## Wanderer 261

Chapter 261: Sixiang

Percy did his best to tune out the incessant chatter, trying to squeeze in a couple more minutes of practice with the pre-casting exercises as they waited for the teacher to arrive. Unfortunately, his efforts were doomed from the start – the gossiping students making it impossible to focus on his mana.

It was a larger room than usual too. From what he'd learned, the academy owned classrooms of various sizes, assigning them based on a course's popularity. This one, in particular, could accommodate twenty-five students – a testament to the subject's overwhelming demand.

'Not surprising, I suppose…'

Standalone course or not, Percy understood why so many people picked Cosmic Studies. The topic was inherently fascinating – everyone grew curious about it at some point in their life. Plus, the exam was supposedly one of the easiest ones, so it was customary for kids to choose this course whenever they were worried about their grades.

'Ah, here he comes.' he grimaced, watching Klatz sit next to him with his trademark smile plastered all over his face.

"Morning! Ready for the new term?"

"Sure." Percy spat, not in the mood for chitchat.

He'd actually gone out of his way to pick a desk with all its neighbours occupied, precisely to avoid this. Sadly, the guy next to him had moved to a different spot a couple minutes ago, presumably to sit by his own buddy, leaving the desk available for Klatz.

He sighed. At least the kid had already turned away to talk with somebody else, leaving him alone for the time being.

“Man, I can’t make sense of your course choices.” the other kid said. “I thought you wanted to be an artist. Picking Affinities was weird enough, but now you’ve dropped Painting for Cosmic Studies too?”

Percy perked up at the sound of that. As annoyed as he was by Klatz gluing himself to him at every turn, he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t grown curious about the boy’s aspirations. Unfortunately, he couldn’t ask him directly, as Leo would have probably known something that basic.

“I’m still planning to become an artist…” Klatz said, rubbing the back of his head. “It’s not that weird, honestly… You need more than just raw skill for that. You need inspiration. And Affinities is an interesting topic. If you think of the world as one giant canvas, the various mana types that exist are almost like colours, painting the most intricate picture of all. Same with Cosmic Studies. If you consider the countless wonders out there among the stars, there’s hardly a better course to pick. Besides, I can always grab Painting again next term.”

Percy raised an eyebrow upon hearing his friend’s response.

‘I didn’t realize Klatz was so… sophisticated.’ he thought. ‘Still, that’s a half-truth at best.’

Perhaps Klatz genuinely found Cosmic Studies interesting, but Percy knew he’d ultimately picked the course up at the last minute just to hang out with him. Clearly, he was still worried about Leo, despite Percy’s reassurances that he was fine.

The more he and Lyn tried to approach, the worse Percy felt. This was like Takeo’s situation all over again. Having had years to think about it, he did regret how he’d handled that. As much as the demonic vines had influenced him, he hated how he failed to come clean to Sengo until the very last moment – even though the man had already realized the truth by then.

And here he was, doing something similar again. Except, there weren’t any infestations to blame this time…

‘No, it’s not the same. Sengo was a grown man. These guys are just kids…’

Instead of turning Klatz and Lyn’s world upside down, perhaps he was better off looking for a way to help Leo recover. But was that even possible?

Granted, he'd done a great job stitching the boy's soul up. Whether it was Leo's body or soul, they should both be fine by the time Percy left. Sadly, the issue lay elsewhere.

'I guess it's a little like Micky's situation, though I don't have my ocarina with me, nor do I know of any songs he liked...'

Then again, Leo was missing a lot more than just some memories. The kid's mind was in shambles! If there was any way to restore it, Percy wasn't aware of it. Maybe he should look for a potent source of mind mana. But he couldn't just use anything.

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'The sleeping pills caused this in the first place, so I should look for something different…'

Suddenly, the door closed, breaking Percy out of his thoughts. It also caused the chatter to die down, as the teacher made her way to her desk. She looked old, her short hair a pale white colour. A Blue core burned brightly in her sternum, reminding Percy of Orin.

"Good morning, everyone! My name's Kemdahlia, but you may call me Mrs. Lia. I sure am glad to see the course is as popular as always this term. I hope you lot enjoy the classes as much as I do giving them." she said, writing her name on the yellowboard.

"Does anyone have any questions before we begin?" she asked.

Nobody raised their hands.

"Good, then let's not dilly dally, since we're a few minutes late."

'You're the one who got here late…' Percy rolled his eyes at the comment.

Oblivious to his thoughts, she continued.

“So, the first thing you all need to understand is the general structure of the cosmos. The universe is unbelievably large, but most of it is empty space. The stars you see in the night sky are nothing more than tiny dots separated by vast distances. As for the planets orbiting them, they’re a thousand times smaller still. Naturally, the same is true of Felmara.”

None of the kids showed much of a reaction, of course. What she’d shared so far was common knowledge, even on Remior.

“Now, here’s where things get interesting. While planets are nothing more than specks of dust in the grand scheme of things, they’re where all the interesting things happen. Does anybody know how different planets are categorized?”

A couple students raised their hands. Mrs. Lia nodded at one of them, a girl a couple years older than Leo and Klatz, sitting in the front row.

“They are separated into dead worlds, and worlds with life. The latter are further split, based on the type of life they bear.”

“Correct.” the teacher smiled. “Please don’t let my next words weigh on you too heavily, but most planets in the universe are dead. Even the most optimistic estimates place the ones with life at under one in a million.”

This time, a few sharp breaths echoed through the classroom, this statistic finally catching a few students by surprise.

“Yes, as depressing as it is, the universe is truly a rather empty place. But if you think about it from a different angle, it just means life is that much more precious. And by extension, all of us lucky to have it. Yet, that’s merely the tip of the iceberg.”

Turning to the yellowboard, she wiped her name away, writing down the percentage of life-bearing planets instead. Only then did she turn back to the students.

“Did you know that most planets with life only contain plants and beasts? We, sapients, are a rare commodity ourselves. Only about three in a thousand planets with life give rise to true intelligence, thus holding the potential for gods to emerge.”

Turning around, she wrote down the new fraction below the first one.

Some hushed voices permeated the classroom, a few students whispering something to their pals. The same girl from before ignored them, however, raising her hand again.

“Yes, Miss…?”

“Eryn, ma’am.” the girl said. “I was just wondering about your comment… Can gods only come from people? How about beasts? With their insane advancement speed, can they never reach godhood?”

Mrs. Lia’s smile widened.

“These are excellent questions. I would normally address them a couple weeks from now, when we’re discussing specific factions. But I suppose there’s no harm mentioning this in advance.”

She tapped her clawed fingers against the desk for a few seconds, seemingly gathering her thoughts before speaking.

“Let’s see… So, beasts do indeed advance far faster than we do, and they also grow smarter with each promotion. By Violet, they are almost on par with us, meaning that there’s technically no reason why they couldn’t eventually comprehend a concept of their own, and thus meet the requirements for divinity.”

“However, there are two major challenges unique to beasts, that stop almost all of them from reaching that stage. First, the insane amount of resources they must consume to get that far. By White, a beast can easily drive an entire continent extinct over a few centuries, just to sustain itself. Let alone advance further.”

“But ma’am, if they’re as smart as us at the higher grades, can’t they find ways around that?” a boy asked – not bothering to raise his hand first.

The teacher didn’t care enough to admonish him, nodding in agreement. She’d probably expected the question.

“Indeed. Getting to Violet or White is rare for them, but it does happen from time to time. And there are ways to handle the issue, whether by rationing resources or by coming up with various techniques – no, I think it’s fair to call them spells at that point – to curb their hunger and reduce their consumption to a more manageable level. In fact, some of them are just lucky enough to be born on larger planets brimming with resources, making their life a great deal easier from the start. It’s actually the second roadblock that is the hardest to overcome by far. Can anybody guess what that is?”

The classroom fell silent once again, even the girl from before not knowing the answer this time. At least until one person raised his hand, receiving permission to speak.

“Are the concepts related to the beast affinity more difficult to master?” Percy asked.

This was just speculation, but it made sense based on everything he knew. Mortals had to master a concept to ascend, and that concept had to be adjacent to their affinity. From everything he’d learned, the beast affinity in particular was unique in more than one way. He wouldn’t be surprised if the associated concepts were downright obscure.

Mrs. Lia’s lips cracked open, revealing a satisfied grin.

“Very much so! In the entire history of the universe, only four species of beasts are known to have taken that last step. In fact, only a single individual managed it by himself, the others merely following his lead. And all of them hail from the same planet. A rather massive one too – a hundred times larger than our own, as well as one of the richest in natural resources…”

“…Sixiang.”

Chapter 262: Greater spring

“But, if that’s the case, shouldn’t these beast gods have dominated the universe already? How can the rest of us compete with creatures that advance so fast?” the same boy from before jumped in again.

The teacher shook her head this time.

“I can see why you’d think that, but it’s not as simple. Despite the relative abundance of resources on their planet and the various techniques they’ve invented to manage their hunger, they can’t just allow everybody to advance past a certain grade. If they did that, they’d wipe their world clean in no time.”

“Can’t they steal resources from other worlds?” a girl asked.

