Wanderer 281

Chapter 281: Extending the trip

“Glad to hear it.” Metatron said before sending him flying out of a freshly opened exit in the cube with a wave of his tentacle, leaving only Gabe and Tlaloc behind.

“Oh, and I noticed you amassed quite a few credits last time you were here… Tell you what… If you can get to 5000, I’ll give you something you can’t find elsewhere.” the titan added right as the door closed.

Leo’s body only came to a halt after tumbling over a dozen metres. Percy winced as he pulled himself up, rubbing his aching nose. This would have hurt a lot more if his host hadn’t been at Yellow. The bastard could have just asked him to leave instead of tossing him out like garbage. Hell, he could have simply teleported him out if he wanted.

‘And I was hoping to catch up with Gabe too… I suppose I’ll have to find him and Nolan later.’

Glancing around, Percy quickly noticed he was in the same area as the challenge cubes, though the place Metatron had just kicked him out of wasn’t one of them. It was probably some kind of personal training room or something.

Entering the nearest unoccupied cube, Percy leaned back on the wall, sliding down to the floor weakly. There were several things he needed to do, but he could use a few minutes to unwind.

‘It’s been one hell of a day…’ he smiled bitterly.

His time on Felmara had been extremely fruitful, even before the “Mana Flow” class. Yet, his greatest gain in this entire trip was easily the final step of the boosting art. Granted, he’d only caught a glimpse of Tlaloc’s demonstration before everything went to shit, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to get a second look at it now that they were in the Vault.

Still, it had been enough for him to understand the underlying principles. It would take a while, but he should be able to replicate the spell with his pure affinity sooner or later. Adapting it to other mana types might be harder though.

Part of him was tempted to leave right away: to bring everything back to his main body. But he still had a few matters to take care of.

'Now what?' Leo suddenly asked, beating him to the punch.

The boy had tried to put on a brave front, but Percy hadn't missed the fear leaking through their connection. And he didn't blame him for it either. In many ways, it had been an even messier day for the kid: he came back from the dead, only to be transported to a different world mere minutes later, leaving everything behind without even a chance to say goodbye to his friends.

Alas, there wasn't much either of them could do about it.

'Luckily for you, the meeting went well. Metatron only cares about himself, but at least I'm useful to him, so I can strike a favourable deal every now and then.'

'So, are we gonna be stuck here for the rest of our lives?'

'Sorry, kid.' Percy sighed. 'Finding a way to bring you all out is one of my long-term goals, but I can't promise anything. I'll introduce you to the others later. They'll help you settle in.'

Next, he proceeded to explain how everything in the Vault worked, giving Leo a taste of what his new life was going to be like. Naturally, the kid was revulsed upon hearing how the Vault's gods mated with their own children, treating their own flesh and blood as livestock for their experiments. To his credit, he didn't complain though, knowing that none of this would have happened to him if he hadn't stood up against Rhaziel.

'Despite its flaws, life here will probably be an improvement for Tlaloc, at least.' Percy concluded. 'Just don't do anything dumb and you'll be fine.'

He spoke that last part sternly, yet he wasn't exactly angry with his host. The truth was, he'd wanted to help Tlaloc since the moment he saw him dragged into the auditorium in chains. The only reason he'd hesitated, was because he hadn't wanted to ruin Leo's life. If anything, the boy's selflessness had made his choice easier.

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Still, he'd meant it when he told him to behave. If Leo tried screaming in Metatron's face the next time he saw a kid starve to death, Percy wouldn't be able to protect him from the titan's wrath.

Only after getting a nod back did he shift his attention to other matters. Returning to the Vault this early hadn't been his intention: he hadn't even finished digesting his gains from the previous trip. Yet, here he was: and with a Yellow host at that. Not to mention an affinity he was proficient in, and with the newfound freedom to use Circulation in the challenges.

'Not pushing through the first few waves would be a colossal waste…'

Plus, there was that thing Metatron had mentioned. 5000 credits was a lot to splurge at once, but Percy knew whatever the titan gave him would be worth it. Of course, knowing how cunning the guy was, there had to be some ulterior motive behind the offer.

'Well, there's no harm in checking it out. I can always decline.'

After instructing Leo on how to clear his new channels and awaken his second core, he walked to the centre of the room, starting the first wave of the Yellow magiscript challenge.

'Draw any twenty enchantments 3000 times in total, in under 30000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn at least 100 times. At least ten different enchantments have to contain multiple runes.'

Percy frowned upon reading the requirements. Once again, the first wave was somewhere between the third and fourth waves of the previous level in difficulty. Twenty enchantments were the same as before, though he needed to pump them out faster.

'And it's specifically asking for composite enchantments this time. That's a first. I bet that's going to be the new standard moving forward.'

Overall, he wasn't too surprised. He'd always known he'd have to dig deeper into the field as he progressed through the levels. In fact, it was a good thing, as it motivated him to keep improving. Though he wasn't going to spend too much time or effort on magiscript this trip.

'Let's see if I can get through the first one before Leo is done with the core.'

It shouldn't be too hard. As luck would have it, he'd coincidentally learned to draw ten composite enchantments the last time he was here. Completing this wave was only a question of getting faster at it.

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'Enchantments: Preservation, Concealment, Hardness, Absorption, Control, Memory, Growth, Heat, Pressure, Rotation, Self-repair, Controlled-preservation, Controlled-concealment, Controlled-hardness, Controlled-absorption, Controlled-memory, Controlled-growth, Controlled-heat, Controlled-pressure, Controlled-rotation. Difficulty: 1.6. Runes drawn: 3000. Time taken: 29766 rits. Success rate: 61%. Score adjusted due to difficulty: 97%.'

"Congratulations! Wave 1 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 300. Current balance: 1829."

'About time.' Percy exhaled.

It had been four days since he arrived at the Vault. Leo had already awakened the new core: a lightning affinity one: so Percy would have given up on the magiscript challenge after this attempt, one way or the other.

Checking the requirements of the next one for future reference, he grimaced upon realizing how tough it was.

‘Draw any thirty runes 6000 times in total, in under 40000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual enchantment has to be drawn at least 100 times. At least fifteen different enchantments have to contain multiple runes.’

‘Whatever…’ he rolled his eyes. ‘Kid, are you ready to get our hands dirty?’

‘You done with runecrafting?!’ Leo asked, his voice tinged with disbelief. ‘I felt like my brain was about to melt!’

Percy clicked his tongue.

‘I know it can be boring if you’re just watching from the outside, but I would recommend that you pick up the art at some point. Not only is it the safest way to earn credits in the Vault, but magiscript is worth your time in and of itself.’

It was no secret he wasn’t a huge fan of Metatron’s personality, but there was no questioning the titan’s genius.

‘I’ll think about it.’ the boy replied non-committedly, and Percy didn’t press him any further. As useful as it was, he knew magiscript wasn’t for everyone.

The two then took a short break, eating some sizian meat as they went over their plan for the combat challenges. Other than the passive boost to their physique, the second core wouldn’t be too useful. It was a grade lower, and they’d barely opened enough channels to shoot a few bolts from their hands.

‘For now, just focus on supporting me with an odd blast here and there. I’ll do the rest.’

“Cube. Start the first wave of the ‘gauntlet’ challenge. Yellow level. User ID: WANDERER.” he said as soon as his host nodded.

“Authorization granted. Wave begins in 18 rits.”

Stretching his limbs, Percy began to take deep breaths one after the other, pumping mana into his channels.

“Wave begins in 12 rits.”

He blamed himself a little for never asking Galahad to show him the lightning pattern back when he was at the mansion. Not that they had the time to temper Leo’s channels for it, but he could have saved the boy some head-scratching if he’d known it.

‘I should try to learn all the patterns I can, given how often I change bodies. Especially now that I can get more use out of my clones.’

“Wave begins in 6 rits.”

Then, he shrugged. Either way, this was a project for the future. Right now, it was time to smash some golems.

“Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!”

Chapter 282:

The Yellow golem was nothing like the bouncing balls of the Red level, or the spider-like constructs of the Orange level. It resembled a person, much like the Green golems, yet it was far smaller than the hulking monstrosities Percy had fought alongside Gabe. Its lean frame was covered in yellow runes, its most threatening feature being the pair of long, curved blades replacing its forearms.

‘Let’s see what you’re made of, then!’

Not waiting for the golem to move, Percy rushed forward at full speed. The tar covering the floor hindered his steps at first, but he didn’t have much trouble jumping over it and running across its surface given how thick it was.

The construct lunged, aiming to pierce his head, only to hit nothing but empty air. Percy circled around it with three swift steps, each of them aided by a perfectly timed burst of wind.

Undeterred, the golem spun at its waist, sweeping its blades in a deadly arc. Anyone else in Leo's shoes might have ended up cleanly bisected by the sudden move.

But it was Percy the construct was fighting, its speed a far cry from his own. Between Circulation, the second core strengthening his physique, his fighting style honed after years of gruelling practice, and the air affinity heightening his mobility, the golem had never stood a chance.

Grabbing its upper arm with his left hand, he halted its telegraphed swing mid-motion, before clamping his right hand over its featureless face. Metal groaned as his fingers dug in, the viscous tar parting with a loud splash as he slammed the golem's head into the floor.

Squirming, it struggled to free itself, but Percy never gave it the chance. Unleashing the compressed mana he'd prepared in his core, he felt his own bones ache from the shockwave as he blasted the golem at point-blank range.

Alas, his opponent had it much worse, its head shattering into a dozen fragments, bringing the challenge to an abrupt end.

"Congratulations! Wave 1 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 300. Current balance: 2129."

'Wow, I didn't even need to use my new core!' Leo noted.

'Don't worry, you'll get your chance sooner or later. The difficulty ramps up pretty quickly.' Percy shrugged.

