Wanderer 551

Chapter 551: Spectral capacity

Before doing anything else, Percy wanted to get his host's living arrangements sorted. Heading back to the residential area, he soon located Cassiel's old room under the boy's guidance, reminded of how tight it was.

The kid didn't even have a shower like Gabe. Apparently, that wasn't a luxury the talentless residents of the Vault could expect. If Cassiel wanted to wash up, he had to request scented mist to be dumped into his room, his bed made by some kind of "hydrophobic" fabric so that it wouldn't soak the moisture.

'Yeah… you're not going to be staying in this shithole kid. Not if I can help it,' Percy said, gathering his host's scattered clothes.

This was why they'd stopped by the place. Cassiel didn't have much: just a couple of standard, synthetic shirts and trousers that one could request from the system. He could have just asked for new ones, but Percy thought that his host might be emotionally attached to his old clothes: considering that they were his only possessions.

Leaving the building, he headed to the residential cube where his friends lived, making his way to Gabe's floor. Asking the system for an unoccupied room, he picked the one closest to the others, dropping Cassiel's stuff in a corner.

Judging by his racing heart, the boy was ecstatic to see his new place. After gawking at the embedded shower for a few seconds, he gently caressed his soft mattress, this one made of something less uncomfortable. He looked eager to rest on a bed that actually fit him for a change, though he'd have to wait for Percy to leave before he could sleep. All things considered, this room wasn't anything fancy either, but it was much more spacious than the previous one, feeling even larger due to the boy's small frame.

'Metatron is an efficient bastard, if nothing else,' Percy thought, his borrowed lips curling into a bitter frown.

The titan didn't waste a square centimetre of space. There was no way the hulking sapients with the horns could have lived in Cassiel's old room: children or not: meaning that Metatron provided each resident with a room tailored to their size.

Not only did he make full use of the artificial world's space, he also counted the seconds he gave each of his people, letting the low-borns starve if they failed to prove their worth after a few years. Everything was a transaction: from the bites of food they were allowed to eat, to the breaths of air they could inhale, to the size of bed they had to rest on.

Percy sighed.

This was nothing new, but seeing even a Yellow-born treated this way was quite eye-opening. Back on Remior, even a Red-born commoner usually got to live with more dignity, let alone someone like Elaine who had lived like a princess growing up.

"Cube, I want another hard copy of my books. Stack them by the corner. User ID: WANDERER."

"Authorization granted. Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. Delivery in 2400 rits."

Percy raised an eyebrow. That was a long time to print a bunch of books. Then again, he owned several books now.

The system began immediately, a hole opening in the ceiling with a burst of compressed air, one steaming-hot book landing on the floor after the other, forming a rising pile.

The stack would take up a non-negligible amount of space even in Cassiel's new room, but it was ultimately a small price to pay for seven thousand credits' worth of knowledge. Percy didn't mind sharing his growing personal library with his future hosts, to save them some money.

In fact, he wasn't going to stop with his friends at the Vault. He intended to put the new seals that he was about to purchase from Metatron to good use, bringing as many copies of the books as he could fit for his family, Nesha, and the rest of Remior.

He didn't know whether House Etna would be willing to ditch their runecrafting language in favour of a new one, as they would have to change everything, from their books to the academy's curriculum, but they could certainly draw a mountain of inspiration from the Vault: at the very least.

Seeing as the system was still printing books, and that Percy didn't have his new storage devices yet, he moved on to something else.

"Cube, I believe I can spend a Yellow bonus reward to get my capacity for spectral fiends tested."

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. The request falls well within the parameters of your reward. Proceed to claim?"

"Do it."

"Choice confirmed. Bonus reward 'testing user's spectral capacity' requires specialized equipment. Please follow the indicators to the designated area."

"Indicators? Wha–" Percy swallowed what he was about to say as a bunch of arrows lit up on the floor. Something similar had happened back when he'd first tried to find the way to Gabe's room.

Following the glowing symbols out of the building, he was led to a couple of blue square outlines shining softly about three metres apart from one another. Each was more than large enough for a grown man to stand inside, though he guessed that he was supposed to step on the green circle blinking between them instead. As soon as his host's feet touched the enchantment, the system spoke again.

"Commencing 'spectral capacity test'. WARNING: User is advised to not move until the test is over. Failure to comply may result in an incorrect assessment. The bonus reward will not be reimbursed in such a case."

Before the cube was even done speaking, a curved pillar with a square cross-section rose from one of the blue outlines, arching above Cassiel before connecting with the other. Numerous enchantments flashed rapidly across the inner wall of the semi-circular construct, only some of which Percy recognized.

'Well… that explains why we had to come here for the test,' he thought. He doubted that the weird arch could spawn anywhere in the artificial world. Even if it could, it sure wouldn't fit inside the boy's room.

The runes on the metallic instrument turned silver, snapping him out of his thoughts. They kept growing brighter until he finally felt something stirring inside his soul. The spectral fiends awakened from their slumber one after the other, a set of insectoid limbs sprouting along his wisp, followed by thin hairs and a series of ever-shifting inscriptions.

'Ah, here we go again…' He sighed mentally, bracing for what was bound to be a painful experience.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the enchantments kept rousing the traits, the legs bending in all sorts of unnatural directions as the hairs flailed wildly, wrapping around the limbs and trying to entangle their joints. Even the markings refused to play nice, shifting the landscape on the surface of Percy's soul, trying to push the limbs and hairs aside, only to provoke their wrath in the process.

Percy winced, though he was glad that his host didn't seem to share his pain. No nine-year old deserved to be subjected to something like this.

Trying his best to keep his emotions from spilling through their connection, and his borrowed body from twitching too much, he endured the effect of the invasive enchantments as the arch kept pissing the fiends off.

At some point, the chaos reached its apex. It was still a far cry from when Percy had actually absorbed his third trait, but the pain utterly dwarfed just about anything else he'd experienced over the years.

The equipment clearly wasn't done with him just yet, however. Percy scarcely registered a new series of runes lighting up along the arch, heating his body up.

'No… not my body…' he realized through gritted teeth.

The enchantments appeared to bypass his host's flesh entirely, targeting his soul. Fuelled by soul mana, they seemed to work like a much more potent version of the heat runes that he had used to fend off the spectral fiends living near the Mirror Lake.

Unfortunately, Cassiel wasn't spared this time. What the boy was feeling was probably a mere fraction of Percy's agony, but the latter's wisp still ached for the child as he clenched his tiny fists.

'Hang on, kid. I don't think it'll be much longer,' he consoled him, hoping that he was right.

Thankfully, the heat died down soon enough, prompting the next change. The temperature seemed to plummet this time, reminding Percy of his soul-freezing ice mana. Of course, the effect was much weaker, the enchantments merely trying to probe: not kill: him.

Following the spectral chill, he felt countless ants crawling all over his soul, gnawing at it from inside out, the pain reminding him of the time he'd splattered wasp acid on his body. After that, there was a high-pitched noise that would have surely ruptured his eardrums had it been targeted at them, a crushing pressure that squeezed his soul into a fraction of its size, and several other unpleasant effects.

'I guess it's checking how my soul responds to different stimuli, trying to quantify its durability or something…'

Luckily, the test only lasted a couple of minutes, though they'd felt closer to hours. Cassiel was drenched in sweat by the time the enchantments died down, the arch soon receding back into the floor.

'Kid, are you okay? I would have asked one of my other clones to do this if I'd known how much it would hurt.'

Not that his other hosts deserved the treatment, but at least they were both adults.

'It's fine. This is nothing compared to starving for weeks, unable to even sleep,' the boy replied with a shake of his head.

Percy was about to say something else, when the system spoke first.

“Test complete. Processing results…”

Forgetting about everything else, he waited with bated breath to hear the verdict.

“Processing complete. Access ‘spectral capacity test’ report?”

Chapter 552: Demonic infestations

Percy’s borrowed mouth said “yes” before his brain was even done processing the system’s question. This would determine whether he could get another trait or not!

“Choice confirmed. Compiling report…”

“Compilation complete. User ‘Cassiel’: Spectral Capacity: 0/1. WARNING: User does not possess the soul affinity. There is no known method to absorb a spectral fiend without it.”

“Compilation complete. User ‘Percy’: Spectral Capacity: 3/4. WARNING: User does not possess the soul affinity. There is no known method to absorb a spectral fiend without it.”

Percy ignored the irony of being told that he couldn’t absorb a fiend right after being told that he’d already absorbed three, focusing on the important information.

‘Four! I can actually do it!’

He’d suspected this for a while, but he would have never dared to attempt it without confirmation. Spending a Yellow reward was a lot given how difficult they were to earn, but he didn’t think that Zoris would have been able to help him without the necessary equipment: especially after having seen firsthand what the test had entailed.

Leaving aside the obvious benefit of acquiring another trait, Percy had another reason to be happy. This outcome would quash Metatron’s lingering doubts about his story once and for all.

To Percy's knowledge, there shouldn't be any method other than the concept of permanence to increase one's capacity, nor was it possible for anyone but him to ever absorb four fiends, leading credence to his previous claims.

Admittedly, he was a little bummed out that his fusion with Micky had only granted him a single additional slot. The blessing had tripled his capacity, and he technically had two souls constantly bathing in the augmented mana now.

'No… I guess it doesn't scale linearly,' he thought, thinking back to the absorption of his third fiend.

Each new trait fought with the previous ones, plunging his soul into complete chaos. If anything, he'd be lucky if his future aspects continued to raise his limit.

Regardless, he had to return to Remior to absorb the fiend. Part of him was petrified at the thought of undergoing what was bound to be a hellish experience, but he'd be lying if he said that he wasn't tempted to ditch the Vault and get right to it. Every single one of his traits had helped him massively in the past, and he had no doubt the next one would too.

'Later. There's still a lot to do here,' he reminded himself, suppressing his bubbling enthusiasm.

Shrugging, he mentally ticked another item off his agenda, moving to something else.

"Cube, do you have any information on demonic infestations or Cardinal Devils? User ID: WANDERER."

"Authorization granted. Evaluating request…"

Percy wasn't anywhere close to ready to help Marnok, but he figured that this was important knowledge, nonetheless. He would end up on more infected worlds in the future, and he didn't want to be defenceless when that happened. The Vault was naturally one of the best places to learn about the topic.

“Evaluation complete. There are 357 books, 1766 research logs, 3 encyclopaedias and 6483 news reports that mention ‘demonic infestation’ and ‘Cardinal Devil’. Part of the selection is restricted for your grade. Only 0 books, 0 research logs, 0 encyclopaedias and 0 news reports are available for purchase. Total cost: 0 credits. Current balance: 29579.”

