Wanderer 571

Chapter 571: Upgrading a Wild Art (2)

Progress was much slower than Percy would have liked, though his efforts weren't entirely fruitless. Seemingly every few days, he managed to learn something new.

For example, he had known for a long time that water mana had a chilling effect on other elements, slowing down their flow. This was something that he experienced every time he used his ice core. However, it was only recently that he had discovered a few implications of that in alchemy.

There were several ways to dissolve solid lumps inside a concoction: raising the temperature, increasing the pressure, or stirring the mixture. Evidently, the first method was slightly less effective than the latter two when a water or water-adjacent ingredient was involved.

It was common knowledge that this applied to pacification, since it involved secondary ingredients of the ice affinity, but Percy had confirmed that a lesser version of that applied to brews with water and mud ingredients: which were actually used frequently with the restructuring principle. The difference was too small to notice if one wasn't actively looking for it, which would explain why he hadn't come across the information in his studies.

Another thing he learned was why ingredients with composite mana types induced more chaotic reactions. Apparently, their seemingly random behaviour could be easily explained by considering the common elements that the composite affinities were composed of. They affected not only each other, but also the final ingredient in the mixture, resulting in a long chain of cascading reactions.

Of course, understanding how this erratic behaviour came to be didn't make it any less problematic to unpack and deal with, but it did add yet another tool in Percy's growing bag of tricks.

Each discovery was minor, and not always something that could be acted upon. Even three months later, Percy didn't feel that his brewing yield had improved. That said, he didn't give up, having noticed some subtle changes during his experiments.

Whenever he watched two ingredients interacting, he played a little game: he tried to guess where the lumps would appear, and even how large they would be. In the beginning, his predictions had been laughably inaccurate, though he seemed to have grown markedly better over time.

The same applied to the drifting motes. Using all the knowledge he had accumulated, he tried to predict when a particle was about to change direction, accelerate or slow down. At first, he had gotten it wrong every single time, though his predictions eventually grew about as accurate as dice rolls.

'It's better, but not nearly enough,' he thought one day.

The improvements were undeniable, but they seemed to have plateaued, and he had yet to experience any tangible benefits in his alchemy. He didn't doubt that the rules and insights that he had drawn were correlated with the predictions that he wanted to be capable of, but the link was faint and muddled at best.

It was like trying to guess what someone would have for dinner by looking into their favourite meals. The information would help, but there were no guarantees. Granted, his predictions were more accurate than before, and if he acted upon them swiftly, he could often eliminate a solid lump effectively.

On the flipside, whenever he got it wrong, his actions could easily harm his yield more than if he had done nothing. After all, raising the temperature of the concoction for no reason would needlessly consume some of the ingredients. All things considered, his gains simply didn't outweigh his losses.

'Maybe I should change my approach slightly. This is alchemy, after all… not combat.'

During a fight, Percy had a lot more information to base his predictions on, but he also required his guesses to be far more accurate. Each of his opponent's potential moves had to be handled in a vastly different way, and guessing wrong could easily spell Percy's death.

Complete certainty was harder to achieve during a process as messy as brewing, but the potential actions that he could take at any given time were easier to enumerate. Even better, it should be possible to act with more caution, to minimize the damage when he guessed wrong.

'It's worth a shot. Whether or not I manage to upgrade the spell, I'm certainly learning something interesting. Worst-case scenario, Nephthys and the Starry Queen will eventually increase their output anyway, so I'll end up with enough Gloomy Dawn for my cores sooner or later.'

Tuning out the noise, Percy reconsidered his approach. His guesses already felt about as accurate as they were going to get, so the next step was to optimize how he acted upon them.

If he could just pick the three or four most likely outcomes rather than just the one, and he chose a strategy somewhat suitable for each of them: like raising the temperature of his cauldron by a few degrees in the area between the potential lumps, or inducing a gentle rotation: he might be able to place himself in a better position, without painting himself into a corner.

Percy went back to work, putting his new idea to the test. Essentially, his job was to prepare for several likely scenarios rather than hinging on whether he could accurately predict the one that ended up occurring. Instead of guessing the future, he wanted to merely guide his concoctions through more favourable routes.

Progress picked up again as he honed this new skill.

Slowly but surely, he developed a sense for the most likely spots inside the cauldron where the next set of lumps would emerge. He wouldn't quite call it a "vision" because his eyes had yet to register anything. It was more like a vague feeling gnawing at the edge of his mind which grew more pronounced every single day.

Percy was elated to experience that, as it reminded him of what he had felt just before he registered his other Wild Arts. It was clearly an indication that he was on the right track, though this upgrade was taking a lot longer to snap into place than the previous ones.

These… self-induced hallucinations: for lack of a better phrase: were blurry and transparent, likely to indicate his lack of certainty. They pointed to several regions inside the mixture, and even to the sizes and shapes of the potential lumps, giving Percy enough information to deal with most of them as effectively as possible.

No longer concerned with narrowing down his guesses, he tried to select the strategy that would eliminate the greatest number of lumps each time, priming his cauldron's enchantments in preparation.

Sometimes, all of his predictions turned out wrong, forcing him to eat unnecessary losses. Gradually, he learned to minimize the impact of such instances by acting more cautiously. For example, he avoided

heating the concoction up too much, so that he could always dial it back down without slashing his yield more than necessary if no lumps ended up forming.

It was a fine line that he had to tread: one of maximizing his expected gains while minimizing his expected losses.

Several more months passed.

Percy had already attempted to apply his new spell to actual brews instead of his sloppy experiments: with mixed results. He had at least reached a point where his actions never negatively affected his output, though the benefits were still marginal.

That said, he knew that he was on the cusp of a breakthrough. As soon as his Status recognized his efforts, the virtuous cycle between his mutation, the new entry, and Phoebe's Decree would amplify the Wild Art.

Percy even felt his eyes resonate with his budding understanding and elaborate strategy from time to time. Once in a while, he could swear that faint shapes appeared in his vision too, though they were always fleeting. Regardless, he was confident that he was just a single push away from his goal.

Still…

'Come on… it's been two weeks since I stopped improving!' he thought, feeling the urge to tear his hair out.

As close as he was, the final step kept eluding him. He knew that it was only a matter of time before he figured something out, though he couldn't help but lament every wasted day of core cleansing for his ice core.

Well… alright. Micky was still drinking Aurora Dew three times a day, so he wasn't really "falling behind". The rest of Remior was still stuck with the cyan paste, so Percy probably shouldn't be complaining. Besides, he hadn't even known about the existence of royal jelly until somewhat recently.

Accepting that he had to be patient, he resumed brewing, resolving himself to invest however long it took for the new spell to click in his mind.

Luckily, inspiration arrived when he least expected it, in the form of the first batch of clones returning from the Vault. They brought several valuable things back from the artificial world: each worth salivating over: though there was something in particular that took the cake.

It was precisely the catalyst that Percy needed right now: a new alchemic principle.

Chapter 572: Myriad

The sheer volume of information that the clones brought back would have left Percy unable to stand for a whole day before his fusion with Micky: and this was only two thirds of his recently acquired knowledge. The Yellow clone was still in the Vault, waiting to assist the main body in possessing the next batch of hosts.

Percy was itching to go over his gains, but he figured that he should probably send the clones intended for the Green and Blue bodies out and retrieve the one still in the artificial world first.

Emptying the new seals by his side to make space, he took a moment to appreciate the mountain of books that his clones had bought. Granted, only a fraction was unique: the rest were copies that he was planning to spread to his friends, family, and the rest of Remior.

'I'll sort that out later,' he decided.

He still had a lot of empty spatial amulets that he didn't think he'd be needing anytime soon, so he could have Freddy bring some of the books back to the settlement the next time he visited. Orin would handle the rest. As for the ones intended for House Avalon, he could pass them directly to Archibald by sending a seal to his elemental body.

Based on the memories he had just received, Percy knew that the Yellow clone would expect his cooperation to empower their connection a couple of days later.

Timing his actions to the best of his ability, he coordinated with his counterpart to possess Tlaloc and Gabe. After that, he allowed the recycled third clone to go on some random adventure, with the

understanding that he might be needed back on Remior a few months from now, when the others approached the end of their trip.

Unlike the last batch, Percy made sure to keep Soul Resonance active with the two clones stationed in the Vault. Now that Metatron had revealed that he knew about Percy's blessing, there was no reason to hold back.

Sadly, only the first empowered connection was entirely effortless, while the second one took some concentration to maintain. It wasn't much, but it might distract him when he resumed brewing. Still, Percy figured that it was good training anyway. He had severely underused Soul Resonance ever since he created it, so it was about time he changed that.

Only after he was done with his bloodline did he finally get a chance to go over his recent purchases. Percy knew that he wouldn't receive the books on seal-crafting that he needed for his artificial advancement until after the Green clone returned, though that wasn't a huge problem.

His elemental body was still busy increasing the number of runes that could be drawn inside his core at any given time, so it would be a while before he was ready to create seals of sufficient complexity. Hopefully, all the new runecrafting knowledge and experience that he had just acquired would accelerate his efforts.

'I'll have the human body join the magiscript training as soon as I'm done with everything else,' he thought.

Leaving aside everything related to runecrafting or his additional storage, Percy considered the rest of his clones' purchases.

Knowledge about demonic infestations, Cardinal Devils, and purification runes was priceless, and he was glad to have it. That said, it wasn't immediately useful to him. The same applied to the extra set of Thess'kalan ritual ingredients. Unfortunately, Percy wasn't even remotely ready to go on an uncertain quest to discover the latent potential that might or might not be hidden in his human lineage.

Focusing on the more actionable rewards, he internally debated whether to absorb his fourth spectral fiend or register the new alchemic principle first.

‘Hmmm… the trait will probably help more in the long run, but I should stick with alchemy while all that training is still fresh in my mind,’ he decided.

His choice definitely had nothing to do with how painful the fiend’s assimilation was bound to be.

Sighing, he didn’t immediately start brewing. Before he registered the consolidation principle, he wanted to upgrade his cauldron again: not only because he wanted to put all his magiscript gains to work, but also because he knew that this particular alchemic principle required certain enchantments. His current cauldron might be sufficient, though Percy saw no reason to work with subpar equipment.

Thankfully, he was more than capable of producing a far more intricate construct than his last one. Not only had his skills reached new heights after testing himself against Metatron’s gruelling challenges with three separate bodies, but he had also vastly broadened his knowledge of the subject by reading so many books.