Despite his words, he failed to stop the corner of his lips from curling up. Judging from how easy this wave had been, and how rewarding the Yellow challenges were, getting to 5000 credits would be a breeze.

'Can you use Circulation by yourself?' he suddenly asked.

Leo shook his head. Not very surprising, given the boy's visceral reaction to the "Mana Flow" lectures. He'd clearly never put his mind to actually mastering the technique, his thoughts having been dominated by the ethical concerns surrounding the lessons.

'Alright. Pay close attention to the way the mana flows through your body as we progress. Speaking from experience, this is the fastest way to learn it.'

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

"Awarded credits: 600. Current balance: 2729."

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"Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 900. Current balance: 3629."

Once again, Percy stopped at the third wave, deciding to rest for a few hours before switching to the swarm challenge.

As expected, his opponents had grown progressively tougher, each golem sporting an additional pair of arms, their agility climbing steadily along with the weapons they carried. The last one had even managed to nick Leo's shoulder: just a shallow scratch: but proof that the next round would be a struggle. In fact, they'd even needed to draw some extra juice from the boy's second core to put the construct down.

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‘I’m sure we can push through the fourth wave with some effort, but I’d rather just get this trip over with…’ he thought, switching to the other challenge. If he did equally well there, it should be more than enough to get him the credits he needed.

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“Congratulations! Wave 1 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 300. Current balance: 3929.”

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“Congratulations! Wave 2 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 600. Current balance: 4529.”

***

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

“Awarded credits: 900. Current balance: 5429.”

It took Percy a few days to clear all the combat challenges, after which he was free to leave the challenge cube to meet up with the others. Fortunately, communication wasn’t an issue for anyone in the group, despite the fact that everyone had come from a different background. Noland had it the worst, as he wasn’t fluent in the Vault’s language just yet. Still, he’d picked up enough to hold a conversation. Meanwhile, Tlaloc had already been given a translation device from Metatron and Leo benefitted from Percy’s: though he’d have to start studying as soon as he was gone.

At any rate, Gabe was ecstatic to have his body back in perfect condition for the first time in years. His second core had yet to catch up to his first one, but he could finally start focusing on his combat

strength again. Now that his disabilities were gone and he no longer needed to worry about food, he could spend his credits on whatever he wanted.

“Man, meeting you was the best thing to ever happen to me.” he said, shaking Percy’s hand vigorously. “Not only did you save my life, you gave me a second core, negotiated a pretty nifty deal for me, and even brought Circulation to the Vault… How can I ever repay you?”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ve benefitted plenty from the Vault too.” Percy replied on the surface, though his thoughts told a different story.

Sure, he didn’t mind helping a friend in need for free, but he wouldn’t have said no if the guy wanted to give him something in return. Sadly, the Vault’s draconian rules made it impossible for people to just give each other stuff…

Regardless, Percy had paid attention to everyone’s progress with the boosting art. He still wasn’t thrilled to have handed it to Metatron, but at least the Vault’s residents would need a few years before they could use the spell. They’d have to train their bodies and temper their channels before they were even qualified to practice it… unless the titan decided to shower them with life mana to speed up the process, of course.

‘Well, whatever. What’s done is done. Let’s just complete the transaction and get the hell out of here.’

Bidding his friends farewell, Percy found a relatively remote location before reaching out to the titan using the cube’s interface. Luckily, he didn’t have to wait long for the pentapus to appear before him.

“I’ve got to say, I was impressed by your performance in the challenges this time. I suppose that’s what happens when you stop holding back on me.” the god chuckled.

Ignoring the casual compliment, Percy noticed how carefully Metatron was observing him. And it didn’t take a genius to guess why. Leo was currently running Circulation, as Percy had instructed him to keep it active on his own until he left, to get used to the pattern under his supervision. Clearly, the titan was more than happy to leech off the boy’s efforts, accelerating his own research.

“So, what have you got for me?” Percy asked, cutting to the chase.

“A little impatient, are we?” Metatron replied with a question of his own, though he didn’t leave him hanging.

Lifting his tentacle, he allowed a drop of some black liquid to ooze out of his skin before gathering on the tip. It looked a bit like ink, but Percy could tell it was probably space mana, its colour bearing striking similarities to Nesha’s.

That said, their grades couldn’t have been further apart, the viscous droplet resembling all the other instances of divine mana he’d encountered in the past. At the same time, it appeared almost entirely colourless in his Mana Sense: as if his sixth sense was barely even capable of perceiving it.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Metatron spun the droplet with a swift motion, the substance soon changing shape. It rapidly expanded into a rotating disk, countless grooves appearing on its surface, settling into interlocking symbols.

‘Are those runes?! There must be hundreds of them!’

Perhaps Percy shouldn’t have been so shocked to see one of the top runecrafting experts in the entire universe: the very mind that had invented the Vault’s magiscript: perform such a feat.

Still, he couldn’t help but compare his own skill to the titan’s. Leaving aside the sheer ease by which the god had drawn the runes, Percy knew he could have barely fit a couple of them in the same amount of space. Let alone how seamlessly he’d combined them, visualizing all those compounding enchantments in his mind.

“What does it do?” he asked, his mouth drying up.

Whatever its function, there was no doubt it was worth way more than a measly 5000 credits! After all, how often did a mortal get to commission a titan to personally enchant something for them?

Metatron remained silent for a few seconds: clearly doing so on purpose, to torment him a little longer. Only when Percy was about to ask again did the titan decide to put him out of his misery.

“This is a storage seal.”

Chapter 283: Storage seal

‘A storage seal?’

Percy already had several questions, but he placed them aside for a moment to do some calculations in his head. Assuming that one portion of sizian meat was equivalent to one dose of elixir back on Remior, the spatial amulets that cost over a million contribution points each would be worth around 2500 credits here.

Metatron was charging him double that, though Percy didn’t doubt the titan’s creation was several times better than the crude products of some mortal enchanters. Still…

“Why would I even need something like this?”

He already had a bunch of spatial devices back home, and it wasn’t like he needed one in the Vault. He could keep his translation device in the system, and get all the books he purchased reprinted for free.

Metatron chuckled, a hint of amusement finding its way into his gaze.

“If this was just a simple storage enchantment, I wouldn’t have bothered to draw it personally for you. I’d have told you to buy one directly from the Vault. This one is for the road.”

“You mean… my clones can carry it in their travels?” Percy’s eyes widened.

“Exactly. And I’ll have you know that getting this to work was tougher than you might think. The seal has to interact with your soul, otherwise it would simply phase through your clones. At the same time, the spatial dimension inside it needs to house physical objects. Trust me, you’d be very hard-pressed to find a second enchantment like it.”

The implications made Percy's heart skip a beat. He'd be able to accomplish so much more with something like this! Not only would he be able to equip his clones with armour and weapons, but he'd now have a way to bring stuff back from his trips!

Noticing his excitement, Metatron pushed the seal along, causing it to float toward him, only for Percy to jump back in surprise.

"Hold on a moment!" he exclaimed, eyeing the titan cautiously. "This sounds great and everything, but I can't just let you stick whatever you want to my soul. How do I know you're not up to something?"

Metatron rolled his eyes at his outburst, some irritation seeping through.

"Paranoid much? I've already attached my Decree to you without you even noticing. Do you honestly think I need to rely on a cheap storage seal? Or that I'd bother lying to get your permission? Don't flatter yourself."

Pondering the titan's words, Percy had to admit he had a point. Then again, he wasn't exactly qualified to assess what was or wasn't possible when magic of such a high level was involved.

"I can think of all sorts of reasons why you'd do it. Maybe your Decree is immutable so you need to rely on a more customizable enchantment to spy on me. Perhaps you need my consent because I can easily dig the seal out of my soul later. Or maybe you want to mind control me or something…"

"Fully mind controlling someone is difficult even for a god with a mind affinity. Let alone using your soul fragment as a proxy to take over your main body. Your fears are entirely misplaced."

"So you say, but you can't expect me to believe you're giving me something this valuable out of the goodness of your heart." Percy replied.

"I never claimed I was. I'm doing it because I have as much to gain from this as you. Our latest deal has proven that."

The god didn't elaborate, but it wasn't difficult to figure out what he meant. As powerful as the Moirais' Decree was, Metatron could have written it off as a fluke. Percy could only pass it to so many individuals, and the titan hadn't had much reason to expect more from him.

But Circulation had changed everything. Not only could everyone in the Vault learn it, but it was concrete evidence that Metatron's investment in Percy hadn't been misplaced. Clearly, the titan wanted Percy's adventures to be as fruitful as possible, as he planned to eventually wrap his own tentacles around his gains.

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"If that's the case, then why charge me for it? Shouldn't you give me the seal for free?" Percy asked, testing the waters.

Not that he minded spending a few thousand credits on something worthwhile, but he had to confirm Metatron's intentions before agreeing to anything.

"Like I told you before, I'm not running a charity. Until you accept my original offer to work with me, our relationship shall remain purely transactional. Besides, if I charged you what the seal was actually worth, you'd never afford it even if you spent the rest of your life completing challenges. I'm only asking for the price of a regular storage device."

"Fair enough, but that still doesn't solve the trust issue."

"Well, what do you suggest I do?" the pentapus asked.

"How about this… Draw the enchantment again, this time very slowly. My skill in runecrafting is obviously far inferior to yours, so you'll have to explain what each individual rune does. In detail."

"That will take over ten thousand rits. Is this even about trust, or are you trying to get a free magiscript lesson from me?"

Percy shrugged. Naturally, his priority was still his own safety, but he'd be lying if he said he hadn't considered it.

"Think of it as payback for the air pattern you've stolen from Leo during this conversation. If you agree, I'll even describe the soul pattern for you."

