Wanderer 561

Chapter 561: Approaching the end of the trip

Percy was surprised by the instructions as early as the first wave.

‘Draw an enchantment containing at least ten different runes.’

The requirements were laughably easy, though what shocked Percy was how different they were from all the previous levels. There was no time limit or a need to draw multiple copies of the enchantment. They only had to draw a single unit cell: albeit one that was arguably quite demanding for a first wave.

‘I suppose the challenge only cares about quality from the Green level onward…’

To no one’s surprise, the requirements continued growing steeply in difficulty with each wave.

***

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

“Awarded credits: 1000. Current balance: 224743.”

***

‘Draw an enchantment containing at least twenty different runes.’

***

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

“Awarded credits: 2000. Current balance: 226743.”

***

‘Draw an enchantment containing at least thirty different runes.’

***

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

“Awarded credits: 3000. Current balance: 229743.”

***

‘Draw an enchantment containing at least fifty different runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 4 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 4000. Current balance: 233743.”

***

‘Draw an enchantment containing at least seventy different runes.’

***

“Congratulations! Wave 5 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 5000. Current balance: 238743.”

Even the fourth wave had required more runes that Percy had ever included in a unit cell before, let alone the fifth. Luckily, he had greatly improved since he created the most recent iteration of his equipment, so drawing unit cells with fifty or seventy runes wasn’t that difficult. In fact, as soon as he laid eyes on the requirements of the sixth wave, a smile couldn’t help but creep its way onto his host’s lips.

‘Draw an enchantment containing at least a hundred different runes.’

It was abundantly clear by now, that he and Gabe were overqualified for this challenge. Just the addition of the Scribing trait alone would have allowed his host to get through it by himself. Percy was confident that he could also clear it without help.

Working together, it shouldn’t be impossible to climb a little higher still. Technically, the sixth wave of the Green level should be on par with the toughest waves that he’d been able to clear in the lower grades, but he had a host that could actually contribute as much as him this time.

Drawing runes was effortless for either of them due to the trait, and they could also infuse meaning together into the enchantments, allowing them to tackle much larger unit cells.

“Cube. I want you to log us both in this time, and count the next challenges under both of our names. Let’s start with the sixth wave of the ‘magiscript’ challenge, Green level. User IDs: 004527945512 and WANDERER,” he said, pressing his palm on the floor.

“Authorization granted. Choice confirmed. Wave begins in 18 rits.”

***

“Congratulations! Wave 8 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 8000. Current balance: 259743.”

“Awarded credits: 8000. Current balance: 67129.”

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

‘Alright, I think this is going to be the last one,’ Gabe said.

‘Probably.’ Percy nodded.

Two hundred runes was already crazy. Based on how the most recent batch of waves had scaled, they didn’t even need to start the next one to guess that it would require at least two hundred and fifty: maybe as many as three hundred. Even with practically infinite time at their disposal, producing such a complex enchantment was out of the question, despite their combined ability.

‘Have you come up with any ideas on how we’re going to clear the rest of the combat challenges? Two more waves of each are going to be hard,’ the jellyfish-person said, moving to a different topic.

‘A few, but nothing too crazy,’ Percy reluctantly admitted. ‘Unlike the last time, you’re not a novice with your air and light affinities, so I don’t think I’ll be able to help you use them any better. That doesn’t leave me with that many trump cards.’

Percy still had a connection to his main body, but phantom mana wasn’t going to help much. It was a grade too low, and even the quantity would be reduced as the original funnelled the resource through the cord. Besides, even if it had been Green, the pure component was way too weak to scratch Blue golems without Reinforcement, and the constructs were completely immune to soul damage, making Percy’s mana types uniquely disadvantaged in the Vault.

Sending some soul-freezing ice mana might be a better idea, but Gabe had no resistance to either of its components, so letting the deadly resource flow through his soul would probably hurt more than it helped.

‘Well, what did you have in mind?’ the native asked.

‘My domain and magiscript. It’s not much, but I was able to accomplish a lot with those on Thess’kala. Juicing up your spells enough to clear a couple of extra waves shouldn’t be out of the question,’ Percy explained.

Obviously, he couldn’t access his main body’s willpower through the connection, and Gabe was just a Green, so he didn’t have a domain of his own like Kassorith. However, a two-cored Green with Synchronization was about as close as one could get to Blue without advancing: unless they had the Dance too, which he didn’t want to use.

Percy and Gabe’s minds weren’t in perfect sync, so fully awakening the man’s willpower shouldn’t be possible, but they should be able to produce a Nascent domain far stronger than Duwa’s with minimal effort. It wouldn’t be too useful by itself, but it would let Percy weave a few enchantments into his host’s attacks.

‘We’ll keep it simple. I’ll use my willpower and your light mana to brand a few heat runes onto the golems or the room. It shouldn’t take more than that to raise the lethality of your spells enough…’

Gabe already possessed the blessing of heat, so his mana was far hotter than it had any right to be. Percy guessed that the light affinity should be uniquely good at instantly drawing intricate runes from afar, so he only needed to give it a little nudge with his willpower and trait.

‘Sounds great. Do you want to try it a few times in the lower waves before we get ourselves killed?’ Gabe asked, caution seeping into his voice.

Percy couldn’t exactly blame him. The last time they’d attempted new challenges together, Gabe had ended up blinded and physically impaired for years. That said, they were both stronger and far more experienced, and Percy even had a lot of divine life mana to heal his host with if things went south. However, he ultimately shrugged, having no issue with taking things slowly.

***

“Congratulations! Wave 11 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 11000. Current balance: 270743.”

“Awarded credits: 11000. Current balance: 78129.”

***

“Congratulations! Wave 12 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 12000. Current balance: 282743.”

“Awarded credits: 12000. Current balance: 90129.”

“Wave 12 is a special milestone. Bonus reward is available. Please voice your request. NOTE: Bonus reward is limited to the Green grade.”

***

“Congratulations! Wave 11 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 11000. Current balance: 293743.”

“Awarded credits: 11000. Current balance: 101129.”

***

“Congratulations! Wave 12 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 12000. Current balance: 305743.”

“Awarded credits: 12000. Current balance: 113129.”

“Wave 12 is a special milestone. Bonus reward is available. Please voice your request. NOTE: Bonus reward is limited to the Green grade.”

“Convert them to Blue rewards and keep them for now,” Percy said.

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. Choice confirmed. User ‘Percy’ has 5 bonus rewards pending. User ‘Gabriel’ has 1 bonus reward pending.’

Gabe exhaled hard, plopping down on the floor. Percy wasn’t faring any better, the last few weeks having taken their toll on both of them. At the same time, he couldn’t help but feel excited.

They’d actually done it!

It had been about fifteen months since he returned to the Vault using Cassiel’s body, and he’d spent every single second productively. Thankfully, this was the last challenge he’d have to clear for a very long time. He was tempted to start browsing through the Blue rewards right away, though there was something else he had to think about first.

‘Over three hundred thousand credits… This is getting ridiculous.’

This was an entire order of magnitude more than he’d intended to earn during this trip. He hadn’t expected that the seal-crafting books would have forced him to possess Gabe and Tlaloc and attempt the Green or Blue challenges, nor that his friend would have grown so capable since their last collaboration.

Needless to say, Percy was struggling to find things to buy. He could still burn through his entire balance in an hour if he really wanted, but it would have to be mostly on junk. There weren’t that many resources left that would greatly help him or his people.

This was the kind of wealth that even Blue residents of the Vault had a hard time amassing. Even if they did, they had to be either Green-borns or extremely talented Yellow-borns to even reach that grade, meaning that Metatron would have already started pampering them at that point.

Since they wouldn't be concerned with their survival and the titan wouldn't spare any expense to strengthen them, it was mostly the bonus rewards that enticed them to keep going. There simply weren't that many things that required such ridiculous amounts of credits.

'Alright. I suppose I don't have to spend everything just for the sake of it. I'll throw bunch on additional runecrafting books or exotic spells and hold onto the rest in case I come up with something during my next visit.'

Either way, there wasn't much left to do during this trip. He and Gabe just had to browse through the Blue rewards, pick what they wanted and trade their affinity-changing treasures if they found one with enough uses left.

After that, Percy would finally ask Metatron what he wanted to talk about, before bidding the artificial world farewell for what he hoped would be a very long time…

Chapter 562: Zelesian beads

The affinities that Gabe was going to add to his cores were obviously up to him, but the man still opted to discuss his options openly with Percy: partly to get a second opinion, and partly because they were planning to trade treasures afterwards.

All things considered, it was a rather straightforward choice. Gabe already possessed fire and air, and Percy was hopefully going to give him lightning, leaving only water and earth as viable elements for his other core.

Strictly speaking, there was no such thing as a bad composite affinity. Even if there was, Gabe's final mana type would grant him three new fusions: not just one: covering all bases, so it wasn't like there was any downright incorrect option. However, Percy and Gabe still seemed to agree that water was suboptimal given their circumstances.

Gabe already possessed a blessing of heat, so certain combinations just wouldn't mesh well with his current arsenal. For instance, an ice affinity was diametrically opposed to his innate gift and might waste his potential.

That was not to say that it couldn't work, of course. He could use ice mana to protect himself from his hottest spells, allowing him to unleash even more devastating attacks. Even so, earth just sounded more suitable. Besides, they needed an affinity that Elaine could also use for the exchange to make sense.

'Okay. I think I'll add lightning to my fire core and earth to my air core,' Gabe said after taking everything into consideration.

That would make superheated plasma and dust his default affinities, while light, lava, sound and metal would still be accessible after going through some additional hoops. The alternative would have been to prioritize lava and sound, but plasma was a faster and more destructive element that would hopefully synergize even better with the blessing.

As a bonus, introducing an earth affinity to his second core would allow him to borrow one of Metatron's rings in the future to obtain another blessing: something that wouldn't be possible if he swapped the elements around.

'Sounds good.' Percy shrugged. 'Let's see what's actually available in the reward pool first. I don't know about the Vault, but finding what I wanted wasn't easy on Thess'kala,' he cautioned.

Affinity-changing treasures came in all shapes and sizes, whether his friend was aware or not. One that lasted longer typically couldn't be used on too many people, and vice versa. It would all depend on what resources Metatron and his subordinates had access to, as well as what they were willing to offer to their Blues.

Thankfully, browsing through their options only took a few seconds, since they already had a pretty clear idea of what they wanted. Even better, they managed to find an earth-granting treasure with as many as four uses left: more than the prizes in the early rounds of the Thess'kalan tournament.

'No, wait. That's not quite right,' Percy reminded himself.

He'd actually seen treasures that could be used on more people there. The issue was that he'd specifically looked for one that would last for years. Anything short of that would have expired before he passed it to all its recipients.