“Believe me, they’ve tried.” Mrs. Lia smiled. “But that’s not as straightforward as you might think. First, gods can’t easily step foot on foreign worlds, for reasons that I won’t get into right now. Of course, that’s not an insurmountable problem for a peak faction like Sixiang. More importantly, the other factions wouldn’t just sit back with their arms crossed as the beast gods conquered the universe.”

“So, they’ve been defeated?” somebody else asked.

“Yes and no.” the teacher replied, before elaborating. “Obviously, they weren’t allowed to freely expand to their heart’s content. Despite that, they’ve still colonized multiple new planets and remain one of the most powerful factions in the universe to this day. In fact, the legends they have spawned permeate nearly every culture. Even here on Felmara, you’ve all heard of them.”

She paused for a moment, appreciating the sight as many students’ faces lit up in realization. Percy, too, had some idea of what she was talking about, having grown up on similar stories back home.

“Yes, they are not mere myths – I assure you they’re as real as you and I. The azure dragons, the vermillion phoenixes, the white tigers and the black tortoises – collectively known as the divine beasts.”

More chatter broke out, Mrs. Lia giving the students a chance to process the revelation. It wasn’t until a minute later that she looked ready to move on, though another student raised his hand, cutting her short.

“Ok. Last question I’ll answer on this since we’ve already strayed quite off-topic.” she warned, nodding at him to speak.

“What makes sapient life-forms so different from beasts? Don’t we all descend from them in the first place?”

The teacher sighed.

“Another excellent question. It’s true that intelligence doesn’t just pop out of thin air. All the sapient races in the universe started off as beasts. Over countless generations, we grew smarter, gradually shedding our beast affinity in favour of other elements. Some scholars consider this a downgrade, from a superior affinity to lesser ones. And, strictly speaking, they aren’t wrong. At least when it comes to worlds without an alternative means of advancement.”

She paused for a moment to let her words sink in.

“However, this is an inevitable consequence of natural selection. Getting rid of our insatiable hunger is what allowed us to thrive. Plus, the path to godhood is infinitely smoother for us, as evident by the discrepancy between gods and divine beasts in the universe.”

‘What does this all mean for Micky?’ Percy wondered.

Originally, he’d hoped his familiar stood a better chance of reaching godhood than him. Even as a Red-born, his promotions were supposed to scale a lot better. Sure, dealing with his growing hunger would be an issue, but not necessarily an insurmountable one.

Yet, the things Mrs. Lia had shared didn’t bode well. Micky’s first core might surpass White within his lifetime, but he’d be hard pressed to master a concept with it. As for his second core, it was stuck in the same slog as Percy’s…

‘Actually, how do the Moirais even become gods? Do they need to master two concepts at the same time, or can they be gods with just one core? And is it even possible for Micky to reach godhood as a familiar? Or maybe, he needs me to do it first?’

Suffice to say, Percy had way too many questions – most of them impossible to answer anytime soon. In the end, he decided to put them aside, his focus returning to the lecture.

“Alright. Now that’s all behind us, let’s discuss the things I actually had planned for today.” Mrs. Lia chuckled. “As Miss Eryn mentioned earlier, planets with life are further divided into a couple categories. We’ve already talked about those without sapients, but even those with them can be split into one of three types, based on their access to advancement resources: Barren worlds, lesser springs, and greater springs. I trust that barren worlds are self-explanatory, but can any of you tell me the difference between the other two?”

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Nobody raised their hands.

“I’ll give you a hint.” she said. “Felmara is a lesser spring. Greater spring is essentially a synonym for the peak factions in the universe.”

This time, a few people reluctantly raised their hands. Mrs. Lia gestured at a boy close to her to speak.

“Does this have to do with the amount of advancement resources a world produces?”

“Not exactly.” the teacher shook her head. “It’s not so much a question of quantity, as it is one of quality. Lesser springs only possess the means for Green-borns to attain divinity. Any world that allows for Yellow-borns or below to do so is considered a greater spring. The reason for that is simple. Although the exact ratios vary slightly from one place to another, Green-borns are generally several orders of magnitude rarer than the rest.”

Percy nodded along, the information pretty much in line with his understanding. The reason the Divine Order wanted to get their hands on the Aurora Dew was precisely because it held the potential to elevate Remior to a greater spring.

“Ma’am, what about worlds where Orange-borns can do it? Is there a different term for that?” somebody asked.

“No.” Mrs. Lia said. “First of all, the number of places where that is possible can be counted on one hand. The Moirais and Sixiang are famously among them. But the difference isn’t actually that big.”

Seeing the students were still confused, she tried to explain herself better.

“Let me put it this way. On Felmara – as in most places – Green-borns are around a thousand times less common than Yellow-borns. If we somehow became a greater spring tomorrow, we could produce hundreds of times as many gods and, by extension, several titans. On the other hand, Yellow-borns are only three times less common than Orange-borns, so the benefit of going a step farther wouldn’t be nearly as steep. Sure, it would help, but it wouldn’t revolutionize our world in the same way.”

This time, some commotion ensued, the teacher’s words generating some excitement among the students.

“Mrs. Lia, how exactly can a world turn into a greater spring?” somebody asked. “Is it something that might happen in our lifetime?”

Percy noticed the guy was a Yellow-born. Clearly somebody who had a vested interest in the answer, as it would determine whether he stood a chance of ever shedding his own mortal coil.

Yet, before the teacher even had the chance to answer, another student jumped in, this time a Red-born.

“What about Red-borns? Can we also do it?”

The others immediately gave that person disapproving looks. And, well… Percy didn’t exactly blame them. Even though he technically belonged in the same camp, Felmara wasn’t even a greater spring yet. Wasn’t this guy getting ahead of himself?

But Mrs. Lia didn’t seem annoyed by the question.

“Now, now… I’ll answer everyone, just not all at once.” she chuckled, turning to the first student. “The way to become a greater spring isn’t set in stone. The problem comes from our limited lifespans and

slow advancement speed. Naturally, there are multiple ways to solve it. The most common ones involve some way of extending one's life or boosting the efficacy of cultivation resources. It's not necessarily impossible for us to discover either at some point, but these things typically take millennia, not decades I'm afraid…"

The kids' faces noticeably drooped in disappointment, but she wasn't done.

"Then there are some outliers who have achieved their status in more unique ways. Sixiang and the Moirais are – once again – perfect examples of that. Even so, most approaches yield modest results. For example, the Moirais would have only been able to let their Yellow-borns past the threshold had they relied solely on their twin cores. It's only thanks to some additional means that they've pushed the boundary to include Orange-borns."

Next, she turned to the Red-born student.

"I hate dashing people's hopes. Truth be told, the universe is a huge place, and I don't think anybody – from the lowest mortal to the strongest titan – can say with certainty what is or isn't possible. Still, no Red-born has ever reached godhood as far as we know…"

The words hit all the Red-borns in the room like a hammer – Percy included. This was the same thing Metatron had told him. But something else had also caught his attention.

'So, there are a few factions that can turn their Orange-borns into gods… Then, why did Svarog fail to help his family? Did he not have access to those means at the time?'

Percy had no idea how long ago the rogue titan had lived. Perhaps, the Moirais hadn't even created their own Decree yet at the time. Or maybe he'd just failed to seize whatever resources he might have needed.

Either way, the way forward was a little clearer.

"Mrs. Lia… How many greater springs are there in the universe?" he asked, drawing everyone's attention.

“888.” she replied. “Well, there are 889 peak factions if we include the Vault of Magic, but that’s technically not a greater spring. It’s an artificial world that several peak factions have repeatedly tried – and failed – to capture. It’s only placed on the list due to its potential – the dizzying speed by which it has been expanding, the dozens of gods they’ve recruited from all over the universe, and their accumulation of precious resources. Oh… and keep in mind that the actual number might exceed the reported one. I wouldn’t be surprised if several factions keep their cards close to themselves…”

Her words shocked Percy once again. Apparently, the number of factions that could elevate Yellow-borns into gods were merely in the triple digits!

‘And I didn’t know Metatron was that big a deal either…’

Evidently, his concerns about cooperating with him were warranted. The titan might truly become unstoppable if he got his tentacles on the wrong spell.

But most importantly, he now had a clearer path forward. 888 greater springs. Visiting any one of them could bring him a step closer to his goal. Of course, it was entirely possible that most of their approaches overlapped, otherwise Metatron would have felt a lot more confident about Percy’s chances.

In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if more than half the factions on the list had achieved their status thanks to the cyan powder. After all, it was by far the simplest approach, hiding right under everyone’s noses. Which meant that the true treasure troves were even fewer.

‘It doesn’t matter. I’ll search through them one by one if I have to. Even if that’s not enough to go all the way, it should buy me time to come up with something else.’

Chapter 264: Proudheart

The library didn’t have any windows, so Percy had to rely on the students coming in every afternoon to keep track of time. Over the past few days, he’d skimmed through the books with very few breaks, only stopping when he estimated it was the morning before the class. Granted, he should still have a couple hours left, but he didn’t want to cut it too close.

‘It’ll probably serve me better to give myself a chance to unwind.’

Picking the pile of empty food containers up from the table, he walked up to a trash can by the corner of the room, shoving the bags inside. Next, he returned the books to their shelves, neatly arranging them before waving the librarian goodbye. On the way to the dormitory, he couldn't help but reflect upon his recent progress.

