Wanderer 371

Chapter 371 – Legend of the Dying Hero (2)

Micky's father paused for a while. He helped his son flip over, as it was time for him to draw the tattoos on the other side of his body.

Meanwhile, Percy took the chance to ponder over the man's words. Being somewhat experienced in cosmic affairs by now, he had a pretty good idea where the story was headed. But that didn't make it any less interesting.

'This Dying Hero… He's the one who invented elixirs on Huehue, isn't he? Or at least the one who truly breathed life into the idea.'

It was fascinating, because Percy guessed a similar story had to be buried in the past of every lesser and greater spring in the universe. In almost every case, it should be a bunch of powerless people struggling to protect their loved ones from the beasts, until some crazy bastard took some risks and ruined their body, looking for a way to advance.

There was no question, something similar must've happened on Remior, long before better known figures like Iapetus or Kronos emerged.

'And this goes beyond just the elixirs…'

He couldn't help but think back to the cyan powder he had discovered by accident on the world with the floating cats. Remior was far more developed than that place – pretty much every single lesser spring was – but it was the uneducated natives of that planet who had discovered such a revolutionary secret first. Clearly, there was no better motivator than sheer desperation to drive people into doing all sorts of reckless things.

In any case, Micky's father soon continued both the story and the process of drawing the tattoos on his son's chest, after having his wife hold the boy up.

“Failing to see any results after a decade, the Hero started to doubt himself. Not that he had any intention of giving up his quest, but he at least realized he might have to find a way to accelerate the process, otherwise he might not live long enough for his labour to bear fruit.”

“Harvesting various ingredients from other beasts and plants around the village, he methodically tried mixing them with the gimbhal hearts, one by one, slowly but steadily exploring what effect they might have on the cleansing process. Unfortunately, most of his experiments were complete failures. The only thing he managed was to waste many of his stored hearts, the other ingredients having a neutral effect at best, or a negative one at worse on the effectiveness of the organs.”

“If that wasn’t enough, the Hero was the object of the villagers’ scorn and disdain by then. His foolish experiments and the cowardice he displayed on the battlefield hadn’t gone unnoticed, and he no longer had any friends to speak out for him either. He was ostracized and treated like a parasite who didn’t even pull his own weight.”

“But he didn’t care. He had already subjected himself to unimaginable pain. If he had to endure the cold glances of the villagers too, it was a small price to pay.”

“Many more years passed before his experiments yielded some results. Decades even. Eventually, he noticed that the colourful leaves from a rare bush had a positive effect on the gimbhal hearts. Mixing the two ingredients together wasted most of their quantity, but the final product didn’t react as violently with his own mana, allowing him to absorb slightly more of it each time.”

“Over the next few years, the Hero fine-tuned the process, learning to preserve more of the ingredients as he boiled them together. He was able to consume the heart pieces more often, and to increase the amount he ate each time. Of course, his methods were still quite harmful to his body. It didn’t take long for him to pay a steep price for his recklessness.”

“Technically, the Hero wasn’t that old yet. He was only in his sixties, which isn’t much for a mage. Even at Orange, one can live for centuries. But the Hero was forced to retire from fighting entirely, since he wasn’t in any condition to keep going. Some permanent cracks had formed on his core, and even his bones and muscles had degraded to various extents from all the toxic ingredients he'd consumed.”

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“At that point, he had no choice but to beg the younger warriors to give him some scraps so that he wouldn’t starve, and some hearts whenever they happened to slay more gimbhals. Most of them looked at him with disgust, but a few of the more kind-hearted ones still helped him out – purely out of pity. The village had all sorts of issues to deal with, but a scarcity of food luckly wasn’t among them. Besides, they didn’t have any other use for the gimbhal hearts anyway.”

“Looking at the poor state of his own body, and the harsh treatment of the villagers, the Hero was forced to reflect upon his actions. Had the elder been right all along? Had he stubbornly fed himself poison all these years, destroying his life for nothing?!”

“Well, it was certainly possible. But it was too late to back down now. His body was already in tatters. He couldn’t fix it, even if he stopped. He couldn’t bring his friends back from the dead either. Nor could he earn back the respect he had lost. There was only one path forward – to see his mission through to the end. Even if he failed, he would die with his chin up.”

“The Hero was no longer able to collect the coloured leaves he needed. Nobody was willing to fetch them for him either. Out of options, he had to plant a few of the bushes right outside his house, growing his own leaves in the village. That much he could still manage.”

“Decades continued to pass, the Hero’s body aging and crumbling away. He knew he had to be making faster progress with his core than before, but he still didn’t know if it would be enough. A third of the organ was already damaged beyond repair, to the point that he couldn’t even use his mana. It leaked away whenever he wasn’t actively absorbing it, and he had to constantly endure intense pain.”

“Even if he managed to advance at some point, he knew he would never fight another battle in his life. But it didn’t matter. As long as his core changed colour, it would be enough to prove the others wrong. To show them the path forward. To convince them to research his methods and improve upon them until they were safer to use.”

“Eventually, the Hero couldn’t even walk anymore. He couldn’t tend to his bushes either, nor could he take care of himself. Luckily, a young woman took pity on him. She was the granddaughter of one of his old friends, and she’d long heard the stories about the old fool who stubbornly poisoned himself with beast mana, refusing to listen to reason.”

“She helped him eat and clean up after himself, though she didn’t want to enable him in his madness. It took him months of begging and coaching to convince her to brew the concoction for him. At first, she wasn’t any good at it, nor did she earnestly care to improve. She was only doing this to placate him.

Clumsily boiling the gimbhal hearts with the leaves, she prepared the toxic substance for him. It was inefficient compared to his own efforts, but he didn't complain, happy to use whatever he could get his hands on."

"The old Hero had already given up in his heart, knowing that the chances of his efforts succeeding were minuscule. This made it extremely difficult for him to press onward. It was quite humiliating to beg a woman he barely knew to help him with a project he didn't even believe in anymore. But he persisted, mostly out of his unwillingness to throw all his previous efforts in the trash."

"He'd made it this far. He'd ruined his whole life for this. He just couldn't find it in his heart to stop. What if he was just a few years from the finish line? Wouldn't it be a pity to die without even knowing? It wasn't like he had any other purpose in life anyway, so he might as well see his efforts through to the end. Even if he failed, he could rest easy, knowing he'd given it his all. It shouldn't be long anyway…"

"More years passed. At some point, the woman stopped indulging him. Her family pushed her to stand her ground. She still took care of the Hero, but she refused to brew the poison for him. She just couldn't bear to watch him kill himself – certainly not with her help."

"But the Dying Hero didn't let that stop him either. It was just another obstacle in his path, no different from all those he had already overcome."

"Crawling out of his bed, he sifted through the village's trash, scavenging for any gimbhal hearts he could find. Luckily, the creatures still attacked sporadically – they have always been relatively common on Huehue – so he found some every now and then. His bushes had survived too. Apparently, other people had started to tend to them. They weren't doing it for him – they just thought the plants looked pretty. Either way, this gave him a steady supply of leaves as well."

"Storing the ingredients under his bed, he hid them from the woman. Whenever she wasn't around, he prepared the concoction by himself, drinking it in secret. It was even harder than before, since he couldn't even stand on his own, and his hands were all shaky."

"But he didn't care."

"His core continued to crumble, until there was less than half of it left. He had to spend several minutes amassing enough mana to cleanse the organ before each session. Every breath hurt as the Hero started

to cough blood regularly. His hair fell and his beak cracked. Even his hands continued to lose their strength. Before long, the woman had to amputate one of them, when it started to rot away."

"But he didn't stop."

"He wouldn't stop, no matter what."

Chapter 372 – Legend of the Dying Hero (3)

Suffice to say, Micky and his sister were both crying buckets by the time their father reached this part of the story. Even Percy was quite moved by the old Hero's stubbornness, despite having pretty much predicted the ending. He couldn't help but feel some newfound respect – not only for the Dying Hero, but also for the countless others like him around the universe.

Based on what Micky's father had said, it seemed the old man had accidentally stumbled upon the principle of deattunement, allowing him to prevent the beast mana from interacting too violently with his own. This was how he had been able to consume larger pieces of the gimbhal hearts, and to do so more frequently too.

He sighed internally.

As an alchemist, Percy understood better than most that the Hero's methods had still been terribly inefficient. Without redirection or pacification, he wouldn't dare to put a single drop of nectar in his own body. It was a miracle that man had even lasted that long.

Even more tragic was the fact that people could, technically,cleanse their cores without beast mana. Of course, it was ten times slower than even the diluted elixirs, meaning it would take one a full century for their first promotion.

'Which would have still been shorter and less painful than what this guy had done…'

Sadly, it took quite a leap of logic to imagine that chipping away at the impurities in one's core for a hundred years would lead to a promotion. It was a lot simpler to just watch how the beasts did it, and to copy their methods – assuming a suitable ingredient was available.

Percy guessed that it wasn't until a civilization already had access to elixirs or some equivalent resource that they could then study its effects on the body, realizing an advancement was possible without it.

'By then, there's no longer a point though, since they already have the elixirs which are twenty times faster…'

That said, it might be a good idea to explain the process to Sol when he next returned to Melodia. The girl wouldn't really need this for herself if he brought her enough Aurora Dew to reach Green, as it would take her a thousand years to reach Blue without beast mana.