‘That analog-control enchantment sounds really useful. I should add it to the heat, concealment, pressure and rotation runes on the cauldron.’

This enchantment built upon the cascading control enchantment that he was already using. He had studied that one on the way to Twilight City, and it allowed him to stack multiple control runes to provide finer control over other enchantments. This was how Percy could carefully adjust the temperature and pressure of his concoctions within small denominations of what his runes were capable of.

The analog-control enchantment took the idea a few steps further. By adding controlled-amplification runes into the mix, Percy would have the option of boosting the potency of his enchantments by up to another fifteen percent over their maximum value.

The enchantment also included yet another new type of runes that he had recently mastered: reversal runes. These would allow him to flip the direction of his enchantments so that they could achieve the opposite of the default effect.

For example, a rotation rune that would normally stir a mixture clockwise would now do so counterclockwise, heating enchantments would cool down his brews instead of heating them up: even

without using ice mana: and pressure runes would reduce the pressure inside the cauldron rather than increasing it.

If a regular enchantment was always at a hundred percent of its capacity as long as it was supplied with mana, a controlled enchantment could be switched on or off without having to cut its fuel off.

In this example, a cascading control enchantment with, say, five control runes could have its effect fine-tuned within a thirty-second of its maximum potency, anywhere between zero and a hundred percent.

Finally, an analog-control enchantment would greatly expand that range. Not only would it allow one to fine-tune the effect within a thirty-second of its potency, but it would do so for any value between a hundred and fifteen percent, to minus a hundred and fifteen percent.

Obviously, the inclusion of this feature would inevitably make Percy's unit cells a lot more complicated: especially since he was already affixing his enchantments with a whopping seven controls each. However, he felt that the benefits were worth the effort, as his extra freedom would make the new principle a lot easier to use.

Other than altering the controls, he added amplification runes to the structural integrity enchantments, preservation runes and self-repairs, to make the cauldron more resilient.

He also further shrunk the size of his runes after realizing that he could do a lot better than his previous attempt, so that he would be able to fit more of them onto the cauldron. It wasn't too difficult, because his magiscript skill wasn't the only thing that had changed since then.

Percy had also acquired an extremely powerful domain that helped him carve his runes with greater precision. His mental capacity had also markedly increased.

Finally, he thought that this was a good opportunity to expand the volume of the spherical construct a little. The change wasn't as drastic as the previous time: he only raised its capacity from forty times that of a standard cauldron to fifty. He didn't want to be too greedy, as he felt that this modest upgrade was more in line with his recent growth as an alchemist.

The expansion of the cauldron naturally increased its total surface area by about sixteen percent, giving him more space to actually carve the runes. The unit cells now contained over seventy runes each instead of forty, but Percy was able to shrink them greatly, making each rune less than half as wide as before.

After all was said and done, he estimated that he had fit about ten times as many runes onto the construct, bringing the total to over ten thousand.

In terms of its actual impact, Percy wasn't expecting too much. At the very least, he didn't think that his cauldron was tough enough to handle Blue ingredients, though he was sure that he'd be able to compress Green potions without worrying about the occasional crack.

The most important change was arguably the sheer flexibility that the new enchantments would give him, letting him put the consolidation principle into practice.

If it worked as he had guessed, he should be able to pair it with the scaling principle to completely eliminate the unnecessary losses: at least so long as he didn't attempt to brew inside a cauldron too large for him. Hopefully, this would allow him to prepare his Gloomy Dawn inside the oversized construct, saving valuable time without having to worry about wasted ingredients.

Between the new principle and the pending spell upgrade that he had been working on before the interruption, Percy would finally be able to retain enough royal jelly to cover all of his needs.

That said, it seemed like a different spell upgrade took precedence.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Thousand Whispers: Masterful -> Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Myriad Screams: Masterful!]

Chapter 573: Guidance

Percy nodded contentedly. His cauldron's evolution wasn't that major: just an upgrade within the same tier: but it always felt good to have his efforts recognized by Phoebe's Decree.

Before resuming alchemy, he spent a couple of hours replacing the base of his construct as well. This time, he went with something more elaborate, designing the stand so that he could easily attach or remove as many legs as he needed: anywhere from three to five.

He even made sure that the magical limbs could be screwed at adjustable angles, and crafted multiple sets of limbs of varying shapes and lengths, enchanting the constructs with amplified self-repairs, preservation runes and structural integrity enchantments.

This way, he would be able to modify his trusty tool to get a proper grip on any surface, making brewing comfortable regardless of his working environment. Perhaps it was a little silly to worry about this when he'd spent the last few years brewing on the back of a flying crow or the uneven floor of a cavern dug out by giant wasps, but it was a small investment anyway.

Once he was done, he started working on the principle. To no one's surprise, it only took him a couple of days to register it.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new alchemic principle: Consolidation!]

The concept behind this one was straightforward, and Percy was experienced enough to put everything into practice: not to mention that the powerful enchantments on his cauldron had done most of the work. He'd merely had to familiarize himself with his new options and weave them into his brews.

In fact, it could be argued that Percy had already started working on the consolidation principle months ago, through the collaborative efforts of his clones to hone their magiscript skills.

Diving into work once more, he knew that it wouldn't be long before his Wild Art also evolved.

The main purpose of the enchanted cauldron and his new principle was to remove the cost of scaling, but there was still a secondary benefit that he was undoubtedly about to enjoy: the same passive influence that each of his registered principles had on his mutated eyes.

'If I'd known that my clones would have brought one from the Vault, I wouldn't have spent the past year working on the spell,' he thought, a bitter frown forming on his lips.

The gap between his previous yield and his desired output had been small to begin with, so the new principle might have been enough to bridge it by itself. On top of that, Nephthys and the Starry Queen had also grown slightly better at generating royal jelly over the past few months.

His familiar, in particular, had mastered three new versions of Circulation, meaning that her conversion rate was currently held back only by her lower grade and lack of elemental mutations. Even better, her second core had recently reached Yellow, having caught up to the first one. Her beast core was only a little over half a year away from Green and the next wave of mutations.

Meanwhile, the Queen's second core had reached Yellow even earlier, and she'd made some progress on the water version of the Dance. The combination of her acid core's slightly higher grade and her rapidly improving boosting art still had a marginal effect on her stamina consumption, but it was better than nothing.

One way or another, Percy knew that they would have collectively arrived at their goal within the next few months, even if the new principle hadn't been enough by itself. As for the upgrade to his Wild Art: it was largely redundant.

'Well, it doesn't matter. I would have needed to upgrade the spell at some point anyway,' he thought, shaking his head.

Besides, he shouldn't be complaining about getting a higher yield than necessary. It would let him stash some Gloomy Dawn away for a rainy day.

As expected, the consolidation principle was the final push that he needed to register the second spell upgrade later that afternoon: he only knew what time it was due to his elemental body on the surface: and tick yet another important milestone off his mental checklist.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Wild Art: Alchemist's Intuition: Crude -> Wild Art: Sorcerer's Guidance: Refined!]

Having seen the notification coming from a kilometre away, he didn't allow it to break his concentration, keeping his attention on the ongoing brew. At the same time, he didn't shy away from exploring the effect of his upgraded Wild Art.

The fleeting visions that had lingered at the edge of his mind finally manifested before his eyes, the shadows of several solid lumps coalescing inside the concoction, indicating that they were about to form in reality.

Brushing his hand over various enchantments, Percy heated up certain regions inside the cauldron that enveloped most of the tiny projections while cooling down the rest. He even lowered the stirring speed slightly, forcing the denser masses closer to the centre of the magical liquid, allowing him to target more at the same time.

The fact that his eyes now passively predicted the appearance of the cancerous obstructions meant that he no longer had to split part of his attention to actively guess where they would appear, greatly reducing the strain on his mind.

The brewing session was over a few seconds later, though Percy didn't bother to measure the product, knowing that it would take a few more attempts before he reached his new limit.

For the next week or so, he brewed one batch of potions, elixirs, Aurora Dew or Gloomy Dawn after the other, slowly eliminating his lingering deficiencies and familiarizing himself with his new capabilities. Once he felt that his growth had plateaued again, he finally stopped to count how many doses of Gloomy Dawn his most recent attempt had yielded.

'Eight hundred and eight drops, or just over eight doses,' he concluded, raising an eyebrow.

This was more than enough for sixteen cleansing sessions per day: or five different mana cores: with an extra half a dose to spare. Not only was it plenty for himself and the royal wasps, but he would even be able to accumulate some. It wasn't enough for an extra person, but having some spare doses in his seal would help if he had to skip a day of brewing.

Taking his current output into account, Percy calculated his yield. The consolidation principle had essentially turned Gloomy Dawn back into a five-step recipe even when he mass produced it inside his oversized cauldron, though that was ultimately just a matter of convenience, since he could have achieved the same result with a smaller tool: it would have just taken longer.

Either way, the eight or so doses that he had just produced indicated a yield of over forty-four percent, suggesting a stepwise yield of around eighty-five percent. Translated to regular elixirs: the benchmark that the Guild's alchemists used: it would place his yield at over sixty-one percent.

'Hmmm… the improvement wasn't as drastic this time. Wasn't it already like fifty-seven percent before?'

Clearly, the higher his yield got, the harder it would be to keep growing. Still, if he had narrowly surpassed the five elders before returning to the Fungal Spire, he had now left them solidly in the dust.

At the end of the day, Percy wasn't even sure that it mattered. Other than using his resources slightly more efficiently, he had no idea if there was any point to aiming for a higher yield, though he couldn't help but hope that there was some greater cosmic mystery waiting to be discovered: somewhere beyond his current reach.

Whatever the case, this was enough for the time being.

'I wonder if Sorcerer's Guidance can be used for anything else,' he randomly thought.

He hadn't missed the fact that the name of his Wild Art was following a similar trajectory to his mutation. Enki's people merely possessed the "Alchemist's Eye": a mutation with mainly alchemical applications. In Percy's case, it had evolved into the "Sorcerer's Eye" shortly after his return from Atlantis, indicating that it could be used more broadly.

In the same vein, he felt that the scope of his new spell might have expanded beyond his concoctions. It wouldn't be that surprising either. Percy had developed it by deepening his understanding of mana itself: the very fuel of magic: so it made sense that its effects would transfer over to other fields.

Putting his hypothesis to the test, he stored away his equipment, focusing on the drifting motes around him for the first time in over a week. The results were immediate.