'I've learned a ton, but nowhere near enough…' he sighed.

Last time, Dugris had mostly stuck to methodology and the course's curriculum, except for a few tougher questions here and there that skirted the lines a little. But Percy was under no delusion the petty teacher would be as courteous today.

And, truth be told, if Dugris truly wanted to catch him off, Percy wouldn't be able to stop him. Not even the oldest and wisest alchemists knew of all the ingredients on Felmara. Certainly not the countless ways in which they could be mixed. Hell, Percy had encountered dozens of recipes on healing potions alone – just the liquid variants, excluding any inhalables or solids.

Consequently, most alchemists resigned to learning only what was immediately relevant to them, taking into account their goals as well as the resources they had access to. Similarly, Percy had opted to expand his knowledge base more broadly, focusing on understanding what was possible on Felmara rather than specifics.

'Hopefully he won't go too far.'

Failing him for being unable to elaborate on the 13 different ways in which bazman flowers could be brewed into cooling lotions would be too obvious even for him.

What worried Percy a little more than the theory were any potential questions on the practical side of things. Last time, he'd managed to get through those due to his experience, but he'd never actually worked with the restructuring principle before, so he had plenty of gaps there.

Alas, he'd already prepared as best as he could. The rest would be up to chance…

'My priority right now is to make sure I don't fall asleep in the middle of the class.' he realized, fighting to keep his eyelids open.

Percy put the three-pronged approach he'd decided on beforehand into action. First, he stopped by the restroom, splashing some cold water on his face. Next, he dropped by the cafeteria – the place was completely empty at this time – grabbing a couple packs of ranki beans from the vending machine. The plan was to eat one now and another right before the class started. Finally, he walked out of the building, hoping that the cold breeze would help knock the last traces of sleep out of his system.

The sky was still dark, neither of the twin suns having risen yet. However, the faint radiance of Felmara's three moons, coupled with the luminescent flowers in the garden helped Percy see where he stepped. Strolling along the cobblestone paths, he travelled farther than he had with Klatz and Lyn the other day. He circled the perimeter of the academy, examining more of the school's grounds as he enjoyed breathing in some fresh air for the first time in days.

'That's one big statue!' he noted at some point, his eyes widening at the sight before him.

The statue was tens of metres tall, towering far above him. Even more astonishingly, it was made almost entirely out of solid gold, except for a few gemstones decorating its clothes. The man struck a gallant pose, his chin up as he faced the stars above. His long mane would have certainly reached all the way to his lower back if left alone, but it split up into dozens of disparate strands instead, each seemingly fluttering in the wind.

Percy struggled to make out the man's expression, as the statue was too tall for that – he barely reached its ankles. Still, from what little he could see, it looked like the artist had gone above and beyond, giving a lot of attention to the man's features.

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'Rhaziel Proudheart, Ruler of Felmara and the patron deity of Proudheart Academy' the inscription said.

Percy wasn't too surprised, having read mentions of this guy in several places. Apparently, Felmara was a relatively small world, despite its technological advancements. They'd produced a bunch of gods throughout their history, but no titans. Consequently, the planet's leader was simply the strongest god they had at any given time, granted the title Proudheart to denote his status. Other than him, Felmarans didn't generally use surnames.

‘Oh well… good for him…’ he shrugged, already heading back to the building.

From what he’d heard, Rhaziel was personally involved with the academy, not only funding it out of his own pocket, but even keeping up with it regularly.

Honestly, Percy did find the notion of a god being so close to his people somewhat touching, having never encountered this before in his travels. Still, it didn’t matter much at the end of the day. He wouldn’t be here for long.

By the time he reached the lab, the first of the two suns was already visible outside the window. A few students had arrived too. Contrary to other classes like Pre-casting or Cosmic Studies, Alchemy students were supposed to get here early, to prepare their equipment.

Subconsciously, Percy averted his gaze. Needless to say, he hadn’t received the warmest reception from his classmates either last week. Of course, it wasn’t nearly as bad as the way Dugris had treated him, but the kids had also looked at him coldly, partly due to his host’s troubled past and partly due to his current attempts to breeze through their course.

‘And I bet they’re even more annoyed at me now, after he punished everyone alongside me…’

Percy made his way to one of the least conspicuous seats by the back of the room, trying not to draw too much attention. Not that he cared about what the others thought, but he wasn’t in the mood to deal with them right now.

Yet, his hopes were dashed when one of his classmates got up, walking up to him. Percy frowned, bracing for the inevitable confrontation, though the boy’s words surprised him.

“Man, don’t tell me you stayed up all week, studying for this?”

Percy creased his brow. There wasn’t any mockery or irritation in the kid’s tone. Just curiosity. Maybe even a smidge of compassion.

“What gave it away?” he asked.

The boy chuckled.

“The bags under your eyes. The pack of ranki beans you’re crushing in your hand. Your hair is a mess. Your eyelids are twitching… Need I go on?”

“Ha. You got me there.” Percy laughed out too, not sensing any hostility. “It’s not like he gave me much of a choice.”

Pulling a chair from a nearby table, the kid sat across him, a few others approaching them too.

“That’s hardcore! You know you don’t have to bend over backwards to please him, right? Even if he rejects you, you can request to join the class next term under a different teacher. I bet they’ll be more reasonable.”

“Yeah, anyone who doesn’t have a stick up his ass will realize you’re qualified for the class.” a girl jumped into the conversation, the others nodding along.

“Thanks for the votes of confidence, but I’d rather not waste a term if I can help it.” Percy replied, still weirded out by their friendly tone. “Say, aren’t you annoyed at me for last week? You all had to sit here for hours listening to him interrogate me.”

The first boy shrugged.

“Why should we blame you for that? We aren’t dumb. It was clear within the first twenty minutes you knew what you were talking about. As far as I’m concerned, he’s the asshole in the story.”

“I admit I was initially annoyed at you.” the girl said. “You look quite young, and this is a tough course. At first, I really thought you were making a mockery of the subject. But anyone who listened to you with an open mind could tell you’ve studied very hard to be here.”

“More than studied!” somebody else exclaimed, some genuine admiration seeping into his voice. “He even brewed the potion right in the afternoon! Only him, Jun and Korin managed!”

The first boy frowned at the sound of that.

“Hey, in my defence, I can brew healing potions too! Just not with a splitting headache!”

Everyone laughed, Percy with them. Apparently, the kids weren’t that bad. Dugris’s efforts to turn the whole class against him had clearly backfired spectacularly.

“Say, do you think you’ve got this?” the girl suddenly asked.

Percy sighed.

“I did my best, but there’s only so much one can cram in a few days. I guess it all depends on how badly he wants to get rid of me…”

“No way!” a boy shook his head. “If he doesn’t give you the ok, I’ll go complain to the registration office!”

“Me too!” “Count me in.” the others concurred.

“Thanks for the backup, but what’s in it for you?” Percy asked.

The girl was the one to reply this time.

“Well, it’s just a question of fairness, isn’t it? If somebody as knowledgeable as you doesn’t make the course, then what are the rest of us even doing here? The academy has regulations to prevent things like this from happening. Teachers aren’t supposed to just bully any student they dislike.”

Percy was about to thank her, when the door closed shut. Dugris was finally here.

The students all returned to their seats, as Percy prepared himself for the second round of the interrogation. In the end, he hadn't eaten the second pack of beans. Hopefully he'd last through the day…

Placing his stuff on his desk, Dugris looked around the room, his eyes slightly less stern than last time.

"Before we begin today's class, there's something I want to say."

Percy tensed up, steeling himself for the test. Yet, the man's next words caused his jaw to slacken.

"I want to apologize to everyone in general, and to Leo in particular, for my actions last week. My behaviour was truly unbecoming of my position as a teacher."

Chapter 265: Dugris

"I've thought hard about it over the past few days, and it is very clear that Leo is a talented and hardworking student who is more than qualified to attend the class. I shouldn't have pushed things so far, and I most certainly shouldn't have involved the rest of you in it either." the man elaborated, sounding genuinely sorry for his actions.

Suffice to say, Percy was still taken aback by the teacher's complete 180. Though his surprise soon shifted to annoyance.

'Wow. So, I've just spent a week in the library for nothing?'

Oblivious to his thoughts, Dugris turned to look at him directly.

"In my defence, I still believe that what you did last year was inexcusable. Disrespectful. If it was up to me, you would have been expelled from the academy right then and there." he added, causing Percy to raise an eyebrow.

He was really tempted to ask what the hell Leo had done to warrant such hostility from everyone. By now, his curiosity was killing him. But alas, asking something like that would do nothing but expose him as an imposter. Whatever it was, he was better off burying it in the past.

“Still, you were allowed to remain, and here we are. I suppose everyone makes mistakes, and kids – more than anyone – deserve a second chance. At the very least, I shouldn’t have let my feelings about you cloud my judgement, nor affect my conduct as a teacher. Needless to say, you will be allowed to remain here.”

Percy’s heart skipped a beat, but the man’s eyes had already moved past him, his gaze brushing over the rest of the class.

“I also happen to believe that spoken apologies amount to little more than hot air. That is why I’ve decided to make it up to you with something more tangible.”

