Wanderer 121

Chapter 121: Concrete

Percy watched the strange contraption grind the materials into fine powder. They swirled through the long metallic cylinder, its interior filled with steel teeth, rotating thanks to the heat from the furnace. It was actually ingenious how the locals harnessed the movement of the hot air to accomplish tasks otherwise impossible with brute strength alone.

'I suppose we would have figured this out too, if we spent our whole lives stuck at Red...'

As for the materials Sengo had placed inside the machine – they weren't anything special. Just some limestone and clay. They had those back on Remior too. In fact, Percy was pretty sure he'd seen both of them in many of the other worlds he'd visited.

A few minutes later, the crushing process was complete. Sengo removed the pipe venting the excess air into the tube, before emptying its contents into several buckets, filling them with an unassuming grey dust.

"This is called cement." the man explained to his 'son' after noticing Percy's perplexed expression.

And the latter wasn't faking it either. While Takeo had seen his father work many times before, Percy struggled to find many details in his host's memories. Evidently, the boy had never helped Sengo much, their relationship having always been rather rocky.

"It's an important ingredient of concrete, but not the only one." the man continued, oblivious to his thoughts.

Next, he picked a bucket with each hand, gesturing at Percy to do the same. The young man didn't miss his 'father' wincing as he lifted them, probably suffering from some old injury or ailment.

The two then walked to a different room where a second machine was located. It looked a little like the one from before, though it was wider and didn't contain any teeth inside. Clearly it was only meant for mixing, not crushing. Sengo placed the buckets on the ground, before picking a different pair up, filled with other materials.

“Concrete is mostly made of gravel, mixed with fine sand to fill in the gaps.” he explained as he poured the buckets into the device. “The cement we created earlier is used along with water to hold everything together.”

Percy nodded along, as he watched Sengo work, occasionally helping out when the latter had to lift something heavy. Even with the aid of the machines, a lot of physical effort still went into this. Though from what the young man had seen, the results were more than worth it.

Once they were done, they emptied the new material into the buckets again, this time ending up with a viscous grey sludge. Leaving the house, they walked over to a building down the street, stopping by one of the walls. It was broken, as a few chopped vines thicker than Takeo’s thigh were lying motionless next to it.

Two men were also working there – the first people other than Sengo that Percy saw outside since coming here. One was an older man – maybe a few years younger than Sengo, while the other was a boy around his age. The two barely spared them a cursory glance, busy as they were. They seemed to be uprooting the malignant growth that had sprouted the vines, before it had the chance to do so again.

“Akio, Haruto.” Sengo greeted. “I see you’ve had a busy day.”

“Aaahhh! We’ve been trying to dig this infernal thing out for hours!” the older man groaned. “Kimiko kept complaining about it. ‘Akio, we can’t leave that thing sticking into our living room!’ Well, I sure don’t see her pulling the roots out!”

“Hahaha! Listen to your wife Akio. You know how important it is to get rid of the darn things whenever they pop up inside the village. If we leave them be, they’ll only get worse.”

But Akio shook his head.

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“What’s even the point? We both know an extra vine or two won’t matter when the whole jungle comes alive! Old friend… I’m afraid this is going to be our last feast…”

Sengo didn't say anything, but Percy didn't miss how everyone's mood turned more sombre after the brief exchange. They all understood they were living on borrowed time. As things stood, they couldn't even venture out to forage for food or more materials. Even if they survived the massacre, who knew if there would be anything edible left out there…

"Come on, Takeo. We need to patch the wall up before the concrete starts to dry."

Percy nodded, though being called by his host's name reignited his guilt. He had yet to tell the man the truth, and he was starting to think he'd never find the courage to do so. It wasn't like the village's situation was great, but at least Sengo seemed to find peace in his work. Percy didn't want to rob him of that minor consolation during his last couple of days.

The two worked in silence over the next few hours, filling the broken segment of the wall with the sludge. They used a few metallic sheets propped against the wall to keep the liquid from spilling out. By the time they were done, the others had finished too, returning to their house. Nobody in the village seemed to be in the mood to do much else, besides waiting for the calamity with their loved ones.

"See, Takeo?" Sengo suddenly asked. "Most of the buildings won't survive the feast, but every wall might just be enough to save an extra life. It's more productive to do this than to go out there killing people."

Percy could tell the man really disapproved of his host's actions. Their differing philosophy on how to approach the feast was probably the core of their strained relationship.

'Honestly, I can't even tell which one of them is right…'

Whether it was slaughtering innocents to delay the disaster by a few minutes or trying to build a few extra houses that weren't likely to survive, none of it sounded like a particularly effective strategy. Of course, it wasn't like they had a better option. Percy hadn't personally experienced a feast, but from what he knew about infestations, these people were screwed no matter what they did.

'I suppose if it's not going to help either way, I'd rather avoid getting blood on my hands…'

Young and hot-blooded as Takeo was, he had clearly gone with the less moral option. Yet, getting out of this place with his hands clean might not be in the cards for Percy either…

“Aaaahhh!!”

Hearing the scream, Sengo and Percy looked in a certain direction, spotting a few hooded men holding hatchets and sabres in the distance. Percy couldn’t make their faces out, but something told him these people weren’t from the village. One of them dragged a weeping lady across the street, heading towards the jungle. She was the one who had screamed.

