Wanderer 251

Chapter 251: Reaching the desert

Micky felt his hunger return with a vengeance.

Rapidly consuming his stamina, he kept both instances of his boosting art active at all times. Most prominent was a set of glowing amber lines branching out of his heart, reaching every corner of his body. A second set spread from his abdomen, swirling like green gales of wind, lighting his feathers up.

‘I wish I’d finished tempering the new channels…’

Had he done that, he could have relied more on his second core, lifting some pressure off his beast mana. Alas, the Holy Child had found him a few weeks too soon… As things stood, Micky had to expel the excess water mana from his body, leaving an azure trail in his wake.

Glancing back, Micky saw the boy was still chasing after him, showing no signs of giving up. Asshole or not, he had to admit the kid was persistent. That said, he’d no intention of falling into the Green-born’s clutches.

Just as he contemplated whether it was worth accelerating, a sudden influx of teal mana flooded his body.

‘We’ve got everything under control here. How’s it going on your end?’ Percy asked.

‘He’s right behind me. Should I try losing him ahead of time? I’m not sure I can make it to the desert like this.’

But Percy metaphorically shook his head.

‘All the more reason to pace yourself. Don’t burn through your stamina any faster than this. Use my mana to slow down the exhaustion.’

Micky did as he was told, knowing his friend was right. As uneasy as he felt flying in the boy's sight, he understood his priority was to reach his next meal, otherwise he was screwed. Even if he managed to escape from the Holy Child, he'd starve long before anybody could help him.

Gathering the fused mana to his beak and talons, he took advantage of the raging flow of beast mana in his bloodstream to feed his first core. Of course, it still wasn't enough to offset his expenditure – Percy's two Orange cores falling a little short of his Yellow one. Not to mention that his conversion efficiency had yet to surpass 25%.

Still, that should buy him a little more time.

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A few more days passed, Micky's condition continuing to deteriorate. His body was already shrivelled and weak, many of his feathers falling off or losing their lustre. If his rampant hunger wasn't enough, sleep deprivation was also starting to gnaw at him. Though it wasn't all bad.

Percy was still pumping teal mana through the cord, taking very few breaks if any. He was doing an even better job supporting him than when they were in the Camelot province, probably realizing he needed every last mote to survive.

Even better, the Holy Child had actually fallen behind! Not because of anything Micky had done – he was still flying no faster than before. Rather, it was the boy himself that had stopped at some point, probably not used to exerting himself for days on end.

'Should I take a break too?' Micky wondered.

Though he shook his head the very next moment. Tempting as it was, it wouldn't help with his starvation. He was better off reaching the desert sooner rather than later. Plus, it might be easier to ditch the kid if he didn't waste the head start.

Having made his mind up, Micky pressed on, determined to get through this.

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It wasn't until the following day that the grassland gave way to a sandy terrain. The shift was gradual at first, but Micky was surrounded by tall dunes soon enough. The ground beneath him looked like a light brown sheet stretching as far as his vision did, its folds and creases glistening under the scorching sunlight.

Micky ignored all that – not in the mood for sightseeing. Instead, he scanned the scenery in search of his targets. It didn't take him long to spot a few scorpions, though they were all at Orange. The Yellow variants were supposedly farther in, according to the information Elaine had shared.

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'If I don't find them in the next hour, I'll eat a few of the smaller ones to build my strength up.' he decided.

Swooping down for a quick snack wouldn't take more than a couple of minutes, but he'd rather not waste a second more than necessary. After all, he had no idea how close his pursuer was.

Luckily, he ran into the first of the human-sized variants soon enough. It was actually in the middle of cannibalizing one of its smaller brethren. Not that strange, given the relative scarcity of food in the area. Micky understood well enough the pressure beasts his grade were under on a daily basis.

Strong prey probably didn't pass through here often, so the scorpions had to eat each other regularly to survive. It meant the survivors were the strongest among their kin. Still…

Micky descended at a ridiculous speed, pumping all his air mana into his feathers. Rending Tornado took effect as he spun through the last stretch. The scorpion tried to stab at him, but its stinger shattered harmlessly against his beak as its venom got scattered by the violent gusts of wind.

The creature didn't even suffer much, Micky drilling through its tough carapace with ease, as if it was made of paper. Strong or not, there was no Yellow beast on Remior half as powerful as him. And he wasn't in the mood to play around with his food right now.

Searching through the scorpion's remains, Micky swallowed its core whole before pecking the other pieces in a rush. Whether it was the hard shards of chitin from the beast's exoskeleton, or the soft chunks of meat contained within, it all tasted heavenly to the starving bird. His only regret was that he couldn't slow down to savour it. In fact, he even kept Circulation up with his second core, to replenish the air mana he'd just consumed by the time he finished his lunch.

'It's done. I've managed to grab a bite. The kid is nowhere to be seen. What now?'

A wave of relief gushed through the cord. Suffice to say, Percy had been worried sick about him over the past week.

'Eat another if you've got the time. As many as you need to fully charge up. Then, head north-west, but don't use Circulation with your first core if you can avoid it. We don't know how long it'll be until your next proper meal.'

Micky nodded.

'You said there should be a small lake there?' he asked.

'Yes. Right where the sand ends. Elaine says it should be hard to miss. You need to wash yourself there, before changing course to the north-east. Hopefully, that should be enough to cut the trail short.'

'Alright.'

Technically, they still didn't know how the Holy Child was tracking him. The most likely culprit was a bloodline, though they had no idea how it worked. That said, escaping from the boy's sight and erasing his scent ought to be enough. If not, there wasn't much else he could do.

'Where are we meeting?' Micky asked again.

'We're heading to the Thirsty Valley. We couldn't stay in Goldenfield town after killing those Greens. I think we've done a decent job covering up the mess, but we figured it was better to distance ourselves

from that. Just follow the cord to me whenever you can.' Percy said, though he failed to mask the worry in his tone.

Micky knew his friend didn't like him travelling alone. Even though he'd proven strong and fast enough to take care of himself, Percy was a bit overprotective. It could be annoying at times, though Micky still felt some warmth in his chest, happy to have somebody looking out for him.

'Don't worry about me. I'll catch up before you get there.'

The next few hours went by quite smoothly. Micky ate two more Yellow scorpions until he felt as stuffed as he'd been after Jason and Rambert. Making his way to the lake, he bathed there for a couple of minutes before taking off towards the others.

The Holy Child was nowhere to be seen.

Micky flew slower than before, conserving his beast mana while relying exclusively on his second core to boost his speed. Percy never stopped providing him with mana, which helped a lot more now that he wasn't eating through his stamina in a rush.

'I guess it's over…' Micky exhaled in relief.

Still, he didn't relax until well past nightfall, to ensure he put some more distance from the lake – so that the kid didn't stumble into him by accident. Only when he was certain he was safe did he allow himself to land at a relatively concealed spot behind a hill, to finally get some proper rest.

'Tomorrow, I should look for another body of water. Maybe vary the route I take a bit too, just in case.'

Sleeping alone in the wilderness without anybody to watch over him was inherently risky, of course, but he didn't have a choice. He'd have to do it sooner or later, and it was already long overdue. In any case, Micky had done everything he could to eliminate the danger. The rest would be up to his luck…

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A rumbling sound woke him up, as the very ground beneath him shook.

Jumping to his talons, he saw tall walls of stone erect all around him. He tried to fly away, but he was a moment too late, as a ceiling of the same material formed above him, blotting out the sky.

Everything instantly went dark, save for a rectangular hole allowing some light to enter from one side. It was as tall as a person. A doorway. Micky tried to waddle over to the only exit, though a figure soon stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

He was shorter than Percy or Nesha. A kid. Micky struggled to make out the features of the dark silhouette, though there was no question in his mind as to his captor's identity. Any lingering doubts evaporated soon enough, as he saw the Blue core thrumming in the boy's chest, a suffocating domain sapping his will to resist.

Micky could do nothing but watch, as the figure grinned, an ominous glint forming in his eyes…

Chapter 252: Bow your head

The domain sapped the strength from his muscles, as Micky felt the stone walls closing in on him. It was over. The only way out was through the Holy Child. Suffice to say, taking on a Blue just wasn't realistic. In fact, Micky found it difficult to even move an inch right now…

'How?! Just how did he find me?!'

He'd truly thought he'd lost him. He was sure he'd done everything right, yet the kid had still caught up, somehow.

"You look confused." the boy's grin widened. "I admit, washing away your scent was a smart move. As was pacing yourself and varying your path. Did you come up with that by yourself, or is there someone helping you?"

Micky just stared at him, pretending he couldn't understand him. The boy clicked his tongue, seemingly disappointed by his lack of a reaction.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Unfortunately for you, I had you in my sight for way too long. By now, there’s very little you can do to mask your trail from me. I can sense even the slightest trace of your mana. The faintest ruffle of your feathers… Your fate was sealed days ago.”

Hearing that, Micky felt crushed. Outwardly he didn’t show it, however, doing his best to keep a stoic expression. Out of options, he reached out to the only person who could help him.

‘Percy… I’ve been caught.’ he sent through the cord.

A jolt of shock and horror soon reached him, followed by stunned silence.

But it didn’t last more than a couple of seconds before shifting to cold determination.

‘I don’t know what he wants from you, but I doubt he went through all this trouble just to kill you.’ Percy said. ‘This means we’ve still got a chance. For now, you need to figure out his intentions and keep me updated.’