He paused for a moment to let his words sink in, cracking a faint smile as the students’ faces lit up in anticipation. Well, everyone but Percy’s, as he hadn’t the slightest clue what the guy was talking about.

“You guessed it. As you all know, every teacher in the academy is allowed to refer one student per year to spend three days in the Wiseman’s Chamber. Usually, we reserve that honour for our brightest students tackling some of the most daunting courses. I’ve personally never referred a student unless they’d already passed the exams on Alchemy 1-18 with flying colours. But I’ve decided to make an exception for you this year.”

The lab erupted into cheers upon hearing that. Percy, too, could tell that this Wiseman’s Chamber had to be quite the opportunity, though he couldn’t ask directly about it. His best bet would be to look into it discreetly in the library later.

“Now, don’t get ahead of yourselves.” Dugris hurriedly said, trying to douse their excitement. “I’m not just going to give you my recommendation. Only a chance to earn it.”

The room calmed down a little, allowing him to continue.

“Normally, your goal for Alchemy 10 is to successfully brew an alchemic product of your choosing in any non-default state. A lot of students go for healing pills as they’re among the simplest and most commonly used brews. The solidification process in particular is relatively straightforward too.” he explained.

The students nodded along, already familiar with the course's demands.

"Well, since there's around a dozen of you, and only one spot in the Wiseman's Chamber, I've decided to turn this into a little competition – to hopefully motivate everyone to work harder. I'll give my recommendation to the first one among you to successfully brew any potion of your choosing into three, different, non-standard formats by the end of the term."

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This time, several faces fell upon learning of the steep requirements. Percy noticed it was primarily the students who hadn't managed to brew the normal healing potion last week. The rest of them appeared more confident.

'Whatever this place is, it sounds useful. Three days are more than manageable for my schedule too. I should try to win this.'

Suffice to say, he was confident that he had more experience under his belt than the other top students in the class, but not with the locals' tools and methods. He also lacked his mutated eyes, meaning he wouldn't be able to cheat.

'Well, either way, my original goal was to master the restructuring principle. This competition sounds like the perfect way to work on it anyway. If I win, that's just a nice bonus.' he decided.

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Much like the previous week, the students had stayed in the lab until well past noon, this time of their own volition. Well, half of them at least, the others having given up after realizing they didn't stand a chance.

Overall, the Alchemy 10 course was rather flexible, the kids given a lot of freedom in how they proceeded. Dugris allowed them to attempt any brew they felt comfortable with, merely overseeing the process while offering them advice and pointing out their shortcomings.

True to their teacher's words, most of them started with healing pills, Percy included. He actually wasn't a complete novice in this department, having crafted similar things back on Atlantis.

That said, condensing a potion into a pill was very different from concocting a pill directly. In the former case, the brew naturally existed in a liquid state by default, so he had to introduce an agent rich in earth mana to convert it into a stable solid.

In fact, something similar was at the basis of all the permutations of the restructuring principle. For example, if one wanted to convert something into an inhalable, they'd typically use a reagent containing air mana. If they wanted to liquefy a solid, they needed to add water mana and so on.

Of course, each variation and each ingredient came with their own peculiarities, making the restructuring principle a rather multifaceted one. Consequently, Percy knew it would take him a few more weeks to nail the pills down, and several more for the other two milestones.

Either way, turning potions into pills was one of the things he'd wanted to learn from the beginning, since he intended to incorporate that into the Aurora Dew. As for the other two variants, he already had some ideas.

"You need to make sure the crushed limestone stems are fully blended with the potion before you raise the temperature, or it won't solidify properly." Dugris told one of the students, staring at the inert sludge in his cauldron.

'At least the others aren't faring any better than me. I've still got a good shot at winning this.' Percy reassured himself as he observed his classmates.

By the end of the lecture, he felt as if his brain had just gone through a meat grinder.

'The good news is that I made it into the course. At the end of the day, that's all that matters. Everything else is just a question of time and effort.'

Wearing a content smile on his face, he made his way to the dormitory, eager to finally sink into his soft mattress after the hellish reading marathon Dugris had inflicted on him over nothing. Of course, he still

had to look into the Wiseman's Chamber at some point and he also wished he could have practiced a little for tomorrow's Pre-casting class – especially after having missed the last one.

Sadly, he didn't have the strength to do either right now, feeling like he was about to collapse. Suffice to say, it was with great relief that he made it to his room, though one final obstacle stood before him.

Once more, he found his friends waiting outside his door.

"Leo! Where the hell have you been all week?!" Lyn asked, her voice cracking.

"You've missed all your classes again!" Klatz pitched in, his expression just as grim as hers.

Percy sighed.

"It's not what you guys think." he muttered. "It has nothing to do with the sleeping pills or my insomnia. I promise you that much. It's just that my new Alchemy teacher gave me some trouble letting me into the course, so I had to spend the whole week in the library cramming information into my head."

The kids visibly relaxed upon hearing that, having probably expected the worst. Though Lyn still punched him in the chest. It didn't hurt much, as she was only at Orange, but it did catch him by surprise.

"What was that for?" he asked, rubbing the spot.

"Sleeping pills or not, you should have given us an update! We were worried sick about you! We were actually considering breaking in just now!" she yelled, some tears glistening by the corners of her eyes.

"Ok. I suppose I deserved that." Percy raised his hands defensively. "I'm sorry I scared you. But I really need to sleep right now, if you don't mind. I'm literally about to pass out." he said, opening his door.

"So, tomorrow…?" she asked.

Percy nodded.

“I’ll be there. I know I’m quite behind, but I’ll do my best to make up for it. Everything is settled now, so I hopefully won’t have to miss another class this term.”

Chapter 266: Valuable reward

As expected, the Pre-casting class was a downright humiliating experience for Percy. Even worse, unlike the hard time he’d suffered unjustly in Alchemy 10 thanks to Dugris’s pettiness, he knew he fully deserved Mr. Lonan’s cold treatment.

Against the man’s advice, he had insisted on staying in a course he was entirely unqualified for. He’d also missed the very first lesson, showing up a week late. The final nail in the coffin was that he’d actually promised the guy to catch up, yet here he was, still stuck on the most basic exercises.

‘Geez, everyone but Lyn is looking at me like I’ve insulted their mother. Mind your own business, will you?’

The other students were already tackling much more challenging stuff. Most notable was another boy with a Yellow core and an air affinity, no different from Leo. He looked like he was around the same age too. He was currently working on rotating the mana in his core in a direction perpendicular to the spell he intended to form. If done correctly, the released wind blade would spin in two axes rather than one, meaning that it wouldn’t just slice through an opponent – it would shred them into ribbons.

The toughest part about this exercise was that he had to maintain the rotation as the mana travelled through his channels. He couldn’t allow its intensity to drop or its angle to be twisted by the journey. This was already several times harder than what Percy was doing – still working on splitting the mana up into a few portions and slowing down its movement.

At this point, he’d already accepted that whatever spell he came up with by the end of the term – if any – wouldn’t be anything to write home about.

‘Oh well… if you guys have an issue with me, take it up with Dugris. I would have studied for this if he’d given me the chance.’ he shrugged.

Either way, the teacher's opinion of him was the last thing on his mind right now.

More importantly, achieving all his goals during his stay on Felmara was looking less and less likely with every passing day. Especially now that he'd added a competition to his plate. And then, there was Lyn. Her latest action only served to further his guilt.

She approached him as soon as the class ended, offering him some kind of pink pastry she'd baked in her Cooking class. It tasted heavenly too – a hundred times better than anything he'd bought from the cafeteria. Its soft texture practically melted in his mouth, releasing a rich sweet flavour that hit all the right spots. A truly thoughtful gift, yet one that made him feel worse about the situation.

'I'm pretty sure she has feelings for Leo.' he grimaced. 'She'll be heartbroken when she finds out he's dead.'

The day was barely halfway through, and it was already shaping up into one of those. Yet, just when everything looked like it was going to shit, Percy found some unexpected hope in the library.

'Holy crap! This is an absolute game-changer! I really need to win the competition!'

Diving into the books, it hadn't taken him long to figure out what the Wiseman's Chamber was. He'd already guessed it had to be a valuable reward based on everyone's reactions, but the specifics still surprised him.

Apparently, it was a specialized facility that the academy had invested countless resources to construct. To put into perspective how expensive it was, it had already been over three hundred years since the school built it, yet they had no intention of creating a second anytime soon.

As for what made it so special? It wasn't any one thing by itself, but lots of minor boosts that added up to a pretty powerful overall effect, making it one of the best places for students to practice their magic and overcome their bottlenecks.

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For instance, the academy had employed Blue runecrafters with a time affinity to enchant it, so that time inside the chamber passed faster than outside. Naturally, the effect was orders of magnitude weaker than the Thirsty Valley they had on Remior, but that was only to be expected, since it was created by mortals rather than a titan. The scope of the enchantment was countless times smaller too, as it only spanned a room large enough for a single student rather than an entire region.

Still, the 50% boost it provided meant that 3 days outside amounted to 4.5 inside. Not that huge by itself, but that was just the start. The air in the chamber was constantly pumped full of inhalables of various types, making studying in there much more effective.

