Wanderer 721

Chapter 721: Tokens

The mortals that Percy and Tiberius quickly befriended looked quite similar to their god. Their fur was less vibrant than the deity's, its colours ranging from orange to beige, while their bodies were noticeably less toned, though Percy wasn't familiar enough with their species to spot any other differences.

As expected, the six mortals had instantly flooded Tiberius with uncomfortable questions about his unlikely survival in the vacuum of space: a topic that clearly fascinated every Colour mage in the universe: not just Percy. Interestingly, each possessed a bulky translation device just like their deity's, once again supporting Percy's speculation that they hailed from a planet significantly more developed than his host's.

For the most part, Percy had allowed Tiberius to handle the interrogation, since the latter didn't know much more about him than the long-necked people. The caped man was also bound to a strict spectral contract that prevented him from revealing anything sensitive, thus forcing him to choose his words carefully.

Percy and his host had seized every opportunity to steer the conversation toward less dangerous and more interesting subjects, eventually gathering a few valuable tidbits of information about the auction.

The Sapphire Pavilion were running a business, first and foremost, with the attendees of their auctions being their primary customers. While their goal was obviously to make money, they were wise enough to ensure that everyone left their branches satisfied and safe. Forbidding any form of violence from taking place near their venues was but one of many measures that the intergalactic vendors had employed to that end.

Another was granting the sellers the option of auctioning their items off anonymously, much to Percy's relief. It wasn't always possible to do that, as some products were unique and famous enough that every attending faction would instantly know their origin, yet anonymity was a massive help for weaker worlds that needed to make money without attracting the wrong kind of attention.

On the topic of money, there was no universally accepted currency. The closest thing was the currency that dozens of member-factions of the Void Hand shared, but that obviously didn't circulate in other places as much. To solve the problem, the Sapphire Pavilion had implemented their own system for

evaluating and paying for the auctioned products: one that was based on the value of affinity-changing treasures.

Every faction in the universe: from the weakest lesser springs to the peak worlds: constantly produced talented mortals, so they were always in need of affinity-changing treasures. Before the start and after the conclusion of every auction, the Sapphire Pavilion allowed the attendees to exchange their treasures directly with them, for tokens that could be spend during the auction: or kept in their account for future dealings.

Of course, affinity-changing treasures came in all shapes and sizes, so the exchange rate varied greatly according to certain rules. For one, the Sapphire Pavilion refused to buy treasures too close to their expiration date, as they might fail to sell them or get them in the hands of a mortal in time. That said, the greedy vendors were more than happy to sell such resources that they already had in stock.

It had taken Percy some back and forth to figure out how long exactly the minimum accepted duration was, since his host and the long-necked people used different units of time than what they had on Remior.

‘So, five days, more or less?’ Micky asked him in private, the Huehuan’s estimates roughly echoing Percy’s own. ‘I don’t think the dandelion will survive that long.’

Percy mentally sighed, offering the first use of the treasure to Tiberius. Upon storing what were essentially Julius’ remains inside his seal, Percy hadn’t missed the wave of sorrow permeating his host’s soul, though Tiberius had been too polite to request the object from the person who had saved his life.

Now that they no longer had to worry about the relative uselessness of the sound affinity in the vacuum of space, and since the magical plant was likely to go to waste soon, Percy saw no reason to hold on to it. He had initially hoped to exchange it for a few tokens to spend at the auction, but it didn’t sound like the dandelion would have fetched much money anyway.

For common and composite affinities, the Sapphire Pavilion generally paid a single credit per remaining use. The value of the resources didn’t scale linearly with their duration, but a modest fifty percent was added to the price if the treasure in question had more than fifty days left, with another fifty percent added for durations longer than five hundred days.

Had Percy sold the dandelion immediately after picking it up, it would have only earned him a couple of tokens. It didn't sound like much, though his travels had probably skewed his perception of the value of common affinity-changing treasures. The simplest way to exchange for even a single token required the death of a god, making each extremely valuable.

Even the dandelion currently rotting away inside Percy's seal was clearly not the sort of thing that the Divine Order managed to get their hands on often. Remior had only produced about a hundred deities in its entire history, with only a dozen or so currently active, so killing other Concept mages was obviously an uncommon occurrence for Percy's people.

As for how they had claimed the Lotus of a Myriad Rivers: Percy wasn't sure, though he doubted that they had slain a god strong enough to produce such a potent treasure. It was more likely that a pair of extremely powerful experts had killed one another, and Remior's deities had simply been lucky enough to flee with the prize before any of the other vultures got their hands on it.

Either way, the seed of the Lotus could have been exchanged for a whopping twenty thousand tokens. It had only produced half as many petals, and the flower itself had only lasted a little over three weeks after blossoming, but the seed hadn't had an expiration date, so Remior's gods could have planted it whenever they wanted. In fact, it was expensive enough that they could have probably auctioned it for even more.

'It's a pity they didn't do that,' Micky lamented. 'They could have exchanged the tokens for more affinity-changing treasures for future generations of Holy Children: without having to give them the water affinity within a strict timeframe or share a third of the petals with the noble Houses.'

'Hey, whose side are you on?' Percy asked with an internal chuckle. 'If they'd done that, you would have never eaten one, repaired your body, or survived our battle with Deimos.'

Jokes aside, Percy couldn't help but wonder why Phoebe hadn't brought the seed to the Pavilion. The titaness had seemed knowledgeable enough about the top factions to at least be aware of the vendors' existence. Perhaps, there simply wasn't a branch close to Remior, or the human deities hadn't felt confident in their ability to travel to and from the venue safely, despite the rules forbidding violence. Not that Percy could blame them, given what had happened to Tiberius' people.

Outside of the standard rates, the Sapphire Pavilion apparently reserved the right to manually adjust the prices based on supply and demand. If their stock of, say, fire-granting treasures happened to be lower at any given time, they might buy and sell them at a premium.

In theory, the same rules applied to rare affinity-changing treasures, though the exchange rate was typically multiplied by a factor of ten thousand. In other words, the Lotus that the Divine Order had used to grant a mindboggling ten thousand mortals the water affinity had only been worth as much as an object that could grant the life affinity to a couple of people.

'That's fucking expensive!' Micky exclaimed with a mental groan. 'No wonder we weren't able to claim one from the regional tournament or the Blue reward pool in the Vault.'

Based on what the long-necked people had said, nobody was dumb enough to sell the rare treasures directly to the Pavilion, as they were pretty much guaranteed to make at least three times as much by auctioning them. The only caveat was that the Pavilion was "generous" enough to not take a cut from the direct exchanges, since their purpose was purely to help the attending factions liquidate their wealth. The vendors made their money exclusively from the auctions, by keeping ten percent of every sale as a commission.

"Do we have any idea what's going to be auctioned this time?" Percy finally asked through his host's mouth.

While the Sapphire Pavilion was willing to accept new listings even hours before the event: provided that they were luxurious enough to make the cut: those who wanted to sell rare or expensive resources generally preferred to inform the Pavilion weeks or even months in advance, to give them the time to advertise the products properly and attract more potential buyers. Consequently, the attendees often had an idea of what to expect even before an auction, though Tiberius' late mentor had unfortunately not given him any details.

Percy wasn't expecting anyone to sell a life-extension or core-cleansing method directly. Such things were rare and typically controlled by greater springs. Not to mention that this was just one of many branches of the Sapphire Pavilion, used only by factions from neighbouring solar systems.

However, this was still his best chance to gather information and potentially connect with dozens of new worlds. Maybe the event would give him a lead on promising places to visit, otherwise he would gladly settle for any way of raising his strength by another notch.

"Well… afat ler kein… lesser spring called Drukalan… brok mar… selling limited access to their bloodline Decree every single year… beleth ram… wouldn't be surprising if they show up again," the ice user said,

though the gurgling sounds of the surrounding magma coupled with the flawed translation made listening to him a chore.

Still, Percy couldn't help but perk up. "What does the Decree do exactly?"

"Serem hath… increases the odds of a newborn… maldrak sim therez… bloodline if they don't inherit one from their parents," the alien replied.

"Isn't it risky to invite outsiders to their planet?" Percy asked.

One of the Violets shrugged. "Zaz kor tem… were already in trouble before auctioning their coordinates off… Halat rom zek… smart way to get out of the mess."

Percy nodded in understanding. While powerful factions could crush the people of Drukalan like bugs to take what they wanted by force, there was no need to resort to that when a peaceful alternative was available. If anything, the lesser spring had only protected themselves from their rivals by proactively offering their most precious resource to stronger worlds, as nobody would risk invading them and offending a greater spring.

Either way, Percy wasn't too interested in this particular item. He already possessed one of the universe's most ridiculous bloodlines, and he very much hoped to pass it to his descendants unchanged one day. If his children failed to inherit it, it would probably be better if they didn't develop a new bloodline at all, as it would increase the odds of Clone resurfacing in his grandchildren's or great-grandchildren's generation.

Even if the Decree was marginally useful for others on Remior, mixing multiple bloodline Decrees without clear benefits was unnecessarily risky, and Percy wasn't going to waste time or money purchasing something like that.

"Is that it?" he asked again, starting to feel that sharing the cyan powder with the long-necked people might have been a mistake after all.

Perhaps it would be wiser to try and auction the red powder from Ruby Heart off, rather than the secret of Crystallization. On Thess'kala, the cheapest affinity-changing treasures had been worth as much as

one of the three ingredients of the Ancestral Lineage Sect's ritual. Going by that logic, an item that could give somebody a mutation should be worth somewhere between ten and thirty tokens.

Percy had enough portions for around fifty people inside his seal, since he had initially planned to grant the mutation to Sol and all the Green-born Melodians. Even if he considered his reinforced bones to be less valuable than his strengthened physique and resistance to toxins, selling the powder in bulk should fetch at least five hundred tokens.

It should be enough for the Sapphire Pavilion to accept the listing at the last minute, and the vendors apparently paid the sellers a fraction of the opening bid of the auctioned items as collateral before the event, allowing them to participate even if they lacked other funds.

The mortals exchanged uncertain glances for a couple of seconds before one of them spoke. "There's a rumour that has been circulating… fel kar don… Lord Porros thinks that it's probably false… Ver lam tan… Sapphire Pavilion occasionally hire third parties to spread fake advertisements… brok lon dith… too good to be true."

Percy tempered his expectations, yet he couldn't contain his curiosity. "Fake or not, you can't leave me hanging with that kind of introduction."

The mage who had spoken chuckled. "If the information is trustworthy… blak sor doon… selling invitation to Mithril… draf thon bil… chance to receive a personalized Focus… fir kiil… wise gnomes."

Chapter 722: Familiar people?