Sure enough, the object that Gabe had picked only had around three hundred thousand rits left: or a few days on Remior. Moreover, this was a limit that not even time dilation could extend, if Hermes was to be believed.

Percy had no idea how long its original duration had been: right after being harvested from the dead god's internal world: nor did he know how often the Vault's deities managed to bring new treasures like this to the artificial world. It couldn't be too infrequent, considering that they'd found one just when they needed it.

The good news was that a few days were plenty this time, as he and Gabe already had everything ready to promptly deliver the exotic resource to the right people.

'Are you absolutely sure you're happy with it?' Percy asked. 'There's no going back once you change your affinities.'

"I'll claim the Crumbling Stone," Gabe said out loud, answering his guest's question indirectly.

"Choice confirmed. Delivering in 18 rits."

'Alright. I'll make the necessary arrangements,' Percy replied, before turning to his other connections. 'Send another clone to the Vault,' he told his main body who had been holding onto a free cord for precisely this reason. 'Ask the others if they want an earth affinity and prepare somebody for it,' he sent to the Blue clone.

Two days later, Gabe had two composite cores, Tlaloc had earth in one of them, Leo had upgraded his lightning affinity to metal, and Elaine was presumably also about to receive a mud affinity.

Percy still had several people he wanted to help: both in the Vault and on Remior: but they would probably have to wait until his next visit to the artificial world. Tlaloc's new mana type would hopefully strengthen him enough to qualify for some bonus rewards of his own by then. Considering that he

would need three more to fully upgrade his cores, Percy should end up with plenty of spare charges for everyone else.

He honestly felt that it was a bit of a waste for his friend to not hold out for a rare affinity though. Gabe and many of the others couldn't help it, as they already had common elements in their cores, but the Huehuan's organs had been blank slates by default, waiting to be filled up.

As inconvenient as his pure affinities had been so far, they also represented a rather unique opportunity. Unfortunately, the Vault didn't seem to have any rare affinity-granting treasures either: not even in the White or Clear pools, and Tlaloc had insisted that he didn't mind.

Changing both affinities would also mean having to re-learn the Dance of the Savage Gods, but it wasn't like he could use the spell under Metatron's watchful gaze anyway.

With Gabe's reward out of the way, it was Percy's turn.

Having no interest in changing his own affinity, he took his sweet time going through his options. Unlike his lukewarm results with the Green list, it didn't take him very long to find something genuinely exciting. He still searched through the rest just to be thorough, but his mind was practically made up already, so he eventually circled back to the strange objects that had captured his attention.

"Cube, I want the Zelesian beads. All three."

"Choice confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 185743. Delivery in 18 rits."

Spending a hundred and twenty thousand credits on top of his Blue reward wasn't pleasant, though he didn't regret his purchase. The items he had selected were special in that his bonus reward could only buy him the first of the three beads, with the option to add the rest in for sixty thousand each.

Having not seen any other items like that, he'd thought that this was another one of Metatron's schemes to get him to spend his hard-earned credits. However, the more information he'd requested about the beads, the surer he'd grown that this was actually a bargain.

‘These things could easily sell for a single Blue reward each. The fact that I was even given the option to buy the rest with credits is crazy…’

The hole opened by his foot with a familiar burst of steam, revealing three transparent marbles. Percy would have thought that they were made of glass if he didn’t know any better. Picking them up and squeezing them, he noticed how soft they actually were, feeling closer to rubber.

Their function was simple enough, though that didn’t make it any less shocking: they could directly store a person’s willpower!

Normally, it was possible to do that indirectly, since a mage’s core automatically attached willpower to their mana. Separating the two was one of the best ways for a Green to develop a Nascent domain, after all, though the amount of willpower extracted that way was pitiful.

To Percy’s knowledge: and according to the system, to the entire Vault’s knowledge: these beads were the only method in the universe to directly store large amounts of pure willpower. In other words, the tiny spheres resting in Gabe’s palm were the closest things to willpower cores in existence!

Even more impressive was the fact that it was impossible to obtain more beads. Apparently, they had been produced by an unprecedented bloodline on a now-destroyed lesser spring: Zelesis. Sadly, the people responsible for this unique treasure had gone extinct.

Percy had no idea if there were any more out there, but these three were all that the Vault currently had: meaning that he could have very well just become the only person in the cosmos capable of storing away his willpower.

That said, it was no accident that Metatron had been willing to part with the miraculous objects. They simply weren’t very useful to gods, as they had already converted their domains into internal worlds, which the transparent marbles were incompatible with.

Even for mortals at Blue or higher, the beads wouldn’t help much, as they had several drawbacks. Their capacity was apparently greatly limited and filling them up was quite inefficient. The stored domain would last about three thousand rits: or an hour: but it would take a hundred times as long to recharge each of them.

Using thicker willpower: such as a demigod's domain instead of a Blue's: wouldn't charge them faster or make them last longer, but it would strengthen the resulting domain accordingly.

Had it been just that, it wouldn't be as big of an issue. Spending four days was ultimately a small price to pay to prepare such a powerful secret weapon.

The problem was that the process of storing and unleashing the domain altered many of its properties, essentially turning the embedded willpower stiff, foreign and borderline unresponsive. It could no longer be wielded with the same finesse as a regular domain, even by its owner.

If a person's willpower could be likened to an extra limb, the domain released from the beads was more like a wooden prosthetic.

All things considered, these fake domains weren't as useful in the hands of the mages who had produced them. Their best application was for a powerful mage to fill them up and pass them to a younger member of their family. Even then, the willpower would hinder friend and foe indiscriminately, turning it into more of an environmental hazard than a true weapon.

At least, it could suppress or dispel a weaker domain, somewhat evening out the playing field between a Green and a Blue, or disrupting an otherwise powerful opponent at an inopportune moment.

'Well, these limitations don't entirely apply to me,' Percy thought with a grin.

His plan was naturally to fuel and use the beads by himself. Rather than an elder passing the objects to their weaker relatives, it would be Percy's main body bestowing them to his clones.

The resulting domains would still be significantly harder to manipulate than if the clones had personally produced them, but he guessed that he would be able to exert at least some control over his own willpower.

In someone else's hands, the beads could only realistically be used as a last-ditch effort to escape from an insurmountable opponent and protect their lives. In Percy's, they would potentially open many more doors.

If there was one downside, it was that the beads were ultimately just external objects. Percy generally prioritized getting his hands on knowledge or other means of permanently increasing his strength over fancy equipment. However, he was more than happy to make an exception this time, for several reasons.

Firstly, unlike the enchanted weapons he had seen on Thess'kala, these beads didn't have an expiration date, nor did he see himself outgrowing them anytime soon. In theory, their strength should continue to scale with his own all the way to the Clear grade, the objects only losing their effectiveness after he became a god.

Secondly, they appeared to synergize extremely well with his domain and bloodline. He even had three of the magical marbles in total, allowing him to pass one to each of his current clones. Overall, he was certain that his investment would pay for itself many times over in due time.

Finally, he wasn't one to pass on such unique treasures. Much like the extra set of ritual ingredients that he had recently purchased, he was looking forward to studying the beads in the future.

Satisfied with his new toys, he stored them in his seal for now.

This had been a long and fruitful trip, but it was almost at its end. The only things left were the last batch of books that he wanted to buy, and his final meeting with the titan.

Chapter 563: Metatron's proposition

Percy stood before the purple pentapus once again, this time wearing Gabe's flesh. Depending on what the titan wanted from him, this meeting would either mark the end of this trip to the Vault, or its extension.

"You've been quite busy lately. I trust that you've had a fruitful time in my world?" Metatron asked, a meaningful grin finding its way into his eyes.

There were many fitting answers for that question, from Percy expressing his displeasure at constantly being spied upon, to pointing out that Metatron had benefited just as much, his army of two-cored test subjects having only grown larger and stronger thanks to Percy.

“Indeed. Thank you for everything you’ve given me,” he ultimately said, opting to stick with respectful gratitude for now, seeing no reason to rub the pentapus’s suction cups the wrong way.

Besides, he genuinely meant it. As cruel as Metatron was to the Vault’s residents, Percy couldn’t deny how much he had earned: not just during his latest visit, but ever since his first meeting with his current host. Pretending otherwise would be hypocritical.

His balance was down to a hundred and thirty thousand credits after spending most of his earnings. Even so, he felt wealthier than ever before, itching to bring the latest batch of rewards back to his main body.

“I’m glad to hear it, though I hope that your recent gains haven’t quelled your appetite. After all, they aren’t even worth mentioning compared to the opportunity that lies before us,” the god said.

Percy was intrigued, though he tried to not let it show too much on his borrowed face.

“If you just want to sell my ticket to the highest bidder and split the profits, you can cut through the chase. It’s not like I have a better use for it,” he tentatively offered.

Metatron chuckled. “Sell it? And miss out on some of the greatest prizes in existence? What a terrible waste that would be…”

Percy didn’t disagree with the god’s assessment, but what was the alternative?

“Surely, you’re not planning to infiltrate the void tournament…?”

He wasn’t looking down on the Vault or Metatron, but there was no denying the colossal gap between the artificial world: which didn’t even qualify as a true greater spring: and one of the top factions in the universe: matched only by the Moirai and Sixiang.

Yet the titan didn’t seem fazed by his doubts in the slightest.

“Not me,” he said, performing a gesture akin to a shrug. “It would be remiss of me to cut you out after all the trouble that you’ve gone through to open this rare door for us. Normally, this is the kind of collaboration that I would avoid bringing up until you officially join me, but you’ve already contributed plenty to this mission. Tell me, how would you feel about participating in another tournament? A much more competitive one?”

Gabe’s features twisted into a strange expression as Percy regarded the god carefully. “Seriously? How would this even work? The tickets are only awarded to members of the Void Hand. You can’t expect them to let an outsider enter with a stolen ticket.”

“Naturally not. Which is why we’ll be sending its legitimate owner: the very person who won it fairly and squarely. Well… as far as they can tell…”

Percy frowned, not pleased with Metatron’s insinuation. He didn’t want to even look at his back-stabbing former host, let alone possess him again. However, that wasn’t even the biggest issue with the titan’s plan.

“I’m still not seeing it. For argument’s sake, let’s say that I can work with Kassorith without throwing up and that we can make him powerful enough to fight people two grades above his own. How are we going to explain his sudden return?”

The treacherous Blue had been at the height of his fame right after winning the regional tournament, only to vanish off the face of Thess’kala for years. To make matters worse, his fellow sect members were bound to have found half of Syrreneth’s mutilated body right where Percy had left it.

“None of these obstacles are insurmountable. I admit that I’ve yet to flesh out the details, but we already have all the key components to make it happen: the participant, the ticket, and the escort,” Metatron explained.

“The escort?”

Metatron nodded. “The big guys with the horns that I’m sure you’ve seen around the Vault. Where do you think they’re from?”