Among the listed potions, Percy had recognized a few, as they were similar to the ones he'd encountered in the Guild. Namely, they used healing potions to keep one's body in perfect condition and maintain their stamina, as well as enlightenment potions to clear one's mind and accelerate their learning speed. They even used rejuvenation potions to help students relax and avoid the need to rest, as well as magic potions – rich in pure mana – boosting one's mana regeneration.

'Well, I guess the life mana won't be of any help to me, unless the room can provide enough for my second core… Still, the rest should be useful…'

Finally, there was another resource called Wiseman's Dust. In fact, it was the most valuable thing in the entire school, as well as the origin of the room's name. According to the book, there was only one known way to produce it, and the conditions for that were extremely rare.

Wiseman's Dust was nothing more than the impurities expelled from a demigod's body as they ascended to godhood, rebuilding themselves into a more perfect existence.

Suffice to say, this wasn't very useful for the gods themselves – it was no different from a snake's shed skin or the fragments of a bird's eggshell. However, it was downright priceless for mortals, as merely sitting in its vicinity supposedly enhanced their ability to comprehend new things.

'It's amazing that Rhaziel donated such a precious thing to the academy.' Percy realized.

Wiseman's Dust was ultimately a consumable resource, even though each grain lasted for countless years. Granted, Rhaziel had only gifted the academy with less than a handful – plenty to fuel the chamber for a long time to come. Still, Percy would have expected him to reserve every last trace solely

for their Green-borns. In fact, he guessed this was probably what the Divine Order did back home with theirs.

'I suppose it has to do with Felmara's limited population.'

The natives didn't have any bloodlines to mutate, nor the means to turn their Yellow-borns into gods, but that didn't mean their mortals were entirely useless. They could still work to develop the local branches of alchemy and runecrafting, which would benefit everyone. A small world like this probably had to do everything in their power to survive. And the fact that their technological prowess seemed to exceed that of Remior's despite Felmara's smaller size was proof that this had been the right move.

'Either way, this is quite the opportunity for me.'

Whether it was the time acceleration, the inhalables, or the Wiseman's Dust, each individual component only contributed in a small way, but it all compounded into quite a powerful effect. Percy estimated that a few days in the chamber would probably amount to months of practice outside.

This way, he could forget about pre-casting for now and devote the entire term to mastering the restructuring principle, winning the competition in the process. Then, he could take advantage of the chamber to make up for the lost time, blitzing through the pre-casting exercises during his stay in the room.

It was still a bit of a gamble, of course. He wasn't as worried about his classmates beating him, but he had no idea if meeting Dugris's demands was even possible in the first place. However, if this worked, he'd get so much more value out of this trip.

'And if I'm lucky, the room might help Leo recover too…'

Many of the inhalables used in the chamber were rich in mind mana. Spending several days breathing them in was his best shot at mending the kid's mind. Once again, he wasn't sure it would work – there was no guarantee that Leo's mind was even salvageable – but it wasn't like he had a better plan. And he owed Lyn and Klatz to at least try, given how warmly they'd treated him over the past few weeks.

Returning the book to its shelf, Percy then grabbed the ones on alchemy again, ready to resume his studies. Now that he no longer had to worry about being allowed into the class, he could focus exclusively on the chapters related to his goal.

Like a sponge, he absorbed everything the library contained on pill creation, cross-referencing the theory with his past experiences – both in the lab yesterday, but also his time with Enki.

'There's only 13 weeks left this term, and the pills are among the easiest brews… Whatever happens, I need to get that done in the next two classes, to leave myself enough time for the rest.'

Chapter 267: Not a bad place to live

The next few weeks passed by in a flash.

True to his word, Percy didn't miss a single class since he cleared the air with Dugris. Even better, he made great progress in his studies, learning all sorts of valuable things every single day.

Cosmic Studies, in particular, was the highlight of Percy's week. Not that he didn't enjoy the other classes, but Mrs. Lia's lectures were unique in more than one way. First, the lessons themselves didn't require him to do any work – he could just switch his brain off and enjoy the teacher's soothing voice as she taught them about the universe.

The content of the course was also quite intriguing. The kind Blue gradually introduced many of the known greater springs in detail, sharing all sorts of useful information that would come in handy during his future travels. Of course, not everything about them was public knowledge, as every race in the universe went to great lengths to keep the most sensitive details about their civilization under wraps.

For example, Percy was confident the Divine Order did their best to hide both the Fungal Spire's existence and the nature of their Decrees from outsiders. That said, there was a limit to what they could do. Simply by virtue of Remior producing gods, others could infer they had a means of advancement. Iapetus's Decree was also difficult to hide, given that Remior's gods and demigods had to use their bloodlines against their enemies. The same could be said about the Thirsty Valley, as other factions wouldn't have missed the sudden jumps in his people's age and grade.

'Phoebe's Decree is the only one that might have not leaked yet…'

And the same was true for many of the greater springs that ruled the universe. Not everything was known about them, but outsiders could still infer a lot of information based on random clues here and there. There was also a huge intergalactic market for this sort of thing, so whenever some news leaked, it tended to spread like wildfire.

'As expected, most of the peak factions have reached their status due to a higher advancement speed.' Percy realized.

According to Mrs. Lia, over 600 of the 888 greater springs had shown signs of cleansing their cores faster. Unfortunately, he had no way to tell which of them had accomplished that via the cyan powder. He guessed it had to be the majority, and visiting any of them might be a waste of time.

'No. They're still peak factions. I'm sure they're worth a trip.'

Even if their means of advancement overlapped with his, it didn't mean there was nothing else of value to be found there. Those civilizations were bound to have a ton of Decrees and other resources.

That said, he'd much rather visit one of the other 300 or so places that were estimated to have reached their status due to their longer lifespans. The ones that had naturally evolved to live longer wouldn't necessarily benefit him, but the ones who had extended their longevity through artificial means might.

And there was another thing that piqued his curiosity.

"Some civilizations were found to possess certain blessings at much higher rates than what should be possible. We don't know the reason for that – the possibility of a god passing down a blessing to their children is supposed to be fixed, and rather small. Yet, every demigod on Ignius with the fire affinity possesses the blessing of heat. And that's not the only place where something similar has been observed." she said one day.

Unlike her, Percy had a pretty good guess about it though.

‘Those factions must possess Rings of Sacrilege!’ he realized. ‘But why don’t the Felmarans know about them? Has Rhaziel kept the information from the mortals? Or do the gods not know about the rings either?’

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Apparently, this piece of knowledge that Metatron had so easily shared with him might be a little more esoteric than he’d initially believed. The guy must’ve really wanted him to keep an eye out for any news of the lost rings…

In any case, Percy took mental notes of all the important things Kemdahlia shared. The factions that he suspected had rings, the ones that might have an interesting Decree for him to snatch, the ones that he thought could help with his lifespan…

Not that he had any way of targeting them at the moment, but he wanted to at least recognize them if he found himself in any of those places by accident. Leaving from a greater spring empty-handed because he failed to realize its worth would be a colossal waste.

In any case, his other courses had progressed well too. Pre-casting less so than Alchemy, as he hadn’t had as much time to work on it outside his classes, opting to invest all his afternoons into mastering the restructuring principle instead.

‘It’s fine… I’ll make up for it once I earn a spot in the Wiseman’s Chamber.’ he’d kept reassuring himself.

Of course, neither Lonan nor his classmates were privy to his thoughts. From their perspective, Percy was just a lazy bum, so they all continued to throw disdainful looks his way with every chance they got. But he didn’t pay them any heed, progressing in his own pace.

Alchemy 10 was arguably where he’d made the greatest strides, however.

“26%.” Dugris declared during the fourth session, pinching Percy’s healing pill between his thumb and index finger. “Leo is officially the first one to earn a point!”

It wasn't Percy's first pill, though it was the first one to reach an acceptable yield. Some of the other kids had partially succeeded too, but none of their pills had even approached a standard dosage.

"Keep working hard if you want to beat him." Dugris told the others, before turning back to look at him. "And you should also keep the good work up. Don't get complacent. Have you thought about the next brew?"

"Yeah." Percy nodded. "I'll stick with healing potions, but I'll try turning them into gels this time."

It wasn't a random choice. Granted, gels weren't necessarily all that different from potions, often used in similar ways. Still, he had a couple of reasons for picking them. First, he technically had some experience with gels too, as many of the things they brewed on Remior – including the elixirs – involved a gelatinous phase.

Not a stable one though, as it would lose its efficacy very quickly when somebody tried to store it, turning into inert sludge within hours. Remior's alchemists had to distil it immediately into a liquid, before that happened.

In order to create stable gels, one needed to infuse them with an ingredient rich in mud mana – the composite affinity made of earth and water. Still, his experience in handling the unstable gels would make his life a little easier.

And there was another reason why he'd picked them. While he didn't have any use for them directly, the method of brewing gels was closely related to that of the third and final product he intended to work on, so he hoped it would help him save some time.

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"I'm glad you're doing better!" Klatz said after swallowing his noodles.

He, Percy and Lyn were currently having lunch in the garden, sitting on one of the benches close to Rhaziel's statue, enjoying the view. The tall construct looked even more majestic during the day, its smooth surface shining brightly under the suns' rays.