Percy spent the rest of the trip mulling over what the long-necked humanoids had said. The wise gnomes were another famous faction ranking in the top ten in the universe. Their power came precisely from the Foci that only they could produce: unique artifacts that could greatly elevate the strength of mortals and deities alike.

While Foci were ultimately external objects: one of Percy's least favourite forms of strength: it was debatable whether they could really be considered as such, since the artifacts were bonded deeply to their owners, growing alongside them. In many ways, a Focus could be considered an extension of a mage's body, and Percy would be more than happy to get his hands on one.

'The yellow-furred people are probably right. This sounds too good to be true,' Micky reminded him.

The wise gnomes weren't in the business of sharing their most important asset with outsiders. The odds that a genuine invitation to their planet: bundled with the opportunity to receive a custom-made Focus: would be auctioned off at a random branch of the Sapphire Pavilion were minuscule. It would be no different from the Void Hand auctioning off access to the Void Decree: peak factions simply weren't desperate enough to compromise their cosmic standing for scraps.

'Well, it doesn't matter. Let's try and sell the secret of the cyan powder anyway, to build up a massive sum of tokens, just in case,' Percy decided. 'Once we open an account with the Pavilion, we'll be able to access our balance from any branch. Even if we find nothing to spend our money on during this particular auction, I'm sure that we'll find other opportunities in the future.'

After advancing a few more times, Percy would have plenty of cords to use, so marking the locations of several branches of the Pavilion and deploying clones whenever there was an auction might not be a bad idea.

Other than extracting every valuable resource from the places that he had already marked and permanently stationing a clone at each Elemental Source that he could find, keeping his eyes open for new discoveries from unlikely places would be among the smartest ways to take advantage of his bloodline in the long term. If elevating a couple of random lesser springs to greater springs earned him enough tokens to buy whatever he wanted, he was more than willing to do it.

Percy was broken out of his thoughts when a portal opened beneath the feet of every mage in the internal world, spitting them out into a giant hall. Tiberius just about managed to clumsily land on his feet as Percy's senses unfolded, scanning their surroundings.

Everything around him was made of the same material: a smooth, polished gem that glowed in a deep blue colour. Even if Percy had never seen a sapphire before, it would have been easy to guess what the crystal was called, just going by the name of the faction that owned this place.

'It must be another space station,' he told his fellow aspect.

He had no evidence to base that conclusion off of, besides the fact that terrestrial venues just wouldn't make sense for an event meant for deities from multiple factions, as most gods wouldn't be able to step foot on the same planet. However, this structure looked quite different from the Vault or the space station hovering over Marador Prime.

Stylish pillars engraved with intricate runes rose from the floor every five or so metres, ending in beautiful arches that were mostly round, yet curved into narrow tips at the middle, making each arch resemble the shape of an onion. The arches themselves were also densely covered with enchantments, but the square-shaped patches of ceiling that they segregated were apparently reserved for delicate mosaics pieced together out of countless tiny sapphires that shone in every shade of blue.

Each image depicted a different scene from the history of the race of humanoids that owned the Pavilion. The picture directly above Tiberius' head showed a pair of mortal kings leading two massive armies about to fight in the air above a colossal lake. This sort of imagery didn't fit with the Sapphire Pavilion's current status as a rich faction of intergalactic merchants, so Percy guessed that it was merely a relic from a bygone era.

From what Percy had gathered about these people, no outsider knew their original name, as the vendors exclusively referred to themselves as "The Attendants" these days.

The Attendants were among the strangest people that Percy had ever seen, as they didn't even have heads. Instead, they each had three arms: two at the standard spots, with a third sprouting where a human's neck would be. All three limbs ended in symmetrical hands lined with six clawed digits, with an eye and a round, fanged mouth inside each palm. Suffice to say, Percy had no idea where their brain was.

'We don't have much time before the auction starts,' Tiberius warned. 'I don't want to rush you, but we need to look for my people and get whatever you're planning to auction registered.'

Percy nodded, knowing that his host was right. He turned to thank the long-necked people for escorting him to the venue, but the seven of them had already left without so much as saying goodbye. They were still within the range of his Sage's Pond, so he could see them walking about six hundred metres away.

'Figures.' He shrugged.

After having fulfilled their end of the bargain, it was probably safer for them to sever all ties with him and pretend that they weren't even acquainted. They'd already received the secret of Crystallization, so the last thing they needed was to get involved in whatever trouble Percy was about to stir, or for anyone to suspect their newfound knowledge.

Percy didn't take any offense, finding their actions perfectly reasonable. Not wasting time, he began strolling around the vast hall, scanning every corner with his Sage's Pond in search of humanoids that looked just like Tiberius.

There were several people from all sorts of races lounging in this place, most of them raising eyebrows or exhibiting other signs of mild surprise upon noticing a random mortal exploring the space station by himself. Thankfully, nobody cared enough to stop Percy or spare him more than a passing glance.

Every dozen or so archways, there were chairs and tables prepared for the attendees' comfort, complete with enchantments that could seemingly produce tasty-looking refreshments out of thin air. Percy would have loved to take a moment to enjoy the Attendants' hospitality and savour their cuisine, but that would have to wait until he was done with more pressing matters.

The good news was that the hall was only about six kilometres across. Percy's Sage's Pond wasn't powerful enough to encompass the whole place at once: not even the version of the sensory spell that he could produce from within a Violet body: but it didn't take much time for him to walk in a wide enough circle to scan everything. He would have finished even sooner if he'd flown, but nobody else appeared to be doing that, and he didn't want to offend the Attendants.

Unfortunately, his findings left much to be desired. While he had counted sapients from at least a hundred different factions, he was sure that Tiberius' people weren't among them. Percy and his host double- and triple-checked just to be safe, before locating the nearest Attendant and asking whether there were any additional lounges like this one, or whether Tiberius' kinsmen had arrived.

The answer was a hard "no" to both questions, much to the mortals' dismay.

'Do you think they might still be on the way?' Tiberius asked, the spark of hope inside his soul rapidly dimming.

Percy sighed. 'I'm sorry, man. That sounds highly unlikely. I don't doubt that the yellow-furred god is faster than them, but they had a long head-start.'

Either the deities hadn't survived the battle against the space bandits, or they had chosen to give up on the auction and return to their planet. There was also the possibility that they had pressed onwards,

only to be attacked and eliminated by a second group of interstellar lowlifes. No matter which scenario was true, Tiberius had no way to return home.

Considering that Percy still didn't want to send his host to the Vault, nor trust any of the people in the space station to safely escort the Violet to his planet, their only option might be to request help from the Attendants directly. Even if they refused to send Tiberius home after the auction, they might be willing to let him live with them until the next event, in the hopes that his kinsmen would manage to attend that one.

Just as Percy was about to voice his request to the odd-limbed humanoid, a small group of people walked into the range of his Sage's Pond, causing his eyes to widen. He hadn't spotted the newcomers earlier, which probably meant that they had only just arrived at the space station. That alone wasn't that strange, since this wasn't even the first group that had reached the venue after Tiberius.

What Percy struggled to come to terms with, was that he actually recognized their appearances, having possessed a member of their species years ago!

Chapter 723: A reluctant handshake

Percy examined the group of sapients carefully to make sure that he wasn't mistaken. There were five people: three men and two women: clearly led by one of the females who appeared to be their only deity. A couple of mortals were Violets, while a man and the second woman were Blues. None had a single hair on their scalp, so Percy could only harbour a guess about their gender based on how bulky or slender their frames were.

Their dark brown skin looked rough and covered in irregular scars. The goddess had it too, so it clearly wasn't the result of an injury or an imperfection in their bodies: just a standard feature of their physique. It looked like somebody had stitched together lots of flakes of different shapes and sizes, too wide to be described as "scales" but too small to be called "plates". The overall pattern resembled a dry patch of dirt that hadn't drunk a drop of water in years.

Every step these people took caused their skin to grind against itself, releasing screeching sounds that didn't seem to bother them in the slightest. They wore no shoes: only a set of yellow training robes woven out of a fabric as thick and hard as their skin, the right side of their tunics pressed tightly over the left by a green belt wider than their fists.

Their clothes weren't in great condition: they were covered in holes and loose strings. The same applied to the goddess, with the only exception being that her clothes were red, though her belt sported the same colour as everyone else's. Percy refused to believe that even the poorest lesser spring couldn't afford better attires for their representatives. Their shabby garments were clearly deliberate.

It was a symbol of the harsh training that their strongest mages constantly put themselves through, and the atypical humility of their Green-borns: or Favoured Ones, as they called themselves: compared to most others of that birthright across the universe.

There was no question about it.

These were the same people that Percy remembered. He hadn't had a mirror or his Sage's Pond to examine his host thoroughly during his time on their planet, but he had seen enough to identify the entourage as natives of Gallimus.

He wasn't sure why every single god attending the auction seemed to have brought mortals along, though there were several possible reasons. Most of the Colour mages in the space station appeared to be Green-borns, here to obtain experience. They were clearly groomed to lead their factions in the future, so interacting with other races early was probably beneficial for their growth.

It was also common knowledge that geniuses didn't flourish by spending their whole lives meditating inside a room. Not that attending an auction was a substitute for a proper fight or other difficult challenges, but these Green-borns were unlikely to find worthy opponents at home anyway, and their gods couldn't exactly send a Blue to fight aliens on a hostile planet. Interacting with opportunistic mortals and deities of other races in a civil environment like the Sapphire Pavilion's events was often the best they could hope for.

Finally, Percy guessed that many of the Green-borns might have been brought here to acquire new affinities. Tiberius didn't belong in that category. He'd already explained that his people could only afford to use affinity-changing treasures on their demigods, but other factions might be wealthier. It made more sense to bring the mortals directly to the treasures, to give them the option of exchanging for items closer to their expiration dates. It was unclear which category the group of sapients Percy was observing fell into, though he did notice that all the mortals had common affinities.

'Wait, don't tell me…'

Considering a remote possibility, he carefully scanned the only male Blue in the group, looking for any distinguishing traits. His old host would have definitely advanced once by now, but not a second time. The man was an adult like the rest, which made sense, since it had been long enough for that person to have grown up.

'A fire affinity…'

The first element was correct as well, but if Percy was right, the Blue should have another core right about…

Percy couldn't get a proper read on the mana around the Blue's abdomen, as even the channels of his first affinity were obscured. They weren't completely invisible, but everything by the man's navel was blurred by some variant of a controlled concealment enchantment.

Anyone skilled at runecrafting would notice that something was off, but most people in the station wouldn't think anything of it. The Gallimian was far from the only mage here with enchanted equipment, which almost always came with concealment runes.