"Do you think I can't discover the patterns on my own?" Metatron asked.

"I'm sure you can, but I bet it'll take you more than a couple hours. Trust me, the soul pattern is a tricky one."

The god remained silent for a few seconds, seemingly considering Percy's terms. Honestly, Percy knew he was getting the better end of the deal, but he also understood that, in the titan's mind, everything Percy achieved would eventually belong to him.

As fairly as the titan appeared to treat him on the surface, Percy was under no delusion that Metatron thought of him as his equal. Much like everyone else in the Vault, Percy was nothing more than an ongoing project. A door to more power.

'Well, the truth cuts both ways… Do you think the Vault is the centre of the universe? It's just another place filled with arrogant gods I'll surpass one day…'

Oblivious to his thoughts, Metatron soon came to a decision.

"Very well. But I suggest you pay close attention, as I'm only going to demonstrate the enchantment once."

Crushing the previous seal into black motes, he pushed more mana out of his body, this time stretching it into a wider volume. Clearly, the god could easily compress the enchantment at will, but he intentionally made it easier for Percy to examine as he began forming the runes one by one, explaining their function.

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Recreating the enchantment took several hours, the number of runes involved vastly exceeding Percy's previous estimates. In fact, Leo was forced to deactivate Circulation at some point, unable to keep going.

Still, Percy didn't drop his focus for a second, unwilling to miss even a moment of Metatron's lesson. And it truly was an eye-opening experience, as he learned more during this demonstration than he would have after months of laborious study.

A few of the runes he recognized. Very few. At the core, the enchantment involved pocket and stability runes: the bread and butter of all storage devices. The exact variants Metatron had chosen were different from the ones Percy had memorized and relayed to Nesha, but the underlying principles were the same. Though the titan used way more of them, and even attached various amplification runes on them, to vastly magnify their effects.

'Wow… these are some high-end enchantments… I wonder how large the internal space will be…'

Metatron hadn't said, but Percy knew the final product would make his own amulets look like trinkets. Whether it was the quality of the god's mana, or his sheer runecrafting skill, this was worlds apart from anything he'd seen before.

Regardless, the seal contained a lot more secondary runes, giving it a lot of flexibility. To start, there was a reason Metatron had called it a seal and not an enchantment. Enchantments were meant to be applied on other objects, whereas seals were more advanced, as they could exist on their own. This was achieved through runes that gave the mana form and substance, without the need of a specialized material to draw the enchantment on.

In some ways, it reminded Percy of his own Crystallization spell, though the mana's permanence was achieved via runes in this case: rather than an innate property of the pure affinity.

"I've given the seal a fixed shape, but I've also enchanted it to only interact with your soul. You'll be able to move it around as you wish, to choose whether to grant it to a clone or keep it in your main body." Metatron explained.

And this wasn't the only way in which the seal was flexible. Apparently, Percy could also divide it into smaller seals if he wanted.

"You can split it in half a maximum of 3 times, for a total of 8 seals. Keep in mind that it's inefficient though. Once divided, the overall capacity across all the different parts will be much smaller than that of the original. That said, you can stack them back together whenever you want, to reverse the process."

Percy nodded, knowing why the titan had designed the seal like this. Right now, he could only have two cords active at a time, and one of them was permanently occupied by his familiar. But that wouldn't necessarily remain the case forever. Should he ever gain the ability to send out multiple clones, he'd be able to equip all of them with storage seals of their own.

"There you go then. All done." Metatron said, causing the completed seal to shrink back to its previous size.

Chapter 284: Burnt meat

Metatron pushed the seal into Leo's body, aiming at the section in his torso housing the largest piece of Percy's soul.

The mana ignored the boy's flesh entirely, entering Percy's wisp unobstructed. The latter tensed a little as the foreign object burrowed into him, but he didn't resist, having already scrutinized Metatron's enchantment to the best of his ability. There was some mild discomfort for a couple of seconds, but it soon faded into the background.

Examining himself, Percy felt the seal floating inside his soul. Using some of his teal mana, he gave it a gentle nudge, realizing how easily he could move it around or even expel it.

"You can get rid of it whenever you want, but I would advise against that. I'm really not trying to cheat you here: I just don't want you leaving anything precious behind because you lacked the means to carry it…" Metatron said, guessing what he was thinking.

Nodding, Percy then took a few minutes to explain how Circulation worked for the soul affinity. Unfortunately, he couldn't demonstrate the spell without his core, so his verbal description would have to do.

Metatron left after that, probably eager to return to his research. Percy didn't blame him for it either, actually sharing the sentiment. It was finally time to wrap things up.

"Cube, please reprint all the books I own for me. User ID: WANDERER." he said, pressing his hand against the floor.

"Authorization granted. Delivery in 30 rits."

Nodding in appreciation at the steaming stack of books that the system spat out a few seconds later, he then proceeded to purchase a few more resources that had piqued his interest the last time he was here.

Between the rune index making it easier to browse through the catalogue, and his new storage seal, getting what he wanted from the Vault had never been easier. He wouldn't have to spend weeks memorizing what he needed either, as he could just take the books back to Remior and read them in his own time.

'The only annoying thing is that I'm down to 289 credits again.' he grimaced, not particularly thrilled seeing his balance in the triple digits.

Then again, he didn't regret any of his recent purchases. Leaving the seal aside, he was more than happy with the reading material too. It would keep him and Nesha busy for a few months at least. Plus, he still had more than enough credits left to buy several more books the next time he was here.

Placing his hand on the stack, he then pushed some mana into the seal, causing the objects to instantly vanish from his sight. At the same time, he felt them appear inside the internal storage.

'Wow, it's actually huge!'

The pocket dimension was still shaped like a cube: much like his own amulets: but this one was ten metres across. This meant it could house a thousand times as much stuff as his existing devices. It should be plenty, even after he split it up for his clones. Not to mention all the other convenient

features, such as storing things by merely touching them, or accessing the seal's contents with just a thought.

Metatron had clearly gone above and beyond to accommodate him.

For a second, Percy considered browsing the system for some deattunement ingredients too, to solve his Aurora Dew problem. They shouldn't be very expensive, and he had the means to take them back now.

But he quickly shot the idea down. He'd have to go through many options until he found a suitable replacement for the rainbow grass, and he wouldn't even be able to test them until he returned. Besides, credits were much harder to earn than money on Remior, making him think twice about wasting them on anything he could obtain a different way.

'Ok then… Let's just help the kid settle in and I can go…'

Percy already felt bad for snatching Leo from his easy-going life on Felmara and dumping him inside what was essentially Metatron's prison. Granted, it wasn't his fault the boy's life had gone to shit, but he did feel obligated to at least make sure Leo was alright before leaving him here.

Accompanying him to the same residential building as the others, he helped him pick an unoccupied room on Gabe's floor. Next, he requested a bunch of books on the Vault's language. Luckily, those were free: unlike other, more sensitive resources.

'Do I really have to go through all of this?' Leo gasped upon realizing how much work lay ahead of him.

'It'll take some effort, but I know you'll pull it off. I've read your notes on Felmara, so I can tell you used to be a good student. And if you need anything else, remember that Gabe lives three doors across the hall. Noland is on the next floor up. As for Tlaloc… I'm not sure, but he said he'd pick a room near theirs too.' Percy reassured him before shifting his attention to something else.

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Leo would be able to get all the food he needed for free thanks to his deal with Metatron, but they still had to find a way for him to actually ask for it without the translation device.

“Cube, is it possible to place a standing order for sizian meat?” he asked.

This time, he had refrained from placing his palm on the floor, or using his own ID. He wanted the system to recognize him as Leo, to negotiate on the boy’s behalf.

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. Placing a standing order is possible. 1 portion of sizian meat is valued at 1 credit. Do you wish to place a standing order?”

“I should be eligible for two free portions per day. Can you have them delivered here whenever they are due?”

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. The standing order has been placed.”

After confirming that everything was in order, Percy was about to leave the Vault, when one last obstacle popped up in his path…

“Attention, user. Three visitors are requesting access to your room. Do you wish to grant it?” the system suddenly asked, causing him to raise an eyebrow.

“Can you show me who it is?” he asked back, though he could already guess the answer.

Sure enough, a few runes lit up on one of Leo’s walls, before merging together into the image of their friends standing in the corridor. Though there was something strange about them this time: their hands were behind their backs, clearly hiding something. Rolling his eyes, Percy allowed them in, curious to see what the trio was up to.

“Percy, are you still around?” Tlaloc asked.

“Yeah. I was literally about to leave though. To what do we owe the visit? Anything wrong?”

The others smiled upon hearing that. Tlaloc might have smiled too, but it was difficult to tell: with him having a beak and everything. Gabe looked a little disoriented. He still wasn’t used to having functioning eyes again. Meanwhile, Noland stood there naked as always.

“Nothing wrong. We were just hoping to catch you before you left. To have a bit of a small celebration: to thank you for everything you’ve done for us.” Gabe explained.

Without missing a beat, all three of them showed him the stuff they were hiding: a couple chunks of yellowish-brown charcoal each.

“Uhhmmm… thanks?” Percy frowned as he took one of the objects from Tlaloc. “What exactly is this?”

Noland and Gabe chuckled upon hearing his question as Tlaloc scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

“You can’t tell either, can you? It’s just charred sizian meat.” he said.

“Seriously? I didn’t even know you could get it cooked a different way.”

“You can’t.” Gabe replied. “It’s already edible in its default state, after it gets cured by the system. But Tlaloc insisted that I charred them with my fire mana for the occasion. It looks like a complete waste of food to me, but he said he has a reason for it.”

Percy wanted to ask about that, though another question took precedence.

“How did the cube even let you give this to me?”