However, it wouldn't be a bad thing for her people to be aware of – in case they failed to find the right resources to turn their world into a lesser spring. Then again, there was a good chance they'd find something once they had the strength to push back the beast tide, as they had a continent full of wildlife to explore.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Micky's father resumed his tale as he moved his needles to his son's arms. The good news was that the story had achieved its purpose, as the boy had been successfully distracted from the pain.

"More years passed, as the Hero persisted in his madness. Gathering the ingredients for the concoction was really inconvenient in his state, so he had to preserve his stash as best as he could. The hearts under his bed rotted, worms crawling through them. But he continued to consume them regardless, hoping the heat would kill the parasites."

"Yet, it wasn't long before he was completely unable to continue by himself."

"He was forced to beg the woman again. He told her everything. About sneaking around… About the hidden stash… Even about the rotten hearts full of worms. The woman sighed, telling him she already knew – she had found out years ago. With tears in her eyes, she agreed to help him once more. She still thought it was a bad idea, but she fully understood how stubborn he was by now. Besides, he'd already wasted his whole life on this nonsense, so she figured she might as well help him through the final stretch."

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“More years passed, as the Hero’s body continued to break. Everyone from his generation had already died a long time ago. Even the people who used to mock him had long perished in the attacks. By now, very few in the village even knew of his existence, since he never left his house.”

“The woman, the concoction and his dying body were his whole world. A living hell of his own creation. But he refused to back down. He refused to let it get to him. He hadn’t cared when the villagers laughed at him, so why would he care when they didn’t even know about him?”

“His core continued to break, and the woman was forced to amputate more of his limbs. At some point, the Hero barely even resembled a person anymore. Every time he cleansed his core, he came this close to dying. Each session was a monumental challenge in and of itself.”

“Yet, he simply refused to die. He had spent nearly two hundred years on his foolish quest. He wanted to push himself just a little longer. Just to be sure that this was a dead-end. If nothing else, it would at least serve as a warning for other people to never follow in his footsteps.”

“Or was that even what motivated him? He didn’t know. Had he done all of this to prove that elder wrong? Or had he done it to protect the villagers? But what would be the point of that?! Nobody knew him, and he didn’t know any of them either! Why should he care about anyone else?”

“Maybe he was doing it for the kind woman who had invested so much of her life to take care of him. Yes, that should be a good enough reason to keep him going. He didn’t have long anyway.”

“The Hero fell sick. It wasn’t his first time – not even close. But it sure seemed like it would be his last. The woman begged him to stop drinking the concoction. At least for a while, until he felt a little better. Yet, he refused to listen to her. What if he never got better? He would just be wasting a few precious cleansing sessions…”

“If anything, he asked her to bring him the concoction more often. He drank it even while his core – what was left of it anyway – still burned. By now, only a piece of the organ remained. A tenth of its original volume at best. And it shrank further still with every dose…”

“A short time later, the Hero finally passed away.”

“Yet, he did so with a smile on his broken face. Even the kind woman who had taken care of him for decades couldn’t help but smile amidst her sobs, happy for the Hero.”

“Why?”

“Because the old fool had succeeded in the end! By his final breath, the tiny fragment in his sternum had changed colour, a Yellow ember going out with him…”

Micky’s and Atzi’s sobs echoed through the cold cavern, as the boy’s eyes blurred with tears. In fact, Percy noticed that even the adults had failed to retain their composure, the man’s voice having wavered close to the end of the tale.

“But dad… Did the other villagers… Did they even believe the woman? Without seeing the Hero’s core with their own eyes?” Atzi asked.

“Most of them didn’t. They thought she’d made it all up. But enough of them did. They took her words seriously, looking into the gimbhal hearts and the colourful leaves. They knew the Hero’s methods weren’t safe in their original form, but they worked hard to improve upon them until they invented the entire field of alchemy and brewed the first true elixirs.”

“It only took a few generations before the first people advanced, finally getting an edge over the beasts after being on the losing side for countless eons. They pushed the monsters back and expanded the village. They spread the knowledge to other villages too, turning the tide once and for all.”

“At some point, some of our most talented ancestors made it all the way to the end, becoming Huehue’s first gods. They ushered a long era of unprecedented prosperity for our people – all because of the Dying Hero’s stubborn efforts. At least until the outsiders invaded.”

“Even as our enemies crushed our defences and threatened our world, our people never lost hope. They all believed that another Dying Hero would appear at some point, descending from the heavens to save them. Many people named their sons after him, thinking it would bring them luck.”

“And sure enough, it was a god who bore the same name that invented the Dance of the Savage Gods, thousands upon thousands of years after the original Hero’s death. People called him the Second Hero, his achievements no less impressive than his predecessor’s.”

“After we lost the war, our people kept believing. Many still name their sons after the two Heroes, hoping another will rise, to break the chains that bind us…”

“What is it?! What’s the Dying Hero’s name?!” the girl asked, her voice trembling with both excitement and sorrow.

The skin at the corner of the man’s beak curled slightly as he looked at Micky with pride. Drawing the final symbol on his son’s leg, he allowed the cyan needles to crumble away, as the boy let go of his boosting art. The memory shattered like glass, returning Percy to Remior as the answer echoed in his ears.

“Mictlantecuhtli.”

Chapter 373 – Harmony

Percy found himself on the ground, near Micky.

Unlike the last time, their mana hadn’t gone berserk – largely because they’d mentally prepared themselves for the unlocked memory. Even while immersed in his friend’s thoughts, Percy had retained some awareness of his own body, and he was willing to bet the same was true of his familiar. Perhaps, the presence of a third mind – his clone – had helped too.

However, that didn’t mean nothing had changed.

Examining himself, Percy gasped as he noticed what had happened to the two cords linking him to the crow. Previously, one of the connections had been rooted near his sternum, whereas the second link had been located a few inches below that.

Right now, his soul had deformed slightly, bringing the two cords closer. Leaving his body, the ethereal threads were twisted together, rolled into a single, larger cord. It spiralled all the way to Micky, before splitting off into two parts again, one sinking into the bird’s soul as the other was attached to the clone.

Even more strangely, both cords were currently in their empowered state, even though everyone involved had stopped paying attention to them a long time ago.

‘How is this possible?’

Examining the weird structure again, he soon understood what exactly had happened. There was some soul mana constantly travelling around the two cords by itself, without anyone’s input. It had somehow formed a stable, self-sustaining loop.

“Hey, are you seeing this?” he asked out loud, not ready to tamper with the connection just yet.

“I can see our souls got a little deformed, but that’s about it. Why aren’t we using the cords to speak?” the crow asked back, though Percy wasn’t sure whether it was the familiar or the clone who had said that.

Micky’s eyes came with passive Soul Vision thanks to his Soul Predator mutation. This allowed him to see souls, but it wasn’t as good as Percy’s mutation in the sensory department. The latter could even see the ethereal cords directly, thanks to his Secret Art feeding into the Sorcerer’s Eye. This was why he had been the first to realize what was going on.

‘I guess we’re gonna have to,’ Percy shrugged, this time answering through the cord. ‘Something weird is happening with our connections. It could be a good thing, but I’m not sure how robust it is just yet.’

‘Well, I don’t know what you saw, but I can hear you just fine,’ the clone replied.

This time, Percy knew it was him, because he could differentiate which of the cords the message had come from. To his relief, their brief conversation just now hadn’t disturbed the strange balance either, the two cords still feeding mana into one another.

Seeing this, his heart skipped a beat. If they could keep this up, it would do wonders when they trained and fought together in the future. Maintaining both the Carnival and two instances of Soul Resonance was a little much, so the value of automating some of it couldn’t be overstated.

But there was one final thing they had to check, to make sure this was truly usable.

Gathering as much mana as he could from his core, he pushed it through the connection. At the same time, his gaze remained glued to the cords. Sure enough, the mana travelled through the empowered connection unimpeded, without even disturbing the passive flow there.

‘Thanks… I guess?’ the clone said upon receiving the mana, clearly oblivious as to why he had sent it.

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Percy didn’t even get a chance to explain himself when his Status broke its silence.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Secret Art: Soul Resonance – Refined -> Secret Art: Soul Harmony – Refined!]

‘Fascinating…’

Over the next few minutes, Percy brought the clone up to speed. Next, the two talked about their new spell, speculating about its uses. Even though its tier hadn’t changed, it would be far more impactful than its predecessor.

‘What do you think will happen if I leave Micky’s body though? I hope it’s not too difficult to recreate this with a new clone…’

Percy frowned for a few seconds as he contemplated his counterpart’s words, before ultimately shaking his head.

‘It shouldn’t be too hard. Even without Micky recalling a new memory, we can manually twist our souls and the cords. They’re quite malleable, after all. I don’t think my Status would have bothered to register the upgrade if I didn’t have the means to reproduce it at will.’

That said, he doubted he would be able to use the new spell with his regular clones. For that to work, he would obviously have to send them out in pairs. Even then, it was entirely possible the clones would just fuse into one, undoing all his efforts. Regardless, it was something to test in the future. For now, he was more than happy that he could use this with Micky...

'Right, Micky!'

Percy felt the urge to slap himself. With all the confusion about the cords, he had forgotten to check up on his friend. The memory the crow had just recovered had been quite an emotional one. No wonder he had remained silent all this time. Walking up to the giant bird, he squatted next to his face, gently placing his hand on the crow's beak.

"Micky… how are you feeling?"

The crow let out a melancholic sigh. He had clearly regained awareness a while ago, but he hadn't been in the mood to join their conversation.

"My family… They were good people… I didn't even know how much I missed them until now…"

His eyes seemed to regain their focus as they looked at Percy.