Oblivious to their discussion, the Holy Child raised his hand, an eerie red glow radiating from his palm. Instantly, Micky felt a suffocating grasp intruding in his body. It was even worse than the domain, violating his very essence, exerting dominion over his soul.

In some ways, it resembled the connection he shared with Percy. It was intangible. Ethereal. Closer to an idea than a physical object. But in other ways, the two couldn’t be further apart. Whereas his bond with Percy was one of equals, this one was the exact opposite. A cold chain, grinding painfully against his mind, robbing him of his freedom.

The glow faded, the Holy Child slowly lowering his hand.

“Bow your head.” he commanded.

How ridiculous was that? How vain?! But Micky found himself unable to resist. The moment the words reached his ears, his body acted against his will, his gaze lowering in submission. He fought back, of course, but the only thing he achieved was to hurt his neck.

‘At least, he doesn’t have access to my thoughts.’ he noticed.

It was his only solace. The chain the kid had inflicted on him seemed to lack many of the ethereal cord’s features. He doubted they could share mana either. Apparently, the boy had to voice his orders for the bloodline to take effect. Still, the situation was grim, to say the least. His mind was trapped in a body that refused to obey him, like a puppet subject to the Holy Child’s whims.

Confirming he had achieved his vile objective, the boy exhaled in relief.

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“You know, I wasn’t sure this would even work on you. I’ve never met a Yellow beast as smart as you… Can you even be considered that, actually? Having two cores and everything?”

Micky didn’t reply. One advantage he had was that the boy didn’t know he could speak. And he’d rather keep it that way. If he found out, he might order him to spill all of Percy’s secrets. As things stood, he doubted he’d be able to resist.

“Hey, don’t look so gloomy!” the boy spoke again. “You should be honoured to serve me. I’ll reach godhood one day, and you might just be able to follow me.”

Then, he scratched his head.

“Well, I think so... The truth is, nobody with my bloodline has made it that far before. No beast has reached godhood either. At least, not on Remior. But hey! There’s a first for everything!”

Waving his hand, the boy caused the construct to shatter, a cloud of dust filling the area. That, too, settled forcefully on the ground, forming multiple mounds of dirt and sand all around them.

The boy ignored all that, already walking away. He was heading a few degrees east of Percy’s group. Micky guessed he was probably planning to return to Goldenfield town first.

“Come on. We have to pick those idiots up. They’re annoying, but I need them. Preparing my own food is a pain.” he said, gesturing at him to follow.

Micky waddled along, physically incapable of doing otherwise.

“I’m Acton, by the way.”

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The tension in the air was palpable as the trio walked along the dirt path. The chirping crickets and the bright rays of the morning sun did little to improve everyone’s mood, as they all scrambled to think of a solution. Naturally, Percy had already relayed Micky’s predicament to his companions.

“Should we return to the town? We still have a few days until they get there. We can try ambushing the kid too.” Elaine suggested.

Percy shook his head.

“I don’t feel confident against a Blue, ambush or not. Do you?”

Elaine’s head drooped, but she didn’t give up.

“We can’t just leave Micky behind though! Who knows what that brat will do to him?!”

“Of course not…” Percy muttered, before sighing. “We know where the kid is headed. As soon as he fails to find his underlings, he’ll either wait for the Root to assign him a new group, or, most likely, he’ll just go to the Thirsty Valley on his own. Do you understand what that means?”

Nesha drew a sharp breath, being the first to realize the implications.

“We need to get there first!” she exclaimed.

Percy nodded.

“Currently, the only way to grow strong enough to beat the Holy Child is to advance. It still might not be enough, mind you. Our gap will shrink, but his domain is still going to be a problem. That said, this is our only hope to free Micky…”

As things stood, everyone in Percy’s group was closer to their next promotion than the kid. Not only were they a decade older than him, they’d also used a lot of Aurora Dew in the past. And they’d continue to do so as soon as they got some more ingredients. They were a week closer to the Thirsty Valley too, as Micky had lured the boy quite far over the past few days.

Unfortunately, all their advantages were fleeting. The boy travelled faster than them, and he wouldn’t have to sneak into the Thirsty Valley either. He could just introduce himself and enter directly, probably saving a lot of time there as well.

Elaine gasped as she realized what he meant.

“If he gets to Violet first, it’s over…”

Percy nodded.

Should that happen, they’d never catch up. Even with Aurora Dew, their next promotion would be over a century away. Needless to say, that was way too long – even inside the Thirsty Valley. Not to mention all the elixir they would need to get there. Currently, all their supplies had come from House Tantalus. Percy had no intention of taking down another ten Houses anytime soon…

‘Micky. Do everything you can to delay him. The more time you buy for us, the better.’ he transmitted, getting a mental nod back.

“It’s not so bad, everything considered.” Nesha said, trying to lift the mood.

“How so?” Elaine asked.

“Well… think about it. The kid will keep Micky fed, at least. Nobody will dare touch either of them, nor ask any inconvenient questions. In some ways, it’s easier for Micky to travel this way. We won’t have to worry about him starving, or getting discovered.”

Percy shook his head, however.

“That’s the part that worries me the most.”

The others gave him a questioning look, prompting him to elaborate.

“Sure, the kid can easily locate and kill beasts for Micky to eat if he wants. But, would he bother to go through all that trouble?”

Elaine tilted her head.

“What’s the alternative? He can’t just let him starve, after everything he did to capture him.”

“No. He can’t.” Percy said. “But there’s an easier way to feed him…”

Elaine’s eyes widened in shock as she realized what he meant.

“He wouldn’t!”

The colour drained from Percy’s fist, some blood dripping from his knuckles as his nails dug into his palm.

“Let’s hope not…”

Chapter 253: Return to Huehue?

A couple of weeks ago

The group was still en route to the next town when Percy's second experimental clone returned. In the end, he hadn't found anything of interest in the alien horse's world, which was a bit of a bummer.

That said, Percy and his clone had managed to keep the cord in its empowered state throughout the journey, indicating that the upgraded Secret Art indeed held the potential to revolutionize his adventures. After he practiced with it some more, of course.

In any case, his soul injuries had already healed thanks to Synchronization, so the group had paused for a while to give him the chance to send another one out. However, he wanted to try something a little more interesting than merely testing out the Soul Resonance spell this time…

"Are you confident you can return to Huehue?" Micky asked, some emotion seeping into his voice.

Percy shrugged.

"I wouldn't say I'm 'confident', no. But I think there's a chance."

One of the biggest issues with his bloodline had always been the lack of navigation. For years, Percy had only been able to send his clones in random directions, hoping they stumbled upon something of value. And sure, it had worked to an extent, though he was constantly on the lookout for ways to plan his adventures better.

Currently, his only option was to use Metatron's Decree to return to the Vault at will. There was also a possibility that he could somehow return to the mysterious girl. At least, he vaguely remembered promising to do so, though he couldn't recall how exactly it was supposed to work, nor had he heard from her since. At any rate, his latest spell did potentially open a new door for him.

"Here goes nothing…"

Severing the orb thrumming in front of his stomach, he watched it shoot away into the distance like a teal comet.

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'Huh, I guess I "won" the coin toss this time.' the clone thought, suppressing a chuckle.

Whenever he activated his bloodline, it was a fifty-fifty chance that determined which side of the cord he ended up on. Of course, whether he was truly better off than the main body would be decided during the next few days – depending on how enjoyable this trip turned out to be.

Soon, a packet of soul mana slammed into him.

Instinctively, he bounced it right back. Not that difficult, since he was already too saturated to contain any more mana. Plus, they'd already been doing this sort of thing for the past week.

'Two weeks, in fact, from my perspective.'

An interesting thing he'd discovered was that it helped for the main body to initiate the communication. That lessened the risk of the clone focusing on Remior too hard and returning prematurely.

Some time later, the packet arrived once more, the clone repeating his earlier action. It took a few more round trips for the connection to widen. Even so, they'd have to keep sending their thoughts and mana through it periodically, to prevent it from closing.

'Are you ready for the next test?' the clone asked.

Obviously, Percy hadn't the slightest clue where Huehue was. But he did have somebody with him who might. Well, kinda. The idea was simple. Whenever Percy left Remior, there was always a powerful pull trying to drag him back. A huge part of it was due to his connection to his physical body and the rest of his soul, but he knew that couldn't be everything.

After all, when Micky died, Percy had struggled to pry him out of Huehue. At first, it hadn't made sense, as there hadn't been any trace of Micky's soul left to anchor him there, and his body had already turned into a corpse by then. The only logical explanation was that souls had an innate connection to their world of origin itself, outside of Percy's shenanigans. And it was precisely this connection that he was hoping to harness right now.

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'We're ready.' the main body replied. 'I've already empowered my bond to Micky too. He's currently trying to locate Huehue.'

Their plan made sense, on paper, though there were a few potential complications. To start, only a fraction of Micky's soul was actually from there. Even then, it had been nearly a decade since he started over on Remior. If there really was any lingering connection to the gladiator's home, it had to be extremely faint, considering that the crow had never even noticed it in the past.

'Then again, he didn't even know about Huehue until a few days ago. He might find it, now that he's actively looking for it…'

The clone waited patiently for news. Admittedly, it was quite annoying, as he was literally floating in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to do. Hell, he didn't even have any thumbs to twiddle!

That said, he didn't envy his main body much. The poor guy had two cords to maintain. And all of that while still walking towards the next town.

'Ok.' the original transmitted at some point, breaking him out of his thoughts.

