposal."

"Thanks for your offer…" Percy spat begrudgingly, his face looking like he'd just swallowed a fly. "I'll consider it."

Metatron shrugged, before turning around, slithering away. However, he spoke again before fading into the distance.

"Oh, and there's one more thing. Ask the cube for information on 'acquired blessings' before you leave the Vault. I won't charge you any credits for this one. Consider it a welcome gift – a tiny sample of the things we could achieve together…" the titan's voice trailed off.

Only a few minutes after the pentapus disappeared from his sight did Percy plop down weakly on the floor, his body coated in a layer of cold sweat. He'd tried his best to stand his ground against the ancient being, but he understood he'd done a poor job at it.

'I need to be more careful moving forward.'

His access to the Vault was an unprecedented opportunity, but also the deadliest of traps. Should he fumble, he'd lose everything. Gabe too. Percy wouldn't forget that Metatron was essentially holding his friend hostage, though neither had seen fit to bring it up during their little chat.

‘Let’s focus on what I can do right now.’ he ultimately decided, placing his palm against the nearest wall.

“Cube. Give me all your information on ‘acquired blessings’. User ID: WANDERER.” he spoke, recalling how Gabe had done this in the past.

A circle of runes lit up around his palm, though it flashed silver this time, probably scanning his soul as Metatron had mentioned.

“Authorization granted. Evaluating request…”

Truth be told, this was the first time Percy even heard of acquired blessings. According to his understanding, the only way to obtain one was to inherit it directly from a god. Clearly, what Metatron was giving him was quite an esoteric piece of knowledge.

“Evaluation complete. There is 1 book, 57 research logs, 1 encyclopaedia and 9457349 news reports that mention “acquired blessings”. Part of the selection is restricted for your grade. Only 0 books, 0 research logs, 0 encyclopaedias and 0 news reports are available for purchase. Total cost: 0 credits. Current balance: 0.”

Percy’s jaw slackened at the result. Was this some kind of joke? He was about to curse, but the system spoke again.

“NOTIFICATION: User has been granted special authorization to view 1 book on subject ‘acquired blessings’ free of charge. View now?”

“Yes.” he nodded. “Please deliver it in hard-copy format.”

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

He knew he was probably just playing into the titan’s hands again, but he couldn’t contain his curiosity.

“Choice confirmed. Printing book: “The Tale of Svarog”. Delivery in 24 rits.”

Soon, Percy held a thick tome in his hands, still giving off some warmth. Wanting nothing more than to finish his business in the Vault and get the hell out of here, he quickly dove right in, ignoring the occasional passerby giving him a curious look. If there was one silver lining to this whole mess, it was the fact that he didn't have to worry about the mortals giving him any trouble. He doubted Metatron would allow anybody to interfere in his project.

'Let's see what this is all about then…' he thought, focusing on the text.

At least Percy was a fast reader, and the translation device made him feel as if he was reading in his native language. A few hours into the book, his stomach began to protest, though he just ignored it. As far as he was concerned, whatever happened to the body from here on was Metatron's problem. That said, only part of his persistence was brought about by his desire to get this over with. Another part was due to finding the tale genuinely interesting.

Apparently, there once was a god called Svarog, who made waves in the cosmos due to his immense power. While he hadn't been a titan originally, many titans fell by his hand as he roamed the universe seeking thrills and adventures.

But Svarog was an oddity among gods in more ways than one.

Most deities tended to mate unscrupulously, often siring hundreds – if not thousands– of children. However, that wasn't what Svarog had done. He only ever loved a single, mortal woman, fathering one son. Just one. And he cherished this only child of his most dearly, to the point he would gladly lay his very life down for him if need be.

Consequently, Svarog only had two regrets in his entire existence. The first was having to watch his beloved wife and son age and wither before his eyes, unable to prevent it. And not for a lack of trying. No matter what he did, he couldn't fight against time itself.

'Even Svarog failed…' Percy couldn't help but clench his teeth after reading that part. Was this why Metatron had given him the book? But he shook his head, diving back into the tale.

Svarog's second regret was that his son hadn't inherited a blessing from him. He had to spend his whole life as little more than a common mortal, not a trace of divinity apparent in his magic. Unwilling to see

his progeny cursed with such a cruel fate, destined to live such a mundane life, Svarog worked tirelessly to change that. He desperately sought a way to grant his son a blessing! Other gods called him a fool for even trying. This was a feat they all deemed impossible. Still, Svarog persisted, inching closer to his goal with every passing decade.

Unfortunately, before Svarog had the chance to succeed, one of his old enemies slaughtered his family in revenge, robbing them of the few years they had left. But that didn't stop Svarog. It only motivated him to press on. Driven mad by rage, he finally completed his project, forging a Decree that shook the whole universe, bringing about one of the most terrifying wars in the history of all creation.

Svarog's Decree was as much as a means of granting a blessing to a mortal, as it was a lethal weapon forged out of hatred and spite. Unlike other Decrees like Phoebe's or Metatron's, this one took the form of a physical object – an unassuming ring mould. Yet, its bone-chilling effect prompted outrage from every deity across the cosmos.