Percy frowned. The information was there, yet he clearly wasn’t qualified to access it. He needed a different approach.

“How about just ‘demonic infestation’?” he asked.

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. There are 987 books, 3128 research logs, 15 encyclopaedias and 137889 news reports that mention ‘demonic infestation’. Part of the selection is restricted for your grade. Only 22 books, 31 research logs, 2 encyclopaedias and 340 news reports are available for purchase. Total cost: 4112 credits. Current balance: 29579.”

Okay, the problem was including Cardinal Devils in the search parameters. He could access some of the information if he stuck to regular infestations. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing.

Just as he was considering whether to narrow down the books, wait until he visited the Vault with a higher grade, or check whether his bonus rewards could get him anything more, something changed. Percy found himself in one of the smaller training cubes again, the familiar pentapus standing before his host.

“Care to explain what that was about?” the titan asked, cutting to the chase. He looked more rattled than Percy had ever seen him, his usually-confident pupils wavering with an emotion that Percy couldn’t quite discern.

“What’s the big deal? I just want some information,” he replied with a shrug, not seeing what the problem was. “Given how much I travel, I thought it would be smart to be ready for anything.”

“Where did you hear about Cardinal Devils? Have you encountered one?” Metatron asked again, ignoring everything Percy had said.

“Well, I’d heard about them a long time ago. It’s not like their existence is a huge secret, though it’s only recently that I stumbled upon a lesser spring presumably destroyed by one: according to their demigods, at least. I haven’t actually seen the Devil: if it even exists: but I did come across a person under its influence.”

Metatron slapped his tentacle on the ground with enough force to shake the entire cube.

“You’ve been here all this time and it hasn’t occurred to you to bring this up?!” the titan yelled, his voice boiling with fury.

Startled, Percy took a step back. He’d displeased the callous god before, but he couldn’t recall ever angering him to this extent. As for Cassiel, he took the titan’s outburst even worse, the poor boy shaking in his own skin.

“I didn’t think it was important. What’s the problem?”

Metatron grumbled something, Percy’s surroundings shifting once again. He found himself right where he’d just undergone the spectral capacity test, the blue squares lighting up for the second time.

“In you go. Now,” the titan spat, leaving no room for debate. He practically shoved Percy’s young host into the green circle, the metallic arch rising above the boy as he landed on his butt.

Runes of various colours lit up along the inner wall, though their effects clearly differed from the other test. Thankfully, this one didn’t hurt. Rather than probing their souls, the enchantments appeared to stir certain emotions in their minds.

Percy felt angry when the symbols turned red, a chill rolling down his borrowed spine as they shifted to blue. It was mostly negative feelings, though the effect was rather mild. The enchantments went through seven different configurations in total before dying down, Metatron exhaling in relief as he presumably checked the results in some unknown manner.

“If you so much as suspect that one of your clones has been to a Great Hell again, I suggest that you self-destruct immediately. I’ll even replace your spatial seal if that’s your concern, but don’t you dare set foot on my world without being sure that you are clean,” the titan warned.

“Clean? Can they really hitch a ride so easily?” Percy asked. He’d suspected it, of course, but nothing bad had happened to him yet, so he’d just assumed that everything was fine.

“Kid, you don’t know anything,” Metatron shook his head. “Even regular infestations are annoying, though I suppose that they aren’t a big issue for me. They are local, and I don’t think they can even infect an artificial world like the Vault. Even if they did, they are mindless and weak, so getting rid of them shouldn’t be too hard. Cardinal Devils, on the other hand…”

Percy swallowed hard. “How accurate is your test? Is it possible that the Devil has followed me home, but not to the Vault?” he asked, his voice trembling. The last thing he wanted was to doom Remior.

“The test should be accurate enough. Once you’re infected, it leaves a mark that even the Devil itself can’t easily take back. The fact that you’re clean now probably means that it hasn’t touched you.”

Rubbing the back of his head, Metatron appeared to fall in deep thought. Percy was about to ask something else when the titan teleported them back to the training room with a flick of his tentacle.

“You wanted to buy information on Cardinal Devils? I don’t think that’s a bad idea. I can’t have you wandering around the universe oblivious to them. I’ll teach you a bunch of things to protect yourself,” he said. Seeing Percy open his mouth, he added, “for free.”

Percy’s borrowed eyes widened, his shock eclipsing anything that had come prior. For the greedy titan to volunteer free information when he could have easily demanded another bonus reward, this was a serious matter indeed…

“How can I fight against them?” he asked the most important question in his mind. “I suppose I should also mention that this wasn’t my first brush with an infestation. I ran into two others, though I’m pretty sure those were the normal kind. Still, they completely ruined the worlds they were in.”

Metatron nodded.

“Demonic infestations are troublesome. If you attack them or those they possess with conventional magic, all you’ll achieve is to scatter their mass, allowing them to spawn elsewhere on the same world. Thankfully, there are several effective ways to permanently reduce their mass, though fully cleansing a planet is still rather troublesome. I’ll teach you a few.”

Seeing the obvious question on Percy’s face, the titan rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Also free. This is too important to be haggling over credits with you. The last thing I need is you bringing that crap to my doorstep.”

Chapter 553: Seven dominions

“While there are multiple ways to effectively fight back against infestations, I’m not surprised that the undeveloped worlds you’ve stumbled upon weren’t aware of them,” Metatron said. “Did those places even have gods?”

“One of them had a single goddess, but she didn’t know much about the universe,” Percy said, not wanting to divulge any actual names.

He didn’t think that anybody knew about Amenthes: that was kinda the problem, in fact: nor could Metatron do anything to the devastated lesser spring that it hadn’t suffered already, but Percy wanted to help Nephthys reclaim her planet one day.

“I see. Well, there are several concepts that can permanently damage infected mass. I suppose that she hadn’t mastered any,” the titan said. “Before you ask, none of my Rings of Sacrilege can grant you one of those.”

“Are there any that can? Perhaps a blessing related to the soul, pure, ice, acid, lightning, air, or water affinities?”

Percy wouldn’t mind getting one for himself or the Starry Princess. Blessings were good to have in general, and he wouldn’t say no to a weapon that could hurt demons. Obviously, he couldn’t absorb another soul blessing, but Metatron was currently under the impression that he had fused with someone who had a soul core, so he had to feign his interest.

That said, it wasn't like he planned to send his main bodies or familiar off world anytime soon, so the blessing wouldn't help his clones that much. Not to mention that getting his hands on another ring was bound to be difficult.

Still, he couldn't help but be curious.

"I know of two rings that meet your requirements," Metatron said, getting Percy's hopes up. However, that didn't last long. "Don't even think about stealing them. The factions that own them are among the most powerful greater springs."

Percy was about to protest. He'd found his way onto one of the Moirais' planets, the Vault of Magic, and Thess'kala so far, hadn't he?

But he quickly caught himself upon thinking it over more carefully. Possessing a random dying baby in what could have very well been some rural area wasn't nearly on the same level as infiltrating their strongholds and snatching one of their most valuable artifacts. He struggled to imagine what kind of host he'd even need to possess to get to such a place, or how he would go about picking one.

"Is there no way?" he asked.

"There's always a way. I can help you try one day. These are exactly the kinds of missions that I want us to collaborate on once you finally join the Vault proper. Even if you don't, I could still assist you for the right price, but you're way too weak at the moment. Ask me again when you're Blue or Violet."

Percy nodded, not disagreeing with the titan's assessment. Even a random elder had nearly trapped his soul on Thess'kala. He wasn't in a hurry to attempt anything riskier than that.

Of course, he also had to consider the question of whether he even wanted to cooperate with Metatron, or whether he was willing to steal from a bunch of innocent people who hadn't done anything to him.

'Well, okay… I doubt they're truly innocent. I bet they crush lesser springs like Remior all the time. Besides, I don't have to steal the ring. I just need to borrow it for a couple of years.'

Not that it made it much better, but there was no point in worrying about the morality of a hypothetical future mission right now.

“Are there any accessible ways to fight against infestations?”

Metatron summoned a stack of books to his tentacle, tossing them over. Percy clumsily caught them, storing them in his seal.

“Purification runes. Study them. They can be combined with various others to grant certain properties to your mana that are deadly to demons. I’ve included a few variants and relevant enchantments in the books,” the titan explained. “I’ll add them to your library too, so you can print as many copies as you want. Their effectiveness is limited, but you won’t be entirely powerless against an infestation. As long as it’s not a Cardinal Devil, you should at least be able to cleanse yourself of its influence.”

Percy frowned. “I don’t remember seeing any mention of these in the rune index.”

He could have missed them, but he didn’t think he had. He’d browsed through the catalogue very carefully, searching for anything even remotely interesting to buy.

“They aren’t in there,” Metatron said with a gesture akin to a shrug. “They’re useless to the Vault’s residents. Even if an infestation could somehow spawn here, I’d just get rid of it myself.”

Percy nodded. This was good. If he worked these enchantments into his scythes and used his empowered cords to provide his clones with enough mana to fuel them, he would have another valuable trump card in his travels. If he could also get the right blessing in the future, it would only make him stronger.

‘Hmmm? Can I draw these purification runes inside my cores during my artificial advancement? It might grant me some permanent resistance to the demons…’ he thought.

“What exactly are they?” he asked the titan, switching to a different topic. “Is there no way to prevent them from forming?”

“They are fuelled by the darkness in our hearts. As long as life exists in the universe, we will never get rid of them completely,” the titan explained. “Tell me, how exactly did the ones you encountered work? Did they embody certain negative emotions?”

Percy thought back to the demonic vines on Takeo’s world and the black ocean he had heard about from his now-familiar.

“One was an insatiable jungle that devoured flesh, mana, and even a person’s will to live. The other was some dark liquid that made people sleepy. As for the Cardinal Devil, I think it exacerbated people’s greed.”

Metatron nodded.

“There are seven known Cardinal Devils in the universe. Even regular demonic infestations fall under their dominion. The first two you mentioned sound like manifestations of Gluttony and Sloth. The Cardinal Devil you found is probably Avarice itself.”

“What does that mean?” Percy asked. “I thought that infestations were random. Do the Devils go around spreading them intentionally?”

“Not exactly. Regular infestations are random, but if a Devil encounters one under its jurisdiction, it has a much easier time seizing it and turning it into a Great Hell.”

“What makes a Great Hell different from a normal infestation?” Percy asked. “The places I’ve been to looked quite hellish already.”

