Wanderer 291

Chapter 291: Chessboard

As soon as they entered the 126th district, Percy and Elaine couldn't help but gawk in awe at the drastic change in their surroundings. The black paint had been replaced by white, while materials like obsidian, basalt and slate that made up the dark part of the city now gave way to alabaster and limestone. Hell, even the trees planted by the sidewalks were of a different variety, the ironwoods and ebonies replaced by aspens and birches.

"I know what you're thinking. The answer is yes. Each of the 144 districts is a perfect square of alternating colours. If you look at the city from above, it's like an oversized chessboard." Nesha said.

"I admit, it's impressive, but it sounds like a whole lot of effort just to make the place look prettier." Percy replied.

But Nesha shook her head.

"Actually, it's like this for purely practical reasons."

He and Elaine flashed her questioning looks, prompting her to elaborate.

"The city didn't always look this way. And neither the Radiant Lords nor the Veiled Ladies were called that, in the early days. Nor was the Syndicate. The city was still separated into districts, but there were fewer of them, and they weren't as cleanly defined. But there was still a single manager presiding over each one, and you already know that many of these people come from shady backgrounds. So, you can probably guess what happened."

"They fought over territory?" Percy asked, getting a nod back.

"Yeah. The Blues were all greedy people, and they constantly fought over the boundaries of their districts, scheming against one another for every last centimetre of land. Eventually, that started to create issues in the city's management, so the Divine Order forced them to sit at a table and figure out a solution. And this is the result."

Percy couldn't help but let out an amused whistle. Quite an innovative solution, if a bit overkill. At least now, every manager knew exactly where their district ended and the next one began, leaving no room for interpretation or ploys…

"So, what do they do whenever the city needs to expand?" Elaine asked.

"They add a new row or column of districts, and open just as many new positions for Lords and Ladies. They have to renumber the districts too, otherwise the numbering would get messy. But it doesn't happen that often. I believe the last expansion happened about 400 years ago. Before then, there were only 132 districts, in a 12 by 11 grid."

"And the managers just accept that? Doesn't their authority get diluted whenever they introduce new seats?" Percy asked.

"It does, but it can't be helped. It's not like they can stop the city's growth, nor would they want to. The benefits they get from the expansion vastly outweigh what they lose by having to share."

Percy chuckled.

"Funny how much trouble they went through: painting the whole place up: just because they couldn't control their own greed."

"Well, the current arrangement runs like clockwork, so who are we to judge?" Nesha shrugged. "Besides, the changes go beyond cosmetics. Haven't you noticed?"

Percy followed her glance, only now registering how empty this place was. Unlike the bustling 138th district they'd just passed through, there was hardly a soul roaming the streets, nor any lights coming out of the buildings. The area was quiet as a graveyard too, lacking the lively establishments of its neighbour.

"Not everyone likes to party all-night. A lot of serious people live in Twilight City too. And they'd rather focus their energy on their daily ventures than waste their time drinking and gambling. Since the city

was already split into black and white, the Syndicate decided to impose quiet hours on the white districts, to give their residents some peace and quiet." Nesha explained.

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"What if somebody wants to partake in both lifestyles?" Elaine wondered.

"Nothing's stopping them. Everyone is free to go wherever they please, and the nearest district of the opposite colour is always just a few minutes away."

Thinking about something, Percy voiced a different question.

"I take it the Radiant Lords and Veiled Ladies also fit neatly into the theme?"

Nesha nodded.

"The Lords are always assigned to the black districts, and the Ladies to the white ones."

Hearing that, Elaine raised an eyebrow.

"Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Actually, this works better. The whole idea is for them to dress in the opposite colour, so they stand out inside their territory. Of course, it doesn't mean they aren't allowed to do business elsewhere. Many of them run enterprises that span the whole city. But they need permission from their corresponding colleagues to operate in their districts."

Percy nodded. He had a few more questions of his own, but he opted not to voice them. As much as he wanted to learn more about the city he'd be living in for the foreseeable future, he could do so later, when his brain wasn't fried. Elaine apparently felt the same way.

The trio then sped up, knowing they didn't have long before daybreak. The 115th district where the inns were located was a white one, so they'd rather get themselves sorted before their neighbours woke up. As much as Percy's mutation and everyone's haircuts helped conceal their identities, they all understood how flimsy their disguises were. And they'd already spotted a couple of wanted posters of him and Nesha on the walls.

Naturally, they had to take some additional precautions to minimize the risk of discovery. For instance, they'd already decided to employ fake names, and to avoid wandering the city more than necessary. Not that they could avoid it entirely, but there was a huge difference between walking through the black districts at nighttime and traversing the white ones during the day.

Another thing they'd discussed was the possibility of staying at different inns and operating independently of one another, for the most part. Their pursuers were on the lookout for both him and Nesha, so it was probably unwise to stick together as a group.

"Should we get hoods?" Elaine suddenly asked.

Unlike before, her voice was barely a whisper, as she didn't know if anyone could hear her, and this was a more sensitive topic.

"At first, I thought we'd stand out too much, but I saw plenty of people hiding their faces in the previous district." she added.

Nesha shook her head, shooting the idea down.

"It might help in the short-term, but it'll only draw more attention. There are people who make a living identifying criminals and selling their information. And the juiciest targets are those who actively try to hide." she explained, keeping her voice down too.

"I thought crime was typically ignored here?" Elaine asked back.

"It is, but that's only the case inside the city. Depending on who you've pissed off, you could be hunted down the moment you step outside. Many people end up staying here forever."

Seeing her pale, Nesha hurriedly spoke again to placate her.

“It’s not all bad. At least the city is peaceful. Even the worst of the worst don’t dare to stir up trouble, afraid of both the Order and the Syndicate. And it’s not just fear either. From their perspective, this is their only sanctuary on Remior, so nobody wants to ruin that. It’s unwise to shit where you sleep, and all that.”

The group had to cross two more districts to reach their destination, the transition from white to black and then back to white again no less jarring than before. Getting used to this would probably take a while.

By the time they entered the 115th district, their exhaustion was palpable, their legs feeling like they were made of lead. Even worse, the sun was already out, some people out and about, opening up their shops for the day.

Percy caught a whiff of freshly baked bread coming from around the corner, causing his mouth to water. It had been a while since he last had a proper meal. But he suppressed his hunger for the time being, knowing this wasn’t a good time to indulge. They still had a few days of rations on them, so they were better off sending Elaine out to buy more supplies for them, after settling in. After all, she was the only one who wasn’t wanted yet.

‘Hopefully.’

Next, Nesha tried her best to recall the locations of a few medium-sized inns. Ideally, they didn’t want them to be too popular or too expensive. Then again, they didn’t want them to be too decrepit either, not only because they hoped to find some soundproofing runes in their bedrooms, but also because the establishments would have probably closed down since the last time she was here if they were too poorly managed.

Then, she gave them directions to those inns, the trio parting ways before more people woke up. They all agreed to meet up again at a nearby park a couple days later, after getting some proper rest.

They had plenty of work in front of them, having discussed the plan on the way here. And each of them had their own role to play…

Chapter 292: Alchemical experimentation

A few days had passed since Percy's group entered Twilight City, and everyone was beginning to adjust to their new life.

Luckily, the 115th district hadn't changed that much since Nesha's previous visit, so the trio had found the inns right where she'd said they'd be. The accommodation was rather cheap too, the conditions more than liveable.

Percy's room wasn't exactly the largest, nor the most luxurious he'd seen on Remior. Not by a long shot. But it was more than sufficient for his current needs, equipped with all the basics. Between the soundproofing runes, the comfy bed, the warm water and proper heating, he had everything he needed to make himself at home for the foreseeable future. From what the others had said, theirs were more or less the same.

He wasn't sure what Nesha and Elaine had done upon first entering their own rooms, but he'd personally drank a couple healing potions to heal the torn skin on his soles, before taking a long, relaxing shower.

Granted, he'd nearly fallen asleep more than once as he stood beneath the warm stream, the water splashing on his face doing very little to keep his eyelids from shutting. Still, he'd forced himself to persist, knowing he'd enjoy his rest a lot more if he wasn't covered in dried sweat.

Sure enough, he'd managed to make it to his bed, passing out almost immediately upon sinking into the soft mattress. In the end, he'd slept for a full day, feeling quite invigorated by the time he'd had his fill. Since then, he'd only left the inn a handful of times, to meet up with the others. The rest of the time, he'd spent locked up in his room, working on his side of the plan.

'I guess the tri-coloured clover is another bust…' he sighed, emptying the inert sludge from his cauldron into a bucket by his side.

He was currently sitting at a table in his room: not quite a desk, but close enough. The pile of ingredients next to him was almost exhausted and, sadly, he didn't have much to show for it. If he failed to make any progress with the remaining reagents, he'd have to switch to a different task until his cousin brought him the next batch.

Getting up, he washed his equipment in the bathroom, before returning to his seat for another attempt. Once again, he began the process by tossing four vials of elixir and just as many portions of teal powder into his cauldron. Naturally, the bonding step went by without any issues. It was only when he added the crushed petals of the illusionary rafflesia that he ran into trouble.

Wasting vial after vial of his hard-earned elixirs left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he understood he couldn't make an omelette without breaking a few proverbial eggs. Besides, he was confident he'd succeed before he consumed even a hundredth of his stash, making this a somewhat acceptable expenditure.

Gritting his teeth, he tuned the heat up to the second highest setting, knowing from his experience with the rainbow grass that the second round of deattunement required a much higher temperature. And thus, he began the brewing session anew…

'Man, deciphering the recipe is so much harder without Orin's help…' he thought a few minutes later, wiping the sweat off his forehead as he stared at another failure.