'Ok?' the clone was startled. 'You mean, he actually found it?'

If he could really return there, it would be great news for everyone. Now that Micky had started recalling his past, a trip to Huehue might help jog his memories. But there was so much more to it than that.

Of all the places Percy had visited, Huehue was among those he wanted to return to the most. The reason? The final step of the Dance, of course. Other than his second core, Percy's boosting art was arguably his greatest trump card. And if merely half of the spell had had such a huge impact on his life, he could hardly fathom what he could achieve with the rest.

'Well, we aren't sure.' the main body admitted. 'He thinks he can sense something, but it's several times weaker than the other connection. Still, it's worth a try. Just follow my instructions.'

The clone acquiesced, listening carefully. Though they both knew it was still a long shot. Even if Micky's unknown connection truly pointed towards Huehue, there was no guarantee the clone would make it.

For starters, he wasn't even directly linked to the crow, so the main body had to act as the intermediary between the clone and the familiar, coordinating the whole process. Even if the clone followed the instructions perfectly, he understood the way space and time got distorted inside the soul plane wouldn't help.

'Worst case scenario, I'll just go to a random place. It isn't much different to what I would have normally done…'

It took some back and forth, but the clone eventually turned his gaze towards a certain direction, almost certain that was where Micky said he felt Huehue. Letting his senses expand, he soon spotted countless souls in the region. Scanning them carefully, he looked for a suitable target to possess.

Sadly, he didn't find one at first. There were a couple injured souls tugging at his attention by the corner of his 'vision', but he didn't allow himself to even glance at them. It had taken him ages to narrow down Huehue's suspected direction – the last thing he needed was to get himself pulled elsewhere.

'We've got a bit of a problem. Assuming I'm facing the correct patch of space, I can't find anything to possess.' he transmitted back.

'Keep looking. It's an entire world. Somebody ought to get injured sooner or later. Besides, we aren't in a hurry.'

The clone nodded internally. His priority right now was to do his best to reach Huehue. If he returned empty-handed, so be it. It wasn't like the attempt had cost them much.

More time passed. If the clone was guessing, he'd say it had been around five hours since his creation. Still, he didn't need to guess anything, as he could just ask the original. According to him, it had been closer to ten hours on Remior.

'Geez, no wonder some of my clones take ages to return. Who knows how much time I've even wasted in this place without realizing?'

Regardless, a couple of souls did get injured as he waited, though Percy hesitated to make a move. One of them was a Blue. He had no idea if he'd even be able to possess them. He was tempted, of course. Whether or not they were on Huehue, he wouldn't mind a chance to play around with a domain. But the guy died a little too fast for his liking. The others did too. It wasn't until a few dead people later that he finally settled on one that was promising. Dying slowly. Yellow core. Probably sapient.

'I think we've got one. Can you and Micky verify that I'm still looking at the right place?' he asked.

Conscious of the soul plane's distorted nature, he was aware his senses might have drifted off during the past few hours. It took a while longer for his support team to help him confirm that his target was still in the acceptable region.

'Alright. Make sure to cross your fingers, cause I ain't got any.' he said, allowing his mind to sink into the damaged soul, a powerful force pulling him towards it.

Soon, his connection to Remior shrank back to its regular width, the distance probably too much for Soul Resonance to hold this time. But it didn't matter. Now that he'd locked onto a host, he no longer needed it. Huehue or not, his path was set in stone.

Patching the soul up went smoothly. There was no rejection from his host, nor did he seem to need anybody's permission.

'Weird. The only other time this happened was with Takeo. Is this person gone too?'

Either way, he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Tapping into the body's senses, he opened his eyes. Glancing down at his body, and then at his surroundings, one thing immediately became clear.

Whatever this place was, it wasn't Huehue…

Chapter 254: Leo

Stitching the fragmented soul up, Percy was a little worried. The shards felt dull and inactive, his host's will absent – save for a few scattered memories he figured he could tap into if he really needed them.

At first, he thought this person had taken more damage than expected, though it soon became apparent that wasn't the case. The pieces of his soul weren't really in that bad a shape. A good thing too, since Percy wasn't sure he could fix a Yellow soul with his limited stash of mana if it was too far gone.

'I suppose it's just the guy's mind that's been wiped clean, for some reason…'

Coming to his senses, Percy found himself on a bed. A rather soft one at that. The mattress smelled of all sorts of aromatic herbs – probably an indication that it had been washed recently. He had a ton of questions already, though he shoved them all aside for now, examining his body.

'Only two arms. No beak either…' he frowned. 'I guess I was too optimistic, hoping to reach Huehue on the first attempt.'

Technically, it was still possible this was Huehue, even if his host wasn't one of Micky's people. However, that ship sailed for good once he spotted the two yellow suns shining outside the window.

'Oh well. I'll just keep doing this with all my future clones until I get lucky.' he shrugged.

Either way, he wasn't too disappointed. He'd known it was a long shot from the start, but it didn't mean the trip was a waste. Far from it. His host was sapient and at a decent grade. The body was in good shape too. At least, Percy failed to find any serious injuries after a quick examination. He still had no idea what had killed the poor guy, but it hadn't left any physical marks as far as he could tell.

The place itself seemed quite promising too. He wasn't underwater, nor underground. He hadn't died in the wilderness either, nor in some deadly challenge or a damp cell. Just a regular bedroom.

'No. Better than regular. It's actually nice!'

It was larger than even Elaine's room on Remior, full of fancy furniture and enchanted appliances, each adorned with all sorts of intricate runes. Not quite on the Vault's level, nor at the Moirais', but more advanced than anywhere else he'd been to.

Getting up, he winced in pain, the shift having shaken his brain a touch. He hadn't even noticed the headache until just now, used to experiencing such things. This was the first sign of damage other than his host's curious absence. On closer inspection, he was drenched in sweat, as were his clothes and his bedsheets.

'Did this guy die from an illness or something?'

Shrugging, he walked up to a mirror, scrutinizing his appearance. He was dressed in silken robes no less dazzling than what the Divine Root wore, though the style was a little different. A vertical line of buttons adorned his chest, his collar jutting upwards in a funny manner. Slightly over the top for Percy's taste, but the locals' fashion was the last thing on his mind right now.

His host was a bipedal humanoid, closely resembling a human. His proportions were off, being a little shorter than he'd expect. Maybe he was just a kid? Either way, the boy was way hairier than a teenager should be. Or even a grown man, for that matter. His skin was covered in what he could only describe as fur – a light brown colour. Same shade as his hair, though that was longer, flaring outwards like a lion's mane, splashing down on his shoulders. His ears were large and pointy, barely sticking out. He had some facial hair too, though it was quite strange. A bunch of long hairs scarcely adorned the space between his nose and upper lip. Not really a moustache. More like… whiskers? His golden eyes were split down the middle by sharp, vertical pupils. Four long canines jutted out of the boy's mouth too, giving him an almost feral appearance. As for his digits… They ended in sharp fingernails, curving a little like claws.

'Oh well, who cares? Let's see what I'm really dealing with here.'

Turning his senses inwards, Percy stirred the mana in his sternum a little, cracking a smile as he recognized the familiar affinity. Air. Not the best, but not far off either. He'd used it enough to feel comfortable with it.

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There was something else too, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. This clone felt different than all the others, somehow. Not that there was anything wrong per se… Just… something out of place. But he couldn't tell exactly what it was. Perhaps his Status would hold the answer…

___

Leo (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

'Nope. Nothing there.'

Well… whatever it was, he'd figure it out at some point. What concerned him more was the situation here. There didn't seem to be any global Decree in place, but a civilization this advanced ought to have at least something worthwhile.

Over the next few minutes, Percy took his sweet time searching around the room, looking for anything of interest. Though he did take lots of small breaks too, to fiddle around with the appliances. Neither the heater nor the night lamps were anything special, but he wanted to examine their enchantments, to see if they were any good.

'Hmmm… A little better than what we have back home, but still trash compared to mine…'

Overall, the boy had lots of useless possessions for him to sift through. Clothes, shoes and even sealed satchels filled with snacks. Not that strange, in hindsight. This was just a teenager's room after all – not a king's treasury…

But he did find a few things of note, gathering them into a pile on his host's desk. Most of them were books. Or well… On closer inspection, the majority were notebooks filled with scribbles. He'd check them out later, if he got a chance. The good news was that there seemed to be enough of Leo's mind left to let him understand the language.

'Huh? This one's a diary!'

An excellent development! Whether this was Leo's home or some other facility, people would seek the boy out sooner or later. Going through the kid's diary was a priority. Coupled with the lingering memories, it might teach Percy enough about his host to avoid exposing himself.

Placing the diary on the top of the stack, his gaze shifted to the other two noteworthy objects he'd found. Both were medium-sized jars made of glass. They were sealed, but opening them was as simple as twisting the lids.

Still, Percy couldn't help but furrow his brow as he looked at their contents. Both jars were filled with pills, each containing a different type. The first, a vibrant amber colour. The other a deep red. He could already harbour a guess as to the mana types involved, but he was still grateful for the – rather informative – labels confirming his suspicions.

'Core-cleansing pills'

‘Sleeping pills’

No huge surprises there. Though the labels did contain some additional information – mostly warnings and recommended dosage. The amber ones were supposed to be consumed once every two days, lest one caused permanent damage to their core. Pretty much on par with the elixirs they had on Remior. Percy fully intended to consume one later – as soon as he figured out how long a day was in this place – though he wasn’t in a rush. The boy’s core still burned a little, so it couldn’t have been long since his last dose. Not that he expected to advance in any reasonable timeframe, but there might be some insight to be gained from the local brews.