The mould could be used to slay a god, subjecting them to a fate most cruel. It refined their flesh and soul, distilling their very understanding of magic into substance, condensing it into a ring. And once worn, this ring could let a mortal wield the slain deity's most prized concept – effectively giving them a blessing. Even worse, the mortal could slowly acclimate to the new concept over time. Eventually, they could fully absorb the power into their being, so that they could wield it even without the ring.

Blinded by wrath, Svarog then hunted down the one who slighted him, torturing him to death. But he didn't stop there, targeting the man's associates next. Soon, he slaughtered them too, but he still wasn't satisfied. Too great was his pain. Too bitter his loss. He kept going after more gods, butchering them one after the other, drowning his grief with blood…

99 gods the newly emerged titan hunted to quell his fury.

And 99 rings he crafted in total, one from each of his unfortunate victims.

The very notion of killing a god to give a mortal anything – let alone a blessing – was viewed as the ultimate blasphemy. After all, mortals were supposed to worship gods, not the other way around.

Thus, the 99 Rings of Sacrilege gained their name.

Raising arms in outrage, countless gods from countless words banded together to punish Svarog for his grave sin. Using the 99 slain deities as the excuse, they laid waste to anything the titan held dear. However, their righteous campaign was nothing but a front for their true purpose…

After all, mortals weren't the only ones who could wield the Rings of Sacrilege. Gods could wear them as well, mastering concepts they hadn't touched before. Ironically, the number of casualties in the resulting war over the rings utterly dwarfed Svarog's victims. The scars left behind by the War of Hypocrites never truly healed. Entire worlds were destroyed, thousands of races having gone extinct.

As for the ring mould – Svarog's Decree?

It shattered at some point, ensuring that no more rings could ever be crafted. Nobody knew how or why that happened, but one thing was for certain. No one ever managed to replicate Svarog's feat. Not before, nor since. As for the instigator of the war himself, he seemingly vanished from the cosmos, never again to be seen. Some theorized he was dead, others that he was still hiding somewhere to this day.

And the rings… the 99 Rings of Sacrilege… The war scattered them throughout the cosmos, most of them lost for countless ages. By now, many of them had been found, a new war occurring every time that happened. Most of those ended up in the coffers of the largest factions in the universe.

But not all of them.

Plenty were still missing, their fate unknown…

Chapter 137: A dangerous game

'Rings of Sacrilege…' Percy struggled to keep himself from drooling.

Reading some more into the book, he quickly learned a few more important details about the priceless artifacts. Apparently, the usual rules still applied to mortals, restricting them to a single blessing per person.

'Or perhaps per core?' he speculated with some hope in his eyes.

That said, this only happened once they fully absorbed the ring's concept. Until then, they were free to take the ring off and switch to a different one.

'Yeah… Let's try getting the first one before worrying about that…' he chuckled bitterly.

Beyond that, he still needed to have the correct affinity for each ring, which complicated matters once again. He was sure at least one of them should have a pure concept – given how common the affinity was – but that might not be relevant to him once the lotus bloomed.

Preferably, Percy wanted one related to the soul affinity, as that might have some positive effect on his bloodline. Still, he understood that beggars couldn't be choosers. Who knew whether Svarog had even found a god with such a rare affinity to kill? Not to mention the difficulty in beating countless gods to such a treasure.

What surprised him the most, however, was a footnote at the very end of the book. Reading the message, Percy was quite certain Metatron had personally added it for him.

"Note: The Vault of Magic possesses four rings in total, with blessings related to the fire, earth, water and time affinities."

At first, Percy wondered why the titan had revealed such a sensitive piece of information to somebody who might leak it outside. On further thought, he realized he was just being naïve. Ignoring the fact that he couldn't even speak about his connection to the Vault freely in the first place, Metatron shouldn't care too much if any outsider learnt of the rings. For all Percy knew, this might even be public knowledge already.

After all, everyone already wanted a piece of the artificial world, yet nobody seemed capable of pinning it down. Metatron had clearly done a great job evading the other factions, roaming the universe completely unobstructed.

'Still, what exactly is his angle here?'

Part of it was probably to entice him into accepting his deal. The titan didn't know what Percy's second affinity was, but with three elemental rings at his disposal, his chances of hitting the nail on its head weren't bad. And technically, he had succeeded too. While none of the four rings were suitable for Percy right now, he was still working towards a lotus petal, so that might change a couple years down the line.

'More importantly, I think he wants me to be aware of their existence, to keep an eye out for them.'

Countless gods might have failed to locate the missing rings, but Percy had already proven his clones could end up in places where others might deem impossible. He still had no idea why a space titan like Metatron seemed to have so much trouble invading other worlds – his portals appeared to suffer from some strange restriction – but Percy wasn't affected by whatever the problem was.