The titan sighed. “You should know by now that most infestations are self-destructive. They keep killing the people that they rely on to survive, eventually dying alongside them. It may sound like a bad deal, but trust me, Great Hells are a lot worse.”

“How so?”

“Cardinal Devils are smart. They can control their impulses, keeping the population around as livestock, only eliminating those they perceive as threats. Once they turn a planet into their personal farm, they just move on to the next world, creating more Hells and expanding their power and influence.”

The titan’s words shook Percy to his core. At least, a demonic infestation would butcher everyone in a relatively short amount of time, dying out with them. Great Hells, on the other hand, were places of untold suffering for hundreds of thousands: if not millions: of years. They kept their victims arounds as pets, torturing generation after generation while permanently stinting a planet’s growth.

This was precisely what was happening to Robari right now, wasn’t it? And it sounded like Avarice was only getting started.

Percy felt extremely bad about his friend, but there was nothing he could do to help him. Not yet, at least. Given how powerful the Devils were, it would probably be easier for him to kill Rhaziel and free Huehue than to save Marnok!

‘I hope he survives long enough…’

Based on what Metatron had said, even a god’s strength was just the bare minimum that he would need, along with the runes that the titan had taught him, and maybe even the right blessing: just to stand a chance.

Alternatively, he could ask a god to pitch in, but it didn’t sound like Metatron had any interest in getting involved, and Percy didn’t want to risk Remior’s deities either.

He sighed. ‘Just the fact that he’s telling me all of this for free is already a huge help,’ he thought, giving the powerful pentapus an appraising look.

It wasn’t like the cruel titan had suddenly grown a conscience. Demonic infestations and Cardinal Devils were simply a threat to all existence. It was wiser for every living being to put factions, ambitions and petty differences aside and unite against these monsters.

“I was told that the Devil in that place was still incubating, though I’m not sure how up-to-date the information was,” Percy said upon remembering Saint Ludwick’s words. “How can you know its name if it hasn’t even been born yet?”

Metatron shook his head.

“Cardinal Devils keep dying and coming back all the time. It’s hard to destroy them, but not impossible. The top factions do just that with every chance they get. The problem is that they never go away forever. Even if you use the correct blessings, all you can do is buy time. Eventually, they’ll spawn on some other unfortunate planet.”

Well… that sure sucked.

There was nothing worse than an enemy that could never be beaten. Perhaps, even a faction like the Moirai or Sixiang would be easier to go up against. They might be more powerful than a Cardinal Devil, but at least they would stay dead if they got killed.

Percy sighed. He wasn’t sure whether he should be happy that he finally had a more effective method of protecting himself, or horrified that even that was little more than a half-measure, at the end of the day.

Seeing that there was nothing he could do about it at the moment, and since the titan was done with his explanation, he decided to switch to a less gloomy topic.

“Thanks for the information and the runes: I’ll keep it in mind. Can I buy those spatial seals that you promised me now that I’m here?”

“How many?” Metatron asked, also clearly happy to move on.

“Three. I’ll pay you fifteen thousand credits and a Yellow reward if that’s okay with you.”

Saying nothing, the titan lifted his tentacle, a droplet of pitch-black mana rolling to its tip, before coming off and spinning rapidly just centimetres above it. Splitting into three thin discs, they expanded until they were wide enough for Percy to observe the runes that they were about to shift into with ease.

Percy paid close attention to Metatron's every action, and not just because he was afraid of the titan sneaking something suspicious into the storage devices. This was a prime opportunity to learn as much as he could about seal-crafting from an expert, and to use it as an excuse for his interest.

Chapter 554: Seal-crafting

Three seals were suspended in the air between Metatron and Cassiel, dozens of new runes forming and attaching themselves to the intricate enchantments every second.

The titan was constructing the spatial devices much faster than the previous time, though Percy didn't think that Metatron was doing this to cheat him. He must have simply noticed how far he had climbed in the magiscript challenge and judged that he was proficient enough in the art to follow his moves.

Sure enough, Percy just about managed to keep up with the divine pentapus, studying all three of the emerging seals and making sure that he at least understood the purpose of every rune.

More importantly, he paid extra attention to two specific types that he was quite interested in. Metatron had used amplification runes in the previous seal too: albeit a different variant than the ones Percy had just purchased. That said, Percy had still been very much a novice in the art before, so he hadn't been able to learn too much about them. This time, he knew a lot more, finding a lot of inspiration as he watched the titan weave them into his enchantments.

Finally, the sealing runes were the most valuable ones by far. While they were the key to solidifying one's mana, they couldn't accomplish that by themselves. The pentapus had combined them with self-repairs and structural integrity enchantments: not unlike the ones that Percy had incorporated into his own equipment.

'I see. So, I'll need books on both the sealing runes and this enchantment to replicate this…' he realized. Thankfully, he was already familiar with most of the other runes.

Thinking about it some more, he couldn't help but wonder whether he could start including sealing runes in his constructs to strengthen them further. His magical silk was comprised of several components: some soft and flexible, others hard and durable. The former were made mostly out of regular phantom mana, and he didn't want to alter their properties too much. The latter, on the other

hand, contained a lot of grey powder and could probably be made even tougher with the right enchantments.

'No harm in looking into this as well, but it's a lower priority…'

Spinning the silk inside his cores was out of the question, so he'd have to rely solely on the seals for his artificial advancement. Reaching Green and Blue would also boost his fighting strength several times more than a few incremental improvements in his equipment: among other benefits. He'd rather focus on that.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the titan pushed the seals toward him as soon as he was done, the black disks seeping into Cassiel's body. Percy's wisp was too small to fit all three: on top of his previous one: so he merged a couple into a slightly bigger seal, storing the last inside his host's soul for now. Thankfully, the constructs were easy to move around, so he could pass one to his other clones later.

'Amazing. Once I merge all of them into one, the internal storage will be forty metres across!' Percy thought, struggling to contain his excitement.

At that size, it was practically a not-so-small warehouse. Obviously, it would still have to be divided among his clones most of the time, but even at "only" ten metres across, each piece would be able to store enough food to feed a small village for months!

With that kind of storage capacity and Ludwick's Compass: which he very much hoped would work with regular planets: at his disposal, he would have so many more options in his future travels.

"Done," Metatron said, breaking him out of his thoughts. "I've subtracted the credits and bonus reward from your balance already. If this is everything, I'd like to go back to my research now. You've been hogging too much of my time lately."

"Hey, it's not my fault you keep monitoring me," Percy protested with an eyeroll. "Don't even deny it. You always know exactly how many waves I've completed, how many credits I've earned, and even what books I've tried to buy from the system."

“Can you blame me?” the titan asked back with a scoff. “You keep finding ways to break everything or asking about topics that no mortal has any business knowing.”

Percy couldn’t deny the god’s accusations. What he could do, however, was to grab this fleeting opportunity to sneakily ask the titan about something else that he wanted from him.

“Speaking of obscure topics, I was wondering whether I can study those sealing runes of yours. They’re pretty handy, though I don’t think I’ve seen them mentioned in the index. Don’t tell me the Vault’s residents don’t need them either?”

Metatron studied his expression carefully, perhaps suspecting that he was up to something. Percy had to resist the urge to swallow hard under the titan’s scrutinizing gaze, appearing as casual about this as he could manage. Thankfully, the titan eventually decided to just answer.

“Quite the opposite. The ability to craft magical artifacts without needing any special materials is universally coveted. Even many greater springs don’t know this technique. You can’t buy it with credits, but you can purchase it with a Green bonus reward or higher. I have to keep some of my most valuable resources difficult to earn, to motivate my people to push themselves harder in the challenges,” he explained.

On the outside, Percy nodded lightly, once again trying to appear as relaxed as possible.

‘This is great news!’ he actually thought.

It would have been more convenient if he could have bought the books with his current means, but he’d wanted to attempt the Green challenges anyway. He only needed to get to the sixth wave in one of them to qualify for the information he wanted.

‘Let’s not rush to do that though,’ he decided. ‘Better to stay in Cassiel’s body for a while longer and buy a bunch of other things first, otherwise he’ll realize how eager I am…’

Percy knew that he was probably being too cautious. There were a billion other potential applications for sealing enchantments that didn’t involve drawing permanent runes inside his cores or inducing an

artificial advancement. Even if he made it clear how important the information was to him, he doubted that the titan would see through his true intentions.

That said, Metatron already knew a lot about Percy's abilities. If he showed up in the Vault with his soul at a higher grade than it was supposed to be, the titan might suspect something. The fewer clues he revealed, the better.

Oblivious to Percy's thoughts, the titan reiterated that he wanted to talk to him about the Void Hand later, before kicking him and his host out of the training cube. Sighing, Percy didn't even bother complaining about the god's rudeness this time, used to it by now. At least, Metatron had given him a lot of valuable things lately, and he hadn't even priced them too outrageously.

Percy decided to head toward the residential area, to try meeting his friends again before working on the tenth wave of the Yellow magiscript challenge. At the same time, he made a mental tally of his gains from the trip so far, and his remaining balance.

'I should have about fifteen thousand credits and nine bonus rewards left, though most of them are Red or Orange. The other clones have already started reading the books: including the new anti-infestation ones: I've confirmed that I can absorb a fourth trait, and I even got the new storage devices from Metatron…'

There were only a few items left on his agenda. He still needed to browse the database for other interesting things later. He also wanted to spend a few weeks attempting challenges and honing his magiscript skills before moving on to the Green clone. However, there was something else that he could look into immediately.

'Let's see the true extent of Metatron's alchemic prowess…'

In the past, Percy had mostly written the artificial world's alchemy off, and for good reason. Judging from the way they treated their Yellow-borns: allowing even the talented ones like Gabe to die in the challenges: it was clear that the Vault wasn't a true greater spring. That ruled out knowledge of the cyan powder or the bonding principle.

The fact that they didn't even have an "alchemy" challenge was further evidence that it wasn't a subject they focused on. Percy was sure that they had some pretty skilled alchemists here, otherwise they

wouldn't have been able to produce and cure sizian meat for their mortals, but he'd still doubted that there was much for him to learn.

The artificial world was simply too small and ill-suited for growing magical plants, so it was already shocking that they could even cultivate the bare minimum that they needed to cleanse their cores. According to Gabe, this was precisely why Metatron had imported sizians: an efficient source of stable beast mana that could also be consumed for nutrition, allowing him to save space.

Potions and tattoos were entirely out of the question. There was a good chance that the Vault's alchemists still knew of the extraction principle due to how simple it was, but certainly not restructuring or compression.