Next, Percy’s eyes landed on the other jar, this time some surprise finding its way into his expression.

‘For the short-term relief of insomnia. Recommended use: Take no more than a single pill every two days. WARNING: Exceeding the recommended dosage can result in serious mental damage.’

‘Wow. This is some potent stuff the kid was on…’ he frowned.

He wouldn’t be certain until he dove into the diary, but it appeared he’d just found the culprit behind the boy’s untimely demise. Anyway, he’d better get on that, before somebody came looking.

Grabbing the notebook from the stack, he plopped down on the bed, flipping through the first couple of pages for some answers.

There was a lot he wanted to understand, both about his host and this world, but one thing took precedence: He needed to know what this place was. Luckily, it didn’t take him long to stumble upon the answer.

‘…Proudheart Academy…’

Chapter 255: Academy

Somebody knocked.

Percy lazily stood up, making his way to the door. Internally, he was a lot more anxious than he showed, of course. His heart raced at a hundred miles an hour, as did his mind. But he forced himself to walk as casually as he could, trying to appear normal.

'Well, this lock ain't helping.' he frowned, taking a little longer than he'd like to figure out how he was meant to unlatch the mechanism.

If his visitor found the delay strange, he didn't show it. It was another boy, slightly taller than Leo. His hair was a couple shades darker too.

"Hey man… Just thought I'd check up on you, since you missed today's Affinities class. Everything alright?"

Luckily, Percy had just about read enough of the diary to get a handle on his host's life. His scattered memories also helped put a name to the face. This guy was Klatz, one of Leo's closest friends.

"I'm fine. I felt a little off earlier, but I'm better."

The other boy creased his brow, seemingly unconvinced.

"You sure? You're not still taking those pills, are you?" he asked, trying to peer into the room.

Percy stood on his tiptoes to block the guy's sight. Not that he cared if the pills got discovered. From what he'd learned, their use was perfectly legal. Besides, it wasn't like he had any intention of taking them. But he knew his host would have acted defensively under these circumstances.

"That's none of your business." he snapped. "I said I'm fine."

Klatz sighed.

"Look… I'm just worried about you. You've been missing more and more classes lately. Those things can be dangerous."

Percy relaxed a little, not wanting to come off as too confrontational. Leo was technically on good terms with this guy. It was a fine line he was currently treading, trying to protect his privacy without alienating one of his closest friends in the process.

Part of him felt guilty lying to the kid about his dead friend. But he figured it wouldn't change much if 'Leo' overdosed a few weeks later than he was meant to. At any rate, the opportunities here were too precious to waste.

"I appreciate the concern, but I can take care of myself. Thanks for dropping by." he said, softly closing the door. Hopefully that was the correct blend of politeness and rudeness.

Truthfully, he knew he'd have to minimize his contact with others. They were unlikely to suspect their buddy was possessed by an alien ghost just because of an awkward interaction or two, but he'd rather not take any more risks than necessary. Besides, there was nothing for either party to gain by keeping the charade up.

Returning to his bed, he opened the diary again, picking up right where he'd left off.

'An academy, huh? I always wanted to attend one.'

The concept itself wasn't foreign to Percy, though such institutions weren't exactly common on Remior. Nobody cared about educating commoners, and each noble House typically took care of their own children, teaching them the language and a few basics before leaving them to themselves. Even House Avalon, which was larger than the average noble House, didn't have enough kids to justify any type of formal schooling. Anyone who wanted to study more could just dig into the family's library, much like Percy himself had done.

The only exceptions to the rule were the Great Houses, as they had enough people to warrant organized teaching. The most notable example was House Etna, which had built a kind of runecrafting academy for their convenience. Over 90% of their students came from House Etna itself, though they often offered a few spots to some of the other Great Houses, usually as bargaining chips in various deals.

From what Percy had heard, the Alchemists' Guild had also considered building an academy in the settlement. More than once, in fact. But the talks never led anywhere – mostly because Remior already had enough elixirs for all the people who mattered.

Either way, Percy could study all sorts of things during his time here.

'The only issue is, I can't stay forever.'

His main body was still possibly on the run, so any benefits he obtained might need to be delivered in a timely manner. Even if that hadn't been the case, Percy always tried to manage his time efficiently.

'I guess I'll need to focus on the most valuable things.'

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Returning to his host's desk, his eyes landed on a small piece of parchment – a memo – scrutinizing it carefully.

'Rising Day – Pre-casting 3

Sword Day – Geography 7

Falling Day – Affinities 5

Resting Day – No classes'

Percy scratched his head, trying to make sense of the timetable. From what he could tell, days on Felmara passed about twice as fast as they did on Remior. It actually hadn't been that long since he arrived here, but it was already dark outside.

Suffice to say, the natives couldn't get nearly as much done in a day. Students only had enough time to attend a single class for a few hours each morning. They then had the afternoon to themselves for studying, followed by a short nap at night.

Their weeks consisted of only four days, which the natives could tell apart based on the orientation of Felmara's twin suns in the sky. Due to the way the world rotated, this changed with every passing day. If the suns lined up vertically, it was a Sword Day, whereas if they lined up horizontally, it was considered a Resting Day. The two diagonal orientations in-between were the Rising Day and Falling Day, accordingly.

As for the academy's courses, they were designed to last a term each – about 15 weeks, or a month in Remior's time. Every student picked three topics to focus on during each term. Percy still had no idea how long each student was allowed to stay in the academy, or what the requirements were for graduating.

'It doesn't matter. It's not like I can spend longer than a term or two…'

Luckily, the current term was due to end in a couple of days. There would be one week without lessons, before the next one began. While Percy was interested in all sorts of topics, he knew he had to carefully pick the subjects he wanted to concentrate on during the coming term.

Grabbing a thin booklet from the stack, he blew the dust off, before reading its title.

'Proudheart Academy Curriculum'

From its state, Percy knew it had been ages since Leo had last needed to consult the booklet. It didn't take students long to familiarize themselves with what the academy offered, and to choose whatever subjects they were interested in. But Percy would have to read this more carefully before making his mind up.

'Let's see… No way I'm keeping Geography. I can also safely rule out History, Natural Resources, Fauna, Flora, Local Dialects, Cultural Studies and Politics. Music, Painting, Calligraphy and everything else under Arts is out too. Same for Psychology and Biology. Heck, these things might not even apply to humans.'

Not that he wasn't a little curious about this place, but none of these things would matter to him much once he was gone. Well, Natural Resources might hold something interesting, but he didn't think he'd be able to get his hands on anything particularly precious in the limited time that he had. And even if he somehow did, he'd have no way to bring it back home.

'I can consider dropping Affinities too, if I run out of slots. It's just a broad overview of various mana types and the ways in which they're commonly used.'

It wouldn't be the worst topic to study – he might learn about a rare affinity he'd never encountered before or get some ideas about his own magic. Still, this stuff wasn't unique to Felmara. Spending his limited time on it sounded like a waste.

There were plenty of courses diving deeper into specific affinities too. Each of the common ones had a bunch. Sadly, this wasn't the case for rare or composite affinities. The academy probably didn't have enough students interested in those at any given time to justify employing teachers to run those classes. Besides, Leo had an air affinity. He wouldn't be able to explain a sudden interest in a different one…

'It's a pity. I guess I'll have to seek out that girl if I really want to develop my soul magic further…'

In any case, there were still a bunch of topics he was interested in. The only thing that annoyed him was that he'd only have the time for a couple courses in each subject, at most.

'Well, Cosmic Studies is a standalone class anyway.' he realized.

According to the booklet, they'd teach him about the universe and the various factions operating in it. Hopefully more than what Remior's gods were willing to share with the populace back home. Granted, he might be able to learn this stuff in the Vault too, but it would cost an arm and a leg.

'I'll take it. And I'm keeping Pre-casting too.' he decided.

As far as he could tell, pre-casting was a rather useful technique which everyone could master, regardless of their affinity. It didn't sound like the most ground-breaking invention, but it was something unique to Felmara, which instantly bumped its priority by several spots in Percy's mind. The only issue

was that his host was already taking the third part of the course, and Percy couldn't remember anything about the previous ones.

'Maybe I can figure it out from Leo's notes. If he's the type of guy to write a diary, there's a good chance he documented his studies…'

If that wasn't enough, he could try the library. At any rate, he had a whole month to figure out the fundamentals. Afterwards, he could slowly develop the rest back home.

'So, do I pick Runecrafting or Alchemy for the final slot?'

Both held the potential of teaching him something new, but he figured any runes he learned here would be a downgrade from the Vault's. Not to mention that they simply wouldn't be compatible with his own, and he'd have to learn a brand-new language.

That said, he didn't think that the local branch of alchemy was much better than what he knew either, but he figured the odds of gaining some valuable insight in this field were slightly higher.

'Hmmm… But Leo never took Alchemy before, and I don't know if the first part of the course is the most suitable for me. Tomorrow's Resting Day. I should hit the library before finalizing my choices.'

Having come up with a preliminary plan, Percy turned the lights off, trying to get some rest. He knew he didn't have long before the suns rose again. He was fairly happy with the subjects he'd picked, and there was something else to look forward to.

There was another course that was handled a little differently than the rest. It was mandatory for all the students of the academy, and it was gradually taught throughout their stay – not during a single term. Percy hadn't found many details about this in either the diary or his host's memories, but it certainly sounded like something he should look into.