"Say, did I tell you what happened to my father before I lost my memories?"

Percy felt a lump form in his throat, not knowing how to respond. He didn't have to be a genius to tell where his friend was going with this. No, he didn't know what had happened to the man – the old Micky had never even mentioned him.

But he didn't want to give him false hope.

It was clear from the memory that Micky's father had loved his family dearly. Percy couldn't imagine him ever abandoning them of his own volition. Since he hadn't been with them in the other memory, there was a very good chance that he was dead. Yet, he didn't want to lie to Micky either.

In the end, he just shook his head.

“I see…” the crow muttered, sinking into his thoughts.

Percy plopped back on Micky’s wing, using the soft feathers as a cushion. The two just gazed at the drifting globules around them, remaining silent for a couple hours. They were both tired, but they shouldn’t have any issue dealing with any beasts – should any show up. As for their training… Well, that could wait a little longer.

Eventually, Micky spoke again.

“Percy… Can we go back one day? To Huehue, I mean.”

“It was always my intention, buddy. I’ve promised you already, didn’t I?”

Micky nodded.

“I know… But I don’t just want revenge anymore… Sure, I want to get back at that Rhaziel guy and all his conspirators for everything they did to my world. And I want to help free my people… Yet, I want so much more now… I want to learn what happened to my father… To see those places in my memories with my own two eyes… Even that bloody coliseum and those frozen wastelands… Not that any of it was fun, but it was mine – you know? I want to visit the Dying Hero’s village – if it still exists. I want to hear the Second Hero’s story too – the god who invented the Dance – if there is one… And to learn more about my heritage.”

Micky turned his head away, not daring to look Percy in the eyes. But he continued speaking.

“I know I’m being selfish. You have your own goals, and you don’t even know if it’ll be possible to reach them… Yet, here I am, asking you to go out of your way to take me to some faraway planet occupied by hostile gods… I–”

“You don’t have to say anything else, Micky.” Percy stopped him, gripping the crow’s wing tightly. “We’re a team, remember? Your goals are just as important as mine. We’re going back to Huehue

together. I'm not just doing it for you either. I'm quite interested in those places too. Both your father and that Dying Hero were amazing people… Let's learn more about them."

Micky turned to face him again, his eyes burning brightly once more.

"We need to get stronger first. A lot stronger."

Percy nodded, leaping back to his feet. Taking a series of deep breaths, he activated his boosting art, before stretching his limbs and cracking his fists. Taking the hint, Micky stood up too, both of their souls singing with new resolve.

"Yes, Micky. Yes, we do."

Chapter 374 – Long-term goal

If it had been anybody else in Percy's boots, they might have found the giant tortoise a challenging opponent. Hidden within its fortress of a shell, they would have likely needed to somehow bait it into extending its limbs and its head out of their chitinous shelter before they could land a hit.

Luckily, this wasn't much of an issue for a soul-user like him.

A flock of burning scythes was about to cleave right through the monster when a complication emerged. As the weapons spun mere metres from the beast's vulnerable soul, an elephant-sized bird flew between them, chased by three more avian creatures. Under any other circumstances, Percy would have continued with his attack regardless, happy to take another opponent down with the tortoise. Unfortunately, this wasn't an option right now, as the bird in question was none other than his own familiar.

'Damn it, Micky! Watch where you're going!'

Percy was forced to steer some of the constructs out of their original path, while shattering the few closest to the crow so that they wouldn't injure him. Micky didn't have it easy either, as he was close enough for the tortoise to nearly snap its reptilian beak at his wing. He was forced to fly out of the way clumsily, crashing on the ground.

At the same time, one of Micky's pursuers – a large eagle-like beast with an even larger wingspan than him – shifted its sights to Percy, probably thinking he would be an easier target. Its long talons dug where he had previously stood, barely missing him by a couple of feet as he moved out of the way.

Granted, the situation wasn't that dire.

Percy and Micky didn't have much trouble regaining their footing and making quick work of all four of the beasts – and all the others stupid enough to attack them. Yet, that didn't change the fact that their blunder just now could have cost them dearly.

About half an hour later, Percy split the last of the creatures' souls in half, before plopping down on the mountain of giant carcasses. Micky landed nearby, strolling around the ravaged battlefield in search of cores still in a decent enough condition for him to eat.

'Well, that was pretty embarrassing.' Zoris suddenly said.

Percy sighed.

'Tell me about it… I guess we could use a little more practice before we leave the Valley.'

Strictly speaking, Percy and Micky were more than strong enough to handle a beast wave by themselves right now. They'd deliberately held back earlier, as they had focused on practicing their coordination.

In theory, Soul Harmony allowed them to keep both of their connections in their empowered states effortlessly, giving them constant awareness of each other's location, and even the ability to share their senses freely.

Sadly, that was too much information for them to process as they fought.

Percy already had his hands full with all the complicated facets of his boosting art – from the circulating mana to the projections produced by his eyes, and all the constructs he had to command. Micky had it a

little easier because he had a clone helping him, but the crow also had his fair share of spells gnawing at his attention. He also hadn't fought any difficult battles in a long time, so his senses had dulled a little.

The fact that Percy's fighting style involved countless spinning scythes flying over the battlefield didn't help, as they frequently collided with the crow. Micky's ice projectiles inhibited his own mobility too, albeit more rarely.

Regardless of the reason, the two kept getting in each other's way.

It was quite disheartening, because there were so many more things Percy wanted to test. They had yet to try controlling each other's spells or fusing their affinities. Yet, here they were, still stuck at the first step.

But he shook his head a second later.

'Oh well… It's probably best that we temper our expectations...'

Hoping to master everything in a couple of months had been unreasonable to begin with. For now, they should probably focus on not getting each other killed. The rest they could figure out later.

Either way, Percy had already decided to leave the Valley a couple of weeks from now. It had already been around two months since Acton's death, so half a week should have passed for the rest of Remior. This was already getting pretty dangerous. If the Root had any way to tell when a Holy Child died, it wouldn't be long before the news reached the guards stationed outside.

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'Where are we even going?' Micky asked.

Percy grinned.

'How would you feel about returning to the Fungal Spire?'

‘Seriously?! Can we even do that?’ Micky asked, his voice incredulous.

Percy shrugged.

‘Not right now. We’d have to pass over many populated areas, and near the headquarters of several noble Houses. We’d definitely get killed. But the Spire is our eventual target, so keep that in mind.’

While Percy didn’t lack elixirs at the moment, he was still quite interested in getting himself his private source of nectar. It would give him the option of just hiding in some corner of the world for a thousand years until everyone had long forgotten him, quietly producing his own elixirs and sending out his clones. Even if he was forced to flee Remior at some point, he might be able to take the wasp with him.

And that was without considering what alchemical insights he could gain in the process. Perhaps a second core or the wasp’s mutations would open new doors for him, giving him a way to advance faster. No matter how he looked at it, creating a wasp familiar was arguably the most profitable venture he could possibly embark on while still on Remior, so he was going to work on it at his own pace.

‘Then what are we doing until then?’ Micky asked again.

‘Well, the whole planet is about to be furious over Acton’s death, and you’re basically impossible to hide, so I expect a lot of people to come after us. Our first priority is to survive and lose our pursuers.’

‘Can we even handle something like that?’

‘Hopefully.’ Percy said, before elaborating. ‘Nobody will bother sending any Greens, as it would be suicide for them. I believe they still won’t send Violets or Whites either though, because those people are busy leading their Houses. So, it’s only going to be Blues… And I think we can just about deal with them.’

Percy wasn’t arrogant enough to think he could suddenly defeat any Blue just because he’d taken Acton down. He knew there were much stronger people around. But he was confident he and Micky could escape from most of them.

‘For the time being, we’ll head north. There are more unpopulated areas there. Of course, that doesn’t mean we’ll be safe. Many of those areas fall under the jurisdiction of a noble House – some even belong to House Ypnos. And who knows what sort of trackers they might send after us. But we’ll do our best to ditch the people chasing us – or kill them, if it comes to that – and find some corner to hide. If we’re discovered, we’ll just run to a different spot. Rinse and repeat.’

It was far from ideal – obviously – but Percy had prepared himself for this eventuality since the day Acton captured his familiar. He’d known Micky would have never been free as long as the Green-born drew breath, and that people wouldn’t stay quiet after the Holy Child’s death, so their fates had been set in stone all along.

That said, he was confident they could salvage the situation. They were strong enough to take care of themselves. They just needed to buy as much time as they could, to grow even stronger.

‘How long are we going to keep that up?’ Micky asked, clearly not entirely convinced.

Percy shrugged.

‘As long as we need. We aren’t in a rush this time. We’ll build up our strength and hone our spells until we’re ready to infiltrate the Spire. Anyway, waiting is good for us. If we’re lucky, the commotion will die down a little after a while, making our lives easier.’

Even before Nesha and Elaine left the group, Percy had had enough elixir to last everyone for nearly six years. Now that his friends had left most of their share behind, he and Micky would have enough Aurora Dew for over a decade. He didn’t think it would take that long to complete his current projects, but his clones were bound to bring him more things by then. He and Micky would likely loot more elixir from their enemies too, so the entire timeline was quite flexible. Percy would work on whatever made the most sense at any given time, until he deemed himself ready to commence his mission.

‘But even if we grow strong enough to beat a bunch of Blues without issue, how will we invade the Guild? I thought they had five Violets stationed there!’