“Right! Don’t pay those idiots in Pre-casting any attention.” Lyn added. “They’ve no idea how tough the past year has been for you. Just the fact that you’ve stopped taking those pills and started attending your classes is a huge win in my book.”

Percy nodded, though he didn’t say anything.

Ever since he realized the Wiseman’s Chamber might help him heal Leo, he felt a weight lifted off his chest. He wasn’t sure it would work out in the end, but the fact that he was doing everything he could alleviated much of his guilt.

Consequently, he’d allowed himself to hang out with the kids more often. He’d even started to genuinely enjoy their time together! He still had to keep his words to a minimum of course, afraid of saying something weird. But socializing with them grew easier the more he got to know them.

‘Felmara wouldn’t be a bad place to live.’ he thought at some point, surprising himself.

But he smiled bitterly the very next moment, realizing how foolish the idea was. Sure, this place was a peaceful paradise as long as he posed as a native, but they were bound to be hostile towards humans. Besides, he had no way to bring his real body here, nor could he just abandon his friends and family back home.

‘Still… I’m glad I ended up here. The things I’ve learned aside, it’s quite an eye-opening experience. Life can be so much better than what most people in the universe think…’

Chapter 268: Ink

More lumps formed inside the cauldron than usual, as the fungal tar Percy had added to the concoction had greatly raised its viscosity. The good news was that the lumps caused by the mud mana were much easier to dissolve than the ones which emerged due to the healing potion itself.

The only problem was telling the two types apart, which he needed to do before deciding the best way to handle them. Sadly, that would only come with experience. Or cheating.

‘Man, this would be so much easier if I had my eyes...’ Percy grimaced.

Turning the heat off, he waited a few seconds for the bubbling mixture to calm down. Only about a quarter of the potion remained, settling into a gelatinous substance he had to scrape off the base of the cauldron. His heart bled seeing how little had survived, especially since it was already the ninth week of the course.

Sure, a 25% yield would be considered good if he was brewing cultivation resources. It was enough to produce a single dose of elixir, or a core-cleansing pill, and thus not lose any money in the process. However, that was only acceptable for novices, and only because handling beast mana was a three-step process at minimum.

When it came to simple potions or potion-adjacent products like the olive-coloured gel he was currently pouring into a vial, ruining three quarters of the material was downright embarrassing. Maybe not for the other students – most of whom were still struggling with the first of Dugris's objectives – but certainly so for Percy.

He knew he could easily raise his yield to over 60% in a week even without his mutation if he devoted all his time to this. Sadly, each alchemy session only lasted a few hours, so he hadn't actually spent that long in the lab.

'In any case, this should be enough for Dugris.' he shrugged, seeing the guy nod at him in approval.

And the alchemy teacher wasn't the only one to have finally taken notice of Percy's progress.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new alchemic principle: Restructuring!]

Reading the notification, he let out a sigh of relief. His Status hadn't registered the new principle back when he brewed the healing pill, and for good reason. Unlike the other principles he'd mastered in the past, restructuring was multifaceted, involving several types of alchemic transformations.

Succeeding at one of them was hardly enough to be considered a master. Of course, brewing two kinds of products wasn't that much better – there were still all sorts of things Percy had yet to touch, such as inhalables, soluble tablets or turning non-liquids into potions.

But it was more than enough to understand the common features that transferred from one transformation to another. Plus, he'd read much of the underlying theory pertaining to the other products, even if he had yet to put all of that into practice. Evidently, that had pushed him past some invisible threshold in the eyes of his Decree.

'This is good. Or will be, at any rate…'

Once he brought the principle back to his main body, he'd have an easier time exploring the rest of its intricacies, thanks to his eyes. Unfortunately, it wouldn't help him with the final part of Dugris's challenge.

"Excellent work, Leo!" the teacher exclaimed, oblivious to his thoughts.

The other students, too, abandoned their own failed concoctions, surrounding Percy. Looking at the glowing gel swirling inside the vial, they broke into applause, honest smiles painting most of their faces. Well, except for a couple of kids who'd still hoped they stood a chance of beating him. Their expressions were a touch sourer, as Percy's latest achievement had finally burst that bubble for good.

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"You still have 6 weeks until the end of the term." Dugris continued, ignoring the other students. "Are you feeling confident about it?"

Percy pondered the question. Strictly speaking, it had taken him under two thirds of the course to get through the first two objectives. Based on that alone, he should be optimistic about his chances. Especially considering that the first week had been wasted on Dugris's test.

That said, things weren't as peachy if he looked at it from a different angle. After all, the gel had taken him twice as long as the pill to complete, for a very simple reason. The mud mana required for the gels was a composite affinity, introducing more variables into the process than the earth mana needed for the pills. All things considered, completing the final objective in time was going to be tough.

"Succeed or not, I'll do my best." he ultimately said.

“A good attitude to have. What are you going to try next?” Dugris asked.

This time, Percy didn’t need to think about it, having made his mind up weeks ago.

“Tattoo ink.”

The teacher raised an eyebrow upon hearing that.

“You know that’s actually one of the toughest products, right?”

Percy nodded.

Tattoo ink was in many ways similar to gels, as it also involved mud mana. In fact, this was exactly why Percy had even worked on gels in the first place – to lay the groundwork for this.

The only difference was that tattoo ink required a very precise viscosity to work. If it was too thick, it wouldn’t flow through the needle. If it was too thin, it would scatter under the skin before it had the chance to coalesce, getting absorbed by the body prematurely. That meant that he had to be extremely careful with the ratio of the secondary ingredients to get it right.

“I trust you understand how troublesome they are to use?” Dugris pressed him again.

Besides the difficulty in brewing them, applying tattoo-based potions was a challenge in and of itself. From what Percy had read, he would have to inject the ink between the first and second layers of his skin, allowing it to settle there. It was a tedious and time-consuming process he’d have to undergo for every potion he wanted to prepare.

Even worse, the tattoo wasn’t permanent. Granted, it would easily last a year before degrading, but it would eventually disperse on its own and get absorbed by the body, wasting the potion completely.

‘Yet, the upsides outweigh the downsides in my case.’

It was the perfect way to use his mushroom-based potions, as they would be far more effective when injected directly into his body. It would also be easier to use them in the middle of a battle, as he'd only have to focus some of his own mana into the tattoo to break it and force it to be absorbed.

At least, it was more subtle than having to drink a potion and wait for it to take effect in front of his opponent. Overall, he figured that having the ability to discreetly use a more potent potion at a moment's notice made up for the effort required to brew and draw the tattoo.

The only thing he hadn't been sure of was whether Synchronization risked activating the tattoos by accident. Fortunately, it hadn't taken him long to learn that his worries had been misplaced. After all, the Felmarans had a boosting art of their own, so they'd naturally considered this. Apparently, the passive mana flow permeating one's body wasn't enough to trigger the tattoos – one had to actively gather a larger amount of mana on their skin.

"Yes, sir. I've thought long and hard about this. I know it might not be the easiest way to win your challenge, but I appreciate how much I can learn from the process." Percy replied, lying through his teeth. He couldn't exactly explain his real reasons behind his decision.

Dugris just patted his shoulder, not saying anything else. After checking the time, he called the class over, letting the kids go.

Normally, Percy would have headed straight to the cafeteria, to have lunch with his friends before hitting the library for the rest of the day. However, he had decided to skip all that today, having something more urgent to tend to.

Entering his room, he dropped his stuff on the desk, before sitting cross legged on his bed. As much as he would have liked to put more work into Alchemy or Pre-casting, the end of the term was getting closer by the day, so there was one more thing he needed to squeeze into his schedule.

Inhaling deeply, Percy drew as much mana as he could into his core, before pushing the rest into his channels. Picturing the vibrant gales on Micky's plumage, he tried to recall the correct pattern for the boosting art, and to adapt it to Leo's physiology.

At first, he made several mistakes. Sometimes, he drove the mana into a dead-end and he had to forcefully expel it from his pores before it did any harm. Other times, he found that his body was missing some of Micky's channels entirely, having different ones in their place. Whenever that happened, he had to adjust entire sections of the pattern, to resolve all the emergent conflicts. But no matter what, he persisted, knowing he didn't have long to master the spell.

'7 weeks until they bring in the guest lecturer… I need to have Circulation down by then.'

Chapter 269: Blumbins

A soft flame burned over Lyn's palm, bathing their surroundings in its golden radiance. Percy had to admit, he was impressed she could maintain the spell for so long with just an Orange core.

From what she'd explained, the trick lay in diffusing the fire mana through multiple channels before releasing it. By spreading the heat as thinly as possible, she maximized brightness while minimizing her energy consumption.

'I guess she hasn't been slacking in the Pre-casting classes.'

Lyn had once mentioned her dream of becoming a world-renowned chef. Mastering her fire magic had never been about combat – she saw it as another tool among many that she hoped would help her in the kitchen.

Still, Percy wasn't thrilled about staying up this late. The term was ending in just a few days, and he had yet to brew the ink for Dugris. His air Circulation technique also needed more practice. He could activate it and maintain it for a while by now, but moving without messing up the flow was a challenge.

Given all that, he had initially wanted to decline Lyn's invitation, thinking his time was better spent studying or resting. However, he just hadn't found it in his heart to turn her down, seeing how excited she'd been. Especially knowing how little time he had left with her and Klatz.