Much like what happened to his opponents during a fight, he instantly saw numerous projections leaping in front of the particles, drawing elegant arcs in the air that the actual motes closely stuck to mere fractions of a second later.

‘Interesting. Unlike the lumps in my brews that are never one hundred percent accurate, these predictions seem reliable enough…’

Turning to his familiar who was laboriously producing royal jelly and working on her boosting art by her mother’s side, he reached out through the cord.

‘Nephthys, could you spare a couple of minutes for a quick sparring match?’

‘Huh? That’s a bit unexpected. I don’t mind, but I don’t think I’d pose much of a challenge. I can get you a stronger opponent if you want,’ the former goddess replied, clearly surprised by the strange request.

Percy shook his head. ‘It’s fine: this isn’t anything serious. I just need you to hurl a few simple water and lightning spells at me from random directions. I won’t even fight back. I’m trying to test something.’

The Starry Princess sent a mental shrug before walking closer. Heeding his instructions, she separated her composite affinity into its components, shooting azure blobs at him or zapping him with thin indigo sparks.

Percy didn’t even bother to dodge, letting the attacks splash harmlessly against his reinforced Cloak. Even if he’d been naked, spells this weak would have barely tickled.

Ignoring the non-existent danger that his familiar’s magic posed, he carefully observed her channels, soul, willpower and body, using his Greater Foresight spell: which was now just a small part of his Ultimate Art: to predict the trajectories of the “blasts”.

He had a hunch that his new Wild Art would influence his ability to foresee the attacks. While many aspects of Greater Foresight were useless in alchemy, the opposite wasn’t true. He felt that improving his understanding of various mana types could only be a good thing.

‘Well?’ Nephthys asked about an hour later, sounding a little tired.

It was understandable, of course. Her second core and its corresponding channels were still full, since she had paced herself well, but this was her first time physically exerting herself in her new body: not to mention that Hibernation left her perpetually exhausted.

'It's enough,' Percy said. 'Thanks for humouring me.'

'Don't leave me hanging! Did it work?' the former goddess asked again, clearly unable to contain her curiosity. 'You were trying to see if that new alchemy spell of yours had any impact in other areas, right?'

Percy nodded. 'It's hard to tell. I think that the window of my predictions has increased slightly, but I don't have anything to compare it to. This is my first time watching you cast spells, and it's been a long time since I last fought a Yellow. Pity I didn't consider testing my limit before starting work on the project.'

Either way, he was more than happy with his new Wild Art. If he was right about it, it would help him in all sorts of subtle ways, whether he realized it or not. A surge of excitement rose in his chest as he looked forward to its next upgrade.

'Hmmm… I wonder what that one will look like.'

After obtaining Obatala's Approval and merging it into his Status, he had turned his Sorcerer's Eye into the Sovereign's Eye. He wasn't sure whether his new spell would evolve in a similar direction next time. The main change in his Sovereign's Eye was its ability to read the flow of willpower: something completely unrelated to alchemy. Percy would probably have a tougher time when he tried to upgrade his Wild Art again.

'Oh well… It's a problem for later,' he thought.

Satisfied with his analysis, he considered his next steps. There were two things currently pressing for his attention. About sixteen months had technically passed since his return to the Guild, so his mentor and the other elders had been waiting for him to teach them the new principles for a while now.

Also, there was another spectral fiend that he had to absorb.

Chapter 574: Canvas

Percy was back in his private chamber: well… his new chamber. The Queen had relocated him closer to her, to make passing royal jelly and Gloomy Dawn to one another more convenient. He was currently sitting cross-legged, contemplating his next step.

'It's probably better to wait until my clones are done in the Vault before absorbing the fiend,' he decided.

He wasn't just making excuses to postpone what promised to be an agonizing experience. If the acquisition of his fourth trait was as bad as the previous one: and it was most definitely going to be even worse: there was a good chance that he wouldn't be able to maintain his empowered cords, which would cost him the ability to communicate with his clones.

'Alright. I'll focus on teaching the alchemists for now. I'll accompany Freddy back to the settlement the next time he visits.'

His friend hadn't brought him any concerning news about Machaon or the Great Houses yet, which had to be a good thing. Once again, it was clear that the gods had no intention of getting involved in his war against the White-cored mage, probably planning to use the disgraced leader of House Asclepius as yet another whetstone for him.

Thankfully, this peaceful intermission only worked in Percy's favour.

He would never forgive the asshole who had massacred Nesha's family, but he knew that he wasn't nearly strong enough to defeat him yet. He wasn't sure whether Archibald would be able to compete with a White after mastering the Dance either.

Consequently, Percy's best course of action was to concentrate on building up his strength. For the first time since his original escape from the Fungal Spire, he finally had a chance to settle down at a quiet, fortified, and mana-rich location, without anyone willing or daring to bother him.

He was confident that he would surpass his enemy sooner rather than later, as there was nobody on Remior who could grow faster than him.

‘It’s late outside. I guess Freddy will be back sometime in the morning.’

Shrugging, Percy was about to brew a few Green potions to kill time, when he noticed something strange by the corner of his eye. Everywhere else in the room, the colourful motes drifted in familiar ways: he could tell, because he had just spent the past few months studying them for several hours per day.

Not there, however.

The magical particles in that spot appeared to behave weirdly. Watching them carefully, Percy allowed the illusionary projections to leap forth from the motes in an attempt to trace their supposed trajectories. Unlike his previous test, his predictions quickly proved completely inaccurate.

‘No… all the other motes are flying exactly like they’re supposed to. It’s only that spot that’s different…’ he noted.

Glancing back at the strange region, he realized that the particles had already returned to normal, almost as if he’d imagined the whole thing, though Percy was confident that he hadn’t.

“You can show yourself,” he said, struggling to mask his irritation. “I knew that you had to be watching me from time to time, but I didn’t expect you to sneak into my room like a creep.”

A soft sigh echoed through the otherwise quiet cavern, an invisible veil seemingly lifting from the conspicuous patch of shimmering crystals and rare minerals to reveal a young-looking woman. She was objectively beautiful, her features seemingly carved out of the finest jade, without a single blemish on her pale skin.

Percy naturally recognized her.

Perhaps unexpectedly, she was wearing the same cheap rags that she had donned during their previous meeting, despite no longer having any need for a disguise. Was this how she always dressed?

Either way, he had a tough time deciding whether her piss-poor attire was doing her a disservice, or whether it only accentuated her graceful figure and innate charms further. If there was one thing that had changed since Twilight City, it was that her fake Green core was nowhere in sight.

“I guess the cat is out of the bag,” she said, her pearly voice ringing like a gentle melody. “I didn’t expect you to spot me. Is it because of your new spell?”

Percy nodded absentmindedly, shocked by the intrusion. While he’d been the one to call the goddess out, he hadn’t expected her to reveal herself so easily.

Her disguise had almost been perfect. She’d completely masked everything: her appearance, mana signature, body heat, any trace of willpower… even the fluctuations of her soul, despite famously lacking the soul affinity.

If it hadn’t been for the slight disturbance in the flow of ambient mana that he had recently learned to read, Percy would have never seen through the illusion. The deity had realized that he’d been onto her, identified even that minor flaw, and adjusted her spell accordingly: all within mere moments.

‘Scary,’ he thought, swallowing hard. Then again, he probably shouldn’t have expected anything less from someone like her.

“You lied about your name,” he said, trying to appear calm.

He had no idea why he’d opened up with that when he had a million more important things to talk about, but it was the first thing that came to mind. As early as during their meeting in Twilight City, Percy had known that he’d seen her somewhere before, but it was like his brain had kept getting distracted whenever he had been about to connect her to the statues and illustrations.

It was only after guessing that the gods had been onto him for a while that whatever she’d done had started to fall apart, though he hadn’t been able to confirm his suspicions until today.

“I didn’t lie,” she replied, her expression even. “’Phoebe’ is the name that was given to me by my parents, a long, long time ago. I did mention how languages evolve over time, didn’t I? Today, my name can loosely be translated as ‘Clarity’.”

Percy chuckled. “A bit ironic given all the sneaking around, don’t you think? Were you planning to watch me from the shadows my whole life?”

It was probably unwise to speak to a titaness so bluntly, but part of him was fed up with the secrecy. He’d long realized that the gods were interested in his growth: and he wasn’t very surprised by it either: yet there were so many things that he was still unable to explain.

“Only until you grew a little stronger. I would have observed you from afar, but the dense ambient mana in the hive obstructs my senses, and this place is too important to ignore. Three of Remior’s most valuable: and fragile: beings are located here,” she answered.

“Oh? And what’s going to happen when I’m stronger?” Percy asked again.

“I’ll bring you to the Order, have you train under our gods, and join our strike force. But you’re not ready for that. Remior is still a better playground for you, and the Great Houses better playmates,” she explained, casually leaning back on a flat-ish surface on the nearest wall and crossing her legs.

Percy didn’t appreciate being treated like a child, though he had to admit that it was probably justified by the ridiculous age gap.

“I suppose that means that you won’t lift a finger to deal with Machaon?” he asked, perhaps a bit more aggressively than he’d meant to.

Phoebe regarded him for a few seconds before replying. “Do I need to get personally involved? He seems like the perfect challenge for you at this point in time.”

“Is that so? And what about the cost?!” he yelled, his outburst surprising even himself. “Is this all a game to you?! What about all those Blues who died chasing me? Some were just greedy or vindictive assholes, but many were only following orders from their families! What about everyone who will die in this conflict? Are they all just pawns to further your ends?!”

The goddess narrowed her eyes. “You’re the one who killed them. Why are you shouting at me?”

Percy clenched his fists. “It’s not the same. I was just a Yellow, chased by dozens of Blues. What was I supposed to do? I would have never survived this long if I’d kept sparing them. You could have ended everything with a single word!”

The titaness shook her head. “I told you during our previous meeting. The Order’s duty is to Remior as a whole: not to a bunch of foolish mortals who should have known better. Besides, their lives weren’t wasted, in so far as they helped you grow stronger. If everything goes well, our world will reap the benefits of their sacrifice for millions of years to come. The same applies to Machaon. I’m sure that he will pay dearly for his crimes, but there is no need to waste the perfect obstacle for you prematurely.”

“Am I supposed to be moved?” Percy chuckled again, but it sounded hollow this time. “You speak as if my growth is so important to you, but you were more than willing to let me: well… Micky: die.”

The corners of the goddess’s rosy lips twitched, Percy’s words appearing to have finally struck a nerve.

