Wanderer 111

Chapter 111: Slaughter

Percy had come a long way since joining the Alchemists' Guild. He'd learned a lot and honed many of his spells over the years, though if there were two things he'd gained the most experience in... well… it would be brewing elixirs and killing wasps.

The latter was precisely the skill he was currently exercising, to survive the onslaught of Starry Workers rushing him like a torrential river amidst a downpour. Most of them were headed to their doom of course, but the mad beasts didn't seem to care, heeding their ruler's command without complaint.

Horizontal slice.

Five dead.

Vertical slash.

Three more.

Sidestep and swing.

Another two killed and one attack evaded.

'There's no end to them…'

It had already been over five minutes since the bugs reached him, and Micky had yet to finish mutating. From the fleeting images he sent over, Percy could tell the knight's carcass was already halfway eaten – he wasn't sure the rest would suffice. But he didn't exactly have the time to worry about that, as he was busy trying to prevent the creatures from getting past him.

The workers never truly stood a chance against his oversized sickles, the crescent edges slicing the wasps' very souls apart like hot knives through morsels of butter. The constructs were frankly overkill for

the job, as was the young man's speed and ferocity, rendering the poor creatures without any means of defending themselves. Thus, no single insect posed a problem by itself, though their sheer numbers did.

With a diameter of nearly three metres, the tunnel was more than wide enough for a dozen workers to arrive at once without bumping into one another. Moreover, they dove upon him in waves spaced apart by mere fractions of a second, never giving him a moment to catch his breath.

'At least the dead ones are blocking the way…' Percy smiled bitterly.

So many had he slain already, that their fox-sized corpses littered his surroundings, forming multiple large mounds. It was to the point some of the oncoming insects had to waste time flying around – or digging through – their fallen comrades, relaxing the pressure on him slightly. Of course, every now and then, one of them crashed violently onto the piles of bodies, sending their limp frames tumbling through the tunnel.

'Is it me, or are they deliberately not using their stingers?'

Given his recent advancement, the upgraded boosting art and his many years of experience, Percy was doing a decent job holding on. That said, he couldn't help but notice he owed some of his success to his enemies not giving their all. Their endgame was to bypass and overwhelm him from every direction, apparently still intent on capturing him alive.

'Just what does she want from me?!?!'

The mere thought of being delivered as a prisoner to the titanic monster would have sent a chill down his spine, if only Synchronization wasn't cooking his body inside out.

"CAW!!" Micky suddenly cried.

It was hard to make his voice out through the cacophony of the buzzing wasps and the endless rumble of the tunnel. Still, Percy could've sworn it sounded a little deeper and slightly more piercing than before.

‘Are you done yet?!’ he asked through the cord, too occupied to turn around.

Taking the hint, the crow used the connection this time, sending him another glimpse of the knight’s carcass. Only a chunk remained, though it was the part Percy’s clone had filled with acid. Micky couldn’t eat that. And it appeared the bird still needed some food to finish evolving…

“For fuck’s sake!” Percy spat through gritted teeth. “Just eat the smaller ones!! They’re all over the place!!!”

Intensifying his efforts, he advanced through the chaotic corridor, leaving his cover behind. Slaughtering a path through the workers’ ranks, the young man turned into a violent hurricane of flesh and soul, his weapons unleashed in a lethal flurry against the insects.

The incessant buzzing gave way to the rhythmic sounds of dead bodies, some making dull noises as they crashed against stones and metals, a few forming crisp tunes as they collided with the crystals instead. Step by step, slash by slash, Percy pushed back the rush of beasts with sheer grit and force of will, his muscles burning and his bones aching as he left a graveyard in his wake.

“Well?! What’s the hold up?!”

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Fortunately, it didn’t take Micky much longer to complete his transformation. The giant corpse had left him very close, and the veritable buffet Percy had prepared for him was more than enough to seal the deal. But it wasn’t all good news. A fleeting glance revealed the crow was now as tall as a human! It had already been impossible for it to fly inside the narrow tunnel before, yet now even fluttering through it was out of the question.

‘Just run then!’ Percy felt like banging his head against the wall. ‘Do I look like I can carry you?!’

‘CAW…’

The bird didn't sound particularly happy but then again, it wasn't the one that had to keep an army at bay. Jolting off, it disappeared into the colourful corridor as Percy also backtracked, conceding some ground to the insects to keep up with his familiar. Under different circumstances, the young man might have found the bird's awkward dash hilarious – Micky actually looking like a chicken as he skittered through the tunnel!

This wasn't the time to laugh at the crow's antics, however, as another change occurred with his attackers. The second platoon was upon him. Spilling into the tunnel, the drones filled in the gaps between the workers, blotting out Percy's view. Pathetically weak as they were, he knew he could crush each of them with a finger. If only he had a few hundred fingers…

'This is going to suck…'

As the cloud of palm-sized wasps reached him, he made the split-second decision to ignore them entirely, focusing his Mana Sense solely on the Orange creatures. Continuing as before, he simply allowed the drones to do as they pleased, many latching onto his body, as a few made their way to his familiar.

"KRAAA!!!" the bird cried in annoyance, shaking the bugs off with a powerful flap of its wings as a series of amber lines lit up on its plumage.

Percy on the other hand was having a tougher time, as he was neither a beast, nor at Yellow. The blanket of insects crawled all over his skin, inhibiting his joints, trying to slow down his movements.

"Piss off!" he shouted, sending a powerful burst of cyan out of his pores, blasting the pests to smithereens. His pure mana might have not been that useful against the knight or the workers, but for the drones? It was plenty.

And thus, they continued – a man and a bird, desperately inching towards the exit, struggling to resist the suffocating grasp of the magical hive trying to steal their freedom.

'How much further is it?!?!'

They must've run for half an hour like this, and Percy wasn't sure he'd last much longer. While he'd grown far more proficient with Synchronization over the past few months, he'd never fought at such intensity and for such a prolonged period of time.

Yet, even more than his dwindling stamina, Percy had another thing to be worried about. The tremors beneath his feet had grown fiercer, indicating the soldiers were about to reach them too! Luckily, there didn't seem to be another knight nearby, or it would have long caught up by now. Still, it wasn't like he felt confident handling a legion of the Yellow creatures in his current state.

'CAW!!!' Micky suddenly called out to him ecstatically, sending a vivid image through the cord.

It was bright, but different than the magical glimmer of the cavern. Sunlight! They'd reached the exit! Moreover, the fact the sun could peer into the tunnel meant Nesha had succeeded too, digging them a way out of this infernal deathtrap.

'Hurry up!!' Percy said, the literal light at the end of the tunnel renewing his vigour. 'We need to get there before the soldiers reach us!'

'CAW!'

Keenly aware of the danger they were in, the two drew on any lingering dregs of strength they'd yet to tap into, hoping to make it in time. But they weren't fast enough.

'Shit, they're here!'

Percy's heart skipped a beat, as the first hint of Yellow appeared in his Mana Sense. Realizing the soldiers would get to him before he made it out, he decided to change tactics. Fighting the workers one-armed, he allowed the sickle in his other hand to transform, soon taking the shape of half a dozen throwing stars. Next, he launched them towards the bugs, the projectiles piercing long lines through his enemies, killing scores of them as they flew into the distance.

This seemed to ease the pressure on him momentarily, letting him manifest a sheet of cyan in his now-free hand, as he continued to hold off the rest of the wasps with the other. Finally, he flung the cloth of

pure mana against the creatures, ensnaring many of them and forcing them to collide, before turning the second sickle into another set of projectiles and throwing that too.

'Here goes nothing!'

Having exhausted all the mana he could spare while retaining his boosting art, he then turned around, sprinting towards his familiar. Picking him up, he slung him awkwardly over his shoulder, before crossing the last few metres separating them from the exit. And without even waiting until he took his first step out of the hellish tunnel, he called to his partner.

"NESHAAA!! COLLAPSE THE ENTRANCE!!! NOW!!"

Catching a glimpse of a dark shape by the corner of his eye, he barely ducked in time to avoid the bolt as it crashed onto the ceiling.

CRACK, CRAAAAAAACK, BOOOOOM!

Percy didn't bother glancing back at the aftermath as he leapt out of the cave, hoping the girl had poured everything into the spell.

"What the fuck is that?!" she asked upon seeing Micky.

But the young man didn't register her words, only now managing to examine the devastation behind him. The bolt of space mana had done its job, shattering a layer of stone off the ceiling, leading to a cascading demolition. Still, this wasn't going to hold them off for long – he was certain the wasps were already busy clawing their way out.

"No time to waste!" he told his companions as he picked a handful of dirt off the ground. "Scrub your bodies with it."

Their only shot at survival hinged on eliminating their trail. No way they'd outrun the wasps in an open space. The others followed his advice, even Micky tossing a few beakfuls of mud onto his plumage.

Finishing first, Percy helped the crow speed up the process as he noticed a dark bandage hung over its neck.

‘Wow, did you actually remember to take it off before advancing?’

That was quite some foresight from the bird. Percy had been too busy to think about that but, had his familiar evolved with it still wrapped around his abdomen, they’d be in need of a new one by now.

‘CAW…’ Micky said, flashing him an annoyed “I’m not a moron” look.