Finally, Percy wouldn't be surprised if Metatron had fully automated their brewing processes, so they wouldn't have a need for the scaling principle either: assuming that it was even possible to reproduce it without the Atlantean mutation.

That was all to say that Percy wasn't expecting too much. In the past, he'd still tried to inquire about the Vault's alchemy, though he'd come up empty handed. Granted, he hadn't spent much time planning out his queries to the system, so it was possible that he had simply failed to navigate through the available information properly. On top of that, he hadn't had that many spare credits before this trip, so he'd always chosen to spend them primarily on magiscript: the field where the Vault actually excelled.

Well, today he had the money to spend for once, and he was much better at getting what he wanted out of the Vault's system, so he was going to settle the question once and for all.

"Cube. I want you to make me a list of every alchemic principle known to the Vault of Magic. User ID: WANDERER."

"Authorization granted. Evaluating request…"

The system remained silent for a while. Percy guessed that it was searching through all the available books and resources for any mentions of alchemic principles, slowly compiling the list. Tempering his expectations, he prepared himself to be disappointed, only for the soulless voice's next few words to challenge some of his assumptions.

“Evaluation complete. Database contains information on the ‘extraction’, ‘pacification’, ‘redirection’, ‘deattunement’, ‘scaling’ and ‘consolidation’ principles.”

Chapter 555: Consolidation

‘Seriously? That many?’ Percy had to practically pick his host’s jaw up from the floor.

The first four principles weren’t that surprising, as they were pretty widespread. Three were required for core cleansing, while extraction was arguably the simplest alchemic principle in existence. Even if the Vault didn’t have enough ingredients to waste on potions, it would have been strange if their alchemists hadn’t discovered it or at least heard about it from some other faction at some point.

Percy found the last two far more shocking, however. He had only ever seen the scaling principle mentioned on Atlantis, and he’d been operating under the assumption that it was impossible to use without some version of the Alchemist’s Eye.

Just as he was about to berate himself for not having looked into the Vault’s principles sooner, he realized that he might be getting ahead of himself.

“Filter out any principles that you lack sufficient resources for an alchemist to study,” he said, amending his previous query.

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. Database contains information on the ‘extraction’, ‘pacification’, ‘redirection’, ‘deattunement’ and ‘consolidation’ principles.”

Percy exhaled in relief upon confirming that he hadn’t needlessly delayed mastering the scaling principle. Evidently, the Vault’s alchemists were only aware of its existence: not capable of using it. Perhaps, Atlantis or their allies were famous across the cosmos, but Percy would have still probably been unable to learn it anywhere else.

That still left the consolidation principle though. Was it the one that allowed them to control the ratio of beast mana in the meat? Luckily, there was an easy way to find out.

“What information do you have on the last one?” he asked.

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. There are 3721 books, 8911 research logs, 17 encyclopaedias and 49553 news reports that mention ‘consolidation principle’. Part of the selection is restricted for your grade. Only 3517 books, 8890 research logs, 16 encyclopaedias and 41567 news reports are available for purchase. Total cost: 40211509 credits. Current balance: 14579.”

Percy nearly had a heart attack upon hearing the eight-digit price tag, and another at his remaining balance, reminded that he’d spent over half of his hard-earned credits in just a few hours.

Fortunately, he knew that he wouldn’t have to pay nearly this much to get what he wanted. The cost was only this high due to the vast majority of the books actually being available to him despite his low grade for a change, meaning that the topic wasn’t nearly as restricted as other things that he had tried to buy in the past.

However, he guessed that most of the information was either repeated or otherwise redundant. It shouldn’t take a whole damn library to register a single principle. Hopefully, one well-written book would suffice. Five hundred credits at most…

“I am a veteran alchemist, looking to study the consolidation principle and nothing else. Can you find me the cheapest book on the topic, or compile me an even cheaper document to that end?”

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. Book titled ‘Consolidation Principle for Experienced Alchemists’ is recommended based on your search criteria. Summarizing the required information costs more than the selected item. Total cost: 2500 credits. Current balance: 14579.”

Percy frowned. If summarizing the book was more expensive than the actual thing, it probably meant that it was compact enough already: getting the system to cut out the fluff just wasn’t worth it. That said, wasn’t twenty-five hundred credits still too much for a single book?

Books on runes didn't cost more than twenty or thirty credits, and even some rather intricate enchantments hadn't cost more than a couple hundred. Hell, Percy and Gabe had only spent about this much on the Moirais' books, but they'd purchased several of them at the time: not just one.

Alas, overpriced or not, he couldn't ignore a brand-new alchemic principle. Even if it ended up being mostly useless, it would still indirectly boost his brewing yield, strengthen his mutation and provide him with inspiration in the future.

"Fine. Print it for me," he spat with a heavy heart.

"Evaluating request…"

At least, its ridiculous price made him feel a little better over having not looked into the Vault's principles properly in the past. Even if he'd learned about its existence years ago, he would have most certainly lacked the funds to buy it.

Apparently, the system wasn't done making his life difficult, however…

"Evaluation complete. User does not have permission to purchase material on alchemy. Do you wish to spend one Yellow bonus reward to obtain permission?"

"What sort of scam is this?!" he yelled, garnering odd looks from the passersby. Ignoring them, Percy continued. "You're telling me that I have to pay a bonus reward just for the right to spend thousands of credits on a single book?"

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. Alchemy falls under 'non-essential magical subjects'. Its practical uses are extremely limited for the residents of the Vault of Magic, so studying anything on the topic is not recommended. Users are allowed to indulge in their curiosity if they insist, but such actions are severely penalized by the pricing algorithm."

Percy wanted to strangle the asshole behind this, fully aware that it was probably a certain all-powerful titan that he wouldn't be able to put a scratch on for a few millennia at least. At the same time, he couldn't help but think back to other random books that he'd purchased in the past, wondering why he hadn't been overcharged like this.

'Shouldn't it have done this for the Moirai information, or the stuff on demonic infestations?'

Thinking about it some more, it didn't take him long to spot the difference. The Moirai books had contained a lot of information on affinity fusion and fission: topics that were useful to anyone with a composite affinity: not just those with two cores.

Meanwhile, Percy had never actually tried to go through with the purchase on demonic infestations. Metatron had interrupted him before he'd gotten the chance to. Presumably, the system would have tried to extort a bonus reward had the titan not saved him.

"Fine. Just do it, you greedy bastards. So much for my bonus rewards…"

"Choice confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 12079. Delivery in 12 rits."

Between the spatial seals, the spectral capacity test and this, Percy had already used up all of his Yellow rewards. From a cursory browse earlier, he hadn't found anything worth spending his Red or Orange rewards on either.

The best that somebody in the lower grades could hope to get would be a Refined spell for their affinity. For a Red or Orange, that could indeed be rather useful, making a real difference in the combat challenges. However, Percy hadn't seen anything that would benefit him too much.

The good news was that bonus rewards could apparently be combined: three Reds for an Orange, three Oranges for a Yellow, and so on. If he failed to find anything useful, he could just keep merging them until he did.

Leaving aside the sealing enchantments that he needed from the Green reward pool, he wouldn't be surprised if the Vault had affinity-changing treasures or other goodies at the higher grades.

‘Let’s not get ahead of myself. Unless I find a powerful host, getting even a single Green reward won’t be easy: not to mention anything higher. I should ask Gabe if he’s willing to team up again.’

A hole opened by his host’s feet with a burst of compressed air, snapping him out of his thoughts. Picking up the steaming-hot book, Percy resumed walking toward the residential area, flipping through the pages quickly and skimming through the content. He’d have to spend more time reading it carefully later, but he was curious to see what exactly he’d just spent all this money for.

‘Hmmm… so this principle can be used to combine and skip multiple similar alchemic steps…’

It sounded like a rather niche application. It was useless for elixirs, since every alchemic step required a different type of secondary ingredient and had its own purpose. Combining them was out of the question.

Trying to come up with another application, he thought back to the various flavours of healing potions that he’d come across in the past. The regular ones that he brewed out of the green mushrooms acted immediately, providing an instantaneous burst of healing. Meanwhile, regeneration potions had their effects delayed by pacification to last for several minutes.

Finally, rejuvenation potions: like the ones that he had used in the Guild: were pacified multiple times, to further delay their effects, so that they could last overnight. Of course, those also included mind mana, but that was a whole other topic.

‘I guess that the consolidation principle would allow an alchemist to combine a couple rounds of pacification, infusing twice as many secondary ingredients during a single step…’ Percy deduced.

This wasn’t as simple as just tossing double the ingredients in one’s cauldron. Normally, that was a bad idea, as introducing too many secondary ingredients would not only alter the recipe substantially, but also exponentially raise the number of reactions.

All things considered, it was generally better to just go through two separate rounds of pacification. Even though it took twice as long and resulted in extra losses, trying to skip one would be worse.

At least, that was the case without the consolidation principle.

The logic behind whatever the Vault's alchemists did to sizian meat was probably similar. Percy didn't know how exactly they removed the excess beast mana from the meals, but the principle likely allowed them to stack as many instances of this mystery step as they wanted, to carefully adjust the ratio of beast mana and nutrients in the final product.

As for how the principle itself worked?

Well… Percy wasn't surprised to learn that it was all thanks to magiscript. Their advanced enchantments allowed them to control the temperature, pressure and rotation in their concoctions with far greater precision than normal.

It was even possible to have opposing rotations inside the cauldron, heat some parts of the mixture while cooling others, and all sorts of specialized techniques that wouldn't have been possible with simpler enchantments.

With so many options at their disposal, it was no wonder that they could learn how to eliminate the additional impurities generated by the consolidated steps.

'Huh… my cauldron is already a bit like that,' Percy realized.

He'd even used a few of the tricks mentioned in the book while trying to figure out the compression principle, though there were many that he hadn't even thought to try. For example, it had never occurred to him to fuel some of the heating enchantments with ice mana to cool off parts of the concoction, allowing him to heat other spots even more than usual.

The good news was that he probably had everything he needed to register the principle within a couple of days after returning home. That still begged the question of whether it would even help him: outside of the slight improvement to his brewing yield that every new principle provided.

After all, he had no intention of brewing rejuvenation potions anytime soon. Enlightenment potions weren't out of the question now that he had the whole Guild at his disposal, but rejuvenation potions were meant to help people sleep better, which his Insomnia trait had rendered obsolete.

‘Consolidating repeated alchemic steps…’ He creased his brow as a new idea took root.

In a way, wasn’t the scaling principle that on steroids? It wasn’t exactly the same, because the ratio of ingredients was identical to a regular brew, but Percy was using forty times the ingredients at once, essentially stacking just as many brewing sessions together.