“That… was a mistake,” she muttered, her confident exterior showing the faintest crack for the first time. “I’m not all-knowing. From my perspective, the crow had held you back for years by clogging up your cords. That said, it’s not my fault that he was about to die, nor was I obligated to save him. I wasn’t the one who sent Deimos: or anyone else: after you either. You’ve provoked them all by yourself. If anything, I was the one holding our gods and Green-borns back from coming after you.”

“You do realize that you’re currently talking to ‘the crow’, right?” Percy asked, giving her an odd look. “I’m only alive due to dumb luck. Half of me, at least. I’m assuming that you would have at least intervened to save the human: given that you were the one who cut off our only escape.”

“Look… I made a strategic decision. I left my feelings out entirely, doing what I thought was best for Percy, and I admit that I was proven wrong on the substance of that choice too. If you want to hold this against me, so be it. Feel free to kill or imprison me as soon as you surpass me. I won’t even resist, but this will have to wait until Remior no longer needs me.”

Percy raised an eyebrow, having not expected such an honest concession from the titaness. For all her flaws, she seemed to genuinely care for their world. He couldn’t help but contrast her against the only other titan he knew. The way she treated those under her wasn’t perfect, though it was markedly better than Metatron.

More importantly, her motives appeared entirely different. As far as Percy could tell, the divine pentapus had only created the Vault to serve himself, while Phoebe was at least trying to make Remior better for everyone in the long-term: albeit in her own way.

Finally, Metatron was arguably mistreating his subjects out of choice. The artificial world had already proven capable of evading capture even from the universe's leading factions, so the titan could have clearly chosen to prioritize his people's well-being. Meanwhile, Phoebe was racing against time to strengthen their world before an enemy too powerful to handle happened to invade.

Percy sighed, finding it increasingly difficult to hate the goddess. "I wish you had tried to do better by Remior's commoners and low-borns though. Not just those you deem useful."

The titaness slid down the wall to plop down on the ground. "I told you before. Our current system is already better than it was when Kronos and I came to power. Sadly, there wasn't enough nectar for everyone. We didn't have your boosting art, your fancy runes, the alchemic principles that you have mastered, or the ability to create additional: stronger even: Starry Queens. We can't afford to slow down the production of bloodlines either. Even after countless generations of noble Houses appearing or falling apart, only a few of our gods possess a decent bloodline."

Percy remained silent for a few seconds, letting her words sink in. "You're right. I don't know what it was like when you took over the Order, but I'm pretty sure that we can do a lot better now."

"I agree." The titaness nodded. "Why do you think I've handed you the Fungal Spire over the past year? By all means, go right ahead: paint whatever picture you want. Remior is your canvas."

Chapter 575: External

It was strange.

On the surface, Phoebe's "permission" hadn't really changed anything. Percy had already been planning to share his alchemy and runecrafting knowledge with the rest of Remior: in fact, he'd even taken several steps toward both of those goals.

The titaness hadn't revealed any new information either. Even before being told as much, Percy had guessed that the gods tacitly approved of his recent actions, otherwise they wouldn't have allowed him to stay in the hive or claim control of the Fungal Spire.

Finally, Percy wasn't even sure he cared about Phoebe's opinion at a personal level. He'd yet to make his mind up on whether he should respect or hate her.

Even so, being given a free pass to do whatever he felt was best for their world lifted a heavy load off his shoulders. For so long, Percy had lived as a wanted criminal, hunted down by every noble House on Remior. Everything he had, he'd earned by himself, fighting every step of the way.

Granted, the past few months had been a little different, but even his current status wasn't something that had fallen out of the sky: he had seized it by force after driving the elders into a corner.

Having the titaness who stood at the very top of the Divine Order officially condone his actions was surreal. It was like finally being allowed to flip over to the next chapter in his life.

Outwardly, he tried not to betray his inner turmoil. Before opening his mouth, he opted to sit down. Phoebe had also taken a seat a while ago, and looking down at the goddess felt weird.

"So, what's going to happen now? Will you resume spying on us from the shadows while we get everything in the Guild sorted out?" he asked. "I thought you'd have better things to do."

"You overestimate how much of my attention it takes to watch over a bunch of mortals," she replied, shaking her head. "Most of my brainpower is being spent working on my Decree: which reminds me that I have yet to thank you for the inspiration that you've provided over the years."

Percy's eyes lit up. He didn't care about her gratitude, but he wouldn't say no to an upgraded Status. "Are you improving it?! When can we expect the new ver–"

"Forget it," Phoebe cut him off with a wave of her hand. "It'll be centuries at the earliest before it's ready."

He nodded, not letting himself feel too disappointed. There were a million other things to focus on until then.

“I suppose you’re right though,” Phoebe continued, oblivious to his thoughts. “I’ve seen enough to know that you’ve got everything under control. The situation here appears stable enough and you’ve already proven capable of thriving under far more dire circumstances. I don’t need to keep babysitting you. Besides, if you fail to handle the nobles with your current position and strength, it means that you were never worth cultivating in the first place.”

“You’re leaving?” Percy asked, raising an eyebrow. “I can’t say I’m sad to finally have some actual privacy, but increasing the Guild’s elixir output would be easier if you got involved.”

Phoebe chuckled. “And rob you of the opportunity to hone your alchemy and runecrafting skills? Practicing by yourself is good, but teaching others and solving real problems are also excellent ways to improve. Remior has waited millions of years for the Aurora Dew. I think we can wait another decade or two.”

“Don’t you think that your approach is a bit inconsistent?” Percy couldn’t help but ask. “You were even willing to let Micky die so that he wouldn’t occupy my limited cords, but you don’t seem to mind me wasting time teaching apprentices or upgrading the Guild’s mana gathering enchantments.”

The goddess gave him a long look. “Alchemy and runecrafting aren’t any less important than your spells. I thought that you of all people would have realized that by now, given how much you have gained from both fields.”

Percy tilted his head in confusion. “I’m not looking down on alchemy and runecrafting. They’ve both served me well, but I’m starting to feel like I’ve already reaped most potential benefits. Between my enchanted equipment, the Gloomy Dawn and my Green potions, I already have everything I could have asked for. Any further improvements would be incremental at this point, no?”

He left any mention of his artificial advancement out of the list, as he had no idea whether the titaness had realized what he was trying to do. It wasn’t like he had any reason to hide it from her, but he had nothing to gain by sharing the information either. As friendly as she seemed on the surface, it wouldn’t hurt to have a trick or two up his sleeve just in case.

Regardless, he'd meant what he'd said.

There might be more alchemic principles out there, but Percy didn't expect to stumble upon many groundbreaking discoveries. His new elixir recipe and his ability to compress potions to higher grades were already impressive enough.

As for core-cleansing and life-extending resources: well, those had diminishing returns, otherwise there would have been more than a handful of factions capable of turning their Orange-borns into gods. Percy was already well on his way to shattering that record, so he felt that there couldn't be that many more promising avenues that he had yet to explore: except perhaps for a first-generation leaf and maybe another thing or two.

The same applied to magiscript. Percy had already bought pretty much all the relevant books that could be sold for credits. The rest were either more variants of the same or too niche for him to bother. Other than that, there was knowledge that could only be claimed with bonus rewards from the higher grades, or things that Metatron wasn't willing to share with outsiders at all. There shouldn't be many places in the universe with runecrafting nearly as developed as the Vault's either.

That was not to say that Percy would stop looking for Decrees or other insights that might allow him to further develop his capabilities, but he figured that it was time to find new ways of growing stronger.

"Hmmm… You don't seem to understand the true value of alchemy and runecrafting. They have a lot more to offer than the brews and enchantments that you have enjoyed so far," Phoebe said, breaking him out of his thoughts. Probably noticing his confusion, she continued. "Let me ask you this: how do you think a god's strength is decided?"

Percy considered her question for a few seconds. He'd wanted to learn more about the Concept realm for a while now, as it was something that he had to start actively working towards, so this was a great opportunity to clear some of his doubts.

"I was under the impression that each affinity has a few associated concepts, and that a god's strength is determined by the number that they have mastered."

Phoebe nodded. "That's a bit of an oversimplification as there are many other factors to consider, but it's mostly correct. You can think of the number of concepts a deity has integrated into their internal

world as the equivalent of a mortal's grade. Of course, it's still important to weave them into their spells skilfully, but that's a separate topic. However, your understanding of where concepts come from is incomplete."

Percy perked up, prompting the titaness to elaborate.

"There is another category of concepts that aren't tied to any specific affinity: external concepts. In theory, anyone can master them, though they are typically some of the toughest to comprehend. They are at least as valuable as regular concepts: often more so: but very few gods have mastered any of them."

Percy swallowed hard. These external concepts sounded like quite the cheat. If the number of concepts that a deity had comprehended was equivalent to their grade, then wouldn't mastering one of these be like jumping from Yellow to Green?

Obviously, he still had no idea how one was normally meant to progress through the Concept realm. Were gods limited by the affinities that they had possessed as mortals, or was there a way to branch out to new ones?

Even if there was, it shouldn't be easy, otherwise the Moirais' Decree wouldn't have been regarded so highly. Didn't that mean that mastering an external concept was the only way to progress after a god was done exploring their affinities?

He was tempted to ask Phoebe about that, but he was just as curious about what alchemy and magiscript had to do with any of this, so he decided to let her speak.

"There are more than two external concepts out there, but that's a topic for another time. The concept related to alchemy is admittedly still hypothetical: not even the most skilled alchemists in the universe have ever confirmed its existence. However, the one related to runecrafting has been conquered once already. Why do you think your buddy, Metatron, is regarded so highly: despite essentially lording over a chunk of metal that would barely qualify as a lesser spring?"

Percy's eyes widened. Was this why Metatron didn't seem to care whether his runecrafting language leaked? He was the only genius to have ever reached the absolute pinnacle of his field and raised the equivalent of his grade as a result.

Was it even possible for somebody to replicate his feat with borrowed knowledge? Percy had a hunch that anyone talented enough to master the same concept would be more than capable of developing their own runecrafting language on par with the Vault's.

"That sounds great, but if there's only one god who has ever comprehended the runecrafting concept and zero for alchemy, why do you think that I stand a chance?" Percy asked.

Not that he wasn't confident in himself, but he knew that his odds of success were objectively low.

Phoebe shrugged. "I don't think you realize how impressive your brewing yield is for a Yellow."