Still, Percy wasn't "anyone". He knew exactly what to look for and had the perfect tool to accomplish that. Concentrating his Sage's Pond on the mortal's body, he tried to slip his sensory domain between the tiny gaps in the Blue's equipment, eventually managing to detect a second mana core hidden within the person's flesh. It was currently empty and actively suppressed, but Percy was experienced enough to recognize its Blue grade and life affinity, causing the corners of his borrowed lips to curl up.

'I may have solved your problem, but you'll have to live with these people for a few years,' he told Tiberius, eliciting a wave of suspicious surprise.

Not bothering to explain, he made his way toward the Gallimians, drawing their attention when he was about a hundred metres away from them and clearly heading straight for their group.

In theory, the fact that Percy had happened to befriend a child on their planet didn't guarantee that their gods would be kind to him. Had these people been Atlanteans, Percy certainly wouldn't have dared to approach them just because of his fleeting friendship with Enki.

However, the things that his then-host had shared about his people's beliefs gave Percy a good feeling about them. Instead of lording their power over their weaker brethren, Gallimian Green-borns risked their lives to grow stronger so that they could protect everyone.

Percy's host in particular had been earnest to a fault: the boy had nearly died due to his unwillingness to violate the rules of his training: and Percy doubted that the young man had changed much in the decade that had followed their meeting.

'I also seem to recall him saying something about making sure they repay their benefactors.'

Introducing himself to the group wasn't completely risk-free, but compared to all the other choices that Percy and Micky had made during this trip, this seemed like a relatively minor gamble. After all, they were still protected by the Sapphire Pavilion's rules.

Reaching the Gallimians, Percy drew apprehensive glances from everyone, including his target, though nobody did anything to stop him. Their goddess was also eyeing him curiously, clearly wondering what had given a lone mortal of a different race the courage to approach. Still, she didn't seem worried that Tiberius was capable of harming anyone under her care.

Stopping before the male Blue, Percy slowly and calmly extended his hand. The Gallimian didn't take it, creasing his brow in confusion.

"Your name is Duwa, isn't it?" Percy asked.

The man's gaze narrowed. It also looked like the space station's enchantments had translated Percy's words properly, even without him or the Gallimian wearing a bulky apparatus like the long-necked people. Good. This would hopefully make everything simpler.

"Who are you?" the Blue asked back, still hesitant to shake a stranger's hand.

Percy couldn't help but roll his eyes. "Come on, man. You once spent like a dozen seasons braving the elements and fighting monsters with your bare hands… and you did all of that as a child. Are you seriously afraid of a little handshake?"

The Gallimian's pupils wavered with shock as even his companions audibly gasped. Clearly, nobody had expected a random mortal from some unknown faction to know so much about their planet's harsh climate, nor the trials that they had to endure to qualify for their most prized Decree.

The goddess seemed about to break her silence at last, but Duwa beat her to the punch, finally grabbing Tiberius' hand.

Percy allowed a thin spectral tendril to worm its way from his wisp, through the few remaining cracks in his host's soul and to the surface of his right palm. Pulling a sliver of phantom mana from his main body, he connected with the Gallimian's soul. Naturally, he'd been cautious enough to conceal the movements of the tendril between chunks of his host's soul, to keep his actions hidden from prying eyes.

Duwa visibly trembled as he felt the intrusion, but he didn't pull his hand away. 'Percy? Is that you?'

Percy replied with a mental smile. 'How have you been, kid? I knew we'd meet again one day, but I didn't expect that to happen this soon.'

Chapter 724: Opening an account

Percy and Duwa didn't get the chance to exchange more than a few pleasantries at first, since the Blue's companions kept interrupting with questions that the two of them were obviously unable to answer in a public space, while surrounded by gods of hundreds of other factions.

"Duwa, one of the auction's private rooms will be a better place to talk to your friend," the goddess declared, gesturing at the mortals to follow. "There isn't much time until the event starts, so we need to head there anyway."

Percy joined the Gallimians without protest, since he wanted to catch up with his former host, as well as ask the deity for a couple of favours. Leaving aside the arrangements that he had to make for Tiberius' safe return to his planet, Percy still hoped to open an account with the Pavilion and try to register the secret of the cyan powder for the auction.

He could have attempted to do both of those things under his own name: or a fake one, if necessary: but he strongly suspected that the Attendants were more likely to take him seriously if he was accompanied by a goddess.

To the other mortals, Percy introduced himself as Tiberius. He knew that Duwa had probably revealed his second core to the leaders of his people, and likely even told them about the spectral guest who had saved his life, but Percy wasn't sure whether the other Colour mages in the group were privy to the details. It might be better to let the two-cored Gallimian lead the subsequent conversation.

After talking to the nearest Attendant, the goddess and the Green-borns in her charge were taken to a spacious chamber, complete with luxurious couches, a decorated buffet full of tasty-looking food, and over a dozen enchanted slabs made of some kind of pale crystal.

Three of the room's walls were opaque, though the fourth was made of a thick, fully transparent sheet of reinforced glass that Percy felt even a mortal should be capable of punching through. At least, this was what he thought until the Attendant: who had likely guessed Percy's misgivings: struck the window with the full force of a Concept mage, demonstrating how easily the enchanted material could absorb the impact.

Glancing out of the window, Percy spotted a wide octagonal stage located hundreds of metres below and ahead of their room, with several rows of similar rooms surrounding the stage and rising for half a kilometre above his head. Most notably, he found himself unable to peer through the other windows: the material appeared to only allow light to pass through one way, while looking like a regular sheet of sapphire from the other side.

"The Sapphire Pavilion greatly values the anonymity of the buyers as much as the sellers," the Attendant explained with his middle mouth as he chuckled with the left. "We naturally can't have our most generous patrons robbed on the way home now, can we?"

The mortals: including Percy and Duwa: were listening to the three-handed deity intently, making it clear that this was everyone's first time at the auction. Percy wasn't sure what other factions did, but the Gallimian deities clearly brought a different batch of Green-borns each time, making his unlikely reunion with Duwa even luckier than he'd initially realized.

Their goddess, on the other hand, wasn't paying much attention, having probably been here before. She merely made her way to the buffet, grabbing a juicy-looking fruit that was shaped a bit like an apple but had the texture of a strawberry, eating a third of it by the time she plopped down on the couch. The Attendant didn't seem to take any offense, flashing her the closest thing to a smile that the fanged-holes on his: or was it her: palms were capable of making.

“Once the auction starts, you will be able to bid for any item you fancy using one of the tablets over there. You don’t have to worry about being unable to pay, since the system won’t allow you to enter a bid that exceeds your remaining balance,” the Attendant helpfully explained through his right hand. These creatures appeared to be capable of speaking through any of their mouths. “If there is anything else that you need, you can call over one of my people through the three-handed symbol at the bottom-left corner of the tablets.”

The Attendant looked like he was about to leave, though he hesitated. Turning to look directly at Tiberius, his eyes narrowed as he spoke again. “Please forgive my bluntness, but I have to ask: is everything okay, young man? I admit that it is highly unusual for a lone mortal unaccompanied by a deity to willingly mingle with a group from a different race. If you are being threatened, coerced in any way, or held here against your will, the Sapphire Pavilion will ensure that the offending party is punished severely for their crimes.”

The Gallimians’ faces paled: which for them meant assuming a slightly lighter shade of brown: as Percy vigorously shook his host’s head, not wanting to get his friend’s people in trouble over nothing.

“I’m here willingly!” he hurriedly said. “My mentor was killed by space bandits en route to the auction, but I was lucky enough that a kind god from another faction offered to bring me here. Unfortunately, my people never made it, yet I ran into a group that we happen to have a good relationship with.”

The last part was obviously a lie, since Percy had no idea whether Tiberius’ people had even seen a Gallimian before, let alone what their relationship was. Hopefully, it would sound believable to the headless deity.

Sure enough, the god’s middle hand bobbed slightly in a gesture that Percy could only assume to be a nod. However, Percy didn’t want the Attendant to leave just yet, because he did need a couple of things from them.

“I was wondering whether I can participate in the auction,” he said.

“Do you have the authority to access the account of your people?” the Attendant asked.

“No. I’m hoping to open a new one under my own name,” Percy explained. “Or actually… under the alias ‘Lone Wanderer’, if possible.”

“Well… I can’t remember the last time a mortal joined the auction by themselves, but I suppose that there is no rule prohibiting it. However, it’s our policy to request a deposit of at least ten tokens when registering a new account,” the deity warned, clearly not expecting Percy to be able to afford it.

And for good reason: what were the odds that a mortal from a faction weak enough to not even reach the venue safely would be able to produce resources worth as much as the lives of multiple gods?

“I… don’t have enough affinity-changing treasures to exchange for that,” Percy admitted, though he wasn’t done. “If I’m not mistaken, the Pavilion pays the sellers an advance based on the opening bid of their items. Can I fulfil the requirements for account registration using that amount?”

Everyone in the room looked at Percy dumbfounded.

“You want to sell something in the auction too?” the Attendant asked, seemingly finding the notion ludicrous.

“I do,” Percy confirmed.

The deity sighed. “Young man… there is no problem with covering the minimum deposit for account activation with the advance from your listing, but I’m not sure you understand what exactly your request would entail. The advance is fixed to a third of the estimated value of an item. For the amount to suffice, you would need to produce an offer worth at least thirty tokens. That would be a steep ask for a quarter of the attending factions: who are only here to exchange a couple of cheap affinity-changing treasures from one element to another.”

Percy was about to correct the deity, but he wasn’t given the chance.

“We also have a rule that last-minute admissions have to exceed the value of the median listing. It’s not a problem if we only accept a couple of new offers, but if there are too many, we need to remove the cheapest listings and compensate their owners. Usually, the median value is around three hundred tokens, but today’s auction is even more competitive. We won’t be able to accept any listing worth less than seven hundred tokens.”

The Gallimian goddess drew a sharp breath, indicating that this was quite expensive even for a relatively well-off lesser spring.

Percy, on the other hand, wasn't as worried about the value of his listing. If he truly decided to auction the secret of the cyan powder off, he knew that it would be worth a lot more than seven hundred tokens. He was more interested in something else the Attendant had said.

"Today's auction is more competitive, you say? Is the rumour about the invitation to Mithril true?"

All three of the deity's mouths grinned. "Exciting, isn't it? It's been millennia since the last time anything even half as precious got auctioned off in this branch."

Percy shrugged. "The next time might be sooner than you think. I was hoping to sell the secret of faster core-cleansing."

Chapter 725 – A risky decision

The Attendant and the Gallimians spent a whole minute trying to pick their slack jaws off the floor.