Drawing his machete, Percy hastily dropped it by Sengo’s feet so he could defend himself. Next, he unsheathed his sword as he ran towards the raiders. Strictly speaking, he didn’t really have any skin in the game. After all, he wasn’t the real Takeo and this wasn’t his village. Consequently, fighting the raiders to save a local was arguably pointless. That said, watching them butcher innocent people while doing nothing just felt wrong.

“Hold on, son!” Sengo shouted, causing Percy to look back.

The older man was running behind him, clutching the machete in his hand. He looked like he was in pain as he exerted himself, but he carried the aura of a fighter all-the-same. Peace-loving as he was, he clearly knew how to defend himself.

Glancing around, Percy noticed more of the villagers rushing out of their homes, each armed with a finely crafted weapon like his own. It seemed nobody here was a vegetarian.

‘Of course not. Even if they don’t like going out there hunting people, they wouldn’t have survived this long if they couldn’t handle themselves…’

Seeing all the familiar faces, Percy couldn’t help but recall some more of his host’s memories. He remembered the countless hours spent practicing with these people, sparring with them, being taught by them how to hold his sword, how to use it. They were all his teachers… and his friends…

Soon, the villagers stood before the raiders, outnumbering them by about 15 to 10. Percy would have expected them to give up and leave, but they hadn’t done that. And why would they? The more blood

that got spilled today the better things would be for the survivors. Evidently, the raiders would rather take their chances.

But Percy wouldn't.

"I'll give you one chance to run away. Nobody has to die. Not today, at least." he said before anybody had the chance to.

The villagers gave him odd looks. Takeo was probably the last person anybody expected to douse the conflict. But he had to do this. Whether it was the locals or the raiders, all of these people were just trying to survive. Percy didn't want to hurt anybody if he didn't have to. Sadly, his enemies didn't seem to agree. They only tightened their grips on the weapons, silently giving Percy his answer.

Watching some of the last surviving natives prepare to kill each other, Percy couldn't help but recall Sengo's words from earlier.

'Sometimes, taking lives and saving them are one and the same...'

Chapter 122: Steel

As it so happened, the two sides weren't evenly matched at all. Their numerical advantage aside, the villagers seemed to completely outclass the raiders in both skill and the quality of their weapons. Hell, even if their numbers were reversed, Percy was confident 'his' people wouldn't have struggled much.

Within mere minutes, over half of the invaders were dead, gutted like fish by the sharp slashes of the villagers. At least, Percy had to give credit to the survivors as they showed no intention of surrendering. They probably reasoned that it was better to die here than to go back to the jungle. After all, everyone could see the vines already swaying in unrest in the distance.

'I'm the only one still taking my time…' he smiled bitterly, as he looked back at his opponent.

He was a man seemingly in his thirties – maybe, though Percy wasn't an expert on these people's physiology. He donned a crudely forged cutlass, its edge dull and its blade covered in dried bloodstains.

Evidently, Sengo's advanced crafting techniques weren't quite as widespread as Percy had originally thought. Of course, he could have defeated the raider already, had he put his heart into it. However, Percy was still struggling to rationalize killing a stranger just to help more strangers.

'Let's try to learn something in the process, at least.'

As early as their first exchange, he had noticed an impulse to move and react in a specific manner – in a way he wasn't used to. Apparently, his host's muscle memory bled into his own combat instincts, driving him to switch up his fighting style.

Percy could have easily resisted the impulse and made quick work of the man if he wanted. After all, he had plenty of experience himself. Besides, it wasn't like Micky's fighting style was any inferior to the locals'. But he didn't do that. He was curious to see how Takeo fought.

The Dance of the Savage Gods involved a lot of exaggerated movements and quick footwork. Its central concept was achieving dominance over the battlefield, wearing down an opponent with multiple opportunistic blows. The natives' style on the other hand couldn't have been more different. It involved much smaller movements, focusing on the delivery of sharp, deadly strikes at an opponent's vitals.

'This style might be more compatible with my soul affinity.'

It was easy to see why. Both worked better with sharp weapons and were best at ending a fight in an instant. Recognizing the value of this art, Percy allowed himself to sink into Takeo's memories as he entered a kind of trance.

His enemy tried to cut him open with the cutlass, but Percy wasn't in a rush to fight back, merely sidestepping the blows one after the other, waiting for an opening of his own. Some of the attacks did come dangerously close to injuring him, but he didn't care too much. Worst case scenario, his clone died a couple days sooner.

'There.' Percy thought after seeing the man overextend.

Taking a step forward, he swung his katana as swiftly as he could, barely stopping an inch before his opponent's neck. The raider stumbled back, swallowing a lump of saliva after realizing how close he had come to losing his head. Though he frowned a second later, upon seeing Percy hadn't tried to finish him.

"Again." the latter said, gesturing at him to stand.

The man complied, soon engaging Percy into another round. The two fought for several more minutes, as the young man continued to use the raider as a whetstone, trying to mix and consolidate Micky's and Takeo's styles in an accelerated manner.

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His body was weaker than he was used to, but not as bad as it could have been. While at Red, Takeo had clearly pushed himself to his limits. In fact, Percy was confident he could have used Circulation with it if he had a functioning core and the necessary channels cleared. Though there wasn't any need for that right now, as he had plenty to learn from even the mundane bout.