Percy wasn't the fledgling alchemist he'd once been, both his mentor's many lessons and his own years of experience still vivid in his mind. Furthermore, the value of having successfully modified the recipe once already couldn't be overstated, as it pointed him in the right direction, allowing him to dodge several avoidable pitfalls.

And that was without even mentioning how much his mutated eyes assisted him in his endeavour. This was an advantage that neither he, nor Orin, had possessed the first time around. Nor did any other alchemist on Remior, for that matter. Suffice to say, he was confident his experiments would yield some positive results sooner rather than later.

Still, it wasn't fast enough in his eyes. Not even close. He'd already lost several weeks of core purification since they downgraded to the regular elixirs. At least, they could still use the teal paste separately, allowing them to drink two doses per day instead of one, but that was still slower than they'd like.

Every day without Aurora Dew felt like a dagger through his heart. After all, it could easily translate to weeks if not months off the other end of his lifespan, bringing him that much further away from his ambitious goal of attaining divinity.

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‘Ok, let’s not be so dramatic… rushing this is only going to make things worse.’

The Aurora Dew would save him several centuries in the long-term. And that was without even considering any further improvements he might make. There wasn’t much sense in crying over a few weeks.

Taking a deep breath, Percy shifted his attention to something else. Come to think of it, all these deattunement ingredients looked a little similar. Most of them were rather exotic plants, their vibrant colours all over the place. Not that surprising they had this in common, really. Reagents used for a similar purpose tended to share the same affinity: just like how pacification ingredients were always rich in ice mana.

Then again, Percy didn’t recall reading about the affinity that tied deattunement ingredients together. Perhaps, it was a rare one that few alchemists had encountered in the past. Or, maybe, they’d just failed to make the connection. And even if any of them had, perhaps they just hadn’t bothered to document this little detail for their successors.

Still, based on everything he’d encountered in recent years, he couldn’t help but notice it somewhat resembled Jason’s karma mana.

‘It’s not just the colour. I suppose the effect fits as well… kinda.’

Deattunement essentially prevented an alchemic ingredient from reacting violently with the next mana type it encountered. Wasn’t this mystical connection somewhat analogous to the ethereal strings his former opponent had manipulated during their fight?

Or maybe Percy was just reaching, and this had nothing to do with that.

He shrugged. Either way, it didn’t really matter.

Whatever the case, his current job was to complete the recipe as soon as possible, so they could all resume drinking Aurora Dew.

Then again, that was only the first stage of their plan. Brewing a few doses per day to keep up with their consumption would be an improvement, but far from enough. What they really needed was to somehow convert their entire stash, so that they'd have over a decade's worth of Aurora Dew during their stay in the Valley.

A daunting task in and of itself.

'I guess I'll just have to trust Nesha with that…'

His girlfriend only roamed the city at night, as it was much safer for her that way. Her current job was to gather information from the black districts, leveraging both her bloodline and her skillset to do so. This was all to eventually establish the connections they needed to scale their operation up. After all, it would take a lot of money, and a trustworthy partner to make the bulk purchases for them.

Of course, that introduced another problem into the equation. Percy had no intention of revealing the Aurora Dew in this place. It was too valuable. Too dangerous. Enough so to potentially scare or entice even the most honest of partners into stabbing them in the back.

Whatever deal they ended up striking, it would probably have the healing potions or the green mushrooms at its foundation. They might not be as lucrative as the Aurora Dew, but they were much safer to reveal. Not to mention easier to produce. As for the details of this hypothetical collaboration, he'd left everything up to Nesha, trusting her to weigh everything properly and minimize the risk.

'At least, I have plenty of teal powder now, and I can easily make more. That's one less thing to worry about…'

The rest of her time, Nesha spent in her own room, working on her Circulation pattern. Percy missed hanging out with her: and he'd like to think she felt the same way: but they both understood that staying together was a risk they could do without. Besides, it wasn't like they had the time to waste on distractions, nor were they in the right mental space to enjoy themselves while Micky was getting tortured by a psychopath.

‘Speaking of which, how close are you guys to the city?’ he asked through the cord.

‘Not sure where exactly the city is, but from what Acton said, we’ll be there by the end of next week.’ Micky replied a few seconds later.

Percy frowned. This was even sooner than they’d expected. Granted, the boy travelled much faster than them, but between Percy’s head-start, Acton having to carry Micky for much of the journey, and the detour the boy had taken to get him fed, Percy had thought they’d bought more time.

Evidently not.

At least, Micky was doing a lot better. His injuries hadn’t healed completely, but he could at least fly by himself: albeit painfully. In fact, he’d pretended he couldn’t for as long as possible, buying a few extra days in the process.

His hunger wasn’t entirely gone either, but Acton did get him enough food to keep him from starving. On top of that, Micky had resumed using his own spells to conserve his stamina, improving his situation a little. And he’d even started working on his ice pattern again, though he hadn’t made much progress with it quite yet.

Alas, Percy had no idea whether Acton would even bother to stop by Twilight City, or whether he’d just head directly into the Valley. In fact, he didn’t even know which was preferable.

If Acton stopped by the city, it would buy them a little more time, but he’d also reveal Micky’s existence to the rest of Remior. Obviously, nobody would bother his familiar much as long as he remained within the Holy Child’s control, but this could introduce more complications down the line, once they managed to rescue him.

‘Whatever the case, we need to make every second count.’

Chapter 293: Scaling

Percy was still struggling to fit the third control rune into the heating enchantment. And he needed to stack four of them, to craft a cauldron on par with his own. Even worse, he wasn’t satisfied with merely matching it: ideally, he wanted to upgrade it: otherwise there wouldn’t be much of a point.

‘I guess it’s gonna be tougher than I thought.’ Percy grimaced, staring at the fried enchantment on his training slab.

Upon successfully stacking the second control rune, he’d assumed the rest of the journey would be smooth sailing. It appeared he might have been a little too optimistic, however.

Wrapping his mind around the cascading controls was indeed half the battle, but the complexity of the enchantments still grew exponentially with each added rune. In other words, visualizing their joint effects was a lot harder each time, meaning that he had his work cut out for him.

Nevertheless, Percy wasn’t one to falter after the first setback. Or after the millionth, for that matter. Pouring mana into the self-repair runes, he erased the malfunctioning enchantment before going for another attempt.

Upgrading his cauldron wasn’t something he’d decided to do on a whim either. There was a very specific reason for it: one which tied heavily into their current plans. And once again, it had to do with the sheer quantity of elixirs that he needed to brew in a relatively short period of time.

After all, Percy had stolen around 175,000 doses of elixir from House Tantalus. A downright colossal amount. Granted, he and his companions had consumed some during the past couple of months, but it had barely put a dent into his stash. And he needed to convert the entire thing into Aurora Dew pretty soon: preferably before they entered the Valley.

‘Well, I can try to do it inside if all else fails. But it’s best to avoid that.’

Nearly all their spatial amulets were full to the brim with elixirs, leaving them no space to bring any more ingredients with them. Getting more amulets wasn’t going to be easy either, as they were quite expensive, and Nesha wasn’t ready to craft one.

Yet, that wasn’t even the main problem.

Even if they found some way to smuggle the secondary ingredients into the Valley, Percy wasn't sure if the conditions there were suitable for alchemy. The Thirsty Valley hadn't earned this name by accident: accelerating time severalfold usually came hand in hand with severe side effects.

From what he'd heard, all bodies of water were affected in strange ways after prolonged exposure to the temporal Decree. For all he knew, that might extend to his brews. Thus, it would probably serve him well to have the Aurora Dew prepared beforehand and stored safely inside his amulets until the time he needed it, rather than to brew it out there in the open.

Not to mention that he might not even have the luxury of sitting still for hours at a time, to brew peacefully.

Thus, on top of completing the recipe and procuring a large volume of ingredients, Percy also had to vastly increase his own output.

'Currently, each brewing session starts with four doses of elixir and takes me about 15 minutes…' he thought, doing the calculations in his head.

Assuming he spent over twenty hours a day brewing, he could convert about 320 doses of elixirs into about half as much Aurora Dew. This was already several times more than what he used to brew back in the Guild, during his collaboration with Nesha. Between his new eyes, and not having to waste two thirds of his time condensing crystals, he could brew faster than ever before.

'Still, not fast enough.'

At this rate, he'd need nearly two years to convert the whole stash. Acton would be close to Violet by then, if not already there. Thus, Percy had to find a different solution.

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Luckily, he already had one in mind! It was all thanks to an alchemic principle he'd read about on Atlantis. One that he hadn't been able to practice at the time, as it had some steep requirements.

The scaling principle.

Normally, alchemists all over the universe tended to use cauldrons of a very specific size, capping the quantity of ingredients they could brew at once. Or, at least, this was the case with both the regular-shaped cauldrons they had on Remior, and the air-tight, spherical cauldrons he'd seen on the underwater world.

And there was a simple reason for that.

As the quantity of ingredients went up, it became increasingly difficult for the enchantments to apply heat and pressure uniformly to the concoction. It was also harder for the alchemist to pry beneath the surface of the substance, and to take all the internal changes into account.

This resulted in one's yield declining sharply past a certain point. Trying to brew more than that was highly inefficient. On the other hand, brewing less than that was needlessly slow: hence the standard size of cauldrons that multiple factions in the universe seemed to have settled on, independently of one another.

Yet, that only applied to novice alchemists on Atlantis.

The more experienced ones had a few additional means at their disposal, that other places lacked. One of them was, naturally, their eyes. Once they grew accustomed to their mutation, they could use it to peer deeper beneath the surface of the concoction, allowing them to handle the increased volume more easily.