'Mana Flow, huh? I wonder what that's all about…'

Chapter 256: Library

Percy’s eyes snapped open as the first rays of sunlight streamed into the room. He was still exhausted, but he forced himself to sit up, knowing that if he didn’t, he might end up sleeping through the entire day.

Stretching, he made his way to the window, curious to take in more of Felmara. He hadn’t had a chance to appreciate the scenery yesterday – too busy catching up on Leo’s life.

'Wow, this is quite the view.'

Leo’s room was situated high up, likely on the fourth or fifth floor, and faced outward. Before him stretched a sprawling garden, reaching all the way to the horizon. It was meticulously maintained, with grass that had an unusual bluish tint. Colourful flowers were arranged in intricate geometric patterns, each centred around a tree. Cobblestone paths wove through the garden in a loose grid, with a few benches scattered throughout. Most remained empty, as only a handful of people were up this early.

'Pity I don’t have time for sightseeing.' Percy lamented.

Leaving the room, he headed down the corridor to a restroom at the corner. Fortunately, Leo’s remaining memories had firmly ingrained its location in his mind, likely due to the boy's frequent visits. Truth be told, he didn’t urgently need to go, but he preferred to handle it before the other students woke up. The fewer people he ran into, the better.

Figuring out how the facilities worked took a few minutes longer than he would have liked, but he managed to return to his room before anyone else emerged. He tossed on a fresh set of robes and gathered a few notebooks he thought he might need later, placing them in a leather satchel slung over his shoulder. He shoved a few of the sealed snacks in there too. He’d no idea what they tasted like, but he’d need to eat sooner or later. Then, he set off for the library.

By now, a few students were already up and about. Fortunately, most only greeted him in passing, while some ignored him altogether. He did get more than a couple odd looks from both groups though. Had Leo done something to offend his peers, or was it simply too early for socializing? Either way, it worked in his favour.

As he walked, he began to realize the academy was even larger than he'd initially thought. The dormitories alone spanned multiple buildings, each towering at least six stories high. And every student had their own room!

'I've got to hand it to them. These people really invest in education.'

Percy still didn't know much about this world, but everything he'd seen so far left a good impression – a high standard of living, relatively advanced technology, and a well-structured educational system.

Running some numbers in his head, he estimated that the academy housed over a thousand students! That meant it either belonged to a powerful faction, or that Felmara was a relatively peaceful world, allowing multiple smaller factions to send their children here without worrying about their safety.

'Hmm… Maybe the lack of a bloodline Decree plays a role in that...'

By now, Percy had noticed the pattern. Worlds with bloodlines – like Remior or the Vault – tended to be far harsher on their mortals. It made a twisted kind of sense – eliminating the weak freed up space and resources, accelerating the mutation of new and stronger bloodlines.

Of course, every place had its own share of problems, and he was sure Felmara wasn't an exception. Still, compared to everywhere else he'd been, it seemed to be on the better end of the spectrum. Well...so far, at least.

Finding the library proved a little harder than expected. Unlike the restroom, its location wasn't as firmly embedded in Leo's mind.

'I should have looked through his stuff for a map of the academy.'

Making a mental note to do that later, he decided to ask somebody for directions for now. The only issue was that Leo wasn't a freshman at this place – Percy had already seen plenty of kids younger than him. Not knowing where to find something as basic as this was bound to raise an eyebrow.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

‘Better ask one of the older students then.’

It would still sound odd, but he figured they were less likely to know him personally, and thus less likely to make a big deal out of it.

Looking around, he ignored all the people his age, walking up to a girl half a head taller than him. She had short, blue hair. A bit of a trend that he’d noticed actually – the girls here all had shorter hair than the guys. He wasn’t sure if it was physiological or cultural.

“Excuse me. Which way’s the library again?”

The girl instinctively wrinkled her nose as her eyes lit up in recognition. Weird. It seemed the older students knew him too – and they didn’t seem to have a good impression of him either. Just what kind of jerk had he possessed?

To her credit, she masked her irritation not long after, however, creasing her brow as her thoughts shifted to his question. Sure enough, it was a dumb thing to ask. Seeing her reaction, Percy was already scrambling to come up with a good excuse…

“Stuck with a crappy teacher?” she asked back.

“Huh?” he tilted his head. This was not the question he was expecting. “What does that have to do with anything?”

She shrugged.

“Well, why else would you need to go to the library? Just go to your classes. It’s easier to learn that way.”

Percy was too stunned to speak. Why would he go there? He could list a dozen reasons off the top of his head! Brushing up on stuff he’d forgotten, building up the foundation to pick a new subject, studying a topic he didn’t have a slot for…

‘Do these kids want everything to be spoon-fed to them?!’

He was a little offended. She seemed to have no idea how precious of an opportunity this academy was.

Then again, he couldn’t help but recall how few people ever bothered using the libraries on Remior. Perhaps laziness and complacency were universal traits. No wonder Metatron had to threaten his people with starvation to get them to study.

Oblivious to his scathing critique, the girl spoke again, probably in a rush to brush him off.

“Anyway, it’s been years since the last time I went there. I think it’s somewhere that way – a few corridors down. Close to the cafeteria. Or wait… was it the auditorium?”

Suppressing the urge to lecture her, Percy thanked her before following her – admittedly dubious – instructions. She hadn’t given him much, but it was still better than wandering blindly. He did ask another kid later, hoping to get some better directions. But no, the response was more-or-less the same. These so-called students took the academy for granted!

In the end, he did reach the place – after having to backtrack once or twice. His irritation all but evaporated as soon as his eyes landed upon the countless towering bookcases, each dozens of metres tall.

‘Geez, this place is several times larger than the one in the Guild!’

At least the library wasn’t completely empty. It seemed the academy did have a few hard-working students. But he ignored them for now, making his way to the clerk.

“May I help you with something?” the man asked.

He was the first adult Percy had seen, and he was quite old too. His mane was a dull grey colour, his face sporting more than a couple of wrinkles. A Yellow core pulsed in his chest.

‘A Red-born…’ Percy guessed. ‘Not bad.’

Landing what looked like a somewhat relaxing job in a prestigious academy seemed like a good deal, given the guy’s birth grade.

Outwardly, he smiled before replying.

“I’m thinking of changing courses next term. Is there any kind of overview of the available subjects? Something a little more detailed than the booklet?” he asked, holding the curriculum up.

The clerk fiddled with his whiskers for a couple of seconds.

“What courses are you leaning towards?”

“I was thinking Alchemy, Pre-casting and Cosmic Studies. Though I’d like to see what’s in Runecrafting and Affinities too. Also, maybe a reminder on what to expect from Mana Flow, just so that I can better prepare for future lessons.”

The man struggled to stand up, his knees making all sorts of creaking sounds. He had to be really old to be in this bad a shape at Yellow. Probably in his 400s. Percy hurried to his side, helping him up.

“Sir, just point me to the right shelves. I’ll find the books on my own.” he offered.

The man didn’t stand on ceremony, nodding before guiding him to the requested resources. A couple were higher up on the bookcases, so Percy had to use some of the sliding ladders attached to them to get to the books. He was tempted to use his air magic to pull the books out, but he knew he’d make a mess in the process. And he respected this place way too much to risk it.

It took a while, but he eventually found what he needed. Walking to a free table at a corner of the room, he set the books in front of him before taking a seat. Next, he picked the first one from the stack, flipping to the first page.

He knew he didn't have much time. Days on Felmara were already short to begin with, and he'd wasted a lot of time getting here.

'Let's see what the local alchemists can do…'

Chapter 257: Restructuring

It wasn't until most other students had left the library that Percy registered how late it was. Getting used to Felmara's short days would take a while. Normally, his body's internal clock would have helped a little, but his host was the kind of guy who'd literally overdosed on sleeping pills, so… no luck there.

'I'm not even halfway done with the books…' he groaned.

He still wanted to research his choices a little better before submitting them. Sure, he had two more weeks until the next term started, but he also had lectures to attend. Sighing, he closed the book he was reading, getting up. Whatever the case, he couldn't miss the Pre-casting class tomorrow. It would help him make his mind up.

'Though I can probably skip Geography the day after.'

Technically, the academy did monitor attendance. Apparently, each academic year consisted of seven terms – a total of twenty-one courses of the students' choosing. The kids were assessed at the end of the year, selecting eighteen of those courses to sit exams for. And they only needed a passing grade on fifteen of them to move up to the next year.

A student's seniority simply denoted the number of subjects they had studied. That said, most courses weren't locked to specific years. For example, one was free to pick Affinities 1 on their first or fifth year if they wanted. Of course, courses with a lot of pre-requisites would often be picked later out of necessity.

Admittedly, it was a rather generous and flexible system, but missing too many classes incurred a penalty on one's grades, making their life harder. Still, Percy wasn't very concerned about that. The second term hadn't even ended yet, and he intended to be gone before the fifth at the latest – depending on how fruitful his time here proved to be.

“Excuse me, sir. Can I borrow these for a couple of days?” he asked the clerk.

“Up to three at a time.” the man replied, passing him a check-out slip to fill in.

Percy nodded, storing the ones he had yet to read in his satchel before returning the rest to their shelves. Then, he waved the clerk farewell as he left.

The corridors were much emptier than they’d been in the morning, most of the students having gone to bed to prepare for tomorrow’s classes. Finding his way back took some head scratching, thanks to the contrived path he’d taken to the library in the first place.