Dodge after dodge, slash after slash, his body oscillated between the two styles as he circled the raider and pivoted on his feet, trying to use the dance to create opportunities for the finishers. As for his opponent, he was constantly on the backfoot the entire fight. That said, he seemed to have calmed down after a certain point, realizing Percy had no intention of killing him.

"Stop." the man spoke eventually, raising his hand.

Percy barely halted mid-swing, only now registering what was happening. The other villagers had long finished their own opponents and were all gathered around him, giving him strange looks.

"Why?" the raider asked again, clearly as confused as the rest of them.

"I'm not going to kill you." Percy shrugged, before sheathing his weapon. "Though I don't really care what the others do with you. After all, you did attack us."

Turning around, he headed for his house, but not before tossing his father a glance. Sengo's expression was cold as ice, probably realizing that Takeo was acting out of character.

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Percy watched silently as Sengo hammered the red-hod lump of iron, losing himself in the rhythmic sound. Every now and then, the old blacksmith would dip the metal in water to cool it, before using a brush to coat it in a layer of clay mud. According to Sengo, this treatment would prevent the sword from rusting.

Next, Sengo placed the lump back inside the forge to reheat it, before resuming the tempering process. Each time, he folded the thinned sheet back onto itself, forcing more of the impurities out with each cycle.

'No wonder it's so much stronger than what we have back home.'

They actually did have steel back on Remior, the idea of fusing multiple metals into alloys not being that foreign to them. However, Percy was willing to bet they hadn't perfected the process to this degree. Sengo's work bordered on obsessive.

Once he was done, Percy watched the man sharpen the blade against a rotating grindstone, powered by heat like all of Sengo's tools. Soon, an intricate wavy pattern took form along the edge of the katana. It was probably only a side-effect of the forging process – not there intentionally. Still, that didn't detract from the sword's beauty at all. It could probably fit inside a gallery just as well as it could on a battlefield.

'It's remarkable what he has achieved with the most common of materials. Maybe the philosophy behind it can be applied to my own constructs…' Percy thought.

Of course, it wasn't the same, as his spells were made of mana, not metals or stones. Still, he did have some ideas as to how he could approach this when he returned.

But Sengo hadn't finished quite yet, breaking Percy out of his thoughts as he attached a wooden hilt to the blade. Next, he wrapped it in a thin strip of cloth several times, forming a vertical pattern of

diamonds. Finally, he checked the sword one last time, hammering it some more here and there, to straighten any lingering imperfections along its length. As for a scabbard, he didn't seem to have one ready, so he just rested the sword on a cushion before turning to his 'son'.

He appeared like he wanted to speak – to explain something perhaps – but he ultimately remained silent. His eyes wavered for a moment, before he averted his gaze entirely. Even looking at Takeo was difficult.

'He knows, doesn't he?' Percy realized.

Sengo hadn't spoken a word since the altercation with the raiders. While Percy had never found the courage to tell him the truth about his son, the man seemed to have figured it out on his own. After all, what sort of father wouldn't have noticed something like that?

'I should still explain everything clearly. It's the least I can do after everything he's taught me…' he decided.

Though he didn't get the chance.

A tremor suddenly shook the house, as Percy heard a couple of screams coming from outside. Both he and Sengo rushed to the window, trying to understand what had happened. The sight before them was horrific. Multiple tendrils as thick as a tree's trunk had sprouted all over the village, all of them covered in countless thorns. The demonic vines lashed at any building within their reach, trying to tear the cement walls down one blow at a time.

The sound of something breaking came from behind them, as Percy and Sengo both turned around, only to see another of the tendrils digging out right in the middle of the workshop.

'Father' and 'son' both clenched their weapons tightly in their grasp, ready to face off against the demonic jungle.

Chapter 123: Torui village

Swinging with as much strength as he could muster, Percy cut through the vine. At first, the blade slid right through the black growth, slicing it apart like butter. However, this was the thickest one he'd

encountered by far. Consequently, the edge kept slowing down, before ultimately coming to a halt about halfway through its width.

“Shit…” Percy pulled, trying to pry the sword out of the tendril, ducking in the meantime to dodge its erratic lashes.

“Pull again!” Sengo yelled, kicking the spot right above the trapped blade, helping his ‘son’ free it.

Percy considered hacking at it again to finish the job, but the vine had already mended the damage. Realizing this was a lost cause, the two ran out of the workshop, hoping the situation was better in the rest of the house.

Sadly, that was just wishful thinking. The demonic vines had already sprouted everywhere, upturning chairs and tables, smashing through the walls and blocking the exits.

“Upstairs!” Sengo shouted again, pushing Percy towards the staircase, running right behind him.

Another vine broke through from their left, though this one was slightly thinner. Without a moment’s hesitation, Percy swung downward, using gravity to add even more strength to the blow, slicing the tendril apart before it had the chance to stop them.

“Faster!” he said, pulling Sengo up the stairs as the vine was already growing back.

The two entered a bedroom – Takeo’s, according to an influx of memories flooding Percy’s mind. Not that trapping themselves here was particularly wise, but it wasn’t like there was anywhere better to go. The whole village was a shitshow by now. At least here, the elevation coupled with a few layers of concrete might keep some of the gluttonous jungle at bay.