Percy hadn't felt confident to practice with this principle while sharing Enki's body, as neither of them had had much time to adjust to their new vision. Not to mention that he'd still been suffering from a rather intense headache as his two Decrees fought for dominance inside his head. Even after returning to Remior, mastering the scaling principle just hadn't been a priority, as his plate had been full of other, more urgent matters.

Finally, there was one more advantage the Atlanteans had, which had clearly helped them invent this principle. And funnily enough, this had probably been completely accidental.

Their spherical cauldrons had initially only been designed as such purely out of necessity. It was the only way to brew anything underwater. Yet, they had inadvertently opened the door to a series of innovations that made their lives a lot easier.

For one, they'd had to craft their cauldrons out of transparent materials, as that was the only way to even see what was going on inside with their regular vision. As luck would have it, this also helped alleviate some of the problems with scaling the concoctions up.

The fact that their cauldrons fully encompassed the ingredients was also beneficial. It gave them twice the surface area, which not only allowed them to see more, but also to more uniformly apply their enchantments.

Thus, master alchemists on Atlantis capitalized on all these advantages to use larger cauldrons than their untrained peers, allowing them to brew more ingredients at once. The exact size of their cauldrons depended on their skill. The more they improved, the further they could push their output without harming their yield.

From what he'd read, some could even use cauldrons dozens of times larger than normal. That said, Percy was looking at something a little more modest to start with.

'I guess I'll start with a fivefold increase. I can always craft a larger cauldron later, once I get better with the runes and the principle…'

Some losses would still be unavoidable, so it was best not to get too greedy. Other than that, Percy was confident he had everything he needed to craft himself an air-tight cauldron just like the Atlanteans, and to dip his toes into the principle.

He didn't have whatever materials they used, but that was fine. He had his own reinforced mana, and he could even turn it invisible at will. Granted, it would run some interference in his passive Mana Sense, but he could probably work around that by engraving controlled concealment runes on it. That way, he could tune their effect down until they only worked on the cauldron's walls, without hiding its contents from his eyes.

Whoever the Atlanteans employed to craft their cauldrons for them was likely a more experienced runecrafter than Percy, but he figured the Vault's superior runes would help close the gap. Lastly, his self-repair enchantments would allow him to maintain the cauldron in perfect condition.

'In fact, I have a much higher ceiling than them too.' he grinned.

Right now, even catching up to them might be a struggle, but Percy was confident that both his alchemical and his runecrafting skills would surpass theirs in due time. In fact, his eyes already had!

So, believing in himself and in his plan, Percy continued to work on completing the recipe whenever he had enough ingredients at hand, and on improving his cauldron whenever he did not. Progress was slow, but steady. He estimated that getting everything in order would take a few weeks. Though what happened just a couple days later still caught him by surprise.

No, he hadn't succeeded yet in any of his projects: not with the cauldron, and not with the Aurora Dew. Nesha hadn't brought him any news either, nor had Acton and Micky reached the city.

This new development had come from a more… peculiar direction.

From above.

His clone was finally back!

And what a haul this one had brought…

Chapter 294: Taking inventory

Percy was currently laying on his bed, his bedsheets soaked with sweat. Suffice to say, he wasn't doing so great. His heart raced like crazy, his brain throbbing painfully against his skull.

'I guess I should be happy about this… The more it hurts, the more useful stuff the clone has brought back…'

He sighed. Technically, his latest clone hadn't been gone for too long. Even if he included the extra week in the Vault, some of his previous adventures had lasted longer. Still, he had worked non-stop during his stay on Felmara, and that was without considering how fruitful his time in the Wiseman's Chamber had been.

Suffice to say, fully assimilating all these experiences would take a while. Incorporating everything into his arsenal and adjusting his plans accordingly wouldn't be a breeze either.

'First things first… this clone really made a mess, didn't he?'

Percy was used to reaping the benefits of his clones' adventures by now: this was why he even bothered sending them out in the first place. But having to clean after them was a relatively novel experience.

Sure, this wasn't the only clone that had run into trouble. There was the one that had literally died on the way back. And the one that had ended up marked by Metatron. Still, neither of those clones had made things harder for his main body, really. After all, he could have simply chosen to never return to the Vault if he'd wanted.

Thus, this clone was completely different in that regard. Not only had he somehow managed to pick a fight with a god, but he'd also revealed the existence of Circulation to Metatron. Both could bring long-lasting consequences to Percy.

Moreover, the other times had been complete accidents, out of his control. This time, his clone had actively chosen to do those things. If he'd wished, he could have simply abandoned the others in the auditorium, leaving Felmara quietly.

'Oh well… it could have been worse…' he shrugged.

As inconvenient as it was, Percy stood by his clone's actions. If he had to make the same choice again, he still wouldn't have left Tlaloc there to suffer, nor would he have allowed Leo to die.

Besides, it wasn't so bad. Rhaziel had no idea how to find him. Or even what he looked like. Percy had all the time in the world to build up his strength and return to Felmara on his own terms, when he was ready.

As for Metatron… well, Percy had made the most of a tough situation there. At least, he'd managed to leverage the boosting art, getting the titan to start treating his hosts better. That alone was enough to lift a huge weight off his chest. Not to mention how much easier the combat challenges would be from now on.

And then, there was the best part about this trip. The thing that excited Percy the most.

His gains!

Most of his successful clones tended to only bring one or two valuable things back. Yet, this one had actually brought quite a few things with him. Since Percy wasn't in any condition to resume brewing or runecrafting, he figured he might as well go over everything in detail, and to see how it all fit into his plans.

First, was his new storage seal.

Percy focused in his chest, in an area a couple inches below his sternum, where the recently retrieved chunk of his soul was already attaching itself to the rest. Inside it, he felt a foreign object floating harmlessly. It didn't interact with his flesh at all, existing exclusively within his soul.

'Let's see how much control I have over this thing…'

Drawing some soul mana from his core, he gave the seal a gentle push, feeling it moving through him. It was a little uncomfortable this time, unlike when he'd tried this in the Vault. The main part of his soul was more rigid than the disembodied wisps he equipped his clones with, offering some resistance to the seal whenever it tried to move.

Still, it only took him a few moments to push the seal to his hand. And a few more to get it to his foot, or even inside his head. Clearly, Metatron hadn't lied about how easy it was to move. Percy now had complete freedom to choose whether he lent it to his clones, regardless of what part of his soul he fashioned them out of.

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Nodding in satisfaction, he tried something else.

Clamping the seal with his mana, he pulled at it from different directions, trying to split it in half. It resisted at first, forcing him to increase the pressure slightly. Still, the seal eventually obeyed, soon snapping into two smaller copies, each of them bouncing on opposite boundaries of his soul.

Examining one of them, it didn't take him long to confirm that it worked exactly like the original. The only difference was that its internal storage was smaller.

'Now, the cubes are about 5 metres across. That's quite a loss…' he frowned.

This meant that each seal could only store about an eighth of the original, shrinking the overall volume to a quarter.

Regardless, this was dozens of times more than all his spatial amulets combined!

Just like that, Percy had solved his storage problem! He now had the means to bring as many ingredients into the Thirsty Valley as he wanted!

Of course, he still wasn't planning to try brewing in there if he could avoid it, but he now had another option to fall back to, in case he failed to prepare adequately. Even better, the seal might help with another problem he'd been grappling with.

Sadly, Micky didn't have a spatial amulet on him right now. He'd travelled to Goldenfield town with Elaine, and she'd been the one to carry all their stuff. Once Acton chased him off, he'd been left with nothing.

That said, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Had Micky possessed an amulet, the boy would have probably found and confiscated it by now, along with all the elixirs inside it. Besides, the crow didn't need the regular elixirs, since he could cleanse his second core using his own beast mana, at roughly the same rate.

It was only when it came to Aurora Dew that he needed Percy's help, because he couldn't replicate the intricate cycle of destruction and regeneration by himself. Granted, they didn't have any Aurora Dew right now anyway, but Percy would have needed a way to deliver him some, once he brewed it. He didn't want his familiar's progress to stall for decades.

'Thanks to the seal, that's not a problem anymore.'

It was the perfect solution: Percy had all the tools he might need to bring it to fruition!

He'd already practiced creating local clones on Remior, and he'd even verified how easily his clones could locate Micky. After all, his familiar's soul was the only one that didn't reject him, even when at full health. Well, besides his own, of course.

This meant that he shouldn't have much trouble possessing Micky and dropping a seal inside his soul before leaving. Acton would never know. Even better, Micky might be able to pop the elixirs directly inside his stomach, given how easy it was to store and retrieve objects from the seal.

That said, this wasn't without risk. Percy had never tried possessing his familiar before. There was a small chance of his clone getting stuck in Micky's body, unable to escape. If that happened, he could permanently lose a second cord.

'It's still worth a shot.'

This wasn't guaranteed to happen. Even on the off chance that it did, it would serve as a valuable datapoint, informing him how his clones interacted with his familiars. It was something he'd have to investigate sooner or later, as he didn't know what other benefits he might be missing out on.

Besides, even in the worst-case scenario, he would be advancing to Yellow relatively soon. That should increase his capacity to sustain multiple cords, meaning that he wouldn't handicap himself entirely.

Thinking of something else, Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

‘Actually, possessing Micky is probably a good idea regardless...’

Now that they could share each other’s mana, fitting Micky with a clone would help them master their new abilities faster. Practicing was currently a chore, as Percy had to get used to several things at once. Empowering their connection, accessing Micky’s cores from afar, and getting a feel for his ice affinity, all at the same time.

