Wanderer 58

Chapter 58: Soul channels

‘I can’t believe she couldn’t even wait a week.’

Carving that sign for the drowsy girl hadn’t taken him longer than ten minutes. It wasn’t a big deal for him, but it had only proven just how lazy she was, having not bothered to do it herself after so many months.

In any case, Percy had considered it a great investment of his time. The sheer satisfaction he’d draw by not having to look at that abomination every day would pay dividends for a while.

Or so he’d thought. One could only imagine his shock upon seeing his work desecrated with a new patch the very next morning.

‘At least I got some useful information out of it.’

Apparently not one who liked owing people, the girl had called him over the following night, giving him a free tip to thank him for the donation. She’d informed Percy of a location on the northwestern side of the Fungal Spire to be wary of. On a map of the second level, she’d circled a couple dozen mushrooms, telling him to avoid wandering there by mistake.

In terms of elevation, those platforms were much higher than the rest of the second level, bringing them closer to the third. Consequently, Starry Soldiers were known to roam those mushrooms, making them extremely dangerous for an Orange core like Percy. However, they were considered part of the second level on paper, because they could only be accessed from below. Their closest neighbours on the third level were too far away, making it impractical to build bridges between them.

“Good to know.” he’d grinned at the time.

The girl – Nesha – had only told him out of concern for his safety, but Percy had heard something entirely different from what she’d intended. He could hunt Starry Soldiers on the second level!

His profits had plateaued for a while now, and he was already considering giving the Yellow beasts a shot sooner or later. What worried him the most was he wouldn't be able to hunt them while keeping all his trump cards secret, and the third level was always crowded. The location Nesha had so graciously shared would let him do it with the same privacy he'd come to enjoy!

'I'm still not ready though.'

Percy understood the soldiers would rip him to shreds as he was. He'd only consider approaching them once he could use Circulation with both cores. Sadly, his results in that department were rather mixed. He'd already finished clearing his second set of channels and he was currently busy tempering them. This was the easiest step, as it only involved pushing mana through them, forcing them to expand little by little, until they couldn't grow any wider. It was the next and final step that stumped him, however.

'Is it even possible to use Circulation with soul mana?!'

Percy had known from the very beginning that each affinity introduced its own variables into the technique, requiring some adjustments to be made. Elaine and Archibald had already learned the hard way, having unblocked a very different network of channels to his own. They'd also been forced to discover the correct pattern for their mana by themselves. In fact, his cousin had still not managed to solve the issue by the time he'd left the Avalon House.

Consequently, he'd already expected his soul affinity would come with its own set of challenges. However, he couldn't have predicted just how many roadblocks he would encounter in his quest. First, there was the issue with tempering his soul rather than his body, but luckily his clones had passively helped him do that. More problems popped up back when he began unblocking the channels though. Each affinity might have its own set of pathways, but at least they were typically fixed in place. This wasn't the case for Percy.

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'They're like intestines!' he'd noted when he first tried opening them.

The ones he had cleared as a child were still ok, as they branched out from his sternum to his soul's extremities. In other words, both their ends were anchored in set locations, making these channels relatively static, much like other affinities. In his analogy, they were like the large intestine.

However, the rest of his channels – the ones that looped around his soul – were a lot more fluid. Like the small intestine, they shuffled around with each 'bowel movement'. Their connections were still fixed in relation to one another, but there was a lot of leeway for them to bend and turn, making the entire network look very different from one moment to the next.

'How am I even meant to find the correct pattern like this?!'

Locating and clearing a single channel wasn't that hard, but to use Circulation he had to look at all of them at the same time and find a pattern that took the whole system into account.

'CAW! CAW!'

Micky sent him an image of his next targets, pulling him out of his thoughts. Shrugging, he began running towards the bridge.

'I suppose I've still got some time left to figure this out.'

It would be a few more months until he finished tempering his channels. He sure hoped he'd work out the correct pattern by then.

Over the next several hours, Percy absentmindedly hunted the Starry Workers along with his familiar. By now, he'd been doing this for so long the arduous task was firmly embedded into his routine.

Keeping Circulation active with his second core. Tempering his soul channels. Rushing from one mushroom to the next. Forming his weapons. Executing the bugs swiftly. Feeding them to the crow. Extracting the nectar from their glands. None of it required much focus, allowing him to keep thinking about the issue.

‘Maybe what I need is a change in perspective. I’ve been thinking of my soul affinity in the same terms as my pure affinity, but it’s clearly a different beast.’

From his experience travelling between worlds, Percy knew that disembodied souls tended to perceive time and space very differently from living people. In that state, a single moment could stretch into days, while a single step could bridge unfathomable distances. In the same vein, it was perhaps a mistake trying to fit his soul and its corresponding channels into the same mould as his body’s.

He grimaced.

‘That’s easier said than done…’

It wasn’t like he hadn’t tried sensing his soul more deeply in the past. However, inhabiting his own body was very different than drifting outside Remior, or fighting to possess others with his clones. In the latter case, his soul was but a fragment, free to move within a much larger vessel, in constant contact with an external – often hostile – soul. Here, his soul existed alone, in its rightful vessel, without much space to move or anything else touching it.

‘CAW!’

Micky called out to him once again. Percy checked the four vials in his pocket. Three were filled to the brim with nectar as the fourth one was a little over halfway there. The sun was also about to set.

‘Shit, I’m going to be late.’

Handing his familiar a rejuvenation potion, he bid him farewell in a hurry, before drinking a diluted elixir and rushing back to the Guild. It was still his first week brewing under Orin’s supervision and he didn’t want to keep his mentor waiting.

After entering the settlement, he sprinted to the old alchemist’s house. He did grab a Honey Roll, only because he was so hungry he might faint during the session otherwise, but he didn’t have time for a chat with Freddy tonight.

Nor would he visit the official stores today. Due to alchemy eating into his schedule, he was already earning less than 400 points per hunt, so he no longer needed to stop by every night.

He barely managed to swallow the last bite of his meal by the time he made it to Orin's door. He downed the enlightenment potion too while waiting for the man to open.

"Another busy day?" his mentor asked with a smile after seeing his student out of breath once more.

Percy nodded, having already flushed out all thoughts of souls and mana channels out of his mind, replacing them with a different set of problems. Right now, the only thing he was thinking about was how to mix those damn ingredients properly.

Making his way to the cauldron, he rolled up his sleeves, fully aware he was going to get his ass kicked here too. But he wouldn't let this bother him.

Taking a deep breath, he prepared himself before tossing the ingredients in.

'I'm going to reach the top, one step at a time.'