'Oh well… I shouldn't worry about any of this right now…'

Either way, this was more of a long-term project. Whether it was the prospect of locating a lost ring, or negotiating with Metatron for the water one, Percy couldn't do much about it at the moment. Shrugging, he returned to Gabe's place to bid his friend farewell, deciding it was time to wrap his current trip to the Vault up. After all, he still had a couple new runes to process back home, as well as bring his main body up to speed on his interactions with Metatron.

"Would you rather meet me outside the building?" Percy asked via the system, willing to spare his friend's room from another stinky visit.

"Yes! Please stay right there! I'll be downstairs in 50 rits!" Gabe replied a little too eagerly.

Soon, the two met up just outside the entrance, as Percy updated his former host on his meeting with the titan. Suffice to say, Gabe's jaw hit the floor upon hearing about it.

"Seriously? Nobody I know has ever met Metatron in person. In fact, I only even met my own father a couple of times." he said.

"Given your second core, I imagine that will change sooner than you'd like." Percy shrugged.

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

“So, what’s the plan?” Gabe asked again, his voice a little shakier.

“Well, since he’s trying to win me over, I imagine the situation will be stable for a while. Killing my friend wouldn’t be the most effective way to convince me that it’s safe to come here…” Percy explained.

“Still, how long will that last?”

“Who knows? The good news is that we’re dealing with a titan.”

“How exactly is that ‘the good news’?!” Gabe asked in incredulity.

“He’s lived for eons. If there’s one thing we don’t have to worry about, it’s his patience. As long as I keep giving him what he wants, he won’t do anything drastic.”

“And will you?”

“What choice do I have? Your situation aside, I want to tap into the Vault’s knowledge as much as he wants my bloodline. It’s just a question of who gains the most from this arrangement.”

“Percy… You’re playing a very dangerous game here…”

Percy didn’t say anything, though he nodded, his expression grim. Of course, he understood what a mess he’d gotten into. At the very least, he had no intention of ever showing Metatron anything related to Circulation. Even if he struggled to complete the challenges without it, he couldn’t risk giving the callous titan such a huge gift.

‘In any case, it would be silly of me to back out now.’

The Divine Order was already after him back home, so it was a little too late to avoid interacting with gods altogether. Hell, if his situation on Remior went to shit, joining the Vault might be his only way out.

After leaving Gabe's place, Percy then returned to the challenge cubes, hoping to earn himself his first couple of credits. Not that he expected to get very far with his current host, but the first wave might not be too difficult.

"Cube. Can you keep my translation device safe for me until the next time I visit the Vault? User ID: WANDERER."

"Authorization granted. Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. Request approved. Place the device on the ground. It will be returned to you the next time you sign into the system."

Percy exhaled in relief. At least, he wouldn't have to burden Gabe with this too.

"After I hand it in, I won't be able to speak, so I want you to let me into the cube and start the 'gauntlet' challenge, Orange level."

While he knew he'd probably get his ass handed to him, he'd at least learn what the challenge involved so that he could better prepare for his next trip.

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. User incapable of speaking detected. WARNING: Without the translation device, it will not be possible to terminate the challenge until its completion. Higher risk of death is imminent. Proceed anyway?"

"Sure." he nodded.

He wasn't planning to leave this place alive anyway.

“Choice confirmed. Please leave the device on the ground. Wave begins in 18 rits.” the system said, a square entrance opening on the cube’s wall.

Following the instructions, Percy walked to the centre of the room, the door closing behind him. Preparing himself, he counted about twenty or so seconds, his heart thrumming in anticipation as the system continued its now-illegible announcements in fixed intervals. The stakes aside, he couldn’t help but feel excited over the upcoming fight. The idea of testing himself against the golems sounded fun.

Soon, the familiar black tar began to roll down the cube’s walls, accumulating on the floor as the level of the viscous liquid rose. Luckily, the challenge didn’t throw as much of the substance this time as it had during Gabe’s attempt, stopping when it reached the base of the monkey’s neck.

Percy wasn’t paying that any attention, however, his eyes glued to the only other thing in the room besides himself. It was a construct slightly larger than he was, resembling a six-legged spider. It clung to one of the walls, its sharp legs digging into the grey metal.

‘So that’s what an elite Orange golem looks like…’

He didn’t get to stare at the construct for too long. Suddenly, the spider moved, swiftly crawling along the walls, unhindered by gravity or by the room’s corner. Its limbs made crisp sounds as they pierced tiny holes through the walls in its passing.

The golem continued its dash for a few seconds, only stopping once it was closer to Percy. Unwilling to give it an opening so early, the latter tried to put some distance between them, though the sludge made it difficult to do that.

Sadly for him, the spider showed no interest in waiting, lifting two of its limbs, pulling them back slightly as if to build some tension up.

And just when Percy was debating what his enemy was up to, the sharp legs sprung forth, detaching themselves from the construct’s body, spinning through the room like two boomerangs aimed at him.

Percy dove into the sludge clumsily, barely ducking before the blades cleaved his head right off. By the time he could toss the spider another glance, its limbs were back on its body, a second pair already preparing the next attack.