Percy gasped, having not expected that. “The Void Hand?”

The glint in the titan’s eyes grew a touch sharper. “Indeed. They’re from Tauros: another lesser member of the alliance, not that different from Thess’kala. A few of their gods defected to the Vault a long time ago. I’ll have one of them bring you there.”

“This still doesn’t add up…” Percy protested, creasing his host’s forehead. “Wouldn’t the tournament’s organizers know the faces of the gods who have betrayed them?”

“That’s the best part, actually,” the titan said. “The Void Hand doesn’t even know that they’ve been betrayed. The top factions spy on each other all the time, and the Vault is no different. Many of my subordinates pretend to work for their worlds: at least those that haven’t been discovered and ousted yet: while secretly feeding me information. Going through with this will probably compromise one of them, but it’s a small price to pay.”

“But why would a god from Tauros escort a Thess’kalan mortal?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’m sure your friend has mentioned that the Void Hand isn’t very united. There is internal strife in every major faction, especially a grand alliance of that size,” Metatron replied.

“Doesn’t that make it even less likely for members of different species to work together?”

The titan shook his head. “Internal strife brings about chaos, and chaos is something that we can easily exploit. The Void Hand’s members regularly bribe, kidnap or even assassinate promising talents from one another. It shouldn’t be too difficult to come up with a story that explains the Blue’s defection and the Violet’s death. Like I said, the exact plan isn’t finalized yet, but I’m sure I’ll come up with something airtight by the time we’re ready.”

“How do you know that your gods are loyal to you?” Percy asked, seeing a potential flaw in the titan’s assumptions. “Maybe you’re the one being spied upon.”

He didn't doubt the deity's craftiness or competence, but this was too serious a matter to dive head-first into without any assurances. If things went south, Percy could easily lose a clone: at best. At worst, he might end up provoking some terrible enemies.

Luckily, Metatron didn't appear to take offense at his question.

"Caution is not a bad trait, Percy, but you're a few eras too young to be sticking your nose into my affairs. If you must know, I hold so much leverage over their heads that none of them would dare double-cross me. I've also offered them resources that their home worlds can simply not provide. Just leave the details of the operation to me. I only need an answer from you."

"Alright. That settles the 'how', but not the 'why'," Percy said. "Are we doing all of this just to earn a few first-generation leaves?"

"Leaves?" Metatron gave him an odd look, scratching his head with a tentacle as he seemingly considered what Percy meant. "Ah, right. I almost forgot that you're searching for ways to extend your lifespan. I thought that you would have given up on becoming a god by now. Then again, that would have only made your finite time even more valuable."

Percy ignored the titan's jab, latching onto something else. "What, do they give the winners anything better than the leaves?"

Metatron examined him once more, his expression shifting to disbelief this time. "Kassorith didn't tell you… I suppose that the topic didn't come up, since you avoided mentioning his new core…"

"Tell me what? What topic?"

The titan sighed. "To answer your previous question first, I wouldn't mind getting a couple of leaves to study if you can bring me some. I'll even trade you something valuable for them. However, that isn't our goal. I'm after the tournament's main prize. Luckily, you don't have to win the whole thing to earn it. If I'm not mistaken, reaching the quarterfinals should suffice."

Percy already had plenty of questions, but he allowed the titan to continue.

“Long story short, there are only two Decrees in existence capable of granting a second core to a mortal. I obviously don’t have to tell you about the better of the pair, but there is only one way to get your hands on its cheaper imitation: through this very event.”

Gabe’s mouth dried up. Percy wasn’t sure whether that was his doing or his host’s: who was naturally following the conversation: but this was the kind of prize that would get everyone’s blood boiling. Oblivious to his thoughts, the god spoke again.

“It’s called the Void Decree.”

Chapter 564: Collaborative

Percy stared at Metatron wide-eyed as he mulled over the revelation.

It was Gabe, his current host, who had once introduced him to the very concept of Decrees and even mentioned that some powerful faction had managed to recreate the Moirais’, though the transparent man had neglected to mention that this mysterious group was none other than the Void Hand.

Then again, Percy hadn’t known enough at the time about this grand alliance, so the information wouldn’t have meant much to him. Perhaps, he should have made the connection after Kassorith told him about his people and their allies, however. After all, the Void Hand was one of the few factions that could rival the Moirai in the first place: not to mention that it had been established precisely to oppose them. Who else would have dared to even attempt such a feat?

“How come the Vault’s residents know so much about such topics?” he couldn’t help but ask. “Shouldn’t you have locked the information behind credits?”

“There are all sorts of factors that have to be taken into account when it comes to the young ones’ education,” Metatron said, before elaborating. “Some techniques: like Circulation: are taught early and for free, as they can have a holistic impact on the mortals’ strength. Others: such as specific spells or obscure techniques: are best placed in the reward pools to motivate them to try harder in their challenges. The same goes for knowledge.”

It didn’t take Percy long to understand what the god meant. He’d already learned that certain topics: like demonic infestations or alchemy: that were of no concern to those at the bottom of the Colour realm, could only be researched by the curious, and for a hefty price.

However, there were also titbits of information about the broader cosmos that could genuinely inspire children to strive toward greater heights. What better way to get a young person to practice magic, than to introduce them early to some of its greatest marvels?

“So what, do you spend your days stressing over what to teach or not to teach the children?” Percy asked.

“As if!” the god chuckled, an amused glint finding its way into his eyes. “It’s all done automatically by the system. It constantly monitors how various moves affect each generation’s performance in the challenges and dynamically adjusts the academic curriculum, the reward pools and the pricing of our resources.”

The titan’s explanation once again gave Percy the urge to throw up. His system was downright twisted: if chillingly practical. Percy couldn’t deny that it worked, nor that even Remior’s deities had probably chosen to spread rumours about groups like the Moirai or the divine beasts to inspire the populace in a rather similar manner. Still, the idea of this being done by some uncaring machine that constantly collected data and decided what to share or not to share with a bunch of oblivious children rubbed him the wrong way.

Alas, he had long accepted that he wasn’t powerful enough to change the artificial world for the better. Not yet, at least. Deciding to spend his time more productively, he asked something else that had been gnawing at him.

“Gabe mentioned that the Void Decree is riddled with flaws. Why would you even want it? Why would anyone?”

Metatron shook his head. “Your friend was correct, but ‘flawed’ doesn’t mean that it doesn’t work. The Void Hand has produced several two-cored champions over the centuries. The exact shortcomings of the Decree are only known to its recipients and the top brass of the alliance. Unfortunately, my subordinates aren’t privy to them, though at least one is not difficult to guess.”

“It can only be passed to one person at a time. Maybe a handful at most,” Percy speculated.

“Indeed. If that hadn’t been the case, they would disseminate it to everyone, like the Moirai do. There would be no need to stick with just the top-performers of their tournaments.”

Percy nodded grimly. This was just one of the Decree’s drawbacks, but it was already a major problem for the Void Hand. The Moirai probably produced hundreds of thousands: if not millions: of two-cored mortals every year, while the alliance was limited to just a tiny fraction of that.

“It’s not as big of an issue as you may think,” Metatron said, clearly guessing what he was thinking. “A faction’s strength is determined by their most powerful gods, so granting a second core to the most talented Whites and demigods is infinitely more important than giving one to a random low-born. The Void Tournament is an extremely effective way to eliminate this particular shortcoming almost entirely,” he explained, rhythmically tapping one of his tentacles against the smooth, metallic floor.

“What about the other drawbacks then?” Percy pressed, his curiosity getting the better of him. “You said that they’re kept secret, but I’m sure that you have some thoughts.”

Metatron performed the closest gesture to a shrug that he was physically capable of.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if forming the second core requires some kind of sacrifice. In fact, it wouldn’t be so different from the broken version of the Moirais’ Decree that you pass to your hosts, which requires a lot of life mana to repair. Except, in the Void Decree’s case, this is likely the default. That said, I don’t think this is a huge problem either.”

“How so?”

“Well, whatever the cost is, it’s clearly something that they can stomach, otherwise they wouldn’t have dared to inflict it upon so many of their most promising talents.”

Listening to all the hoops that the Void Hand’s gods had gone through to merely follow in the Moirais’ footsteps, Percy couldn’t help but wonder about something else.

“What makes the Moirais’ Decree so difficult to replicate? I would have thought that once a titan shows that a certain Decree is possible, it would only be a matter of time before others copy them,” he asked, shifting slightly.

The titan sighed. “It’s not that simple. Decrees aren’t like regular spells: there’s more to them than mere power or complexity. To cast magic that can exist independently of its owner involves overriding the very rules of the universe: at least locally and subtly. Some Decrees: such as the one granting bloodlines: have indeed been successfully stolen and spread widely, while others: like Svarog’s: have never been deciphered or recreated. But that’s not all. The Moirais’ and Void Decrees involve an additional layer of difficulty.”

Percy creased his borrowed brow, prompting the god to elaborate. “Haven’t you noticed something special about how Decrees are named?”

Percy nodded. It would have been strange if he hadn’t. Unlike regular spells that were granted all sorts of arbitrary names that had to do with their function or their creator’s intentions, Decrees appeared to follow a very strict convention: they were always named after the titan who had cast them.

Or, well… almost always.

Now that the titan had brought this up, Percy instantly noticed a couple of exceptions.

“I see that you’ve pieced it together,” Metatron said with a nod. “Titans aren’t obligated to slap their name onto their Decree, but it’s not surprising that we all do. Who would willingly forsake the opportunity to permanently carve our name into the very fabric of the cosmos: in a form that can potentially persist even if we perish? However, there are two major cases when a Decree would naturally be called something else.”

“If it’s not your first Decree,” Percy guessed one.

“Indeed,” Metatron confirmed. “Titans that have produced multiple Decrees are rare. They do exist, but casting a Decree requires as much luck as it does talent, power and persistence. Just because you succeeded once, it doesn’t mean that you can do so again. Regardless, the second category of uniquely-named Decrees is far more daunting.”

“Collaborative Decrees?” Percy asked.

This time, he was less sure of his guess, even though it made sense. The Moirais' and Void Decrees had clearly been named after the factions: not the individual titans: who had birthed them. Percy could be wrong, but he felt that it would be presumptuous of any single god to describe their own spell using the name of their people.

"Correct," the titan said, a trace of melancholy showing in his expression. "Once again, I must stress how different Decrees are from the cheap parlour tricks that you are used to. Having multiple gods work together to cast one is not just difficult: it's normally impossible. It takes some pretty special circumstances to even attempt it, and even then, the odds of success are minuscule."

"What circumstances are those?"

"It varies from case to case, and there are barely a handful of instances of collaborative Decrees in the universe to learn from anyway, so it's not easy to draw any conclusions. A powerful connection between the titans seems to be the key, but even then, it's only enough to turn the impossible into extremely difficult. I don't think we'll see another case like the Moirai sisters anytime soon."