The excessive number of reactions involved was precisely the source of the additional losses that he incurred. His spherical and transparent cauldron, coupled with his mutated eyes, allowed him to cut the losses to an acceptable level, but mass-producing elixirs or potions was still inherently inefficient.

‘Hmmm… if the two principles can be combined, maybe I can get rid of the losses from scaling entirely or at least minimize them!’ he realized, his heart skipping a beat.

Even better, this might allow other people to use a weaker version of the scaling principle without his mutation. He didn’t think they’d be able to brew forty times as many elixirs at once, but doubling or tripling their output might not be entirely out of the question.

If the losses proved acceptable, this might even be the answer that he was looking for, to help the Alchemists’ Guild keep up with the hive’s increased nectar production!

‘Alright. I’ll go through the book again later. For now, let’s see if the others are back home,’ he thought as he reached the residential building.

Chapter 556: Three clones and seven hosts

“Can you believe that guy?” Percy asked. “Just because he’s at Yellow, he thinks he gets to boss us around!”

He was munching on a reheated Honey Roll from his spatial storage. His host, Jenio, was an Orange sapient from a barren world who looked a bit like a humanoid dog. He had four arms like the people of Huehue, though his lower pair was only about half as long as the upper one.

Percy had gone through several bodies before he found a good fit for the Vault. Jenio had just lost his whole tribe: and nearly his own life: to a pack of vicious beasts when Percy possessed him. After healing and helping him get revenge for his family, Percy had pitched the artificial world to his unfortunate host.

Having lost everything tying him to his planet of origin and not wishing to brave its dangerous wilds by himself, Jenio hadn't seen any reason to decline.

"Tell me about it!" another Percy exclaimed after swallowing a mouthful of his own Honey Roll. "Why does he get to have fun spending all of our hard-earned credits while we're the ones having to actually read all these books?"

The Orange clone wasn't as familiar with the Red host, Dremmy's, situation, but he guessed that it shouldn't be too different from Jenio's. Dremmy was a burly humanoid covered in fur like Noland, though his was longer and more colourful. Apparently, that had made him quite popular with the ladies back home, though his story clearly didn't have a happy ending, otherwise he wouldn't be here.

"That looks really tasty," the actual Noland said, unable to keep himself from drooling as he watched two of Percy's hosts enjoy the sweet snacks.

The others weren't faring much better, tossing the clones looks of unconcealed envy. They were all currently in Gabe's room, which clearly wasn't meant for six people.

Unfortunately, the Vault didn't really have any spaces available for large groups. The residents of the artificial world were understandably antisocial, in no small part due to its harsh rules on mortals sharing resources or procreating with anyone but their divine parents. If it hadn't been for Percy, these people would have never hit it off either. Then again, most of them wouldn't have even been here: or alive, for that matter.

"Cube, am I allowed to give my friends Honey Rolls? It's just regular food, and you've already granted us permission to share sizian meat since we're all eligible for free portions. User ID: WANDERER," Percy said.

He didn't even have to press his hand against the wall, since he was pretty much already squished against it.

"Evaluating request…"

“Evaluation complete. Sharing resources of any kind is against the rules and will be severely penalized,” the system’s cold voice replied.

“I’m sorry man.” Percy shrugged. “This place seems to lack common sense. Maybe Metatron would make another exception for us if we pushed it, but I believe Yellow me has been quite annoying lately, so I’d rather not risk pissing him off. I promise to bring you lots of Honey Rolls and other goodies the next time I possess you. Same goes for everyone else.”

Noland sighed, as did most of the others. Even Tlaloc who had been a slave for most of his life and the people originating from barren worlds had still eaten a variety of foods before, so they were understandably sick of sizian meat. Its hard texture and bitter flavour certainly didn’t make it any easier to consume day in and day out.

The only one who didn’t seem as bothered was Gabe. The jellyfish-person had spent his whole life in the Vault, so he’d never tried anything else. Percy wasn’t sure whether to be happy for his friend or pity him. Of course, this was bound to change soon, when he employed the guy’s help to clear the Green challenges. Naturally, he was going to handsomely reward him for his assistance.

“Do you want to move outside?” Tlaloc: who had been forced to sit on the bed because there was nowhere to stand: suddenly suggested. “This is ridiculous: especially if another Percy is planning to join us. The lack of privacy isn’t ideal, but it’s not like we can hide anything from Metatron anyway, and the mortals’ opinions don’t really matter.”

After a round of cramped nodding, the group left the building, finding a semi-isolated spot outside to sit in a wide circle. It wasn’t until a few minutes later that a seventh person joined them: a child belonging to the short race of green-skinned people that everyone had seen in the Vault.

Those who had met the boy in the past few weeks naturally recognized him as Cassiel: Yellow’s host. The clone who was clearly in control of the child’s body almost walked by the group, failing to notice them. He was immersed in yet another new book that he must have purchased recently. Thankfully, the others stopped him before he went knocking on the residential cube for them.

“What’s that one about?” Red asked. “More runecrafting?”

Yellow shook his borrowed head. “Alchemic principle, actually. Turns out that the Vault has one that we didn’t know about.” Glancing at the others, he added, “I’d greet you guys: it really is a pleasure to see you all again: but I’m guessing that the other mes have done that already.”

“How bizarre…” Gabe muttered. “So, you can be in three places at once now?”

“More like five to seven, depending on how you count them,” Orange explained with a shrug. “I’ve already come up with a few ways to abuse my bloodline in the Vault, so let me know if any of you needs a boost in the challenges or has any objects that you wish to: you know what: to one another,” he added, making a swapping gesture with his hands. He didn’t want to be too explicit, to avoid triggering a warning from the cube.

“I’m good for now,” Leo said. “I’m sure that you can help me climb even higher, but clearing challenges is one of the best pastimes in the Vault. I’m still decades away from Green, so I’d rather work on them by myself so that they last longer. I’m also not lacking in credits, since I don’t have to spend them on sizian meat or accommodation.”

The others nodded along.

“Alright,” Orange replied. “Let us know if you change your minds at any point in the next few months though. It’ll be a while before we return to the Vault, so this might be your only chance to get some extra credits before advancing.”

“Actually, I’d still like to possess Tlaloc and Gabe in the near future if that’s okay with them,” Yellow interjected.

“How come?” his fellow Huehuan asked.

“Well, you’re the only one who doesn’t have the Moirais’ Decree yet. I don’t expect to get very far in the Blue challenges with a pure affinity and a weaker second core: no offense: but I’d rather not leave you hanging.”

“I thought you didn’t want to give Metatron too many freebies,” Tlaloc said.

“I don’t, but this is different. I’m doing it for your sake, not his,” Yellow explained.

“What about me?” Gabe asked.

“Well…” Yellow awkwardly scratched the back of his host’s head. “I admit that’s for personal gain. You’re the strongest for your grade, and you’re also the best one at magiscript besides me, so you’re probably my best shot at getting to the Green bonus rewards. Hell, we’ve already claimed two of those when we were much weaker, and I’m sure that you’ve climbed even higher since then. Ah, but I promise I’ll make it worth your time.”

The jellyfish-person shrugged. “I don’t mind. It’ll be like the good old times. I didn’t know that you could possess us again though. I thought that your bloodline was random.”

Yellow shook his head. “It is, unless I know where I’m going and can make the necessary preparations. I didn’t bring it up during my previous trips since I was still limited to a single clone and couldn’t locate the Vault without Metatron’s Decree. I can’t even open a portal without a body, but that means that I’ve lost the chance to possess one of you by the time I’ve stepped foot here. Thankfully, none of that is much of a problem anymore.”

Yellow had left a few things out, but Orange obviously knew what his partner meant. While Ludwick’s Compass was also of limited use when it came to the artificial world, they didn’t need it: they had a third method to get here.

As long as there was a clone already stationed in the Vault, Percy’s main body could use the cord to direct the others to him. It might take some trial and error: not unlike the time he had visited Felmara: but it was bound to work sooner or later. With a clone here, he could even ensure that he injured and healed his friends in a controlled manner.

The only catch was that he would need a couple of empowered connections to supply the presiding clone with unlimited phantom mana and the other with directions, but both of those were doable now that he no longer had to suppress his blessing. As soon as one of his clones returned to Remior, he could have the main body coordinate with the others to widen their cords.

After working out the logistics of the operation, the group moved to other topics.

Three Percys and seven hosts: past, present and future ones: spent the rest of the day catching up. It was an opportunity for him to not only learn what his friends had been up to, but also to introduce his new hosts into the group, hoping that they would feel more welcome in the artificial world.

The Vault was generally a cruel and cold place, but Percy was determined to make it a little warmer for those he cared about: at least until he came up with a more permanent solution.

The group bonded over tales about their challenges, though everyone who had come from a lesser spring: Percy included: still avoided mentioning their home worlds much. They didn't want to give Metatron more clues than necessary, even though the titan hadn't given them the impression that he cared.

Not that Felmara or Huehue were in great shape right now: one was currently being ruled by a sadistic despot, while the other had been conquered by him: but everyone hoped to eventually settle those injustices and reclaim their homes, somehow.

Once everyone had had their fill of socializing, the clones returned to the challenge cubes, waiting in the queues once more. It could easily be a couple of months until they got in, but they could spend that time going through the books.

As soon as they entered, they were going to put what they had learned into practice, pushing for an additional wave of the magiscript challenges. Whether they successfully cleared it or not, it would help them internalize their newfound knowledge and hone their skills.

Next, they would return to Remior, bringing everything back to the main body and consolidating their gains. For each of them, less than a year would have passed since they parted ways but, for the collective, they would have accumulated half a decade's worth of magiscript experience. Adding all the other things that they had purchased from the Vault, the originals would have plenty of new toys to play with.

Finally, a new batch of clones would be sent to the Vault to possess Tlaloc and Gabe.

Clearing Green and Blue challenges was the easiest way to digest everything that his five selves would have learned independently, while also earning the seal-crafting knowledge that they needed from the reward pool.

Overall, it had already been about six months since they arrived in the Vault, and it would easily be another half a year until they were done with everything, but this was certainly going to be one of the most productive periods in Percy's life.

'After that, I'll check what Metatron wanted to talk to me about, focus on my projects on Remior, and start sending clones to random places again…'

Chapter 557: Possessing Tlaloc and Gabe

The next few months passed in a flash as Percy: multiple Percys, actually: focused on their training.

Much to the joy of his siblings, the Yellow clone joined them in studying the new runes while waiting in the queue. He hadn't expected the challenge cubes to be so busy during this trip, or for him to end up with so much downtime.