Brandishing their weapons, they prepared themselves again, as more vines broke through. This time, there were two of them – one digging through the floor, another climbing into the house from outside, breaking through the window.

Realizing their swords would only get stuck again, Percy gestured at Sengo to take care of the thinner of the two vines, as he tossed his katana aside, manifesting a sickle of teal mana. Next, he hacked at the infernal thing, cutting about two thirds into it again before the sickle stopped. Unlike before, however, Percy had a response this time. Switching the construct to its immaterial state, he freed his weapon before swinging it again, finally cutting the tendril apart.

Sengo raised an eyebrow at the scene, but didn't say anything. Given the circumstances, the mystery that was Percy's identity was clearly the last thing on his mind right now. Using his own weapon, he took care of the second vine, leveraging his bigger build – his muscles forged from decades of gruelling work.

But their trouble wasn't over yet. In fact, it had only just begun. Two more vines smashed through the walls, and then two more, and then a fifth one right after. Father and son unleashed a flurry of strikes at the demonic plants, desperately trying to hold them back, to keep them out of the bedroom.

Through all their efforts, they did manage to carve out a small space amidst the vines, but their house was already surrounded. The wall of tendrils had blocked out the last traces of moonlight seeping through the window, forcing Percy and Sengo to fall back to their inherent night vision.

Percy didn't even want to imagine how the rest of the villagers were faring. Even if any of them survived the ordeal, it would take them months – if not years – to clear out the village again.

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'And decades to repopulate it…'

The young man's movements slowed down as he contemplated how pointless his efforts were. He was fighting for a lost cause, to help a doomed people he didn't even know merely delay their inevitable demise. What for? He wouldn't even be here tomorrow!

Lost amidst his thoughts as he was, he failed to evade an incoming blow. A vine hit him right in the chest, slamming him against the wall. The taste of iron filled his mouth as blood trickled down his chin. Some of his ribs had also cracked, the vine greedily sucking him dry through the spots where its thorns had stabbed him.

‘What’s wrong with me?! Since when do I give up so easily?!’ he couldn’t help but wonder as his body grew cold.

It was true he couldn’t do too much for the villagers, but that had never stopped him before. He’d always tried to help people in need, even when the odds were stacked against him.

Thinking back to his actions since coming to this place, Percy couldn’t help but recognize he’d really been acting strangely throughout. Whether it was his reluctance to tell Sengo the truth, or his indecision against the raider, it was like he was a different person.

‘Is it the vines?!’

Was it possible the demonic jungle devoured more than just mana and blood? Could it be gnawing at his very willpower too?

The realization sent a chill down his spine. These demonic infestations were even more insidious than he had originally thought.

Suddenly, he felt the pressure on his chest ease as somebody pulled the vine right off him. Percy winced as the thorns were removed from his wounds, but at least he was free now. Making out his saviour’s figure through the darkness was tough, but who else could it be?

“Thanks.” he said, before pushing himself up.

Most of the fused mana in his construct was gone already, but he repaired the sickle with some more from his stash before helping Sengo again. The two fought for what felt like an eternity, as the jungle continued its relentless assault, determined to devour every last morsel of flesh, every last drop of blood on this forsaken world.

Sengo might have been the stronger of the two, but he was also older, his movements slowing as his stamina dwindled. Even Percy wasn’t doing too great, his wounds – both the old and the new – holding him back. At least, he now knew to consciously fight back against the jungle’s influence, but his host’s soul wouldn’t last much longer either.

Suddenly, he felt the ground disappear from beneath his feet, the floor having apparently sustained too much damage. He fell by about a metre before somebody grabbed his arm, slowing his fall. But not stopping it. Both he and Sengo slid down the now inclined surface, rolling right onto another vine. They were back in the workshop, though the place now looked more like the jungle Percy had seen the day before.

Stabbed in multiple spots against the tendril's thorns, the young man knew this was it. Even if he could somehow unlodge himself, he wouldn't be in any condition to move. Sengo wasn't doing much better either. The man had been lucky enough to avoid impalement, but Percy could vaguely see the blacksmith's legs bent in the wrong direction through the darkness.

'Is it me, or are the thorns drinking my blood slower than before?'

Percy didn't know whether to cry or laugh at the irony. The feast was probably close to its end, yet that was little consolation to him and Sengo. Their wounds were already lethal. The two just remained in that spot, the only sound breaking the sombre silence being their ragged breaths, alternating in irregular intervals.

"Sengo…" Percy muttered, forcing himself to say what he should have said a long time ago. "You know I'm not your son, don't you?"

"…"

The man didn't reply immediately, though Percy faintly saw him nod after a while.

"When did you find out?" he asked again.

"…the first moment I saw you." Sengo said, causing Percy's eyes to widen.

'The first moment? Is that why he was crying?!'

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything…" Percy said, feeling his heart tighten. "But why didn't you?"

“I was afraid you’d leave…” Sengo spoke, his voice cracking. “…and my boy’s face would rot.”

Percy had no words for the man. All this time, all the lessons. Teaching him about steel and concrete. Showing him how to repair a wall. Demonstrating how a sword was forged. Was it all just a grieving father’s desperate attempt to see his dead son’s face for a few more hours?!

“Sengo… I’m sorry about your son… and your village…”

“…”

“I know it’s not much, but I promise I’ll use what you’ve taught me to help others.”