Regardless of whether he succeeded in healing Leo, he was unlikely to see either of them again after leaving Felmara. The least he could do – given all the kindness they'd shown him – was to hang out a few more times…

Then again, he wasn't the only one regretting the lost sleep tonight.

"Lyn, can you remind me why we couldn't just go for a picnic during the day?" Klatz grumbled, his voice still a little raspy.

"Like I said, this isn't a regular picnic!" she rolled her eyes. "Just wait a little longer. I promise it's worth it."

The trio had already trekked several miles from the academy buildings. Technically, they were still within the school's premises, though the area here was far less manicured. The neatly arranged flowerbeds and the cobblestone paths had long given way to wild grasslands, the knee-high blades swaying gently in the night breeze.

The overgrown terrain made for slow and slightly eerie travel. If Percy hadn't already learned that the academy routinely culled any dangerous beasts in the region, he might have been a little more on edge.

Eventually, a small grove rose in the horizon. Unlike the oak-like trees with the pink trunks and blue leaves he'd seen closer to the school, these trees were different. Their leaves were still a shade of blue, but they were shaped like needles. The trees were much taller too, their bark a familiar brown colour that one might see on Remior.

As soon as the tiny forest came into view, Lyn picked up the pace, practically dragging the others forward with renewed vigour.

"We're nearly there! You brought the rug and plates, right?"

"For the third time, it's all in my backpack!" Klatz groaned.

The kids didn't stop until they reached a clearing in the middle of the grove. Only then did Klatz lay down the rug, Lyn placing the basket of pastries she'd hung over her shoulder in the middle. Next, they sat in a loose circle around it.

Percy felt a twinge of guilt as he realized he hadn't contributed as much. The only thing he'd brought were a few snacks from the vending machine. But neither Lyn nor Klatz seemed to mind, the latter absentmindedly grabbing a handful of krimbian leaves before tossing them in his mouth. Meanwhile, Lyn passed Percy a loaf of bread, warming it slightly with a touch of mana.

He appreciated the warmth spreading through his fingers before biting a chunk off.

"This tastes… different from the last one you gave me." he remarked between chews.

Lyn grinned.

"They can't all be the same, can they? I played around with the fermentation process this time."

Percy nodded, taking another bite. The night air was a little colder than he'd like, but the warmth of the food and the quiet company made up for it. For now, at least, the weight of their upcoming goodbyes could wait.

"Lyn… your pastries are awesome as always, but I'm still not seeing why we had to come here this late." Klatz said once more. This time, he sounded more curious than annoyed though.

"Of course you don't!" her grin widened. "That's because the main event has yet to start! Just give it another hour or so."

Accepting her response for now, neither Klatz nor Percy dwelled on it any further, appreciating their time together instead. They chatted about all sorts of things, from their classes, to gossiping about their classmates, to the new lomerian kebabs in the cafeteria.

Stolen story; please report.

At some point, the topic shifted to the upcoming term, the kids asking each other what subjects they planned to study. Suffice to say, Percy was forced to lie to them again, saying he would stick with Alchemy and Pre-casting, replacing Cosmic Studies with Affinities.

The truth was, he intended to leave right after the Mana Flow lecture. Although he hadn't made as much progress with pre-casting as he would have liked, he still hoped to make up for that in the Wiseman's Chamber. Meanwhile, the things he'd learned in the other courses were already plenty to bring back home.

Not that there wasn't more to learn on Felmara, but he'd already hit diminishing returns in terms of usefulness, and there were plenty of other places in the universe he wanted to visit. Staying any longer just wasn't very efficient.

"Shhhh! It's starting!" Lyn suddenly said, putting her index finger on her lips.

Percy and Klatz looked around, still unsure why she'd brought them here. At first, they didn't see anything different, though it didn't take long for the spectacle to begin.

Soon, a flock of birds stormed through the grove. They didn't just fly above the trees' crowns, but also through the tiniest gaps in their branches, and around their trunks. A few whizzed by their ears, the gust sending Percy and Klutz's manes into turmoil.

Under other circumstances, it would have been a scary scene, as the birds' wings blotted out the sky and could have easily plunged their surroundings into darkness. However, that wasn't what happened. The birds were tiny, each of them small enough to fit in Percy's palm. And their bodies shone in various colours – from fiery reds, to cold blues, to electric yellows.

It wasn't magic lighting up their flesh either. They were nothing more than regular birds, Red cores pulsing weakly in their torsos, not a speck of mana flowing in their bodies. This was just good old luminescence, like an avian version of the fireflies they had on Remior.

"They are called blumbins!" Lyn practically shouted. It was the only way to be heard over the cacophony of flapping wings. "A friend from my Cooking class told me about them! Apparently, it's currently their mating season! They spend most of the day sleeping on the trees, only waking up a few hours before sunrise, looking for a partner!"

Percy – who had used his forearms to shield his face from the flock – gave up resistance. Instead, he fell back, resting his head on the cool grass. The others followed his lead, the trio silently observing the exotic dance taking place before their eyes.

At some point, Percy noticed that only half of the birds were shining, turning the forest into a living painting of bright lights intermingling with dark shadows.

“Only the male birds glow!” Lyn suddenly said, explaining the phenomenon. “They’re competing for the females’ attention!”

The dance continued for several minutes, only beginning to die down when the first rays of sunlight pierced through the thicket. By now, the kids’ hearts were racing in their chests, the exotic performance having stirred more than a few feelings.

“I take all my complaints back!” Klatz exclaimed once it was all over. “Thanks for bringing us here! This was definitely worth losing a few hours of sleep!”

Lyn wasn’t paying him any attention, however. Instead, she grabbed Percy’s hand, looking him in the eyes.

“Leo. Can you do me a favour?” she asked, her voice soft and wavering.

“Huh?” Percy was taken aback by her sudden move.

As much as he enjoyed her and Klatz’s company, he had no intention of getting any closer to her than he already had. She was just a kid, and he wasn’t even the person she thought him to be. Not to mention that he had a girlfriend back home.

Yet, her next words weren’t what he had expected.

“Please, don’t go to the Mana Flow lecture.” she said, the corners of her eyes glistening with tears.

“Lyn, what are you saying?!” Klatz exploded, struggling to mask his shock.

But she ignored him, speaking again.

“Just make up some excuse! Tell them you’re sick! Hell, take a few of those sleeping pills if you have to! I know how much we’ve pressured you into getting off them but… maybe just this once… it’s better than the alternative…” she begged, her voice cracking.

Percy was too stunned to speak, her request having come out of the blue. Instead, it was Klatz who protested.

“Lyn!” he yelled again, some anger seeping into his voice this time. “You know that missing the Mana Flow lectures is a serious offense! Are you trying to get him in trouble?!”

She bit her lip at the accusation, her fingers clenching tightly around Percy’s.

“I know… But you saw what happened last year!” she cried. “I just don’t get why Lord Rhaziel wants the course to be taught in such a barbaric manner! Why can’t they just teach us like all the other classes?!” she asked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Needless to say, Percy was racking his brain to figure out what she was talking about. He’d long guessed there was something weird going on with the Mana Flow course, but he couldn’t ask people directly. Yet, Lyn’s words had given him a few more clues.

‘Barbaric? Do they beat the kids up if they fail to make progress?’

This would be completely out of character compared to everything else he’d seen on Felmara. Most of the people he’d met were kind and reasonable – students and teachers alike. The academy was fair and efficient, the kids treated with respect and taught with patience.

Then again, he could see why Mana Flow would be handled differently to the other subjects. If it was half as powerful as Circulation, it made sense that Rhaziel wanted all his people to learn it without exception. Perhaps a carrot and stick approach was simply the most effective way to accomplish that.

‘Is this what led to Leo’s death?’

Maybe the boy hadn't been very talented in it, receiving a nasty beating as punishment. That could explain why he'd withdrawn from his friends and ended up addicted to the pills. Then again, it didn't answer everything. Why would everyone treat him so coldly if it was just that? There had to be more he was missing.

"It's not our place to question Lord Rhaziel." Klatz said in a severe tone. "I don't like how the course is taught either, but the gods are the ones who know what's best for our world. Just, don't let things go like they did last year…"

Lyn looked like she wanted to say something, but Percy stopped her, squeezing her hand gently.

"Thank you for looking out for me, but Klatz is right. I need to attend that lesson."

Whatever the case, Mana Flow was easily the most valuable thing on Felmara. Percy couldn't possibly miss his one opportunity to learn it.

"But what if the same thing happens? What if you get seriously hurt this time?!"

Percy looked at her in the eyes, not daring to blink.

"No matter what happens, I promise you I'll take care of myself."

'And I'll do everything I can to protect Leo too…' he kept that last part to himself.

Chapter 270: Last class

Percy carefully poured the contents of the cauldron into the funnel, counting each droplet as it trickled into the pinkie-sized vial.

'…99… 100… 101.'

Technically, this was already more than a full dose – enough to meet Dugris's objective. But Percy didn't rush to celebrate, not feeling great about this batch. Shaking the vial, he watched the liquid with bated breath. It glowed with an olive-coloured light, releasing a faint scent of mint.