“It wasn’t that hard.” Noland said. “We asked for permission, making it clear that all four of us are eligible for free food. The system refused at first, but I think Metatron intervened on our behalf, because it just relented at some point.”

“Will you try it already?” Tlaloc asked, looking at him expectantly.

Percy shrugged, biting a chunk off the overcooked snack. Truth be told, he’d never been a fan of its taste to start with. He really doubted that charring it to a crisp would make it any better, but he didn’t want to be rude to his new pal. And, sure enough…

“Cough… it’s certainly… memorable.” he said, trying very hard to convince his host not to spit it out.

The thing was positively dreadful, the meat’s bitterness tuned up to eleven. Biting through its hard exterior was a chore, its texture dry as a desert. Hell, Percy wasn’t even sure the burnt meat had any nutritional value left, nor did he think it could still function as a cultivation resource.

“It’s garbage, isn’t it?” Gabe asked, Noland nodding along. Clearly, they’d both had a taste already.

Flashing Tlaloc a questioning look, Percy was genuinely curious whether the guy was trying to poison him, or if he really had zero sense of taste. Considering that he’d spent his whole life in chains, it wasn’t impossible.

“I’m really sorry about the flavour.” Tlaloc snickered, proving he was fully aware of what he was doing.

“I don’t get it: was this a prank or something?” Percy asked.

“Not exactly…” Tlaloc sighed, his expression getting more serious. “My older brother used to char meat for me back when I was little: before I got captured and shipped off to Felmara.”

Over the next few minutes, he spoke about his past. Apparently, it was common practice on Huehue, as doing this was a quick way to rid the meat of some of its potential diseases. Obviously, it wasn’t as good as taking the time to properly cook the meat uniformly, but many families on the run didn’t have the

luxury of stopping at one place for long. Getting sick could be a death sentence for young, low-born children, so their parents had to try everything to better their odds.

“Obviously, I didn’t personally need this after my core awakened at Green, but my brother kept the tradition going. He said it reminded him of our parents… I know it tastes like shit but, believe it or not, some of my fondest memories are from eating this by his side.”

Percy didn’t miss the tears glistening by the corner of Tlaloc’s eyes. Not wanting to insult the poor guy, he begrudgingly moved the burnt meat to his mouth again, biting a second chunk.

This time, Leo didn’t utter a word of protest, and the others also joined in, the former slave’s story having probably touched them just as much… But Tlaloc wasn’t done.

“Anyway, I didn’t bring this up just to reminisce about my past, or to ruin the mood.” he chuckled. “I just thought about that amnesiac friend of yours you were trying to help. I don’t know anything about his life before the coliseum, but it’s possible his family used to feed him the same thing when he was little… This sizian meat tastes a little different from the animals on Huehue, and I’ve no idea what the meat in your homeworld tastes like, but it might still jog a memory or two if you cooked something like this for him.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll introduce you two one day, after he remembers.” Percy said, some warmth gathering in his chest.

The group then finished their meals in silence. Only once they were all done did Percy store the translation device in his seal, removing his soul from Leo’s nearly-healed injuries.

Allowing the cord to pull him out of the Vault, he finally set course for Remior.

Chapter 285: Welcoming the Holy Child

“I’ve been clearing new channels all week, but I still can’t figure out how this thing works.” Acton clicked his tongue in frustration.

Micky barely spared him a glance as he landed beside him in a flurry of feathers and residual mana. He had long learned to keep his expressions neutral, his emotions locked behind the pretence of obedience. There was no point in antagonizing his captor: it would only make his life harder.

Originally, he'd wanted to keep Circulation hidden, unwilling to offer Acton even a sliver of insight into the technique. Doing so would only make him stronger than he already was: harder for the others to rescue him. Sadly, the boy had already witnessed the spell during their chase, leaving Micky no choice but to demonstrate it upon receiving the command.

'It's fine. He won't be able to copy it. He doesn't even know he's supposed to strengthen his body first.' Micky reminded himself. 'Besides, Percy is right. I need it.'

Percy had advised him to keep both Regulation and Circulation running at all times regardless. They were essential to minimizing his stamina drain and to furthering his training. Not only that, but he'd instructed him to continue working on his water and ice affinities, to complete the spell as soon as possible.

They weren't just thinking about the present. Cut off from Aurora Dew, Micky's growth was already stalling. Even worse, Acton hadn't given him any regular elixirs either, having not yet realised that his second core required them, just like everyone else's. If his first core reached Green before his second got to Yellow, finding enough food would grow even harder. At that point, the only way to quell his hunger would be through his spells: meaning he couldn't afford to slack off.

Glancing at his wings, he felt a wave of relief as he marvelled at the two sets of glowing lines decorating his plumage. The green ones swirled like gales of wind, as the newest addition: the aquamarine lines: resembled waves.

'Well, at least I've got the water pattern down. Only one to go.'

It was barely any consolation given his current predicament, but he'd take what he could. With this, the mana flowing to and from his abdomen was balanced at last, meaning he wouldn't have to waste the excess. Of course, converting the water mana to beast mana wasn't as efficient without a mutation, but that would hopefully get fixed in time.

As for the amber lines, they weren't there at the moment. Luckily, Acton's commands to "use that weird spell" and to "get a move on" hadn't been too explicit, leaving them open to interpretation. This was how Micky had managed to hold on to his beast mana, though he'd still been forced to fly back to Goldenfield town faster than he'd have liked.

"Hey, don't look so sad!" Acton grinned, some amusement seeping into his tone. "I told you I'd get you something to eat, didn't I? There are hundreds of people living here, plenty of them at Yellow or Green! You can have as many as you like!"

Micky felt the blood freezing in his veins at the sheer nonchalance in the boy's voice as he casually talked about feeding him his own kin. This was precisely what they'd feared! Clearly, Acton didn't give a shit about the commoners. He'd gladly sacrifice hordes of them just to make his own life a little easier.

Recoiling in disgust, Micky tried to resist the command. To stop walking. He pushed against the illusory chains with everything he had, using every drop of willpower in his body. But it was futile, his talons digging into the dirt no slower than before as he strove forward.

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'No! Please, don't make me do this!' the scream died in his throat.

Sure, he'd eaten humans before, but only their enemies: the people who'd tried to kill him or Percy. The thought of massacring a bunch of innocents just to satiate his hunger made him sick. It was wrong. Repugnant.

He was tempted to beg, but he doubted Acton would listen. It would only reveal his ability to speak, making everything worse.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the growing crowd parted before them, startled gasps and awed exclamations echoing near the gate. He didn't know whether the townsfolk were more shocked by the arrival of the Holy Child, or by his own: a Yellow beast with two cores following obediently behind a human. Either way, it didn't matter.

A few stepped back in unease, but most of them were completely unaware of the danger they were in. In fact, many had the opposite reaction.

“A Holy Child!” a woman shouted gleefully.

“It’s our town’s fortune to receive you!” another added.

Many more cheered, some of them even bowing in respect. The fools were happy to see the little monster! As for the demon in question, he failed to suppress a smirk at the irony of the situation.

‘Run, you idiots! Grab your kids and get the hell out of here! I won’t be able to stop myself once he gives the command!’

Micky’s heart raced like crazy, a frantic drumbeat pounding against his ribs. He clenched his beak as tightly as he could, ignoring the piercing pain as cracks rippled through it.

‘Percy, help me! I don’t know how, but you can’t let me do this!’

It didn’t take long for Percy’s voice to ring in his mind, accompanied by a wave of horror and a packet of soul mana.

‘Help me strengthen the connection. We’ll fight this together.’

Without wasting a moment, Micky bounced the mana right back, working with his friend to widen the cord. He wasn’t sure this would be enough to stop him: they’d already tried and failed to resist the boy’s bloodline before: but Percy’s words still brought hope to Micky’s eyes. There was nobody else on Remior he trusted more. Just having him by his side meant the world.

“Go on then. Eat.” Acton muttered, his voice barely a whisper.

But Micky heard it clearly, every word slamming into his skull with undeniable authority.

Some of the commoners must've heard him too, as the smiles froze on their faces, their features twisting in terror. Sadly for them, however, Acton never gave them a chance to escape. Stone walls rose from the ground, trapping dozens of people with Micky. Among them were men and women of all ages, ranging from Reds to Yellows, from toddlers to an elderly lady.

There was a Green in the group too, though he didn't look like much of a fighter. Instead of attacking Acton, his first instinct was to turn around and try to break through the prison. Unfortunately, his pitiful water spells splashed harmlessly against the construct. As for the others, they didn't even try to resist.

Regardless, Acton unleashed his domain for good measure, sealing the deal. Everyone who had somehow managed to remain standing instantly fell to their knees, whatever strength they had left evaporating from their muscles.

At the same time, the ground shook as a second round of constructs clawed their way up, not taking long to pierce the surface. It was a series of giant hands made of stone, one for each person. The colossal limbs grabbed their immobilized victims, each of them large enough to close comfortably around an adult's body.

The joyous cheers that had previously filled the place were instantly replaced by panicked screams and pained shrieks, everyone finally realizing this wasn't a day of celebration.

As for Micky, he'd never stopped bouncing mana to his friend for even a second, as his body continued to move on its own. Walking up to the nearest prisoner, he barely halted for a moment as his tall frame loomed over her, casting an ominous shadow over her limp frame.

She was a woman whose appearance placed her in her twenties, a Yellow core pulsing in her chest. His shadow wasn't nearly dark enough to hide the agony in her expression or the fear in her eyes. Her features were covered in snot and tears as she silently pled for mercy. But no sound escaped her lips, the giant fist clenched around her chest having squeezed the breath out of her lungs.

"Come on already. We haven't got all day." Acton spat.