Chapter 576: Elemental Acquisition

"Is my yield good even by the standards of a greater spring?" Percy asked.

The titaness smiled, a hint of envy finding its way into her eyes.

"More than you know. I'm an alchemist too. Care to guess what my yield was as a mortal?"

Percy wasn't surprised to hear that the million-year-old goddess had dabbled in the art at some point. He was willing to bet that she was more talented than the Guild's current elders too, so it had to be over sixty percent.

As a Green-born, it would have taken her over fifty-five hundred years just to become a demigod, plus however many tens of millennia she had spent stuck at the Clear grade, trying to forge her internal world. Her yield could have easily surpassed seventy percent in that time. She also had a mind affinity, which Percy assumed hadn't hurt.

"Seventy-five percent?" he tentatively asked.

Phoebe's smile stiffened. "Sixty-three. It was barely better than yours, and I was five grades higher and hundreds of times older right before my ascension. Even a million years after becoming a goddess, I'm

still stuck at seventy-six. Rumour has it that the most talented alchemists in the universe: figures like that Ea guy whose Decree you have 'borrowed': have yet to cross ninety percent. The leading hypothesis is that attaining a perfect yield is synonymous with mastering the concept. And this one is especially coveted."

"Coveted? More than others?"

She nodded. "Alchemy is the field of manipulating foreign mana of affinities that you don't necessarily possess, so what do you think that its corresponding concept would do? This is obviously unconfirmed, but we have reason to believe that it might allow a god to more easily acquire additional affinities: among other things. And I shouldn't have to explain how valuable that would be."

Percy's heart skipped a beat as he pondered over the implications. Didn't that mean that the first person to reach a perfect yield would automatically gain access to countless new concepts? This was the equivalent of a Yellow instantly jumping to the Clear grade: only at an even more terrifying scale, and from a being who had already left the Colour realm far behind.

This might be the single most straightforward way to conquer the universe!

'What the hell?! How close is anybody to accomplishing that?!' he couldn't help but wonder, his mouth agape.

Phoebe was clearly using the Guild's standard for evaluating an alchemist's yield. If someone like Ea was at eighty-nine percent on a three-step recipe like the elixirs, it would put his stepwise yield at around ninety-six percent: just four points away from the end!

Would the Moirai or the divine beasts even allow him to succeed? Would his allies? Or would he get assassinated the moment he showed signs of coming close?

'No, a better question would be what it would even take for him to bridge the gap…' Percy realized.

He had no idea whether Ea had managed to give himself his own Decree. Probably not, as a god's body should be harder to affect than a mortal's. Even if he had, he was probably stuck with the basic version of the Alchemist's Eye, and there were plenty of alchemic principles that hadn't been discovered on

Atlantis. Could the titan take the final few steps if he had access to all the things that Percy had stumbled upon in his travels? Or was this seemingly tiny gap an insurmountable obstacle?

Percy's eyes scanned the colourful motes dancing around him and their playful projections, developing some newfound appreciation for his new Wild Art. Perhaps, his slightly higher yield wasn't all that useful at the moment, but Sorcerer's Guidance had already helped him more than he could have ever imagined.

It had earned him a premature meeting with Phoebe: who clearly hadn't planned to reveal her presence anytime soon: and it had even allowed Percy to climb a little higher atop the tall mountain of alchemy.

The titaness's explanation had also helped him understand the difference between mortals and gods better.

In the Colour realm, one's talent was mostly decided by their birth-grade, with their affinity taking a secondary role. However, everything changed upon attaining divinity. A mage's grade stopped being a factor, as it made no difference whether one had started off at Orange or Green.

Meanwhile, their affinity and its associated concepts became much more relevant. Percy was lucky to have a rare affinity, though he might have to reconsider what to do with his second core.

'That also answers why the Moirais' Decree and the Rings of Sacrilege are so valuable. They basically grant access to free concepts: isn't that the same as effortlessly skipping grades?'

Turning to the goddess again, he hoped that she would be willing to answer some of his questions.

"Do you know how divine ascension would change for a person with multiple cores?"

"Not much. You'll still end up with a single internal world. The additional mana should allow it to start off a little larger, but that is ultimately just a small head start. Internal worlds passively grow over time, so it'll only save you a few years. The greatest benefit is the opportunity to comprehend concepts from multiple affinities during your ascension. Of course, you can still choose to ignore all but one of your cores and turn into a regular god if it proves too difficult, but that would be a terrible waste of a priceless gift."

This was in line with Percy's suspicions. His unique situation would give him a tremendous advantage when the time came, but it seemed like the difficulty would be much higher too.

"How exactly does a god normally comprehend additional concepts? Assuming that the external ones are all nearly impossible to master, does that mean that they're stuck to those of their original affinity?"

"Not quite," Phoebe replied, before elaborating. "Fledgling gods begin their journey by exploring their existing mana types. This is known as the Self-Discovery stage, and it can easily last tens or even hundreds of thousands of years: depending on one's talent. The Elemental Acquisition stage is the one occupied by the vast majority of deities in the universe. As the name implies, it involves trying to add more affinities to their internal world."

"Wait… are you telling me that anyone can master every mana type? Doesn't that make the Moirais' Decree obsolete?"

The titaness shook her head. "Only common affinities have ever been acquired, and it's a difficult process. Each element takes more time than the last, because comprehending the new concept isn't enough by itself: you also have to resolve the growing number of conflicts that it creates with the other concepts in your internal world."

"How about you? Are you also in the Elemental Acquisition stage?" Percy asked, unable to suppress his curiosity.

"I am," Phoebe confirmed. "I went for air and water first. These are popular choices, as they allow a god to generate as much oxygen and drinking water as they need to survive off-world. For one with a mind or soul affinity such as myself, any elemental affinity also gives substance to their internal world which is extremely useful. Once that happens, cultivating food in your internal world isn't that difficult either, so it's one of the simplest ways to become completely self-sufficient in outer space."

'Nephthys was probably still in the Self-Discovery stage…' Percy realized.

He had no idea whether his now-familiar had ever finished mastering all the mind affinity concepts, but she had clearly never managed to comprehend any of the common affinities, nor had she known that it was even possible to do that: since her internal world had never turned into a physical place.

Zoris had mentioned that there was a well-known method to give substance to one's internal world. He was probably referring to this, though he had never elaborated. That said, Percy was still worried that one of his most cherished Decrees would prove redundant if obtaining new affinities was so widespread.

"How long did it take you to master air and water?"

The goddess smiled, clearly guessing what his concern was. "Air took me three hundred thousand years, and another one hundred thousand to learn all of its concepts. Water took another six hundred thousand to complete, and I comprehended earth another six hundred thousand after that, though I'm still exploring it."

As shocked as Percy was to learn of the tremendous timescales involved, he couldn't help but exhale in relief. It sounded like the Moirais' Decree was far from useless. Even if one only had common elements, they would still save themselves hundreds of thousands of years of hard work after attaining divinity.

"What about composite affinities?"

"Composite affinities are part of the process I've just described. Mastering a second common element essentially requires that the corresponding composite affinity is also understood. A mortal with a composite core or two elemental cores can basically skip some of the early parts of the Elemental Acquisition stage."

"But there aren't any affinities that involve three or more elements," Percy protested. "How would one continue adding concepts afterwards?"

"Incorrect," the titaness said. "It's debatable whether these can be referred to as 'affinities', because no mortal core can contain them and deities deal with concepts rather than mana types… however, the equivalent of three-element, four-element and five-element composite affinities do exist."

Percy's eyebrows shot up. "Doesn't that mean that a Moirai with two non-overlapping composite affinities can basically skip most of the Elemental Acquisition stage?"

“In theory. Their ascension would be extremely difficult, because they would not only have to comprehend all the concepts already present in their cores, but also the corresponding three-element and four-element combinations that they never had a chance to come in contact with as mortals. From what I have heard, even the most talented Moirai demigods are usually happy if they can retain three of their elements upon ascending, ditching the fourth one: though they have an easier time figuring it out again later. For them, half the Elemental Acquisition stage is identical to their Self-Discovery stage. They still have to master all the auxiliary concepts of their elements: things like the concept of permanence that you are familiar with.”

Phoebe had given Percy plenty to think about already, but his mouth kept spouting more questions. “What comes after the Elemental Acquisition stage then?”

The titaness sighed. “Nobody knows. The next logical stage would involve acquiring rare affinities but, like I said, no god has ever accomplished that. You either have them from your time as a mortal, or you don’t. Elemental Sources make it much easier to acquire a new affinity, but even the factions that possess them have failed to pierce through this barrier so far. So the most powerful gods in existence are merely at the peak of the Elemental Acquisition stage right now.”

“So, the Moirai…” Percy muttered.

“Yes. A demigod with two composite cores can potentially skip much of the Elemental Acquisition stage, but it’s infinitely better to have two rare affinities. In that case, you’ll still have to master all the common elements the tedious way, but you’ll end up with more concepts after all is said and done. This is the crux of why their Decree is so valuable.”

Chapter 577: A greater stage

Silence filled the dazzling cavern as Percy finally understood the true essence of the Moirais’ superiority. It wasn’t until a few minutes later that Phoebe spoke again.

“I would advise you not to absorb any common or composite affinities into your second core. A rare affinity would be best if you can ever get your hands on one, but the pure and beast affinities also work like the rare ones: in the sense that no god has ever managed to acquire them.”

Percy felt the urge to swear. Why hadn’t she mentioned this earlier?! There had been so many times when he’d been tempted to stuff a common element into his second core!

Then again, he could have only done that with his main body that had always been on Remior: under Phoebe's watchful gaze: so she would have presumably stepped in at that time.

"So are the factions that can produce gods with two rare affinities practically unbeatable?"

"Sort of." Phoebe shrugged. "What you need to remember is that mortals with two rare affinities are difficult to come by. Fewer than one in tens of thousands are born like that, and most are Red-borns. Even if they're Orange-borns or above, they still have to make it all the way to godhood. Rare affinity-granting treasures help, but those are tough to get even for the peak factions, so giving a couple to someone with two pure cores would still be a waste. The most effective approach is to give them to mortals with one rare and one pure core, so the pool of candidates is still small."

"But it's bound to happen if you have a large population and wait long enough," Percy protested.

"Indeed. The good news is that these gods still have to go through the Self-Discovery stage for both affinities, and then the entire Elemental Acquisition stage with practically no shortcuts. There are also a few other factors that I haven't mentioned which greatly limit the number of gods who can make it to the very end, though I'm sure that some will eventually succeed," Phoebe explained.