Practicing Internal Magiscript would have arguably been more productive: it would have allowed him to bring even more valuable memories back to his main bodies: but he'd rather not reveal the technique in the artificial world. Metatron's equipment should have a tougher time detecting what was happening inside his cores, but it wasn't worth the risk just to save a few weeks. Besides, any magiscript training was useful, and studying the new runes would probably help more in the challenges.

It took him and Cassiel a couple of months to get their turns this time, though they weren't sure how long it had been for the others. Picking a queue was a complete gamble, since the speed by which the line moved depended solely on the whims and intentions of those in front.

By the time he entered the challenge cube, he hadn't finished reading even half the books. He and the other clones had split the material between themselves for efficiency's sake, though they hadn't done that perfectly. There was inevitably some overlap in the topics that they had deemed to be the most important, as well as a few things that they had collectively agreed to ignore for now.

On top of that, they had bought many additional books over time, having come up with several new ideas or developed new interests during their studies. Not all of their recent purchases had to do with runecrafting, however.

A few books contained information on spells and other technologies that they didn't have back home. Nothing too valuable for him personally, but a lot of it could potentially benefit the people of Remior as a whole.

Percy's balance had dropped below six thousand credits by now. It was still plenty compared to his previous trips, but a far cry from the thirty-seven thousand that he had amassed after completing the challenges.

'Hopefully, we'll be able to increase it again,' he thought with a sigh as he asked the system to start the tenth wave of the magiscript challenge.

At least, he had learned a lot of stuff that he was itching to put into practice. Over the next month: his ninth during this trip: he repeatedly attempted the challenge, focusing more on honing his skills than completing it. The time limit for this one was barely twenty minutes, so he was able to restart it dozens of times per day, and several hundred over a period of around four weeks.

At the beginning, he wasn't doing that well, still stuck at a level only slightly better than what had been required by the previous wave. In other words, he could draw five unit cells per second, each containing seven or eight different runes at most.

It was quite a respectable achievement for a Yellow mortal who hadn't even been alive for half a century: let alone one who had barely practiced magiscript for a couple of decades.

He had his Scribing trait to thank for making it this far. At the rate by which he was drawing the symbols, its influence was quite noticeable. It allowed his hands to move with a speed and precision that somebody else in his shoes would have found impossible: a task no easier than actually breathing meaning into the enchantments.

More importantly, he improved rapidly. At least at first. By the second week, he doubled his output, drawing unit cells that contained fifteen runes each. This was only to be expected, since this was his first time truly pushing himself since he'd woven his Cloak a couple of years ago, as well as his first chance to truly take advantage of his increased mental prowess following the fusion.

Sadly, his gains appeared to slow down after that. By the start of the third week, Percy barely managed to push his output to eighteen runes per unit cell, reaching twenty by the end of the fourth. He could

still draw enchantments of the required size if he wanted, but not fast enough to meet the requirements in the allotted time.

'Alright… I suppose this is my current limit,' he thought with a heavy sigh.

His improvements hadn't stopped entirely, so he could probably complete the wave if he stayed here for several more months, but it wasn't worth extending the trip so much just for a few thousand credits. The fact that his balance hadn't gone up probably meant that the other clones had failed to complete theirs too.

'Oh well… it was still good practice. I'm sure that our efforts will benefit the main bodies and the next batch of clones.'

Sending a message to his siblings, as well as Tlaloc and Gabe through the system, he enlisted their help to move on to the next phase of his plan. Passing the other clones the new spatial seals, he made sure that they filled them up with several copies of the material they had bought. They might as well take advantage of all that storage space that had cost him so many credits.

Bidding their hosts farewell, the Red and Orange clones were the first to go, leaving him in the Vault for a while longer.

Ideally, they wanted Gabe's clone to have all three sets of memories, since the Green challenges were by far the most important ones. Tlaloc would have to make do with less, however. After all, they needed the Yellow clone to stay here and help with the possession.

About two days after the weaker clones left, Percy began pumping what little phantom mana he had left in his stash through the cord, trusting his main body to do the same on the other end.

If they failed to widen their connection this way, he'd have to return to Remior as well, send another random host to the Vault that would keep his cord in its empowered state from the beginning, before proceeding with the next step.

Luckily, that wasn't necessary.

Each packet must have strengthened the connection just enough for the other to travel farther, the two colliding somewhere in the middle. Soul Resonance hadn't activated just yet, but the main body promptly seized the opportunity to send even more mana to the clone, the latter bouncing it back a few times until the connection stabilized.

From there on, things were much simpler: if somewhat tedious. The clone in Cassiel's body didn't have to do anything else. It was up to the main body to guide the new clone to the Vault using their connection and a couple of rapidly fading marks that the previous clones had placed using Ludwick's Compass as references.

Soon, the fourth clone arrived, just as Percy was done surgically cutting Tlaloc's soul open. The grey wisp seeped into the Huehuan's body without difficulty, working along with the Yellow clone to stitch the man's wounds up.

It was finally time for him to go too, to ensure that the fifth clone would have his memories as well.

'See you around kid. Thanks again for all the help,' he said. 'It's not goodbye forever, but I imagine it'll be a while before I possess you again like this. Then again, that's what me and Gabe thought just a few years ago: from his perspective: and here we are.'

The boy teared up. Or was it Percy? Cassiel was one of his longest-lived clones so far, after all. They'd even approached the one-year mark.

'I should be the one thanking you,' the child replied. 'Not only did you save my life, but you also made it a billion times better.'

Percy chuckled. 'I get that a lot but, honestly? Everything I do, I mostly do for myself, first and foremost. Helping you was just a lucky afterthought.'

Cassiel shook his head. 'Somehow, I doubt that. There are many little things that you didn't have to do: like giving me a copy of your books or not touching any of my credits. In fact, it would have been more efficient for you to sell me your resources at a discount or something like that, to put my own money to work. Besides, I'm not sure that your intentions matter more than the result.'

Percy shrugged. ‘You’re a mature kid, Cass. Did anyone ever tell you that? I suppose you didn’t really have a choice: growing up in this shithole and everything.’

Not saying anything else, he finally left the child’s body, soon returning to his own.

Once again, he couldn’t help but appreciate how seamlessly his memories blended with the original’s. Even after having already absorbed nearly two years’ worth of experiences from just as many clones in the past couple of days, he wasn’t fazed in the slightest as the third one joined them. That said, truly consolidating his gains would still take some effort.

‘Well, that’s partly what the new clones are for, isn’t it?’

Emptying the new seal, he merged it into a bunch of others. He’d already sent a big one to Tlaloc, but he couldn’t fit everything in a single wisp. Activating his bloodline again, he placed the device in the forming clone. Technically, he still had a third cord available now, but he didn’t need more than two in the artificial world.

If he hadn’t needed somebody to guide him to the Vault, or to pass Tlaloc the Moirais’ Decree, they could have even skipped the second clone entirely. In fact, Percy: all versions of him: were looking forward to resuming their regular adventures as soon as possible, having placed them on hold for a couple of years.

As soon as he severed the wisp off, he found himself flying in the soul plane, apparently being the clone. Reaching back to the main body before he travelled too far, he worked with him to widen the cord again, before following his instructions and another temporary mark to return to the artificial world.

Thankfully, finding his counterpart: a soul that actively exerted a powerful attraction toward him: didn’t take long. Ignoring his fellow clone, he jumped into the injured Green soul next to him. It had to be Gabe, right?

Sure enough, he found himself in a body he recognized: albeit one markedly stronger than he remembered. Its owner instinctively granted him permission to stitch him up, clearly having expected him.

‘Hey! It’s been a while, hasn’t it?’ Percy asked.

‘Sure has,’ a familiar voice answered. ‘Ready to melt down a few golems?’

Percy grinned. ‘I’ve been ready for months.’

Chapter 558: Cosmic-level genius

It was difficult to say for sure whether the combat challenges scaled more harshly than the magiscript challenge across levels.

On one hand, magiscript was an esoteric field that required a lot of studying and practice to get any good at, the first waves of each grade being nearly impossible to clear for a newcomer that lacked the necessary background.

On the other, each level was only offset by about three waves, which was arguably more forgiving than the combat challenges. After having experienced many of those, Percy was quite confident that the sixth wave of each grade was roughly on par with the first of the next one.

In other words, to get to even the first bonus reward, one had to be capable of fighting a whole grade above their own: a feat equivalent to being an elite disciple on Thess’kala. Given how few people of such talent even a massive greater spring had at any given time, a tiny world like the Vault should have struggled to produce any.

The fact that figures like Gabe: who could attempt the sixth waves even without outside assistance: emerged fairly regularly was testament to how effective Metatron’s cruel rules were at creating mortals with blessings and powerful bloodlines.

The good news was that advancing to the next grade automatically boosted one’s strength greatly, making the first few waves of the combat challenges quite accessible even to a relatively untalented person: something that couldn’t be said about magiscript. However, getting multiple bonus rewards from the combat challenges was harder in many cases.

That dynamic had changed slightly after Percy brought his boosting art and the Moirais' Decree to the Vault, since Synchronization had made it much easier for his hosts to get to or past the sixth waves even without him holding their hands.

After all, Synchronization was what had allowed Percy to comfortably fight Yellows fresh out of the Guild, back when he had only possessed Orange cores himself.

It wasn't until he obtained his mutated eyes, his enchanted equipment, his trollsfury potions, and various other trump cards that he had grown powerful enough to fight two grades above his own. As for three… that had only become possible following his fusion with Micky.

That was all to say that he wasn't very surprised to learn that his friend had made it past the tenth waves of the combat challenges by himself. Gabe had managed to clear the sixth ones with minimal help and a weaker second core years ago, so his advancement and Synchronization had naturally pushed him much higher.

'Wow, you would have qualified as one of the most talented people on Thess'kala!' Percy exclaimed as he watched Gabe dismantle the golems of the sixth wave of the swarm challenge with ease. 'Hell, it's supposedly rare for even the top contestants in the void tournament to fight two grades above their own, which means that you're technically a cosmic-level genius right now,' he added.

The same hulking constructs that had given the two of them so much trouble years ago barely slowed the powerful Green down this time as he helped Percy earn some easy credits.

Gabe chuckled. 'Ha, you don't have to flatter me. I would have carried you through the challenges anyway. Besides, we both know that those elite snake people would be kicking my ass if you taught them Circulation too.'

Percy shrugged, not denying it. Of all his trump cards, his boosting art was by far the simplest to replicate. If the day ever came when it spread throughout the universe, he would instantly lose a lot of ground compared to his peers.