The boy's voice was cold, devoid of empathy: as if he had ordered him to munch on a worm rather than a person. Yet his words resonated with his bloodline once more, amplifying the pressure in Micky's mind.

His beak opened against his will, his muscles tensing. He had no control over any of this, but he could tell he was about to rip the core right of the woman's sternum the very next second!

'Percy! It's now or never!'

Chapter 286: Graveyard

The stone fingers loosened slightly, exposing the woman's sternum. Unable to resist, Micky pounced toward the opening.

He was about to rip the core from her chest when another hand: a much smaller one: suddenly emerged from his own body, grabbing his beak. It was cold, made entirely of mana, not unlike Acton's spells. Its grip wasn't very strong, but it didn't need to be. His own hesitation did the rest, allowing the hand to slam his beak shut.

"What the hell?" the Holy Child blurted out in shock.

The boy's surprise was justified. By all rights, Micky shouldn't have been able to fight his command. Even more baffling was the nature of the construct. It had sprouted from his own body, yet not from his cores. In Acton's Mana Sense, it had seemingly appeared out of thin air, fuelled by some strange affinity that Micky didn't even possess.

And that was only the beginning.

More mana surged through his channels: this time his own. Pale blobs seeped from his pores, blooming like frozen flowers along his joints. They quickly solidified into blocks of ice, inhibiting his movements.

"How dare you defy me?! You are nothing more than my servant! Stop whatever you're doing!" Acton snarled.

But the mana continued to rush through his body uninterrupted, forming a thin shell of ice over his plumage. At first, it almost emptied his second core, but the constant circulation of water and air mana flooded the organ, mixing together to replenish his reserves.

At the same time, more fused mana gushed through the cord, a second teal arm sprouting from his chest, mirroring its sibling. It clamped down on his beak too, struggling to buy a few precious seconds for the ice mana to do its job.

Even better, Micky was given a moment of reprieve. Acton's poorly worded command had allowed him to briefly stop fighting his own body. After all, the only thing he had done was to follow the boy's orders. Everything else was all Percy.

"Just kill that woman already, or I'll kill you both myself!" the boy yelled, probably realizing his gaff.

This time, Micky was forced to comply, his muscles ripping themselves apart as he fought against his binds. The ice around him cracked and crumbled in several spots, the magical fingers holding his beak snapping one by one.

Noticing his pain, Percy hesitated, the mana easing slightly.

'Don't stop!' Micky hurriedly said. 'Don't worry about me! I can handle it! Besides, I doubt he'd let me die!'

Percy nodded, doubling down on his resistance. Sending more of his mana, he forcefully seized Micky's cores too, reforging the hands and the ice shell once more. Of course, Percy was fighting an uphill battle, despite his initial success. Stopping a Yellow beast with some Orange constructs wasn't easy. Let alone doing so from afar, with mana that didn't even entirely belong to him.

Thinking outside the box, he grabbed hold of Micky's beast mana too, slowing down the passive flow in his veins, to weaken him.

But the pressure in Micky's mind only increased as his muscles drank his beast mana against his wishes. The opposing flows collided violently inside his body, ripping holes into his vessels. Blood spilled out of his orifices, as he felt like his flesh was on fire.

Sadly, he won out in the end, managing to extricate himself from the binds half a minute later. The immobilized woman trembled as he stepped on her shoulder with his talon, crimson rivulets dripping from his cracked beak, splashing ominously on her neck.

“NOOO!!! Please… don’t hurt my mom!” a boy cried.

Micky couldn’t even turn his head to look at him. Judging from his voice, he had to be young. Younger than Acton. Probably younger than he had been, back when his own mother was murdered in front of him.

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Suddenly, the frozen wasteland flashed before his eyes once more, the dim glow of Huehue’s red sun blending with the bloody pool beneath the two corpses.

‘Percy… kill me if you have to!’

His friend paused again, clearly unwilling to go through with it.

But there was no time to think it over.

‘Don’t let me do this to him! I don’t want to be a monster!’ Micky pleaded again, bloody tears rolling down his face.

Percy acquiesced, sending more foreign mana into his body. Unlike before, it spread through Micky’s frame, slicing countless tiny incisions into his soul. It hurt a hundred times more than the physical wounds, causing him to almost fall unconscious as his vision blurred and his brain throbbed.

Yet, a wave of relief rushed over him. It worked! He lost control of his body at last, falling powerless on the ground next to the woman.

‘Thank you.’ he sent back, though he didn’t get a reply.

Percy was already doing his best to stitch the wounds up before his soul deteriorated any further. Healing him was probably harder through the cord, but he’d been careful when injuring him.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the woman next to him shifted. Her head was close to his, her lips moving as she tried to whisper something. He couldn’t make out her words, but her gaze was filled with more than just fear this time. There was gratitude. And pity.

Micky was about to respond, when a spear jutted upwards. The sound of ripped flesh echoed through the stone cage, a bucketful of blood splashing onto his face. This time, it wasn’t his own.

The woman’s pupils shook for a second, before glazing over. An oppressive silence followed, but it only lasted a few seconds until the boy’s wails pierced it.

A hand painfully grabbed the back of Micky’s head, pushing his face into the woman’s body.

“I said… eat!” Acton growled as the scent of iron filled Micky’s nostrils.

But he didn’t open his beak. Not because he could resist the boy’s command, but because Percy had deliberately avoided repairing that part of his soul.

“Hahahahaha!” the boy laughed sardonically, struggling to conceal the rage in his voice. “You think you can do as you please, huh?! Very well… It’s time for you to learn what happens when you defy your master!”

Pulling his face out of the woman’s corpse, Acton forcefully turned him around, to look at the other people pressed on the ground under his constructs. Closest to him was the newly orphaned boy, struggling to breathe between sobs. He couldn’t have been older than five or six, his curly hair caked in mud, his cheap clothes full of holes.

With a flick of Acton’s fingers, a second spear emerged. Micky wanted to look away, but the Holy Child didn’t let him move an inch.

“This is what happens when you don’t do as I say!” Acton hissed.

He turned Micky’s head again, to look at a burly guy farther away. He was bald, an eyepatch covering his left eye. Micky recognized him as the Green from earlier. Unlike the others, Acton must’ve attacked him at some point: when he wasn’t looking. He was covered in wounds from head to toe, two stone hands having joined forces to hold him still.

“I have no idea why you even care about these people, but you’re gravely mistaken if you think you’ve done them a favour.” Acton spoke again, sending a third spear, this time through the man’s skull.

Next, he turned his head again, to face another woman. A petite brunette who looked like she was pregnant.

“You could have just eaten a bunch of them to quell your hunger.”

Two spears rose this time, for good measure.

“Now, I’ll make sure to kill more of them, just for you.”

Another spear. And then two more…

It wasn’t until a couple of minutes later that everyone inside the cage was dead, the stone walls already crumbling. There was nobody outside, the others having long run away.

But Acton wasn’t done, apparently.

More spears emerged, this time beside him. With a flick of his hand, he sent them flying to the nearest house, piercing through the walls as if they were paper.

And that was merely the start. The Holy Child repeated his actions again, and again, shooting barrage after barrage through the buildings. Micky didn't think the boy even bothered to check whether there was anyone inside. Not before his attacks, and certainly not after.

Dragging Micky's limp body across the town, Acton ravaged everything in his path. Occasionally, muffled screams echoed through the holes. A few times, people rushed out on their own before he attacked, grovelling before him. Begging for him to spare them.

He never did.

The Holy Child stopped at some point. Not because he'd suddenly grown a conscience, nor because he'd killed everyone in the town: he'd barely decimated a little over half. As far as Micky could tell, the boy had simply grown bored of the carnage.

His heart felt heavy, as if it had turned to stone. Neither his physical wounds, nor the injuries to his soul bothered him anymore, his gaze dull and lifeless. Just like that, dozens of innocent people had lost their lives.

'And all of this over nothing…' he thought bitterly.

The cheerful crowd that had welcomed the Holy Child with open arms had paid dearly for their respect, their town now a bloody graveyard…

Chapter 287: Gaze

"You still won't eat?!" Acton hissed, his voice laced with frustration.

With a single vicious kick, he sent both the bird and the man's corpse tumbling through a shattered wall like discarded dolls.

The veins on his forehead throbbed, the blood inside his veins boiling at the beast's defiance. Not necessarily because he cared that much about it refusing to eat a few peasants. Even having to take a detour for a couple of days to hunt a different meal for it wasn't that big a deal. The real issue lay elsewhere.

“This was supposed to be different! YOU were supposed to be different! My ticket to greatness!” he stormed towards the creature once more, his features twisting in fury.

Lifting his foot, he drove it down on the bird’s knee just hard enough to send a jolt of pain through its body. Though he did stop short of shattering the limb entirely. Despite his words, he wasn’t ready to give up on his minion quite yet.

Defiant or not, the beast had continued to prove its worth at every turn. It was far stronger than a regular Yellow. Probably strong enough to hold its own against a Green. Should it advance, it was bound to become a powerful helper, elevating his fighting strength to the next level. With that, he would finally be able to stand tall among his peers!

“But that only works if my bloodline keeps you under control!” he snarled, slamming his boot into the bird’s chest. A sharp crack met his ears as a rib gave way under his foot, the creature wincing in agony.

Acton wanted to vent some more, to pummel the beast to his will. But he forced himself to stop before he did any lasting damage. This much should be ok: beasts had sturdy bodies and healed fast. He’d been careful to leave its organs and wings mostly intact.

‘I’ll have to carry it to its next meal though…’ he sighed.

After waiting a couple minutes for the dust cloud to settle, he walked to the largest piece of stone he could find amidst the rubble. Pouring some mana, he flattened it, smoothening the rough edges enough to sit on it.