Percy wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw two pale trickles flowing down Sengo’s cheeks as he nodded. Two more were rolling down his own as his soul crumbled apart, bringing his journey to an end.

There wasn’t much he could have done for these people, but there was one last thing.

“Torui village… I promise I’ll remember it.”

Chapter 124: Blighted bloodline

“Percy… seat… all day…” Micky said.

“Sit.” Nesha corrected him.

“Sit.”

Bored as she had been over the last couple of weeks, the girl had volunteered to teach Micky how to speak. By now, the crow’s vocabulary had expanded greatly. Even his ability to vocalize much of it had grown shockingly well. The bird still struggled to form complete sentences, but he was learning faster than a human toddler would.

“Yeah, Percy is sitting all day, brewing elixirs for you freeloaders!” the young man quipped in an irritated tone after overhearing them.

Following the creation of his latest clone, the trio had paused their journey, camping at a spot outside the Camelot province. Had they kept walking, they would have certainly reached their destination by now, though Percy had his reasons for delaying.

He wanted to spend some time brewing a few weeks ahead, just in case he didn’t get the chance later. Having spent about three weeks waiting for his clone to return, he had already brewed enough elixirs to last them for the next two months.

“Hey, it’s not like we’re lazing around.” Nesha argued back. “We keep watch and gather food for you too.”

“No. Micky keeps watch and gathers food. You just chat with him for a few minutes whenever he returns.”

“Well, I cook...” the girl shrugged, but didn’t say much else.

At least Percy had shaved a few more seconds off Crystallization again. By now, he only needed a little under eight minutes for each crystal. If only he’d been this fast back when they started selling the Aurora Dew, they would have made so much more money…

He sighed. Drawing another sliver of mana out of his core, he was about to resume his work, when a silver blur caught his attention, flying in the horizon at an insane speed. What’s more, it seemed to be heading right towards him!

But the young man didn’t panic, already knowing what it was.

‘Took you long enough...’

A moment later, the wisp slammed into his stomach, lodging itself inside the hole in his soul. Then, a flood of memories flashed through his mind. An insidious vine strangling him, a trek through a black

jungle, a finely crafted blade, a bitter reunion, a guilty conscience, a master of the forge, a forsaken village, a bloody feast…

There wasn't much there, as Percy's clone had only spent a couple of days in Takeo's body. Most of the elapsed time had been spent searching for a host. However, what the clone did bring back was valuable. And he'd already promised to keep it all close to heart.

'Torui village, huh?'

The tragic fate of the small village made him shudder. This was his first encounter with an infestation, and it was far more scarring than he could have ever imagined. Robbing an entire world of its mana, dooming all its denizens to short, difficult lives? Forcing people to kill each other to delay their own deaths? Draining their very will to live, crippling them? R

'And one could just as easily pop up right here, on Remior…' he thought grimly.

Percy didn't know too much about these cosmic cancers, but he did know they could appear pretty much anywhere life dwelled, with next to no warning. While that hadn't happened to his world yet – as far as he knew – it didn't mean it couldn't.

'But it won't be the same. We have gods here. They'll take care of it…'

The young man's feelings on the topic were mixed. He certainly had his differences with the Divine Order – heck, he was currently on the run from them – but he couldn't help feeling reassured knowing that should the sky fall, somebody was there to hold it up. That said, relying on those pompous assholes definitely irked him.

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'All the more reason to get stronger.'

"Is your clone finally back?" Nesha asked, noticing the commotion.

Percy had already brought her up to speed on his secrets. He'd even offered to teach her Circulation, though she hadn't given him a direct answer yet. His guess was that she wasn't looking forward to years of intense workouts.

"Yes." he said. "Tomorrow, we're finally entering the province."

"Finally… Food…" Micky cawed excitedly.

Spoiled after stuffing his face full of Orange cores over the last few years, the crow hadn't enjoyed living off Red vermin during the past month. Especially since his needs had grown greatly following his advancement. The only decent meal he'd eaten recently was the bandit group.

Percy smiled.

"Just a few more days buddy."

***

Percy and Nesha walked along the paved road, looking at the post ahead. Three men stood watch, all dressed in fine silken clothes, decorated with yellow insignias. They depicted a human mouth sporting a set of strangely elongated canines.

"Members of House Tantalus…" he muttered, warning his companion.

While the enemy family had deployed most of their forces to exert pressure on the western side of the province, it wasn't like they had completely abandoned their own territories. Going through a rudimentary check at the border was only to be expected.

"How do we handle this?" Nesha asked.

“They have no clue I’m from House Avalon, nor that we came from the Alchemists’ Guild. It’s already been weeks since Hermes’ announcement. Just act like a commoner and let me do the talking.” he said, getting a nod back.

Nearing the trio, he noticed something that gave him pause, however. One of the guards was extremely pale, his eyes drooping and his features sickly. He was hunched over and appeared to be having a tough time just standing there.

‘Fuck. He has the bloodline.’ Percy realized.

Through his correspondence with Elaine over the past year, he had come to learn a lot more about the conflict between the two Houses. Apparently, the founder of House Tantalus was originally a member of House Avalon! In fact, he was Percy’s great-great-great-granduncle or something!