"Young man, are you messing with me?" the three-handed deity finally asked.

"I'm not," Percy insisted. "I want to sell a method of cleansing a mortal's core twice as fast. I'm talking about the most obvious method – the one that involves eating a certain type of glowing paste after each cleansing session, mending the cracks in one's core. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, since I refuse to believe that a faction as rich and influential as the Sapphire Pavilion is unfamiliar with this secret."

He didn't feel the need to explicitly sell them the Aurora Dew's recipe. It would be trivial for the faction that bought the information to figure out how to bond the cyan powder to their stable form of beast mana, but Percy saw no reason to make things even easier for them.

The god sighed from all three of his mouths, clearly realizing that Percy was telling the truth.

“I wasn’t aware that Rom had discovered the secret. That information is indeed valuable enough to become the final lot of today’s auction, surpassing even the opportunity to obtain a Focus from the wise gnomes,” the Attendant admitted. “However, there is a reason why the Sapphire Pavilion doesn’t sell the secret directly, and why no other faction dares to auction it off.”

“Will you not accept the listing?” Percy asked.

“We will, if you are certain about doing this, but I need to make sure that you understand the risks. The Sapphire Pavilion’s stance on the matter is that we wish for more worlds to obtain more effective means of advancement. The more lesser springs that evolve into greater springs in the universe, the more wealthy customers we will be able to trade with, after all. Unfortunately, not all the powerful factions share our view. We can’t be held responsible if a third-party decides to sell the secret at one of our auctions, since they could have just as easily sold it on their own, without anyone knowing. But we won’t be able to shield you from the consequences either.”

Percy frowned. “What about my anonymity?”

The Attendant shrugged. “We will maintain your anonymity both as a seller and a buyer to the best of our ability, which should be more than enough to keep you safe from the vast majority of the attending factions. That said, your actions may place you at odds with some of the most powerful worlds, and we have no idea what means they may have at their disposal.”

Percy gritted his borrowed teeth, genuinely unsure of how to proceed. He didn’t want to implicate Tiberius or Duwa’s people, but he also didn’t want to miss out the chance to acquire a Focus now that the Attendant had confirmed that the rumours were true.

Foci were the most valuable weapons of one of the strongest factions, and this might be his only opportunity to legitimately obtain one. The artifact would elevate his fighting strength by another level, allowing him to fight against demigods, and the boost should follow him well into the Concept realm. As far as he could tell, this was the sort of powerup that he wouldn’t be able to find elsewhere, and it would stack nicely with his other advantages.

The problem was that lots of wealthy gods would be emptying their coffers trying to win the auction, so Percy would need a serious sum of tokens to guarantee his success. Considering that his advance would only amount to a fraction of the estimated value of his listing, he would need to sell something at least three times as expensive as the invitation to Mithril. Probably more, since the rarest items were guaranteed to sell for several times their estimated value.

Nothing else in Percy's possession would qualify, except for the Dance or the Moirais' Decree, and he'd already gone over this choice with Micky. Percy would rather strengthen a lesser spring and piss a few greater springs off than strengthen a greater spring and anger the Moirai.

'Can they even find us?' the Huehuan asked through their connection. 'Without any other information on the seller, they'd have to rely on some kind of conceptual tracking that relies on our mere intention to sell the secret. Tiberius and the Gallimians have very little to do with our decision, so the clues would lead straight to us. Will there even be a trail for them to follow after we escape through the soul plane?'

Percy mentally nodded. The obscure nature of his bloodline gave him some confidence in taking the risk – it was the main reason he was even entertaining the idea. Locating him would probably require multiple powerful gods with rare affinities working together. Even among greater springs, there might not be many capable of producing the right lineup of specialists.

Besides, even if a hostile faction managed to locate Remior, he should be able to placate them by offering them his other secrets in exchange for peace – as a last resort. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about dooming his entire planet. Even the greediest greater spring would rather take the Dance and a few hundred mortals with second cores and leave Remior alone than insist on the world's destruction. Percy could enforce the terms with Kerfyl's Decree if the worst came to pass.

"I'll do it," he said.

Even if he tried to sell other things to gather the required tokens, Percy would inevitably step on some toes when he tried to outbid everyone else trying to buy the invitation to Mithril – let alone all the other items that he was planning to purchase in not only today's auction, but all the future ones. If he was going to draw the ire of a bunch of greater springs anyway, he might as well keep things simple and generate all his tokens with a single move.

"So long as you're certain… " The headless deity nodded, before falling silent for a few seconds. "The value of the secret is difficult to estimate, since the impact it will have on the development of a lesser spring is pretty much unlimited, and nobody can predict what the world in question will eventually produce."

"Then how is the item going to be evaluated?" Percy asked.

“Our policy in such situations is to limit our assessment to the next hundred thousand years. That’s roughly enough time for an entire generation of new Yellow-borns to have a shot at divinity. Depending on the population of the faction that ends up buying the secret, it could easily result in up to a hundred thousand deities.”

Percy’s eyes widened at the number. Didn’t this also apply to Remior? Sure, Percy’s planet probably didn’t house as many mortals as whatever rich lesser spring would end up winning the auction, but they would still probably produce thousands of new gods.

He’d obviously known for years that the secret of the Aurora Dew would have that kind of impact on his world – this was precisely why the Divine Root had chased him and Micky to the ends of the continent – but it was another thing entirely to have an Attendant from the Sapphire Pavilion confirm his speculation.

The god wasn’t done, however. “Quantifying the value of a deity is also difficult, because we have to take their lifetime accomplishments into account. Many will remain at the very bottom of the Self-Discovery stage forever, not producing even the cheapest affinity-changing treasure in case they die, while some might reach the peak of that stage or climb even higher. A select few will certainly become titans, casting Decrees that will further change their world. For the most developed lesser springs or newly-risen greater springs, we usually estimate the average value of a deity to be around twenty-three point four tokens.”

An invisible force lifted one of the pale tablets from the stack, pulling it to the Attendant’s left hand. The deity’s clawed digits turned into a blur as he inserted some information into the object, before tossing it over to Percy.

“Press your hand against the screen and think of a twelve-digit number that will serve as your identification,” the god instructed.

Percy followed the instructions, picking a random number and trying to burn it into his mind. His eidetic memory would have certainly helped with that, but there didn’t seem to be a need. The enchanted tablet resonated with his thoughts through some sort of mental enchantment that Percy didn’t fully understand, carving the number into his brain in a way that he was sure would never allow him to forget it.

Glancing at the screen, Percy realized that it now showed his new balance: ‘780,000 tokens.’

“Expect to have a lot more tokens than that by the end of the auction, though this amount will hopefully be enough for you to buy whatever you want today,” the Attendant said as he finally moved to exit the room.

“Wait! I still haven’t given you the item!” Percy yelled.

“No need for that. It’s just information, so I know what to write on the parchment – your intention to sell the secret is enough to lift the responsibility off of our shoulders and place it on yours,” the deity explained, though Percy heard the Attendant mutter something else right before the door closed, “I sincerely hope that you live long enough to enjoy your newfound wealth.”

Tiberius swallowed hard. Or was that Percy?

He might have just made one colossal mistake, though it was probably too late to change it.

Shifting his attention back to the Gallimians, Percy noticed that they were all staring at him with incredulous expressions. Even Duwa and their goddess looked at him like he was some kind of madman.

“Ahem. Now that that’s been dealt with, I was wondering whether you guys can let me crash at your planet for a couple of years,” Percy said on behalf of his host, scratching the back of his borrowed head. “Since there’s a… hopefully remote chance that a couple of angry gods will come knocking on your door, blaming you for spreading out the secret of faster core-cleansing, I suppose that it’s only fair to share it with you as well. No sense in suffering for a treasure that you don’t even possess.”

Chapter 726 – Karmic compass

To their credit, the Gallimians initially refused to accept the secret of the cyan powder from Percy – or any other payment for that matter. Apparently, Duwa had been even more forthcoming about their time together than Percy had imagined, so everyone – including the mortals in the group – had known about the young Green-born’s second core and Percy’s bloodline.

According to the goddess, Aje, the Gallimian leadership was extremely grateful to Percy for saving the boy. Despite the harsh trials that they put their children through to earn the Decree, or perhaps because of them, they valued the life of every single mage greatly.

Obatala himself had instructed his deities to repay the favour if the opportunity ever arose, so fulfilling Percy's request to take care of Tiberius for a few years was a given. The goddess had even offered to escort the mortal directly to his planet – Rom, according to the Attendant from earlier – but Percy's host unfortunately didn't know the way back. The Violet's only hope would be to have the Gallimians keep bringing him to future auctions until he managed to reunite with his kinsmen.

Percy didn't necessarily agree that the Gallimians owed him a favour, since he had honestly benefitted just as much from his time on their planet as Duwa, if not more. Obatala's Approval might not be as valuable as the Moirais' Decree in anyone else's hands, but it had completely revolutionized Percy's abilities.

Without it, he might have never managed to merge the Carnival and a handful of other Masterful spells into the Symphony, nor would his mutated eyes have evolved to their current state. In fact, if anyone went through Percy's Status with a fine-tooth comb, they would quickly realize that the powerful domain he had awakened ahead of time had directly or indirectly touched more than half of the entries on the page.

Sure, Percy had saved Duwa's life, but Obatala's Decree had also saved his own a dozen times over. That said, he needed these people to help his current host, so he wasn't going to reject their kindness.

'We should stay in Tiberius' body until he arrives on Gallimus,' Micky suggested.

'I was thinking the same,' Percy agreed.

It wasn't like he didn't trust Duwa's people to treat the Violet well, but this was an excellent opportunity to leave a mark on Gallimus, so that he could revisit it at will. That way, Percy would keep in touch with not only his former host, but also one of the most developed lesser springs he had ever stepped foot on.

He felt that the Gallimians would make for reliable allies – which Remior was going to need, sooner or later. On a personal level, Percy didn't know if there was anything of value to be gained on Gallimus, but

he hoped that they would at least let him tag along in future auctions. He was going to have plenty of tokens left after today's event, and he would gladly welcome every opportunity to spend them.

Percy had already left a mark on the space station, but he doubted that he would ever find a dying mortal to possess. For one, every single Attendant that he had seen so far had been a deity, and the Colour mages from other factions had all been kept safe within the internal worlds of their gods. Gallimus would probably be Percy's only way to return to this branch of the Sapphire Pavilion in the foreseeable future.

Despite her kind stance toward Percy, Aje hadn't shied away from voicing her displeasure about his reckless actions, clearly not appreciating the pot of trouble he was about to stir while sharing a room with her people. This was one of the reasons why Percy had insisted on sharing the secret of the cyan powder with the Gallimians – it was the least that he could do after involving them in his mess.