Percy nodded. Indeed, he didn’t think it would be easy to surpass a Violet in so little time, let alone a whole group of them. As for his next promotion, it was over a century away. But this wasn’t a problem.

‘Who said anything about invading the Guild? All we need is a wasp egg. We just need to fly to the top of the Spire and kill a Starry Commander on the fifth level. I’ll shove a clone in its body and we’ll have it steal an egg for us from the hive. Meanwhile, we’ll escape and return later to collect our prize. We’ll be in and out before those geezers even realize what’s going on.’

Of course, that didn’t mean it would be easy. There were several problems Percy would have to solve before then. They’d need to get strong enough to take down a Blue beast quickly, and he’d have to get even faster at preparing his clones.

Even if that worked, convincing a Starry Commander to not only let him possess it, but to also steal an egg from its mother would be a whole other challenge. The Orange and Yellow wasps Percy had fought before had been dumb enough, but the Blues wouldn’t be.

And all of this was assuming they even survived until then. Either way, it was too early to be thinking about the details of their plan. At the rate he was improving, Percy had no idea what he’d even be capable of when the time came.

‘Sounds good, but what are you going to do if the gods lose their patience and chase you down directly?’ Zoris suddenly asked.

Percy frowned. This was the possibility he was afraid of the most. Or rather, it was what he had been afraid of for years– ever since he decided to go against the Divine Root in the first place. He still didn’t know why the gods had let him be this long either. Perhaps, they just couldn’t be bothered to get their hands dirty with mortal affairs, or maybe there was a voice of reason advocating on his behalf within their ranks. Whatever the case, he’d be a fool to take this for granted now that he’d killed a couple of Holy Children.

‘If it comes to that, we only have two options. Either I try to negotiate with them on the basis of my bloodline, or we escape to the Vault.’

Percy wasn’t happy with either choice, but there was nothing more he would be able to do in that scenario…

Chapter 375 – Open challenge

Storing the newly-dried meat inside one of his spatial amulets – the one he had designated for rations – Percy was finally done reorganizing his inventory. He didn't know when he'd next get a chance to settle down or hunt again, so he figured it was worth the time to restock on their food. It was also nice to know which of the artifacts everything was in, for quicker access while on the run.

"I can't believe we're actually leaving." he muttered, throwing another glance at the dim ceiling of azure looming above his head.

"I don't know about you, but I'm not going to miss this shithole." Micky replied.

The crow had spent even longer than him inside Kronos's Decree, and he'd been captive to a psychopath for most of that time, so Percy didn't exactly blame him.

And honestly, this wasn't the most welcoming place to begin with. Between the toxic globules constantly floating around, the onslaught of powerful beasts always trying to grab a bite, and the weird days and nights that stretched for entire weeks, he wasn't looking forward to coming back either.

The Valley's value had greatly diminished in his eyes too. Even if he returned, the beasts would no longer be worth fighting. Sacrificing the best parts about his bloodline and not even being able to practice alchemy didn't help the case either. Not to mention how hard it would be to sneak back here and spend several more years – which he would need at that point, as his next promotion was over a century away.

He shrugged.

'Well… Never say never. I suppose it's nice to have the option. Maybe I'll run into another situation in the future that forces me to sprint ahead…'

After triple-checking that they hadn't left anything behind that might betray their presence, Percy and Micky then headed toward the northern boundary of the Valley. Obviously, the Divine Root wouldn't take long to realize what had happened here, but that didn't mean they had to make things easy for them.

In any case, Percy was planning to leave the Decree the same way he'd entered. He had no idea what the schedule of the patrol units was like, so it was entirely possible they'd run into the guards. But it was fine. Even if they got into a fight, they could easily handle a bunch of Greens, and they would be long gone by the time the rest of the guards learned about their missing colleagues.

"What about Nesha and Elaine?" Micky suddenly asked. "Did they make it out without issue?"

Percy nodded.

"They must have."

Had the girls run into trouble, they would have certainly warned them to leave early. Since that hadn't happened, it meant everything was okay. Percy had been tempted to contact them during the past couple of weeks, but he understood it had barely been a day from their perspective, so there wasn't much of a point in subjecting themselves to the clunky communication.

'I do wonder how Sol and the others are doing though…'

Now that he'd internalized the blessing, he could technically return the ring to Melodia at any point. Sadly, he wouldn't be able to find his way back until he received the girl's signal. That clearly hadn't happened yet, or his external clones would have told him about it.

It wasn't that strange either. For him, it had been over a year since they parted ways, but for the Melodians, it hadn't even been a full month. They were probably still practicing near the Mirror Lake.

In any case, this wasn't that big of a problem. As long as they made it home, Sol's empowered signal was almost guaranteed to reach Percy. The fact that he'd be sending out his clones so frequently would also raise the odds of him picking up on it.

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At some point, he and Micky reached the wall of bubbles and foam, the breathtaking sight breaking him out of his thoughts. The tumultuous screen of blue and white looked quite pretty from up close, though he hadn't really had a chance to appreciate it before. Back when he first entered the Valley, he'd had other, more pressing things in his mind. Since then, he'd mostly stayed clear of the Decree's boundaries, as he hadn't had any reason to risk getting seen by the guards.

"Ready to say goodbye to this place?" he asked, turning to his familiar.

"Been ready forever," the crow shrugged.

Micky then lowered his head, letting Percy climb onto his back. Sitting on the bird's neck, Percy exhaled in relief upon noticing how comfortable the crow's plumage felt. This was quite important, as he expected to spend a lot of time airborne in the days to come.

"Turn Circulation off for a couple minutes."

"What for?"

"Just a precaution."

Micky did as he was told, deactivating his boosting art for the first time in decades. Flapping his powerful wings, he then took off. Like an arrow let loose from a giant's bow, he pierced through the magical barrier, exiting the dome in a splash of enchanted water.

The change in time flow didn't feel any different, but Percy did take a moment to revel in the bright rays of sunlight licking his body. Admittedly, he couldn't help but squint a little at first, but it didn't take him long to adjust. Remior's sun really felt much homier than the hellish star hanging over Melodia – just warm and bright enough to breathe life into the world, without tormenting its inhabitants.

'Percy… We aren't alone.' Micky suddenly said.

'Yeah.'

As immersed as he had been in the sudden change of environment, Percy had maintained enough awareness of his surroundings to spot the group of Greens staring at them in awe. There were four of them, dressed in the Root's colours. They were standing a couple hundred metres away – a trivial distance for mages at such a high grade. The guards didn't waste much time, however, rushing after him a moment later.

'I guess it's safe to say they don't know about Acton yet.' he noted, getting a nod back.

Had they learned about the Holy Child's death, they wouldn't have been as eager to jump to their own.

'What do you want to do?' Micky asked.

Percy's gaze lingered on the approaching Greens for the briefest of instants, a wave of killing intent rippling through his soul for just as long. But he sighed the next moment, turning away.

'Let's spare them.'

'You sure?'

'Just go.'

Percy had killed many people before, and he would do it again if it meant protecting himself or his loved ones. But he didn't see a reason to resort to violence in this case. Whether the guards died or not, the result would be the same. The Root would know something strange had happened here by nightfall, and they'd learn about the missing Green-borns by tomorrow.

Granted, if he killed them now, he might buy himself a few hours, but that was a small prize to justify murdering four people. By the time the guards reported him to their superiors, he and Micky would have flown quite far anyway.

The crow took off again, soon flying over the deep chasm separating the Valley from the outside world, leaving the guards behind. Though he did question Percy's decision a moment later, not entirely convinced this had been the right move.

‘Couldn’t we have knocked them out? Broken their legs or something, to slow them down?’

Percy shook his head.

‘We would have had to reveal at least some of our spells. They would have spread the information, and all the groups coming after us in the future would have been trickier to deal with. This way, we can keep some of our trump cards hidden as long as we don’t leave any of the Blues alive.’

This was the reason he had asked Micky to deactivate his boosting art. Of course, the rest of Remior wouldn’t be entirely oblivious to their strength. It was obvious he and Micky were strong enough to fight Blues, and everyone would have plenty of clues about their magic too. Micky’s second core and his ice affinity weren’t a secret, and people had seen the glowing lines on his plumage before. Still, Percy didn’t know how well their enemies understood the function of the spell, so it wouldn’t hurt to try and keep it under wraps.

Percy’s information was also readily available – at least the bits and pieces he had shared with the Guild during his registration. But a lot of it was vastly outdated, and the rest was brand-new.

‘Either way, we should probably assume it’s all leaked, just to be safe. If we end up catching them by surprise, it’ll be a welcome bonus…’

On the flipside, Percy didn’t know anything about his prospective pursuers either, so it wasn’t like he’d have an advantage over them. He was keenly aware that every battle from here on out would be dangerous.

Yet, he couldn’t help but feel some excitement along with the fear. His heart thrummed wildly, as his lips curled up.

“Bring it on, then. Let’s see what all that training truly amounts to…”

Chapter 376 – Hopefully not today

Earlier

Floating countless miles away from his main body, Percy noticed some differences from his past clones.

Other than the flashier benefits afforded to him by his new blessing – such as the increased number of cords and spectral traits he could endure – it seemed there were some other, subtler upgrades. The cord linking him back to Remior felt weaker, and its pull was growing more slowly.

'No. That's not quite right.'

On further inspection, it wasn't the cord itself that had grown weaker – if anything, the concept of permanence had strengthened it too. Rather, it was his disembodied soul that felt heavier – better at resisting his main body's call.