A minute later, the entire group was done masking their scent – and just in time too. The loose pebbles resting atop the recently collapsed entrance were already shaking violently, intense tremors seeping through the ground.

“Good. Now let’s get the hell out of here.”

Chapter 112: Mutations

The trio ran for hours until they felt safe enough to take a break. And even then, they only gave themselves a few minutes to catch their breath and rub some more dirt on, before resuming their journey until nightfall. Perhaps, the Green or Blue bugs could still track them down, but Percy guessed the queen wouldn’t bother sending her elites that far from the hive.

‘Do you see anything suspicious?’ he asked his familiar.

Ever since they exited the tunnel, he’d had Micky fly lower than usual, to ensure he didn’t get spotted by anyone on the Spire. It wasn’t until the colossal structure was naught but a distant silhouette on the horizon that he gave him permission to climb higher, acting as a scout.

‘No…’

Percy’s eyebrows shot up.

‘What?’

‘No.’ the bird repeated.

The young man was sure he hadn’t misheard. His familiar hadn’t merely transmitted his thoughts – he’d sent an actual word over! Of course, the bird hadn’t uttered a sound – it was all in Percy’s mind – but Micky had talked through their connection in a high-pitched, childlike voice.

‘Can you speak normally now?’

‘No.’

Percy frowned.

‘What words do you understand?’

‘No. Yes. Percy. Micky. Eat. Fly…’

The bird kept going for a while until the young man cut it off.

‘Ok, I get it… I guess this is something to work on...’

Micky’s vocabulary wasn’t too varied, and it didn’t seem like he could form a complete sentence just yet, but this was promising. While he might have been able to achieve all this even before the evolution, it would have probably taken more effort.

As expected, the promotion had boosted Micky’s intelligence. All advancements did that to an extent, but not as much as other aspects of one’s existence. For instance, while Percy’s thoughts had grown a little clearer upon reaching Orange, he certainly hadn’t turned three times as smart or anything crazy like that. Still, as far as he knew, beasts tended to benefit more than sentients in this regard, and he had a hunch his familiar was an outlier even among them. After all, he doubted other beasts started to speak upon hitting Yellow – though he wouldn’t rule it out for the higher grades.

‘Are his old memories beginning to resurface?’

Percy sure hoped that was the case. At least, this was the first real sign his friend was on the road to recovery. However, it had taken them nearly five years to reach this point, so if the past was any indication, it was going to be a long road…

‘Oh well… For now, let’s just teach him a few more words and see if he can actually speak them out. But I suppose that has more to do with his vocal cords than his intelligence…’

In any case, this wasn’t the only change Micky had undergone during his advancement. As early as back in the tunnel, Percy had noticed some additional differences in his appearance – besides the obvious size increase – though he hadn’t had the time to dwell on them. Now that they were finally free, he could examine them in more detail.

‘Micky, come over here.’

Hearing him, the familiar dove downward at great speed, partly to show off, and partly to simply revel in his newfound strength – as he had been doing ever since they escaped the claustrophobic walls of the underground cavern.

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He landed in front of the young man, raising a cloud of dust with a flap of his wings. Percy rolled his eyes at the theatrics as he stepped closer, scanning the crow’s body carefully. r̤

‘The colour has spread to cover the entire talons and beak… Even his eyes are completely silver now…’

Just like the last time, Micky’s nature as a familiar seemed to have bled into the rest of his being, furthering his evolution towards this unique direction. They’d have to test the sharpness of the bird’s claws in an actual fight, but Percy suspected they were on par with his sickles now.

However, the crow's abnormal soul wasn't the only thing to have induced some unexpected mutations. Looking closely, the young man noticed Micky's plumage had undergone a subtle shift too. The dark feathers were now tinged with a hint of green at the edges. The difference was minuscule – barely perceptible under the soft moonlight – but Percy knew his friend well enough to spot it.

'Is it because of his air affinity?'

Nobody could answer that, of course, as Micky was possibly the only beast in the universe to have a second core. They were pretty much in uncharted territory. Still, this sounded about right – nothing else could explain this oddity. In fact, Percy had a hypothesis as to why the crow was mutating in such a manner.

'This must be how affinity fusion works for beast mana.'

They'd tried to combine Micky's two mana types before, though they'd never succeeded. At first, Percy had chalked it up to the mismatch between the two grades, though he was now confident there was more to it than that. Even on its own, the beast affinity seemed to revolve entirely around empowering and transforming its user's body. Perhaps all its fusions involved incorporating other mana types into the body, resulting in mutations like this.

Percy felt his speculation was close to the truth, though at the end of the day it didn't really matter. Whatever the cause of these changes, the most important thing was figuring out how to take advantage of them.

'Can you gather some air mana on your feathers?'

Micky heeded the request, releasing a faint green aura by the underside of his wings. Percy had watched him do this many times before, but it was different now. Bathed in the air mana, the crow's feathers lit up, apparently resonating with the substance! Activating Mana Sense, the young man observed a layer of Red coating them, sticking to them without dispersing!

"Fly?" the bird asked, clearly eager to put its new trick to the test.

"Fly." Percy nodded.

Taking off, the crow sped through the night once more, this time doing so with even greater ease as the air seemed to part in its way, aiding rather than hindering it.

‘Interesting…’ the young man noted.

It wasn’t the first time Micky used his second affinity to augment his flight, but the effect had never been quite as pronounced. This, in tandem with Circulation and just the overall boost from the advancement, and the crow was guaranteed to be a menace in aerial combat!

“Are you two done playing around?” Nesha asked in annoyance, snapping Percy out of his thoughts.

The girl had remained oddly quiet since their frantic escape, apparently contemplating a great number of things during their journey.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions.” Percy said.

Honestly, he felt a little guilty over letting her join without knowing much about him. It was true she’d followed him of her own volition but, in hindsight, he should’ve probably come clean beforehand. Between Micky, his clone, Circulation and his second core, there was plenty he’d have to bring her up to speed with.

“I do.” she nodded, but then shook her head. “There’s only one thing I want to know right now, however.”

Percy tilted his head, waiting for her to elaborate.

“Where are we going?”

Ah, that! They hadn’t really discussed their plans for after leaving the settlement, had they? In Percy’s defence, it was a miracle they’d even survived this long.

“Well, I did have a place in mind.” he said. “It’s a small town about two weeks from here. I have my reasons for going there. Unless you wanted to go somewhere else?”

“No, that sounds fine. Anywhere is good, as long as I can buy a new pair of glasses.”

Percy’s jaw slackened upon hearing what her priority was.

‘Though I suppose I’d also want that if I couldn’t see properly…’

Shrugging, Percy gestured at her to follow him as he strayed away from the dirt path. The road was easier to walk on, but it wasn’t the safest place to camp the night. Moving a couple hundred metres, they made their way around a hill, hoping to rest behind it, hidden from plain sight until sunrise.

‘Take the first shift, will you?’ he asked Micky.

It was a rhetorical question. Percy knew he deserved some sleep after fighting a damn army of wasps for his familiar’s sake. Picking a nice-looking patch of dirt, he patted it a few times to soften it, before lying down. Sadly, they hadn’t brought any camping equipment, as the amulet had only had enough space for some food and water. But it was ok. With his enhanced physique, even weathering the frigid midnight winds with his bare chest shouldn’t be too difficult.

Thinking of something, he turned to Nesha who was also preparing her own resting spot, before speaking.

“I thought advancing fixed things like poor eyesight.”

“It does. You should have seen me at Orange.”

Chapter 113: Search

“What do you mean you can’t find anything?” Deimos’s voice boomed, the entire room shaking.

The idiot in his grip trembled as he was held by the collar, not even daring to blink as the spittle splashed all over his face.

“S-Sir, we’ve searched the settlement inside out. We’ve already interrogated all the registered alchemists too. Nobody knows anything about this Aurora Dew. Or well… at least nothing they’re willing to share.”

Deimos felt his blood freeze at the mere thought of returning to his father empty-handed. Hermes might have given the rest of Remior the impression of an easy-going eccentric, but Deimos knew the truth about the fickle god. If he failed to deliver the elixirs, his father might just beat him to death.

“Look again! Leave no stone unturned! Interrogate everyone from the most senior alchemists to the lowest Red-born trash selling junk food on the streets! Don’t show your ugly mug to me again, unless you have something useful to report!!!” he yelled, tossing him out of the room.

The fool was lucky he still needed him.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Deimos then walked out of the temporary lodging the Guild had so “kindly” bestowed him, eager for some fresh air. At least the mana density was rich here – the only silver lining in a mission too troublesome to be worth it. Walking along the cobblestone road, he breathed the colourful motes in, trying to calm himself down.

A few minutes later, he reached a grand building – one of the largest in the settlement – climbing up its stone steps. Upon seeing him, an attendant in a green robe rushed to greet him, but Deimos just waved him away.

“I know the way.”

“But sir… the elders are currently in a meeting… I’m sure if you wai–”

“No meeting is more important than this. Your elders know that too.”

Without even waiting for the man to reply, Deimos walked past him, making his way to a large chamber. The door had been left wide open – he could see the five old alchemists locked in a heated discussion from here. Though no sound escaped, as the room was clearly warded. Another attendant was stationed outside, the man looking at him in hesitation, probably considering whether he should try stopping him. But Deimos didn't care, ignoring him as he entered the hall.