Taking over the crow’s body would vastly accelerate the process. He’d be able to play around with Micky’s mana directly, without having to go through the other steps. It was akin to breaking a more complicated task into smaller, bite-sized portions, so that he could digest them more easily.

In fact, it was even better than that. Percy would effectively have two minds working on the same task. He could have both the clone and his main body collaborate with Micky, to attack the problem from various angles.

‘At any rate, let’s not get ahead of myself.’

Right now, mastering Micky’s affinities wasn’t a priority. It was best to leave that for after they rescued him. Not only did they not have the time for it, he didn’t want Micky’s personal strength to grow any more than necessary, as Acton might use it against them.

For the time being, Percy only wanted his familiar to focus on his core’s purification, and on mastering Circulation and Regulation. Those were the things that would help with his hunger. The rest could wait.

‘The same goes for pre-casting.’

Percy didn’t have the time to adapt it to his own affinities, nor to integrate it into his spells. The technique was more useful for Micky right now, but he’d rather not teach him while he was still on the opposite side. This wasn’t the time to possess the crow either. He had to brew some Aurora Dew first, else there wouldn’t be much of a point.

Pulling some more mana from his core, Percy then pressed the two seals back together. They resisted at first, just like before, but they merged with a satisfying click, restoring the seal to its original size.

‘Alright then. That settles the seal and pre-casting…’

He grinned.

It was time for the big stuff.

Chapter 295: Planning ahead

Rubbing his hands, Percy summoned his Status, eager to read all the recent changes.

___

Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

[Mana core 1 – Orange – Soul][Mana core 2 – Orange – Pure]Bloodline:

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

[Sorcerer’s Eye] – Draws from the cumulative knowledge listed in the Status to enhance one’s vision, allowing them to discern details previously unseen.Spectral trait:

[Weaving]: Boosts one’s proclivity in manipulating one-dimensional structures.Spells:

[Concussive Blast: Crude][Secret Art: Soul Resonance: Refined][Spectral Art: Soul Stitching: Refined][Wild Art: Greater Foresight: Refined][Wild Art: Grim Dance: Refined][Spiritforged Effigy: Refined][Soul Conversion: Refined][Soul Harvester: Refined][Reinforcement: Refined][Synchronization: Refined][Spectral Art: Phantomscale Regalia: Masterful]Alchemic principles:

[Extraction]: Separate and condense an ingredient's essence.[Pacification] – Delay an ingredient's activation rate.[Redirection] – Adjust an ingredient's effect.[Deattunement] – Prevent multiple conflicting ingredients from reacting with one another.[Bonding] – Enrich an ingredient with crystallized pure mana.[Restructuring]: Alter an ingredient's phase.Decrees:

[Phoebe's Decree]: Grants access to your Status.[Iapetus's Decree]: Grants a bloodline.[Moirais' Decree] – Grants a second mana core.[Metatron's Decree]: Open a one-way portal to the Vault of Magic at will.[Ea's Decree (Modified)] – Augments and enhances your Status. Grants the Sorcerer's Eye.___

'It keeps getting longer… But I suppose that's a good thing…'

Shrugging, he shifted his gaze to the newest additions.

Strictly speaking, there were only two of them: Concussive Blast and the restructuring principle. The former was merely a Crude spell. The only one of its kind, staining his Status once again, after all the trouble he'd gone through to upgrade everything. Worse still, this was a spell he couldn't even use without Micky's help.

Yet, he wasn't too disappointed.

More than anything, it was like an inert seed, representing his newfound understanding of pre-casting. Percy was confident he and Micky would eventually turn it into something truly fearsome.

Then, there was the new principle. A rather complicated one, which had taken him quite some time to master.

'Of all the things I brought back, restructuring might be the most useful in the short-term.' he smiled.

Simply by having mastered another principle, Percy had grown as an alchemist. The benefit was indirect, but still undeniably there. It would help him with everything he did, from completing the new recipe, to improving his yield. In fact, it would probably help him master the scaling principle faster too. And with every new entry in his Status, his eyes grew stronger, further boosting his proficiency.

‘This might also solve our money problem…’

Initially, he had planned to brew healing potions for that. He’d only need some spoiled meat and some space to grow as many mushrooms as he wanted. Considering how large Twilight City was, it shouldn’t be hard to get either.

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Once his cauldron was ready, he would then be able to practice the scaling principle on the potions. That way, he’d not only push his yield as high as possible before moving to the elixirs, but he’d also be able to sell the excess, to buy the secondary ingredients for the Aurora Dew.

The only problem with this plan, was that healing potions weren’t that popular with high-borns. Not to mention that the market was likely already saturated.

Percy’s only advantage was that he would probably be able to undercut his competition, given how easily he could grow the mushrooms. After all, he could do everything locally, without having to import any ingredients from outside the city, planting the mushrooms on what was essentially trash. Even so, there was no guarantee they would amass all the money they needed fast enough.

But that was all in the past.

The knowledge he’d brought from Felmara now opened a new door for him. Healing tattoos were arguably superior products, and not just due to their novelty. If he was right, injecting the potions directly into one’s body would be more effective than consuming them. Not to mention how much easier it would be to activate a tattoo in the middle of a fight.

That said, there were still a few challenges they’d have to overcome before they could mass produce them. Brewing the ink would require an additional alchemic step, increasing the cost. They’d have to find a source of reagents rich in mud mana. Percy would have to spend more time and effort too, and with a lower yield to boot. Finally, they’d need to train somebody in applying the tattoos to their customers.

‘I should discuss this with Nesha. She understands this stuff better than me: she’ll know if this will sell better than the potions.’

In any case, Percy wasn’t done going over his gains yet. Just thinking about his greatest prize from the trip made his mouth water. Against all odds, he’d managed to obtain the final step of the Dance!

Strictly speaking, it had been his goal from the start, but he could have never imagined things would go the way they had. Somehow, he’d ended up on the wrong planet, spending most of his time there oblivious to the fact that it was even connected to Huehue. Regardless, in the end he’d still learned the technique from one of Micky’s people, just like he had planned.

‘It’s such a pity I can’t practice it right away…’ he smiled bitterly.

Mastering the spell would massively boost his combat strength. Other than reaching Yellow, this was easily the most direct way to bridge the gap between him and Acton: at least partially. In fact, if Elaine learned it too, they might be able to defeat him together, even without advancing.

Sadly, that was just wishful thinking. From what little he’d seen, Percy knew the complete spell was quite intricate. Probably a Masterful one. And, unlike Circulation, he hadn’t experienced it directly. He’d only caught a fleeting glimpse of Tlaloc’s demonstration.

The good news was that he shared the guy’s pure affinity, and he’d seen enough to feel confident in reproducing it. But it would take time. Months. Maybe even years. Adapting it to other affinities and teaching his companions would take longer still.

‘Right now, I have to focus on converting the elixirs and sneaking into the Valley. I can practice the spell there.’

Percy had always planned to work on his spells during his stay in the temporal Decree. After all, drinking Aurora Dew would only take a few minutes per day, and he had to spend over a decade in there. Since brewing wouldn’t be an option, he’d considered working on his mana threads.

Evidently, he now had one more thing to look forward to. If everything went well, the Percy who walked out from the Valley a couple years from now would be a completely different person.

Alas, there was no use in daydreaming about a future that might not even come to pass. Anything and everything could go wrong before then.

He shrugged.

‘Alright… so that’s the bulk of my loot. Though there are a couple more things to consider…’

Other than the storage seal, pre-casting, restructuring and the Dance, Percy had brought a few… less tangible things back. There was the inspiration he’d drawn from the Wiseman’s Chamber. In the future, he intended to look into inhalable potions or time acceleration enchantments. Even more importantly, he’d like to get his hands on some Wiseman’s Dust if possible. The miraculous substance had done wonders for his training, and he wouldn’t say no to another round.

‘If only I had the seal back then, maybe I could have stolen some…’

Then again, getting through the fortified panel would have been a challenge.

In any case, there were also the books he’d brought from the Vault, but he wasn’t going to go through them just yet. And there was everything he’d learned about the universe in general, and the greater springs in particular, through his Cosmic Studies classes.

Recalling the cold look Mrs. Lia had given him in the auditorium, he couldn’t help but sigh. It was such a stark contrast to the gentle smile and kind eyes she usually wore.

‘But she’s the one in the wrong: all of them are. Not me or Leo.’ he reminded himself.

Percy could almost forgive the Felmarans for conquering Huehue. As much as he hated them for hurting Micky and his people, he understood that the universe was a cold and brutal place. Every faction had to look after themselves first and foremost, and to do what they could to survive. Everyone was in a constant struggle for resources. They had to stay ahead of their enemies no matter what, lest they risked getting annihilated.

That said, Percy would never forgive Rhaziel for the way he'd treated his prisoners. For torturing them. Humiliating them. Stuffing them in coliseums and forcing them to fight for their lives. Parading them around like exhibits. Trophies of his victory over their ancestors…

All of that was unnecessary. The mere memory made Percy's blood boil as he clenched his fists until they were drained of colour.

'I hope you don't forget my promise to you, Rhaziel. Because I won't.'

Chapter 296: Dusty old hut

The half-moon shone dimly over Twilight City, bathing the park in its soft radiance. It illuminated the faces of the two people sitting side by side on an old bench, discussing something quietly.

At some point, one of them: a bearded man with glowing eyes: carefully handed the woman something. There wasn't anyone else nearby, but he still made a conscious effort to hide the object in his sleeve for as long as possible before passing it over.

It was a small black cube, strung on a thin chain. Lots of tiny lights decorated its surface, glittering like stars. They formed faint patterns that wouldn't have meant much to the average person. Yet, if a member of House Etna had been here: or a high-ranking noble, they would have certainly recognized it as a spatial amulet.

