Wanderer 79

Chapter 79: Natural selection

‘Experiments? What could gods possibly gain from us mortals?’ Percy raised an eyebrow.

‘Lots of things, actually.’ Gabe shrugged. ‘The most obvious benefit is getting more people to ascend to godhood, expanding their ranks.’

While the chances of any one child reaching divinity were laughably minuscule, it was ultimately a numbers game. Especially for immortal beings who could keep pumping out kids for millennia on end.

‘But that’s just a matter of luck, isn’t it?’ Percy asked.

Gabe shook his head.

‘It’s true a child’s grade is random, which means it’s not possible to control the emergence of new gods directly. However, an indirect solution is to simply have children more often.’

‘Having more kids means you need more space to house them, and more food to feed them. How is that sustainable?’

‘It’s not. At least, not if you care about what happens to the failures.’

Percy’s eyes widened. Resource management was a problem all worlds had to deal with. That said, it was even more pronounced in the Vault of Magic, due to its smaller size and barren environment. Consequently, it could only support a small number of mortals. This meant the gods had to be a lot more deliberate when choosing which of their kids to keep around.

“Cube. I wish to purchase one portion of sizian meat. User ID: 004527945512.” Gabe suddenly said.

“Authorization granted. 1 portion of sizian meat is valued at 1 credit. Current balance: 26131. Proceed with purchase?” the soulless voice answered again, as the colourful symbols blinked along the room’s walls.

“Yes.” Gabe said.

“Confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 26130. Delivery in 6 rits.”

Percy couldn’t help but wonder what happened if one tried using somebody else’s ID. Though, he seriously doubted the gods in charge had been dumb enough to overlook such a glaring loophole.

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A small circular hole opened in the ceiling a few seconds later, before an amber object fell on the bed.

‘What’s that?’ Percy asked.

‘Lunch.’ Gabe said, before picking it up.

The alien snack was irregularly shaped and about as large as Gabe’s fist. Taking a bite, Percy quickly noticed its texture was rough, its taste bitter. Between this and the spoilt rodent meat he’d eaten back on Huehue, he couldn’t help but reevaluate the food they had on Remior. His world might be far from perfect, but if there was one thing he couldn’t complain about was their cuisine. At least, he’d yet to stumble upon anything on par with Freddy’s Honey Rolls during his travels.

As soon as Gabe finished eating, he began circulating his mana between his sternum and stomach, in a manner very familiar to Percy. And about half an hour later, the meal’s efficacy was exhausted, leaving a burning sensation lingering inside the core.

‘Now I’m confused. Is this your food, or how you cleanse your cores?’ Percy asked.

‘Both.’ Gabe replied, before elaborating. ‘As you can imagine, the Vault can’t exactly support a diverse ecosystem, so the gods in charge had to carefully choose what flora and fauna to cultivate. They ended up importing sizians, which are a bunch of reptiles that store beast mana in their flesh. It makes their meat both nutritious and – after some processing – suitable for core purification, killing two birds with one stone.’

‘But isn’t it expensive? What about those who can’t afford the advancement?’ Percy asked in protest.

‘They starve, making space for more people.’ Gabe said.

Percy grimaced in disgust. What sort of monsters would treat their children like that?!

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‘It’s even worse than you think. They make us fight for our food. The challenges are the only way to earn credits, but Red-borns and Orange-borns can’t keep up with their needs.’

‘Why?! Do those bastards get off watching you struggle?!’

‘It’s not for entertainment. You see, they don’t just want to increase the quantity of new gods. They want to improve their quality too.’

‘The bloodlines?’

Gabe nodded.

In the context of the Vault – and even Remior – one of the most important factors influencing the ‘quality’ of a god was whether they had a powerful bloodline or not. After all, bloodline abilities had all sorts of weird effects, often letting one do things even gods couldn’t otherwise replicate. Percy himself was a prime example of this. So, while a bloodline wasn’t a requirement for divinity, a god who had one was generally stronger than one who didn’t.

‘Yes, everyone born under Yellow is left to starve, while the rest of us are thrown into challenges to test our bloodlines. The ones who make it further are granted the “honour” of mating with our own parents, to create the next generation of children. That way, they maximize the odds of breeding people with both a blessing and a powerful bloodline.

