Wanderer 62

Chapter 62: Crystal

It wasn't easy telling day and night apart on this world. Percy had no idea how many suns there were, as the brown clouds perpetually obscured the sky. Still, it was never dark, as the light seemed to be absorbed and then disseminated by the substance, giving it a permanent glow.

Suffice to say, he didn't know how the natives kept track of time. But he guessed it was their equivalent of a night when he saw the old lady go to sleep on the floor, not long after he'd begun observing her. The rest of the village soon grew quieter too, as he turned around to show some common courtesy. He didn't think she'd mind being stared at, but it felt downright creepy to do that as she rested.

Several hours later, people started waking up. What drew his attention was a young girl walking his way. She was actually the one who'd tried petting the furball when he first arrived here, only to be scolded by an adult.

She seemed to have learned her lesson too, as this time she stood some distance from him, eyeing him curiously without daring to move closer. Feeling bad for the girl, Percy patted her head, prompting her to smile brightly, two dimples forming on her cheeks.

A few minutes later, more kids arrived. This time it was a pair of boys, slightly older than the girl. Probably siblings too, as they'd come together from the same house and looked identical to one another. In fact, Percy was being conservative. He was confident they were twins, but maybe he wasn't that good at telling the natives apart.

In any case, they joined the first girl outside the hut. Soon, the old lady also woke up, inviting them all inside. All four of them sat down on the floor, forming a circle. It was quite cramped in there – especially with the cat-creature floating just inches above their heads – but they still left enough room for one more person.

Nobody spoke as they waited for the final member to arrive. It wasn't until half an hour later that the man from last night helped his daughter along, escorting her to the old lady's hut once more. Only after the teenager joined the others in the circle did her father leave.

'Is she teaching them how to become healers?'

This suited Percy just fine, as he looked forward to the lesson. After exchanging a few words with the newcomer, the old lady addressed the rest of the kids. Next, she pulled some mana from her core, forming a cyan blob in her hand.

The students followed her lead, although the sick girl seemed to have more trouble controlling her mana. Despite having the highest grade in the hut, her condition wasn't doing her any favours. However, this wasn't what Percy was focused on.

'They all have a pure affinity!' he'd rub his paws together if he could.

Doubling his concentration, his gaze locked onto the old lady's palm, unwilling to miss whatever she was about to do. Her first move was to will the blob into a solid, forming a cyan sphere the size of a tangerine. Percy nodded. This wasn't very different from his own constructs.

However, what she did next made him furrow his brow. She placed her other hand on top of the ball, and then began pressing them both together, trying to squeeze the sphere tighter. The kids also mirrored her actions, but he didn't pay them any attention, preferring to learn from the expert.

The strangest part was that Percy wasn't exactly sure what she was doing. Her muscles were tense and her face red, suggesting some level of physical activity. Yet, her core was also shining a touch more brightly, which typically happened when somebody was using their mana to form a spell.

'She's exerting both physical strength and willpower!'

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At first nothing changed, making Percy wonder whether they were pulling his leg. However, a minute or two later he noticed the sphere had shrunk somewhat. It contained the same amount of mana as before, but it was denser.

The old lady kept going. She was already drenched in sweat, but her focus didn't waver. She was probably used to doing this. Over time, the ball continued to shrink, until it was roughly half its original size an hour later. Only then did she stop, letting the ball roll out of her hand.

The marble made a crisp sound as it hit the floor, bouncing once before rolling to the centre of the circle.

'What the hell?! It's stable!!!'

In his experience, whenever he stopped paying attention to his constructs, they instantly crumbled into motes of mana before dissipating. But that wasn't what happened here. The old lady had already forgotten all about the ball, as she was talking to her students, pointing out their mistakes. Yet, the sphere was sitting idly on the floor, giving no signs of breaking anytime soon.

'How does that even make sense?! Our cores already contain denser mana, yet it doesn't crystallize like that!'

The old lady only had an Orange core. An injured one at that. Her mana capacity couldn't compare to a Yellow, let alone a Violet or White, so why did the substance transform this way just by being compressed by about 50%?

Thinking back to her actions, Percy tried to figure out what she had done to cause this. She had first pulled the mana out of her sternum, manifesting the cyan blob in her hand. At that point, it was still in its fluid state, as that was how mana was stored in one's core. When in that state, mana could be compressed countless times, which was essentially the difference between different grades. By purifying their core, mages reinforced it, allowing it to withstand more pressure and store denser mana.

'But she created a construct before squeezing it!'

After turning into a solid, the mana resisted the compression more strongly, requiring a lot more effort for even the tiniest deformation. The old lady had probably done this her whole life, yet she'd still needed an hour before the crystal was stable.

Percy's attention returned to the kids. It had taken them longer than their teacher, yet most of their spheres had barely shrunk by 20% – a far cry from their goal. The younger girl was actually the best, but even she had only compressed hers by about 25%. All of them were breathing heavily too, their hands shaking.

One of the boys was the first to make a mistake, his sphere shattering into a cloud of dust. Percy almost thought he had made it, but the powder faded away into nothing not long after. The rest of the kids soon followed, none of them leaving behind much evidence of their efforts, other than a shallow pool of sweat by their seat.

After giving them a couple minutes to catch their breath, the old lady spoke to them in a consoling tone, seemingly giving them a few words of advice. Only then did she remember the marble on the floor, picking it up before flicking it a couple of times with her fingernail.

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It showed no signs of breaking, making the children nod in appreciation as Percy considered the implications.

'It looks like it takes a lot of effort to learn, but it could be worth my time. If I can form my constructs out of this crystal, I can make them a lot strong–'

He didn't even get a chance to complete that thought, when the old lady smashed the ball with a rock, splitting it in two. She then tossed the pieces in a bowl, before proceeding to crush them both into powder.

'Ok, scratch that. It's useless in a fight.'

Perhaps the crystal was slightly harder than his regular constructs, maybe not. But it was certainly extremely brittle. Even if Percy ignored the effort required to create it, he doubted his weapons would take more than a hit or two before breaking.

'It won't be easy to repair them either…'

With his hopes dashed, he had no choice but to keep watching the lesson to its end. The old lady continued to mercilessly pound the crystal for a while longer, until she was left with a pile of the same cyan powder he had seen before.

She then picked up an oblong piece of bone from the corner of the room. It was hollowed out, looking a bit like a vase. She poured a few drops of water into the bowl, before handing it to the sick girl.

The teenager then mixed the powder into paste once more, before repeating her actions from the previous night. Half an hour later, the old lady said a few more words to her students before sending them on their merry way.

‘I guess they can’t make enough powder to keep up with everyone’s poison.’

Even if every person with a pure affinity learned to do this as proficiently as the old lady, it wouldn’t be enough. In any case, Percy fully intended to observe for a few more days. He had a hunch this trick could help him with alchemy back home.

Unfortunately, he had no way of knowing what repercussions this decision would have on his main body…