But he didn’t care much. He had a few more things to take care of before calling it a day. Grabbing one of the food bags from his satchel, he opened it, tossing the first of the orange flakes into his mouth as he leisurely strolled through the dormitories.

“This stuff tastes awesome!”he blurted out as the exotic snack crumbled between his teeth with a satisfying crunch.

It was really crispy! Salty too, though it left some lingering sweetness in his mouth as soon as he swallowed it. They were called krimbian leaves – according to the label – but he wasn’t sure if they’d come from an actual tree. Either way, this journey was turning better and better by the hour!

Returning to his room took him around fifteen minutes in total – more than twice what it should have taken. In that time, he finished three packs. He was tempted to open another one, but he figured he should probably ration them a little until he figured out how to get more food.

Luckily, he made it to the correct door on the first try, saving himself from a potentially awkward situation. Dropping off his stuff on his desk, he then stopped by the restroom for a quick shower, his mind still pondering over the things he’d read earlier.

As he had expected, alchemy on Felmara wasn’t that different to what they had back home. Their core-cleansing pills were made from the goo of some caterpillar-like beasts. Having consumed one earlier, he realized it wasn’t any more potent than the elixirs he was used to. A pity.

Their other products were a little more varied than the potions they had on Remior, however. Part of that was due to having a greater variety of useful ingredients, but another part was due to something else. The locals referred to it as alchemical restructuring, and he was confident it was the kind of thing that his Status would register as an alchemic principle once mastered.

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'It's definitely worth looking into…'

Apparently, the natives brewed their products in all sorts of different states. Potions, pills, soluble tablets, gels, lotions, and even inhalables. Suffice to say, this had initially struck him as odd, as he hadn't encountered this elsewhere.

Alchemy on Remior had been developed entirely around the purification of nectar into elixirs, and so everything they crafted usually took liquid form, largely thanks to the underlying techniques used.

Meanwhile, alchemy was a lot more developed on Atlantis than either Remior or Felmara, but the fact that it was underwater placed a lot of restrictions on what was possible. People there had to condense their brews into dense, water-proof pills, so as to store and handle them without worrying that they would disperse.

Evidently, Felmara's alchemists had gone down a different route, learning how to customize their brews into a phase tailored for their intended application. And it was easy to see the benefits of doing so. Some products could be more effective when applied directly to one's skin, whereas others might be best delivered into one's lungs or stomach.

Percy already had an idea as to how this could benefit him. The mushrooms his potions were extracted from worked better when injected directly into one's body. Unfortunately, he'd been forced to use the potions somewhat suboptimally, as he had no intention of planting mushrooms inside his skin, and no idea how to brew them into something other than drinkable potions. But this new principle could potentially open a new door for him.

'Plus, there are other advantages to learning this.'

The Divine Order was currently on the lookout for the Aurora Dew. Specifically, the old version of the Aurora Dew – vials containing a turquoise liquid. But Percy had brewed the most recent batches using his teal powder instead – because he'd stashed a lot of it for his constructs. Using the fused mana instead of regular pure mana didn't change the effects of the elixir in any way, but it did change its colour slightly, giving it a silver tint.

'If I can reshape it into pill form, it'll be completely unrecognizable. Not to mention that it'll probably take less space in the amulets…'

These two applications aside, he wouldn't say no to mastering a new alchemic principle. Even on a purely theoretical level, it would deepen his understanding of the field and help him boost his yield a little faster. Not to mention that his eyes would benefit from it too, possibly allowing him to see things he might otherwise miss.

'The only problem is that it's taught in Alchemy 9 through 12…' he grimaced.

Naturally, one couldn't learn alchemy without getting their hands dirty. Consequently, the relevant courses were split into theoretical and practical, typically alternating between the two for any given topic. Alchemy 1, 3, 5 and 7 introduced the fundamentals from a theoretical perspective, whereas 2, 4, 6 and 8 gave the students a chance to put that knowledge to the test. Sadly, it wasn't until the ninth part of the course that the restructuring principle was taught, and Percy would need four terms in total to master it if he went solely through the official route.

'I guess I can pick 10 and maybe 12 for some demonstrations. I'll have to cram the theory on my own in parallel…'

It wasn't going to be easy, but Percy was already a veteran alchemist. At any rate, this should be enough to wrap his mind around the topic. If not, he could practice more at home. Yet, there was one more issue…

'Leo's never studied Alchemy before… Will they even allow me to skip to 10?'

He'd have to ask. If they didn't let him, he'd have to study the topic on his own and pick Runecrafting or Affinities instead. Of course, he'd rather not, as neither of those seemed very useful for him, based on what he'd read.

He sighed.

'It's barely been a day since I got here and I'm already planning to pack my schedule full of work…'

At least, he didn't intend to study for Cosmic Studies outside of the classes. He didn't need to memorize anything for it either. Just learn some useful information that might come in handy in his future travels. That meant he only really had to split his time between Alchemy and Pre-casting for now. Well, Mana Flow too, but he'd yet to figure out how that one worked.

'Better prepare a little so that I'm not late tomorrow.' he thought.

Sifting through Leo's notebooks, he familiarized himself a little better with the list of topics his host had studied in the past. Sadly, most of them didn't interest him much.

Picking out the notes on Pre-casting 1 through 3, he placed them in his satchel for tomorrow. At the same time, he looked through the boy's stuff for any map or other reference he could use to actually find the place.

Luckily, he did stumble upon a map of the building listing where each course took place. It also included other places of interest like the library or the cafeteria – where he hoped to get some more food tomorrow.

Based on what he'd read in his host's diary, all students received some annual allowance from the academy, so he figured he should be able to buy food that way. Though he'd have to observe the other students to understand how it all worked to avoid making a fool out of himself.

Satisfied with his preparations, he switched off the lights, going to bed. As tough as the next few weeks promised to be, he was just as excited about Pre-casting as he was about Alchemy.

‘Hopefully I don’t have to interact with any of Leo’s friends much though…’

Chapter 258: Pre-casting

Aided by the map and his eagerness to begin his studies, Percy made it to the classroom early. By now, the first of the twin suns had fully emerged from its slumber, the other still bathing the sky in all sorts of vibrant hues as it slowly rose through the horizon.

The room itself wasn’t very large. It only contained twelve wooden desks, neatly arranged in four rows of three. It reminded him a little of the place where he and Nesha had had their orientation, back during their first day in the Guild. Though the desks all faced a yellowish board, smooth as glass. He’d no idea what people wrote on it with.

‘I guess I’ll find out soon…’

Sighing, he sat in one of the least conspicuous locations near the back of the room, right next to a window. Hopefully, the students weren’t assigned specific seats, or he was about to piss somebody off. Propping his satchel against the wall, he took out the Pre-casting 1 notebook, along with a food bag, placing them both on the desk.

Opening the snack, he grabbed a handful of small, brown seeds, tossing them in his mouth. Unlike the krimbian leaves he’d eaten the day before, he’d seen several mentions of these ranki beans in Leo’s diary. Apparently, the boy had often had them for breakfast.

“They’re bitter!” he blurted out, his features scrunching. “But… I can see the appeal…”

The flavour would take some getting used to, but his half-closed eyes jolted wide open, the exotic snack instantly knocking the last traces of sleep out of his system. For a minute or two, he just sat in silence, watching the rest of the sunrise as he finished his meal.

Only once he was done did he finally flip the notebook open, intending to do some last-minute reading before the other students arrived. Supposedly, he still had some time left.

‘Let’s see… So, pre-casting essentially involves priming your mana in preparation for a spell while it’s still inside your core…’

The concept itself was relatively straightforward. An air user like Leo could potentially begin swirling their mana in advance, preparing to unleash a tornado from their hands. Or a fire user might raise the temperature of the mana inside their body, to save time later when they shaped it into an attack. It also made it harder for one's opponent to realize what was going on, potentially catching them off-guard.

'I wonder if I'd be able to see through this with my eyes…'

Following one of the training exercises in Leo's notebook, Percy tried to split the air mana in his core into three parts. When a mage wanted to shoot multiple projectiles, they'd normally separate the mana after it had already left their body. Splitting it from the core and drawing it out through different channels would lead to slightly faster spellcasting. Granted, the difference wasn't huge – just fractions of a second, really. Still, a valuable advantage to have.

Sadly, things didn't go smoothly.

'This is harder than I thought.' he creased his brow.

Even the slightest perturbation had sent his mana into turmoil, making it difficult to grab a hold of. No wonder he'd never encountered this technique elsewhere. It sure seemed like an absolute pain to master…

Not that it was difficult to exert his will on the mana. In fact, the exact opposite was true. The problem was precisely that the mana was too responsive while in his core. Getting it to do as he wanted would need a delicate touch.

And there was another issue.

Percy was keenly aware that pre-casting wasn't very compatible with his current arsenal. Most of his spells involved either his mutated eyes, his bloodline, or constructs that took ages to craft. He currently lacked any spells that would immediately benefit from the technique, making it a little useless at the moment.

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‘It’s still a handy trick to know. Maybe I can learn to form runes inside my cores after some practice…’

Obviously, he wasn’t sure if that was even possible. Nothing he’d read had mentioned anything of the sort, but that just might be due to Felmara’s runes not being suitable for the task. Or, perhaps, the difficulty involved was simply too staggering. After all, Percy already had his hands full with the basics. Let alone shaping the mana into something as intricate as a rune and maintaining that for a long time.