Of course, this was rarely a limiting factor in his adventures. Even when the pull strengthened, it was typically only able to drag him back while he was drifting in the void without a body. Whenever he was firmly embedded inside a healthy host, this was something he could mostly ignore.

Even his hosts' health hadn't been much of an issue in a while – not since he mastered Soul Stitching. Nowadays, his clones tended to stay away for as long as they wanted, only leaving once they were done with whatever they were trying to do, or if they were in a hurry to bring some benefits back to his main body.

Come to think of it, he had never actually tested how long his clones could exist separated from him. While Percy generally liked knowing his limits, he couldn't afford to keep a useless clone active for years to learn that. He certainly couldn't have done that back when he still only had a single cord available.

'Either way, it's nice to have the option of staying away longer.'

Obviously, he still didn't know how long that would be, exactly, but he would hate to miss out on something genuinely valuable because his clone got whisked away at the last minute.

Another, even subtler benefit of the blessing, was something he struggled to put into words. His clones typically felt like dead objects – in a way. They could still survive for a while on their own, and his mind

was present in them, but they felt different from his main soul. They were like discarded pieces of cloth – or clipped fingernails – preserved solely due to his bloodline.

Right now, his soul felt a little closer to a real one. It still wasn't quite at the level where it could survive indefinitely by itself, but it reminded him more of a severed limb. There was still some lingering body heat, and some liquid blood flowing through its veins – metaphorically speaking. In other words, it had yet to fully die, the blessing working alongside his bloodline to preserve it a little longer.

It wasn't that surprising, really.

Zoris had told him this was one of the primary functions of the blessing. Hell, it was in the concept's very name. But Percy wasn't sure when or how any of these changes would help him.

'Well, they're bound to show their worth sooner or later.'

Anyway, just because he could send out more clones now, it didn't mean he could afford to waste his time. Shaking the pointless thoughts out of his mind, he focused his senses outward, scanning the sea of souls for his next host. Percy had a pretty clear goal for this clone – and most of his clones moving forward.

He had to start looking for those greater springs that held the keys to godhood.

Not that Percy looked down on barren worlds. Many of his most valuable gains – such as Crystallization or the Ring of Sacrilege – had come from places like that. Still, lesser and greater springs were simply more likely to possess something valuable. Should the day ever come when he had exhausted all the pinnacle worlds, he could consider branching out to more remote locations again.

That said, he didn't have any way to target a greater spring directly, but he could at least start by ensuring he always landed on a lesser spring. That, he could more easily control.

The trick was to possess Blue hosts.

Sapients could only reach Blue if they had a means of advancement, which pretty much sealed the deal. Beasts could do it without one – in theory – but most barren worlds didn't have that many creatures at that level. The few Blue beasts they did have, were likely overlords that had ruled over their territories for centuries. The odds of them happening to die right when Percy was scanning their worlds were minuscule. Even if they did, Percy could easily filter out the beasts from the sapients.

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'Unfortunately, this isn't an option right now.'

The only Blue he had ever possessed had been Elaine, and he'd had his main body and Micky helping the clone out. Sadly, the original had been too busy with other matters to use Soul Resonance this time, so Percy was currently stuck with the limited mana in his stash.

Then again, Green hosts could work too. He hadn't possessed many of those in the past either, because he hadn't had enough mana to fix them. The only time he had succeeded without help from his main body had been Gabe, and he had only managed that due to an external source of soul mana.

But all of that had been before his recent advancements.

Granted, Green hosts weren't as good as Blues, since Green-borns like Doh existed even on barren worlds. Luckily, they were rare too, so the odds of a Green being the product of an advancement instead were much higher.

With some semblance of a plan at hand, Percy ignored most of the prospective hosts around him, brushing over countless candidates in search of Greens. Even when he found one, he ignored them unless they were both a sapient and surrounded by more Greens.

Obviously, being this picky meant it could take him much longer to find a host. Evidently, the newfound longevity of his clones might come in handy sooner than he had expected…

Hours passed, and then days – at least in his perception, though he did feel like he'd gotten better at telling. His main body's pull was still quite weak, so he could probably keep this up for several weeks – maybe even months – before it became a problem.

Yet, it appeared he wouldn't have to wait that long.

At some point, he found a bunch of relatively powerful sapients dying near one another. Among them, he saw everything from Yellows to demigods. There was even a god there!

'Yeah… no. Not going anywhere near that place…'

His first instinct was to run away and never look back. The mortals were currently dying a little too close to the god for his liking. Percy generally tried to avoid situations like this, since he didn't want to get discovered by a deity.

Still, he hesitated at the last second, his curiosity getting the better of him.

'Hmmm? Is it me, or is the god dying too?'

As always, the god's soul manifested in his senses like a bright sun, its burning rays brushing over everything in the area. But Percy noticed a few dimmer spots swirling within it, and a faint attractive force almost pulling him in. It was quite weak – it would probably be centuries until the god succumbed to whatever injuries had reduced them to that state – but there was no mistaking it…

This was a dying god.

Percy was tempted to possess them, though he held himself back. Not only would it be extremely risky to directly meet with such an entity, he knew he wasn't nearly powerful enough to heal them. Hell, he wasn't sure he would even be able to possess them. Was his flimsy mortal soul even capable of interacting with theirs in any meaningful way?

But the rest of the dying souls also piqued his curiosity, as they were quite different from others he had seen. This was clearly a lesser spring at the very least, but its population was laughably small. Barely a few hundred souls. And not a single one of them was healthy!

It was almost as if their entire race had gone extinct, leaving only a few survivors left. They were clustered together in some sanctuary, protected by their last surviving god, slowly dying alongside their deity. There weren't any beasts either. Not even a single Brown insect. It was quite bizarre, to say the least.

'What do these people even eat? Is everything on their planet dead?'

Percy really wanted to check the place out, but he was still wary of the dying god. Would they capture him? Erase him on sight?

Maybe he was overthinking it though. These people seemed like they had bigger issues to deal with than an invading Red-born.

'What if I try possessing one of the Greens? Will I get discovered?'

The mortals were admittedly quite close to their deity, bathed in the potent radiance of the god's soul. Percy wasn't sure what that translated to, in terms of physical proximity. Were they in the same country? The same city? The same building?

Either way, staying here was probably ill-advised, but he knew he'd regret it if he didn't check the place out.

'Hey, even if I get discovered, it doesn't mean things will go badly for me…'

Not every god in the universe was an asshole. Percy might have something they wanted, and they might be willing to trade him something valuable for it. Who knew what kind of treasures that god possessed, and how desperate they might be.

Worst-case scenario, Percy would lose his clone and an eighth of his seal. Neither of those things would be ideal, but they also wouldn't be impossible to recover from for his main body. Conversely, things could also go in a vastly positive direction. Even if he didn't find anything useful in that sanctuary of theirs, he might be able to explore the rest of their deserted planet, and loot all sorts of abandoned valuables left behind by their deceased owners…

Making his mind up, he located the healthiest-looking Green in the group. They were still dying, but they did so a little more slowly than the others. Focusing on them, he allowed himself to sink into their body as he contemplated his life choices.

'One day, my greed will be the end of me… Possibly multiple "mes"…'

He shrugged.

'…hopefully not today.'

Chapter 377 – Strange world

Percy's wisp stretched, filling the gaps in his host's soul.

Strictly speaking, this person's injuries weren't that serious – they had barely crossed the threshold of lethality, and they didn't seem to be worsening very fast either. Whatever calamity had befallen the poor residents of this planet was clearly taking its sweet time in claiming their lives. It appeared to be a matter of years – maybe even decades – at the earliest. Probably not days or months.

Letting much of his stashed mana out, Percy used it to stitch the fragments together, weaving dozens of preservation runes in his host's soul. It didn't take long for the situation to stabilize, allowing him to tap into the body's senses. Curiously, his host hadn't yet shown the slightest sign of life, however.

'Hello? Anybody there? Don't tell me it's another brain-dead person…'

No. That wasn't quite right. This soul felt different to Takeo's or Leo's. If anything, they resembled Leo after the Wiseman's Chamber. Their mind was there, in a seemingly healthy state, but it didn't respond to his stimuli.

'Sleeping? Come to think of it, I do feel a little sleepy myself…'

Percy instinctively moved his hand to cover his mouth, yawning.

Wait… yawning?

That didn’t make any sense either! Percy now possessed the Insomnia trait. All his clones should have it too. Not only should he not be feeling sleepy, his host should have also woken up by now!

Opening his eyes, he found himself resting on a bed. Not a very comfortable one at that. The mattress was just a slab of stone – cold, smooth and hard. The low ceiling was just a flat surface of the same material, as were the walls. Though he did see several lines delineating the stone in the walls, indicating that the architects of this structure had stacked several massive blocks together.

Countless rows of strange symbols adorned the material. It wasn’t quite like the writing he was used to – this language seemed more primitive than that, with elaborate hieroglyphs telling some kind of ancient story.

Still…

‘I think I can read these,’ he realized.

Whatever this language was, his host was clearly well-versed in it. That said, he wasn’t quite ready to worry about that, having yet to figure his own situation out. Left with no better option, he pulled up his Status to make sure his trait was still there, and to see what other information he could learn.

___

Rasef (Percival's clone)

Spectral traits:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

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Percy frowned at the sight.

Sure enough, his trait was exactly where it was supposed to be, which meant that whatever had induced his drowsiness had somehow overpowered it. Was the affliction plaguing these people somehow related to this insidious sense of lethargy?