'Shit, how do I get to it?' he wondered, evading the new attack a little better than before.

Still, he had no means of attacking from a distance, nor could he walk up the smooth wall like the golem.

In the end, Percy was forced on the defensive, dodging attack after attack, only occasionally getting hit. This went on for about an hour, until he finally made a fatal mistake, getting his body sliced into three pieces.

Strictly speaking, he could have probably minimized the damage at the last second, but he'd decided against doing that. The attack would have immobilized him anyway, so he might as well make Metatron's subsequent work a touch harder. Still, he resisted the urge of destroying the monkey's soul too, having already decided to not provoke the titan too overtly.

'I don't think I'll be able to get very far in these challenges with simple beasts. At least, not without showing any of my secrets.'

He grimaced. Without any ranged spells, he wouldn't even manage to hit the golem, unless he came here as some kind of bird. And he doubted the combat challenges would be any easier for the other grades.

'My best chance is to progress through the magiscript challenge…' he realised as the ethereal cord pulled him out of the Vault.

Playing Metatron's mind games promised to be a hell of a task, but Percy fully intended to rise to the challenge.

Chapter 138: Rodrick

Rodrick clicked his tongue, annoyed he'd been assigned the tedious task.

“Why couldn’t they send somebody else?!” he asked, getting a nod back from Sarin.

Did he feel a little bad his relatives were missing? Sure, he wasn’t that heartless. Still, this was Remior – people died all the time. Especially during these tumultuous years. Their family was in the midst of a damn war for fuck’s sake! Even if the bastards of House Avalon weren’t the ones behind the attack, there were plenty of other suspects. After all, the filthy commoners in their towns hated their guts!

“It’s not that bad Roddy. I’ve been itching for some peasant meat lately.” Bessinda said, licking her lips.

Well, she did have a point. While the owners of the Drain bloodline could technically sustain themselves with beasts and demi-humans, there was just something special about hunting down their kin. Nothing beat tasting a human’s hopelessness as the life left their eyes, their body shrivelling like a dried waterskin.

Of course, they all knew these… strange stirrings were but another side-effect of their blighted bloodline. But fuck if it didn’t feel good giving into the temptation! Besides, who cared about a couple peasants anyway? They already had to regularly cull the stronger ones, so that shit like this didn’t happen as often.

“There it is… finally.” he said once Bogside town came into view.

Entering the decrepit town, the trio pinched their noses, not appreciating the stench of piss and excrement all that much. These damn commoners were hell-bent on turning the place into another swamp!

A few of them scurried to their homes upon seeing their lords strolling along the streets. The sight caused Rodrick to smirk. They could hide all they wanted – three of them would end up sacrificed all the same.

Reaching a small tavern in the middle of the town, he gestured at Sarin to do his part. The boy was a couple years younger than him and Bessinda, but he knew the drill by now. Kicking the door open, Sarin soon dragged an elderly man out. Fegan was among the oldest in the town – a Red-born that House Tantalus had allowed to live this long on purpose, so they’d have somebody leading the rest. Placing a person in charge only made their jobs easier.

“M-Master Rodrick! To what do I owe this pleasure?” the old bootlicker stammered, faking the most pleasant smile he could muster.

Still, the third-rate act sounded like nails scraping against a wall to Rodrick’s ears, making him grimace.

“Two things.” he said, wanting nothing more than to get this over with. “First, three members of our House went missing from their station at the north border. Do you know anything about that?”

“My lord! We don’t even have that many Yellows since you–” Fegan swallowed hard as he caught himself. “…we don’t have that many Yellows lately. Everyone at that grade is a young boy or girl who’s never trained a day in their life. Nobody here would be dumb enough to attack three elites from your family.”

Bessinda slapped the old man, sending him tumbling on the dirt.

“You think we don’t know that?!” she yelled, her voice oozing with contempt.

“We’re obviously asking if anybody suspicious has entered the town recently.” Sarin added, rolling his eyes.

“Ah! Ah, yes!” Fegan hurriedly nodded. “Two travellers arrived about a month ago! They’re currently staying by the eastern edge, close to the bog.”

Rodrick frowned. He hadn’t really expected to find any clues in this god-forsaken dumpster of a town. A month was plenty of time for the culprits to have travelled hundreds of miles from the province – the only reason it had even taken the family so long to realize the guards were missing was because their attention had been focused on the war against the Avalons.

“Just two of them? Is either at Green?” he asked, having difficulty believing two Yellows would have been strong enough to take down the whole group. But if they had a Green, things could get troublesome. 𝔯

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“No, my lord! In fact, only the girl is at Yellow. The boy is at Orange!”

Hearing that, Sarin kicked the man’s chest, the old codger coughing out a splash of blood.

“An Orange?! Has old age finally rotten your brain, you piece of shit?!” Bessinda asked. “How could they possibly take down three Yellows?!”

It was her turn to kick him a couple of times. Had his grade been any lower, he would have died by now.

“That’s enough, Bessy.” Rodrick said, grabbing her shoulder. “He’s still useful. Finding somebody to replace him would be a pain in the ass.”