Centuries ago, that person was born with a mutated strain of the Clone bloodline, called Drain. Its effect was similar, but it essentially worked in reverse. Rather than forming living clones out of life mana, it instead allowed its users to break living tissue into life mana. Had this been all it did, the Drain bloodline would have certainly been a powerful asset for House Avalon. With it, Percy’s family might have grown even more powerful by now. Sadly, this wasn’t meant to be, as the Drain bloodline was blighted.

Blighted bloodlines were those that had mutated severe detrimental side-effects, plaguing their owners more than blessing them.

In this case, those with the Drain bloodline constantly needed to use it, as their bodies rapidly broke down in the absence of life mana. Worse still, the Drain bloodline wasn’t bundled with the life affinity – unlike its predecessor – which meant its owners had no way around their curse. From there, it was easy to see how the originator of the bloodline had ended up at odds with the rest of his family, driving him to leave and start a rival House nearby. And the two sides had been enemies ever since, their conflict partly driven by hatred and partly by disputes over territory.

But there was more.

The one thing the owners of the blighted bloodline wanted more than anything else, was to lift their curse, creating a brighter tomorrow for their descendants. And what better way to fix the Drain bloodline, than to mate with members of House Avalon who had the Clone bloodline?

If they got lucky, the detrimental side-effects would disappear, or maybe they could even get the life affinity bundled to their own strain, letting them solve their issue indirectly. Consequently, it was common practice for members of House Tantalus to kidnap those with the Clone bloodline, subjecting them to… unspeakable things.

"Change of plans." he told his companion while also speaking through his bond. "Micky, start flying towards us. Nesha, be ready to defend yourself."

Taking a deep breath, he began accumulating mana into his channels, knowing the situation had a high probability of devolving into violence. Originally, he'd thought the guards wouldn't have had much reason to suspect him – which was still the case. However, that wouldn't matter. Would the sickly noble think twice before killing a couple of commoners to alleviate his symptoms?

'Not going to risk it.'

Preparing his boosting art, he inched closer to the trio, as the latter finally took notice of him.

"Halt." one of them yelled. "What's your business in the Camelot province?"

"I'm a blacksmith by trade. This is my wife. We're originally from Riah town in the Sentin province, but the situation there has been a little chaotic lately. We figured we'd try our luck elsewhere." Percy spoke his rehearsed lies.

The guard nodded, gesturing at them to keep walking, though Percy didn't miss the sickly guy eyeing them with greed, practically salivating.

'Yeah. Fat chance he's planning to let us go.'

Taking another breath, he finally pushed Circulation past the point of no return, as a bird's shadow brushed over him, blotting out the sun, accompanied by a shrill cry.

'Mom. Dad. This one is for you.'

Chapter 125: Rare affinity

As it turned out, the people Percy had previously faced weren't exactly the best the Yellow grade had to offer. Neither the guy he had killed in the hunting grounds, nor the bandits seemed to hold a candle to the nobles from House Tantalus.

One of them had the earth affinity, but he used it much more skilfully than that other guy. Rather than wasting a ton of mana to form long stone javelins, he instead concentrated it into smaller projectiles like knives and needles. Percy initially thought they'd be weaker at least, but he couldn't have been more wrong. It was much easier to accelerate them to a high speed, so they packed as much of a punch, if not more. The only difference was that his opponent could launch way more of them, and each was much harder to evade.

'Better put some distance between us.' he groaned as he leapt back, narrowly dodging another sharp stone whizzing by his ear.

He'd already nearly been hit a couple of times, despite having his attention glued to the guy. So focused was he, in fact, that he barely had the chance to observe what his second opponent was doing. His mana was transparent, causing faint distortions wherever it passed. At first, Percy had thought it was an air affinity, but it lacked the characteristic green tint that Micky's mana had.

'Is it a rare or composite affinity?'

Apparently, today was the day Percy would finally find out how it felt to be on the receiving end of a rare mana type. At least, the guy didn't seem to be targeting him directly. Instead, he formed a strange structure in the air in front of him. It looked a bit like a lens, though it was rotating clockwise, picking speed with each revolution. Once the construct was fully formed, its master moved it in front of the earth mage, who began to launch his own projectiles through it.

Every time one of them passed through the transparent screen, a deafening explosion sounded, the stone daggers instantly appearing where Percy had stood a moment before. Each stabbed a deep, wide crater into the ground, with several cracks branching out of its centre.

The young man had no idea how this affinity worked, but it made the projectiles impossible to dodge. The only reason he was still in one piece was because he could glimpse his opponent's intentions, guessing the spells' trajectories before they were unleashed.

'What the fuck is that?! A time affinity?!'

His only other guess was space, but it looked nothing like Nesha's mana. Either way, he was forced to put more distance from them again, making it even harder to launch his own counterattack. It was lucky Micky was keeping the third guy – the one with the bloodline – busy, or Percy would have lost already. As for Nesha, she was sitting this one out. Perhaps one day she'd grow into a decent fighter but, right now, her clumsy spells would only get in the way.

'Here goes nothing.' Percy thought as he used all the fused mana he'd accumulated since the start of the battle, forming a teal sheet.

Swinging it towards the earth mage, he turned the outer half of the Mantle into a wave of visible, corporeal projectiles to capture his enemies' attention. Secretly, however, he had turned the second half of the sheet invisible, still holding it in his hand. A second later, he discreetly swiped it one more time in a wider arc, releasing another wave of projectiles – these ones invisible and immaterial. They branched outwards more than the rest, travelling a few metres behind them.