The woman: a young lady in her early twenties, with short azure hair: received the object, handing the man another one like it. Naturally, she was Elaine, and the guy was Percy. The amulets were both full of elixirs, but the one she'd given him also contained the deattunement ingredients she'd purchased earlier that day.

"Did you run into any issues?" he asked.

"Not really." she shook her head. "I found almost everything you requested, except for the dazzling fern. I've already spoken to Ebony about it: she said I should try looking in the 91st district."

Percy nodded. Ebony was the name Nesha was using while they stayed here. Elaine was Azure, while Percy had borrowed the name of one of his hosts, calling himself Noland.

“Bring it with the next batch if you find it. I’ve put the list in the amulet.”

Elaine was the only one in the group who wasn’t a fugitive, so they’d given her the task of traveling through the white districts during the day, to look for the ingredients he needed. Percy told her what to look for, depending on how the experiments went, while Nesha instructed her on the best places to look for them.

The rest of her time, she spent working for a water manifestation company. This was a special industry they employed in Twilight City, to provide the residents with drinking water. Normally, villages and towns were built near sources of water, like rivers or lakes. Unfortunately, Twilight City had nothing of the sort nearby, as it had been built next to the Thirsty Valley.

For that reason, the Syndicate relied on water users to manifest water out of their own mana, to provide for their residents’ needs. The pay wasn’t that great: especially since she only worked there part-time: but she figured it was good training for her. Manifesting streams of water for hours at a time gave her the chance to work on both her stamina and mana control. It was somewhat useful, since there wasn’t any other place in the city suitable for a Green to practice.

Naturally, she couldn’t use Circulation while on the job, but the company provided their employees with a few magic potions per day, to help them replenish their reserves faster. The potions cost a fair amount too, and they weren’t too effective on the higher grades either. Still, the city’s management clearly felt it was a small price to pay for the service Elaine and her colleagues provided.

“You don’t look too good.” she suddenly said, her voice tinged with concern. “Is the clone back?”

“Yeah.” he sighed. “My head is killing me. I took the afternoon off. Hopefully, I’ll be back to brewing tomorrow.”

“Anything good?”

“Lots of things.” he grinned, before lowering his voice even more. “Most importantly, we’ve got it! The rest of the Dance!”

Her eyes widened; her face full of questions. But he spoke again.

“It’s a little complicated. We’ll have to practice in the Valley. For now, just stick to the plan.”

“Alright.” she said, getting up.

Percy grabbed her wrist, however, stopping her in her tracks.

“Are you meeting with Ebony soon?”

“Tomorrow.” Elaine said.

They’d agreed to use different meeting spots with each other. Percy never met his cousin where he met Nesha. The girls used a third location for their own meetings. And they all scheduled their meetings in advance, based on what they needed from each other.

In case of an emergency, they’d have to visit each other at their inn, of course, but they preferred to leave that as a last resort. Hopefully, it would make it harder for any prying eyes to track the whole group down. Honestly, they knew this was a bit overkill, but they’d rather be safe than sorry.

“Tell her we’re moving our next meeting forward by two days. I have a few new things to discuss with her. They’re related to alchemy, and our upcoming business.”

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He let go of her hand as soon as he got a nod back. Elaine then walked away, leaving him alone in the park. The night was still young, and he could use some fresh air, the cold breeze doing wonders for his headache.

It wasn’t until about an hour later that he decided to return, hoping to get some shut eye before the sun was up. He was already feeling a little better, so resuming work tomorrow was looking more and more likely.

That said, he didn't head directly towards the inn. Instead, he opted to take the long way around the park, to explore the area a bit more. Not for any practical reason: he just wanted to appreciate the greenery a little longer.

The park wasn't that large, only about a mile across. Still, it was maintained well, the hedges carefully trimmed, the grass regularly manicured. He hadn't seen any trash littering the place either, the whole garden completely spotless.

A few minutes later, he reached the other side of the park. Satisfied with his break, he was about to leave, when something caught his attention. There was a small hut in the middle of the garden, looking completely out of place.

The wooden planks lining its walls were densely covered in preservation runes, yet the enchantments seemed to have done little to stop the material from rotting: a testament to how ancient the hut was. Even the runes themselves were old, as many of them had already faded, their glow dim.

Beyond that, Percy was confident that the enchantments hadn't been there from the start: they had probably been added later, in a futile attempt to maintain the decrepit house. After all, it didn't look like anything special, even by a commoner's standards. Even the houses in Bogside town were larger than that. The most likely scenario was that somebody had grown interested enough in this place to try preserving it, long after its original owner had moved out.

He hadn't the slightest clue who had done this, but they had to be sanctioned by the Syndicate. That would explain why they'd built an entire park around it, and even erected a fence around the hut, covering it in "DO NOT TRESPASS" signs.

"It's the owner of the hut who was special, not the place itself." somebody said, guessing his thoughts.

It was a female voice, piercing the deafening silence of the park like a gentle melody.

Gentle or not, it still caused Percy's heart to skip a beat, however. He'd only stayed here this long because he thought he was alone. Generally, he avoided meeting anyone he didn't have to, to minimize the risk of somebody recognizing him.

But he didn't let his shock show on his face, unwilling to make himself any more suspicious. Turning slowly, he soon located the person who'd just spoken. A young lady, wearing simple clothes. A ragged outfit of worn linen. Not the kind of attire one would expect to see on such a pretty girl. Her black hair fluttered softly in the wind, her delicate features looking like they'd been carved out of the finest jade. She stood a few dozen metres away, seemingly admiring the enchanted hut too.

Every time the wind blew towards him; he caught whiff of a strange scent coming from her. It was faintly sweet, reminding him of agarwood. Though it wasn't exactly the kind of perfume somebody would wear by choice. It was more like an aroma that had clung to her by accident, perhaps from her house. Or her workplace.

More importantly, a Green core thrummed in her chest. And he had some trouble identifying her affinity, having never seen mana channels shaped like hers. It had to be a rare one. One that he hadn't seen since he got his mutated eyes, ruling out life, soul, karma and space.

Her cheap clothes non-withstanding, a Yellow-born with a rare affinity was very likely to be a noble. Even worse, her face looked a little familiar, though he couldn't quite recall where he'd seen her before.

Was it from the Guild? Maybe she used to work there? Or was she some travelling merchant who'd passed through the settlement at some point during his stay?

Then again, Percy had never been the most social person. He was sure she wasn't one of the attendants who'd bought his nectar and sold him the elixirs. And he hadn't met that many people in the Guild.

But where else could they have met? One of the towns on the way to Twilight City perhaps? Or had she visited the Avalon mansion when he was younger?

Either way, this was bad.

Getting seen by a stranger was already an unnecessary risk. Coming face to face with somebody he knew was a hundred times worse. If she recognized him too, he was screwed!

Panicking, he scrambled to think of a good excuse to run away before she got a better look at him. Then again, leaving in a rush would only draw more attention. What he needed to do was to keep a low profile and try not to make an impression. Thus, he didn't even dare to open his mouth, afraid his voice might give away more clues.

The woman seemed to have mistaken his prolonged silence for something else, however. Her pink lips parted into a bright smile, two faint dimples forming on her cheeks.

"I didn't think anybody else would be interested in this hut. Most people don't spare it a second glance. It's sad really, seeing a place with such a rich history forgotten like that."

Percy frowned.

Nothing in her words suggested she might have recognized him. This was a great start. Forcing himself to calm down, he took advantage of the situation, sinking deeper into the topic at hand, to distract her.

"What history? I have trouble figuring out why the Syndicate has put so much time and effort into preserving a dusty old hut."

She chuckled.

"It's not just a 'dusty old hut'. It's the birthplace of a very influential person… he's the reason this city even exists."

Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"One of the founders, you mean? The people who built their restaurants next to the Valley?"

"Nope. Everyone knows that story, but they only settled here because of the Valley. Almost nobody knows why the Valley itself was placed here, though…"

Her words confused him more. As far as he could tell, the Thirsty Valley was a Decree, cast here by a titan. How many people on Remior even knew what a Decree was?

Suddenly, he felt more on-guard against the woman, giving her another appraising look. If she truly knew something that esoteric, she might be involved with the Divine Root in some way. This was even worse than he'd initially feared.

Oblivious to his thoughts, she continued, however, soon confirming some of his suspicions.

"The Thirsty Valley was created by the titan, Kronos. A previous leader of the Divine Order. And he chose this place for purely sentimental reasons."

Percy wanted to get the hell out of here.

Still, realizing something, he pushed his worries aside for a moment, failing to contain his curiosity.

"The hut… was it...?"

The woman nodded.

"It's where Kronos was born. This dusty old hut."

Chapter 297: Clarity

Percy stared at the hut in stunned silence for a few seconds, partly because he hadn't decided what to say to the woman just yet, and partly because he found her words interesting.

So, this little hut, standing stubbornly against the eroding march of time, had been the home of a titan once…

Maybe he shouldn't be so surprised about something this minor though. After all, he'd come face to face with living gods and breathing titans before. He'd even bargained with them, or threatened them directly.

Still, this was different. Metatron and Rhaziel were aliens. On top of that, he only had memories of their meetings, since he'd never actually met them himself.

Instead, there was something more real about Remior's gods. They were humans like him. Or had been once, at least. They'd walked on the same ground as him, breathed the same air. Their actions had influenced everything and everyone he'd ever met, their decisions changing the course of history forever. He'd read stories of them as a child, having grown up taking their existence for granted.