"Sisters?"

Metatron nodded. "Not just sisters, but identical triplets: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. They were born in a clan with an empathic bloodline that allowed their members to share their thoughts and emotions. It wasn't that powerful originally, but the triplets experienced a far stronger bond with one another than their relatives."

Percy frowned. "That doesn't sound so rare: relatively speaking."

Bloodlines like that were quite common, in fact. Hell, even if he ignored his own bond with his familiars, there was also Femel's family on Remior, among others. Finding triplets with a bloodline like that who all managed to become gods was obviously a tall order, but only from the perspective of a single planet. Things changed if he looked at it from a cosmic perspective.

On a lesser spring, it would be impossible, of course. A family with the correct bloodline could theoretically produce a group of triplets eventually, but they wouldn't even stand a chance of becoming gods if they weren't Green-borns. Given that only one emerged in thousands, the odds of a set of triplets all being born with a Green core was astronomically low.

However, this wouldn't be a problem for a faction that was already a greater spring. Producing Yellow-born triplets in the correct clan would still take several attempts, but it was bound to happen somewhere, eventually. All three of them successfully becoming gods: and even titans: was many times harder, but Percy could still see it happening. Especially if all the major players deliberately worked toward that result for countless eons.

"You're not wrong, but what if I told you that they all needed to have a specific rare affinity as well? And not even the same one, so it's impossible for all three to have inherited it from their parents," Metatron said. "In their case, I believe that only Clotho was born with a life affinity, while the others had originally possessed pure cores. After the Moirai leaders realized the triplets' potential, they granted mind and soul affinities to Lachesis and Atropos. The gamble clearly paid off big time for them, but good luck to any other world trying to get all the stars to align again."

Percy swallowed hard, finally realizing how many coincidences: both small and big: had been involved in the creation of one of his most prized Decrees. The top factions could clearly get their hands on rare affinity-granting treasures every now and then, and pure affinities were also all over the place, but getting triplets that had at least Yellow cores, pure affinities, the correct bloodline, and the talent to become titans all in one go?

Yeah…

After this little chat, he was never going to look at his second core the same way.

"Then what about the Void Hand? Clearly, they got at least somewhat close."

"'Somewhat' does a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence," Metatron said. "They managed to get three regular siblings with a similar bloodline, though their bond was weaker and their affinities not a perfect match to the Moirais' sisters. If I'm not mistaken, they got only two of the rare affinities right, while the last one had some unrelated composite affinity that probably got in the way more than it helped. They also had dozens of other gods pitching in indirectly, with various bloodlines and other means. The Void Hand still had to go through hundreds of iterations and lots of dead test subjects before coming up with something even remotely viable."

Percy's face twisted into a grimace the more the titan spoke.

“Then I still don’t get why you would be interested in this weird patchwork of magic. It sounds like a vastly inferior version of the Moirais’ Decree, and it’s not like you can spread it more easily. Wouldn’t it just be me or Kassorith getting it? And we both already have a second core. Unless the Decrees stack…”

His voice trailed off as a spark of an uncertain emotion lit up in the god’s eyes, fanning the flame of Percy’s suspicions. If he was right about this, then it was no wonder that the titan wanted him to claim the Decree: rather than buying the ticket off him to produce his own champion.

“Well, what do you think, Percy?” the pentapus asked, his voice tinged with greed. “Are you interested in giving me a bunch of three-cored test subjects?”

Chapter 565: Void Decree

“Is it even possible to stack the Decrees?” Percy asked, though he struggled to suppress his greed.

“How should I know?” Metatron spat, lifting a pair of tentacles up helplessly. “Nobody has ever attempted this before: for obvious reasons.”

Percy nodded. The Void Hand would never allow the Moirai: their most hated enemies: to so much as step foot in the tournament, let alone claim its ultimate prize. This was uncharted territory.

“But I already have a second core in my abdomen. Wouldn’t the new Decree attempt to plant one there, only to fail?” he asked in protest.

“It all depends on how the Decree actually works,” Metatron replied. “I’ve never seen it in action, but I have carefully observed what happens to your hosts when you pass them the Moirais’ Decree, so I think there’s a chance.”

“Care to spell it out for me?”

Percy knew that he’d already grilled the titan a lot more than usual today, though Metatron had opted to humour him instead of telling him to buzz off: as he would have probably done under different circumstances. Clearly, the god wanted him to agree to this mission. He must’ve also realized that there

was no way that Percy would jump into something this dangerous without having his questions answered.

“The Decree doesn’t target your abdomen directly: it only ends up there. You have to remember that not every living being in the universe even has the same body structure as you. Take me for example: I have nothing remotely similar to an abdomen, but I’m pretty sure that you could have still granted a new core to a mortal of my species if they hadn’t gone extinct,” Metatron explained.

“Okay. But every race with a similar body structure as the Moirai that I’ve ever possessed always had their new cores take root in the same spot. Surely it can’t be a complete coincidence,” Percy pointed out.

This even included birds and insects like Micky and Nephthys.

“It’s not,” Metatron said, before elaborating. “The Decree looks for a natural mana centre: a spot where your channels would be densest. Of course, you don’t actually develop those mana channels until after you awaken the core, but that’s irrelevant. The perfect locations are pretty much universal. I suppose you haven’t noticed that your Decree always tries to plant the seed in your sternum first. It only moves to the next best spot after finding the first one occupied,” he explained, tapping the tip of his tentacle on Gabe’s abdomen, pointing to the light brown dust core pulsating beneath the man’s transparent skin.

Percy’s eyes widened. As a matter of fact, he hadn’t known that. This probably happened within fractions of a second of him possessing a new host. By the time he was done convening with them and stitching up their spectral wounds, the Moirais’ Decree had likely already taken root.

What Metatron hoped for was clearly that the Void Decree would also attempt to plant a new core in his sternum first, move to his abdomen after failing, only to be forced to relocate a second time to the next suitable body part.

Percy had no idea where that would be for a human, but that was beside the point. If this worked, he would become the universe’s first three-cored mage!

If the stars aligned, he might even acquire the ability to pass both Decrees to his future hosts, which was clearly what the god was betting on. If that happened, Remior and the Vault would instantly gain the means to surpass both the Moirai and the Void Hand: in due time!

“You’re making a lot of assumptions though, aren’t you?” Percy couldn’t help but point out. “If it worked like you claim, then wouldn’t the Moirai or the Void Hand have tried to stack their own Decrees multiple times?”

“I’m sure that they have, and that it didn’t work, otherwise we would have long seen some pretty monstrous mortals with multiple cores,” Metatron admitted. “However, even two seemingly overlapping Decrees can approach a problem in completely different ways. Just because the Decrees don’t stack with themselves, it doesn’t mean that they are incompatible with one another. We can’t know for sure until someone tests this.”

“What if it kills me? Or if we get found out by the tournament’s organizers? Hell, even if it all goes smoothly, it might just be Kassorith who gets the new core, or I might also obtain one but not the ability to pass it to other people.”

Obviously, the Blue Thess’kalan was also one of Metatron’s assets at the moment, so the titan wouldn’t end up entirely empty-handed in that case. However, Percy doubted that the titan would be satisfied with just that, otherwise he could have had Kassorith enter the tournament by himself.

In fact, he could have even had one of the Vault’s natives participate in the regional tournament of their home world a long time ago: had he been interested in a single two-cored specimen.

Going to such lengths just to empower one mortal clearly wasn’t worth his time. The mission would only truly succeed from the god’s perspective if the new Decree could spread as easily as the other one, giving him an endless supply of three-cored specimens.

“It’s as you say,” Metatron replied, not denying any of Percy’s concerns. “I still think that it’s worth a shot. Keep in mind that you’re not going to be the only one invested heavily in the mission. I fully expect my spy’s cover to be blown: if not immediately, then certainly within a few years of your participation. I’m still willing to pay the price, and you should be too. In this world we live in, there is no reward without risk. Besides, weren’t you looking for ways to extend your lifespan more than any other Red-born in the universe? Becoming the first three-cored mage sounds to me like the kind of opportunity that you can’t afford to miss out on.”

Percy frowned.

Had this been a few years ago, he would have indeed jumped excitedly at the titan's offer. However, he now had a good reason to believe that he would be able to solve his lifespan problems with his artificial advancement and the royal jelly: on top of the Aurora Dew and the second-generation leaf that he had already consumed.

Undertaking such a risky mission was unwise. A lot could go wrong, and he didn't even need it. Of course, Metatron didn't know about most of that, though Percy was hesitant to agree to the titan's proposal just to trick him.

'No, I'm thinking about this all wrong…' he corrected himself.

Complacent mortals didn't become gods.

Countless Green-borns across the universe comfortably reached the Clear grade with dozens of thousands of years to spare, only to fail in the end. Percy needed every second of lifespan that he could get his hands on to maximize his odds. If he played his cards well, he would not only get a new core, but also a first-generation leaf from the tournament.

Moreover, his lifespan wasn't the only concern.

Even if he could guarantee his ascension to divinity with his current means, why would he stop aiming higher? His unreasonable ambition had brought him this far, hadn't it? Was he satisfied with merely becoming another deity among millions?

Zoris had once told him that the essence of divinity was always striving for the impossible: a mentality that resonated with Percy deeply. So what if he had solved his lifespan problem?

The universe had made things harder for him from the start by cursing him with a Red core, but it had also provided him with a unique opportunity to make up for his shortcomings and climb higher than anyone before him: his bloodline.

If he stopped trying the moment he crossed the tipping point, wouldn't he be squandering his greatest gift?

“Alright,” Percy reluctantly spat after thinking it over for a while. “I make no promises, but I’m willing to at least entertain your proposal. I’ll need to hear a very detailed plan that deals with all the potential pitfalls before I go through with it though. I’ll also need a lot of time to prepare.”

There were naturally several problems to solve before they even attempted the mission. Kassorith had demonstrated many suspicious abilities in the previous tournament: the worst being the Vault’s magiscript.

Percy and his host hadn’t been called out at the time, but news of their activities could have easily reached the ears of the alliance since then. Even if they hadn’t, the organizers of the void tournament were bound to be more knowledgeable than the Thess’kalans.

Consequently, on top of coming up with a good excuse for why Kassorith would be escorted by a god from Tauros instead of one of his own people, they would need an explanation for everything else.

Furthermore, the Blue’s previous strength wouldn’t cut it. Percy and Kassorith had barely eked out a victory last time, and the void tournament’s standards were much higher. They couldn’t reveal Circulation or his second core either: for obvious reasons.