More importantly, however, it barely swirled inside the tube, moving more like syrup than water. A frown creased Percy's face. Sure enough, it was another failure…

"Sorry, kid. This is almost as thick as a gel. No way it passes through a needle." Dugris agreed with his assessment, patting his shoulder apologetically.

"Alright." Percy sighed. "I still have time for three more tries, right?"

Getting a nod back from the teacher, he washed his tools, starting over. This time, he adjusted the amount of fungal tar, hoping the small tweak would make all the difference.

Unlike his previous brews, the tattoo ink was judged not only by its quantity, but also its quality. If it was too viscous for its intended purpose, then it didn't really matter how much of it he made.

Not that the batch he'd just brewed was completely worthless – it could still be consumed like a regular potion. Still, that defeated the whole purpose of adding the mud mana in the first place, meaning that Percy had just wasted his time and resources for nothing.

'Maybe I should have picked something easier for the last brew…' he thought as he waited for the cauldron to heat up.

Funnily enough, he'd already achieved both the correct viscosity and a sufficient yield to win the challenge. Just never in the same batch. Suffice to say, it was only a matter of time until he got it right. Unfortunately, time was the one thing he was quickly running out of, as today was the last class this term. If he failed, he'd miss the opportunity to enter the Wiseman's Chamber and, with it, several months' worth of free training.

Even worse, he'd lose his only chance to heal Leo. Should that happen, the boy would die shortly after he left Felmara, turning Klatz and Lyn's worlds upside down.

‘No. No second-guessing.’ he shook his head, fixing his gaze on the cauldron. ‘It’s way too late to try something else. Besides, I haven’t lost yet. I just need to make the next couple of attempts count.’

Pushing away his doubts, he focused entirely on his craft. Using both his eyesight and Mana Sense, he watched the mixture closely, responding to every shift in the cauldron the moment it happened.

He wasn’t alone either. He’d drawn quite an audience by now, both the teacher and the other students having long abandoned their own tasks, opting to observe him instead. The kids had already given up on the competition, accepting they wouldn’t get anything more done this term. Most of them were still stuck on the second objective, though a couple had yet to make it past the pill.

Several minutes passed as the cauldron bubbled, over a dozen pairs of eyes glued to the concoction. Yet, the lab was silent as a graveyard, nobody daring to utter a sound, afraid of distracting him.

Once the reaction was complete, Percy lowered the temperature again, pouring the ink into another vial. This time, he exhaled in relief upon seeing it flow much more smoothly than before.

“The viscosity is perfect.” Dugris confirmed.

A wave of gasps rippled through the room, as everyone waited patiently for the result. Only one thing remained – the quantity of the ink!

“…97… 98… 99.”

Percy’s heart clenched as the last droplet he needed stubbornly refused to come out.

“Come on, Leo! You can do it!”

“Yeah, you still have two more attempts!”

“Almost there!”

“You just need a bit of luck!”

Percy glanced around the room, some warmth spreading through his chest as he listened to his classmates cheer him on. Even Dugris nodded at him approvingly, the stern man having come to respect him over the past few weeks – a stark contrast to their rocky start.

Rinsing his equipment again, he grabbed six more vials. Uncorking them all, he emptied the first four into the cauldron – the ones with the healing potions. The others were full of tar, so he stopped about halfway through the last one. Then, with steady hands, he began to stir, reigniting the heat.

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Soon, the third batch was done.

Before evaluating it, Percy took a few deep breaths to calm down, wiping the sweat off his brow with his elbow. Needless to say, the suspense had taken its toll on him – there was just too much riding on this.

Upon pouring the ink into the vial, one thing immediately became clear. The quality was a little worse this time, the liquid being slightly too watery. Percy’s expression fell, as did the other students’.

But he didn’t let it get to him. The difference was small, so it wasn’t necessarily a failure. It would all depend on Dugris’s judgement. For now, Percy was better off making sure the quantity was sufficient.

“…100… 101… 102!” he exclaimed.

Everyone’s faces lit up at the sound of that, but they weren’t as quick to celebrate. They turned to their teacher, looking at him expectantly. Picking the vial up, Dugris held it in front of his eyes, giving it a swirl. With his free hand, he rubbed his chin as he scrutinized Percy’s brew.

The latter couldn’t help but nervously tap his foot, and he wasn’t the only one. It wasn’t until a couple minutes later that the man finally spoke, putting them out of their misery.

“Let’s see… I’m sure you’ve realized it’s a bit worse than the last one. Personally, I’d be embarrassed to sell this in a store.”

As soon as his words fell, the room broke in disappointed groans and clicking tongues.

Percy was about to clean up his equipment to prepare for the final attempt, when Dugris unexpectedly grabbed his forearm.

“Don’t be in such a rush – I wasn’t done.” he chuckled, some new hope flashing in everyone’s eyes. “Sure, it’s not ideal, but I think it’s just about thick enough to form a stable tattoo. It might come out a little distorted, but it’ll do it’s job…”

“You mean… the challenge…?” Percy’s heart skipped a beat.

Dugris smiled.

“Congratulations, Leo! I honestly thought I’d made the challenge too tough for you guys, but you proved me wrong.”

The room erupted in cheers, as everyone took turns hi-fiving Percy and showering him with praise. Dugris didn’t stop them either, allowing the kids to celebrate for a few minutes. Only then did he clear his throat, causing the chatter to die down.

“Alright, pipe down everyone. I’ll talk to Leo after the class about his prize. For now, we still have about half an hour left. I could have asked you all to attempt another brew, but I have something else in mind.”

The students looked at him in confusion, though nobody spoke, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Leo. Open the cabinet to your right, and bring me the set of needles on the top shelf. I’ll give you all a practical demonstration of how to inscribe a tattoo. And you can keep it afterwards. Think of it as a bonus reward for the added difficulty.”

Percy nearly jumped from his seat, struggling to contain his excitement. Sure, the tattooing process wasn't as hard as brewing the ink, and he'd already read up on the theory, so he was confident he could figure it out by himself. Still, learning directly from a master would save him a lot of effort and wasted potions later. Alas, there was a small problem with this…

"Sir, I'm grateful for the offer, but do you mind giving somebody else the tattoo? I'd rather experiment some other time by myself…"

Obviously, the teacher found his excuse a little odd, but he didn't make a big deal out of it. Shrugging, he called another boy forward – Korin, the second best in the class.

The real reason why Percy had refused was because the Moirais' Decree would have gobbled up the life mana the moment the ink touched his body. In fact, he had been forced to handle all the ingredients with extreme caution over the past few weeks, to avoid ruining them or exposing himself.

Over the remainder of the lesson, Dugris explained everything to the students, from how deep into the skin they were supposed to penetrate, to how they were meant to pour the ink into the needles.

'Will I have to commission specialized needles back home?' Percy wondered.

Probably not. He couldn't craft such a thin object with his reinforced mana yet, but he could control the soft variant a lot better, and it should be more than hard enough to pierce through his skin.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Dugris completed the tattoo on Korin's shoulder. He didn't go for anything fancy, just a simple circle, choosing functionality over beauty. Even then, the circle came out a little crude, its perimeter somewhat fuzzy.

"Like I said, this is what happens when the ink is thinner than it should be." Dugris explained, though he failed to fully mask the embarrassment in his voice.

Percy didn't know if the problem lay with the ink, or with Dugris's skill, but it didn't really matter. The tattoo was barely visible under the boy's fur, and it would be gone in a year at most.

As soon as he was done, Dugris kicked the other students out of the lab, asking Percy to stay behind.

“You will enter the chamber next Resting Day – so the day after tomorrow.” the teacher said.

“This soon?!” Percy raised an eyebrow, not having expected that.

“Why? Is there a problem?”

“Not at all!” Percy hurriedly said, more than satisfied with this result. “I just thought I’d have to wait in a queue.”

This was something he’d been worried about. There was only one training room, and hundreds of teachers in the academy – each with a recommendation to give. Had the Wiseman’s Chamber been booked for the next several weeks, he wouldn’t have known where to cry.

“There are queues sometimes, but not in the middle of the year.” Dugris explained. “Most of the teachers give their recommendations near the exams, after making their minds up, with some of them spilling over to the start of the next year. But I’m confident it’s free next week. I checked yesterday, and I’ll book it for you as soon as we’re done here.”

“Thank you, sir. Both for this opportunity, and for the course.” Percy said, giving the man a deep bow. “I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I’ve really enjoyed your classes.”

“Don’t mention it. You’ve earned this through your hard work, Leo. I was a fool for nearly kicking you out.”

Percy nodded. Picking his stuff up, he was about to leave the lab, when Dugris spoke again.

“Before you go, let me offer you a word of warning.”

“Hmmm?” Percy tilted his head, having no idea what this was about.

“The next Mana Flow class will take place in the Auditorium, two days after you exit the chamber. And Lord Rhaziel will personally oversee the lecture, as always.”

The teacher’s words sent Percy’s mind into turmoil. The last thing he’d expected was to come face to face with a god. But he bottled his emotions up, not letting them show on his face. If this was truly a common occurrence, then Leo was supposed to know about it. Either way, Dugris wasn’t done.

“Son, I’ve no idea what madness possessed you last year but… I really hope – for your sake – that you don’t do anything stupid this time.”