A couple seconds later, the tangible batch reached the mage, though he had already sidestepped them. But Percy grinned, having expected this. He watched the second layer of throwing stars head straight towards his oblivious opponent's location, about to stab his soul full of holes. Though it wasn't meant to be.

'What the hell?!' Percy's eyes widened as he saw the projectiles slow down to a snail's pace about a metre before reaching their mark.

"Get out of the way you idiot!" the suspected time mage yelled.

It was only now that the others realized what had happened. The earth mage clumsily dodged out of the way of Percy's attack, the colour draining from his face as he must've finally activated Mana Sense, realizing how close he'd come to dying. As for Percy, he noticed the time mage had moved his construct

at some point, forcing the invisible projectiles to go through it. Though it had the opposite effect on his own magic, decelerating the spell rather than speeding it up.

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‘Troublesome…’ Percy clicked his tongue.

His opponents weren’t complete idiots this time. At least one of them had been on-guard for his sneak attack, and now both of them would be. As for the time affinity, it was annoyingly good at supporting them both offensively and defensively.

‘A battle of attrition then.’ he decided, starting to accumulate fused mana again.

Percy could see the earth mage was pacing himself well, so it would take him a long time to run out of mana. His only hope was that the time spells were more costly to maintain. And so, the two sides continued like that for several more minutes, unleashing a barrage on each other whenever they could, to keep up the pressure, both waiting for the other to exhaust their reserves first.

‘Joke’s on you if you think you can outlast Synchronization.’ Percy smirked.

Sure enough, the time construct crumbled at some point. Its owner fell to his knees, breathing heavily. Seizing his chance, Percy ran towards him, aiming to execute him before he had the chance to recover. Of course, the stone daggers were still difficult to dodge, but it wasn’t as bad without the time spell supporting them.

Yet, as Percy reached the halfway point, he realized something was wrong. The time mage had wrapped the last traces of his mana around his body, coating himself in a translucent halo. He looked very odd, as he breathed three or four times faster than normal, a lot of mana accumulating in his lungs.

‘Shit, it’s a trap!’

Percy frantically retreated, but not before unleashing another barrage of invisible blades. Sadly, the time mage raised another screen to slow them down before they reached him, looking at Percy with a savage

glint in his eye. As for Percy, his features twisted into a grimace as he narrowly dodged more of the sharp stones. This was his first time running into somebody who could match his regeneration!

'In fact… he might even be faster than me…'

Realizing he wasn't getting anywhere like this, Percy tried something different. Upon manifesting another Mantle, he began dashing towards the time mage again, as the earth mage began to shoot the deafening blasts at him.

Percy zigged and zagged to avoid them, timing his steps against his opponent's moves, as he closed part of the distance separating them. Upon nearing as much as he dared too, he unleashed all his mana into a single set of incorporeal throwing stars, aiming straight towards the time mage. The latter frowned at the predictable attack. He merely moved the screen in front of him to slow the projectiles down, before sidestepping them with ease, letting them fly away harmlessly.

But Percy didn't stop running. Instead, he turned, circling around the time mage, making it more difficult for the earth mage to target him. The two men had to pivot around too, so that they could continue shooting at Percy. As for the latter, he gathered more fused mana, trying to form his Mantle again.

"Uuugghh!!!"

Playing dangerously as he was, Percy was eventually hit by one of the stone daggers. Not directly – fortunately – as that would have probably torn a limb off, but even getting glanced by one was enough to carve a nasty gash on his thigh, sending him tumbling on the ground. Though he pushed himself immediately, rolling out of that spot, knowing he couldn't afford to stop for a single moment. Sure enough, another blow landed right where he previously was.

Out of options, Percy swung the half-formed Mantle once more, aiming towards the time mage. But he didn't even stop to check whether his attack landed, as he continued running away towards a certain direction.

"I don't know if you're really an Orange core or some kind of monster, but it's impressive you've lasted this long." the man sneered as he casually negated the invisible daggers again. "But it ends now."

The time mage's smile froze on his face, however, when he saw his partner fall limp on the ground, his eyes glazed over.

"W-What?! How?!" he exclaimed in disbelief. "You sent all the daggers my way! I made sure of that!"

Percy cracked his neck, looking at the time mage with a cold smile. He slowly walked towards him, manifesting a set of silver knives in each hand. Yet, he didn't speak. Why bother explaining himself to a dead man?

Indeed, he had thrown the last of his fused mana towards the time mage, but that wasn't what he had killed the other guy with. Instead, he had retrieved the daggers he had launched during his previous attack, recycling the mana into a new Mantle after circling around the entire battlefield!

Of course, Percy could have never done this on his own. It was impossible to outrun his own spell – not even with Synchronization. That was why he had relied on the time screen to slow the projectiles down for him, allowing him to catch them on the other side!

The man panicked as Percy approached. Clearly, he didn't have a single offensive spell in his arsenal, his kit limited to support magic. He looked like he was about to beg for his life, but Percy never gave him the chance.

Tossing the knives at him, Percy forced him to defend with the screen. Though he didn't stop after the first wave. The man might be able to regenerate mana faster with his time magic, but he spent it more quickly too. Knife after knife, minute after minute, Percy continued until the man was lying on the ground breathing heavily.