“Very well. It’s not like we’re in a rush,” Metatron agreed. “The tournament takes place frequently, the Decree is always offered to the top contestants, and your ticket can be used whenever you want. I’ll perfect our cover story and do my best to prepare Kassorith before your next visit. I suggest that you also put some thought into strengthening your host, however. There’s a limit to what I can do, and you’ll be the one fighting alongside him.”

Percy nodded. This arrangement worked for him as well. He’d already earned too much during this trip, so his priority was to return to Remior and spend the next few years digesting his gains. The infiltration would still probably have to happen before he advanced: be it naturally or artificially: as he didn’t want to show up in the Vault with Green cores centuries sooner than expected. However, he still had some time before that happened to come up with a few additional tricks.

Before he left the artificial world, the divine pentapus passed a black ring to Gabe: one that was intended for the jellyfish-person himself, not his spectral guest. To Percy’s shock, the unassuming artifact was one of the Vault’s four Rings of Sacrilege: the one containing an earth-affinity blessing. Unlike Zoris’s eternal prison, this one didn’t seem to possess a will of its own.

Percy was as surprised by the god's unexpected generosity as he was tempted to snatch the magical object and vanish from the Vault forever, though he probably should have been neither.

Gabe was swiftly becoming quite a powerhouse. He'd recently completed combat challenges of a difficulty roughly two whole grades above his own: albeit with Percy's help. Once he mastered his new composite affinities and acquired a second blessing, he would become one of the Vault's most talented mortals, so it wasn't that strange that Metatron had started investing into him directly.

As for stealing the ring from under the titan's gaze?

Yeah… Percy wasn't dumb enough to try. He doubted that he'd even succeed, and there was no point in backstabbing the pentapus right now. Bidding his friends farewell, he filled up his spatial seals with as many books as they could fit, before finally leaving the Vault with all of his clones.

Evidently, he was going to return to the artificial world a lot sooner than he had originally planned, the ambitious mission to infiltrate one of the universe's peak factions filling him with as much dread as it did anticipation.

However, this was ultimately a project for later. Thinking about processing his recent gains, an ethereal grin formed on its non-existent lips as he drifted through the soul plane.

Chapter 566: Using one's time productively

Over a year ago

Percy was sitting cross-legged on the uneven floor of a vast cavern, its walls and ceiling shimmering with crystals and minerals of all shapes and sizes as a flock of colourful motes danced wildly around him.

This had been his not-so-humble abode for a while now: a private room that his familiar and her mother had carved out for him in the depths of their sprawling kingdom, so that he wouldn't have to travel to and from the settlement all the time. Of course, he hadn't really had much of a chance to relax until recently, as he'd been busy giving new cores to the Blue creatures.

He was currently studying the ethereal cords linking him to his clones, noting that they had been unusually calm for the past couple of days.

'Hmmm… I suppose that they've all made it to the Vault by now. Finally…' Percy heaved out a relieved sigh.

The clone tasked with possessing a Yellow host had never returned to Remior, indicating that he had successfully traced the mark to the artificial world on his first attempt. It was great news, as it had proven that Ludwick's Compass could indeed be used for more than what the deceased Saint had envisioned.

Sadly, the Orange and Red clones hadn't been nearly as lucky as their sibling. Finding the illusionary pyre suspended in the middle of nowhere, they had deduced that they'd arrived too late, narrowly missing Metatron's oversized cube as it sped through the infinite darkness. After receiving reports of their failures, Percy had realized that the mindset wasn't without its blind spots when it came to interstellar navigation.

He could have still used the existing cord linking him to the Yellow clone to guide the others or sent more critters to plant new marks before using those to return to the artificial world, but Percy hadn't been overly attached to the idea of possessing natives. The main reason he had bothered the first time around had been to test his mindset: something that was no longer necessary.

In the end, he'd simply decided to send random hosts to the Vault the good old way. It had taken the clones several attempts to find fitting candidates, though it appeared that they had both eventually succeeded.

'It'll be a while before I have news from them. I should find something else to keep myself busy…' he decided.

The elemental body and Archibald had almost reached the Camelot province by now. They could have made it there much faster if they'd flown, but they were bogged down by the army of life clones following Percy's grandfather.

Archibald had slowly replenished their ranks during his stay in the hive, regaining his peak fighting strength in the process. Unfortunately, his mindless minions didn't possess mana or domains, so they

couldn’t fly on their own. Additionally, there was no way that Archibald or Micky could have carried over a hundred grown men by themselves.

Consequently, they’d been forced to travel on foot. Thankfully, the landbound entourage moved quite fast, even their walking pace far exceeding that of a galloping horse.

Regardless, Percy didn’t bother with them, leaving everything regarding his family and friends to his counterpart. It was best to have this side of his mind focus on more productive projects.

Getting up, he left his colourful chamber through the nearest exit, walking through a tunnel that he estimated to be wide enough for the Blue wasps, but not their Queen. Even after all the time he had spent in the underground kingdom, he couldn’t help but marvel at how different it was from all the other places he’d been to.

Percy considered himself a well-travelled man by now, having visited technologically advanced worlds, primitive villages, as well as lesser and greater springs. Hell, he’d even been to a town at the bottom of the ocean, stood atop a spire tall enough to pierce the clouds, and nearly fallen asleep inside the internal world of a slumbering goddess.

Even so, the colossal complex resting beneath the Fungal Spire was one of his most unique destinations to date.

Leaving its mind-boggling size aside, its roughly-dug tunnels looked nothing like the neat corridors that the hands of sapient beings could have constructed. Its chaotic layout resembled a natural, three-dimensional labyrinth more than any other structure that came to mind. During his first few weeks in the hive, Percy had gotten lost multiple times, though he had thankfully grown better at navigating the place since.

His steps echoed through the empty tunnels, crisp ‘tings’ alternating with dull ‘thuds’: depending on where his feet landed: reminding him of how much the depths of the Fungal Spire had changed over the past year. The hive used to be full of buzzing insects of all grades, though its population had greatly shrunk: mostly because of his own actions.

Tens of millions of the weaker bugs had been sacrificed by their monarch just to produce enough green mushrooms to grant new cores to their stronger kin. The rest of the smaller creatures were currently

busy picking up the slack of their deceased siblings, having been sent to the farther reaches of their kingdom to harvest the ambient mana threatening to leak out of its boundaries.

Obviously, there weren't enough of them left to collect every single mote, but that was fine. As long as they prevented the excess from escaping, they could just let the mana density in the middle of the hive slowly build up for later. This was one of the reasons the air around Percy appeared especially bright and colourful today.

Every now and then, he still encountered a lone Drone, Worker or Soldier traveling through the tunnels. On even rarer occasions, one of the creatures proved dumb enough to attack.

The royal wasps couldn't monitor every single one of their subjects, and the weaker ones lacked the intelligence to recognize their honoured guest. Even so, their rude actions barely registered as a nuisance, as Percy didn't have much trouble scaring the poor creatures off with the faintest ripple of his powerful domain.

The Green and Blue wasps hadn't participated in the recent slaughter: at least not in the same way: so there were still plenty in the hive, though Percy didn't encounter any of those either. He'd only passed the Moirais' Decree to the Starry Commanders and Breeders, but he'd taught Hibernation to the Knights too: with the Queen's help: so the creatures were currently busy trying to cut their stamina consumption and increase their nectar output.

Every single day, the humans living in the settlement a few kilometres above his head delivered vast amounts of cyan paste to the underground kingdom, helping the Blue bugs accelerate the advancements of their second cores.

The wasps had yet to reciprocate the favour, as they needed to repopulate their home before sparing any excess nectar for Percy's people. However, it shouldn't be long now.

Percy wasn't in a rush to return to the Alchemists' Guild either, trusting the six elders: Orin had been promoted recently because of him: to take care of everything for now. The senior alchemists had been tasked with expanding the settlement, procuring more secondary ingredients, constructing more labs and living spaces and recruiting new members.

Percy was going to help them improve their brewing yields eventually, but he was more than happy to wait until the elders were done laying the groundwork, so that he could use his own time more efficiently.

Right now, there were more urgent things begging for his attention.

Several tunnels later, he finally entered one of the largest caverns in the hive, finding a colossal wasp standing in the middle. Its glossy carapace was adorned with golden watermarks, looking far healthier than when he had first met her.

A much smaller wasp was standing by her side, this one no larger than a human. Her appearance was strikingly similar to her mother's, except for a deep crimson gem firmly embedded in her carapace, in a spot right above and between her eyes.

The Queen and the Princess both looked rather tired, the beast mana in their bodies flowing far more slowly than usual, though this wasn't a bad thing. They owed their apparent weakness to Hibernation: the spell that they were currently using to conserve their stamina and build up some royal jelly.

Walking up to the Violet creature, Percy placed his hand on one of her pillar-like limbs, using a trickle of phantom mana to connect his soul with hers.

'Shall we get started?' A lethargic voice rang through their connection.

The corners of his lips curved into a faint smile.

'After you, Your Majesty.'

The Queen was going to help him with something that he'd been itching to attempt ever since their first meeting. Sadly, their circumstances hadn't allowed them to embark on this promising quest earlier, but it was better late than never.

Today, Percy was going to incorporate the royal jelly into the Aurora Dew!

Chapter 567: A few doses short

Percy's heart thrummed wildly as the Violet bug leaned forward, opening her mandibles above a shallow impression on the uneven floor.

The sooner he succeeded at upgrading his elixir recipe, the sooner he'd be able to double his cleansing speed, halving the time to his next natural advancement. Ideally, he would have loved to do this the moment he'd learned about the miraculous resource, but the hive's rulers hadn't had any spare royal jelly for him until recently.

Unlike Machaon, Percy had no intention of accelerating his own growth at the creatures' detriment, so he'd patiently waited for the Queen and her daughter's situation to stabilize before requesting their assistance.

A narrow rivulet of thick, amber fluid flowed out of the wasp's cavernous mouth, trickling down the jagged edges of her mandibles to drip into the small hole. The pitiful display was a little anticlimactic, but it couldn't be helped.

The nectar glands of the Starry Wasps only tripled in capacity with every advancement, despite the creatures' overall volume increasing by a factor of twenty-seven, making the organs disproportionately small at the higher grades.

It was unavoidable, because generating enough excess beast mana got harder with every promotion, meaning that the creatures' glands would have been useless if they'd scaled proportionally to their frames.

'This is probably the same reason why mana cores store denser mana but don't grow any larger, no matter how massive the beasts become,' he realized.

The only exception to that rule might exist at the opposite end of the spectrum, where an animal was so small that merely having a Brown core wouldn't cut it: they had to have a smaller organ too for it to fit in their body.

Focusing back on the Queen's secretion, Percy noted that the substance didn't look that different from regular nectar: besides its markedly higher viscidity, more pronounced colour, and greater uniformity.

Examining it with his mutated eyes, he noticed a lack of impurities or grains in its texture: probably the very property that made it twice as effective at core cleansing as its cheaper variant.