More importantly, he quickly spotted a few other things he had never encountered before in his travels.

‘My host doesn’t have any mana cores! None at all! How is this even possible?!’

Everyone needed a mana core to survive. Even Takeo’s Status had listed both of his cores, despite the fact that the boy had never awakened either of them. Percy’s current host should have had them too. His soul was clearly at Green. Percy wasn’t an amateur – he’d learned to identify his hosts’ grades decades ago. But how could Rasef have a Green soul, without a Green core?

Furthermore, Percy had obviously passed him the Moirais’ Decree too, but the seed of his second core wasn’t there either.

Scanning his surroundings once more, Percy focused on a detail he hadn’t paid much attention to earlier. Everything around him was monochrome – the bed, the room, and even his own body softly glowed in a deep shade of red. Earlier, he had ignored that fact, chalking it up to his host being colourblind or something. Perhaps there was more to it than that, however.

‘It looks a bit like mind mana…’

There was no mistaking it. Percy had run into the rare affinity a bunch of times in the past. Phoebe's mana had permeated the temple where he had tested for his affinity, and the enlightenment potions he had fed to his familiar had sported the same colour.

It could be a coincidence, but he didn't think that was the case.

So, was that what this was? Could it be, that he wasn't in the physical world at all, but rather… inside someone's mind?

Getting off the bed, he felt the ground beneath his host's bare feet. It was solid – made of stone like everything else. Walking up to the wall, he traced the engravings with his fingers, feeling the jagged edges – even nicking his skin on a sharp tip at some point.

'It sure feels real…'

Even if Rasef's mind had somehow been extracted from his body and stuffed inside someone's mind – or perhaps his own – that didn't explain how Percy had managed to possess them. Souls were supposed to go inside bodies… And minds – in his experience, at least – went inside souls…

'Maybe that doesn't always have to be the case…'

Percy couldn't help but think back to Rei's words. Souls were a record of one's experiences. If somebody's mind found itself in some kind of virtual world, where it could survive and walk around in some semblance of a physical form… Would their soul then adapt to the situation, inhabiting the fake body as if it was real?

It was admittedly quite a leap of logic, but he felt it was close to the truth. Still, that left several questions unanswered.

Who or what had done this to these people? Another faction? A powerful god? Or something else entirely? Was Percy currently inside a dream? And if so, who did this dream belong to? Was Rasef simply trapped inside his own mind? Or where they currently in the dying god's mind?

The thought made him shudder.

‘Well, if I’m lucky, the god might be asleep too. Though I could end up the same if I’m not careful.’

Whatever the case was, this was certainly a dangerous place. Percy could think of a dozen things that could go wrong, just off the top of his head. At the same time, it was a place brimming with opportunity. If he was truly inside a god’s dream, then who knew what knowledge he might find, lying around.

Percy doubted he’d find anything tangible that he could bring back to Remior, but treasures came in all forms. This world – or at least the world his host had originally come from – had definitely produced gods in the past, so he might find some alchemic secrets in here.

‘Let’s make this quick then.’

Before leaving the small room, Percy scanned his body more carefully, to see what he was dealing with. His host appeared humanoid, though he was quite lanky. If Percy gauged his proportions correctly – and if they correlated to this person’s original body – he was probably a man standing at around two metres tall. His limbs appeared thin and frail, each only sporting four digits. Rasef wore nothing but a simple kilt, just about covering his privates and his thighs. There was no reflection in the room, so Percy didn’t have any way to check his own face, but it didn’t really matter much either.

Next, he shifted his attention to the engravings on the wall, hoping they contained information that could help him.

‘Rasef… Orange-born… fire affinity… born in 13,234 AC… son of Beku and Lenut… resident of Dir’Ylos town in the Maharian desert… husband to Henia… father to Sefen and Tiya… enlisted as a Divine Knight in 13,307 AC… succumbed to the Slumber in 13,325 AC… sealed in the Sanctuary in 13,327 AC…’

There was a lot more there, but Percy quickly realized it just listed his host’s personal information. Whoever had stuffed him inside this dream – the Sanctuary, presumably – had clearly felt the need to preserve the information, probably not expecting this man to ever wake up again. Even with Percy’s trait affecting him, the guy’s mind appeared too corrupted to as much as stir in his slumber.

‘Well, I don’t know how long this illness would take to overpower my trait entirely, but I’d rather not bring this crap back to my main body...’

Percy briefly considered leaving immediately, not wanting to risk getting infected. That was when he noticed something that sent a chill down his borrowed spine.

He could barely feel his cord!

He had no idea when this had happened, but something was blocking his connection to his main body! Unless he solved this issue, he might not even be able to return.

He was stranded!

Chapter 378 – Sanctuary

Overcome by panic, Percy took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. Part of him wanted to question whether it was even real air he was inhaling, but he had bigger things to worry about. For the first time since his original meeting with Sol, he found himself trapped, not even having the option of ditching everything to return home!

Granted, the connection to his main body wasn’t entirely gone. He could still feel it tugging softly at his soul, and he could even pinpoint Remior’s general direction. However, the ever-present force pulling him there was greatly suppressed at the moment, an even stronger force locking him in Rasef’s “flesh”.

‘Is it because of this strange world? Or is somebody doing this to me on purpose?’

Each scenario was more chilling than the last, and he wasn’t even sure which one he preferred.

Either way, he wasn’t completely out of moves just yet. Turning his senses inwards, he tried to activate Metatron’s Decree – to see if he could still escape to the artificial world and possibly return to Remior from there.

No response.

Percy had discovered a long time ago that he couldn't open the portals in his disembodied state – his soul wisps had to possess a host before activating the ability, for whatever reason. Apparently, his current body didn't qualify either. Or maybe the Decree was simply suppressed by the same rules interfering with his connection.

Scrambling to come up with a solution, Percy then tried to extract an empty vial from his seal. Not that he had anything in there that would help him leave, but he figured it was worth knowing whether his internal storage was even accessible.

Sadly, he soon confirmed it wasn't. Testing this with various items, he found himself unable to take anything out. Conversely, he probably wouldn't be able to store anything in it either, though there was nothing here to test that with. The only object in Rasef's room was his stone bed, and it appeared fused to the floor. The man didn't even have a pillow, and a cursory test revealed that Percy couldn't even chip a piece off the material.

'Okay, that settles it… This is definitely not a physical world…'

Frowning, he considered his last resort. Whether Rasef's body was real or not, both of their souls currently resided within it, as did his stash of mana. Percy might not have access to a proper mana core right now, but he wasn't entirely powerless.

Drawing a sliver of fused mana out, he noticed – to his delight – that it appeared in its original bluish-grey colour even here, painting a stark contrast against the backdrop of red. Manifesting a tiny orb no larger than a cherry, he moved it around the room, watching it phase freely through every surface – the bed, the walls, the floor and even the ceiling. Evidently, that property of his soul affinity worked here just as well as it did everywhere else.

Percy tried to turn the substance corporeal too, though that didn't seem to change anything. The orb still passed through the objects in his surroundings like before. Had this world's rules prevented him from shifting its state? Or did pure mana not interact with the stuff in here either?

'Well, whatever the case is, I can use it to destroy myself if it comes to it.'

To his relief, this was an option this dream-like place had failed to rob him of. Not that he liked the idea of essentially committing suicide, but it was definitely better than falling in deep slumber and getting stuck here forever. Besides, he'd come here knowing the risks, so he couldn't complain.

'I should still look for another way out before resorting to that though…'

Having nothing else to do in Rasef's room, Percy decided to explore this place some more. The room wasn't sealed – there was a single doorway without a door, leading to a long corridor. The doorway's dimensions were a little off – it was taller and narrower than what he'd seen in other places, likely to accommodate the physiology of the natives.

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But he didn't care about that.

The corridor was rather dim. Much like Rasef's room, there wasn't any dedicated light source. Instead, this whole world seemed to hum in a soft red glow, faintly illuminating everything. Consequently, there weren't any shadows either, which admittedly looked a little eerie.

Walking through the corridor, Percy spotted many other open doorways on either side, leading to dozens of rooms no different than his host's. In each one, there was a single bed with a person sleeping on it. All of them were adults, though he saw both men and women. The latter were slightly shorter and much slimmer than Rasef, and they wore a strip of clothing on their chests too.

'I guess privacy isn't a big thing here…'

These people clearly didn't feel the need to shut themselves in their rooms. But maybe it was this sleeping situation that rendered the concept of privacy moot – not the local customs. After all, what would be the point in having doors if there was nobody awake to spy on them?

In any case, Percy managed to get a better look at their faces too. Their features weren't all that different from a human's, but their egg-shaped heads were much larger, their foreheads spanning about a third of the space.

He was tempted to sneak into their rooms and read the hieroglyphs on their walls. He didn't know if it would be considered rude – or if it even mattered, since these people would probably never wake up again. He was definitely curious to learn more about this place, yet he managed to hold himself back in the end. He didn't do that just to be considerate, but also because he doubted he'd find a way out by reading their personal information.

Percy did gather some mana to his eyes, however, activating Soul Vision. Sadly, it appeared he wasn't even capable of using Mana Sense without a core in his body, but he could still determine these people's grades from their souls.

'Hmmm? They're all at Green… Are their living quarters segregated by grade?'

Reaching the end of the corridor, he found a few stone steps leading down and to his right, feeding into another corridor. The second corridor looked just like the previous one, though it was located about a metre lower, and Percy could have sworn it looked slightly longer too.