"Eventually? It hasn't happened yet?" Percy asked.

"The Moirais' Decree is fairly recent by universal standards. The first wave of gods with two rare affinities aren't that much older than me, so they're still working through the Elemental Acquisition stage. I don't think that many of them have become titans either, so the impact is relatively small for the time being."

Percy swallowed hard. Apparently, the most powerful faction in the universe was still in a period of rapid growth: they had yet to reap the brunt of the benefits of their most prized Decree!

"How will anyone compete with them once that happens?"

The titaness sighed. "With great difficulty. That is actually the same question that the other peak factions are currently asking each other. This is part of the reason why the Void Hand and Sixiang are

working so hard to slow the Moirai down. That said, there are a few ways to keep up with them. Metatron is a perfect example of that. He has a space affinity and an external concept, so his strength won't be much lower once he is done exploring all the common elements. The divine beasts are rivalling them with sheer numbers: they can produce gods faster than any other factions, and all of them begin their divine journey with the equivalent of a rare affinity. Other factions have their own means, and everyone is constantly researching new ways to grow stronger."

Percy let out a whistle. He'd been racking his brain to understand why Phoebe was so willing to teach him about the universe, and he finally had his answer.

'She's trying to motivate me!'

Now that he was aware of her subtle support and had fewer challenges on Remior, she could no longer push him to train through fear or desperation, leaving only curiosity and ambition as viable options. Obviously, she had to be aware that Percy's personality would have never allowed him to laze around, but dangling a few carrots in front of him couldn't hurt.

Moreover, he had to admit that it had worked like a charm!

All this time, Percy had inadvertently thought of the universe as a static place that had already settled into its current state millions of years ago. Evidently, that couldn't be further from the truth.

The cosmos had never stopped changing: evolving! The peak factions were always working to outgrow and defeat one another, the Moirai were rushing to create the first group of titans with two rare affinities and all the common ones, and their rivals were doing everything in their power to stop them.

However, that was just one of many similar races happening at once.

The most skilled alchemists were working tirelessly to perfect their brewing yield and master one of the most powerful and elusive concepts in existence, while loners and smaller factions like Metatron's were biding their time and searching for opportunities to climb to the centre stage.

Greater springs were forming alliances and fighting over Elemental Sources and Rings of Sacrilege, while lesser springs like Remior were trying to remain hidden for long enough to improve their means of

advancement and grow into greater springs: with the number of such factions constantly increasing as a result.

Finally, demonic infestations and Cardinal Devils ran rampant across the cosmos, bringing worlds of all shapes and sizes to ruin, threatening sapients everywhere.

'What a crafty woman…' Percy thought, catching a satisfied glint in Phoebe's eyes. The titaness looked young, but he couldn't let himself forget how old she was.

For as long as Percy could remember, his goal had been to attain divinity. Now that the faintest outline of his success was starting to appear on the horizon, it was time for him to start thinking past that: to prepare for a greater stage. After all, another regular god wouldn't help Remior that much, nor would Percy ever be satisfied with the bare minimum.

Thinking of all the possibilities, his heart thrummed with eagerness, yearning to soar across the stars and compete with the best of the best. That said, there were still several obstacles to overcome before he even reached the Clear grade: let alone forged his internal world.

'It'll be harder for me than anyone else,' he realized, his expression turning grim.

He would have to master more concepts than the average god, and he had no intention of giving up on any of them to go for an easier promotion. Percy hadn't gone through all this trouble to create these opportunities for himself just to toss them in the garbage.

The good news was that he might be able to have each of his aspects focus on their own affinities, while still integrating all of them into the same internal world. Phoebe had also given him a few precious clues on how to improve his odds.

Meditating at an Elemental Source was apparently beneficial to gods trying to comprehend new concepts: not just mortals developing their spells: and Percy had exclusive access to the Mirror Lake!

'I'll need to look for more Rings and Sources,' he decided. Those would be the keys to managing so many concepts at once. He'd just need to station clones and familiars at each of them at the time of his ascension.

Granted, some were inherently problematic. It was commonly believed that Sixiang had the Source of the beast affinity. Even worse, nobody but them had ever attained divinity with that concept, so Percy would eventually need to sneak on their main planet.

He didn't even know whether he would keep the pure affinity or swap it for a proper rare element, but it wouldn't hurt to at least look for the ice, water or air Sources. The first would be the most useful one, but the others would still help.

Thinking about all of that, Percy found himself eager to start sending clones out again. That had always been his plan, of course, but it certainly helped to have a clearer purpose.

'Let's not get ahead of myself. Leaving aside all the issues on Remior, I still need to complete my artificial advancement for any of this to be relevant, otherwise I'll have to look for other ways to extend my lifespan.'

Even if everything went well, it would still be tens of thousands of years before he reached the Clear grade, so there was no rush.

"Thanks for the lesson. I promise I'll cherish this information," he told the titaness.

"Good." Phoebe nodded. "See that you don't get carried away daydreaming. I'll be the first to admit that your potential is boundless, but that's all the more reason to remain cautious and diligent enough to ensure that you don't waste it. I expect great things from you, Percy, and I look forward to the day when you are ready to join our ranks."

"Wait!" Percy yelled, hurriedly getting up upon realizing that she was about to leave.

"Hm?"

"I almost forgot," he said, slapping his forehead. "Could you help me segregate my memories? Nephthys no longer has the mind affinity, and I don't have anybody else to ask."

“Ah, that. Right when I thought you had given up on separating.” Phoebe chuckled, her melodious laughter bouncing off the crystalline walls. “Under different circumstances, I would have probably set this as a goal to get you to work harder, but I suppose that giving you a hand is the least I can do: considering that your current predicament is partially my fault.”

“You’ll help?” Percy asked, his heart skipping a beat.

He hadn’t expected the solution to one of the biggest problems plaguing his life to literally appear out of thin air: or rather, to have secretly been by his side for over a year now.

Micky had yet to set out for Twilight City, so they might even get themselves separated before they reunited with Nesha. Then again, that only made Percy regret not sending his human body instead of the elemental one outside the Fungal Spire.

Sadly, he hadn’t had a choice. His mutated eyes helped with alchemy, so this arrangement had made more sense.

“Sure,” the goddess replied with a shrug. “Do you want to get started right away?”

Percy was about to say ‘yes’, when he realized that rearranging his memories would probably affect his ability to maintain his empowered connections to the Vault. This was the same reason why he had delayed the acquisition of his fourth trait.

“How about a few months from now?” he asked.

Phoebe nodded. “Wise choice. I’ll check up on you later then.”

Not even saying goodbye, the titaness practically faded away on the spot. Technically, Percy had no way of making sure that she had truly left, but he didn’t think that she would have lied to him just to stay hidden in a corner.

Plopping back down, he allowed himself to relax after realizing that the meeting with the titaness had left him somewhat tense. Not that she'd given him any reason to be scared or worried, but this was his first time facing such a powerful being with his main body.

'Well, that was intense,' he thought, exhaling deeply.

Phoebe had given him a lot to consider, though it didn't look like he had much time to do that right now. Nephthys suddenly relayed an image of Freddy walking down the labyrinth of tunnels that her subjects had presumably just sent her.

Percy promptly asked his familiar to ensure than no Starry Wasp attacked his friend by accident. Nephthys obviously knew what she was supposed to do after accommodating the plump vendor's visits for over a year now, but Percy didn't want to leave anything up to chance, since Freddy wouldn't be able to protect himself from a Starry Soldier.

Afterwards, he packed up his stuff: just a couple of empty vials from his most recent cleansing session, really: in preparation to relocate. He planned to spend the next few weeks teaching the alchemists new tricks, along with a couple of other projects that would also improve their output.

Chapter 578: Teacher

Percy was back to his house in the settlement, preparing for tomorrow's lecture. He was nervously pacing back and forth in his bedroom, trying to come up with a plan.

There was obviously no real reason to worry, since he would merely embarrass himself a little at worst: it wasn't like his life was on the line, nor was Percy someone to shy away from danger. That said, he had never done this sort of thing before, and he'd rather not make a fool of himself in front of his students if he could help it.

'I'll start off with a demonstration,' he decided.

Percy would inevitably have to deconstruct his approach and teach the alchemists all of the principles applicable to them over the following weeks, but it wasn't a bad idea to begin with a practical session where he wouldn't even have to talk much.

It would help him break the ice and overcome his nervousness, while also sparking his students' curiosity and establishing his competence. After that, they'd be more inclined to pay attention.

'Sounds like a plan. I'll start with something impossible to mess up: like brewing healing potions.'

Even if his yield was a little lower than usual, it would still be high enough that nobody would notice. Besides, they would all be busy gawking at his oversized cauldron and all the strange techniques that he would be using.

After that, he could pause to give them an overview of all the enchantments and alchemic principles involved: the very topics that he would be covering in greater detail over the rest of the course. Finally, he would complete the lesson with more alchemy. Compressing his potions and brewing some Aurora Dew should be impressive enough.

'Orin said that the first lecture will be two hours long and be attended by around two thousand people.'

Percy had naturally asked his mentor to arrange everything. He could have just taught the six elders and had them pass the knowledge down to the rest, but he felt that it would be more efficient to directly teach as many people as possible, as it would help his lessons spread through the settlement faster.

Two thousand attendees were a lot for somebody who had never given a lecture before, but it was only a tiny fraction of the alchemists living in the settlement. Percy wasn't going to personally teach everyone, so his audience would consist of only the most senior Guild members.

Orin had emphasised that they could end the lecture early if necessary, but Percy wanted to make the most of his time. The sooner he passed his knowledge to his first-generation students, the sooner they could take over the mantle of teaching the rest while he focused on other things.

'Great. As long as I can get through tomorrow without any issues, they'll be too busy trying to pick their jaws off the floor to care if I stutter in future lessons,' he thought, standing in front of a fancy mirror in his bedroom. 'Now I just need to make myself presentable.'

Drawing phantom mana to his hand, he created a small, grey blade, bringing it to his beard. It had been years since he'd last groomed his facial hair, partly because he hadn't had any reason to care about his appearance while on the run, and partly because it had served him well as a disguise.

That said, he knew that looking like a caveman in his lectures wouldn't be ideal, as people had been walking on eggshells around him for a while now. The fact that he'd been a wanted criminal until recently: while also being as strong as a Violet: didn't help, yet he knew that his appearance had contributed at least a little.