Glancing around, he didn’t miss the relieved sighs of the townsfolk. Most of them were still hiding in their homes, peeking through the windows, only a few daring to step outside. Even those who did made sure to keep their distance from them.

“Just to be thorough, where did those two come from?” he asked, turning to Fegan again.

The old man was holding his knees in pain, trying to make himself smaller. It took him a second to realize Rodrick had asked him a question.

“F-From the south, Master Rodrick. They said they fled from their town because things got too dangerous there.”

Rodrick nodded, growing more and more certain they couldn’t be their targets. They’d just have to report to the family that they’d found nothing, and hope the group sent to the other town got luckier.

“Get up.” he ordered, not leaving much room for debate. “Fetch us three commoners close to our age. Two girls, one boy. At Yellow.”

The old man gritted his teeth at the sound of that, a hint of defiance appearing in his eyes for the first time today.

“My lord, it hasn’t even been three months since the last time. Please give us a few more weeks, I beg you!” he said, climbing to his feet with difficulty.

Bessinda looked like she was about to kick him again, but Rodrick held her back.

“I don’t care. We’ve grown sick of feeding on critters. Since we’re here, we might as well indulge. Or would you prefer we pick two people each?”

Fegan balled his fists, the colour draining from his hands as he remained silent for a few seconds. Eventually, he spoke again.

“As you wish…” he spat in resignation. “At least, can the new girl be one of them this time? She’s the right age.”

“Is she pretty?” Sarin asked.

“She’s ok.” the old man said, his features twisting into a grimace.

The boy looked like he was going to ask for more details, but Rodrick cut him off.

“Bring her.” he shrugged. “Just hurry up. The sooner we get this over with the better.”

Fegan limped away, though Rodrick knew he was exaggerating his injuries to buy his fellow peasants a few more breaths. What a pointless endeavour…

It wasn’t until half an hour later that he returned, with three people in tow. Two of them – a boy and a girl – Rodrick recognized. Not by name of course – that would be ridiculous. But he did remember their faces, having seen them on some past visit. They were locals. The last girl, however, he didn’t recognize.

Her frame was petite, her tousled black hair only reaching her shoulders. Her black eyes were half-hidden behind a pair of glasses. As for her demeanour, it was different than the other two.

'Of course it is…' Rodrick grinned, deciding he was going to take good care of her.

Contrary to the downtrodden expressions of the others, who had already given in to their fate, the newcomer clearly had no idea what was about to happen to her. She asked Fegan all sorts of questions, trying to figure out what was going on.

Wearing the fakest smile the old man could muster, he lied to her through his teeth, convincing her that the generous nobles of House Tantalus were about to grant her some grand opportunity. What a fool she was. Buying Fegan's bullshit, she looked at the trio in excitement, eager to follow them out of the town.

"Have five more ready by the time we return." Rodrick told the old man as they turned to leave. "Our aunts and uncles at the estate could use a few themselves."

Soon, the group was inside the Grisly Bog. The place stank even worse than the town, but Rodrick liked bringing his victims here for the privacy. If they got lucky, they might even stumble upon a Yellow beast for dessert later.

Delving a little deeper into the swamp, the group stopped once the stench had grown too foul to stomach. The locals were already sobbing by now. At this point, even the new girl seemed to have noticed something was wrong, as she kept asking all sorts of questions.

"My lords, what is this opportunity exactly? Why did you bring us in this dreaded swamp of all places?"

"Just shut up already!" Bessinda snapped, actively holding herself back from slapping the girl. She knew better than to mess with Rodrick's meal.

"Take your clothes off." Sarin commanded, sounding a little too eager.

Rodrick didn't exactly blame the boy. If they were going to kill these peasants, what was the harm in having a little fun with them first? They'd even get to live a few minutes longer. It was a win-win.

All three of the commoners flinched back at Sarin's command, hesitation flashing in their eyes. The two locals looked at each other, probably considering whether to try fighting for their lives. Though their faces sank a second later, as they knew they were no match for the nobles. Letting themselves die quietly was the best they could do for their loved ones back home.

As for the new girl, she appeared even more scared than the others. Her hands trembled as she finally realised what a great "opportunity" this was. Still, none of them stripped. Just when Sarin was about to force them, a shrill cry pierced the gloomy ambiance of the bog.

"KRAAA!!"

Chapter 139: Quarterstaff

A terrifying sound echoed through the swamp, soon followed by a powerful flap of wings. A shadow rapidly dove upon Sarin, tearing two wide gashes through his shoulders before the boy even had the chance to react.

"What the fuck?!" Bessinda yelled, staring at the silhouette of the monstrous bird as it flew away, disappearing into the dark canopies of the trees ahead.

There was something strange about the creature, its plumage glowing brightly for some reason, the wind swirling behind its wings leaving a green trail in its passing. Yet even these afterimages faded a second later, the boy's bleeding body the only evidence of the encounter.

"Sarin, are you ok?!" Rodrick reached for his cousin.