The people in the first couple of rooms were also at Green, much like the ones before, though the mana in his eyes ran out a few moments later. He still had plenty in his stash, but he didn't rush to reactivate the ability, since he didn't want to waste it that quickly.

'Let's only do that every second or third corridor, to determine when I've reached the Yellows.'

Percy would be lying if he said he didn't find this place unsettling. None of the natives showed any signs of life, and the environment was bland and never-changing. It was rather quiet too, the deep silence of this place only barely disturbed by the echoes of his footsteps and his yawns that kept getting more frequent by the minute.

It wasn't until two corridors lower that Percy activated Soul Vision again, confirming that he'd indeed reached the Yellow residents at some point. Other than the grades of the sleeping people, not much had changed, however. Sure, Percy had descended another metre and taken a right turn for each new sublevel he traversed, and the pathways continued to grow slightly longer each time, but that was about it.

At some point, he paused, raising an eyebrow.

‘Maybe I should be going the other way?’

Based on what he’d seen so far, Percy was confident this structure was a pyramid, and he was currently traveling along its outer walls, spiralling down towards its base. He had passed through at least two corridors with Greens so far – maybe more – but he didn’t know how many of those existed on the other side. The Yellows should be even more numerous, based on the distribution of souls he saw before entering this world.

But he shook his head the next moment, resuming his stroll down the Sanctuary.

‘I don’t know if I’m more likely to find an exit at the top or at the bottom, but I’d rather not run into the demigods or the god if I can avoid it.’

Since he had already started travelling this way, he might as well check what lay at the end before reconsidering his options. Then again, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d end up ascending the pyramid sooner or later…

Sighing, he pressed on, passing through another dozen or so corridors before something changed.

Once again, Percy found another right turn at the end of the path, though there weren’t any steps leading downward this time. It seemed he had already reached the very bottom of the structure. The doorway to his right didn’t lead to a corridor this time, but a vast room that seemed to encompass the entire base of the pyramid. The ceiling was only a few metres high, but the sides of the colossal hall stretched for over a hundred metres. There wasn’t any furniture either, but that didn’t mean this place was empty.

Far from it, in fact.

The room was densely covered in writing, rows upon rows of hieroglyphs decorating literally every surface, from the floor beneath Rasef’s feet, to the ceiling above his head. Percy’s heart skipped a beat at the sight, as he could tell he’d find something more interesting than somebody’s personal information this time.

‘As soon as I figure out where all this text is supposed to start…’

Chapter 379 – Amenthes

Percy was, admittedly, a little bummed out that he hadn't found a door leading out of the pyramid yet. He'd already mostly explored its outer walls while descending through the corridors, and it didn't seem there was an exit at its base either. It appeared that his only chance would be to find one near the very tip of the structure, and even that wasn't a certainty.

Suffice to say, his odds weren't looking good. Worse still, he doubted he would make it there without running into trouble, which greatly dampened his mood. After all, it was hard to get excited about the treasure trove of information inside this hall if he didn't have a way to bring it back to Remior.

At the same time, he couldn't find it in him to leave the room without at least skimming over its contents. Considering that this place stretched for over a hundred metres in two of its three dimensions, and that every inch of it was covered in writing, he understood that he couldn't possibly read everything carefully. Certainly not in the limited time that he had.

It had barely been an hour since he found himself in this world, and his eyelids were already drooping, as he felt more tired than he had in weeks. Evidently, the curse plaguing these people was already steadily encroaching into his mind, winning the battle against his spectral trait.

'I'll have to be smart about it… Let's pick out the most important titbits of information, memorize them quickly, and get the hell out of here while I still can…'

A cursory scan of the room revealed that the hieroglyphs on the floor and ceiling shone a little brighter than the ones on the walls – save for a single patch at the other end of the room. It was a column a few metres wide, glowing more intensely than its neighbours. Shrugging, Percy walked toward it, thinking it was worth checking out. That said, he did try to read some of the information above and below him on the way.

'…marinate the besumian eel in fharine oil for two days and nights… grill until its flesh begins to redden before adding the spices… serve with dried kongal berries…'

What the hell was this?!

At first, the text had stirred Percy's heart, as he thought he'd stumbled upon some obscure alchemical secret right from the get-go. On further inspection, this looked more like a cooking recipe, however.

A few metres down the hall, he found a second recipe, and then a third. And a fourth. Warm and cold meals… Main and side dishes… Sweet, spicy and sour… Baked, grilled, fried and steamed… Fish, meat, soups, salads, pies, kebabs… and even things he didn't have any words for in his own vocabulary to translate to, as they didn't resemble anything they had on Remior. Evidently, this room was nothing more than a vast accumulation of cooking recipes!

'Seriously? Are these people just a bunch of foodies?!'

Shaking his head, he pressed on toward the glowing patch on the wall, figuring he might have misunderstood something. Needless to say, he'd be quite disappointed if this entire room turned out to be entirely dedicated to the native cuisine.

Soon, he arrived at his destination, reading the hieroglyphs.

'Culinary Arts – a vast accumulation of recipes from all over Amenthes, grouped together based on the regions they originate from. Note: Only the oldest, most popular and most unique dishes have been preserved.'

Percy frowned.

This read suspiciously like a book cover. Was this room some kind of magical library then?

Stepping to the next, dimmer column to his right, he read the text there too, soon confirming his guess.

'Pottery – the art of crafting decorations or utensils out of clay. Listing various techniques, materials and information on famous artists and pieces of work from across Amenthes.'

'Amenthes, huh? Both topics mentioned that. Is that the name of the world these people have originated from?'

Shrugging, Percy placed his hand on the wall, brushing over the engraved hieroglyphs in search of a way to change the topic. Luckily, things were rather straightforward.

The moment his host's long, slender fingers as much as touched the writing, the whole column lit up, as a deep rumble permeated the room. Scanning the hall, he watched the symbols along the ceiling and floor merge, twist and split chaotically for a few seconds, before settling into a new orientation.

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'Fascinating… though I still think a regular book is more convenient than this nonsense...'

Just craning his head to look up or down at the text was quite exhausting. Having to constantly walk around the hall wasn't great either. He had no idea why these people had chosen to do things like this, instead of installing a regular library. Was it just to make everything flashier? Or did they think they could better preserve the information like this? Then again, he still had no idea where he even was. If this was somebody's dream, maybe they didn't even have any control over how things manifested.

Well, whatever the case was, Percy now had a much easier way to navigate the contents of the strange library. Walking along the perimeter of the room, he scanned the various topics one by one, looking for something worth his time.

'Sculpting… Painting… Music… Dancing… Fishing… Hunting… Masonry… Smithing… Tailoring… Geography… Traditions and customs… Architecture… Calligraphy… Languages…'

Percy ignored most of these categories, realizing a lot of it was junk – at least to him. Not that he wasn't interested in these people's culture, but he simply didn't have the time to immerse himself in every mundane detail.

'Come on… Don't you have anything on magic?!'

It wasn't until about halfway around the hall that he finally stumbled upon something potentially useful.

‘Runecrafting – A collection of the most potent enchantments for various everyday tasks. Note: The runes are grouped first by their complexity, and then by the relevant mana types.’

Not wasting a moment, he triggered the change, waiting a few moments for the text around him to shift. This time, the hieroglyphs on the floor and ceiling varied more than before, however. Besides the regular text, there were also more intricate symbols sprinkled throughout the room – runes most likely, surrounded by information and instructions about their effects and construction.

Over the next few minutes, Percy gleefully strolled around the room, randomly skimming through the information as he tried to gauge the locals’ level. Eventually, his shoulders slouched a little. He had no idea how good these enchantments were exactly, compared to the ones on Remior – but it was clear that they weren’t even remotely close to the Vault’s magiscript. That was only to be expected, obviously, though it wasn’t automatically bad.

A key advantage here was accessibility.

In the Vault, every single rune cost a lot of credits. On Remior, Percy couldn’t easily get his hands on teaching material either, as it was mostly hoarded by House Etna. Meanwhile, he was free to study whatever he wanted inside this hall.

Sure, the enchantments wouldn’t be that potent compared to the ones he was used to, so he doubted he would be able to truly upgrade his strongest spells in any significant way with them. Still, it didn’t mean he couldn’t find some useful runes to make his everyday life a little easier.

‘This… It’s decent stuff… If only I had the time to study it properly…’

The problem was, he would have to learn another runecrafting language. On top of that, these runes wouldn’t even be compatible with his own, so he would be hard-pressed to combine them into useable enchantments. It was the same issue that had forced him to ignore runecrafting on Felmara too. Unlike alchemic principles, which were much more transferrable from one world to another, runecrafting was a relatively esoteric field.

Furthermore, Percy already had fairly consistent access to the best runecrafting language he could have hoped for. If he wanted to make any significant gains in the field outside the artificial world, his best bet would be to look for a suitable Decree – assuming there even was one.

‘Oh well… The people of Amenthes have produced at least one god, so they should have discovered alchemy too. I just need to find it.’

Returning to the glowing column, Percy continued to circle the hall, browsing over the remaining topics. Not all of them were mundane – some did discuss spells and other magical knowledge – but he didn’t see anything else that piqued his interest.

It wasn’t until he was almost back to the original column – the one on Culinary Arts – that he finally found what he was looking for.

‘Seriously?! All the way here?!’

Percy couldn’t help but roll his eyes at his bad luck. If only he’d traversed the room in the opposite direction, he would have stumbled upon this in the first few seconds. Then again, he would have probably wanted to search the whole place regardless, in case he found anything else of value, so the end result would have been the same.