"You know… there aren't that many gods out there who would actively resist the opportunity to turn their world into a greater spring," Percy said with a chuckle.

Judging by the angry look Aje gave him, it took a lot of restraint on her part to hold back from slapping him. Fortunately, she never got the chance, as the octagonal platform outside the window suddenly lit up, indicating that the auction was finally about to begin.

Percy and Aje each held an enchanted tablet logged into a different account, ready to spend their hard-earned – or in the former's case, not-so-hard-earned – tokens, while the other mortals would merely spectate the event.

An Attendant walked onto the stage, dressed in an elegant dark suit that contrasted nicely with his pale skin. All the three-handed deities that Percy had seen today had worn fancy clothes, but this one took that to the next level. The creature's cuffs were dotted with tiny sapphires, arranged in the shape of sparkling runes that spewed out dancing azure motes of water mana with every step the god took.

"Ladies and gentlemen, mortals and deities, and of course, esteemed patrons of other or no genders, welcome to the Sapphire Pavilion's four hundred and thirty-eighth branch's annual auction!" the Attendant said, their voice amplified by seemingly every enchantment in the building.

The octagonal stage rapidly enlarged before Tiberius' stunned eyes, until it occupied every cubic centimetre of space outside the window, with the god turning into a giant humanoid hundreds of metres tall. Percy didn't think that the Attendant had actually grown bigger – it had to be an illusion.

"It is always with great pleasure that I preside over these events, but today's auction promises to be a truly special one. I'm sure that many of you are still struggling to believe that an invitation to Mithril is going to be sold in our humble branch. I assure you that the rumours are true, though I'll say more on that topic closer to the end of the auction, since the invitation is going to be one of the last items to be sold. What none of you is aware of, however, is that we have just received a last-minute submission that is even more lucrative than the elusive opportunity to acquire a Focus! Had we known a few days ago, we would have certainly spread the news to draw even more attention to today's event, but there is no point in spoiling the surprise so close to the auction. What I will say, is that I hope all the representatives from lesser springs have exchanged for a lot of tokens, as I promise that you are going to need them!" the colossal deity said right before the pearly-white fangs in all three of the creature's mouths flashed the audience a series of radiant grins. "Without further ado, let the auction begin!"

An octagonal hole opened on the floor in front of the Attendant, a same-shaped column carrying a spherical object rising until it reached the god's chest. The item couldn't have been larger than an apple, though the illusion had magnified it like everything else on the platform, giving everyone present a good look at it.

It was a red, semi-transparent orb, with a green metallic needle suspended smack in the middle of the crystal. One end of the needle was pointy enough for someone to prick their finger on, while the other was flat and about half as wide as an adult human's finger.

Picking the undoubtedly-magical sphere up, the Attendant rolled it a couple of times between his left and right hands, showing the audience that the pin inside the object could rotate freely, and that it always pointed at a certain spot near the right edge of the ceiling, regardless of the orb's orientation.

Percy was obviously curious about the object itself, but he also couldn't help but notice that a thick eyelid and a pair of lips closed over the Attendant's eyeballs and mouths whenever he held something with the corresponding hand, probably to protect the sensitive organs. Not that simple contact with a light object could possibly harm a god's eyeball, but this was clearly an instinct that the divine Attendants retained from their mortal days.

"The first item to be auctioned is a karmic compass pointing at a barren world confirmed to possess a reliable source of stable beast mana," the Attendant said. "The primitive natives of the planet have yet to realize that they can use the resource to cleanse their cores, so it's completely undefended.

Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on your perspective – the lesser spring that discovered this untapped treasure is located too far away from the planet to take advantage of it, so they have chosen to auction its location off. Bidding starts at a hundred tokens."

A chill rolled down Percy's borrowed spine as he realized that the spherical object being auctioned in front of him was going to determine the fate of an entire race of people. The poor creatures had probably never even imagined that there were other intelligent people out there among the stars, let alone the fact that the richest among them would one day fight over the right to colonize them.

"How common are these karmic compasses?" he asked Aje, trying not to think too hard about the unfortunate mortals that were about to receive a rather nasty surprise in the coming months.

"Very," the goddess said. "They're among the most popular ways to trade the location of foreign planets, since they're more convenient than coordinates."

"How do they work?" Percy asked. "I've been tracked by a Green with a karma affinity before, but I'm pretty sure that he was only able to perceive connections between objects that had come into physical contact."

The Gallimian shrugged. "That's the most basic form of karmic tracking. I wouldn't expect a young mortal still in the lower half of the Colour realm to achieve much more than that. However, deities with that affinity can peer into deeper layers of reality, isolating much fainter connections. Even thinking of someone's name or appearance can technically form a trackable thread, though I'm not sure if there's any god who can perceive a connection quite that fleeting. The connections also stretch thin with distance, and the karmic deities still have to filter out an almost-infinite number of other connections before they can isolate the one they want, so karmic tracking is a skill with an extremely high ceiling that nobody has ever even approached."

"And the compass specifically?" Percy asked again.

"Well… the hardest part is isolating and amplifying the correct thread. Once a god has a proper grasp on that, affixing the connection on an object that even mortals without the affinity can use is trivial," Aje explained. "Don't be surprised if over seventy percent of the auctioned items are karmic compasses. Not everyone has – or is willing to sell – valuable treasures or Decrees. The resource most commonly traded within the Sapphire Pavilion is information about planets that are interesting for one reason or another."

Percy nodded. He'd suspected some of that information before, though he once again hoped that locating his main body based solely on the clone's decision to sell the secret of the cyan powder wouldn't be easy.

The karmic compass eventually got sold for two hundred and fifty tokens. According to the Attendant that had chatted with Percy earlier, that was approximately the value of eleven or twelve deities. A dozen gods weren't that many in the grand scheme of things, but it was more than this unfortunate barren world would ever get the chance to produce…

Chapter 727 – Plaque

Much like Aje had said, most of the items sold in the auction were karmic compasses pointing at various unlucky barren worlds and lesser springs. However, the goddess had still underestimated the percentage of such sales, since the auctioned karmic compasses were closer to eighty percent of the lots. The opening and closing bids rose steadily, quickly crossing into thousands of tokens about halfway through the event.

Percy even noticed the item that the long-necked humanoids had told him about – a karmic compass leading to Drukalan, where people from other races would be allowed to give birth for a high chance of obtaining a bloodline. This wasn't even close to the most valuable item in today's auction, so Percy wasn't sure why the yellow-furred people had paid so much attention to it. Perhaps, for all of their world's development, they still hadn't produced a bloodline Decree of their own, making this opportunity quite important for them. And they weren't the only ones.

The bidding war for this particular compass – a blue one with a yellow needle this time – was easily the most competitive in the auction so far. Percy wasn't sure what percentage of the factions present were both wealthy enough to afford it and interested enough in bloodlines to want it, since the Pavilion kept the identities and even the number of potential buyers hidden.

Still, the few groups that met the requirements clearly stopped at nothing to win. The auction had started at a thousand tokens, with the item eventually being sold for four point two thousand – which was the largest profit margin yet.

Percy had considered buying a few of the cheaper compasses himself.

It wasn't like he was interested in the resources of those worlds, since he didn't even place an alternative source of stable beast mana in his eyes nowadays. He knew that he could eventually cover Remior's cleansing needs simply by optimizing the output of the hive and the Alchemists' Guild. Not that he would say no to a backup source of a nectar-adjacent ingredient, but he would surely find something worth importing through his travels sooner or later, without paying a single token.

However, he might be able to save the lives of countless people who were about to get invaded by cruel factions, and a few thousand tokens would hardly put a dent in his balance.

'What's even the point, though?' he couldn't help but ask himself.

There were hundreds of karmic compasses being sold in just today's auction, and this was merely one of hundreds of branches of the Sapphire Pavilion – not to mention the countless unlucky worlds that were discovered and conquered every day without their location ever changing hands. Percy would never save them all. Not as he was. If he wanted to change things, his best bet would be to invest everything in his own growth. His efforts had slowly but surely given him a voice on Remior. Maybe they could give him a voice in the wider cosmos one day.

Another thing he noticed was that every karmic compass looked different from the rest. They all seemed to come in a standard shape and size, but the colours of the crystalline orbs and the metallic needles housed within them varied greatly.

Percy wasn't sure whether the gods who had created the objects had done that on purpose, treating each unique combination of colours like a label to tell the compasses apart, or whether they didn't have any control over the manifested colours in the first place. Perhaps, each karmic thread that got grafted onto an orb possessed its own set of hues.

A small part of him wondered what colours a karmic compass pointing toward Remior would acquire, though a much larger part hoped that nobody would ever craft such a terrifying object.

It wasn't until about two-thirds into the auction that Percy finally found something that he wanted.

"The next item is a plaque enchanted to grant anyone a mindset. The mindset is a simple one that occupies a little over half of a person's mental capacity and enhances their cognitive ability. The greatest advantage of the plaque is that it can be used repeatedly. Better still, the object recharges and

maintains itself with ambient mana, so its owner will never have to seek out a mind mage, though they will have to wait a few days between uses. Bidding starts at twelve hundred tokens."

Percy wasted no time before entering his first bid. Others didn't either, causing the opening price to quickly double, which forced Percy to enter a second one. Competition slowed down after that, though he still had to pay just over three thousand tokens for the plaque.

'It's worth it,' he thought as a small octagonal pillar like the one on the stage rose from a hole on the floor of the private room, delivering his prize.

This mindset didn't sound anything like the specialized and personalized one that he wanted to eventually commission from an expert. It wouldn't even fill up his entire capacity, and the creator of the plaque had clearly sacrificed a lot of power and efficiency to design a mindset that could be passed to multiple people so easily. Even a proper mindset wouldn't necessarily be worth more than a good mutation, which Percy had already estimated to be worth no more than a few dozen tokens.

That said, it would serve as an acceptable placeholder for a few years, until Percy found the right person for the job. Unlike spectral traits, mutations or bloodlines, Nephthys had explained that mindsets could be removed and replaced fairly easily, so there was no sense in letting his mental capacity continue to be wasted until he found something better.

The fact that he would be able to grant the mindset to an unlimited number of allies was a welcome bonus, as well as the only explanation for its ridiculous price tag. Percy didn't doubt that Phoebe could give much better mindsets to a single individual, but the titaness was clearly incapable of designing an object that would mass-produce them, otherwise there would have certainly been multiple items like this plaque circulating all over Remior. Phoebe's goal was to strengthen their world as much as possible, after all.