The elders went silent upon noticing him, their features twisting into a grimace following his "rude" entrance. Dressed in their violet robes as they were, it had probably been centuries since the last time anyone dared to treat them this way. But he wasn't afraid of the old coots. Their status was no higher than his given the circumstances. One of them was about to speak, but Deimos beat him to it.

"How the fuck have you managed to miss something like this happening right under your noses? Somebody comes up with a one-in-a-million-years recipe, pumping out some miracle elixir next door from you, and you're the last people to find out?!"

Deimos's voice shot up again, crushing against the warded walls like a tidal wave, the power of his blessing nearly shattering the soundproofing runes.

But the elders didn't seem rattled by his outburst. Unlike his minion earlier, they merely unleashed a sliver of their own presence, shielding their bodies from the annoyance. Next, the oldest of them – a short man with black hair that had begun to grey around his temples – spoke.

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"Deimos… Have you ever considered that people might be more willing to give you what you want if you ask them nicely?"

Listening to the old man's patronizing tone, Deimos felt his rage bubbling up again. But he pressed it down. The only thing that mattered here was finding those elixirs, and snapping at these fossils wouldn't help.

"As I see it, you have exactly two options in front of you." he said. "Either you find out how this happened, or you figure out the recipe yourselves. And you better do it fast, or my father might come here personally and 'ask us all nicely'."

This time, all five of the elders – their leader included – shuddered at the god's mention, their expressions turning grim.

The two sides discussed for another ten minutes, before the alchemists assured Deimos they would continue to do everything in their power to get to the bottom of this. Then, he handed them one of the vials that Talos guy had sent, asking them to work on the recipe. Of course, everyone involved knew that figuring the base ingredients out from the finished product was a tall order. That said, it was something they had to try, in case they failed to locate its maker.

Once he was done, Deimos returned to his place, finding the blond kid waiting outside. His features eased slightly, as he knew the boy was the most capable of his subordinates. Hopefully he'd done a better job than the other morons.

"Since we couldn't find anything about the elixirs directly, I looked into other strange happenings over the past few days." Jason cut to the chase.

"And?"

"A popular gambling den closed a few hours after we arrived. It didn't open the following day, and nobody has seen the owner since."

Deimos gave the boy a questioning gaze, not knowing what a random gambling den had to do with any of this. Still, he knew Jason wouldn't have approached him with this if he didn't have something more. ʀ

"The owner was a girl from the Veritas House. She's only been in the Guild for a few years, but she's made quite some money in that time."

"Veritas…?" the name did ring a bell, but Deimos was having trouble placing his finger on it.

Jason shrugged.

"I didn't know them either, so I asked around. Apparently, they were affiliated with the Asclepius until they got the shaft right around when the girl joined. She has a Truthseeker bloodline."

Deimos's eyes narrowed at the revelation. Indeed, a girl with a good business sense, the ability to detect lies, and a possible connection to the Oblivious Agents just vanishing out of the blue was a bit conspicuous. Of course, people in the Guild died all the time while hunting – it wasn't exactly the safest job. But something told him the girl didn't spend her days on the giant mushrooms. And nobody could have left the settlement the normal way either due to the lockdown they'd imposed.

"I trust you've already followed through?"

The boy nodded, before snapping his fingers. Another man in a green robe approached them at the sound of that.

"Tell him what you told me." Jason commanded, prompting the guy to swallow a lump of saliva.

"Y-Yes… I was on guard duty at the gate leading to the hunting grounds on the day of the message. I remember her going out that night, but I never saw her return."

Deimos raised an eyebrow.

"Are you bullshitting us, or do you memorize the faces of everyone who goes through?!"

Startled, the man took a step back at the outburst.

"N-No, sir… I-I remembered her because I'm one of her r-regulars… It made an imp-pression because I've n-never seen her go h-hunting b-before." he stuttered, his words an affront to the ears.

"If he's telling the truth, the girl must be hiding on the Spire. Scan every level with the others. Get one of the elders to help you search the top level." he said, before scratching his head. "Not that she would have survived surrounded by Blue beasts… But look there too, just in case. I want to know what happened to her, and I want to know it yesterday."

Jason nodded before taking off.

‘The girl must only be a piece of the puzzle…’ Deimos reasoned, rubbing his chin.

Based on what they’d learned, there was indeed a high likelihood she was involved with the distribution of the product, but she wasn’t an alchemist. She couldn’t have been that as well. So, whoever came up with the recipe was somebody else entirely. Probably one of the veterans in the Guild – maybe even one of those five coots themselves. Chances were, they got rid of the girl too, disposing of her body to hide their tracks.

But Deimos shrugged.

‘Oh well… It doesn’t really matter. Now that we’ve got an actual lead, Jason will sniff them out with his little trick…’

Chapter 114: Ripples

“Grandpa!! Why are they taking you?” Floria cried as the members of the Divine Root placed Bronn in handcuffs, escorting him out of the building. The man could free himself of course – if he wanted – but he didn’t seem to have any intention of resisting.

The girl just couldn’t understand how things had come to this. Hadn’t her grandpa been the one who came forward with the information the gods wanted? Why was he getting punished?! Panicking, she rushed behind them, ready to fight against the powerful mages if she had too – blessings be damned. Of course, she wasn’t stupid – she knew she’d probably get killed too, but how could she just watch them take her grandpa away?!

A firm hand descended on her shoulder, however, locking her in place. Floria instinctively tried to lash out, but withdrew her mana upon noticing who it was.

“Dad! Are we going to let them take him?!?! This… it isn’t fair! They should be treating him like a hero!”

But Fyn shook his head.

“This all happened because we went behind the Order’s back to buy those elixirs… for me. We’re lucky the Divine Root agreed to our terms. They’re going to place our House under their protection for the next two hundred years. And they’ll even spare me, letting me reach Violet and replace father. That way, we’ll have a chance to recover. This is what we wanted – what we traded the information for…”

“But then why?!” the girl shouted, her voice cracking.

“They can’t just let us go entirely unpunished. It would send the wrong message…” her father patiently explained.

Listening to him, Floria couldn’t help but shudder. She hadn’t realized how close her dad had come to being arrested too. Turning back to her grandpa, she noticed he’d been escorted quite far already. She frantically wiped her tears away, trying to look at Bronn one last time, just so she could remember him. Yet her vision kept blurring.

“Floria… Your grandpa knew this would happen when he sent that letter. He is a hero. To our family at least. Remember that…”

The girl nodded, her gaze still glued to the group in the distance.

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“Lord Asclepius, care to explain this situation?” an authoritative voice asked, the passive presence it radiated leaving all the others in the room with their heads bowed. Nobody dared lift their eyes. Not the dozens of Blues, nor even the handful of Violets. None but Lord Asclepius himself – a fellow White.

“Theseus, we’ve known each other for thousands of years already. I thought we were on first name basis by now.”

“I’m here on official business, Machaon. I do need to maintain appearances, lest I wrongly give the impression that I’m going easy on you.” Theseus clicked his tongue, before scanning the others in the room, each shuddering as his eyes brushed over them.

“It doesn’t matter whether you go easy on me or not, old friend. The answer will be the same. You know how our agents operate. Better than most in fact. I hope you haven’t conveniently forgotten how often the Divine Root employs our services.” Machaon replied sharply.

“Be that as it may, I’m sure you understand how much pressure I’m under to get to the bottom of this.” Theseus said.

“There’s nothing we can do to help you. Just like our field agents, the people who registered the mission have also erased all details from their minds. Nobody can recall anything about the one who hired us.”

“How the hell did it even come to this?!” Theseus snapped. “Your agent should have never agreed to transport those elixirs! They should have rejected the mission and reported it right away!”

But Machaon shook his head.

“How was anybody supposed to know those were elixirs – let alone ones as revolutionary as this? Lacking any other information, our agent must have assumed they were just a new variety of potions or something. Or did you want them to taste them too?!”

Theseus didn’t respond right away, considering his words. Next, he looked Machaon in the eyes before speaking.

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“At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter whether your House is in the right or not. You know that, right?”

Machaon clenched his fists as he unleashed his own presence, pushing back Theseus’s as the two domains collided, prompting the others to retreat a few steps just in case. The clash went on for several minutes, as neither of the powerful Whites was willing to back down. At least, not at first. ĥ

“This is as stupid as it is pointless…” Machaon eventually waved in exasperation, withdrawing his aura. “Just tell me what you want from me...”

“A scapegoat.” Theseus cut to the chase, before elaborating. “We both know there’s no way to identify who employed you, but a head is going to roll today all the same. If you can’t find the specific agent who took the mission, pick a different one. I don’t care who.”

Machaon’s eyes widened at the sheer audacity of the request. It wasn’t until a moment later the words sank deep enough for him to grit his teeth.

“Must we resort to such a barbaric outcome?!”

“Machaon… I’m not playing games here.” Theseus said, his tone not leaving room for debate. “Either you sacrifice one of your agents, or it’s the two of us who’ll lose our heads.”

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“This is amazing!” Uncle Gareth exclaimed. “If we get those elixirs, even I could reach Violet!!”