His wounds looked nasty, but he should be conscious. Or so he thought. Tipping the boy over, the blood froze in Rodrick's veins as he noticed Sarin's lifeless eyes staring at nothing.

"H-How?!" he struggled to believe it. The injuries were serious, but not lethal.

“Run! NOW!!” the spectacled girl suddenly shouted, her frightened demeanour dropped like a bad act. She grabbed the other two by the wrists, dragging them along as she ran towards the town.

Rodrick tossed them a glance, debating for a second whether to stop them, before shaking his head. Their priority right now was to defend themselves against the mysterious creature. The peasants, they could handle later.

Standing back-to-back with Bessinda, they scanned their surroundings, on the lookout for the strange bird. It didn’t take them long to find it, as it didn’t even bother hiding. It was perched atop a thick branch a few dozen metres away, looking at them playfully.

“Yellow?” Bessinda asked in confusion.

It was true. A cursory glance via Mana Sense revealed a bright Yellow star thrumming in the crow’s sternum. Its size fit too. However, there were plenty of things out of place, making it different to any beast they’d seen before. A series of Yellow lines branched out of the bird’s core, filling its entire frame like veins. They reached everywhere, except for a band looping around its abdomen which appeared empty for some reason. The same markings appeared on its plumage in Rodrick’s regular sight, though they were a deeper, amber colour.

Beyond that, a second set of lines covered the monster’s body. These were a humble Red colour through Mana Sense, a faint green otherwise. They didn’t look like veins, instead swirling throughout the creature’s visage like gales of wind. Just what was this monster?! Was it using magic, somehow?!

“Don’t worry about Micky. He’s going to sit this one out.” a male voice came from Rodrick’s right.

Still weary of the monstrous crow, he only dared to take a glimpse at the newcomer by the corner of his eyes. He was a young man of average height, two sets of lines glowing on his own body, just like the beast. They were working together! Though his were both Orange through Mana Sense, silver and cyan in his normal vision.

The newcomer wielded a cyan rod – some kind of quarterstaff, perhaps? Normally, Rodrick would have laughed at a pure construct of such a low grade, but he wasn’t in the mood to take anything lightly right now.

“Who the fuck are you?!” Bessinda hissed. “Are you the one who killed the others at the border?”

The man didn’t bother responding. The lines on his skin grew even brighter, his muscles bulging as motes of mana leaked out of his pores. At first, they shrouded him in a dual halo, but they soon blended together into wisps of teal. The young man’s flesh turned crimson all over, as beads of sweat formed one after the other.

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“Shoot him down!” Rodrick yelled, not daring to wait any longer.

At the same time, he launched two pressurized orbs of water at him, trying to blast his head off. Bessinda followed up with a couple fireballs of her own a moment later.

The intruder didn’t seem to mind the attacks, however. Having seemingly expected them, he spun the rod in his hands, smashing the spells apart one after the other, slowly advancing towards them.

Each of his steps was measured and heavy, raising a screen of mud. As for his blows, they shattered the projectiles into fiery flares or splashes of water. Together, the colourful splotches of brown, orange and blue painted quite the contrast against the dull tapestry of the Grisly Bog, but Rodrick didn’t care to appreciate it.

He didn’t pause for a second, and neither did Bessinda. The bastard couldn’t possibly deflect all the projectiles! His weapon might be harder than it should’ve been, but its durability wasn’t without limits. It already bent and cracked with each blow, forcing that asshole to keep flooding it with mana.

Drawing more power from their cores, the cousins continued their relentless barrage, occasionally throwing the crow a fleeting glance – just to make sure it wouldn’t interfere.

And just when their opponent crossed about half the distance to them, the cyan construct finally snapped in half. The young man had to bob his head, barely dodging a fireball aimed at his face.

‘Took you long enough.’ Rodrick grinned.

He still had no idea how an Orange spell had survived this long against their own, but it didn't really matter. Their opponent was screwed without it. Or was he?

The young man clicked his tongue in annoyance, but he didn't seem to panic. Contrary to Rodrick's expectations, the broken Quarterstaff didn't dissipate either! Its owner kept holding the two pieces, now wielding them separately as he resumed his steady march towards them.

"What the fuck are you?!" Bessinda snapped, gathering a much greater volume of mana in her hands.

"Don't! He's just baiting you!" Rodrick tried to stop her, but she didn't listen.

She unleashed four larger fireballs at the man. This time, he didn't even try parrying them, choosing to leap out of the way instead. Clearly, he was smart enough to not try pitting his broken weapon against a Yellow's all-out-attack. Somehow, the bastard could read all of their intentions!

Even worse, his reserves never seemed to run out. The man kept replenishing them with each breath. That idiot, Bessinda, hadn't realized they'd already lost!

"Dodge!" Rodrick warned her, as he saw the two rods spinning towards her.

At least she listened this time, barely avoiding them.

Still, she fell limp into the mud a second later, having been hit by something.

"How?" he wondered, noticing there was less of the teal smoke shrouding his opponent's body than before. Had he used it to fuel some kind of sneak attack?