'Maybe she'll be able to draw inspiration from it and the Vault's magiscript to create something more potent,' Micky speculated, making Percy feel even better about his purchase.

Upon receiving the plaque, he allowed Tiberius to activate it to acquire the mindset. Percy had hoped that he would obtain it too, since that was what had happened on Robari, when Ludwick's projection had granted both him and Marnok a different mindset.

Unfortunately, unlike the canister of Clear mana that Saint Ludwick had prepared, the plaque didn't seem to have enough ambient mana stored for multiple people. Percy's ability to tap into his host's mind was also rather limited, the object would take a few days to recharge, and he was more than happy to pass the mindset to the Gallimians too if they wanted it, so he would probably have to wait until he reunited with his main body to personally experience the benefits of his new toy.

'It's good,' the Violet assured him. 'It's not that potent, but the improvement is noticeable.'

'Do you not have any demigods with a mind affinity on Rom to give your Green-borns something better?' Percy asked.

'We do, but mindset design is a very demanding field. The most talented experts have long wait queues and typically prioritize providing their services to our Whites and demigods. I'd have to wait centuries to get my turn,' Tiberius explained.

Percy nodded. As far as he could tell, this was a field that didn't even exist on Remior. Phoebe was clearly aware of its existence, but they probably didn't have nearly enough powerful mages with the mind affinity to delve into it. Perhaps, the titaness personally granted a couple of powerful mindsets to the Order's gods and demigods and left it at that.

'Let's add that to the long list of things that we need to change if we don't want our planet to just be a pretty flower that any random passerby can pluck at their leisure,' he told himself and his fellow aspect.

Returning his attention to the ongoing auction, Percy noticed that the Attendant was back to selling karmic compasses, though there was something different about the more expensive ones.

"Next, we have an exclusive compass pointing to another barren world with a stable source of beast mana. Bidding starts at two thousand tokens."

Percy turned to the Gallimian goddess with a frown. "It's twenty times more expensive than the other one. Is that because it's 'exclusive'?"

Aje nodded. "'Exclusive' means that the seller hasn't shared the location of the planet with any other faction, vouches never to do so in the future, and is confident that no other faction has discovered the location independently in the past."

Percy raised an eyebrow. He could see how this seemingly minor distinction could increase the value of a karmic compass by dozens of times – it was simply more convenient for the buyer to own exclusive access to the resource, instead of having to share it with other worlds.

At the same time, he could see why some sellers would rather go for a non-exclusive listing. In many cases, they might not even have a choice, since the location of the planet might have already leaked to a third party. Even when that wasn't an issue, the seller could potentially make a lot of money by auctioning the location off repeatedly, though the value of the item would probably continue to decline with every sale.

Percy could also understand why buyers might be willing to settle for a non-exclusive compass. Some resources – such as the opportunity to send a few pregnant women to give birth on Drukalan – would not be depleted by repeated usage. There might even be cases when a powerful greater spring would purchase a non-exclusive compass with the confidence that they were strong enough to violently drive their competitors away from the planet.

Either way, Percy was relieved that he hadn't foolishly purchased the compasses earlier in an attempt to protect the natives of those worlds. Those listings hadn't been exclusive, so he would have simply thrown his tokens away.

"What if the seller lies?" he asked the Gallimian goddess. "Don't tell me that the Pavilion will send somebody to every single planet to check."

"A few of the weaker factions who are desperate for tokens might try that," Aje admitted. "I highly recommend that you remain sceptical of every listing claimed to be 'exclusive'. However, most of them should be legitimate. The strongest factions know better than to risk getting banned by the Pavilion forever for some short-term profit."

Keeping the deity's advice in mind, Percy paid closer attention to the subsequent listings, eventually even finding a few exclusive karmic compasses that interested him – and not just out of a misguided sense of pity toward the unfortunate residents of those planets.

Chapter 728 – Bountiful harvest

Paying four thousand and five hundred tokens, Percy bought a black orb with a bright pink needle that supposedly pointed toward a lesser spring with a relatively high concentration of sound mages. According to the information that the seller had shared with the Sapphire Pavilion, the ancestors of these people had once possessed the Elemental Source of that affinity, though their original planet had been discovered and conquered by a greater spring tens of thousands of years ago.

A few surviving gods had fought hard to transport some of their most talented mortals to a new world, giving them a chance to start over, hidden away from their oppressors. The pool of sound users had obviously been greatly diluted over countless generations, since the probability of inheriting a composite affinity from one's parents was extremely small, and the refugees were no longer under the influence of the Elemental Source. However, the new planet had still given rise to a higher proportion of sound users than other worlds of that size, on top of inheriting a rich variety of spells that took advantage of that affinity from their ancestors.

Percy felt bad that the location of the lesser spring had leaked a second time, so he'd been quite happy to purchase the compass to keep it from anyone else's hands. Still, magnanimity hadn't been his only reason for doing that.

Once he figured out how to strengthen his mutations and wield his familiar's acid mana safely, Percy would need to study the sound affinity as well – the final combination of Micky's and Nephthys' common elements. A third composite mana type wouldn't help him much, but mastering the sound affinity was the last prerequisite that he would have to fulfil before he could practice with the storm element.

Not only was mastering a calamity affinity bound to be quite impactful, but Percy also still felt a sense of responsibility toward Ishkuria to at least embark on this project, to eventually pay her back for everything that she had given him.

For six thousand tokens, he purchased a green orb that housed a deep purple needle, pointing toward a lesser spring that specialized in alchemy. Sadly, the presenter had specifically mentioned that the world in question wasn't Atlantis, inadvertently shooting down Percy's hopes of reuniting with another one of his past hosts. However, the Attendant had also mentioned that the people of that planet were working hard on a way to condense their stable form of beast mana into a more potent resource. They hoped to accelerate their cleansing speed and evolve their world into a greater spring.

Percy had found it strange that the bidding war over that particular compass hadn't been fiercer. His guess was that most potential buyers didn't have high expectations for the lesser spring's project, clearly doubting the ambitious alchemists' ability to succeed. They probably weren't the first people to try condensing beast mana into a more potent variant, yet most of their predecessors had obviously hit a dead-end.

Of course, Percy wasn't as quick to dismiss them. He already knew that it was possible to produce a more potent cleansing resource, due to the naturally-occurring royal jelly that Nephthys and her mother had generously shared with him.

From what he had gathered, even the overwhelming majority of greater springs hadn't come in contact with something like that, but he saw no reason why an alchemist wouldn't be able to artificially reproduce it. Perhaps, the incomplete methods of the lesser spring, combined with samples of nectar and royal jelly would constitute enough reference points to lead Percy to a breakthrough.

Even if he was right, he remained doubtful that he would be able to brew anything better than Gloomy Dawn for himself, but mass-producing the elixirs for everyone else on Remior might not be out of the question. With any luck, he'd also register a new alchemic principle in the process, which was more than enough to entice him even at a personal level.

The third and final compass that he purchased wasn't nearly as expensive as the other two. Bidding had begun at three thousand tokens, yet Percy won it fairly easily by spending no more than three and a half thousand. It was the only one of his purchases that wasn't even exclusive, yet it was the one that excited him the most, since it supposedly pointed toward a greater spring.

Aje explained that the location of most greater springs was common knowledge, so people rarely bothered to sell that information at the auctions. Few even dared to, as the mere act of doing so was considered highly offensive toward the greater springs in question.

Percy would certainly like to get his hands on a complete list of coordinates, or a large collection of karmic compasses one day, though he had no idea where to even ask for such things. For now, his best bet was to attend as many auctions as possible and try to purchase the few compasses that happened to cross his path.

The rare listing in this case had been placed by one of the greater spring's rival factions – who clearly and openly cared more about insulting their enemies and enticing third parties to annoy them than the pitiful profits from the sale. Percy wasn't thrilled with the idea of being unleashed upon that planet like

some kind of intergalactic mosquito, but it wasn't like he would visit that world with his main body, nor would he allow himself to get involved in the dispute. As long as he knew which direction to send the clone toward, he would infiltrate the greater spring in his usual, subtle way, relying on his bloodline.

Before learning that an invitation to Mithril was going to be auctioned today, purchasing the locations of greater springs had been his main goal in this trip, as they might hold the secret to extending his life and activating his third core.

More importantly, this particular world was rumoured to possess a Ring of Sacrilege of the ice affinity. The information wasn't confirmed, so it could just as easily be propaganda by their rivals trying to paint a target on their backs, yet Percy didn't mind putting his new Shapeshifting Sentries spell to good use, scouring the planet from pole to pole in search of the artifact.

Glancing at the tablet in his host's hands, Percy couldn't help but sigh upon realizing that his balance had dropped by over seventeen thousand tokens. It was a hefty amount – one that he was convinced that he would have never managed to raise by selling less risky items than the secret of the cyan powder.

Scanning the mindset-granting plaque and the three new karmic compasses stored safely inside his spatial seal, he felt that his gamble had already paid off, and that was before even considering the main prizes that he was about to purchase. Hopefully, he had more than enough money for them too.

Before presenting the much-anticipated invitation to Mithril, the giant Attendant presiding over the event introduced the third most luxurious lot in today's auction – which coincidentally also interested Percy greatly!

"There is a reason why our Pavilion uses the value of affinity-changing treasures as the foundation of every transaction, yet it's not every day that you, our esteemed patrons, are given the opportunity to purchase a rare one."

The god picked some sort of old-looking notebook from the raised platform, lifting it up for all to see. Its brown, leather cover was worn and had no title or author's name. It only sported a couple of small holes which, along with the half-chewed bottom-right corner, revealed the glossy silver pages contained within the thin booklet.

Opening the notebook, the Attendant flipped through it slowly, showing the audience that it only contained a pair of sheets. They appeared to be in better condition than the cover, but they were completely blank as well.

Percy wasn't surprised by the appearance of the treasure, since he knew that they didn't always manifest as plants. It wasn't difficult to guess which mana type consuming the silver pages would grant either.

"There isn't much that needs to be said, since the item is pretty self-explanatory," the Attendant agreed. "Still, for the sake of clarity, let me point out that it will grant the soul affinity to a maximum of two mortals. As a reminder, only pure cores can acquire a rare element. The notebook will last about twenty-six more days, so please ensure that it reaches its recipients in a timely manner. It would truly be a pity to let such a valuable treasure go to waste. Bidding starts at the standard twenty thousand tokens."

Percy had already worked out that twenty-six of the Pavilion's days were approximately equal to three weeks on Remior – which was more than enough time to deliver the resource, even after accompanying Tiberius and the Gallimians back to their planet.

He was admittedly a little disappointed that the first rare affinity-changing treasure that he had ever laid eyes upon was of the one element that he didn't need. Even if it had been of a different mana type, he had yet to decide whether he wanted to replace his pure affinity.