“Aren’t you a little too excited for something that would still be over a thousand years away?” Dad shut him down, though it didn’t last long.

“Still, I’ll reach Blue much faster too!” Gareth spoke again after a few moments, his enthusiasm clearly not so easy to douse down.

“Silence.” Uncle Galahad said. “If and when the Divine Order decides to mass produce this Aurora Dew, we will give priority to the Yellow-borns. Whether anyone else gets any will depend on the cost and availability.”

Hearing them discuss the topic of the elixirs, Elaine gave her grandpa an odd look, as he also tossed a fleeting glance her way. It hadn’t been long since they allowed her to attend these strategy meetings. Yellow-borns were given the privilege younger, as they represented the future leaders of the family. Though she didn’t say anything. Today, she was only here to listen.

Archibald cleared his throat.

“Just a reminder that we’re here to discuss House Tantalus. Not the fancy new elixirs.” he said, putting the debate to rest.

Hearing him, Uncle Balin slammed his fist, shaking the long table. He must’ve held back too, or it would have shattered to splinters.

“What’s there to discuss?! I say we attack them head on already! Are we afraid of those bastards?!?!”

The others averted their gazes following his outburst, Elaine included. Everyone still stepped on eggshells around him, knowing the man was grieving. It hadn’t even been a year since Hector’s death.

“Calm down, son.” Grandpa said. “We’d probably win an all-out war, but our losses would be greater that way. Though I agree we need to escalate our attacks too, if we want them to stop.”

It had already been months since their House started fighting back, having killed many of House Tantalus’s members in that time. Still, that only seemed to pour oil in the fire, as their enemies retaliated even more aggressively. They appeared determined to weaken them regardless of the cost, their goal probably being to prevent Galahad from consuming a petal. After all, they already had their hands full against Archibald – a Violet core with a powerful bloodline. They clearly didn’t want to deal with a second one in possession of a composite affinity.

‘I bet they’ll escalate even more after that announcement…’ Elaine smiled bitterly.

The meeting continued for a few hours, as everyone exchanged ideas and plans on how to best defend the western side of the Camelot province from their enemies. River Glein had always served as a natural barrier, splitting the province in two down the middle, but the recent unrest had made the rival House a lot more daring.

It wasn’t until the meeting was over that Elaine approached Archibald. She waited until they were alone in the room before speaking.

“Grandpa… Those elixirs… Do you think…?” she trailed off, though the man clearly caught her meaning.

“Hard to say. The fact he managed to become a full-fledged alchemist in a few years is impressive… But coming up with a new recipe so quickly? That sounds a little farfetched.”

Elaine nodded in agreement, though Archibald wasn’t done.

“Still, it’s quite the coincidence this happened so soon after he arrived there. The old elixirs had remained mostly unchanged for tens of thousands of years… I suppose it’s not impossible he was involved, given his ability…”

She gasped.

“Do you think he might be in trouble?!?!”

“How should I know? We aren’t even sure it’s him. If it is, it was smart of him to not tell us through the letters. These things are better shared in person. Let’s just hope he knows what he’s doing…”

***

Similar scenes played out all across Remior, as those involved with the new elixirs tried to hide, and everyone else couldn’t wait to get their hands on the miraculous product. Percy would have been shocked had he seen how far his actions had reached.

In fact, the ripples extended all the way to a dark room hidden in some remote location, where no sound was ever heard, nor any soul did ever visit. It was a simple room, lacking any furniture. There was only a mat, with two incense burners lit up on either side. The faintly sweet scent of agarwood permeated the place, as a hooded figure meditated silently atop the mat.

Had somebody stumbled upon the room, they might have thought the person was a corpse – and not a very important one at that. After all, they were dressed in naught but the cheapest clothes, a ragged outfit of worn linen. It was as if somebody had picked the lowest commoner off the street and left them here to starve for whatever reason.

Yet, here, in this room in the middle of nowhere, amidst the thick veil of darkness and hidden beneath the unassuming hood…

…a pair of lips curled upward.

Chapter 115: Clothes

‘Percy!’

‘What is it?’ the young man asked, sensing the crow’s urgency through their bond.

Getting used to hearing actual words from Micky would take a while.

‘People…’

He sighed. They were bound to run into somebody sooner or later – it was the downside of travelling along a paved road. Especially one leading to a destination as popular as the Alchemists’ Guild. If anything, it was more surprising it had taken three days for this to happen.

‘Hermes’ message must’ve spooked everyone.’

Percy guessed most merchants would steer clear of the Spire for the next couple of weeks, waiting for the dust to settle. Yet some people didn’t care, apparently.

‘How many?’

‘Three.’

‘On horses?’

‘Yes.’

The young man nodded, assuming they had at least one person below Yellow with them. Ideally, it would be nice to know their exact grades, to decide the best course of action, though that might be asking for too much. Micky couldn't get too close to them, or they might notice something was off. That's why Percy had asked his familiar to fly wide circles around him and Nesha, scouting the area while remaining at least a mile away. That way, he might pass for a wild bird that just happened to roam the region.

Back when they'd first headed to the Spire, things hadn't been as bad. Orange beasts weren't nearly as rare, nor as dangerous, so one flying above somebody wouldn't raise an eyebrow. Now that Micky had evolved, however, he was more than a little conspicuous. Not to mention, it would be easier to spot the crow's bandage from up close. Naturally, Percy had wrapped it around his familiar's abdomen again after escaping the hive, though it looped fewer times now.

"Nesha."

"Hmmm?"

"There's a group behind us. Let's find some cover just in case."

Honestly, Percy was confident they could handle them. He doubted they were too strong and, if they were, they were unlikely to be bandits. Nobles and Yellow-borns didn't need to dabble in petty crime. That said, he'd prefer to avoid them altogether – whoever they were – for multiple reasons. First, he was still half-naked, his body covered in dirt and grime. It made the prospect of meeting people a little embarrassing. Second, he'd rather not be seen anywhere close to the Spire.

Making up their minds, he and Nesha upped the pace, to keep their distance from their unwitting pursuers. They scanned the surrounding scenery for a good place to hide. Most of it was flat, entire fields of yellow grass stretching to the horizon. Though it wasn't tall enough to shroud them properly. Finding something they could work with took about an hour. Straying from the path once more, they made their way to the first hill they spotted, hoping to wait there for the group to pass.

Alas, despite their caution – or perhaps because of it – they were caught off guard by what happened next…

“Well, well… what has the wind delivered today?” a creepy voice asked. It sounded quite off – as if the man behind it was wheezing.

In front of Percy stood a trio in mismatched leather outfits, all of them sporting scraggly beards, grinning with yellowed teeth. The one who’d spoken appeared to be their leader, standing in the middle of the bunch. He had a nasty scar marring the upper half of his neck and up his chin, all the way to his bottom lip. Right where it ended, the man’s canine was missing.

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“How…” Nesha began to ask, though she trailed off as she put two and two together.

This was the only place in the surrounding area where one could take cover, so… didn’t that work both ways? Evidently, it also made for a great ambush spot. In fact, if Percy’s guess was right, the other three were probably on their way here, the two groups being in cahoots.

“Hahaha. I’ll tell you what. Hand over that enchanted bandage and the girl, and we’ll let you go. We don’t get off killing punks.”

Yeah, right. Fat chance they were willing to leave a survivor behind. Especially once they found out about the spatial amulet hidden beneath his bandage. But Percy wasn’t paying attention to the bandit’s “offer”.

‘Two Yellows and one Orange…’

It wasn’t that intimidating a lineup. Nesha didn’t have much experience fighting, but she shouldn’t have much trouble dealing with the weaker guy. As for the other two, Percy felt confident fighting them by himself. Stepping forward, he took a couple breaths in quick succession, building up his reserves. His body was still sore from all that madness in the hive, but otherwise uninjured.

“Brat, are you deaf? Toss me your bandage, or else…” the leader spoke.

Then, he manifested a fireball the size of a watermelon above his palm, trying to spook him. He must've thought it was working too, judging from the smirk on his face. Though Percy didn't blame him. Seeing him breathe rapidly, they were probably under the impression he was hyperventilating or something. Well, if the idiots thought so, they were in for a rough awakening.

"Let me make you a counteroffer." Percy replied, the calmness in his tone eliciting a frown from the bandit. "Back off now, or it'll be too late once I start."

"…" the criminal just stared at him for a few seconds, blinking a couple times. The others also looked at each other, until one of them broke into a cackle, causing the others to follow.

"Hahahahaha!"

"Start what?" the rightmost guy asked, but Percy remained silent. He already had his answer.

'Micky. Keep an eye out for the other three. If they come this way, kill them all.'

The young man wasn't concerned about his familiar's safety in the slightest. Following his promotion, the crow might even be stronger than he was. As long as the other group didn't have somebody at Green, there shouldn't be anything to worry about.

Truth be told, this situation felt a little nostalgic. Hadn't they run into bandits on the way to the Guild too? Back then, Percy had relied on deception and sneak attacks to survive. Rick's group had been weaker than today's enemies too.

'Let's see how much I've grown then.'

The bandits' eyes widened as a series of cyan lines lit up underneath Percy's skin. They were static and orderly, spreading out of his abdomen, reaching every corner of his body. At the same time, a silver maelstrom raged within, carving violent gushes through Percy's soul, drawing a constantly shifting vortex around his sternum.