His gaze fell on his minion’s bloodied body, its chest heaving up and down weakly. At the same time, he thought back to its previous actions, contemplating the implications. This didn’t bode well at all! It was way too early for it to be showing signs of resistance… Would the bloodline even hold once it advanced?

‘No. There’s nothing wrong with my bloodline. It worked like it was supposed to…’ he corrected himself.

Technically, the bird had followed all his commands without fail. Acton couldn't pinpoint any specific action that violated them. At least, none that the bird had taken of its own volition. The problem clearly lay elsewhere.

It had all started when that strange teal mana popped out of thin air, holding the creature back. It had manifested human arms too: not a beast's doing.

This confirmed that somebody else was involved. Even more unsettling was the sheer range of abilities they possessed. In a direct contest, Acton's bloodline had won out, otherwise he wouldn't have managed to enslave the bird in the first place.

However, he had failed to completely override its connection to its previous owner. Worse still, they could control it from afar, and even send their mana to it, somehow.

He shook his head.

'That's merely the tip of the iceberg… They can hijack its own mana too. And they've somehow brainwashed it more thoroughly: it was more willing to side with them just now…'

One thing was certain: this wasn't one of his relatives. It couldn't be. Acton knew all his elders, and all of them had the same crappy version of the bloodline as him. It was possible that one of the younger children had suddenly manifested a new strain in the past couple of years, but he struggled to believe that.

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'The gods had us breed for thousands of years with nothing to show for it… What are the odds somebody just managed to mutate such a powerful variant right after I left?!'

He frowned. This had to be somebody else entirely. Yet, that was even more disturbing, in some ways. It meant that another House had secretly developed the most powerful beast-controlling bloodline on the face of Remior!

‘Well, whatever. I bet they aren’t a Green-born. If they dare get in my way, I’ll get rid of them.’

Regardless, it appeared this person had a soft spot for commoners. As long as he avoided doing anything this drastic, they might not get involved again.

‘Anyway, where are those idiots?! Did they somehow miss the commotion?!’ Acton raised an eyebrow.

There had been other towns closer to him. The only reason he’d bothered to bring the bird here was because he’d also wanted to rejoin his guards. He wasn’t that surprised those weaklings had lost his trail during the chase, but they should have returned here and patiently waited for him.

‘Maybe they’re out there looking for me? It’s also possible they returned to the Root to report my absence…’

Whatever the case, he wasn’t going to wait here for them. If he didn’t see them by the time he reached the Thirsty Valley, he’d just request a new escort from the people there.

Getting up, he glanced at his minion once more.

“Since you insist on not eating human meat, I’ll make an exception for you, just this once.”

The ground shook as he poured a colossal amount of mana into the dirt. Soon, a giant hand of stone rose from underneath the bird, its huge fingers closing around it. Lifting the creature to the air, the disembodied forearm then travelled towards Acton, cracking the ground in its path. Upon reaching him, it lowered the creature just enough for its eyes to level with his.

“I’ll feed you beasts, but this is the only compromise I’ll make for you. Consider it a gift from your new master. Yet, know this. If you defy me one more time, I’ll squash you like a bug. I’ve no need for a disobedient slave.”

The bird didn’t react. Acton wasn’t sure it had even heard him, its silver eyes dull and lifeless.

He was about to turn around, when he suddenly felt a cold shiver roll down his spine. Startled, he took a step back.

“The hell?!” he spat, trying to make sense of this.

For a second there, he’d felt someone’s gaze run through him like a sword. But there was nobody around: his Mana Sense confirmed that. Nobody besides the bird, and it was barely awake…

Looking into its listless eyes once more, he sensed it again. A torrent of unconcealed fury, seeking to split his very soul apart under its cold edge. Then, he blinked, and it was gone, almost as if he’d imagined the whole thing.

Acton couldn’t help but swallow a lump. Logically, he understood he had nothing to fear. He was a Green-born: a Blue. Very few people on Remior could best him in a fight, and fewer still would dare to even try. Yet, the owner of that glare just now didn’t seem to care in the slightest. Not about his strength, nor about his status, his primal rage branding him with a silent promise.

Was this person even human?

***

The past couple of weeks had been quite intense, to say the least. Ever since they got separated from Micky, the trio had travelled toward the Thirsty Valley at full speed, only taking a break whenever it was absolutely necessary. And their labour had paid off, as they were nearly there, about to reach their destination in a few days.

Suffice to say, everyone was optimistic that they’d make it there in time. They’d have to solve a bunch of other issues before they could enter, of course, but it seemed they stood a real chance of rescuing Micky.

Not everything was going well, however…

“How long has it been?” Nesha whispered.

“An hour or two?” Elaine replied, her forehead creased.

The two kept their voices down, to avoid distracting Percy. Usually, he was the first to urge them all to rush, ignoring his own fatigue to save even a minute whenever possible. Yet, he’d halted his steps of his own accord earlier today for some reason. Since then, he’d stood in the same spot, staring ahead without blinking.

It didn’t take a genius to guess that something had happened to Micky. And, from the looks of it, it was bad…

At some point, Percy had also activated Synchronization, huge volumes of mana disappearing from his body at regular intervals. Needless to say, Nesha and Elaine were dying to ask him what was wrong, but they didn’t dare to utter a word.

“I’ve never seen him like this.” Elaine struggled to contain her worry as she glanced at the ground beside Percy’s feet.

Nesha followed her gaze to the two crimson puddles there. The blood had half-way seeped into the dirt, but more splashing droplets occasionally expanded its surface, dripping from his clenched fists.

“Me neither.” Nesha replied, thinking back to all the enemies they’d faced since they escaped from the Guild.

The wasps… the bandits… House Tantalus… the beasts… the trolls… even the Divine Root. Percy had fought each of them with everything he had, but he’d always managed to remain calm through it all.

This was different. His eyes glowed with cold fury, his seemingly vacant gaze actually piercing the void with murderous focus as it crossed the vast distance separating him from his familiar.

Nesha and Elaine would have to wait for this to end before asking for the details, but one thing was already clear…

“Whatever that boy did to Micky… he’s going to regret it.”

Chapter 288: Promise

Every step sent a jolt of pain up his legs, his shoes already soaking in blood. Over the past couple of weeks, Percy’s group had averaged over 20 hours a day on the road. Not to mention, he had it the worst among the three due to his grade.

His only relief was the gentle breeze softly caressing his tired features, mercifully brushing away the acrid scent of sweat surrounding him. Though more seeped through his forehead, his eyebrows failing to prevent it from trickling into his eyes.

Still, he refused to stop, knowing that the battle against the Holy Child had already begun. Sure, they were currently separated by a vast: albeit constantly shrinking: distance, but the race to their next promotion was no less important than their eventual clash would be.

And Percy had more on his plate other than merely reaching the Thirsty Valley. After all, he wouldn’t be able to advance fast enough without Aurora Dew, and his enormous stash of elixirs wouldn’t convert itself. Certainly not before he procured the right ingredients, or completed his preparations to accelerate the process. Thus, he’d had no choice but to improvise: to find ways of spending his time on the road even more productively.

‘The bag is full again…’

Reaching at his waist, he unstrapped the cloth bag he’d hastily fashioned a few days ago, giving it a quick shake. The teal marbles made crisp sounds as they rolled and collided with one another.

Grabbing one of the amulets around his neck, he poured some mana into it, causing the cube to expand. Holding it clumsily with one hand, he struggled not to drop it as it grew to the size of a crate. Next, he pressed his chin on a rune, using some more mana to open the box.

Emptying his bag into the container, he willed the marbles to shatter into powder. Then he shrunk the amulet, hanging it back around his neck, and the bag to his waist, right below the modified Effigy.

The spell hadn't changed much. He'd only made the links between the crystals and the beak even thinner, so that they wouldn't hold under the weight of a fully grown marble. This way, the crystals would break off on their own whenever they reached their full size, rolling into the bag. It wasn't the most ground-breaking idea, but it allowed Percy to passively accumulate teal dust as he walked, by simply pouring mana into the construct, leaving his hands free to do other things.

'Well then… I have another hour until it's full again…'

Next, he grabbed another object from his pocket. A rectangular slab of reinforced mana, as big as his palm. It glowed in an eerie teal light, much like everything else he crafted. Strictly speaking, it wasn't very different from the Effigy, sporting a single self-repair enchantment on its back, its front face smooth as glass. Perhaps, this was why his Status hadn't seen fit to register it as a separate spell.

Yet, its function was entirely different.

Lifting his free hand, Percy gathered some more mana to his fingertips before carefully carving a few lines into the object. Keeping his fingers steady was a struggle, neither his exhaustion nor the bumpy ground doing him any favours. But he was already experienced in runecrafting by now, seeing this as just another challenge to overcome.

At first, he drew three concentric circles, before filling them with more details. Soon, the outermost ring resembled a heat rune, the innermost two containing overlapping control runes, linked in a very special manner. One of them was constrained to the inner circle, while its sibling was free to span both regions.

Suffice to say, this was one of the cascading control enchantments he'd studied in the Vault. All the craziness since Gentlebreeze town had prevented him from working on this before now, but he was keenly aware he'd have to upgrade his cauldron soon. If everything went according to plan, he could significantly boost his brewing speed, which might just be the difference between rescuing his familiar or losing him forever.

Thus, he continued to push himself to his limits, and beyond. His body ached and protested as he forced it to keep moving, his cores burning under the relentless rush of mana. Even his mind wasn't spared as he focused on his runecrafting.

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‘Another failure…’ he grimaced about forty minutes later, once the enchantment failed to activate.

He knew there was nothing wrong with its design. Not only had he copied one of the illustrations from the book, he’d spent way longer than necessary to ensure the intricate symbol was flawless. The problem lay with his visualization of the composite enchantment.