His second core had served him well until now, with the pure element being an integral component of his arsenal. Percy no longer entertained the idea of getting rid of the affinity in favour of a common or composite element. Even Phoebe had warned against that, having explained that deities could acquire common elements but not the pure affinity, making it functionally similar to a rare mana type.

Still, the deities of Huehue had been considered weaker than other gods before the invention of their boosting art, and Percy hadn't missed the fact that every single two-cored mortal in the void tournament had chosen actual rare affinities for their new organs. Clearly, there was still some major disadvantage of the pure affinity that persisted even in the Concept realm that Percy didn't yet know about.

Either way, he didn't hesitate to enter a bid. Even though he wouldn't be able to personally use the thin notebook, he was pretty sure that his grandfather would be thrilled to acquire a soul affinity.

In fact, this was something that all of Remior, including the gods, would be quite interested in. If everything went well, Archibald would become the universe's second "wanderer", sending out soul clones and bringing back priceless treasures from every corner of the cosmos.

The auction for the notebook was a heated one, though Percy eventually managed to win it for seventy-three thousand tokens. It was only after storing the treasure inside his spatial seal that he turned to face the Gallimians. "I almost forgot. You guys are here to acquire new affinities too, aren't you?"

"We are," Duwa confirmed with an enthusiastic nod. "Lady Aje is planning to wait until after the auction to buy a handful of cheap treasures for us with whatever tokens we have left."

"Any preferences?" Percy asked before offering anything, to avoid pressuring the Gallimian mortals into picking an affinity they didn't want.

"I'd be more than grateful to obtain anything but lightning," his former host said.

"How come?" Percy asked, genuinely confused. "Plasma is a powerful element."

Duwa shrugged. "I'm sure that it is, but I would rather go for an affinity that will result in a more hospitable internal world if I ever become a god. Fire is already a pretty bad mana type for that purpose, so I'm hoping to obtain air, water, or earth."

Nodding, Percy pulled the dandelion out of his spatial seal, tossing it over. The one remaining pappus had lost most of its lustre, with the majority of the green florets having visibly withered. Even the stem and leaves of the magical flower had shrivelled and rotted, indicating that it wouldn't last much longer.

"Percy… I can't accept anything else from y–"

Percy raised his borrowed hand to stop his former host. "If you don't want it, just throw it away. I've already fed the other use to Tiberius, and I have no need for the final charge."

Duwa gave his kinsmen an uncertain look, receiving encouraging smiles from everyone, including the goddess. Sighing, the Green-born plucked what was left of the round flower, swallowing it whole.

Peering his borrowed eyes away from his former host, Percy allowed the kid to deal with his evolving affinity by himself as he returned his attention to the oversized Attendant. It was finally time for the auction that had attracted most of today's audience, as well as sealed Percy's own decision to part with one of his most prized secrets.

The bidding war for the unprecedented opportunity to acquire a custom-made Focus was about to begin!

Chapter 729 – Tickleglobben

"For those of you wondering how such an incredible opportunity has ended up being auctioned off, the seller has shared a few details to hopefully settle your doubts," the Attendant said. "As one might imagine, the wise gnomes are generally averse to inviting outsiders to their planet or handing out their precious Foci. The seller is a powerful deity close to the peak of Elemental Acquisition, who happened to help out an injured god from Mithril a few millennia ago. They were gifted this opportunity out of gratitude, to redeem or pass along to somebody else as they pleased. The seller held on to the invitation for a very long time, before eventually deciding that their world would benefit more from the profits of the auction than a single one of their mages receiving a Focus."

Percy found the explanation difficult to accept, since he wasn't sure that anything in today's auction had been worth giving up on the priceless artifact. A Focus would supposedly grow alongside its owner, strengthening even a god at the peak of Elemental Acquisition.

'Perhaps, only mortals can bond with it,' Micky speculated. 'It might be too late for an established deity to acquire one. Since it's impossible to predict which demigod will successfully attain divinity or become a powerful god in the future, it might be safer to invest in thousands of affinity-changing treasures for all of a faction's Green-borns and Yellow-borns than gamble everything away to empower a talented individual.'

This made more sense, but Percy still wasn't entirely convinced. Had he been in the seller's shoes, he would have tried to raise funds for affinity-changing treasures and other, smaller prizes in some other way – to avoid wasting such an unprecedented opportunity.

Then again, he wasn't privy to the finances of that deity's faction. Besides, hadn't he chosen to earn his own tokens by selling the secret of the cyan powder? That might arguably be an even dumber decision, so he probably shouldn't be judging others.

In any case, the Attendant clearly wasn't in a rush to declare the start of the bidding war. "We are aware that many of you are still not satisfied with the seller's explanation or convinced of the validity of the invitation. It would be unreasonable of us to expect you to spend hundreds of thousands of tokens, only to be turned away when you try to redeem the invitation – or worse, punished by the wise gnomes for a perceived transgression. That is why we have reached out to Mithril, for confirmation that this opportunity is legitimate."

The deity pointed at one of the opaque windows surrounding the octagonal platform before clicking their fingers to activate an enchantment. The outline of the rectangular panel lit up for a couple of seconds as the sapphire screen quickly lost its colour, revealing the private room hidden behind it.

There was only a single person sitting inside the room, though they weren't using the provided furniture. It was a meerkat-like creature that Percy estimated to be about half as tall as an adult human. It was covered in pale fur, complete with a long beard that would have hung all the way to the meerkat's feet had the creature been standing. The meerkat was definitely a deity, so the colour of its fur and beard couldn't be signs of aging – just standard features of its physiology.

The tiny god was sitting cross-legged on a magical orb larger than a watermelon and covered in countless intricate symbols. The crimson artifact was hovering right above the table and in front of the window, its colour matching that of the creature's beady eyes and pointy cap. While Percy had obviously heard of the wise gnomes before, he hadn't seen an illustration of them, nor their Foci, though he'd be a fool not to recognize both.

"Lord Tickleglobben has generously agreed to attend today's auction, and to say a few words to put everyone's doubts to rest," the Attendant explained, clicking his fingers a second time to lower the glass panel entirely and give the gnome a way out of the room.

The divine meerkat floated outside the enclosed space, his body rapidly enlarging as he entered the range of the illusion and approached the centre of the octagonal platform. By the time he reached it, the creature looked half as tall as the three-handed presenter, hovering right by their side.

Magnified by a thousand times, the gnome appeared even more menacing than the Attendant, though Percy was too busy trying to keep himself from chuckling at Tickleglobben's name to be intimidated.

“Thanks for the introduction, Fingers,” the gnome said, speaking in a much-deeper voice than one might expect from his small stature, every word amplified by the same enchantments that the Attendant had been using. “Let me make something very clear. We are not pleased with this situation. Not at all. Sharing our Foci with outsiders is something that we generally avoid, and the fact that the recipient decided to auction this opportunity off instead of treasuring it and reserving it for one of their descendants or students is nothing but a slap in the face. Needless to say, my colleague was punished severely for his carelessness, and there were plenty of voices in the council, insisting that we voided the invitation.”

The petit deity made no attempt to hide his irritation, his every word causing the entire hall to tremble. Thankfully, the creature appeared to exert enough control over his power to avoid breaking anything – either that, or the Sapphire Pavilion’s infrastructure was rather resilient.

Upon reaching the end of the rant, Tickleglobben sighed in defeat. “Fortunately for the lot of you, my people take our promises very seriously. Yes, my kinsman should have never extended the invitation in the first place, and yes, the recipient should have known better than to sell it at a public auction, but what’s done is done. The opportunity was ultimately theirs to do with as they pleased, and Mithril has decided to honour it. That said, know that I’ll be competing against you, in an attempt to buy it back.”

Percy failed to suppress a grimace. It was nice to receive confirmation that the opportunity was genuine, but he guessed that the gnome would be willing to spend a hefty sum of tokens to keep it from landing in an outsider’s hands. Alas, there was nothing he could do about that, besides hoping that the nearly-seven hundred thousand tokens he had left would be enough to outbid Tickleglobben.

Having given his warning, the meerkat flew back into his room as the octagonal pillar rose before the Attendant again, delivering a pair of items. One was another karmic compass – a brown orb that contained a golden needle – while the other was a palm-sized disk engraved with similar symbols to those carved onto the gnome’s Focus. Percy guessed that the first item was supposed to lead him to the planet, while the second was the ticket that he would be able to exchange for the actual artifact.

“With that out of the way, we can finally begin,” the Attendant said. “Bidding starts at a hundred thousand tokens.”

Percy gritted his borrowed teeth. They were still well within his budget, but the opening price was already higher than the closing bid of the most expensive item up to that point – the soul affinity-granting notebook that he had just bought.

Despite the exorbitant cost, the bidding war for the invitation was fierce, causing its price to triple within mere seconds. The offers only appeared to slow down after Tickleglobben entered a bid for three hundred and fifty thousand, indicating that he was quite serious about winning the auction.

The Attendant hadn't bothered to obscure the meerkat's room again, nor had the gnome requested privacy, so everyone could see the tiny digits tapping at the oversized tablet in his hands.

"Well, I can be stubborn too," Percy muttered, entering a bid for four hundred thousand.

He was getting dangerously close to running out of funds, which would be a problem in future auctions. Percy might have been less willing to splurge if it hadn't been for the knowledge that he was going to earn a lot more tokens after his own listing got sold.

A couple of other potential buyers quickly pushed the price up to four hundred and fifty thousand, before the meerkat entered a second bid for half a million. Percy was starting to worry that the gnome was going to win. Thankfully, the scowl on the creature's face gave Percy hope that this was a non-trivial amount even for a representative of one of the ten strongest worlds. Entering a bid for five hundred and fifty thousand, Percy prayed that it would stop Tickleglobben in his figurative tracks.

Sadly, he wasn't that lucky. The gnome raised the price again to six hundred thousand as his crimson eyes narrowed. At least, no third party interfered this time, indicating that it was just Percy and the meerkat left. Still, they were almost beyond Percy's means. Glancing at the tablet, he couldn't help but frown upon being reminded of his remaining balance: '688,900 tokens.'

All of a sudden, he regretted spending so many tokens on the affinity-changing treasure. Giving Archibald a soul affinity wasn't a bad idea, but it could have waited – Percy was bound to find more treasures like the thin notebook in the future, though he might never get another chance to earn a Focus.

In his defence, he'd really thought that his remaining balance would have been enough. Even the Attendant who had chatted with him had clearly felt the same way, and for good reason. The current bid had already reached six times the opening price, indicating that Tickleglobben was willing to spend a lot more than even the Sapphire Pavilion thought the item to be worth.