Panicking, the leader tossed the fireball right at him.

But Percy had seen the attack coming before the man even launched it. Hooking his arm around Nesha, he leapt backwards, calmly watching the spell blast a patch of grass into ashes where he'd previously stood.

Everyone gave him odd looks. The girl had seen his boosting art back when he rushed out of the tunnel, though they hadn't discussed it. Now that it appeared again, she couldn't help but examine him curiously. As for the bandits, they now sported a strange mix between greed and caution they had lacked a moment ago.

The young man didn't care about any of them, however. He'd already decided to not keep much from Nesha anymore. They were in this together now. As for his enemies? Well, their fate had been sealed the moment he activated Circulation. Though he didn't stop there. Inhaling again, he pushed his body further, his muscles tensing as they brimmed with strength, his abs causing his bandage to stretch. Beads of sweat popped up all over his reddened skin, as motes of two colours leaked out of his pores, shrouding him in a twin halo of cyan and silver.

"Nesha. Take the rightmost guy on. I'll handle the others." he muttered, though the bandits must've heard him too, as all three began to prepare their own spells. The guy in the middle formed a new fireball, as the other two both used water.

"W-What?! By yourself?! They're both at Yellow!" the girl was taken aback. "What are you going to do?"

Percy shrugged. If anything, this was a good opportunity to test something else he'd been working on. Neither the Starry Knight, nor the horde of wasps had been suitable opponents, but these people were. Next, he focused on his mana, as the two halos around his frame began to change. Cyan and silver blended together into a single aura, as smoky wisps of teal enveloped him.

"What else? I'm going to get myself some new clothes."

Chapter 116: Mantle

Oversized fireballs and blasts of pressurized water rained upon Percy one after the other, keeping him on his toes. The surrounding patches of grass had all been reduced to soggy cinders, his boots leaving dozens of prints as he danced along the soot and mud, dodging the apocalyptic storm of magic.

Had it been a single enemy, he wouldn't have had as much trouble evading. He'd already done something similar years ago in the Guild, back when he'd been much weaker. However, the situation that night had been a little different. His opponent had been an earth user – an affinity not exactly famous for its speed. Also, comparing that person to the two bandits, Percy was starting to think he might have been drunk.

'I suppose that would explain why he went hunting on the first level in the middle of the night…'

And that wasn't all. Percy's ability to dodge the spells heavily hinged on reading his targets' intentions via Soul Vision. Sadly, he couldn't exactly keep his eyes on two people at the same time. Of course, the situation wasn't that bad. He could easily put some distance from them if he wanted, as he was much faster, and they had no way of catching up. It was approaching them he had trouble with. So, the two sides were essentially at a stalemate, as neither one could land a hit on the other unless they made a mistake.

'Oh well…' Percy grinned. 'More practice for my affinity fusion.'

He'd already grown used to combining his two types of mana, but he hadn't had much opportunity to test that in the heat of battle as neither the Starry Knight nor the horde of wasps had been suitable opponents. And he did need to knock a few kinks off his new trick. Constantly aligning and maintaining his mana while watching his enemies and dodging their attacks was tough. Yet, that was exactly what made this fight so valuable. Sure, he could probably find a way to win without it, but why waste such a willing pair of whetstones?

As for the outcome of the battle, he wasn't too concerned. He knew he had the advantage, though the bandits hadn't noticed. Due to his outlandish regeneration, they'd exhaust their cores before he did. Now it was just a question of whether they'd realize it in time, prompting them to take a risk he could pounce on. Either way, they were screwed.

'I wonder how Nesha is doing…'

Retreating a few paces to give himself some space, he tossed his companion a quick glance to check whether she was ok. Not the best idea. So shocked was he by what he saw, he nearly caught a fireball to his face, yet even that wasn't enough for him to pick his jaw off the ground.

‘What the hell?!’

The girl and the final bandit had put some distance from them, and were just standing around, doing nothing. Forget about fighting, the morons didn’t even bother to look at one another, their attention glued to his own battle.

“Mind lending a hand since you’re free?”

He didn’t really need help, but it irked him to see her chilling while he did all the work.

“If I do, he’ll butt in.” she pointed at the bandit with her elbow.

And the guy actually nodded at that! It was ridiculous but it made sense. Kinda. Neither of them felt confident joining the bigger fight, so their fate would inevitably be decided by the victor.

‘Not how I would’ve done things if I were in her shoes, but I suppose that’s why she never got into fighting in the first place…’ Percy shook his head, focusing back on his own enemies.

The two were nearly out of breath already. They threw each other a quick glance, seemingly communicating something, before drawing most of their remaining mana out of their cores.

‘Here it is. Their gamble.’

Readying his stance, Percy tensed his calves and scanned the two souls carefully, as he began to gather the teal wisps into his hand. He was going to meet the all-out offensive of two Yellow cores with his own!

Six condensed balls of azure shot at him in quick succession, trying to block out all his escape routes. Each punched a foot-deep crater into the ground before exploding in a splash of water. None of them hit but, together, they forced Percy into an awkward stance, right as the seventh projectile flew towards him. A spinning blast of fire twice as large and three times as fast as the others!

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Percy’s eyes widened at the sight of the rapidly expanding flame, but he didn’t panic. With a swing of his arm, he coalesced all the fused mana he’d gathered since the start of the battle, forming a large teal sheet, three metres long and half as wide. Then, the fluttering cloth slammed onto the incoming projectile like a whip, forcing it to explode before reaching its intended target!

The shockwave shot Percy butt-first into the mud, as the heat scorched a layer of skin off his frontside. Luckily, he’d thought to shield his eyes with his elbow in time.

“Percy!!” a female voice yelled, as a cloud of steam enveloped him.

“Is he dead?” the bandit leader also asked, more relieved than disappointed.

Evidently, he’d grown more concerned with keeping his life than covetous over Percy’s secrets by now. Sadly for him, however, he wasn’t walking away with either today.

“I’m fine.” the young man replied, pushing himself up.

In their corporeal state, his teal constructs were no stronger than pure mana, which meant they couldn’t survive a frontal collision against an elemental spell a full grade higher. However, Percy could still use them to collapse an incoming spell early, lessening the damage he took greatly. And… that was just the start.

As the steam faded, the bandits’ eyebrows shot up upon seeing the young man standing, a cyclone of tattered strips of teal cloth spinning around him while inching closer to his hand. There, they latched onto one another, quickly restoring Percy’s latest tool back to its original shape. Within mere seconds, it was complete again – though a little smaller than before.

“My turn!” he said with a toothy grin.

Next, he dashed towards the leader, swinging the teal sheet again as soon as he reached the halfway point.

The spell shifted mid-movement, the cloth now replaced by a couple dozen throwing stars, their curved blades making shrill sounds as they spun through the air toward their target.

“Fuck!” the bandit shouted as he tried to shield himself with whatever dregs of mana he could still summon.

Which wasn’t much! He’d exhausted most of it in that last attack. A pathetic spark lit up in each of his hands, but the man didn’t give up, slamming them against one another. Apparently, he wanted to imitate Percy’s trick, using the small explosion to block the projectiles!

Unfortunately for him, it wasn’t meant to be. So caught up was he in this last-ditch effort to protect himself, he didn’t notice the blades had gone silent at some point! Through Soul Vision, Percy watched the projectiles phase through the shockwave unaffected, before stabbing countless holes into the bandit’s soul. The man dropped limp in the mud a second later.

By the time he turned to the other one, the poor guy was running for his life! Gritting his teeth, Percy gave chase. Whatever happened, he couldn’t let a witness go after revealing all his secrets. Catching up wasn’t easy, however. It should have been, but Percy suspected his opponent was using some minor bloodline to boost his physical speed. The two men ran, one hot on the other’s tail, as they both tried to recover some mana amidst their dash.

‘Micky! How are things on your end?’

‘Three… dead…’

The familiar sent him an image of the corpses. All of them were covered in nasty gashes from head to toe, lying in bloody pools. Only one showed a Yellow core within Micky’s Mana Sense – the very same he was currently feasting on.

‘Just finish what you’re doing and go kill the last one. We can’t let him escape.’ Percy said. For some reason, he had this sneaking suspicion Nesha wouldn’t bother chasing him.

Turning back to his own target, he tossed a handful of teal daggers at him. But the bandit had learned his lesson. He didn't try blocking, instead summoning a splash of water beneath his feet, sliding away from the projectiles.

Clicking his tongue, Percy formed the teal sheet again. He continued his pursuit, drawing and pouring mana until it was back to its full size, before swiping his arm again.

Once more, the man used what little water mana he'd managed to recover, evading the barrage by the skin of his yellowed teeth. Sadly for him, however, Percy's spell could do more than just turn incorporeal. In his rush to dodge, the bandit had made a terrible mistake. Relying solely on his eyes, he had completely failed to notice a second bunch of daggers, these only visible through Mana Sense…

And just like that, he joined his former boss in the afterlife…

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Mantle of Deceit – Refined!]