And there was something real about this tiny house too. It stood here, before his actual eyes, its rotting surfaces illuminated by the pale moonlight. It was made of wood: just plain old wood, harvested from trees native to Remior. The craftmanship wasn't anything special either. Whoever had built the hut: whether it was the titan himself, or one of his ancestors: they clearly hadn't been very good at this. The mismatched planks left plenty of gaps between them. The roof had probably leaked a ton of water whenever it rained. Still did, in fact.

'It's not that different from our house in Bogside town, actually.' he thought, the nostalgic memory bringing a faint smile to his face.

It was easy to think of the gods as these lofty existences who could shatter mountains and dry up lakes as casually as breathing. But they'd all started as mortals, much like him. Granted, they'd all been Green-borns, so they'd never been quite as weak, nor had they been treated the same. Still…

"I'm guessing Kronos was a commoner?" he asked.

The woman nodded.

"He was. But that used to mean something slightly different, back when Kronos was mortal. It's quite interesting if you think about it. How languages evolve with our culture. The very words we speak subtly change meaning over time, as if our history is woven into their very fabric."

"What do you mean?"

Hearing his question, she tapped her lip, seemingly gathering her thoughts.

“Kronos’s predecessor, Iapetus, had already disseminated bloodlines among our people, but the current system of noble Houses hadn’t been established yet. There were a couple of kingdoms around, but peasants made up an even greater fraction of the population than they do today. And they were treated even worse. They were nothing more than objects, meant to serve their kings and queens. Even the Green-borns weren’t protected from their cruelty, as the Divine Order prioritized internal affairs back then, rather than trying to strengthen our world. All the early gods, including Iapetus, had come from the royals themselves.”

“So, how did Kronos even become a god?”

“He snuck around, stealing elixir whenever he could, trying to advance while staying hidden in the shadows. Eventually, he slaughtered all the royals who had mistreated him and his family, before reaching godhood. Then, he killed the other gods too, leaving only Iapetus alive. He was the only one he forgave, purely out of respect for the bloodlines he’d gifted humanity with. Next, he reformed the Order, establishing the system of noble Houses. He was also the one who came up with the rule to protect and support all the Green-borns, realizing this was the key to our world’s prosperity. This all happened before he became a titan himself, mind you.”

Percy frowned. Sneaking around and stealing elixir? That sounded a little familiar. The guy was a proper badass too, having slaughtered many older gods with ease, as soon as he advanced. But that didn’t mean Percy liked him.

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Wanting to probe the woman further, he pushed back a little.

“Is the current system supposed to be an improvement? Most people still live in poverty, and now Remior is drowning in constant war.”

“Perhaps, but the number of people who do get better lives has gone up by several orders of magnitude. From a couple dozen royals, to hundreds of thousands of nobles. Besides, the Order never did this to improve everyone’s living standards. Their goal was to foster the growth of new bloodlines, and the emergence of more gods. We need them, to protect our world from outsiders.”

Percy didn't like it, but he had no retort. Cruel as it was, the current status quo had done its job. At least, Remior had survived this long, hadn't it?

The only places he'd seen that were arguably better were Atlantis and Felmara. The former only remained peaceful due to Ea's Decree. It made their alchemists valuable, allowing them to collaborate amicably with other races. As for the latter… well, their prosperity had been built on the suffering of others.

Alas, Percy was too tired, and in too much pain to reform Remior tonight. Besides, he had a more pressing concern at the forefront of his mind.

"How do you know all this?" he couldn't help but ask.

What he actually wanted to know, was whether the woman was a member of the Divine Root. It would explain how she was privy to all this ancient information. At the same time, it would also be the worst-case scenario for him.

But he didn't want to be too direct about it. If she truly was his enemy, he'd rather not clue her in. And maybe he was wrong, and this was all just a big coincidence.

"What can I say? I'm a student of history. I enjoy learning about our world's past." she shrugged. "Besides, none of this is a secret."

Hearing her response, Percy relaxed a little. Maybe he'd misjudged her? The Divine Order might not be in the business of spreading high-level information about Decrees and other races, but they weren't entirely cryptic about less important stuff.

People already knew about the three titans who had led the Order in the past. Hell, they'd built statues of them on every temple, so people had seen their faces too. Looking into ancient history wasn't forbidden. It was just that very few people ever bothered.

'Regardless, I should still be careful of what I say in front of her…'

Whether she was affiliated with the Order or not, the fact remained that he'd seen her before, somewhere. No matter how hard he dug, he failed to place her, the elusive information always slipping off the edge of his mind.

In any case, since he'd recognized her, she could also recognize him, so it was still in his best interest to cut the meeting short.

"It's getting a bit late. Thanks for the history lesson, but I'll be going." he said, casually waving her goodbye.

"Wait." she said just as he was about to turn around, stopping him in his tracks.

Percy swallowed hard, afraid that he got busted. Though her next words weren't what he was expecting.

"Don't you want to check the hut out from inside?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Isn't that against the rules?" he asked, gesturing at the signs.

The woman chuckled, her voice ringing like a bell's chime.

"Do you see anyone else around? The fence is just plain wood. Even the runes are only to preserve the hut. Nobody will know: we'll just steal a peak and get out."

Percy had to admit, he was slightly tempted. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious to see where the titan had lived as a mortal. The bed where he'd slept as a child.

But he shook his head.

“Thanks for the offer. I’m sure it would be fun. Especially with such pretty company. Though I don’t think I want to disrespect the place.”

It wasn’t a lie exactly. He really felt grateful to the Order and the titans over everything they’d done for Remior, despite his current conflict with them. However, his priority was to put some distance from the woman before she pieced everything together. Not to mention that his status as a fugitive made it a terrible idea to start breaking city rules.

She laughed again.

“I didn’t know you were such a stickler for the rules. Maybe it’s those glowing eyes of yours? They make you look like more of a troublemaker.”

Ignoring him, she strode forward, climbing over the fence. Evidently, she intended to go through with this, with or without him.

“Ah, but please don’t tell anyone about me.” she hurriedly yelled, right before entering the hut. “Name’s Clarity by the way.”

“I’m Noland.” Percy shouted back, already grabbing the opportunity to walk away as fast as possible.

His heart was still racing, the conversation playing over and over again in his mind as he tried to make sense of it. Had he given anything away? Had she seemed suspicious of anything he’d said?

He didn’t think he had… The woman: Clarity: was quite odd, but she’d seemed entirely focused on the hut. Maybe he’d just confused her with somebody else?

‘Yeah… On second thought, I don’t think she’s with the Order… Probably some crazy woman, with a soft spot for history…’

Thinking of all the members of the Root or the Order he’d interacted with, he just couldn’t picture any of them dressed in a bunch of cheap rags. Nor could he imagine any of them engaging in a casual conversation with a random Red-born. For all her quirks, the woman was definitely quite approachable.

‘Well, whatever. We should change inns tomorrow, just in case.’

Chapter 298: Changing district

Percy felt much better come morning, even though he didn’t get as much sleep as he would’ve liked. His headache hadn’t subsided completely just yet: he’d likely have to put everything he’d learned on Felmara into practice before he could knock the last kinks off. That said, he’d improved enough to resume working.

Before diving back into alchemy, he did spend some time sending out a new clone though. Taking advantage of his bloodline was always among his highest priorities.

He hadn’t sent the new guy out empty-handed either, equipping him with one of his spatial seals. Not the original: only a quarter, since he didn’t want to risk losing the whole thing if something went wrong. The storage space was only about two-and-a-half metres across, but that would probably be enough to bring back anything important.

Percy also confirmed that he could seamlessly transfer objects from one seal to another: as long as both seals resided within the same soul. This meant he could freely allocate whatever resources he wanted to his clones before deploying them, without having to take his stuff out of the internal storage.

But there was one thing he hadn’t tested yet.

He didn’t know what would happen if he tried to split the seal when it was already full. Would the smaller seals break due to being unable to contain the objects? Or would the shrinking space crush its contents?

‘Nah, Metatron wouldn’t have made such a rookie mistake…’

More likely, either the seal would refuse to split until it was emptied, or it would automatically eject the excess objects to make space. Either way, Percy planned to be careful with it, unwilling to damage the precious artifact out of carelessness.

Regardless, he hadn't kept in touch with the clone. It didn't seem like the clone had travelled far, so Percy could have probably kept Soul Resonance active if he'd wanted. But he didn't have time for that, opting to focus on alchemy instead.

The sky was already dark by the time he exhausted the recent batch of deattunement ingredients. He had yet to brew any Aurora Dew, but that was not to say that he hadn't made progress. In fact, he'd almost succeeded with one of the reagents, giving him a few ideas on what to try next, and on how he could further optimize the second deattunement. All in all, Percy felt confident he'd get the recipe down within the next couple of batches!

Alas, something else took precedence.

Leaving the inn, Percy did something he would have preferred to avoid. He walked to the neighbouring 116th district: a black one: finding Nesha and Elaine sitting together at a bar. This was their private meeting spot, which he wasn't supposed to ever visit.

Suffice to say, the girls flashed him questioning looks. After all, using separate meeting spots had been his idea in the first place.

Gesturing at them to follow him, he told them about his meeting with Clarity, explaining the need to move to a different district. He still didn't think the woman had recognized him. Even if she had, she hadn't given him any indication that she meant him any harm.

Not that a brief meeting like that was enough to get a feel for one's character, but Percy had a few additional reasons not to suspect her. To start, she hadn't really needed to trick him. Without his armour or his companions, Percy would have been hard-pressed to hold his own against a Green. Certainly not without raising a commotion and drawing unnecessary attention to himself. The fact that a full day had passed without anyone knocking on his door further corroborated that the woman hadn't snitched on him.