Sadly, it was too late to take back the first impression that he'd given all the Guild members who had already seen him, but he had luckily spent most of the past year underground.

'Hopefully, most of them will be able to focus on my cauldron rather than shaking in their boots.'

Once he was happy with his trimmed beard, he cut his hair a little as well: just enough that it would look neat instead of unkempt: though he was too used to it being long to get rid of it completely.

After a quick shower, he tied it back before turning his Cloak corporeal. One of the best features of his enchanted clothes was that he didn't even have to take them off to wash himself: he could easily allow soap, water, and even his skin to phase through the magical fabric if he wanted. In its ethereal state, his phantom mana was only obstructed by his soul which flowed deeper inside his body.

'It doesn't even look that bad. I can probably wear this to the lecture.'

The Cloak's dull grey colour was arguably a little mundane: especially to the Guild's alchemists that had all come from noble backgrounds: but that was fine. Wearing something simple would only make Percy more approachable. Besides, the faint sheen of his magical silk coupled with the intricate runes that he'd woven into its very texture gave it a refined appearance, so he wouldn't look like a complete vagrant. On top of that, he regularly fed phantom mana into the self-repair enchantments of his constructs to maintain them, so they always looked brand-new.

Examining himself in the mirror, he nodded in satisfaction upon confirming that he resembled an actual person again: for the first time in Phoebe-knew how long. His slit pupils and the soft grey glow of his irises would still be a little intimidating to the uninitiated, but there was no way to completely hide his

mutation, nor did he care enough to bother. At least, his eye colour wasn't nearly as strange as it had once been.

'I've still got over twelve hours left. I should do some test runs.'

Percy didn't really need to practice brewing for the lesson: it had been his bread and butter for months: but he did need to trim down his speech and figure out how to communicate the information more effectively.

Hell, he wasn't feeling very confident in having even a regular conversation right now, since he hadn't socialized much recently. He'd spent most of his time either working alone or communicating with his clones and familiar through the cords.

Thankfully, his elemental body had talked to his relatives and the people in his family's towns over the past few months, so he wasn't entirely out of touch. The human body had even had the occasional chats with Freddy whenever the Honey Roll vendor had brought him stuff to the hive, which was something.

'Nephthys, how is the delivery coming along?' Percy asked a few hours later, deciding to take a short break.

He wasn't going to spend all his time in the Guild teaching. He also had another major project to tend to: one that would hopefully increase the wasps' nectar output somewhat: he was going to draw a massive mana-gathering array around the Fungal Spire, to contain more of the colourful motes and enrich the density of ambient mana in the hive and settlement.

The Starry Wasps already did a good job harvesting most of the airborne mana before it leaked out of their kingdom, and the humans had enchanted the buildings in the settlement to retain and use as many of the colourful motes as possible, but Percy was confident that he could increase the mana density by another ten to twenty percent using the Vault's potent magiscript.

He could draw the required enchantments using his own mana, but that would make their maintenance less efficient. He would rather use some of the new runes that he'd recently mastered in the artificial world, which were less potent but could be powered automatically by ambient mana. Naturally, it made more sense to carve such enchantments on magical minerals: which the Starry Wasps had an inexhaustible supply of.

Not all the ambient mana in the depths of the Fungal Spire could be harvested by the bugs. In fact, most of it remained trapped in the floors and walls of the hive, slowly coalescing into glowing crystals and magical metals that the insects constantly had to get rid of.

The materials were usually just wasted: pushed aside by the creatures into an ever-expanding region around their underground kingdom: since the bugs had no use for the minerals and the humans had always avoided messing with the Starry Wasps. However, Percy saw no reason for that to continue.

Some of the books that he had recently studied mentioned the most common magical minerals in the universe. Apparently, there weren't too many different types, nor did they change that much from one world to another. More importantly, the kinds of enchantments that each material was suitable for were well understood, and the hive produced a nearly inexhaustible supply of most of them.

Crafting actively-used equipment such as Percy's clothes and weapons out of magical minerals wasn't a great idea, since he would have to frequently feed said materials into the self-repairs to maintain them: not to mention how impractical it would be during a fight, or how poorly his tools would scale once he advanced to the higher grades.

However, for passive enchantments like the mana-gathering array that he was going to draw, or the ones on the buildings in the settlement which only degraded slowly over time, the dust in the air was more than enough when combined with the constant flow of ambient mana.

'We've found the colours you asked for. Our Workers and Soldiers will start funnelling the materials to the surface as soon as you give the word,' Nephthys replied.

'Alright. Hold on for now. I'll need to coordinate with the Guild before we move on to the next step,' Percy replied.

He had to be the one completing each rune and pouring his willpower into them so that the enchantments would activate properly, but he could still borrow manpower from the settlement to speed up the earlier stages.

'Between the alchemy lessons and runecrafting, I'll be busy until the clones are back.'

After that, he would not only be free to absorb his fourth trait, but Phoebe had also promised to help him segregate his memories.

Chapter 579: Anqi

Anqi was sitting in the front row of the lecture theatre, along with the remaining elders. He and four others wore violet robes: the only ones in the entire Guild: while the most recent addition to their group stood out in blue. Ostanes still complained from time to time about Orin's promotion, though nobody else was bothered by it as much.

Sure, it was highly atypical to count a Blue among their ranks for the first time in Remior's history, and it could even hurt the prestige of their position slightly, but this was ultimately a small price to pay as far as Anqi was concerned.

If it hadn't been for Percy's close ties to his former mentor, there was a good chance that he would have adopted a far harsher stance toward the Guild. If anything, Orin had contributed more than any other elder over the past few months, merely by smoothing out their relationship with the young man.

'Public lectures are still a little overkill though,' he thought as he glanced at the empty lectern, waiting for their teacher to arrive. His colleagues probably felt the same way.

It wasn't like they were looking down on Percy. Anyone with a functioning brain would readily admit that the young man had accomplished many impressive feats in his relatively short life.

Saving the Starry Wasps from extinction and exposing Machaon's crimes were things that Remior would never be able to repay Percy for, and this was without even considering his recent impact on the hive and the Alchemists' Guild.

Whether it was the increased production of nectar, the miraculous recipe that he had shared, or the alchemic principles that he was about to teach, the Red-born had already revolutionized the field of alchemy more than any other figure in their planet's past.

Adding the Cascading Cracks technique that had already massively reduced everyone's elixir consumption and the advanced runecrafting knowledge that he had disseminated, Percy had arguably

given all of humanity infinitely more than they deserved: given how unfairly the noble Houses had treated him.

However, Anqi still wasn't expecting much from the young man's demonstration.

That was not to say that the content of the course itself wasn't immensely valuable, but Percy could have just written everything down: the information regarding his supposedly-special cauldron, the alchemic principles, and whatever else he had discovered in his travels: and passed the documents to the elders.

With their superior experience in the field, it wouldn't take long for them to master everything and relay it to their subordinates more effectively. As for Percy's current brewing skill: nobody thought much of it.

'How high could his yield even be? Forty percent? Forty-five, at most?'

Orin had informed them that Percy had been a qualified alchemist even before his escape from the Guild, and he was bound to have improved since. The young man had sounded especially proud of his skills too, though he'd never stated his exact yield.

That said, there was a limit to how much he could have grown in a couple of decades: even after taking into account all the knowledge and techniques that he had incorporated into his craft. After all, Percy had spent most of that time on the run or fighting an army of hostile nobles several grades above his own.

How much free time could he have even invested into honing his skills?

Of course, a forty-five percent yield was nothing to scoff at. It was higher than most senior alchemists sitting behind the elders in the auditorium. Nobody in the Guild: including Anqi and his colleagues: had been nearly as proficient in their youth, so they all understood that Percy would surpass them eventually. It was even more impressive that he had accomplished this under such harsh circumstances.

No matter what happened during today's lecture, nobody was going to think less of their young overlord. Even so, Anqi felt that this whole thing was rather pointless. It was nothing more than Percy's desire to show off after getting carried away by his recent fame.

‘Oh well… To be young is to be hot-blooded. I suppose there’s no harm in letting him have his fun,’ he thought with a shrug.

Two minutes before the lesson was supposed to start, Percy entered the lecture theatre, making his way to the front. A wave of silence rippled through the room, with naught but the Red-born’s footsteps echoing through the vast hall.

The place had been relatively quiet to begin with: at least more than during a typical lecture: as the attendees were all senior alchemists, and nobody had wanted to disrespect the elders. That said, even the occasional hushed whisper had died down as everyone looked at their young lecturer with bated breaths.

Percy himself also looked tenser than Anqi had ever seen him. It was a bit jarring to see the same figure who had singlehandedly challenged the authority of the gods and forcefully seized control of the Fungal Spire acting nervous over a simple alchemy lesson.

‘I guess he’s still human beneath all the mutations and spells…’ Anqi thought, the corners of his lips curling up.

It was quite a relief. He wasn’t sure when, but he had inadvertently started seeing Percy as more of a monster than a young man. He doubted that his colleagues had felt any different.

“Ahem.” The Red-born cleared his throat upon reaching the lectern. “Is this thing on?” he asked, speaking into a sound amplification enchantment carved onto the wood. Not even waiting for a reply, the young man frowned, gathering some mana in his fingers and using it to draw a new set of runes in a different language.

The previous enchantments had actually worked just fine, though nobody felt the need to speak up about it. Anqi wasn’t sure what everyone else’s motivations were, but he was more than a little curious to see the Red-born’s famous magiscript skills in practice.

A few strokes later, Percy nodded in satisfaction before speaking again. “HOW ABOUT NOW? IS IT ANY BETTER?!”

Most faces around the room winced, Anqi's among them.

'So potent!' he thought with a gasp. 'Just a simple enchantment he drew in a couple of seconds… and he barely poured some Yellow mana into it!'

Were all the tiny runes woven into the young man's clothes as powerful as these? No wonder he was so strong!

Oblivious to his thoughts, Percy adjusted the amount of mana he fed into the symbols, as well as the precise locations were it was being injected as he scratched the back of his head with his free hand.

"Sorry about that! Hopefully, it'll be better now."

Lifting his palm above an empty spot next to the lectern, he began pouring a different kind of grey mana onto the floor. Leaving aside its atypical colour, it greatly resembled ice mana, though it wasn't flowing out of the young man's cores: it seemed to simply pop into existence somewhere in his torso.