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Nesha watched Percy as he picked clothes from the dead bandits, testing them until he found some his size. Whenever he was done with a corpse, he'd toss it to his crow to feast on. Suffice to say, the sight was more than a little disturbing, but that wasn't what she was concerned about.

She'd known her partner had harboured his fair share of secrets for a while now, but the things she'd seen over the last few days had vastly exceeded her wildest imaginations. From the powerful beasts he seemed to effortlessly command, to the bizarre techniques he had unleashed on the bandits, each layer he revealed was more shocking than the last. In fact, she was pretty sure by now that he and his pet had two cores each, somehow! Hell, she'd just watched the duo dismantle an entire band of bandits by themselves. Was Percy really just a Red-born?!

'He wasn't this strong when we joined the Guild…'

Nesha was sure of it! She'd seen him return from his hunts worn out, with barely a couple vials full of nectar!

‘Has he come this far in the last three years?!’

But then… the revolutionary Aurora Dew that had turned Remior upside down… compared to this… it was nothing!!! Just the tip of the iceberg – a mere afterthought!

The realization sent a chill down Nesha’s spine. Unbeknownst to everyone, biding its time away from politics and wars, hidden beneath the shadow of the Fungal Spire, in some corner where nobody ever bothered to look…

…a monster had been born.

Chapter 117: Destination

“I look like a bandit…” Percy groaned, glancing down at his mismatched outfit.

“You stink like one too.” Nesha said, pinching her nose as she inched further away from him.

“Hey, remind me again… Who was it that took all my spare clothes?” Percy asked in a faux-offended tone.

But the girl just shrugged unapologetically.

“Woohoo, I’m dressed as a commoner.” she said flatly. “What an upgrade.”

Percy shook his head, not seeing any point in continuing the argument. Though he did pick up the pace, eager to find some water to wash up. If his memory served him, they should be reaching River Glein in the next few hours. They could look for a good spot to camp there.

‘Found anything edible?’ he asked his familiar.

‘Rat…’ the crow replied.

The young man frowned at the prospect of eating rodent meat for the second day in a row. Sadly, there was only so much space in his amulet, so they had to ration their supplies for a rainy day. Still…

'I swear he's doing it on purpose. He's always had a taste for the darn things…' he sighed.

The duo walked in silence until nightfall, only stopping once the body of water came into view. Next, they spent a while longer travelling along the river, looking for a decent camping spot. It wasn't easy as their surroundings were still mostly flatlands, but they did eventually stumble upon a semi-concealed place between a few large boulders. It wasn't perfect, but it would do.

After drinking his fill, Percy scrubbed his clothes a few times until he was somewhat satisfied. Of course, he knew no amount of washing would ever completely rid him of the stench, but he hoped it wouldn't be quite as nauseating over the remainder of their journey.

Once he was done, he set his alchemy tools up. Unfortunately, he had yet to condense tomorrow's crystals and brew the corresponding elixirs. It was annoying he had to spend five hours every night doing this, but it couldn't be helped. He'd only waste his previous efforts if he started skipping days.

'I suppose I'll be able to cut the time down some more if I keep practicing…'

After confirming with Micky that the coast was clear, Percy activated Synchronization. Next, he formed a blob of cyan between his palms before beginning the first of his daily chores. Surprisingly, Nesha didn't slack off either while he worked. She lit a campfire, taking it upon herself to cook their dinner. Apparently, the crow had found a snake too, so their meal was quickly turning into a veritable buffet.

As soon as Percy was done, he drank his third set of Aurora Dew for the day, using his Whirlpool technique to cleanse both cores. Having mastered it some time ago, he could get the full benefit from the elixirs now. Micky and Nesha joined him too, consuming a dose each. Only after they were done did the humans finally pick their kebabs up, taking a bite. As for the crow… Well… He preferred his food raw.

"It tastes nice!" Percy exclaimed.

The girl didn’t reply, though he didn’t miss her lips curving slightly at the compliment. Evidently, she wasn’t that bad a cook. Still, knowing where the food had come from did dull his appetite somewhat, so he didn’t eat much in the end.

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“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going?” Nesha suddenly asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Home.” Percy replied. Then, he scratched his head. “Well, kinda…” he added vaguely.

By now, the group had almost entered the Camelot province, where his family was based. However, the young man wasn’t planning to return to the Avalon House’s mansion directly. While his home was probably the safest place to brew elixirs and send out his clones, he knew getting there wouldn’t be easy. After all, House Tantalus’s goons constantly patrolled the borders, looking for opportunities to hurt his family. RA

That said, Percy still wanted to be close to his House, so that he could reach them more easily when the lotus bloomed. As a result, he figured it was best to settle somewhere within the province. And he’d picked the exact spot too.

“We’re going to Bogside town.”

Nesha raised an eyebrow, prompting him to explain.

“Returning to my family is currently not an option, so staying in a small town nearby is the next best place for the time being. We’ll just have to keep our heads low for a while.”

“Why that one specifically though? I’m sure the Camelot province has multiple.”

Percy nodded. Indeed, the western side had three of them, but Bogside town wasn’t among them. Instead, it was on the eastern side, being one of the two under their enemies’ control!

“The members of House Tantalus are currently roaming my family’s territories like sharks, eager to take a bite. But I doubt they’d look twice at a couple of commoners passing through their own side of the province. We’ll enter from the north and make our way to the town. We’ll hide there, right under their noses, looking for an opportunity to reach my House in the next two years.”

Nesha creased her brow at the explanation. She didn’t seem convinced.

“If the only issue is the blockade, there are other ways around it. We could circle the province and enter your family’s side from a different spot.”

“Indeed, we could.” Percy said, before grinning. “But I have another goal in Bogside town.”

“Which is?”

“Remember how I said we only have enough elixirs to last as two years?”

“Yes?” the girl tilted her head in confusion, apparently unsure what this had to do with anything.

“Well, we can’t return to the Guild anytime soon, so there’s only one other place where we could possibly restock on elixirs.”

Nesha’s eyes widened as she realized what he intended to do. Indeed, after the Alchemists’ Guild, the next best place to find a large amount of elixirs was a noble House’s warehouse!

After all, a family of that size had over 500 members, of which around 200 would receive elixirs regularly. Assuming they had enough in stock to last them a couple of years – which was the norm for his family at least – it meant their combined stash would last Percy and Nesha for over a decade!

And if he was going to raid a noble House’s storage, what better target than his family’s enemies – the very ones who murdered his parents?

“Have you lost your mind? How are we going to accomplish something like that?”

Percy shrugged.

“Well, I admit that’s the part I haven’t figured out yet…” he said with a sheepish grin plastered all over his face. “Still, we have two years to find a way!”

“You’re nuts…” the girl shook her head but didn’t say anything else.

There was actually one more reason why Percy had picked that particular town over the other. Now that Micky had advanced, they needed a good place for him to stay – a place where he’d have access to all the higher-grade food he now needed. And as it so happened, Bogside town was located right next to a dangerous swamp filled with Orange and Yellow beasts – the Grisly Bog.

Putting out the fire, Percy cleaned the camp up a little before finding a decent spot to sleep. Then, he reached out to his companions.

“Nesha. Micky. Can you two do me a favour and split tonight’s shifts between yourselves? I’ll make it up to you later.”

The two groaned at the prospect of staying up longer, but ultimately agreed. Naturally, Percy had a reason for voicing this request – and it wasn’t because of laziness. He needed to get a good rest, as he had something important to do the following day.

Their target was still a week away, but that wasn’t the only place Percy would be visiting in the near future. While it hadn’t been that long since his latest wasp clone got destroyed, the colossal amount of soul mana his familiar had harvested from the Starry Knight had been more than enough to fully heal his soul.

Now that his ventures inside the hive had been placed on hold, it was finally time for the young man to resume sending clones out of Remior.

“Let’s hope it’s a lucky one.”

Chapter 118: Takeo

“Takeo… Don’t leave the village. It’s too dangerous.” Father said sternly.

But he wasn’t having it.

“This is exactly why we have to go! We can’t just wait here like cowards!”

Sengo reached for his son, but the boy shook the hand off his shoulder. Grabbing his father’s latest creation from a table, he bolted out of the room.

“Come back!” Sengo yelled, though his voice only grew more distant as the boy ran through the empty streets, his wooden sandals clacking against the paved dirt.

Takeo circled around the house by the corner of the road before heading straight, right into the dense thicket. The pale moonlight was already faint to begin with, though it vanished entirely as the young man dove into the black vines. The infernal things blotted out the sky, greedily shrouding the world in their demonic embrace. At least the young man’s eyesight had always been the sharpest in the village, so he could still see where he was going. Somewhat.

He strapped the object he had taken from his father to his waist, before unsheathing his own machete from the other side. He ducked and squeezed through the vines whenever he could – his smaller frame making things easier – though he still had to hack an opening once in a while.

Every few steps, the boy caught one of the thorn-covered tendrils shift by the corner of his eye. Had this been a few years ago, he might have chalked it up to fear, but he knew the time of the feast was almost upon them.

‘No way I’m letting everyone get eaten!’

The young man roamed the jungle for hours, though he never extended too far from the village. If he was going to kill somebody, he figured he might as well look for a raider targeting his people. Plus, he

had the advantage in his own turf. Knowing the place like the back of his hand, it would be harder to fall into an ambush here.