Regardless, the trio still chose to err on the side of caution. Packing their stuff, they abandoned the 115th district, moving all the way to the 11th. It was another white one, located at the other end of the city. Walking there took them a couple hours, and they'd even made sure to split up this time, unlike before, to avoid being spotted together by half the city.

Sadly, the inns there were significantly worse than the ones they'd left behind. They weren't any cheaper, but their rooms were much smaller. Even the enchantments were in poor condition. Percy didn't know about the others, but the heating runes in his bathroom barely worked, forcing him to take a shower in lukewarm water.

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If the steep decline in their living standards wasn't enough, the girls would now have to walk a lot farther every day, to reach all the places they needed to get to, making the whole situation even more inconvenient.

'Oh well… Better safe than sorry…'

Strictly speaking, the safest option would have been to abandon the city completely. But that was tantamount to leaving Micky in the Holy Child's mercy. Something that none of them was willing to consider.

Besides, even if they ignored the crow's safety, it wasn't like they had much of a choice. They all understood there was an invisible sword hanging over their heads, about to fall at any moment. Reaching the next grade a decade sooner was something they needed to do, regardless. In fact, not entering the Thirsty Valley was arguably riskier than staying in the city.

'At least, it's not all bad.'

Everything considered, there was one upside to living in the 11th district. It was located along the northernmost edge of the city, bordering the Valley directly. It would make it easier for them to investigate the Valley's perimeter from here, allowing them to better prepare to infiltrate it. They'd also be able to ask the residents of the nearby districts questions about the Valley, without it coming off as too strange. After all, it was only reasonable to be curious about a place that was just around the corner.

Beyond that, Percy also got a chance to talk to Nesha about his recent gains. Hearing about the restructuring principle, she exhaled in relief, explaining that this would make her job easier. They weren't going to abandon the healing potions entirely but, according to her, they'd earn money faster by selling both products.

They would be targeting two entirely different markets. The healing potions would be aimed at poor families with low-born children, who wanted to have a few doses at home, in case of an emergency. Percy's lower price point would only make them more enticing.

As for the healing tattoos, they were a more premium product, aimed at richer folk: or those who got in trouble often. For them, money wasn't necessarily an object. They'd be more likely to splurge, to get their hands on all the advantages the tattoos provided them with.

On top of that, Nesha suggested that he got some practice brewing magic potions if he had the time. There was a lot of demand for those, thanks to the city's water manifestation companies. Percy wasn't opposed to the idea, since learning to brew a simple potion like that was relatively trivial for him: compared to all his other ventures, at least.

This way, they'd be selling three products at once, maximizing their revenue.

Admittedly, the thought of selling trollsfury potions did cross his mind, though he quickly shot the idea down. Naturally, he'd brew some for his own use, but most people on Remior didn't fight with their bodies. A physical enhancement riddled with drawbacks wouldn't be very popular.

"Any leads on potential partners yet?" he asked, leaning on a wall by Nesha's side.

"A couple." she nodded, lowering her voice. "Most notably, the Radiant Lord of the 44th district seems like a good candidate."

"Why him?"

When it came to this sort of stuff, Percy trusted her way more than he trusted himself. Still, he was curious.

"Many reasons." she shrugged. "He's involved in the city's food industry, so he shouldn't have much trouble getting us the spoilt meat you need for your mushrooms. He's involved in the alchemy market too. Not as much as others, but he should be able to get us some secondary ingredients. Even better, he's got a reputation for treating his partners fairly. Unlike the other managers, he hasn't stabbed anyone in the back, as far as I can tell."

“Good.” Percy nodded, liking what he was hearing. “How safe is it though?”

Nesha grinned.

“That’s the best part! This guy hates the Order with a passion. Apparently, his sister was a Green-born. His parents tried to hide her from the gods, only to end up executed. Even if he somehow learned who we are, I bet he wouldn’t snitch on us. And if that wasn’t enough, I’ve heard rumours that he got injured by a mind mage a few centuries ago. Supposedly, he hasn’t been able to deploy his domain since!”

Percy raised an eyebrow. A domain was a Blue’s sharpest weapon. Not to mention, the most debilitating one when used against the lower grades. Without it, the man would still be a tough opponent, but not necessarily an insurmountable one. Should he betray them, it might be possible for him and Elaine to take him out with a well-prepared trap.

Once again, Nesha had outdone herself. There was always the chance that something would go wrong, of course, much like what had happened in the Guild. Still, Percy knew he couldn’t have done better than this.

“How long do you need to set everything up?” he asked.

“Depends. When will you need the supplies? I can move as quickly as we want. Just keep in mind that the slower I move, the safer it’ll be.”

“The recipe will be complete in a couple of days. We’ll resume drinking the… you-know-what. But we can manage that much by ourselves.”

The handful of ingredients Elaine brought him were more than enough to cover their daily needs. It was only for the bulk purchases that they’d need help from the Radiant Lord.

“What about mass-production?” she asked again.

“I’ll need another month: give or take. Ideally, I’d like to plant the mushrooms sooner though.”

Getting them to grow on Baldy's clones had been near instant. Explosively so, in fact. But they had Violet bodies, swimming in life mana of the same grade. Percy had no idea how much slower it would be when he planted them on some mundane meat.

"Alright. I'll make my move by the end of the week."

Chapter 299: Alexander

'Another failure.' Nesha grimaced.

Emptying the excess mana from her channels, she plopped back onto the floor, her chest heaving up and down.

On top of spending her nights to establish the supply lines they needed for their plan, she made sure to carve a few hours per day for Circulation. Yet, no matter how much effort she poured into it, the pattern for the space affinity remained a mystery.

The mana channels she'd cleared as a child were alright. They began at her sternum, spreading to every corner of her body, much like everyone else's. It was the new pathways she'd opened recently that didn't seem to make any sense.

Many of them still started at her sternum, but instead of extending outward to her skin, they led to dead ends inside her body. Others were the opposite: beginning at her skin but never reaching her core. Both types were completely useless. After all, how could mana possibly flow through a pathway that had only a beginning but no end? The mana would just fill the channel in an instant, then stagnate, trapped with nowhere to go.

Naturally, Nesha had considered ignoring these channels entirely, but that came with its own share of problems. Less than half of the new pathways were properly integrated into the network. If she relied only on those, her version of Circulation would end up far weaker than Percy's or Elaine's. Worse still, the dead-end channels weren't the only ones causing issues.

Some of them had only one entry but multiple exits, or vice versa. This forced her to artificially weaken the flow, to balance the input with the output. And even when she ignored the dead-ends, stray mana

still spilled into them by accident, accumulating dangerously in her body. Controlling the raging flow with perfect precision was impossible. The best one could do was to try and guide it.

'I guess there has to be some trick I haven't discovered yet.' she shrugged.

In any case, the sun was nearly down, and she had bigger plans for the night. Popping into the shower, she took a few minutes to wash up, before taking a pinkie-sized vial out of her spatial amulet. Uncorking it, she drank the liquid in a single gulp, already gathering mana: first to her stomach, and then back to her sternum.

Naturally, this was a vial of Aurora Dew. Percy had kept his word, having completed the new recipe a few days ago. He said he'd replaced the rainbow grass with an ingredient called shimmering sap. The measly amounts Elaine bought for him were enough for now, but it was Nesha's job to make sure they got a lot more of it.

Leaving the inn, she headed off, hoping to reach the bar in time. The 44th district was over an hour away but, at least, she'd already learned to cleanse her core while walking.

"There you are! I was starting to think you weren't coming today!" Jina, the barwoman, greeted her with a grin as soon as she stepped inside.

"You're acting like I'm late." Nesha rolled her eyes. "It's the same time I come here every night."

Nesha: or Ebony, as people here knew her: had only started frequenting this place over the past week. In fact, she'd made a point to never miss a single night, to give the appearance of a regular. After all, she didn't want anyone to think she'd only started coming here on the same day as her targets.

It wasn't the fanciest bar in the district: far from it. In fact, it was rather filthy. The floors were sticky, the air thick with the scent of cheap alcohol, and the clientele sparse. But that was exactly what made it perfect. The fewer people who saw her, the better. Not to mention that she genuinely preferred the quiet.

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Grabbing a pint of ale from Jina, she sat at her usual seat by the corner, idly sipping her drink as her thoughts drifted off to her earlier attempts with Circulation.

The number of people who arrived after her could be counted on one hand. Yet, she ignored everyone, only perking up when a certain couple entered the bar. She expertly hid her gaze, of course, but every ounce of her attention was glued onto the newcomers.

The woman: Martina: wore a midnight blue gown. It wasn't very cheap, nor very expensive. In fact, Nesha knew exactly how much it had cost, as she was the one who'd paid for it. After all, Martina was somebody she'd hired to negotiate on her behalf, so she had to look the part. Nesha certainly couldn't have her wearing those dingy clothes she'd found her in.

Even so, Martina still looked like a beggar next to the man who accompanied her.

He was middle-aged, dressed in an elegant white suit, his polished shoes gleaming under the dim lighting. Rings adorned his fingers, and his neatly trimmed grey beard gave him an air of refinement. A powerful Blue core thrummed in his chest. The only hint of black in his attire was a pin he wore on his shirt. It depicted four tiles, two of them white, the other two black: like a miniature chessboard. The insignia of the Syndicate.

Yet, despite his composed demeanour, his gaze wandered now and then, snapping back into focus a few seconds later. An aftereffect of his injury, no doubt...

This was Alexander. The Radiant Lord of the 44th district, and the man Nesha was hoping to work with.

"M-My Lord…!" Jina stammered as she practically ran to greet him, nearly tripping in the process. Only when she reached him did she give him a polite: albeit somewhat clumsy: curtsy. "…it's my great honour to serve you tonight! What may I get for you?"

