Wanderer 56

Chapter 56: Calm before the storm

“Careful. Careful! Stir it! STIR IT!!!”

Percy followed his mentor’s instructions, picking up the pace. However, before he even got the chance to celebrate the broken lumps, more bubbles began to form in the cauldron.

“Shit!”

It took him a couple seconds too long to remember what he was supposed to do. Brushing his fingers over the rune controlling the temperature, he hurriedly dialled it down a notch, but the mixture was already threatening to boil over.

SSSS

A few drops landed outside, soon evaporating into wisps of steam, causing Percy’s heart to clench. Each of those was a wasted contribution point!

Pinching a touch of powder from a bowl, he tossed it into the concoction, causing the bubbles to die down more quickly. Of course, this wasn’t without cost. Every mistake he made either killed some of the elixir’s efficacy directly or delayed the process – indirectly resulting in a lower yield.

“Well, that was positively atrocious.” Orin said a few minutes later, staring at the useless sludge in the cauldron.

Percy plopped down on a chair, before wiping the sweat off his brow. He was too embarrassed to look his mentor in the eyes. The alchemist chuckled, patting him on the shoulder.

“Don’t let this get to you kid. This was your first time trying this. You should have seen me back when I was starting out. It took me a month just to get through the pacification step. I’m sure you’ll get it down within the week.”

Percy sighed. Brewing an elixir was nothing like reading about it in a book. There were a ton of things that could go wrong with each attempt, and it was an alchemist's job to deal with any issues that came up promptly and effectively.

If he had to explain alchemy to an amateur, Percy would liken it to a song played by two clueless musicians – the nectar and the secondary ingredient. In this analogy, the alchemist was like the conductor, who had to somehow fix the shoddy performance, blending the dissonant tunes into something acceptable. No matter what he did, it would never sound good, but he could minimize both the duration of the piece and the number of mistakes that slipped through, to spare the audience's ears from the pain.

'Or in this case, to spare my wallet from the loss.'

It wasn't like the recipes outlined everything perfectly either. The nectar was an organic product, and it wasn't homogeneous from one vial to the next. There were subtle differences not only between wasps, but even a pair of drops coming from the same gland. Consequently, no two brewing sessions would ever go the same. Percy had to learn to recognize problems before they even manifested, relying on various clues such as faint odours or minor changes in the colour of the mixture.

'And I have to preserve over two thirds of the nectar after each step, if I want to end up with a 25% yield.'

"Let's stop here for today. Technically, we've got some time left, but I can see you're still rattled by the god's message." Orin said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Percy didn't deny it. He'd known about the existence of gods his whole life, but he'd never seen one in person. Well, that was still true of course, but he had experienced one's spell today, and it was truly eye opening.

Hermes had somehow affected the whole world with his magic!

Sure, it wasn't some apocalyptic spell bringing ruin and destruction on Remior or anything crazy – just straightforward transmission magic. However, Percy still had difficulty picturing the insane amount of mana it should have required.

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And then, there were the god's words. The deity definitely seemed a little long-winded and downright eccentric – Percy didn't know if that was a common side-effect of divinity. That said, it was the substance of the message that interested him the most.

'In five years, I'll have a chance to fix my second affinity!'

It was still going to be difficult – but not impossible. He didn't have to worry about the 7,000 petals the Divine Order would keep to themselves, or the other nearly 3,000 handed to the rest of Remior. He merely had to snatch one of the three spots in his own House!

The good news was, of the 500 people in his family, about 60% had been born with the life affinity. He only had to compete with the remaining 200. In fact, there were even fewer, considering 16% already had a water affinity. Elaine and Gawain came to mind. However, there weren't many Red-borns left in their family. Most of those 170 eligible people had a stronger claim to the treasure than him.

'Yeah, fuck that. If it comes down to it, I'll trade Circulation for it.'

He'd rather not deal with the fallout of such a rash move, but he wouldn't pass up a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity just to keep a secret. In any case, he had five years to figure something out.

"Sir, are you going to compete for a petal too?"

Orin appeared to ponder over his question for a few moments.

"I could. But I don't think I will, no."

"Why not?"

“Well, Hermes didn’t say anything about giving the Guild any petals. That’s probably because all our members are nobles, so they can all just go back to their family for the event. However, my House was destroyed a long time ago.”

“But you’re a senior alchemist! And forgive me for putting it so bluntly, but you’ve said it yourself that you’re loaded! Surely you can cut a deal with one of the smaller Houses!”

Orin nodded.

“Indeed, that’s why I said I could do it. And truth be told, it would be fun to upgrade my fire affinity to steam. It would certainly give me a fun toy to play around in my old age. Hahaha!”

“But it won’t affect my alchemy, and I can’t even remember the last time I got into a fight. I don’t really need this, so I’d rather leave it for somebody who does. What about you?”

Percy smiled wryly.

“I have a soul affinity already. Also, I can think of an uncle or two who would lose their shit if a Red-born like me got a petal.”

Lying to his mentor – even if only by omission – felt wrong. Especially given how much Orin had done for him. But Percy hadn’t known him for long, so he couldn’t risk telling him about his second core. He’d already reported his soul affinity to the Guild too. On paper, he had neither the need nor the means to compete for a petal, so he’d have to play the part.

“Percy.” Orin spoke in a sombre tone. “Don’t leave the Guild in the next five years.”

“Huh? Why not?” the young man asked.

“This announcement sounds like a good thing… And, well… It IS a good thing, for the most part.” the old alchemist said, before elaborating. “However, it will also bring a lot of chaos in the foreseeable future. It’s better to stay out of trouble until it all blows over.”

Percy wasn't sure he understood. Back when he heard the message, he did consider the noble Houses might intensify their conflicts over the petals. However, he quickly concluded they wouldn't. After all, Hermes said every House would get three of them. He didn't say you'd get more if you destroyed a rival family. That would be a barbaric message to send, wouldn't it?

"I know what you're thinking, but there are plenty of ways to tiptoe around it. For example, what if one House annexed another without destroying it? Or kidnapped important hostages to use as leverage? People have done worse things than that over the centuries. There's no telling how low some families are willing to stoop in the face of such a treasure."

Percy swallowed a lump of saliva. If this was true, the world outside the Guild's walls was going to become even more dangerous than usual. After all, the majority of Blue and Violet cored mages on Remior could instantly grow stronger with a petal, elevating their House's status. Naturally, they'd do everything to get more of them.

"Thanks for the warning, sir. I have no intention of going anywhere anytime soon." Percy said.

Another half-truth. He'd have to return home before the five years were up. However, that was some time away. He wasn't even remotely close to meeting his goals in the Guild just yet. In fact, he'd barely even begun tackling them.

After bidding his mentor farewell, Percy leisurely strolled to his place. Since the brewing session had finished earlier than expected, he had some time to kill. It wasn't enough to go back to the Spire and he was already used to sleeping less, so he didn't feel the need to go to bed either.

Instead, he was going to deal with something else that had been bothering him for a while.