'Then again, it would put sapients in a much better spot against Cardinal Devils,' he noted, thinking back to his conversation with Metatron.

In the same way that he was starting to open up toward Remior lately, to hopefully elevate his world into a proper greater spring, perhaps it would be worth spreading some of his secrets to the powerful factions in the future, to aid them in the fight against their common enemies.

It wasn't something that he would entertain while he was still heavily disadvantaged toward them, but rather something that might be worth considering after he and his people closed the gap to the top.

Focusing on the task at hand, Gabe flapped his six magical wings to dive toward the last golem like an eagle, shifting his body slightly as he neared his target. The upper pair made of blue flames and the lower one that consisted of green gales propelled him faster, though the massless middle pair made of white light didn't contribute to his speed at all.

On the flipside, it was the deadliest of the lot, slicing through the monstrous construct like a hot knife through butter: or rather, a sharpened scimitar cleaving through wet tissue.

Gabe landed behind the crumbling golem with a heavy thud as the cube declared his victory.

"Congratulations! Wave 6 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 6000. Current balance: 162743."

"Wave 6 is a special milestone. Bonus reward is available. Please voice your request. NOTE: Bonus reward is limited to the Green grade."

"Uhm… I'll save it for later," Percy said, not missing his beat.

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. User has 6 bonus rewards pending.'

Of his eleven previous rewards, Percy had already used the three Yellow ones, converted three Reds into an Orange, and three Oranges into another Yellow, leaving only one Red, two Oranges and one Yellow.

Gabe had helped him clear up to the tenth wave of the gauntlet challenge already, so the addition of the sixth wave of the swarm challenge had just granted him his second Green reward. They still had four easy waves to clear before they entered uncharted territory, and they hadn't even attempted the magiscript challenge yet.

Apparently, his friend had already made it to the fifth wave in that one, so getting another bonus reward shouldn't be too hard with Percy's help, but whether they could get the combat challenges to the twelfth remained to be seen.

Of course, Percy already had what he'd come here for: the means to buy the books on seal-crafting that he needed above all else. He didn't rush to buy them just yet, once again to give Metatron the impression that it wasn't that important to him.

His fellow clone had worked with Tlaloc on the Blue challenges too, though they'd gotten stuck on the third wave of the magiscript challenge and the fifth of the swarm challenge. They were currently progressing through the gauntlet challenge, though it didn't seem like they would be able to climb much higher, based on how slowly their credits were starting to trickle in.

'They must've just cleared the third wave. I don't think they'll get past the fifth…' the Green clone thought.

Sadly, getting to the Blue bonus reward with a weaker second core and just regular Circulation didn't seem possible. Not to mention that Tlaloc had unfortunately awakened another pure affinity, leading credence to Percy's hypothesis that Huehuans were cursed with some sort of bodily defect.

'This is still a lot of credits though. Maybe I should have waited and bought even more spatial seals from Metatron…'

After thinking about it some more, he shook his head. He already had plenty of storage space. Besides, his current balance consisted of most of the credits he would be able to earn in the foreseeable future.

Getting any more would require him to greatly strengthen his friends or start sending Violets and Whites to the Vault.

It was best not to burn through his resources too fast.

Gabe deactivated his bloodline, his majestic wings dispersing into a cloud of colourful motes. He didn't seem to be in a rush to let go of his boosting art, however. Apparently, he'd been working hard to improve his endurance so that he could keep the spell going for longer. These easy waves served as the perfect exercise to help with that.

Percy seized the opportunity to study the glowing lines on his friend's body. Gabe's channels shone more brightly than most of Percy's other hosts: or maybe it was just the fact that even the ones deep inside his body were fully visible through his transparent skin.

The fire and air patterns weren't anything new to Percy, though the former sported an atypical blue colour thanks to the man's blessing. Percy paid more attention to the third set of pale lines corresponding to the light affinity.

They were far narrower than any other mana channels Percy had seen, but also more numerous, crisscrossing through every square centimetre of Gabe's skin: not unlike a densely woven fabric. More importantly, the lines passed through every point where the fire and air patterns intersected, once again suggesting that this was a common phenomenon with composite affinities.

The imbalance between his cores used to be an obstacle to fusing his affinities, but clearly one that Gabe had managed to overcome after enough training. The fact that his second core had caught up certainly helped, though Gabe had obviously managed to fully incorporate his blessing into the fused mana as well. Seeing that, Percy couldn't help but wonder whether he should try getting himself a water blessing.

'Metatron mentioned having a water Ring of Sacrilege, didn't he?'

Recalling what the titan had told him, Percy was impressed that the Vault had amassed as many as four different rings out of a mere ninety-nine, when most actual greater springs didn't even have one. Perhaps, this had more to do with the artificial world's mobility allowing Metatron to keep them from being stolen, than the other factions' inability to acquire them.

Would the titan be willing to lend Percy one though? He'd only need to borrow it for a couple of years, but the logistics were a bit problematic. Even if he convinced the god to temporarily part with the precious artifact for the right price, how would this work? Would Metatron let him bring it to Remior with no guarantee that he would return it? Or would Percy have to bring his elemental body to the Vault: something that he wanted to avoid at all costs?

There was also the question of whether this was the right blessing for him. No matter what it did, he would prefer one of the ice affinity, to avoid introducing an imbalance into his core.

Perhaps he shouldn't be so picky, since composite affinities were supposedly a hundred times rarer than the common ones. However, after having seen how easily residents of greater springs could use affinity-changing treasures to upgrade their elements, he was starting to think that there were more composite rings out there than he'd initially expected.

'Let's not rush this,' he thought.

Percy was still quite young: all things considered. He had also barely scratched the surface of what was possible with his bloodline, so there was no reason to make any reckless decisions.

If he failed to find a better blessing in a few centuries, it wouldn't be too late to haggle with the titan. Besides, he doubted that a Green or even a Blue bonus reward would be enough for him to rent a Ring of Sacrilege for any length of time.

'Now what? Do you want to take a break, or keep going?' Gabe suddenly asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Percy shrugged. 'Let's get through all the waves that you've already cleared before. We can pause after that to plan ahead.'

Chapter 559: Ten affinities

"Cube. Restart the 'swarm' challenge. Green level. User ID: WANDERER," Percy said after discussing the matter with his host.

“Authorization granted. Restarting ‘swarm’ challenge, Green level. The user has already cleared wave 6. Do you wish to resume at wave 7? WARNING: Wave 7 contains elite enemies.”

“Do it.”

“Choice confirmed. Wave begins in 18 rits.”

‘By the way, you’ve never told me what you’re working toward,’ Percy said. ‘If I’m not mistaken, you were trying to claim a powerful fire spell with your bonus reward when we first met: before being forced to waste it to heal yourself.’

Gabe sighed. ‘I’ve changed my mind. A fire spell wouldn’t be nearly as useful for me now. A good light spell would help more: if only to draw inspiration from: but I’ve come up with an even better idea. Sadly, I need three bonus rewards to make it happen.’

‘Oh?’ Percy couldn’t help but crease his host’s forehead. ‘Is it in the Blue list then?’

Gabe nodded. ‘If we can get both combat challenges to the twelfth wave and the magiscript one to the sixth, I can combine all of my rewards to buy an affinity-changing treasure for one of my cores.’

“Wave begins in 12 rits.”

‘Interesting…’ Percy replied with a hum.

He’d long hypothesized that someone with two cores and a pair of composite affinities that had no overlapping elements could develop a grand total of ten distinct mana networks in their body, though Gabe was the first of his hosts actively working to make that a reality.

It would take a lot of affinity fission and fusion to recombine all the basic elements into four additional composite affinities not native to the person’s cores, so Percy had no idea how practical it would be in combat.

However, it would synergize extremely well with his boosting art if it worked. A fully cleared and tempered mana network could circulate about as much mana as a core, so Gabe would end up with twelve times the capacity of a regular person, six times the capacity of a regular Circulation user, and three times the capacity of a two-cored mage using Synchronization: like Percy. This was without considering any additional boost to his physique that might allow him to widen his channels even further.

Someone like Elaine could never achieve this even if Percy brought her two different treasures, because both of her cores already shared the water element. That said, she could still develop a total of six affinities in the future, which was nothing to scoff at. It would give her double Percy's capacity.

Gabe would likely have to wait until Blue to get a second treasure by himself, as he wouldn't be able to earn enough Green rewards sooner than that. Either way, Percy guessed that his friend's situation was considered among the best-case scenarios for a young Moirai, though he struggled to decide whether being born with two rare affinities would be even better.

They wouldn't produce nearly as many combinations, and none of them would result in any additional, stable mana networks, which was quite a loss. Clearly, Percy's boosting art synergized extremely well with composite affinities.

However, rare affinities were still generally valued more highly than composite elements due to their unique properties, so it was hard to say for sure which was preferable.

"Wave begins in 6 rits."

'What are you going to do if it has multiple uses left?' Percy asked, thinking of something.

'I'd like to pass it to Tlaloc if both of your clones are still here,' Gabe replied. 'I feel really bad for the guy.'

'Agreed,' Percy said with a nod. 'If you can get one with three uses though, I'm willing to trade you a use of a lightning treasure for it.'

Luckily, Percy's elemental body was still in his family's province. He'd ended up staying longer than expected, to help his relatives consolidate their new territory. Even better, he had yet to decide who to spend the extra charges of his own affinity-changing treasure on. So far, he'd used it on Orin, Elaine and Gawain, and he was saving the fourth use for Nesha, though there was still one left.

Archibald had suggested a few people, but he would probably be happier if Elaine grew even stronger, as she was quickly turning into one of House Avalon's most powerful members. If Percy played his cards right, he might be able to help Gabe and his cousin upgrade both of their cores ahead of time.

"Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!"

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Spinning rapidly, Gabe shaped all six of his wings into giant axes, allowing them to blend into a magical tornado. Combining his own reserves with the ambient mana around him, he used all three of his affinities to turn the heat up, supercharging his attack.

There were three giant constructs in the tenth wave, all trying to surround him. As early as three waves ago, the cube had started throwing six-legged monstrosities at them, each tall enough to barely fit inside the room. Their heads and clawed paws reminded Percy of a lion's, the artificial abominations using them to rip anyone dumb enough to approach.

Even though this was still the Green level of the combat challenges, the constructs had blue runes pulsating along their glossy frames, indicating that they were genuinely powerful enough to threaten mages of the next grade.

Percy had no idea how large the Violet golems were. If they were any bigger than this, they clearly wouldn't fit inside the challenge cubes, meaning that there had to be specialized areas for the strongest mortals to train in. Regardless, he had more pressing things to worry about.