On one hand, the challenges are there to motivate us – since we’d starve or fail to advance without them. On the other, they’re our opportunity to develop unique spells, revealing which bloodlines are worth keeping in the process, weeding out the weaklings.’

Percy remained silent for a while, contemplating the implications. Strictly speaking, Remior’s gods weren’t much better than this. True, they didn’t treat low-borns nearly as badly and, they also didn’t sleep around to spread their blessings all over the place. That said, their approach to bloodlines was more or less the same.

The constant war rampant between the noble Houses was clearly something that suited the Divine Order. After all, it would only take Phoebe a word to stop it, since nobody would dare oppose her. In other words, letting Remior’s nobles continue killing each other was their version of the challenges, to keep recycling the population, allowing more gods to emerge and powerful bloodlines to mutate.

‘Though even those at the bottom can still have some semblance of a life there.’ Percy thought.

By comparison, the Vault’s deities were downright cruel, treating their own offspring as nothing but livestock.

‘Well, as much as we all hate their guts, I guess I can’t argue with the results.’ Gabe shrugged.

Indeed, Percy’s latest host was clearly one of the lucky ones, having inherited the full package.

‘You still died though, didn’t you?’ he couldn’t help but point out.

‘I suppose.’ Gabe said, before adding. ‘Now that you bring that up, what are we going to do about it? You did promise to help.’

‘Right. Like I said, this is a long shot, though I guess it’s been going well for us so far.’ Percy replied.

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning that healing your body DID greatly slow your soul’s deterioration. It’s still a mess, but between your second core and my stashed mana, we have a lot more time than I previously thought.’

Percy felt a wave of hope inadvertently seeping through their connection, but Gabe quickly quashed it.

‘I sense a “but” coming.’ the latter said.

‘But it’s not a permanent solution. You need a lot more soul mana than I have left for a decent shot at a complete and rapid recovery. And I guess only a god’s mana is dense enough to be stored for a long period of time.’ he explained.

Naturally, Percy wasn’t certain about that last part, but all his experiences seemed to corroborate that deduction.

‘Seriously?!’ Gabe was flustered.

And rightfully so. While life and soul affinities were both categorized as rare, the former were much more common than the latter. The Vault of Magic clearly possessed at least one god with a life affinity willing to donate some of his mana. However, there was no guarantee they had what Gabe needed.

‘Is it impossible to get any?’ Percy asked.

‘I don’t know. Even if we have it – and that’s a big if – it’s definitely in the restricted lists. You can’t buy a god’s mana with credits alone, otherwise we wouldn’t have had to go through that challenge to fix my body in the first place. The only way is to get another bonus reward.’

‘So?’ Percy didn’t understand what the problem was. ‘It should be easier to complete another challenge now that you’re healed.’

But Gabe shook his head.

‘You don’t understand. You only earn a bonus reward every 6 waves. The “swarm” challenge is the one I’m best at, because my wings essentially grant me unlimited endurance. Even then, it took everything I had to clear wave 6. The next reward is at 12.’

Percy swallowed hard. He had no idea how the difficulty scaled, but he couldn’t help but picture an army of Green golems like the ones from earlier surrounding them.

‘What about the other challenges?’ he asked.

‘There are only two more types. The “magiscript” challenge doesn’t involve any combat, but nobody under Blue bothers learning the art, as it takes decades to make any progress. Right now, I couldn’t place down a single glyph to save my life. And that’s just the Red version of the challenge. The Green one involves much more complicated inscriptions. You can only earn rewards for your own grade.’ Gabe said.

As much as Percy would’ve loved to dip his toes into the field, he didn’t argue back. Not only had he promised Gabe he’d try saving him, they also didn’t have enough time for this. Even with their newly repaired body, he estimated they’d last a month or two at most.

‘And the other one?’ he asked.

‘The “gauntlet” challenge is admittedly the only one we might stand a chance at. Still, beating the third wave was tough. I can’t see myself clearing three more, especially since the last one will be on a whole different level…’

It definitely sounded like a tall order, but Percy wasn’t one to give up easily.

‘Then, I guess we’ll have to be on a whole different level too.’