Tightening his grip on the tablet, Percy inserted a bid for six hundred and fifty thousand, before wiping Tiberius' sweaty palms on his thighs. Glancing over at the only other exposed room in the hall, he almost forgot to breathe as he waited for the gnome's response.

The meerkat's clawed finger hovered over the tablet, suggesting that he had more than enough funds to outbid Percy again. The only thing holding the deity back appeared to be a concern that the invitation wasn't worth that much. Just because the gnome hailed from a powerful faction, it didn't mean that he could be irresponsible with his budget. Time seemed to crawl to a halt as hundreds of eyes undoubtedly stared at the short god.

Eventually, Percy watched in horror as Tickleglobben entered a bid for six hundred and seventy-five thousand.

"Shit!" he spat within the privacy of the room that he shared with the Gallimians.

The silver lining was that the meerkat had hesitated, and only opted to raise the bid by half the previous increment, indicating that the amount was starting to burn a hole in his pocket.

Percy was sure that the gnome had a lot more money than this. A lot of smaller factions should too, otherwise there was no way anyone would be able to pay millions of tokens later, for the secret of the cyan powder. Tickleglobben was simply struggling to justify spending this much on something that would only strengthen a single mortal – or in this case, prevent a mortal from being strengthened.

To put things into perspective, a single use of a rare affinity-changing treasure was over sixty-seven times cheaper than the current bid, yet was the kind of opportunity that even the Void Hand – one of the strongest factions in the universe – could only afford to give to the top four contestants in their tournaments.

In theory, Percy had enough tokens to outbid the deity once more, but not by much, nor by a round number. If Tickleglobben saw a bid for six hundred and eighty, or six hundred and eighty-five thousand, he would instantly know that his opponent was at the end of the rope, making the gnome much more likely to raise the price to seven hundred thousand.

‘Well… it’s better to try and fail than give up without even exhausting my funds,’ Percy reasoned. ‘Besides, if that petty little bastard is determined to gatekeep the item to this extent, I’ll at least take a bite of flesh on the way down.’

Just as Percy was preparing to bid the rest of his money – strategy be damned – he saw his balance jump up by fifteen thousand tokens. Startled by the change, he glanced at the Gallimians, finding Aje winking at him mischievously. “It’s only a loan,” she emphasized. “I want it back later,” she added with a smile.

Forming a soundless, “thank you,” with his host’s lips, Percy hurriedly edited his new bid to a nice, round, seven hundred thousand tokens, entering it into the system mere fractions of a second before the timer on the tablet hit zero.

A loud snort echoed through the hall, the bearded ball of spite making no attempt to hide his displeasure. “Fine. I’ve no idea who you are, nor why you’re going to such lengths to win, but I suppose I’ll find out when you come to Mithril to redeem your prize.”

Despite the gnome’s apparent concession, Percy didn’t dare to relax until the tablet officially declared his victory, and the expensive pair of items got delivered to his room. Duwa and the other mortals patted Tiberius and, by extension, Percy on the shoulder as he plopped down on the couch, exhausted.

The tension in Percy’s borrowed body hadn’t disappeared entirely, since the auction wasn’t over yet. There was still one final item to be sold – one that Percy had a very large stake in. However, he could at least rest easy in the knowledge that he would be a mere spectator from here on out. It was other people’s turn to fight tooth and nail over Percy’s listing.

Chapter 730 – Explosive conclusion

“The final item to be sold today is knowledge of an easily generated resource that can double the recovery rate of a mortal’s mana core after a cleansing session, allowing Colour mages to advance in half the usual time,” the Attendant said.

Percy had expected the presenter to at least hint at the fact that the cyan powder could be brewed into elixirs for even better results – to hike up the price of the lot further – but the divine merchant had surprisingly opted to stick to the details that Percy had volunteered.

Despite the deity's restraint, the words lingered within the vast hall, undoubtedly eliciting shocked reactions from the audience. Percy wasn't privy to most of them, since they had occurred behind opaque panels. He was only able to study Tickleglobben's expression, as the gnome's room was the only one still visible to everyone.

The furious scowl on the meerkat's face didn't disappoint.

Strangely enough, Tickleglobben appeared even angrier at the mere thought of somebody selling the secret of faster core-cleansing than he had been about losing the bidding war on his own heritage. Percy had been told by multiple sources that greater springs actively suppressed weaker worlds, but he was apparently still underestimating how strongly the cosmic overlords felt about this matter.

'Pathetic. Why don't you bastards focus on making your own people stronger, rather than keeping everyone else down?'

The Attendant, on the other hand, looked quite pleased with the response. "I trust that I do not need to point out the kind of impact that such a purchase can have on a developing world. Bidding starts at two million and forty thousand tokens."

The opening price was already daunting, but it rose to a whopping eight million in no time, showing no signs of slowing down. Even Tickleglobben – who had previously given up on the Focus when its price had reached a mere seven hundred thousand – didn't hesitate to enter a bid for ten million, only to be instantly outdone by somebody else.

Percy had suspected that everyone's pockets ran far deeper than what they had previously revealed. After all, their funds were the accumulation of entire planets over countless years – even the richer lesser springs clearly possessed a lot more wealth than they'd been willing to spend.

Apparently, all concerns of frugality went out of the window in the face of this opportunity. Even draining their accounts dry was clearly a small price to pay for a chance to become greater springs.

"Should we leave while the auction is still ongoing?" one of the Violet Gallimians asked, drawing everyone's attention. "Staying here until the end is starting to look dangerous."

“Leaving before everyone else is even riskier,” Aje said, shaking her head. “If we get spotted on the way out, people will suspect that we have something to do with the sale. We’re currently protected solely by our anonymity, so our best bet is to stay put and leave with everyone else. If Percy’s decision leads to any negative consequences, I suspect that he will have to deal with them in the coming years – not right away.”

Percy frowned as he saw the bids cross the twelve million mark. He wanted to be happy that such a ridiculous sum was about to enter his pocket, yet he struggled to muster any excitement, fully aware that he had just kicked the cosmic equivalent of a hornet’s nest.

Tossing another glance at the items inside his seal, he tried to convince himself that he had made the right call.

He’d purchased the coordinates of as many as four interesting new planets, each brimming with unique opportunities. Outside of the primary benefits of each destination, half also happened to be greater springs, with one being the home of an extremely powerful faction, giving him a good shot at finding a new way to extend his lifespan.

Eventually, the secret of Crystallization got sold for fourteen and a half million tokens, far surpassing the profits of the previous listing both as a percentage and a raw number.

Percy had stopped paying attention to Tickleglobben’s bids at some point, so he wasn’t sure whether the gnome had won. Judging from the meerkat’s grimace, he hadn’t, making Percy wonder whether it was another zealous greater spring that had purchased the secret to keep it away from lesser springs, or whether it was a weaker world that had emerged victorious after emptying their account. Or maybe, it was Tickleglobben who had claimed the prize, after all, and the gnome’s dwindling balance was precisely the cause of his foul mood.

Either way, Percy’s nearly eradicated funds suddenly rose by an astronomical amount. After the Pavilion had taken their standard ten percent cut and recouped their advance, Percy made sure to also pay Aje back for her timely loan. He even went so far as to add a few thousand extra tokens as interest, to thank her. Only then did he examine the new number on his tablet, the eight-digit sum making him feel slightly better: ‘12,250,000 tokens.’

‘Hey, cheer up,’ Micky said. ‘Think of all the things we’ll be able to buy with this kind of money. I suppose that most of it is going toward karmic compasses, but that’s still a massive improvement over wandering around the universe blindly.’

Percy mentally nodded. His clones had failed to find a greater spring during the entire decade leading up to the void tournament. If it hadn't been for the ticket that he and Kassorith had earned from Thess'kala, and Metatron's assistance, he would have never stepped foot on Marador Prime.

Thanks to the Gallimians and the Sapphire Pavilion, he would now have a far more reliable way to learn the locations of such worlds, once a year. He and his fellow aspect just had to survive the aftermath of their actions.

Before leaving the space station with the Gallimians, Percy spent a few minutes and another ten thousand tokens purchasing common affinity-changing treasures directly from the Pavilion, requesting for them to be delivered to the private room, so as to avoid being seen in possession of such wealth.

He prioritized treasures with durations between thirty and forty-nine days, to ensure that they would last until he returned to Remior, yet without crossing the threshold that would incur a higher cost than necessary. Spreading the funds evenly between the five elements, he also reached out to his main body, asking him to inform the allied Houses that they would need to send their eligible mages to the Fungal Spire within the coming weeks.

With this many treasures, Percy could ensure that every allied noble and all the Guild's combatants would upgrade their common affinities to composite elements of their choosing. In theory, Percy had more than enough money to provide treasures to everyone on Remior, but he decided to hold onto the rest of his tokens for now. His priority was growing his own power, and it wasn't like he could negotiate with every House on the planet in the span of a single month anyway.

With nothing left to do at the Pavilion, Percy and the other mortals entered Aje's internal world as the goddess finally set course for Gallimus.

Much like Lanthaniel and the long-necked deity that had rescued Tiberius from the vacuum of space, the Gallimian goddess appeared to have ascended with a composite affinity and to have reached the peak of the Self-Discovery stage. Her internal world was about three kilometres across, however, making it a little larger than the other deities he had met at that level. Aje's world was a frozen wasteland that made Percy and Micky feel right at home.

‘I guess that their strength is the bare minimum that a god needs to travel through the cosmos safely – without worrying about space bandits,’ Percy concluded.Those three deities had all travelled alone, seemingly unconcerned about their survival.

Summoning a tall pile of green mushrooms by his host’s feet, he instructed Tiberius on how to awaken his new core and begin clearing his channels. He saw no reason to be stingy with the Violet after everything that the poor guy had been through.

Percy would have volunteered the information and the ingredients sooner, but he’d worried that activating the magical organ would have been risky in the presence of hundreds of deities.

Judging by the arguably sloppy measures that the Gallimians had taken to successfully conceal Duwa’s second core, Tiberius would have probably been fine, but Percy hadn’t had a reason to gamble. That said, he hoped that his host wouldn’t awaken an air affinity, otherwise they would both regret their decision to feed him a piece of the dandelion.

With the Violet busy working on his new affinity and Percy having nothing else to do, he decided to ask Aje about a few things that had been bugging him. The Gallimian goddess seemed approachable enough, and they did have a long journey ahead of them.

“Hey, Aje… how is a god’s power measured anyway? I know that it’s supposed to scale with the number of concepts that they have comprehended, but I don’t fully understand the impact that they have, nor how they relate to the size of one’s internal world.”