Eventually, he stopped upon spotting a few broken vines. Somebody must've passed through recently. In the last few minutes too, otherwise the jungle would have repaired the damage already.

Putting his machete away, Takeo grabbed the hilt of the other object, clenching it tightly in his grasp. Twisting the blade upwards, he pulled it slightly from its sheath. Then he crouched, advancing through the thicket with more caution. At the same time, he scanned his surroundings for more signs of activity. And it wasn't long before he found another broken vine, and then a third. Soon, Takeo was hot on his prey's trail, inching closer by the second.

'The fools won't know what hit them!'

Aware he was probably close enough they could hear him; he held his breath before brushing a vine aside and peering through a gap in the undergrowth. One of the thorns stabbed into his palm, causing him to wince, but he didn't utter a sound as his gaze finally locked onto his prey.

'Three of them.'

Examining his targets, he firmed his stance, ready to pounce on them. Though he hesitated at the last second. One of them was a kid – a boy even younger than he was. Of the adults, only the man was holding a hatchet in his hand. The woman was unarmed.

'A family…'

Takeo felt his heart clench at the sight, having second thoughts about doing this. These people weren't raiders – they were probably just running away from all the chaos, looking for a safe place to hide before the feast. Chances were, their home had been destroyed already.

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‘It doesn’t matter. It’s either them or us! Lots of innocents will die anyway, if we can’t stop the jungle from awakening!’

The young man clawed into his arm with his free hand, his fingernails digging into his skin as he tried harnessing the pain to move. But his legs refused to listen. No matter how hard he forced himself, he just couldn’t find it in his heart to murder the trio.

Suddenly, a vine broke under the pressure, causing the family to jerk their heads in his direction. The kid almost screamed, though his mother covered his mouth. At the same time, the man’s features twisted in fury at the sight of Takeo’s sword. The latter stepped back, looking for the words to explain himself. But he couldn’t find any. After all, he was still considering the act a moment ago.

“Leave my family alone you fucker!” the older man hissed, dashing towards Takeo with his hatchet ready.

Realizing they were long past words, the young man calmed himself down, as he resumed his stance. His enemy was larger and probably stronger, but no fighter. His movements were crude, his steps uneven. Another wave of hesitation bubbled up, but Takeo pressed it down as he drew his sword, its edge the only source of light in the dark jungle as it reflected whatever scant rays reached it.

THUD, THUD

The mother covered her child’s eyes to shield him from the horror as their world came crashing down. Takeo exhaled the turbid air in his lungs before looking at the two in shame. He knew he should finish the job, but he also understood he didn’t have the stomach for it. His arm fell weakly by his side as he dropped his weapon.

Of course, he didn’t expect the woman to thank him for sparing them. Naturally, she glared at him with unconcealed hatred, occasionally tossing a glance at her husband’s decapitated body, the colour draining from her face at the gruesome sight. But in the end, she knew what had to be done. Grabbing her son, she ignored his sobs as she suppressed her own, running away before Takeo changed his mind.

The young man looked at the corpse one more time. Blood still gushed out of the wound like a fountain, but there wasn’t any beneath the body. The jungle had already sucked the pool dry.

Takeo picked his sword up before heading off, in search of another group. As disgusted as he was by his actions, the vines wouldn't be satiated with a single meal. Or a thousand, for that matter. Others would have to help too if they wanted to delay the feast.

Over the next few hours, he continued roaming his village's vicinity, not stopping until he cleared the whole area twice. In that time, he found a dozen more targets, though luckily, none of them were civilians. Heavily armed and in groups of at least three, they posed a much higher threat to Takeo than his first unfortunate victim. Still, between his father's masterfully crafted katana and the sharp combat skills he had honed his whole life, none of the skirmishes gave him much trouble.

'But it's nowhere near enough…' he smiled bitterly.

The lives he had sacrificed today weighed heavily on his conscience, but for the vines? They didn't amount to much. Maybe a few hours of peace if they got lucky. Takeo knew he'd have to come back tomorrow. And the day after. And even then, he was only delaying the inevitable…

In any case, there wasn't much he could do about it right now. Turning back towards his village, he was about to return home, when something lashed at him. By reflex, he swung the sword at it, managing to intercept the vine in time. The severed tendril twitched a couple of times by his feet before dying down.

'That one almost got m–'

Takeo didn't even get the chance to complete that thought when he felt an impact on the back of his head, a sickening crunch reverberating through his skull. His vision blurred as he fell to the ground. At the same time, another tendril wrapped itself around his neck, squeezing it.

'Can't… b

The young man tried to chop away at the vine, when he realized he had dropped his sword at some point. Drawing his machete with his left hand, he was about to use that, when another tendril lashed at his wrist, stopping him. Out of options, he resorted to brute strength, though he was no match for the demonic wood. Takeo pummelled the vine again and again, though it didn't do him much good. Each hit was weaker than the one before, until he couldn't go on. Finally, the boy's resistance fizzled out into smoke, as his eyes fell shut, the very jungle he had spent all day feeding becoming his undoing.

Chapter 119: Infestation

Percy was a little bummed out by his latest venture. This was his first clone outside Remior in months, though luck hadn't been on his side. He'd spent the entire trip looking for a suitable host, but all he'd found were crumbling souls that wouldn't last a minute once he took over. In the end, he went with the least damaged option, though their grade left much to be desired. It was somewhere between a Red and an insect – which was a first for him.

'Better than nothing, I guess…'

At least, the actual possession went smoothly. For some reason, his host appeared completely absent this time. It was nothing like the lizard or the furball, which had remained passive yet still present in the background. No. This body's owner was gonzo. Encountering zero resistance, Percy slid between the gaps, patching the broken soul with unprecedented ease. A few memories flashed through his mind in the process, though they were too disorganized to piece together.

'What the hell?! Did this guy get hit in the head or something?'

Tapping into the body's senses, Percy finally pried his eyes open, only to be greeted by endless darkness. After a moment, some vague shapes started coming to focus, but he didn't have the chance to worry about them, as he discovered he couldn't even breathe. Something was squeezing his neck tightly.

Trying to move his hands, he soon realized his left was bound too, leaving him only his right to pummel the object with. Whatever it was felt slimy, its surface smooth and damp. It slowly slithered around his throat, a small spike tracing a shallow cut along his skin as it did so.

'The fuck?! Some kind of thorny snake?!'

Not getting anywhere barehanded, Percy summoned a sliver of his stored mana, forming a weapon in his hand. Soon, a teal flash sliced a line through the darkness, severing the tendril off him.

Percy filled his lungs with air a couple of times as he practically felt the colour return to his face. But he was still trapped. Hacking again with his sickle, he cut another three "snakes" a second later, freeing the

rest of his limbs. Jumping to his feet, he activated Mana Sense, hoping to scan his surroundings better. Or he tried to, at least. For some reason, his current body couldn't even use Mana Sense!

'That's a new one…'

Accepting that his impaired eyesight was all he could rely on, he examined the ground around him, attempting to decipher what had happened to his host. Faintly illuminated by his mana construct, he spotted five severed vines – all of them black like tar, covered in spikes of various sizes. The dead ones weren't moving right now, but the living ones were – wriggling ominously as they waited for another opportunity to pounce.

Making a note to keep an eye on the strangely animated plants, Percy's attention was drawn to a couple of manmade objects glinting nearby. Picking the first one up, he noticed it was a slender sword, sporting a single, curved edge. A quick test revealed its sharpness wasn't a joke, as it cut a couple inches into another vine with minimal effort.

'Wow. Is this really a mundane weapon?'

There sure weren't any runes visible on its surface, nor the typical glow he would expect from a mana-rich alloy. Finding a scabbard matching the sword strapped to his waist, he sheathed it, before picking the second object off the ground. This one was a machete, crafted from the same material, though its edge had dulled a little from overuse. Still, it was better than any steel tool he'd seen on Remior.

'I suppose I can rely on these for the time being.'

Allowing his construct to crumble, he collected as many of the teal shreds as he could, storing them back inside his soul. Some strange force was pulling on them, trying to pry them from his control, but Percy would be damned if he let his limited supply get snatched so easily. Exerting all the willpower he could muster, he forcibly dragged most of the substance into his body, ultimately recovering about three quarters of the amount he'd used.

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'Man, this fused mana is a gamechanger!' Percy couldn't help but nod in appreciation.

The young man had naturally been thrilled upon discovering he could supply his clones with the teal mana as long as it was stored in its ethereal form. Not only did this let him essentially “cheat” some pure mana into his clones, it was highly recyclable too, allowing him to get a lot more value from it before it ran out. Ṛ

‘In any case, better get a move on.’

There was a lot to think about, but this wasn’t the time or the place. Looking around, Percy realized he recognized the scenery somewhat. Despite the poor lighting, his host seemed to be extremely familiar with the area. In fact, he could even tell which way “home” was.

Heading towards the village he scarcely remembered, he soon noticed his body was rather weak. Exhausted and injured all over, yes – but that wasn’t it. It reminded Percy of his youth, from before he advanced to Orange.

‘Come to think of it, there’s no mana in the air whatsoever...’

No wonder he couldn’t even use Mana Sense. Had his host not even awakened his core?!