‘But if it works… the possibilities are endless.’

For instance, he could draw concealment runes to hide his second core from within, eliminating the need for an enchanted bandage or his armour. And who knew what else he’d come up with?

“Leo!” a chirpy voiced called out, snapping him out of his thoughts. So absorbed had he been in the exercise that he hadn’t even noticed the newcomer.

“Eh… good morning…” he replied by instinct, trying to put a name to the girl’s face.

Olive-coloured eyes, light brown hair, dimples when she smiled… he vaguely recalled his host calling her Lyn, though he wasn’t certain that was her. If it was, she’d been mentioned several times in the diary too. Another close friend of his, no less so than Klatz.

‘I should avoid calling her by name until I’m sure.’

Then again, talking to somebody who knew him so well was just as risky as getting her name wrong. His best course of action would be to keep his distance from her entirely. Sadly, that instantly became a great deal harder, as she opted to sit right next to him. Would it be rude if he moved elsewhere?
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“I’m glad you’re taking classes again!” she spoke again, oblivious to his thoughts. “Do you still have trouble sleeping?”

Percy raised an eyebrow. Apparently, Leo's problem was a bit of an open secret. How should he even respond? Telling her he was fine would alleviate her worries for now, but they were still supposed to find him dead in his room a few weeks later.

"It was a little better last night." he said, carefully measuring his words.

She looked like she wanted to say something else but, fortunately, two more kids entered the room, cutting the conversation short. They both greeted them before taking their seats. One of them was even kind enough to say Lyn's name, verifying it was her.

More people walked in shortly after, the classroom rapidly filling up with students. Some of them gave him the side-eye again, others ignoring him entirely, just like yesterday. One of them appeared even more annoyed than the rest, glaring at him for a couple of seconds as he grumbled something illegible. The owner of the stolen desk, perhaps? Luckily, he didn't make a scene, sitting at one of the remaining spots instead.

The teacher arrived too. A middle-aged man. His fur was pitch black, a Green core thrumming in his chest. He wore similar robes to the students, though his were embroidered with a few intricate symbols, indicating his higher status.

"Wanna grab lunch later?" Lyn whispered while the man unpacked his stuff on the desk.

Percy deliberately ignored her, taking advantage of the fact the class was about to start. Internally, his mind was racing, however. He knew she'd ask him again later, and he had to think of a good excuse by then.

"Ahem." the teacher cleared his throat, gathering everyone's attention. "As you all know, today's our last class this term. I've no idea how many of you intend to sit the exam at the end of the year, but here's a list of things you need to be proficient in, should you choose to do so."

Turning around, he wrote on the yellowboard with some kind of enchanted stick. Each stroke made a squeaky sound as it brushed against the smooth material, leaving a deep blue line in its wake. Every now and then, the man made a mistake – scrubbing the words out with the back of the stick.

The students were silent, their eyes glued on the list of topics they'd have to revise by the end of the year. Clearly, most of them planned to sit the exam. Percy himself didn't care about that, but he still paid close attention, trying to get a clearer picture of the things he needed to catch up on.

As soon as he was done, the teacher spoke again.

"By now, you should all feel very comfortable with the training exercises taught in the first three courses. I'm actually in charge of the next part too, and I hope to see all of you there in the next term. Obviously, you're not obligated to stick with the subject if you don't want to. Still, in my humble opinion, it would be a waste to drop it now that you've finally reached the best part. In Pre-casting 4, you'll have the opportunity to put everything you've learned into practice. The objective is to incorporate the technique into an actual spell. That is also the basis on which you will be examined at the end of the year, should you choose to take that exam too."

Percy swallowed hard at the sound of that. The prospect of developing a new spell was exciting, but he didn't look forward to cramming three months of Pre-casting exercises along with two months of Alchemy theory.

He sighed.

'Can't be helped, I suppose... Either I squeeze out the most valuable lessons the academy has to offer, or I waste the trip…'

Chapter 259: Mana Flow

The next few hours were quite a slog. The lesson itself had been illuminating, cementing the idea in Percy's mind that pre-casting was a valuable technique to master. Even though it wasn't immediately applicable to his spells, he knew it was only a matter of time until he found a use for it.

Sadly, he'd also made a complete fool of himself in front of the others. His classmates ran circles around him, practicing far more advanced exercises with ease. Meanwhile, he struggled with even the simplest tasks.

'Cut me some slack, will you?' he grimaced. 'You've been doing this crap for months. I only learned about this an hour ago…'

Currently, he was trying to stabilize the mana in his core. Normally, the air mana flitted about playfully – a key feature of this affinity. Suffice to say, forcing it to stand still went directly against its nature. Once mastered, it could potentially allow Percy to add a slightly different flavour to his wind spells than what air magic was traditionally known for.

Passing the knowledge to Micky might benefit him, but this wasn't why Percy had chosen this avenue to pursue. Rather, he figured that reining in the wild aspects of air mana was good training for his eventual goal of forming stable runes inside his cores.

"Son, I'll be blunt." the teacher said, watching his fumbling attempts with a disappointed frown. "Your current level won't cut it in Pre-casting 4. I suggest you drop the subject for now. If you're still interested, I'd recommend practicing on your own for a few terms and taking the course next year."

Percy smiled bitterly, not disagreeing with the instructor's assessment. But this wasn't an option – he couldn't stay here that long.

"Thanks for the honesty, sir. I'll do my best to make up for my deficiencies."

The teacher sighed, moving to the next student. He offered him some words of encouragement, clearly more pleased with him. Though Percy couldn't shake the feeling there was more to the man's disapproval of him than merely his subpar performance.

'Don't tell me Leo managed to piss off the teachers too…'

It was around noon when the instructor ended the lesson, after reiterating the key points one last time.

Percy ignored the pitying looks of his classmates, not letting his blunders weigh on him too heavily. He had expected nothing less out of his first day, given how abruptly he'd found himself thrust in the middle of the academic year. Besides, it wouldn't be his first time overcoming stacked odds…

'More importantly, I need to get the hell out of here while Lyn is still distracted.' he reminded himself.

He hurriedly packed up his belongings, stuffing everything into his satchel before slipping out the door. Fortunately, Lyn was busy chatting with a friend.

Just as he thought he'd made a clean escape, however, someone intercepted him in the hallway.

"Leo! Are you free right now?" Klatz called.

Percy frowned. These kids just wouldn't leave him alone.

"Are you stalking me?" he asked dryly.

Klatz flashed him a sheepish grin, rubbing the back of his head.

"I wouldn't call it stalking… Look, I'm sorry if I came on too strong the other night. We're just worried about you. Me and Lyn both. You shouldn't let what happened last year ruin your whole life…"

Percy nodded, outwardly accepting the explanation while internally dissecting the boy's words. Truth be told, he knew something major had happened to his host at some point. From what he'd pieced together, Leo had once been a model student – smart, hardworking, and well-liked. Then, everything changed.

As far as he could tell, it had something to do with Mana Flow. Unlike most other things the academy taught, the technique required years to master. They had the students work on it throughout their studies, in parallel to the other courses. Occasionally, they brought in guest lecturers to demonstrate key parts of the technique, to allow the students to move on to the next step.

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'Something must've gone wrong during one of those lectures.' Percy had realized.

Leo hadn't explicitly mentioned this in his diary, so it was largely speculation on Percy's part. Still, the signs were clear. Leo never wrote what happened on that day, but all the diary entries had noticeably shifted in tone since then.

For one, he never even mentioned Mana Flow again. He withdrew from his friends, developed severe insomnia and ignored his plummeting grades. Whatever had happened, it had chipped away at him emotionally, leading him down the spiral of addiction, ultimately causing his untimely death.

"Thanks for caring." he said. "I guess I just haven't been feeling like myself lately, but the past few days have been different. You really don't have to worry about me."

Before Klatz could respond, Percy was already moving past him. Unfortunately, the delay had given Lyn enough time to catch up.

"Leo! Are you running off again? Let's grab lunch and take a stroll through the garden. I really think some fresh air would do you good!" she called out.

Glancing back, he saw her giving him a pleading, puppy-eyed look. Klatz appeared no less concerned.

Percy sighed.

"Fine. But only for an hour. You heard the teacher – I have lots of work to do before next term starts."

'I hope I don't regret this…' he thought to himself.

It should be fine, right? This was an opportunity to learn how to get more food. And, if nothing else, he'd wanted to check the garden out since he first saw it.

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Percy followed Klatz and Lyn in silence as they led him to the cafeteria. Apparently, every student was entitled to at least one free meal per day. He wasn't sure about dinner, but at least he wouldn't have to rely solely on his host's dwindling stash of snacks.

Even better, he figured out how to restock those too. The cafeteria had something called a vending machine where students scanned an enchanted card and selected items from a panel.

'Ah… so that's what that thing was for…' he realized, recalling a card like that among Leo's belongings.

He hadn't brought it with him, so he'd have to return here later. He should check his remaining balance too. Hopefully, Leo had enough money to last through the term.

Once they got their meals in paper boxes, Lyn practically dragged him outside, eager to make the most of their limited time. To his surprise, hanging out with them wasn't the worst thing. The kids were genuinely kind, as was everyone else he'd met so far. Well… maybe not towards him, specifically, but in general…

The garden was even prettier up close too. The flowers swayed softly under a gentle breeze, their fragrance filling the air. Percy inhaled deeply, committing the scent to memory. It wasn't often that his clones ended up somewhere nice.