Shaking the pointless questions out of his head, he turned around to leave. He wasn't out of mana yet, but he could tell he was outmatched. Even if he could somehow catch the bastard unprepared, the crow was still looking at him with hunger in its piercing silver eyes.

‘It’s pointless! There’s no way I can outrun them!’

He didn’t even bother trying, as the spectacled girl emerged from the trees ahead, cutting his path forward. They were all in cahoots!

“You guys were a disappointment.” the young man spoke. “The other group were much tougher than you.”

Rodrick clenched his fist in anger, though he didn’t retort. He knew it was true. Their lower combat ability was why their family only sent them on low-risk missions like this. Who could have expected it would turn out this way?!

“What do you want?” Rodrick spat, evaluating his situation.

“Many things…” the young man said. “But from you? Only a few answers.” he added, inching closer.

Rodrick didn’t miss how the bastard exchanged a glance with the girl.

‘Maybe I can try taking her hostage? She doesn’t look like a fighter. She didn’t participate in the scuffle just now.’

The odds of this working were laughable, but he didn’t see a better option. Yet, just when he was about to go through with his makeshift plan, the young man spoke again.

“Don’t bother.” he said, manifesting a teal sickle in each hand. “Just spare us both the pointless effort and empty your core.” he added, his tone not leaving much room for debate.

‘How did he know?’ Rodrick wondered, taking another look at his opponent’s face.

The silver lines reached into the bastard’s eyes, his pupils glowing. Was this how he kept reading their intentions?

Gritting his teeth, he slowly extended his arms to his sides, pouring what little mana he had left harmlessly by his feet. He did briefly consider using the puddle for a sneak attack, but the young man narrowed his eyes, clearly having sensed it too.

“I know about your bloodline, so don’t try anything funny with it either.”

Rodrick sighed, knowing he was fucked.

“What do you want to know?”

The young man smiled coldly.

“Everything.”

Chapter 140: Reinforcement

Percy sighed as he watched Micky devour the corpses, each of them barely a couple years younger than him. The first one to die might have not even reached adulthood yet. Still, he knew they’d all killed dozens of townsfolk with their bloodline, and they would have certainly continued to do so had he spared them. Had he let them go, he would have only doomed several others in their stead.

“What now? You realize this is going to bring us more trouble, right?” Nesha asked.

She had stuck with him through Rodrick’s interrogation, scrutinizing the information with her bloodline. At first, the guy had tried to mix some lies with the truth. Percy wasn’t sure if he’d done this merely to spite him, or out of love for his family. That said, the man soon gave up after coming to understand how pointless it was.

By now, Percy had a pretty complete picture of House Tantalus in his head. He knew their numbers and their grades – he even had a rough idea of their combat strength and their current posts. It would certainly make his infiltration easier, assuming they survived the coming months.

“What choice did we have?” he asked.

While he'd always planned to take action against the rival House, he'd originally intended to do so much later. Ideally, he would have allowed the situation with the dead guards to calm down, giving himself another year to grow stronger. Sadly, he couldn't have predicted the old man handing Nesha to those assholes the first chance he got. Was Percy supposed to just let her get killed?

'Now they'll come looking for Micky…'

Given the circumstances, his best option had been to let the nobles drag the commoners to the swamp, having his familiar attack them. It wasn't an accident he'd allowed the two peasants to see the culprit. Now, they'd disseminate the news back to the others, diverting House Tantalus's eyes away from him and Nesha. For all anyone knew, the perpetrator of both attacks was just a wild beast that had now settled inside the Grisly Bog.

"Next time, they'll send stronger people." Nesha said grimly.

"Yes, they will." Percy nodded. "And we'll be ready for them."

It would be dangerous but, at least, they had some time to prepare. Suffice to say, he had no intention of letting the crow bear the consequences alone. Luring the nobles to the bog – away from prying eyes – would only make it easier to ambush them.

Heading back, he quickly noticed some commotion at the centre of the town, a crowd of hundreds standing there. It was rather quiet, considering how many people had gathered. The only thing breaking the sombre silence was a girl's shaky voice, as she recounted the events in the bog. Her words were interspaced with sobs, a male voice interjecting to add a couple details here and there.

Percy flashed Nesha a glance, prompting her to act a little more distraught too. Her excuse for not entering the town with the others was that she was afraid to do so, given what old Fegan had done. Percy also had his own role to play, having supposedly found his companion hiding by the outskirts of the swamp.

"What the hell, old man?!" Percy yelled as he approached the crowd.

The townsfolk drew sharp breaths upon noticing them. Most of them parted, opening a path to Fegan. One person rushed to stop him, however. It was Mr. Dylan, the shopkeeper.

“Calm down, kid. I know you have every right to be angry, but just hear old Fegan out first. He had his reasons for doing what he did.” he said, placing his hand on Percy’s shoulder.