'Hopefully, it'll help with brewing too,' he thought, rubbing his hands with anticipation.

The Queen was done a couple of breaths later, having poured a respectable amount of royal jelly into the makeshift basin. In the past, she hadn't been able to produce much even for herself: let alone anyone else: as she'd been forced to keep her body on the verge of starvation, to ensure that she never advanced to White accidentally. This was no longer necessary, since she had found a few ways to limit her stamina consumption should she ever evolve.

Granted, many of those methods could still use some work. Her second core was several grades weaker than her first one, so its contribution was negligible for the time being, even after taking her multifaceted boosting art into account. However, according to her estimates: that she had shared with Percy: she was going to greatly close the gap by the time she turned into Remior's first Starry Empress.

More importantly, Hibernation already allowed her to greatly slow down the flow of beast mana in her body, vastly decreasing her expenditure. Percy knew that it wasn't the most pleasant feeling to always keep that particular spell active, as it left the creatures perpetually tired, but that was ultimately a small price to pay to reduce the strain on their reserves.

'I'm sorry, Percy,' Nephthys's voice echoed in his soul. 'I can spare some royal jelly too, but its quantity would be laughable compared to hers.'

'It's fine,' he replied, shaking his head. 'For now, you should prioritize your own development. I'm sure you'll surpass her in no time.'

Technically, the reincarnated goddess was already producing jelly more efficiently than her mother, since her second core was just a single grade lower than the other one. She was more proficient with Hibernation too, probably due to her experience as a former deity and her Divine Spark mutation constantly filling her with inspiration.

Her composite affinity would give her three additional mana networks to work with as soon as she was done clearing and tempering them, allowing her to easily upgrade the spell into a very potent version of

Regulation. After mastering the Dance and unlocking the next set of mutations, she would probably end up with Consumption or something on par with Micky's Symbel of the Savage Gods.

However, her current output was still low as a flat quantity.

Percy removed his palm from the Queen's foreleg, walking to the tiny magical puddle and kneeling by its edge. The Violet creature helpfully moved her limb closer to him, gently placing the colossal appendage by his side in case he needed to talk to her again.

Dipping his finger in the jelly, he stored all of it in his spatial seal, neatly separating it into multiple empty vials. This was the quickest way to measure exactly how much the oversized monarch had gifted him.

'Twelve hundred and fifteen drops, or just over twelve doses…'

He frowned. Truth be told, this wasn't very surprising: it was precisely how much he would have expected from a Violet wasp after considering that the capacity of their glands tripled with every grade. Unfortunately, twelve doses of unprocessed ingredients weren't even remotely sufficient for their current needs.

The good news was that the creatures could produce more than a single refill per day if they volunteered it: as opposed to having it looted from their remains by the Guild's hunters.

Percy had asked the Queen about this months ago, wondering why her kind hadn't formed a more peaceful collaboration with humanity. The Violet bug had explained that sending a fraction of her descendants to their deaths every single day was her primary way of culling her weaker subordinates to maintain the quality of the hive's members.

As for gathering the relatively small amounts of ambient mana leaking out of the mushrooms or providing the alchemists with nectar: those were just fortunate side-effects. Thanks to Percy's mushrooms offering an alternative use for the dead insects, as well as his own function as the connective tissue between the two species, they hoped to greatly change the dynamics of the Fungal Spire for the better.

Reestablishing his link to the creature, he asked, 'how much do you think you can generate?'

The Queen appeared to consider his question for a few seconds. ‘It won’t be pleasant, but I think I can manage enough jelly to fill up my gland one-and-a-half times pretty consistently, without exhausting myself to death.’

Percy nodded, satisfied with her response. According to her, the wasps atop the giant mushrooms could only manage about twenty to thirty percent more nectar than their glands could naturally contain, depending on the level they were grazing on. Ambient mana was apparently gushing out more aggressively near the top of the Fungal Spire, before slowly drifting down to lower altitudes. This was why the strongest wasps frequented the higher levels.

All of that paled in comparison to the mana density in the very depths of the hive, where the creatures could potentially produce about a hundred and forty percent their capacity per day. Thanks to Hibernation, the Queen could manage a little more than that. Once Nephthys fully mastered her abilities and caught up to her mother’s grade, she should easily reach two hundred percent or more, and the raw quantity would continue to grow as she advanced to White or Clear.

Percy had no idea what exactly would happen to his familiar’s body should she ever attain divinity again, but he guessed that she would produce a lot of royal jelly.

‘There’s something I never quite understood,’ Percy said, thinking back to his days of hunting Workers and Soldiers atop the mushrooms.

‘Go on.’

‘Every gland I ever harvested was full of nectar. Shouldn’t there be some variance? After all, I’m sure I would have caught a few of the bugs at a bad moment: before they had a chance to fill their organs up.’

The Violet creature shook her oversized head. ‘This is indeed the case, but to understand why that happens, you need to learn more about our kind. We store beast mana in three separate ways: inside our cores, scattered throughout our bodies, and inside the glands. The first two methods aren’t unique to our species: they are shared between every beast I know of.’

‘So what?’

‘So, our glands have two functions. Increasing our capacity slightly is merely the lesser one. Their primary feature is allowing us to freely convert beast mana to a stable variant that can be expelled from our bodies and stashed externally: nectar.’

Percy knew all of that already, though his eyes still widened as he realized what the Queen was trying to tell him. When a regular beast died, the mana in its core and channels swiftly dissipated. In the Wasps’ case, it had a better outlet.

‘Does all the mana in your body rush to your gland when you die, flooding it with nectar?’

‘Exactly,’ the Violet bug confirmed. ‘Some is still wasted, but this ensures that your kind never ends up empty-handed.’

‘I see. Well, eighteen hundred drops a day will certainly help, though we’re still a few doses short,’ Percy said, shifting his attention back to the matter at hand.

When he normally brewed Aurora Dew, he started with regular elixirs as his base ingredient, undergoing two alchemic steps to bond the cyan powder and deattune the product. Unfortunately, this wasn’t an option when it came to the royal jelly, as elixirs that used it as their primary ingredient simply didn’t exist on Remior.

He would have to brew them from scratch, going through the entire, five-step process. If he took the additional losses induced due to the scaling principle into account, it was closer to a six-step process.

‘Considering my current yield, I’ll end up with about six finished doses per day… not bad, but not enough.’

Leaving aside his friends and family for now, Percy needed enough elixirs for a minimum of five cores: Nephthys and the Queen’s second cores, as well as three non-beast cores for his own bodies. Obviously, he couldn’t leave the royal wasps behind. Not only did the jelly belong to them in the first place, but accelerating their advancements was the only way to eventually get more of it.

Over the past few months, the creatures had been using raw jelly coupled with the cyan paste. It was much cheaper for them since it didn't involve any alchemic losses, and it was already about four times as fast as regular elixirs, but not quite as quick as it could be.

'At least the beast cores are fine. They're already advancing fast enough without it,' he thought.

Either way, their current output was too low. They would need to undergo fifteen cleansing sessions per day to support five elemental cores, though they thankfully only needed seven-and-a-half doses to accomplish that, due to the Cascading Cracks technique halving their expenditure. Still, Percy was currently a dose-and-a-half short…

'Maybe I can produce a little more if I push myself,' the Queen offered.

'Forget it,' Percy said, shutting her suggestion down immediately. 'It's not worth harming yourself over it. I'm sure your efficiency will gradually improve with more practice. At worst, I'll just have to let one of my cores fall behind for a few years. It's not a big deal. Besides, I'm not entirely out of options yet.'

If they couldn't procure more jelly, then Percy would just have to improve his own brewing yield. One way to do that would be to simply ditch the scaling principle and switch back to a regular-sized cauldron to avoid the extra losses. When it came to such limited and precious resources, it was better to prioritize efficiency over raw output. It would only take him a couple of extra hours per day to process all the royal jelly.

Of course, he estimated that this was still not quite enough. It would get him just over seven doses, though he would be a few drops short of his target. The Queen and Nephthys's gradual improvements were bound to solve that in due time, but Percy luckily had another trick up his sleeve that might get him there sooner.

'For now, I should focus on figuring out the new recipe and cleansing four of our cores. I'll worry about the last one afterwards.'

Chapter 568: Gloomy

Percy didn't rush to work on his brewing yield. While the Queen's current jelly output fell a little short of meeting their requirements, he still had enough to support the royal wasps' cores and two of his own,

so he didn't see any reason to delay any longer. Taking out his cauldron and the secondary ingredients that he had recently acquired from the Guild, he began brewing the new elixirs.

It was none other than Freddy who had brought him the materials.

Percy had had the brilliant idea of asking his friend to work part-time as a messenger to the hive, delivering news, alchemical reagents and, of course, Honey Rolls to him. This way, Percy had kept in touch with his friend and the elders, while also conveniently receiving all the resources he required to continue his projects. Finally, it also helped justify the expensive elixirs he was paying Freddy in the plumb vendor's mind, so that he wouldn't feel so bad about it.

Regardless, it soon became clear that the royal jelly behaved almost entirely like regular nectar, meaning that Percy didn't have to go through too many hoops to adjust the recipe. If anything, the uniformity of the rare substance made it even easier to work with, though not quite enough to affect his brewing yield.

The biggest challenge came not from the ingredients, but from the process itself. It had been a while since Percy had last worked with raw nectar, since he had mostly just added crystallized mana to turn elixirs into Aurora Dew over the past few decades, so he was understandably a little rusty with some alchemic steps.

Pacification and deattunement were fine, because Percy also used them for his potions, though it had been a while since he had last employed the redirection principle. Even so, refamiliarizing himself only took a couple of days. As for the rest of the recipe: most of it could be applied to the jelly with minimal changes.

'Here it is… a core-cleansing resource more potent than anything that the vast majority of people in the universe have ever laid eyes upon,' he thought.

He was pinching a small gemstone vial between his thumb and index finger, a dull grey liquid swirling inside. Only half of the crystalline vessel was full, since the people of Remior could now cleanse their cores with just fifty drops of elixir thanks to the Cascading Cracks technique, and they had yet to mass produce containers with half the previous capacity.

Percy's remark was just a guess, but he felt that it was most likely true. Even many greater springs didn't know about the cyan powder, and he had no idea if more potent forms of stable beast mana like the royal jelly existed anywhere else. Whether or not they did, the combination of the two had to be exceptionally rare.

Shifting his attention to the Starry Queen who had been observing him silently over the past week, he nodded. The giant bug remained motionless, though she must have communicated with one of her subordinates through their mental link, because a Starry Commander soon walked into the vast chamber.

"Here you go!" Percy yelled, tossing the vial into the creature's dark throat, not even bothering to extract its contents first. The potent acid in the Commander's stomach shouldn't have any trouble melting it down into inert powder.