Shrugging, he placed his palm on the wall again, causing the symbols to light up. Curiously, the topic literally translated to “Potion-making” in his host’s mind – they clearly didn’t have a separate word for “Alchemy”. He didn’t know if they simply used a different name for the field, or if they’d hidden the more sensitive information elsewhere, but he sure hoped it was the former.

Diving into the text, it didn’t take him long to wrap his mind around the topic.

The gist of it was that they had indeed developed a cultivation resource on par with elixirs – which made sense, for a lesser spring. Most impressively, Amenthes was – or had been – blessed with not just one, but two sources of stable beast mana! The first were the scales of some kind of aquatic creatures, while the second was extracted from the horns of some land-dwelling beasts.

That definitely got Percy’s hopes up. If they’d found some way to combine the two ingredients to create even more potent elixirs, it would open new doors for him.

Sadly, he quickly realized they'd done nothing of the sort. Their alchemists – or potion-makers as they called them – had merely found lots of standard ingredients around their planet, discovering all the basic alchemic principles he was familiar with – extraction, deattunement, pacification and redirection.

They called their cultivation resource "amber potions", and they didn't really differentiate them from other potions they brewed. For the most part, this wasn't particularly useful to him, as he doubted he'd find any physical ingredients in this world, nor did he have any means of bringing them back home, as things stood.

Though one thing did catch his eye. It was something he hadn't seen anywhere else.

'The compression principle? Now, that's a new one…'

Chapter 380 – Compression

In every world Percy had been to, potions were considered secondary products of alchemy – far inferior to the cultivation resources people used to cleanse their cores and advance to the higher grades. Part of it was due to the sheer importance of elixirs. After all, very few things could compete with a permanent increase to one's power or lifespan.

But it didn't help that potions were inherently flawed either.

Typically brewed out of Orange plants, their efficacy was barely worth mentioning when consumed by those at the higher grades. Percy had experienced first-hand how his most recent advancement had muted his potions' effects on his own body, and Yellow wasn't considered a high grade either. For people like Galahad or Archibald, potions were completely useless – let alone gods and demigods.

The reason for that was fairly simple too.

Every living creature required a mana core to survive, and that included plants – which potions were made of. That said, the way in which mana cores manifested was very different for flora than it was for fauna.

When it came to animals, Brown was a grade reserved for only the tiniest of creatures – such as insects. Any mundane animal larger than that – from mice to whales – usually had a Red core instead. Once a

beast reached Orange, both its body and its demeanour changed in all sorts of ways, and it was almost always considered a magical creature.

Of course, there were some exceptions. The Starry Wasps Percy had hunted before were insects, so they turned into magical creatures as early as Red – in the form of the Starry Drones he had seen at the base of the Fungal Spire.

Plants, on the other hand, didn't have a single mana core. Instead, they possessed a vast network of minuscule nodes, spread evenly along their volume. Mundane plants had a Brown core regardless of their size. Even a towering tree could have that, though its mana would barely be perceptible in that case, due to how thin it was, and how widely it was distributed.

Meanwhile, magical plants were mostly found at Red or Orange. The former were used as secondary ingredients for various alchemic steps, their properties often determined by their affinity, while the latter were considered main ingredients out of which potions could be brewed.

As a result, potions were essentially always at Orange, regardless of the grade or the skill of the alchemist who had brewed them, or the method that they had employed. Yellow plants did exist, but they were far rarer than Yellow-born sapients or beasts, and a slightly more potent potion wouldn't exactly be enough to fix the problem either.

Sadly, plants never had the beast affinity nor any intelligence, so it was impossible for them to advance, and thus the whole universe was stuck without Blue or Violet potions – generally speaking.

There were some unique plants that seemed to break all convention, like the jade tree the Divine Order had gifted to House Avalon, which was brimming with dense life mana, or the Lotus of a Myriad Rivers Percy had used to change Micky's affinity.

Percy hadn't the slightest clue how such things could even exist, nor did he know whether anybody had ever succeeded at brewing anything with them, but they were clearly rare enough that it would be a waste to use them for a one-time consumable product with a temporary effect.

However, it appeared there was another, more reliable way to concoct potent potions – one which the Amenthei had discovered.

The compression principle.

Rather than relying on the occasional higher-grade plant, these people had instead come up with a method of fusing many regular potions into a more potent variant! The idea was simple enough that every alchemist had considered it at some point – Percy included – though this was his first time coming across a civilization that had managed to realize it.

Sadly, their approach had its own share of drawbacks.

In theory, one would need a minimum of three Orange healing potions to brew a single Yellow potion, three Yellows for one Green, and so on. In practice, there would inevitably be some losses – much like with every other alchemic step Percy had studied in the past. These losses were comparable to the losses incurred when a Yellow creature consumed an Orange potion, which kinda defeated the purpose of the technique.

Simply put, a similar quantity of Orange ingredients would be wasted to heal a Green's injury, regardless of whether those losses were incurred inside a cauldron during the brewing process, or inside that person's body.

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'No. That's only the case for the average alchemist… If your brewing yield is high enough, you can probably get more value out of your ingredients this way…'

Percy's yield was already extremely high for both his age and his grade, thanks to his constant cheating. If he were to master another alchemic principle, it would likely climb again, so this would probably be worth it for him. And this would get even better once he stumbled upon more principles in the future, or once he upgraded his Alchemist's Intuition to Refined.

If he could get his brewing yield close to 100% – or at least 90% – one day, he might be able to brew something like a Violet healing potion with just over a hundred of his green mushrooms. Meanwhile, if a Violet mage wanted to receive the same amount of healing from the regular potions, they'd have to consume closer to a thousand mushrooms' worth.

Furthermore, it wasn't just the wasted ingredients that one had to consider.

There was also a question of practicality. A single Violet potion was something one could easily swallow in an instant, whereas taking a thousand Orange potions meant drinking a whole bucket. And if Percy wanted to use his potions in tattoo form… Well, there simply wouldn't be enough space to draw them once he reached Blue or Violet, even if he covered every inch of his body with Orange ink.

Thus, learning and incorporating the compression principle into his brews was the only way for Percy to not waste all the time and effort he'd previously spent with his other principles.

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

'It actually goes so much further than potions… Understanding how to forcefully elevate the grade of a potion might help me come up with a way to advance without elixirs… Or to at least make elixirs more useful…'

Percy didn't think the compression principle could be applied to elixirs directly, because nectar worked differently from other ingredients. Much like his crystallized mana, it wasn't separated into different grades. Starry Soldiers and Knights simply produced more of the same substance than Drones or Workers, rather than a more potent form of it.

That said, he already had some ideas that he wanted to test in the future.

His boosting art already almost raised his grade – though it was missing a couple of steps. On top of that, Percy wanted to try drawing runes inside his core at some point, using pre-casting. Adding the compression principle into the mix, and he might just have enough tools in his arsenal to induce an artificial advancement.

It was an ambitious plan, but it was also exactly the kind of thing he'd need to invent if he ever hoped to attain divinity as a Red-born. His next advancement was over a century away, so he'd probably have to give this a shot before that once he had the time for it.

'Alright. I'm sold, but that still doesn't solve my immediate problems...'

As much as he wanted to study the new principle, he didn't have the time to read everything here in detail. Percy would have to skim through the information on the ceiling to understand the gist of what the Amenthei had done. As for actually practicing and registering the technique, he'd have to wait until he returned to Remior – assuming he found a way out of the Sanctuary.

'Let's not dilly-dally, then…'

Not wasting another second, Percy downright skipped all the historical information about how the first alchemists on Amenthes had originally discovered the principle, and all their failed experiments from back when the technique was still in its infancy. Practically running through the hall, he scanned the relevant sections both above and below, searching for the fundamental components necessary to study the principle by himself.

'…much like a core's promotion, elevating a potion's grade comes down to compressing the mana down into a denser state – hence the name of the principle…'

'Yeah, no shit… I could have guessed that by myself!'

Rolling his eyes, he moved on to the next paragraph, and the one after, ignoring all the details he didn't think were crucial.

'…but simply compressing the liquid from the outside isn't enough. A mage passively uses their willpower to condense the mana inside their core. Sadly, it's impossible for us alchemists to infuse our willpower into an ingredient's mana, so we had no choice but to look for an alternative…'

Percy yawned for the millionth time since coming here – the tenth this very minute, in fact. Realizing he was running out of time, he hastened his steps, knowing he was close to the answer.

'…the most important thing is to use a secondary ingredient rich in gravity mana. It pulls at the potion from within, helping greatly with the compression…'

'There! Now we're getting somewhere!'

‘…but that alone isn’t enough. External pressure is needed as well, and the two sources have to be applied in a very specific manner. One must press down on the liquid rhythmically, catalysing the gravity mana within the secondary ingredient. Each potion requires a different compression amplitude and frequency, which can only be discovered through trial and effort…’

Percy would have loved to continue, but keeping his eyes open was already a monumental task, and he still had a whole pyramid to traverse.

‘Anyway, this should be enough… A secondary ingredient rich in gravity mana… varying the external pressure to find the right frequency… Shouldn’t be too hard…’

Shrugging, he sprinted toward the exit in the opposite side of the room from where he’d entered. Next, he climbed a few stairs to another hall right above the previous one. It looked more or less the same too, though it was slightly smaller, likely because it was higher up in the pyramid.

More importantly, it was also set up like a library, though its contents seemed quite different from earlier…