The latter shook it off, giving him a sharp glare. Truth be told, his opinion of the shopkeeper was good. They’d already worked together over the past few weeks, with Percy having crafted a few knives of decent quality, selling them through the guy’s shop. Plus, they were currently discussing the possibility of importing iron from the neighbouring town.

Suffice to say, he wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of taking his anger out on Dylan, but he had to play his part. Besides, his rage wasn’t entirely faked. Had he and Nesha failed to piece together the town’s situation, she might have really died today.

“Calm down?! What reason did he have?! Somebody had to die, so might as well pick the new girl, right?! Who cares about her?!” he yelled again, looking at the old man.

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Fegan glanced at his feet in shame, as did many of the others. Honestly, Percy understood where they were coming from, but it was still a fucked-up thing to do.

“Everything you say is correct, young man.” Fegan found the courage to speak after a while. “I was forced to choose between kids I’ve known my whole life, and somebody that only got here last month. I’m deeply ashamed of my choice, but I’d do it again.”

Percy snapped at that, approaching him with clenched fists, as more of the townsfolk moved to intercept him. In the end, he didn’t get very close before speaking.

“Listen. I get why you did what you did. But I’m warning you now – If you try anything like that again, we’re going to have a problem.” he spat, before grabbing Nesha by the wrist and walking away.

Only once they were back in the privacy of their humble hut did his expression ease.

“How was it? Do you think they bought it?”

“I’m not the best person to ask.” Nesha rolled her eyes. “My bloodline kept tingling with every drop of bullshit spewing out of your mouth. Though, I suppose it would have sounded somewhat believable without it.”

Nodding, he let her return to her work – she’d been practicing how to draw the space rune over the past few days. That said, a spatial amulet involved multiple enchantments, and she was still some distance away from getting the first one to work. However, she didn’t slack, focusing on her task intently, knowing they were swiftly running out of time.

As for Percy, he had his own concealment rune to worry about, though he ignored it for now, choosing to perfect his newest spell instead.

‘The middle part of the Quarterstaff was too weak…’ he noted, recalling his earlier fight.

It was impressive how he’d managed to deflect multiple spells from the Yellow cores with it, but he understood he owed much of that to Synchronization too. His new trick, on the other hand, could still use some work.

Percy had developed this latest technique partly from Sengo’s teachings, and partly from the Moirais’. Unstrapping a linen pouch from his waist, he opened it, pinching a handful of cyan powder. Naturally, the new spell involved the exotic substance, using it to reinforce his pure constructs!

The idea was that crystallized mana was harder but too brittle to be useable by itself, while uncrystallized mana was too soft. However, what would happen if he combined the two?

In a process reminiscent of the creation of concrete, he used his willpower to blend the two variants of mana together, forcefully combining them. Unlike mundane materials, he couldn’t join them through heat or pressure, but that didn’t mean he was without options.

Percy was essentially performing affinity fusion!

Yet, instead of merging two separate affinities, he was now mixing two variants of the same one. Soon, he ended up with a new material. It was a handful of small rice-shaped grains. They were even tougher than the crystals, making them much more difficult to break.

But Percy wasn't done yet. The new substance was merely an intermediate step. While it was stronger than its two components, he couldn't form constructs out of this alone. Next, he grabbed some more powder from the pouch, drawing mana from his core. He mixed all three variants once again, letting the dust settle between the grains, filling the gaps with regular mana to hold everything together.

Via Mana Sense, he carefully scanned the mixture, smoothing out any imperfections, forcing the grains to align, reshaping the "alloy" into a more coherent form. It took him another ten minutes before he held another Quarterstaff in his hand, much like the one he'd used in the bog. Or maybe a little stronger than that, if he was lucky.

'The only problem is that it takes too long to prepare…' he smiled bitterly.

His opponents wouldn't always give him so much time before a fight. And this was just to fuse the existing powder with his pure mana. He still needed to spend several hours producing enough dust in the first place. At least, the powder could be recycled afterwards, to be used in a different weapon or in alchemy. Percy had already retrieved the broken pieces from earlier – they were part of his current stash.

'Oh well… As always, it'll get easier with practice.'

Opening his Status, he checked the spell section once more.

Spells:

While his new trick could still use a lot of work, the Status had been kind enough to register it. Reinforcement had taken Crystallization's spot, apparently being considered a direct upgrade of that. For some reason, it hadn't been linked to the Quarterstaff itself – perhaps because the new substance could be used more broadly than just that.

It’s my third Refined spell!’

He couldn’t help but grin at the realization. His arsenal was getting more and more ridiculous! Sometimes, it was easy to forget how much stronger he’d grown, as he was always pitting himself against tougher opponents.

Even now, he was planning to ambush a bunch of hostile nobles, while at the same time preparing to infiltrate their House’s warehouse, to steal tens of thousands of elixirs. And all of that, while continuing to hide from the Divine Root. Every bit of it sounded insane – at least, he would have never believed he’d be in this position had somebody told him a couple years ago!

But at the end of the day, it was merely evidence of how far he’d come. And he wasn’t going to stop anytime soon.

‘I’m going to surpass them all, one spell at a time...’