The new elixirs weren't intended for anyone but him, his familiar and her mother, but he still thought that it was better to test the experimental resource on a more… disposable core before ingesting it directly. Risking the life of a Blue wasp wasn't ideal either, but those were the only insects that had non-beast affinities, and it was better than testing the elixir on a human.

Either way, Percy was almost certain that it would work as intended, though it never hurt to be cautious. He and the royal wasps waited patiently for around fifteen minutes before he turned to the Queen again and established a new spectral connection.

'Well?'

'Success,' the Queen replied, an excited glint finding its way into her compound eyes. 'My subordinate has reported a more effective cleansing session without any adverse side-effects.'

Percy exhaled in relief. While he hadn't had any reason to believe that the upgraded elixirs wouldn't work, he'd found himself unable to fully suppress his worries. This was an extremely important matter, as it would potentially save him nearly a century from his next set of advancements, and close to a millennium from the one after.

Pulling another similar vial from his seal, he examined it more closely, caressing it fondly with his thumb.

‘So, what should I name you? I can’t keep calling you “Aurora Dew with royal jelly”.’

The new elixir sported a dull grey colour with a faint greenish-blue tint, reminding him of a cloudy sky lit up by the rising sun. Technically, it owed its darker hue to Percy’s soul mana: not the royal jelly. His elixirs had already looked exactly like this for years now: acquiring a silver hue after he began crystallizing his phantom mana instead of regular pure mana, later turning grey due to the blessing. As for the royal jelly, it hadn’t really affected the colour of the liquid in any noticeable way.

However, the rest of Remior would soon start producing, trading, and consuming Aurora Dew that looked just like Percy’s original version, while the jelly-enriched variant that he personally brewed would be the only one carrying this characteristic grey hue moving forward, so he thought that it would be fine to name it accordingly.

‘How about… Gloomy Dawn?’

Nesha was the one who’d named the previous recipe, though she wasn’t here to share her opinion this time.

Remembering that he still had to segregate his memories before he could spend quality time with his girlfriend again dulled Percy’s excitement slightly, though he shook away the distracting thoughts to focus on the matter at hand.

After helping the Queen and the Princess drink their first doses of Gloomy Dawn, he consumed some too, sitting cross-legged to cleanse his cores.

Drawing two streams of phantom mana, he churned the contents of his stomach, allowing his mana to blend with the elixirs. Percy had stopped using his Whirlpool of Four Streams technique, returning to the original ‘Two Streams’ variant that the Moirais’ documents had mentioned.

He had originally had no choice but to modify the technique, because his soul mana was incorporeal and couldn’t be used to stir the liquid in his stomach. Consequently, he had taught himself to draw two streams from each core to balance out the affinities while still having a pair of corporeal streams to control the whirlpool.

Recently, Percy had realized that this was no longer necessary, since he was used to circulating phantom mana through both cores nowadays, which he could freely turn corporeal. There hadn't been a reason to return to the simpler version before learning the Cascading Cracks technique, though it was now making it a lot easier to combine the two arts.

Turning one of the infused streams incorporeal again as it left his stomach, he led both through his channels and to their corresponding cores, building up pressure inside the spherical organs. Releasing the violent bursts, he caused the crystalline walls to crack, giving Percy several spots to gently target with the following waves of mana.

Fifteen minutes later, he was done.

He was still getting used to simultaneously cleansing his cores in such an elaborate manner, though his efficiency had already surpassed ninety percent. The minor losses stung a little, but he knew that they would fade away completely after a few more months of practice.

Percy had come up with a name for the new technique too: Whirlpool of Cascading Cracks. Admittedly, it wasn't all that original, but he felt that it captured the essence of the technique well enough.

'It's such a pity that I don't have enough Gloomy Dawn for the elemental body,' he lamented.

Even though Micky was dozens of kilometres away from the hive, Percy had discovered an easy way to pass resources between his two bodies. Now that his soul was capable of freely flowing through the ethereal cord, they could send their spatial seal back and forth. This was something that he couldn't do with his clones or familiar, because they could only share mana through their connection.

This was obviously quite convenient, as it would give the elemental body access to anything within the human body's reach: potions, nectar, royal jelly, Aurora Dew, Gloomy Dawn: no matter where he travelled on Remior or even beyond!

That said, Percy had decided that the ice core was the best one to fall behind until he improved his yield, for two main reasons.

First, the cores of his human body directly affected the number of ethereal cords he could support, so it was more important for them to reach the next grade as soon as possible.

Secondly, Percy saw this as the perfect opportunity to equalize the progress of his Yellow cores that had fallen slightly out of sync. He had obtained and cleansed them at different times and with different resources. Micky in particular, had stayed inside the Thirsty Valley a lot longer, so the ice core was currently a few years ahead of the others. Even the soul core was a few months closer to Green than the pure one, so Percy could try to balance them out a little better as he worked on his yield.

In any case, it would be another eight hours before the next cleansing session, and twenty-four before he had to brew the next batch of Gloomy Dawn. Percy fully intended to use this time productively, already having a promising idea on how to improve his efficiency.

'It's about time to upgrade my Alchemist's Intuition. Wild Art or not, it's embarrassing to still have a Crude spell in my Status.'

Chapter 569: House Yeepas

Archibald strolled leisurely through the vast plain, tall blades of grass gently brushing against his knees. Some moisture from last night's drizzle seeped through his clothes, though he wasn't very bothered by it. Be it the soft embrace of nature or the fresh morning breeze, he found them more than welcome after having spent the past few years rotting in a dark cell.

Behind him, an army of men that sported identical features to his own followed silently. Even after centuries of practice with his bloodline, controlling so many clones at once could still put a noticeable: albeit manageable: strain on his mind during a battle or some other complex task, but that didn't apply to something as simple as having them march in unison, allowing him to focus on other things.

A series of orderly lines branched out of his abdomen, glowing with a cyan light across his skin. With every breath he took, more pure mana rushed into his channels, trying to fill his muscles up with strength. Unfortunately, his pathways were already saturated, so the resource ended up spilling out of his pores.

Archibald was still not used to how much weaker his second affinity was. It had been centuries since he'd last wielded Blue mana: let alone Yellow: so a resource twenty-seven times less potent than the one stored inside his first core felt pitifully weak. This gave him the illusion that he could push more

inside his body than his pathways could realistically contain: a bad habit that he was still trying to grow out of.

Even so, he couldn't complain. His next advancement had originally been thousands of years away, yet his grandson had given him several more promotions to look forward to before then. The first should occur a couple of years from now at the latest: depending on how quickly Percy could arrange for House Avalon to receive Aurora Dew from the Guild.

Shaking away the distracting thoughts, he concentrated on the elongated whirlpools extending outwards from his pores, dancing like elegant ribbons as they helped him draw ambient mana from his surroundings.

Percy's clone had previously demonstrated the complete Dance while possessing him, so Archibald had had a much easier time working on the Masterful spell. Still, he made a mistake every now and then, prompting the grey crow perched on his shoulder to correct him.

"Try to keep the ribbons scattered evenly across your body. That way, you can draw the most ambient mana with the fewest whirlpools. Also, make sure they're all the same size. You need to make the ones on your legs spin faster so that they grow as long as the rest."

The corner of Archibald's lips twitched at the bizarre scene of his grandson advising him from his comfy seat. He wasn't even sure which part he found the weirdest: that the boy had already grown up into a figure as imposing as the patriarch of a noble House? That he had somehow turned into an entity with multiple bodies? Or that Percy felt at ease having his dignified grandfather carry him home like this?

Well… the last one couldn't be helped. The elemental wasn't that heavy in his current form, nor did his cold touch bother Archibald too much. If it allowed Percy to focus on that Internal Magiscript spell of his, he was more than happy to do his part.

Fighting hard to suppress a smile, Archibald focused on applying his grandson's tips to his boosting art. The sooner he registered the upgrade, the sooner he could start working on the life version: which would help their family a lot more in the short term.

Thinking about all the things that Percy had done for their House already filled Archibald with pride.

And guilt.

'To think that I wouldn't even give him elixirs for years…'

Archibald knew why he'd made the choices that he had, but that didn't make them sting any less. Had he known what he did now, he would have ignored the insignificant strain on their family's finances, the opinions of their relatives, and any other meaningless concerns, supporting Percy wholeheartedly from the start. That way, his grandson could have reached Orange and tapped into his bloodline half a decade sooner.

He sighed, knowing better than most people how pointless regrets were. Thankfully, things had turned out well in the end. There was no telling what would have happened had they followed a different path.

Early in the afternoon, Archibald spotted River Glein in the distance, indicating that they had reached the Camelot province at last. He took a slight left turn, heading toward the side that used to belong to House Tantalus.

"Hmm? Aren't we going home first?" Percy asked, clearly noticing the detour.

"We are," Archibald said, not bothering to elaborate.

His grandson nodded, probably catching his implied meaning.

The entire province had originally been their home, and they'd fought hard to recover their lands from their sadistic rivals, only for their neighbours to swoop in like vultures to steal it again the moment they sensed weakness.

It was time to pay those opportunistic bastards a visit.

Of the two towns in the eastern side of the province, Greyquarry town was the one that Percy had never been to. It was conveniently the one closest to the northern border too, so Archibald figured that they might as well start there.

Nearing the small settlement, he saw scouts wearing House Yeepas's: a medium-sized family from the Sentin province: colours running to the town to report his arrival.

Archibald chuckled. He hadn't expected his army of clones to go unnoticed: especially in broad daylight: but he didn't really care. He and Percy were individually powerful enough to handle several Blues at once if they proved dumb enough to attack.

Outside the town's gate, he found a group of nobles waiting for him. They were led by a pair of Blues: a young-looking man with a crooked nose and sharp features and an elderly woman that resembled him slightly. They were dressed in elegant silken robes woven out of a midnight-blue fabric, the insignias sewn on the left side of their chests sporting a slightly lighter blue colour and depicting a bird of prey.

Archibald recognized them, having interacted with the emissaries of the neighbouring family many times during his centuries-long tenure as the patriarch of House Avalon. The woman, Galida, was one of the oldest Orange-borns he'd ever met, having advised multiple leaders of her own family for over a thousand years in total. The man by her side was her talented nephew, Aronos. He was a Yellow-born who had caught up to her grade about a hundred and forty years ago.

Behind them stood four Greens and thirteen Yellows that Archibald was less familiar with. It was honestly a rather sizeable force for such a small House to deploy to a single town, but he wasn't very surprised. House Yeepas wasn't the only one competing for a chunk of the Camelot province, so they couldn't afford to show weakness to their rivals.

Strictly speaking, if all the involved families cooperated, they could still overpower House Avalon, even with its recent gains. Thankfully, a direct conflict wasn't the only thing that they had to consider. They were probably wary of retaliation from either him or his grandson: who could both definitely cause serious damage to a noble House on their own if they survived the war.