He sighed, pouring some mana into the self-repair rune. At least that one worked, flashing brightly before slowly erasing its malfunctioning sibling from the other side of the slab. This was the object’s true purpose: a convenient training tool that allowed him to practice his runecrafting on the move.

‘The bag will be full again in a few minutes…’ he frowned.

He didn’t have enough time to start another attempt, so he should probably wait to empty the bag first.

Turning to his companions, he noticed they weren’t slacking either. Nesha didn’t look quite as exhausted as he was, but mana continuously surged through her channels as she slowly forced them to expand. She hadn’t started working on her Circulation pattern just yet, but her pathways were almost fully tempered by now.

Of course, she hadn’t had much time to exercise while travelling: none of them had. But they didn’t need to. The only reason one had to strengthen their body before practicing Circulation was because it allowed them to push their channels further, letting them contain more mana. Once they got to the tempering stage, pushing mana through the channels grew physically demanding in and of itself, allowing them to easily maintain their physical condition.

‘I should talk to her at some point…’

She hadn’t spoken a word about it, but he knew that losing Micky had weighed heavily on her. Moreso than him or Elaine, in some ways. Granted, she hadn’t known the crow for nearly as long as them, but she also felt guilty over her inability to help them against the Root’s men.

Percy wanted to console her. It wasn't really her fault she couldn't fight against a bunch of Greens at Yellow. She was already doing plenty. But he ultimately chose not to disturb her right now. Letting her channel her frustration productively would benefit her in the long run.

'Elaine also seems to have been affected by the fight.'

His cousin was the only one who hadn't broken a sweat, but that didn't mean she was taking it easy. Her forehead was creased, mana constantly rushing to her feet, enveloping them in a thin film of water. Clearly, she wasn't satisfied having only elevated one of her newest spells to Refined. He'd seen her work on her magic before, but never this… relentlessly. Something during her fight against the three Greens must have shifted her mentality.

And there was another bit of good news, despite all the recent chaos. His latest clone had been gone for a while, which was always a great sign. Doubly so, given his efforts to return to Huehue. It didn't necessarily mean he'd succeeded, but he must've found something of value regardless. And Phoebe knew, Percy needed every advantage he could get right about now.

'Just hurry up and return already, wherever you are...'

Though he shook his head the very next moment, forcing himself to calm down. There was no sense in getting impatient. He still had plenty of things to do, so he should just stick with his current plans for now. If the clone brought anything useful back, he could adjust course accordingly.

Seeing that he had a couple more minutes to kill until his Effigy was done, he turned his attention to the cord.

'Micky, how are you holding up?'

The response came delayed.

'…I'm not. He's holding me up, with that spell of his.' Micky joked, trying to put a brave front.

But Percy didn't miss the deep pain and despair simmering beneath his friend's words.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve been able to keep your spells up?’ Percy asked again, though it wasn’t difficult to guess the answer.

‘Not Circulation. My body hurts too much when I try. But I can still feed some of my elemental mana to my beast core.’

Percy nodded. As serious as Micky’s injuries were, they weren’t life-threatening anymore. Despite his senseless cruelty, Acton had still been careful not to inflict any lethal wounds. As for the soul injuries, Percy had done his best to stitch them up properly. Though it would take Micky a while to fully recover, and it wouldn’t be a fun process in the slightest.

‘The hunger?’

‘About as bad as it gets. But we’ve entered a forest, and he’s already fed me a couple of critters. Barely a snack, but it’s only a matter of time until he finds something bigger. He moves fast.’

Percy increased the flow of fused mana a little. He’d had to tune it down a notch since the massacre, to avoid provoking Acton again. But he also knew the crow needed every drop it could get, given the circumstances.

‘Hang in there, buddy. I swear I’ll get you back if it’s the last thing I do.’

Though Micky shook his head.

‘I don’t care about that. Promise me something else.’

Percy felt a bitter lump in his throat, already knowing what the crow meant, Micky’s words only confirming his suspicions a moment later.

‘Whatever happens to me… kill the little shit.’

Chapter 289: Twilight City

“Finally! It’s working!” Percy exclaimed, flickering the enchantment between states.

Technically, it wasn’t the first time he’d managed to heat the slab up, nor even the first time he’d gotten it to switch on and off at will. But it was his first time getting everything to work as intended, allowing him to cycle between all four states without fail. The slab was a bit hot to the touch at the highest setting, though he’d prepared for that, coating his hand in a thin layer of pure mana before playing around with the runes.

“Congratulations, Percy! Does that mean you’re ready to craft yourself a new cauldron?” Elaine asked.

Naturally, he’d already briefed his companions about his latest project, seeing no reason to hide it from them. He trusted both of them with his life.

“I’d love to, but I’m not quite there yet…” he scratched his head before elaborating. “I’ll need to stick more than two control runes on each enchantment, or it’s going to be worse than my current one. It would also be nice if I could get a little better at drawing them first, otherwise I’ll have to carve each rune a hundred times to get them all right…”

Regardless, a wide grin was plastered all over his face. Despite all the stress he was under, this was the first positive development in weeks. He’d at least grasped the underlying principles behind the cascading controls. Now, it was only a matter of pouring some more time and effort into it.

Part of him wanted to get started on that right away, but his eyes couldn’t help but veer off to the distance, as a colossal city faintly appeared on the horizon. The others followed his gaze, letting out startled gasps in the process. The city was still a few hours away, but it was clear it stretched for tens of miles across, its bright lights scattered like tiny dots, almost blending into the starry sky above it.

“Is this the place?” Elaine threw him a questioning look, some excitement bleeding into her voice.

“It has to be.” he nodded, prompting her to exhale in relief.

And she wasn’t alone in feeling that way. Honestly, they could all use some rest.

This city was where they were planning to live over the next few months. Right behind it, hidden by the vast stretch of tall buildings, was the place they actually wanted to get to: the Thirsty Valley. Though they weren't ready to sneak in just yet. First, they had to complete their preparations.

"It's even larger than I thought it would be! The House that owns it must be filthy rich!" Elaine concluded.

"Well, it is the most densely populated area on Remior. But you're wrong about the last part. It doesn't belong to any one family. It's somewhat neutral." Percy explained, causing her to raise an eyebrow.

"Neutral? Does the Divine Order even allow that? Who makes all the decisions here?"

This time, it was Nesha who answered, however.

"Well, obviously, if the Order wants something, everyone has to oblige. Not that different from everything else on Remior, really. But for the most part, they don't bother. They can't be asked to manage a city this large by themselves. It's too big even for the Divine Root. It's governed by its own organization: the Black and White Syndicate. As long as they don't do anything too egregious, the Order lets them do as they please."

"Black and White Syndicate? Sounds ominous." Elaine frowned.

"They did start off as a bunch of criminals." Percy shrugged. "This is actually the one place on Remior where bandits and lowlifes are free to sell their loot with relative impunity."

"And the Order doesn't arrest them?! Right next to the Thirsty Valley?!"

"They kinda benefit from it too." he said, before elaborating.

At first, there hadn't been anything next to the Valley. This all changed when some daring people set up a few shops and inns. The Green-borns didn't mind that. In fact, they welcomed it, as they finally had a place to rest and restock their supplies before commencing their training. Even when a couple thieves

tried to launder their ill-begotten money in the settlement, nobody cared. After all, the more this place grew, the more useful it was for the Order.

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Eventually, more people joined. Commoners realized this was one of the few places on Remior they could call their own, without being driven away or ruled by the nobles. Small-time criminals realized the Order would turn a blind eye to their checkered past, giving them a chance to build a new life for themselves and their families.

Thus, the small collection of inns and restaurants turned into a tiny village, and then into a town no smaller than the ones they'd seen along the way. But the town kept growing, until it far surpassed any other on Remior. Everyone: from the most prestigious merchants to the most prolific crime lords: funnelled huge amounts of resources from all over the world, accelerating the city's growth.

"…and so, the Twilight City was born: a place where law and crime freely mix."

Of course, that didn't mean people were allowed to rob or murder in broad daylight. The city wouldn't have survived for more than a week had that been the case. But as long as everyone behaved within the city's walls, nobody asked them any inconvenient questions.

"Does that mean we're also in the clear?" Elaine asked, her eyes sparkling with hope.

"If only it were that easy..." Percy smiled bitterly. "Directly defying the Divine Order: as we have: is the one thing that won't be forgiven. We'll still have to be careful."

Elaine nodded, as Nesha spoke.

"It's not all bad. There are actually a few things that work in our favour. The Twilight City's scope goes beyond a mere supporting pillar for the Valley now. It's one of the largest trading hubs on Remior. Arguably larger than the Guild. The only downside is that we can't buy nectar here, as exporting it out of the Fungal Spire isn't allowed. Still, we shouldn't have much trouble finding everything else we need."

“Wait, what’s the point of trading alchemical reagents here? Aren’t most of Remior’s alchemists staying in the Guild?” Elaine asked.

“For the most part, yes. And even the few who aren’t can’t do much without nectar. The market for potions is much smaller. But many reagents have other uses. As for the ingredients which are exclusive to alchemy, they are still often gathered here from all over Remior, to be transported to the Guild in larger batches. The Syndicate is one of the Guild’s most prominent suppliers.” Nesha explained.

Listening to her, Percy cracked a wry smile. She wasn’t wrong, but she’d omitted one tiny detail. Finding and buying the reagents they needed were two entirely separate matters. Even if they found a deattunement ingredient suitable for the Aurora Dew, procuring the sheer volume they needed without raising an eyebrow would be a challenge.

But that was a problem for later.

Meanwhile, his cousin couldn’t help but toss another glance at the colossal city before her.

“How long did it take for it to grow this big?”