Suddenly, a vine lashed at him from his right, though he was prepared for it. With a semi-awkward swing of his machete, he cut it to pieces, though he didn’t relax just yet, knowing more could attack at any moment. Ignoring the soreness and pain, he picked up the pace, practically running towards his host’s village, hacking at whatever obstacle stood in his path.

‘Is this jungle the reason there isn’t any mana here?’

If the black vines sucked all the ambient mana in this world, it would explain why his host had never managed to awaken his core. For all Percy knew, the poor sap might have been born with a Yellow one, but he’d lived and died without ever enjoying its benefits.

And as if that wasn’t enough, the hateful plants weren’t satisfied with all the mana they stole, seemingly thirsting for blood too. In fact, this situation felt a little familiar to Percy, as he couldn’t help but recall something he’d read about on Remior.

‘Could this be an infestation?!’

The gods of the Divine Order weren’t that open about their operations, but a few morsels of information did trickle down to the mortals like him. From what he knew, foreign races weren’t the only threat the deities had to deal with. Other than the fierce competition over resources and territories, gods across the universe had another major enemy – this one in common.

Demonic infestations.

Supposedly formed from the accumulation of negative thoughts, they sprouted randomly like cancers, dooming whatever unfortunate world spawned them. Infestations came in many shapes and sizes – from imps and gremlins as weak as the weakest mortals, to great devils as powerful as the strongest gods, to mindless entities spanning entire worlds, bringing calamity upon their residents.

Evidently, this jungle belonged in the latter category. Percy’s confidence in his guess grew as he scanned the living vines around him. This didn’t seem like a natural phenomenon. Unlike the brown fog he had encountered before, this disaster was alive, dripping with malice and cruelty, its only mission to drive all life to extinction.

It was only once he finally reached the edge of the dense thicket that he exhaled in relief, leaving the demonic jungle behind him, as he stepped into the pale moonlight. The small village standing before him looked both alien and familiar, as his host’s memories bled into his own.

‘Now what do I do?’

Part of him was curious about the infestation. He knew it was close to some turning point, and it was his first time experiencing one with any of his clones. Not that there was anything to be gained from it, but he was sure he’d run into more in his future travels, so it wouldn’t hurt to get a taste.

On the other hand, his current clone might be a good candidate to return to the Vault with. Stumbling upon a host that was both sentient and brain-dead was a rare stroke of luck. He had free reign over the body, and he wouldn’t even have to feel guilty over dragging someone else into his mess.

That said, he didn't know if he'd be able to practice magiscript without a functioning core. Perhaps, he could awaken it inside the Vault, but his body wasn't in great shape, so it might not last long enough.

'Let's figure out the situation here first…'

At the very least, Percy wanted to learn more about the crafting technique of the locals here. The strength and sharpness of his steel tools almost rivalled that of his pure constructs, which was quite impressive for a pair of mana-less weapons. Maybe he could learn to make similar tools back home.

'But before all that, let's see what I'm dealing with.'

Summoning his Status, Percy read his host's details at last.

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Takeo Muramasa (Percival's clone)

Chapter 120: Sengo

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Takeo Muramasa (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:

Spells:

Decrees:

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As it turned out, his Status was able to recognize Takeo's grade. It was at Red, which wasn't exactly great news. Even if Percy could fill it up inside the Vault, it wouldn't help him much.

'No new Decree either… Though that's to be expected. I doubt any gods can emerge in this place.'

There wasn't really anything of note here. The only silver lining was that his stash of teal mana allowed him to use most of his spells. He still couldn't use Circulation without his cores, but everything else was on the table, at least until his reserves ran out. If everyone else was incapable of using magic, it would give him a significant advantage over the locals. Of course, he wasn't sure he'd even need it.

Shrugging, Percy walked along the paved dirt, tracing the way to his host's house by instinct. The first thing he noticed as he travelled through the small village was that the buildings looked a little strange. They were made of some pale, uniform material which looked nothing like the stone buildings they had in the Alchemists' Guild, nor the wooden walls in his family's mansion.

'They seem surprisingly sturdy too.'

Despite the lack of any engravings or magical materials, the houses appeared in decent condition. At least, he couldn't spot any signs of age on their simple walls. Evidently, the crafting techniques of the natives extended beyond their steel tools.

Though it wasn't that odd, considering they didn't have magic to fall back to. Back on Remior, people used it as a crutch to solve all their problems. Why bother improving the quality of your materials when you could just carve a couple runes on them to compensate for their deficiencies?

'Let's figure out how all this works and then leave.' Percy decided.

Luckily, he didn't meet anyone on the deserted streets, saving him some time. Apparently, they were all holed up in their homes – evident by the faint shadows he occasionally saw shifting through the windows. Every now and then, he caught a glimpse of a villager, which might have startled him under different circumstances. Their deep crimson skin and bright yellow eyes made them more than a little intimidating. Not to mention their sharp features, or the four fangs each had sticking out of their mouth.

However, Percy wasn't scared in the slightest. And that wasn't merely because he could defend himself. Seeing these people through Takeo's eyes, he realized he could put a name to each face. They were his family – the very people he had grown up with.

'And now he's dead.' he thought, feeling his heart tighten.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

He'd sent plenty of clones, but this was his first time meeting the loved ones of his host. Perhaps he should have prepared himself for this eventuality, though the guilt was hard to stomach. What was he supposed to tell them? Pretend that he was Takeo, only to die in front of them a few days later? Or explain how he had taken over the boy's corpse? The fact that Takeo appeared to be in his early teens only made the situation more tragic.

Percy stopped right in his tracks, realizing he couldn't in good conscience return to his host's house like this. He knew the boy had a father waiting for him there, and neither of them deserved to be put in that situation. Yet, just as he was contemplating whether to open a portal to the Vault right then and there, or leave the body behind and return to Remior, his worst fear came to light.

"Takeo!" a rough voice yelled.

It was only now the young man saw the person he recognized as his host's father standing some distance away, staring at him intently, his expression a blend of concern and relief.

Percy wanted to turn around and leave, but he never got the chance. The older man sprinted towards him, only stopping once he was a few steps away. Sengo – Percy thought his name was – scanned him up and down, shuddering at the sight of his son's gruesome injuries.

Tears rolled down Sengo's face, forming two pink trickles on his cheeks. It was only now that Percy managed to recall another titbit of information from the shattered prism that was Takeo's mind. Apparently, all the people in this world cried red tears, but Takeo's clansmen were a little unique in that theirs were a few shades paler. This was the source of the village's name – Torui.

Seeing the man remain quiet, Percy wanted to speak first. To explain that he wasn't Takeo. But the words got stuck in his throat. The two just stood there, staring each other in silence for a few minutes, before Sengo pulled Percy into a firm hug, sobbing as he clenched him tightly.

"I told you not to go!" the man said in a stern tone. At least Percy could understand him, as Takeo's memories breathed meaning to the words.

"Look what happened to you!" Sengo spoke again, gesturing at his son's wounds.

Though it was only now that Percy registered some of the blood on him wasn't his own. In fact, it didn't take much effort to recall where it had come from. Perhaps it was because those memories were more recent, or because they'd had a greater impact on his host. Whatever the reason, he vividly remembered killing over a dozen people, including a scared father protecting his wife and kid.

Percy frowned, suddenly feeling a little less sympathetic for the boy. The brat had been a cold-blooded murderer, ruining a family just like that. But he shook his head a moment later, remembering the situation that had led Takeo to do that.

'I suppose everyone here is just desperate to survive. The vines will awaken sooner unless they keep sacrificing strangers…'

Probably realizing what Percy was thinking about, Sengo placed a hand on his shoulder, before lifting his chin with the other. He looked him in the eyes as he spoke.

"What's done is done." he said sternly. "Sometimes, taking lives and saving them are one and the same."

The young man nodded, though his guilt had more to do with his charade than his host's crimes. He knew it was cowardly of him to remain quiet, but he just couldn't find it in his heart to turn Sengo's world upside down.

'Let's tell him tomorrow. He can sleep soundly one more night, and I can think of the best way to deliver the news…' was what Percy thought, but he wasn't sure he believed it.

Following the man to their house, he placed his hand on the pale wall, feeling its rough surface. Digging into his memories, he tried to recall what the material was called. It took a few seconds, but it eventually came through.

‘Concrete.’

“Do you want to help me repair miss Kimiko’s house tomorrow?” Sengo asked as he saw him tracing his finger on the material. “Feeding the jungle isn’t the only way to protect our village you know. We can build strong houses, and arm everyone with weapons to prepare for the feast.”

Percy nodded.

‘Maybe I can stay here until the vines attack. I’ll help these people defend themselves, and maybe even learn a couple things in the process.’

In any case, it wouldn’t be long until the infestation reached its final stage. If his host’s memories could be trusted, they only had days at most. And each feast was more severe than the ones before. The demonic jungle had existed as far as Takeo could remember, having nearly driven the world’s inhabitants to extinction already.

Perhaps the few remaining villages would be gone too in another decade or so. After all, infestations were mindless and vicious. They didn’t care about self-preservation in the slightest. The only thing they knew was destruction – first of their surroundings, and ultimately themselves.

‘I suppose protecting the boy’s people should be enough compensation for the free ride...’