More importantly, every noble on Remior had to be mindful of Percy's current status as the undisputed lord of the Fungal Spire. It was naturally better to get in his good graces than risk pissing him off.

"Lord Avalon," Galida greeted with a deep bow, her subordinates following along. "We've been expecting you."

Archibald smiled faintly. The experienced woman had spoken in the most honeyed tone she could muster, but she'd still failed to hide the traces of bitterness bubbling up through the cracks in her expression.

As for her subordinates, they had an even tougher time masking their thoughts. A wave of tension had rippled through the group upon his arrival, the nobles sweating profusely as they shifted uncomfortably in their spots.

It wasn't that strange that they would feel pressure when facing a potentially hostile Violet like Archibald, but he knew that it wasn't him they were most concerned about in this case.

The weaker mages tossed the crow on his shoulder uncertain glances, and he was sure that they must've scanned it with their Mana Senses too. While his grandson's abilities weren't fully understood across Remior yet, most nobles knew enough to recognize the significance of Archibald's arrival with the bird: certainly the ones that had dealings with their family.

"Thank you for taking such good care of our town in my absence. We'll take it from here," he replied with a nonchalant nod, ignoring their unease.

Sighing, the woman gestured at her subordinates to step aside, opening a path for Archibald and his minions to enter the town. However, she didn't leave immediately, instead opting to follow him inside by herself.

He wasn't worried that she was up to anything nefarious. If anything, she'd only placed herself in danger by walking between him and his army of clones. Even if she hadn't realized the danger that the crow posed, she definitely knew that attempting to sneak attack Archibald would be ill-advised.

"These are all the materials we've extracted from the mines and quarries in this area ever since we took over," she hurriedly said, gesturing at countless minerals that had been neatly arranged into several piles as tall as hills in the town square. "This includes interest and even compensation for our unjustified aggression, sent by our patriarch," she added, pointing at a couple of piles with materials that shouldn't be available in the Camelot province.

Archibald was dumbfounded.

He'd expected that their rivals would offer up the stolen territory with minimal resistance: it was the only sensible outcome, after all: but he hadn't predicted that they would do so in such a meek manner.

Seemingly oblivious to his thoughts, Galida continued. "We haven't coordinated with the other families, but from what we know, you can expect a similar reception everywhere else."

Collecting himself, Archibald nodded. Next, he listened to the woman give him a detailed overview of the resources harvested from the region in the past few years. Technically, House Avalon had much of this information documented since they used to own the whole province in the past, but a lot had changed in recent centuries, so he didn't mind the refresher.

Much like her subordinates, the noblewoman tossed the bird fleeting glances as she spoke, though she always averted her gaze just as quickly. Archibald even caught her swallowing hard at times, the poor Blue practically shaking in her boots. No matter what, she never so much as dared to even acknowledge Percy's presence or speak to him directly, however.

It wasn't until after the mages of House Yeepas left that Percy spoke. "Well, that was weird. If they're so scared of you, why the hell did they try to steal our land in the first place?"

Archibald didn't know whether to cry or laugh. "I don't think it's me they're afraid of…"

Chapter 570: Upgrading a Wild Art (1)

Alchemist's Intuition was a spell that Percy had registered over a decade ago, emerging naturally as he explored the intersection of multiple schools of alchemy while brewing in Twilight City.

Developing the Wild Art had allowed him to channel his insights and understanding of various principles through his eyes, greatly improving his yield. The spell had only grown more powerful over the years: especially after registering the compression principle and adding new senses to his mutation.

At its core, Alchemist's Intuition allowed him to peer beneath the surface of a concoction, detecting the lumps and bubbles forming in its depths. Each passive improvement had increased the depth slightly, though Percy hadn't had the chance to actively work on upgrading the spell yet.

Reaching the Refined tier was bound to help even more, but Percy had opted to focus on easier ways to improve his yield in the past: such as crafting a better cauldron or getting used to his thermal vision.

Now that he had more time in his hands and fewer low-hanging fruit to pick, resuming this old project of his might not be a terrible idea.

'The only question is, how should I go about it?'

The spell already did a great job drawing from his senses and registered principles to paint a cohesive picture of his cauldron's contents. He couldn't quite intuit what was going on in every cubic centimetre of his concoctions, but he estimated that his Wild Art had already grown about as powerful as it was ever going to be in its current state, as improvements had slowed to a crawl after countless hours of brewing.

There were two indirect ways to strengthen the spell, of course: registering yet another new principle, or evolving his mutation again. Seeing as neither of those options was currently on the table, he would have to come up with a third: hopefully more direct: method.

Fortunately, he wasn't entirely without ideas.

'I guess I'll still have to borrow a page out of my other Wild Arts, after all…'

As early as when he had first registered the spell, Percy had noted its similarity to Greater Foresight and hypothesized that he could potentially develop the ability to predict the future: eliminating solid lumps inside his brews before they even formed.

If he succeeded, he would greatly cut both his losses and brewing time by another step. If he got lucky, this predictive feature might even synergize well with the current effect of the spell, allowing him to see deeper into the concoctions as well.

The only problem was that alchemy was very different from fighting.

Percy had a lot more cues to study when trying to read an opponent's moves. He could gauge their intention through the shifts in their soul, guess the shape and size of their spell through the flares in their mana core, the flow of their willpower, and even their physical movements. In fact, this was precisely how he had developed Greater Foresight in the first place: through countless sparring matches against the trolls in the Grisly Bog.

Grim Dance was even simpler, as it merely gave form to his own intentions: something that Percy was obviously privy to.

Unfortunately, most of these tricks weren't applicable to his brews. Mana inside his ingredients contained no willpower, nor did it belong to anyone with a soul or a physical body, leaving Percy with very little information to base his predictions off.

'I suppose the reactions aren't entirely random, otherwise alchemy wouldn't exist,' he reminded himself.

Ingredients interacted in certain ways, giving rise to the many alchemic principles and recipes that he was intimately familiar with. Their reactions were determined solely by the properties of the involved affinities, so his new spell would have to rely on that.

The problem was that these reactions were extremely chaotic, making each brewing session somewhat unique. It was an alchemist's job to develop a set of rules and hone their intuition through years of practice, gradually getting better at dealing with the bubbles and solid lumps threatening their yield. If Percy wanted to develop anything even remotely akin to an alchemic foresight spell, he would have to deepen his understanding of mana itself: in all its many flavours.

Enjoying the story? Show your support by reading it on the official site.

'Well, I've got a few advantages over other people,' he thought.

After decades of fighting against powerful opponents, Percy was at least tangentially familiar with pretty much every affinity that he'd ever heard of. Through his clones, he'd even wielded most of them: usually, multiple times. It would definitely help with this project, though he knew it wouldn't be enough.

Mana behaved differently under a person's control than it did in nature. His experience couldn't hurt, but he should probably study how various mana types acted when left alone. Luckily, he'd already taken a step in that direction as well, by using ingredients of many different affinities in his concoctions. After all, many of the alchemic principles he had mastered required specific reagents.

'I should ask Freddy to bring me more of everything.'

Percy wasn't going to stick to just the ingredients that he was familiar with. While he had no expectation of inventing a new principle during this endeavour, it wouldn't be a bad idea to broaden his knowledge by exploring how different kinds of ingredients reacted with one another: even in concoctions without any practical applications.

He was sure that other alchemists in Remior's long history had attempted this, but he doubted that they had a background on par with his own, so he was confident that he would be able to learn things that had eluded his predecessors.

Finally, he had one other major advantage that separated him from everyone else: his environment.

Scanning his surroundings, Percy examined the colourful motes dancing in the air, a strange idea forming in his mind. The vibrant particles drifting around the cavern were essentially manifestations of ambient mana, brought about due to the extreme mana density in the depths of the Fungal Spire.

The alchemists living on the surface experienced a lesser version of this, but the magical swarm wasn't nearly as abundant in the settlement or atop the giant mushrooms.

Back when Percy had first arrived in the Guild, he had wrongly assumed that the colour of the particles indicated their mana type: that a cyan mote corresponded to pure mana, an orange mote to fire mana, and so on. This wasn't entirely off base, but not quite accurate either.

It wasn't until his fight with Deimos that he had learned more about the nature of the particles. While trying to convert them into his own affinities through his boosting art, he had realized that changing their colour was a lot easier than a complete conversion.

Regardless of what they looked like, the particles were all made solely of ambient mana: a mixture of every affinity that was only slightly biased toward specific elements, giving the motes their hues. In other words, a silver particle wasn't quite made of soul mana: just ambient mana with a subtle inclination toward it.

Percy's domain could affect motes over a wide area, shifting their bias toward his own affinities, essentially priming them so that they could be absorbed or converted more easily through his boosting art. This was actually a property that his willpower had inherited from his Extreme spell, though a complete conversion required additional effort.

In any case, this knowledge was very relevant to his current project. By observing how particles of various colours behaved, he could learn more about the corresponding mana types, and what properties they bestowed upon the ambient mana.

'Hopefully, I'll accumulate enough insights from these experiments to push the spell over the tipping point.'

Perhaps it was a long shot, but wasn't it through pure understanding of alchemy that he had registered the Wild Art in the first place? It was only fitting that he should follow a similar approach to upgrade it.

Besides, it was only a Crude spell that he needed to raise to Refined. Even if it proved as ambitious as Internal Magiscript: well… he had succeeded once, hadn't he?

Happy with his plan, Percy immediately got to work.

Bringing out his cauldron, he began mixing secondary: and even primary: ingredients in random configurations, studying how they interacted and trying to discern any interesting patterns that he might have missed in the past.

Given his current status as the undisputed lord of the Fungal Spire, acquiring supplies should be easier than ever before, so he didn't worry about his expenditure in the slightest. He could always ask his friend to bring him more of anything he needed during his next visit.

Nobody would dare complain: and not just due to the leverage that Percy held over their world. The knowledge he had shared with the rest of Remior was priceless. Besides, any further progress he made in the field of alchemy would eventually trickle down to the others in the Guild in one form or another.

The only ingredient that he didn't dare squander was naturally the royal jelly. It was limited and way too precious, so he wasn't going to waste a single drop of it. However, even regular nectar wasn't safe from his experiments.

Over the next few weeks, Percy: the human body, at least: alternated between four main tasks: brewing Gloomy Dawn for the royal wasps and himself, cleansing his cores, experimenting with random ingredients in his cauldron, and spending hours observing the colourful motes dancing around the cavern.

It quickly became apparent that this project would take a while to yield any results, though Percy wasn't deterred by that. With three clones completing challenges in the Vault and his elemental body busy with other things: including practicing Internal Magiscript: in the Camelot province, Percy knew that he was spending every second of every day over five times as productively as the second most hard-working person in the world.