'At least these things can't use domains, otherwise we would have been in trouble.' He sighed in relief.

According to the clone in Tlaloc's body who had faced similar monsters, the Blue golems exhibited extremely high resistance to hostile willpower, greatly weakening the effect of a domain. While a

domain wouldn't faze the constructs, it could be used to strengthen one's spells, but the golems were still more troublesome against true Blue mages than Greens trying to punch above their grade.

The golems couldn't move too fast due to the limited space in the cube, though they'd still formed a tight circle around the two-cored Green, placing him right within their reach.

Colossal limbs descended upon him one after the other, only to be melted off under Gabe's heated offensive. He was experienced enough to prevent his spells from harming his own body too badly, though Percy still had to use his host's elbow to wipe the sweat trickling into their eyes every now and then.

The constructs foolishly continued putting pressure on Gabe, only to lose more of their mass with every passing second. Unfortunately for them, the man's bloodline was fuelled solely through ambient mana, and Synchronization had only boosted his regeneration even further.

Endurance had always been one of Gabe's strongest traits, and it had only improved since Percy first met him.

Advancing toward his opponents, he dodged any attacks that he could to preserve the temperature of his wings, using them to deliver devastating cuts across the constructs' torsos, slowly shaving chunk after chunk of red-hot metal. The first golem collapsed after about a minute, the others following soon enough.

"Congratulations! Wave 10 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 10000. Current balance: 223743."

Finally. That was the last of the combat challenges that Gabe had already cleared, leaving only magiscript left before they started pushing beyond the man's previous limits.

Not in a rush to continue, Percy wanted to take a break to buy what he'd actually come here for. With two Green bonus rewards, he could grab something else first to throw Metatron off, pretending to only purchase the seal-crafting books after failing to find anything better.

“Cube, I want to browse through the Green bonus rewards. Is there a way for me to visually study the list instead of listening to you go through it? User ID: WANDERER.”

“Authorization granted. Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. The walls of the challenge cube may be used as screens to aid with reward selection. Proceed?”

The system’s words left Percy’s borrowed jaw hanging.

‘Seriously?!’ he asked his host, not bothering to hide his irritation. ‘You couldn’t tell me this back when we first completed challenges together? Do you have any idea how annoying it’s been to navigate through the database?!’

Gabe shrugged. ‘I thought you knew about it. I generally don’t need to do this, since I already have a pretty good idea of what is available and what I want to buy…’

Percy sighed. “Yes,” he replied out loud, walking to the nearest wall as countless runes blended into a giant screen. As much as he wanted to punch his friend in the face, it would have to wait until he returned to the Vault with a different body.

For now, it was time to see what the Green pool had in store for him.

Chapter 560: Familiar reward?

The magical screen quickly proved even more useful than Percy had expected. Not only did It allow him to view dozens of rewards listed next to one another at the same time, but it also provided him with several useful options to navigate through the pool easily.

Under Gabe’s guidance, he discovered that he could choose to focus on or filter out entire categories of items either by asking the system directly or by pressing his hand on certain spots along the wall. He could even sort rewards by type, name and various other properties.

‘I’m not sure whether I should be happy or pissed off,’ he thought, causing his host’s lips to curl into a bitter frown.

He was glad that there was such a convenient way to sift through the list, of course, but he couldn’t help but lament all the hours that he’d needlessly wasted trying to figure out what had or hadn’t been available during his previous trips. Most of his hosts had been ignorant like him, though he was definitely blaming Gabe and Cassiel for not mentioning this.

‘Oh well… it’s better to use my energy productively,’ he reasoned, examining the available rewards more closely.

Sure enough, the Green pool was a lot more generous than the lower grades. It only took him a few seconds to find several interesting items: from divine mana of various affinities to obscure magiscript topics that he hadn’t come across before, to lots of Refined and even Masterful spells compatible with his affinities.

One was particularly tempting. It was a Refined spell that would apparently teach him the most efficient ways to spread ice in a wide area, to freeze large enemies or objects faster and with less mana.

It sounded especially useful for Percy, because he’d already used three-layered formations before to amplify the heating or cooling effects of his magic. The two methods could probably be combined to create some truly powerful attacks.

‘Okay, I might come back to this if I don’t find anything else, but this is the kind of thing I can probably figure out on my own,’ he thought, marking the item before moving on.

Funnily enough, he also found tomes on efficient soul-healing. Based on their overviews, the knowledge they contained wasn’t all that different from the tips that Sol and her father had given him on Melodia. Percy had luckily learned all of that for free from his friend, whereas the Vault was trying to extort a Green bonus reward for the same information.

All things considered, his Mend spell hadn’t been that special: at least not before his Weaving trait and runecrafting skills had elevated it to Soul Stitching: but he wasn’t surprised that it was valued so highly in the artificial world, considering how rare the soul affinity was.

Shrugging, he resumed scrolling, pausing whenever he found something even remotely useful to him. Asking the system for any additional information it was willing to part with, he slowly developed a respectable wishlist of his favourite rewards.

Gabe didn't complain either, letting Percy take his sweet time deciding. Spending one's resources effectively was the key to surviving longer in the Vault, so not bothering one while shopping was apparently a common courtesy.

Of course, Percy's life had never been at risk: he was ultimately just a rich outsider practically earning freebies from the artificial world: but this mentality was probably deeply ingrained in the very bones of the Vault's residents.

'Well, either that, or he's still feeling guilty over the screen.'

A few hours later, Percy was done going through most of the relevant categories, having narrowed the list down to fifteen or so items that he wouldn't mind claiming. In all fairness, nothing stood out too much to him: at least nothing that could compare to the things that he'd used his Yellow rewards on.

This had nothing to do with the Green pool being worse than the Yellow one, but rather with Percy having bought things tailored to him: specialized spatial seals personally crafted by Metatron that he could carry in his soul, a spectral capacity test that would be practically useless to anyone else in the universe but priceless for him, and a modest alchemic principle that the Vault's mortals didn't really need. Unfortunately, the titan showed no intention of pitching in with suggestions this time.

Right as he was about to circle back to the start and compare his handpicked choices, his eyes landed on a rather exotic prize that he recognized but hadn't expected to see.

'Thess'kalan mutation ingredients: A complete set of ingredients taken from a Greater Spring, coupled with instructions on how to use them. Under the right circumstances, they can strengthen a person's physique, granting them a special mutation. This treasure is powered by an unprecedented bloodline unique to a certain sect on Thess'kala: a member-faction of the Void Hand.'

'What the hell?!' Percy's borrowed heart skipped a beat upon reading the information.

“Cube, I want this! The Thess’kalan ingredients! Now!” he hurriedly yelled, not even bothering to think this over.

Was it a little impulsive? Perhaps, but he didn’t want anyone else to claim the reward: presumably the only one of its kind: before him.

“Choice confirmed. Delivery in 30 rits.”

‘What is that?’ Gabe asked, curiosity spilling through their connection.

‘Something that Metatron must have taken from that asshole host of mine that I mentioned,’ Percy said, giving his friend a quick explanation of the Thess’kalan ritual.

It was obviously not a huge mystery how the ingredients had ended up in the titan’s tentacles. Kassorith had claimed a second complete set after the semi-finals in the tournament, though he had never had a chance to use it before getting thrown into the Vault by Percy.

The treacherous Blue had mentioned his original intention to trade them for an equally valuable reward from some future tournament, but this was clearly out of the question now.

Percy didn’t know whether his former host had opted to give the set to Metatron in exchange for something, or whether the god had simply taken the ingredients from the mortal by force.

What he did know, was that he couldn’t let this opportunity slip by.

Technically, the ingredients weren’t very useful for him. In fact, most of the other rewards that he’d singled out were objectively better. Kassorith had mentioned that a second ritual would have a greatly diminished effect on somebody who already possessed the Greater Thess’kalan Physique: let alone a human like Percy who had even needed two baths to acquire it in the first place.

Taking a third would be a complete waste, so Percy’s only option was seemingly to pass the ingredients to someone else: perhaps one of his friends in the Vault, or those at home. Even then, the ritual was unlikely to grant them more than the Lesser version of the physique, barely strengthening them.

One of the better candidates was the future mother of Percy's children: should he ever decide to have any: to hopefully help him pass a weaker version of his own physique on. Without the Ancestral Lineage Sect's bloodline, the mutation was bound to greatly degrade with every generation, but his kids might still inherit some of it.

Another option would be to give the ingredients to one of his familiars or aspects: which was essentially the same as doubling down on the mutation. However, his elemental body was already made of living ice, making it essentially immune to toxins and extreme temperatures. Even the minor physical component was unlikely to help much.

Nephthys would probably benefit the most, as the physique might enhance the potency of her venom slightly. Considering that she also had the acid affinity and would likely develop additional mutations related to it in the future, it might become one of her strongest weapons.

That said, Percy hadn't claimed this prize for the reincarnated goddess either.

He had something more ambitious in mind. He wanted to study the ingredients at some point, to look for a way to unlock his own latent potential: the dormant traits that modern humans might have secretly inherited from their beast ancestors.

Was it a long shot?

Absolutely. Percy didn't doubt that his own species had a special physique of their own hiding in their bodies, though he didn't know whether he would ever possess the skills to embark on this quest. Even so, he felt that it was a good use of his bonus reward.

Everything else in the pool, he could find another way to claim in the future. As long as he kept coming back to the Vault, completing challenges and trading with Metatron, nothing would be out of reach. Meanwhile, the ritual ingredients were things that he might never have access to again if somebody else bought them first.

A hole opened in the floor with a burst of compressed air, three familiar-looking vials emerging from within. Percy stored them in his spatial seal before explaining his reasoning to Gabe. Not that the man

needed to know any of it, but Percy didn't mind satisfying his friend's curiosity, seeing no reason to hide it.

Next, he went back to the list, pretending to oscillate between the ice spell and the seal-crafting books, before eventually "settling" on the latter. This one, he wasn't as forthcoming toward Gabe about. He didn't think that his friend would rat him out to the titan, but it was probably safer for both of them if he gave him the same excuse of being interested in the spatial seals.

Once he was out of Green bonus rewards, Percy then asked the cube to start the magiscript challenge as he walked toward the podium rising in the middle of the room. If he and Gabe made it to their stated goals, they would each be able to combine their next three rewards to claim a Blue prize, otherwise they'd have to grab more stuff from the Green list.

Given how much Percy had already earned, it wouldn't be the end of the world if he failed to get anything else, but he still intended to do everything in his power to make the most out of this trip.