The poor girl nearly had a heart attack as she fumbled over her words. Nesha knew Jina wasn't used to treating customers this politely, but she didn't blame her for trying to please the old Blue. The Radiant Lords and Veiled Ladies had absolute control over their districts. A single word from Alexander, and this place would never open again.

None of this was ‘Ebony’s’ business, though. After offering Alexander a polite nod: much like the handful of other customers did: she returned to her drink, appearing utterly uninterested in them.

Martina took a seat two tables away from Nesha. It was the closest she could manage without drawing suspicion. Alexander followed, sitting opposite her. They exchanged a few pleasantries while waiting for Jina to bring their drinks, only moving on to business once the bartender returned to her post.

Martina retrieved four objects from her purse: three glass vials and a piece of paper. Two of the vials contained a vibrant green liquid, though one was tainted with a light shade of brown. The third vial was cyan. As for the paper, somebody had sketched the simple outline of a leaf: that was Nesha’s idea, a brand to better market their healing tattoos.

Following the script, Martina detailed their proposal: the remote warehouse they needed to cultivate the mushrooms, the spoiled meat required for the process, the employees who would handle planting and harvesting, the ingredients necessary for the ink and magic potions, and the prices they intended to set for the three products.

Most of the discussion revolved around logistics, but Martina occasionally sprinkled in questions designed to tease out Alexander’s true intentions: allowing Nesha to assess his honesty through her bloodline.

Of course, Martina didn’t know about that last part. She simply followed the list of questions Nesha had given her. Unbeknownst to her, Nesha had employed a similar tactic when vetting her a few days earlier, ensuring she was both intelligent and trustworthy enough to serve as the face of their operation.

The meeting stretched for hours, eventually prompting Nesha to order a second drink. To Martina’s credit, she adhered to the script perfectly, asking everything Nesha had instructed her to, and emphasizing the key selling points that might entice Alexander into agreeing.

Sure enough, by the end of the discussion, the man had relaxed significantly, laughing and joking as they finalized the details of the deal.

Nesha struggled to suppress a grin of her own. She was more than satisfied with his responses. She wasn’t a mind-reader, of course: especially when relying on a third party to ask the questions: but she

felt confident Alexander was as pleased with their collaboration as she was, even if he remained completely oblivious to who his actual partners were.

At the very least, she didn't expect him to try anything underhanded. Not that he had any reason to. This wasn't some illicit product they were peddling: just a bunch of simple potions, really.

Leaving the bar about half an hour after the others, she made her way back to the 11th district, eager to break the good news to Percy tomorrow.

Little did she know, Percy had some bad news of his own to share…

Chapter 300: Flawed Decree

Percy listened to Nesha as she briefed him in on her progress. It was great that they'd managed to get the Radiant Lord on board without a hitch, though that wasn't enough to wipe the frown off his face.

"What's wrong? You don't look very happy." Nesha asked, noticing something.

"Micky contacted me a couple hours ago. They've entered the Valley…"

Her eyes widened.

"Immediately? Without even stopping to rest?"

He sighed.

"Micky was starting to get hungry again, and the kid knows he'll refuse to eat people. So… I guess we forced his hand."

At least, Micky wouldn't have to worry about food as long as he stayed there, since the place was packed full of Yellow and Green beasts. Of course, the Valley's ecosystem was entirely artificial. After all, beasts of such high grades had difficulty surviving in even the densest forests and lushest jungles, let alone a barren wasteland like the Thirsty Valley.

However, the Order didn't want their Green-borns to sit idly for decades at a time, guzzling down elixirs while never bothering to hone their magic. If they did that, they'd grow up into weak gods, wholly incapable of defending their world. And that was assuming that they even made it that far. Most likely, they'd never attain divinity in the first place.

Thus, they'd tasked the Root with gathering beasts from all across Remior, and dumping them in the Valley on a daily basis. They didn't really care about creating a balanced ecosystem: that wasn't even possible to begin with. Most of the beasts got eaten immediately, while plenty more still starved to death. But enough survived, serving as practice dummies for the Holy Children.

Suffice to say, the expenditure was enormous. Especially since the ecosystem was embedded in vastly accelerated time. This was one of the reasons why the Divine Root was always short on manpower, despite being the largest noble House on Remior by far. On top of that, they had to maintain all the supply chains that they needed to function, escort the younger Holy Children wherever they travelled, ensure that all their temples operated as intended, and the list went on…

But Percy didn't really care about their problems. The only thing that mattered was how it all reflected back to him and his companions.

"Have you heard any disconcerting rumours?"

Nesha shrugged.

"Nothing I haven't told you already."

News of the strange crow with a second core were already circulating Remior, having reached Twilight City before the Holy Child himself. The bird's existence had sparked interest everywhere, but most people still treated it as an isolated case: a freak of nature. Still fascinating, of course, but not as much as if they'd found a human like that. After all, nobody had any idea Micky's circumstances were man-made, or potentially reproducible.

Of course, the Order would likely pressure the kid into breeding Micky with other crows once he returned, just on the off chance that he could pass his condition down. For the time being, nobody had dared to investigate the matter further, unwilling to get involved in Acton's business.

People had learned about the tragedy in Goldenfield town too, though their reaction to that was more lukewarm, everyone collectively choosing to sweep the incident under the rug. It wasn't every day a Green-born went on a massacre, but cases like that weren't unheard of either. As far as the rest of Remior was concerned, the residents of the decimated town had simply been unlucky to find themselves in those circumstances.

"Alright. Keep an ear out for any updates. The Root should have learned about the missing guards too."

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Unlike the other matters, this hadn't spread yet. After all, nobody but Acton had known about that, so the Root had only learned about it today, upon receiving the boy's report.

This was the story most likely to affect Percy's group in the short-term, though he wasn't too worried about that. Nobody knew he'd stolen so much elixir from House Tantalus, nor could they imagine he was bold enough to try sneaking into the Valley. Consequently, he'd be surprised if they connected Micky or the missing guards to him and Nesha. The odds of them guessing he was currently hiding in Twilight City were even lower.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to be cautious.

"What's our new timeline?" Nesha asked.

While they knew time passed several times faster inside the Valley: hence their reason for even coming here in the first place: they didn't know exactly how much faster that was. Not because it was a secret, but because the temporal acceleration wasn't fixed. It fluctuated every few years, creating a very unique dynamic.

Time inside the Valley was separated into fast and… less fast seasons. The flow ranged from forty to twenty times that of the rest of Remior. The Order tended to send the Holy Children there during the faster seasons, giving the Root a chance to replenish the dead beasts during the slower seasons. But the kids weren't really prohibited from going there during the off-season either, if they wanted.

“Let me check.” Percy replied, asking his familiar to send him back a few images of his surroundings.

The crow got back to him promptly, though the sensory input was way too fast for Percy to process.

‘Woah! Slow down buddy! Remember, time is flowing much faster for you right now!’

Dizzy as he was from the excessive stimuli, Percy had to suppress a chuckle, imagining how funny his words must have sounded to his familiar, coming in slow motion. He should also make an effort to speak faster as long as Micky was in the Valley, so that they’d hopefully meet somewhere in the middle…

In any case, the bird didn’t take long to adjust course. The images still reached Percy faster than he was used to, but it was more manageable now.

Micky was munching on some Yellow lion. Acton stood some distance away, tormenting a Green variant of the same species with his earth spells, probably working on improving them.

Most notably, the area was densely covered in floating globules of water, each about the size of a peach. They inhibited Micky’s vision, preventing him from seeing very far.

‘I don’t know if he’s warned you about this, but try not to touch the globules. Certainly don’t drink them. If you’re thirsty, make water out of your mana.’ Percy said, speaking as fast as he could manage.

The Thirsty Valley was actually full of water, though it hadn’t earned its name by accident. The temporal magic clung to the water more closely than everything else, effectively poisoning it. Coming into contact with it would cause one to age faster, without getting any benefits back. Drinking it was even worse.

Of course, the effect was subtle: touching a few globules or even drinking one might not be immediately noticeable. Still, people were supposed to spend decades in there, so the effects could easily accumulate if one wasn’t careful.

Consequently, people were advised to do everything they could to shield their bodies from the globules during their stay. As for drinking water… many of them tended to bring a water user with them, as water

mana wasn't affected directly. The time magic only began to poison it after it turned into regular water, and the process wasn't instant.

Alternatively, people could bring water with them, as long as it was stored in a spatial device, as that supposedly shielded it from the environment. This was what Percy had originally planned to do, at least until Micky got the petal and Elaine joined the group.

Of course, this phenomenon wasn't exactly an accident. Percy suspected it was very much intentional: built into the Decree by Kronos to make it more efficient, allowing it to cover a wider area and to exhibit a greater temporal acceleration.

After all, living beings consisted mostly of water, so this was a way to target the people training inside the Valley more so than the inert rocks and dirt in the environment. As for all the unfortunate side-effects, they were just a necessary inconvenience.

'Such a flawed Decree…'

It was a strange thought, but a true one, regardless. No Decree was perfect, some having more drawbacks than others.

Percy considered himself a bit of a connoisseur of divine magic, having run into a few Decrees by now. Phoebe's and Ea's were perfect examples of how two Decrees with similar effects could be so different from one another. Metatron's was quite niche too, only useful for a very specific purpose.

It was a stark reminder that titans, however powerful, were ultimately just people. And Decrees were just spells. Insanely complicated and incomparably vast… yes. But spells nonetheless, subject to their caster's abilities and talents all the same.

Alas, this wasn't the time to ponder the shortcomings of divine magic. Percy had already pieced together the information they needed.

He turned back to Nesha, before speaking.

“I’ve got good news and bad news.”