From what Anqi and his colleagues had pieced together about Percy's abilities, the strange mana type was a fusion of ice and soul mana that he created with the help of his crow, though nobody fully understood how Orin's student could tap into this power in the bird's absence.

The resource slowly accumulated into a block of grey ice, the wooden planks creaking beneath its weight as it grew tall enough to reach Percy's navel. Placing his hand on the structure, he caused yet another object to seemingly manifest out of thin air: a spherical tool affixed to a tripod, which the young man promptly set atop the icy cube.

The round object was covered in countless tiny enchantments, so Anqi didn't think that the Red-born had created this one on the spot like the frozen table. He must've taken this one out of that advanced storage device that he'd mentioned.

Twisting the lid off the spherical tool, Percy dumped dozens of glowing mushrooms inside it.

‘Don’t tell me! Is THAT the cauldron he was talking about?!’

It was ridiculous! Hadn’t Orin taught his mentee that cauldrons came in a standard size for a reason? Had Percy gotten so carried away by his desire to impress them that he thought he could brew tens of times as many ingredients at once?

‘He’s going to end up with nothing but inert sludge!’ Anqi thought, giving the other elders uncertain looks, his colleagues promptly reciprocating the sentiment.

They weren’t alone either. The entire lecture theatre broke into murmurs for the first time since the Red-born’s arrival, everyone seemingly having forgotten about their previous apprehension.

Meanwhile, Percy was done with his preparations, screwing the lid back onto his construct. With a wave of his hand, he caused everything to disappear: the block of grey ice, the tripod and the large cauldron.

At least, that was what it had looked like at first, though a spherical volume of squished mushrooms remained visible right inside where the cauldron was supposed to be, seemingly suspended mid-air.

The people at the very back of the room would probably have a hard-time seeing the exact alchemical reactions about to take place inside the tool, though most of the alchemists here were at Green or Blue, so they should all be able to follow the gist of what the Red-born was about to do.

“Er… I’m sure that you all have a lot of questions about my cauldron and what I’m about to show you, but I decided that it’s best to begin the lesson with a practical demonstration. I won’t be brewing anything special: just a bunch of healing potions: so try to enjoy the session for now. I’ll pick my actions apart and explain everything in detail later.”

Percy waited until he got a few nods back from the audience before beginning. Instantly, his entire demeanour seemed to shift, the nervousness disappearing entirely from his expression as a palpable wave of pressure radiated from him.

His eyes dug into the transparent cauldron with piercing focus as his hands turned into blurs. Mana spilled forth from his palms, splitting off into numerous tiny streams that rushed into the invisible enchantments.

Not missing a beat, the contents of the oversized construct stirred, marking the start of the most bizarre brewing session Anqi had ever seen in his long life.

Chapter 580: Paracelsus

Paracelsus struggled to peel his eyes off the young man's cauldron, though he did his best, curious to see what his colleagues thought of the demonstration. Tossing his fellow elders a fleeting glance, he quickly confirmed that they were as shocked as he was: including the boy's mentor. Apparently, Orin hadn't watched his student brew in a long time either.

Nobody appeared nearly as flabbergasted as Anqi though.

The willowy man's face had turned pale as milk, his usually stern and collected expression twisted by disbelief. The old alchemist had clearly even forgotten his usual habit of rubbing his long, dark beard for a moment, too busy coming to terms with what they were witnessing.

'Can't say I blame him,' Paracelsus thought.

It had barely been five minutes, and it looked like Percy was almost done converting what had probably been around two hundred mushrooms into nearly as many doses of healing potions.

Paracelsus wasn't sure he could complete a regular brewing session this fast, let alone one involving dozens of times as many ingredients, yet that wasn't even the most impressive aspect of the young man's demonstration.

He was attacking and eliminating several solid lumps per second, before most of them had a chance to fully form. Even with a front row seat, the senses of a Violet, and millennia of experience, Paracelsus had a tough time following the lecturer's movements and trying to comprehend the effects of the cauldron's varied enchantments that were being activated one after the other.

Paracelsus didn't envy the Greens at the back of the room. At least the Blues or those closer to the lectern probably had an easier time learning something from the Red-born's unprecedented display.

Before anyone knew it, Percy was already pouring the finished potions into the vials.

'If I'm not mistaken, his cauldron has fifty times the standard capacity…' Paracelsus thought, counting how many doses Percy had bottled up.

A hundred and sixty-five.

That would indicate a yield of fifty-six percent when adjusted for elixirs, which would put Percy on equal footing with Flamel: the most skilled among the elders: despite the insane amount of ingredients that he had processed. Meanwhile, Paracelsus had been stuck at fifty-four percent for centuries.

Moreover, Percy had clicked his tongue upon measuring his output, indicating dissatisfaction with his performance. Did that mean that he could usually do better than that?

'It's crazy. If we take his yield, his cauldron's size, and his speed into account, he can easily outperform a hundred junior alchemists while consuming half as much nectar!'

Scanning the Blues and Greens behind him, Paracelsus noticed the same awed expressions that he saw on the Violets' faces, complete with the occasional jaw hanging loose.

Of course.

Everyone here was experienced enough to recognize the importance of Percy's demonstration. If they could all replicate even a tiny fraction of his abilities, they might not have to recruit and train that many new Guild members to meet Remior's ever-increasing demand for cleansing resources.

"I can do a little better usually, but I suppose that it doesn't really matter. This should give you a good idea of what I'll be teaching you in the next few weeks," Percy suddenly spoke into the enchantments that he had previously carved into the lectern, his voice reverberating through the lecture theatre. Thousands of stunned pairs of eyes focused on him as he continued.

"This is a cauldron forged out of my own fused mana, enchanted personally by me. It allows me to hide it from both Mana Sense and regular vision. Sadly, you won't be able to create something similar

without both of my affinities, nor will you be able to turn my mana invisible if I give you a similar construct."

"Does this mean that we cannot learn to brew like you?" somebody asked, sounding disappointed.

"I didn't say that," Percy replied, his lips parting into a grin. "I've recently studied runes that can be fuelled by anyone's mana, meaning that they can be operated by other people. The lack of my phantom mana is still a problem, but there are plenty of transparent materials with magical properties out there that would make for a decent substitute. It shouldn't be too difficult for me to make a few thousand simpler versions of my cauldron for everyone in this room, but I would still advise you to reach out to House Etna to get more. I don't intend to personally equip everyone in the Guild."

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Percy had directed the last part at the elders, getting a nod back from Flamel. Most of the Great Houses had done their best to maintain a neutral stance in the matter between Percy and Machaon, clearly struggling to decide which party was the least risky to support.

However, House Etna was a notable exception. The runecrafting family had been more than a little thrilled to get their hands on a copy of Percy's magiscript books. Their patriarch had even gone so far as to publicly denounce the crimes of his fellow White, recognize Percy's control of the Fungal Spire, and: if rumours were to be believed: privately reach out to Archibald, offering to ally with House Avalon.

Getting him to help with their runecrafting projects shouldn't be too difficult.

"What are the limitations of the watered-down cauldrons?" another person asked, this time from the front row. It was actually Orin who had spoken, clearly feeling more at ease than anyone else in his former student's presence.

"They'll be much smaller than mine. I think you'll still be able to use the scaling principle to brew a couple of times more ingredients than normal. The shape of the cauldrons will be the same, though the number and complexity of the enchantments will also have to be lowered if you want me to produce so many cauldrons in a reasonable timeframe. I'll still make sure to include the bare minimum necessary for everyone to dip their toes into the topics I'm going to teach."

After saying that, he went over some of those topics, giving everyone a brief overview of the alchemic principles that he had learned in his travels. The bonding principle was the key requirement for brewing Aurora Dew, but many of the others were just as important.

He had already shown them the scaling principle, yet he claimed that it was only thanks to the consolidation principle that he could brew so many ingredients at once without incurring any additional losses.

The compression principle would allow them to brew higher-grade potions: something that few alchemists had even thought possible: though Percy claimed that the subpar cauldrons he was about to give them wouldn't be able to withstand anything above Yellow.

Finally, the restructuring principle would allow them to convert their potions to inhalables, pills and other states that would potentially open many new doors for the Alchemists' Guild. It was admittedly the least groundbreaking of the new principles but, according to Percy, every little bit would indirectly affect their brewing yield.

"Don't expect to benefit as much as me without my ocular mutation and its associated spell but raising your yield by a few percentage points should be doable. If you can also brew twice or thrice as many ingredients, shave a few seconds off your brewing sessions and double the number of alchemists in the Guild, we'll already be able to get enough elixirs for most people on Remior, and Aurora Dew for all the people who used to get undiluted elixirs before. As for getting Aurora Dew for everyone: that's more of a long-term project."

Paracelsus knew that not everyone in the room was happy with the young man's focus. They'd all come from noble backgrounds, so they were used to disregarding commoners and low-borns.

Consequently, the majority of Percy's audience was dissatisfied with his goal of producing enough resources for everyone on the planet. It would have been far simpler for them to just ignore everyone but the Yellow-borns and some Orange-borns.

Another thing Paracelsus knew that his fellow alchemists weren't very thrilled about, was the degradation of their profession. If Percy succeeded at teaching them everything he had promised, they would increase their yield and output more than they had ever thought possible, but that was ultimately a doubled-edged sword.

The abundance of nectar, elixirs and Aurora Dew would probably eat into their profits, forcing them to put more effort if they wanted to keep enjoying the same lavish lifestyle that they had grown to love.

That said, nobody dared to utter a word of protest. Percy had made his stance on the matter clear over a year ago, so everyone had come to the lecture knowing what to expect. Challenging the person in control of Remior's entire supply of nectar would be beyond foolish. It could get them kicked out of the auditorium: or worse, the Guild.

After going over his plans for the course, Percy finished the lecture with another demonstration. This time, he went with more ambitious recipes too, showing them how to brew Green healing potions and, of course, the fabled Aurora Dew.

Paracelsus noticed that the young man's yield had markedly improved compared to earlier as well, proving that he had previously underperformed, likely due to stress. However, he also realized something else after watching Percy.

As impressive as the spectacle had been, Paracelsus had spotted an area that could use a lot of work. Percy didn't seem to be aware of his shortcoming either, so he would probably improve rapidly once somebody informed him about it.

'Might as well. It's the least I can do after everything he's given us,' Paracelsus thought, waiting for everyone else to leave the Auditorium.

"Got any questions?" the young man asked upon noticing him approach.

"Not exactly." Paracelsus shook his head. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think you used your domain while brewing earlier."