Walking along the cobblestone path, the trio quietly dug into their meals. Some pink noodles that tasted like cabbage, dipped in some spicy sauce and sprinkled with pieces of mincemeat.

'I wonder what happened in that lecture to derail Leo's life so completely…'

He just couldn't make sense of it. The academy seemed like the perfect place. Well-run and well-funded. Everyone was polite, and the curriculum was both accessible and rich in valuable knowledge. Leo had clearly been thriving here until that moment.

"…is it true they're bringing in another guest lecturer at the end of next term?" a nearby student asked.

The words sent a ripple of tension through the group. Lyn and Klatz exchanged worried glances, knowing this was a sour topic. They softly guided Percy away, careful not to let him overhear too much.

Of course, Percy wanted to roll his eyes. He wasn't Leo, nor was he bound by his host's trauma. If anything, he was curious to find out more about this. Had he been alone, he would have stayed to listen. Instead, he had to let himself be pulled along, playing his role.

'At any rate, I need to go to that lecture… Mana Flow might be the most valuable thing to learn here.'

This wasn't empty speculation on his part either. He hadn't been able to find much on the topic, as the academy seemed to prefer that the students learned about it exclusively during the guest lectures. However, what little he'd learned had been plenty to pique his interest.

Mana Flow appeared to be another boosting art, bearing striking similarities to Circulation. This was the first time Percy ever stumbled upon another spell like it, in fact. The reason it took students so long to master it, was precisely because they had to train their bodies and clear their channels before they could even begin to practice it.

With that in mind, Percy had finally pinpointed what had bugged him since he examined Leo's body. Apparently, the boy's mana channels were all tempered already!

Suffice to say, he was used to having a complete mana network with his real body. Two of them, in fact. But not his clones. That was why he'd subconsciously felt something out of place, though it hadn't really clicked until he made the connection.

'I should learn to use Circulation with this body before then.'

It wouldn't be hard, as he already had everything he needed. His body was ready for it, and he even knew the correct pattern for the air affinity, having helped Micky discover it. Obviously, he'd need a few days to adapt it to Leo's physiology, and to familiarize himself with it, but it shouldn't take as long as his other studies.

'If everything goes to plan, I might be able to merge the two spells!'

Chapter 260: Probationary student

The next six days went by in a flash. Percy skipped both the Geography and Affinities classes, deciding his time was better spent preparing for the next term.

Technically, it might have been a good idea to prioritize Pre-casting, as he knew nothing about the topic. However, he chose to invest more than 80% of his waking hours into Alchemy instead, for a very simple reason.

'My most urgent goal is to be allowed into the course in the first place…'

No matter how bad he was at Pre-casting, nobody would object to him taking the fourth part after having just completed the third one. However, he knew he'd inevitably be subjected to a lot of scrutiny when he tried to skip nine Alchemy courses at once.

When that happened, he couldn't afford to make any mistakes. He needed to be able to answer any questions they asked. Consequently, he focused on familiarizing himself with the natives' tools, techniques and ingredients, to make the transition smoother.

Still…

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"What you're asking of me is unprecedented." the clerk responsible for course registration said. "Obviously, it's not uncommon for students to skip a course. In fact, I've just allowed someone to jump two levels of History a couple days ago. But everything has to be within reason."

"Sir, I understand how odd this is… But I'm telling you, I've studied the prerequisites in my own time. I honestly don't think I'll be at a disadvantage compared to the other students."

The clerk shook his head, unconvinced.

"Kid, Alchemy is one of the toughest subjects in the academy. Even the introductory courses are hellishly difficult. Very few students take the exams, and only a fraction of them pass. I promise you, if core-

cleansing pills weren't a gold mine and downright integral to our world's survival, nobody would bother with it."

The man allowed his words to sink in as he adjusted his glasses. He wasn't very old – looking in his early thirties, an Orange core thrumming in his chest. A Red-born, most likely. No wonder his eyesight hadn't improved yet.

"Not to mention… Half the classes are practical. Do you expect me to believe you've turned yourself into an experienced alchemist simply by reading a few books?"

Percy sighed.

"I understand your misgivings, but I'm not lying. Are you seriously going to make me waste nine terms to climb to my current level step-by-step?"

The man shrugged.

"It doesn't have to be nine. How about you start with Alchemy 4 directly? If you're as good as you claim, it should be a breeze. You can pick 8 next term, and then 10 after that. I know it's not exactly what you've asked for, but you're still blitzing through one of the hardest courses in the academy in record speed."

Truth be told, the clerk's suggestion was more than reasonable. Unfortunately, Percy couldn't possibly accept this, given his circumstances.

"Sir, with all due respect, why does the academy even care? I've never heard of anyone's course selection being rejected like this. Worst-case scenario, I just embarrass myself. If that happens, I'll simply avoid taking the exam. No harm done."

Admittedly, this was a bit of a bluff. While it was true he'd never heard of any such rumours – he'd only even been around a few days. Though he really hoped situations like this were truly rare, or he was about to get called out…

“Normally, we don’t care.” the man admitted, much to Percy’s relief. “But Alchemy is an exception, because the ingredients consumed in the practical classes are expensive and paid for by the academy. We’re very careful about who we let in, to prevent waste.”

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Another valid point. Percy knew first-hand how precious such resources were. But he wasn’t going to back down so easily.

“Is there any way to prove my qualifications then? Perhaps if I can take a test, or speak to one of the teachers in charge?”

The clerk grunted something illegible, rubbing his temples. Evidently, Percy had given him quite a headache.

“I can’t even remember the last time we had to deal with a case like this.” the clerk said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

Getting up, he opened a cabinet behind him, sifting through a bunch of old documents.

“There.” he spat, blowing the dust off a piece of paper. “Fill this in. I’ll register you as a probationary student. It’ll be up to the teacher’s discretion whether you get to stay there, after the first two classes. You’ll also need to put in a replacement course, to automatically join if you get rejected.”

Percy nodded, his heart skipping a beat. Grabbing the document, he filled in all of Leo’s details, writing Affinities 6 as an alternative. He’d already decided that Runecrafting wouldn’t help him much, so if it came to it, he’d have to make do with that.

‘Let’s not even entertain that possibility. I need to make sure I get accepted.’

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Percy practically ran out of the office, to not give the clerk a chance to change his mind.

'It's done! One of the hardest parts is over! Now I just have to convince the teacher to keep me there.'

Well, actually staying on top of his courses would also be one hell of a challenge, but he had a whole month to deal with that.

Returning to his room, he found Klatz and Lyn waiting outside the door.

'Geez, they never give up, do they?' he wrinkled his nose.

Following their lunch a few days ago, Percy's "friends" had continued to visit him daily. Most of the time, he came up with various excuses to push them away. It helped that he was genuinely behind in his studies and had a lot of catching up to do.

That said, he knew he couldn't always turn them down, lest they realized something was wrong. This put him in a difficult spot, as alienating his friends too much was just as risky as spending a lot of time with them. Consequently, he had to balance things out, agreeing to hang out once every few days, just to get them off his back.

Not that he disliked their company, per se. They were good kids. Fun to be around. But continuing to deceive them like this was not only distasteful, but a pointless drain on his limited time.

"Hey, Leo! Where were you? We've been waiting here for ages!" Lyn said.

Percy shrugged.

"I submitted my course selection."

The girl raised an eyebrow upon hearing that.

“Are you changing courses?”

He nodded. From what he’d learned, students didn’t need to visit the registration office otherwise. They were automatically registered for the next part of their current courses – assuming they all had one.

“I’m dropping Geography and Affinities for Cosmic Studies and Alchemy.”

“Seriously?!” Klatz jumped in. “I thought you liked Affinities!”

He looked a little annoyed about it. Probably because he was also taking that course.

“I do. I might pick it up again later.” Percy lied through his teeth, scrambling to come up with a believable excuse. “I’ve always wanted to learn more about the cosmos. As for Alchemy… Well, everyone knows how lucrative it is. I thought it’d be nice to leave some doors open, for after we graduate…”

The others looked at each other, apparently finding his reasons a little strange. Did he say something out of character? Maybe the boy had come from a rich family, making his worries about money redundant… Or maybe he’d never shown any interest in the broader universe before. The possibilities were endless.

‘I need to be more careful...’

Alas, he couldn’t always dodge their questions. Besides, his courses weren’t exactly a secret. They would have found out about them, sooner or later.

“Fine.” Klatz spat. “Then, I’ll pick Cosmic Studies too. I was thinking of dropping Painting anyway.”

Percy smiled wryly, unsure what to say to that. The guy was clingy as fuck! In the end, he just chuckled along, telling him he looked forward to seeing him there. With Lyn also moving on to Pre-casting 4, it would be just as difficult to avoid them next term…

‘At least they can’t follow me into Alchemy 10.’ he sighed, unlocking his door.

“Are you sure you don’t want to grab dinner?” Lyn asked.

“Sorry. I really need to get some more work done before classes start.” he said, waving them off without even turning back. He knew they’d guilt trip him into going if he did.

Resting on the door, he allowed his weight to seal it shut.

‘Lying to them is getting harder by the day…’

Alas, the part about having to study was true. Sitting at his desk, he picked up one of the alchemy books he’d borrowed from the library, resuming his work. Luckily, his first Alchemy class was on Sword Day, so he still had some time for that.

That said, the term was officially starting tomorrow. As for the subject?

It was finally time to learn more about the stars above, as well as the myriad races living among them…