“Beats me. Probably thousands of years.” he replied. “The Syndicate is the strongest organization on Remior under the Great Houses. The only one of its kind too, considering that they don’t let any nobles or Yellow-borns join.”

“Seriously? How can it be this powerful without Yellow-borns? Orange-borns can’t get to Violet or White.”

Percy nodded.

“Indeed. But the Syndicate has a lot of Blues. And I mean a lot. They are called the 72 Veiled Ladies and 72 Radiant Lords. Most of them are over a thousand years old. And each governs one of the city’s 144 districts.”

Suffice to say, finding such a powerful force outside the noble families was highly atypical. Under normal circumstances, the nobles should have fought tooth and nail to recruit these people. Granted, most Houses primarily invited Yellow-borns, not Orange-borns, but that distinction only applied to the younger ones.

After all, unless an Orange-born peasant had mutated a powerful bloodline, they weren't worth the investment. It would take them over 500 years to reach Blue: not to mention the ridiculous amount of elixir they'd consume to get there. And only a small fraction would even survive that long, the rest ending up a waste of resources.

But Orange-borns who had already reached Blue were a different story. They might be stuck there for the rest of their lives, but they could still live over 4000 years in total, which wasn't a short time by anybody's standards. And Blues were immensely valuable strategic resources for any House, as a group of them could even topple a Violet.

"I've heard that the Lords and Ladies in the Syndicate do receive lots of invitations and marriage proposals. No surprise there. But they tend to refuse." Nesha said.

"Really?" Elaine was surprised. "Not to toot our own horn, but I thought commoners generally jumped at the opportunity to join a House."

"Not if their life is already more comfortable here. Not to mention safer, since they don't need to get involved in the wars. In fact, the exact opposite dynamic has been reported. Some Yellow-born Blues have tried to defect from their families and join the Syndicate, only to be rejected. These people actively despise us nobles. Many of them suffered through traumatic experiences in their past."

"You think we'll get in trouble?" Elaine asked.

Percy chuckled.

"Elaine… if anyone figures out who we are, we'll have bigger issues than some noble-hating Blues… Though, I'm afraid we'll need to take a risk at some point…"

“Yeah, we will.” Nesha agreed. “The easiest way to get the ingredients we need is to approach one of the Lords or Ladies and offer them a good deal.”

Elaine swallowed hard, probably realizing once more how dangerous her decision to follow Percy was. But she didn’t say anything, picking the pace up instead.

As did the rest of them, eager to reach their destination a minute sooner. Not only was Micky counting on them, but they could hardly wait to see the bustling city from up close.

Chapter 290: 138th district

Not every settlement on Remior took the same approach to security.

Some of the smallest, most decrepit places: like Bogside Town: didn’t even have a fence, let alone guards or a wall. As for the richer towns, like the ones Percy’s group had recently travelled through, they could at least afford the bare minimum. They were enclosed in simple walls, making it a little harder for wandering beasts and criminals to sneak in unnoticed.

Then, there were the locations of strategic importance, like the Alchemists’ Guild. Places so well-defended that entering or exiting without permission was nearly impossible: unless, of course, you were a flying beast… Or had the means to dig through a magical hive teeming with monstrous wasps.

Twilight City, however, was an outlier. It didn’t fit neatly into any of those categories.

On one hand, the entire city was surrounded by a massive wall: twenty meters tall and three meters thick, made of solid stone. It was exactly the kind of fortification one might rely on to repel an invading army. Yet, despite its imposing presence, Percy didn’t see any guards near the bronze gate. Its colossal leaves stood wide open even in the dead of night, inviting anyone to freely enter, making him question why they’d even bothered building the wall in the first place.

“It’s mostly to keep beasts out. And… well, they can close the gates and man the walls in the case of an emergency. But nothing of the sort has ever happened, as far as I know.” Nesha said, answering the unspoken question in his eyes. “As for people… everyone is allowed inside anyway, so what would even be the point of guards?”

With no one stopping them, the trio entered the city, immediately struck by its unique architecture. Every building, whether a house or a shop, was at least three stories tall and made entirely of stone. The sight reminded Percy of the Guild's settlement, though there were a couple of key differences.

For one, the city obviously lacked the colourful motes that bathed the base of the Fungal Spire. Nor were there any glowing runes carved into the exteriors of the buildings. Maybe the relative scarcity of ambient mana made it harder to power them efficiently, or perhaps the city was simply too vast to get everything enchanted. As a result, many of the buildings looked a little worn. Without the self-repair enchantments, they likely had to be maintained: or even replaced: regularly.

Another detail stood out: a more glaring one, in fact. Nearly everything around them was pitch-black! The buildings, the stone paths beneath their feet... even the occasional bench by the side of the street. The older-looking structures were merely painted, but some of the newer ones looked like they had been constructed out of darker materials to begin with.

If that wasn't enough, Percy noticed a couple of trees planted along the sidewalk a few dozen metres ahead. Even those had been selected to match the aesthetic, their ebony trunks and similarly coloured leaves fitting right in.

"What's up with their fashion sense?! Are they mourning somebody's death?!" Elaine grimaced, clearly not very enthused by all this.

Percy also raised an eyebrow. From afar, the city's details had been somewhat hazy: especially at night. But now that he was closer, he had to admit, it did look a little gloomy.

"It's part of the theme." Nesha chuckled. "You'll understand why when we reach the next district."

"Been here before?" Percy asked.

Everything he knew about Twilight City was second-hand information that had mostly come from books. Sadly, it didn't include details about the city's appearance or its daily life. Nesha, on the other hand, seemed to know a lot more about it, for some reason.

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“Once.” she nodded. “My dad sent me here as a child… before everything.”

Her gaze drifted off for a moment, but she shook it off before he or Elaine could offer their sympathy.

“Oh, but it wasn’t exactly a vacation. It’s just a good place for an aspiring merchant to visit. You can’t really expect to get good at trade without seeing one of Remior’s grandest markets with your own eyes.”

Percy couldn’t help but scratch his head in embarrassment.

“Mind leading the way, then? I admit, my plan gets more… vague past this point.”

“I figured as much.” Nesha smirked. Then, she tapped her chin, thinking. “Let’s see… it’s been over a decade since my last visit, but I suppose the inns in the 115th district should still be among the best.”

Gesturing for them to follow, she led them through what she explained was the 138th district.

Another huge difference from the Guild, was that this place seemed to have a thriving nightlife. Peddlers lined the streets, selling everything from clothes and snacks to drugs and weapons.

Among them, they even met a few women of… questionable occupation. Some of them were sitting on the ground, others leaning seductively on the walls, all of them eyeing potential customers. Most of them flashed Percy bright smiles or playful winks, subtly inviting him to seek them out later. Luckily: for everyone involved: they didn’t do much more than that, likely deterred by Nesha and Elaine’s presence by his side.

Of course, Percy was way too tired to pay them much attention. His body ached from head to toe, each step a monumental and agonizing endeavour. Even keeping his eyelids from drooping took everything he had, let alone dragging his feet forward. If Nesha and Elaine’s frequent yawns were any indication, his companions weren’t doing much better.

Still, one girl did briefly catch his eye, prompting him to sober up a little. She was a touch prettier than her colleagues, seemingly in her early twenties. Her hair was a wheat-blond colour, the air around her thick with the overly sweet scent of berries. Her eyes glistened in a deep blue, like a pair of sapphires. Well, “glistened” in the non-magical sense, at least. She wore a tight dress that barely reached halfway through her thighs, leaving very little to the imagination.

Percy’s purely appreciative gaze might have lingered a second too long, however, as a pitch-black butterfly fluttered past his face, nearly landing on his nose. He might have missed it too: its dark frame blending seamlessly with the background: if not for its silhouette shining in a bright Yellow before his mutated eyes.

Startled, he nearly stumbled as he tried to avoid it, careful not to let the lethal construct touch him, lest he lost an eye or, worse, his life. By the time he turned to Nesha, his heart pounded like a drum, though his girlfriend strode forward nonchalantly, not even bothering to look at him. Swallowing hard, he awkwardly waved the girl goodbye before quickening his pace.

As soon as he reached Elaine’s side, he was rewarded with a jab from her elbow. Stifling a groan, he rubbed his bruised ribs, wondering if his purely academic curiosity even warranted such harsh treatment. Meanwhile, his cousin gave him a stern look, though he knew her well enough to tell she was holding back a chuckle.

“Uhhhm… I guess my glowing eyes are popular with the ladies…” Percy coughed dryly.

“Dream on.” Nesha scoffed. “They’d hit on a chimpanzee if they thought he could pay for it.”

Scratching his head, Percy followed her in silence. Luckily, the girls didn’t say much either, sparing him from further condemnation.

The trio walked for a few more minutes, their steps barely audible through the cacophony of voices around them. Apparently, the 138th district stretched for at least a handful of miles… Or, actually, were they still in the same district? Or had they already crossed over to the next one? Percy had no way to tell.

He opened his mouth, about to voice his question, not only to satisfy his curiosity, but also to hopefully distract Nesha from… other, less convenient matters. Yet, he never got the chance, the answer revealing itself before him.

A couple hundred metres ahead, the district finally came to an abrupt end.

How did he know?

Because the world itself changed.

Currently, they were surrounded by obsidian buildings and black streets, only able to see past their noses thanks to the scarce city lights barely illuminating the dark contours around them. Yet, past a certain point, everything inverted: black to white, shadow to stark brilliance. The houses, the pavement… even the air itself almost seemed brighter, as though night crossed into day. As if that was something men could control, and not determined by the sky above their heads.

Of course, that was merely an illusion, as the sun was still absent, and it was still the middle of the night. But the white surfaces of the next district did a better job reflecting the pale starlight, making it a far easier place to navigate.

“Welcome to the 126th district.” Nesha grinned.