Finally, he manifested a sickle in his hand, throwing it at the mage, watching it cleave his soul apart as if it were a sheet of paper.

And just like that, the second guy died too.

Chapter 126: Dessert

A few minutes earlier

Micky flew in a wide arc around the pale man, trying to figure out how to attack him. Using the annoying trick Percy had taught him, he made his heart beat faster, and his body glow yellow. He was a lot stronger like this!

Micky had really wanted to slap Percy when he first showed him how to do it, as it always made him really hungry afterwards. But Micky forgave Percy, as the trick allowed him to get even more food, so it was a good thing. The new changes to his feathers helped him a lot too, but the pale man still didn't let him approach.

A glowing indigo net shot at him, giving him a tingly feeling all over his body, as some smoke came from his feathers. The magic was really hard to dodge! The fire and air of the guys he had fought before wasn't that bad! At least, it didn't hurt him too much from this far, but Micky was a little scared to get closer. And not only because of the zappy thing.

Percy had warned him to not let the pale guy touch him with his hands. Micky didn't know why, but he always listened to Percy when he was being serious like that. He knew he wanted what was best for him.

"Eat!!" Micky yelled at his opponent angrily.

Percy had told him not to speak when strangers were around, but this one should be ok, right? After all, the man had already seen them use their tricks. Either way, he would have to die. Percy rarely let Micky eat human cores – which made sense, as Percy was a human too. But Micky felt guilty because he really liked them! After all, they tasted differently from the bugs and other animals. Maybe not this guy though. He looked sick, so his core might taste bad.

Micky shrugged. It couldn't be much worse than the mice and snakes.

"What the fuck is up with this bird?! Did it just speak?!" the man asked.

Micky felt insulted hearing him. Did the bad man think he was stupid or something? Nesha always said he was learning fast!

Pulling some air mana from his new core, he tried to throw it at his enemy with a flap of his wing. He normally preferred using it to make himself faster, but there was no reason why he couldn't fling spells around like humans did, right?

Though the blast didn't travel far before dispersing. In fact, that happened behind Micky, as he was flying even faster than it. Pathetic. How did the humans even do this? The mana was so much more useful when it clung to his feathers! In fact, even if he could reach the man with it, he doubted it would be as good as his talons or beak.

Another indigo flash zapped him, taking him out of his thoughts. How annoying! A few weeks ago, Micky had killed several people with Yellow cores at once. Now this guy was giving him so much trouble by himself. It was that irritating indigo light! Percy would make fun of him later if he didn't finish this quickly! Micky glanced at the pale guy in hatred, peering into the silvery thing.

It flickered!

With another flap of his wings, Micky avoided the indigo light before it was even released. Just like Percy had explained. Micky had always been able to see the silvery things, but he'd never relied on them much during a fight. By the time he learned he could kill the bugs more easily with it, he could already predict their movements on his own.

This was good!

He could get closer to the pale guy now! Sticking more mana to his feathers, Micky flew as fast as he could, spiralling towards his opponent. The man kept trying to shoot him down, but his speed coupled with his ability to see the silvery thing helped him dodge most of the spells.

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Every now and then, he did get hit, which wasn't great. The blasts hurt more from this close. At least, the air mana seemed to reduce the pain a little. Micky couldn't wait until he could use the trick with his second core too. Sadly, he hadn't finished clearing his mana channels yet, as it was really boring to sit around doing that. Though Percy had promised him it wouldn't make him hungry when he used it with his second core. ʁ

Micky got burnt again. This time, the damage made it a little harder to fly, as each flap hurt. And he still hadn't solved the problem of the guy touching him when he pounced on him. While Micky knew he was really fast, he didn't think he could avoid both the indigo lights and the man's hands from that close.

But it wasn't like he had many options. The only thing he could do was to use his air mana to fly faster. Gathering it on his wings, he paid more attention to how it interacted with his feathers. It made them feel wider, causing them to push against the wind better.

However, they weren't all the same. Some parts of his wings received more pressure as he flew. Micky tried to gather more mana on those feathers, removing it from the parts that didn't help as much. Then, he flapped his wings.

It worked!

He leapt even further than before, narrowly dodging another indigo net. Lucky! Micky kept at it, fine-tuning how his mana interacted with his flight. It was hard, because his second core was so much weaker than his first one. It barely had any mana! He had to use what little he had more intelligently. But that was ok, as he was the smartest bird on Remior!

Flap after flap, Micky grew faster as weird greenish vortices formed behind the tips of his wings. He had expected this to be louder too – flying faster always made more noise. But that didn't happen. For some reason, he had grown quieter instead. The wind just parted naturally in his passing, propelling him forward rather than holding him back.

More.

More!

Micky circled the pale man from a distance of about a dozen metres, whizzing around him at an insane speed. Everything in his eyes was a blur, but that was ok. If Micky was having this much trouble seeing, his opponent should be even worse. Indigo flashes shot randomly, but few even came close to hitting him. Feeling ready, Micky banked towards the man, opening his talons wide.

“Aaaaggggghhh!!!” the man screamed as Micky carved several deep gashes along his arm and soul both. The bird didn’t miss how his opponent had tried to grab him at the last second, but he was moving too fast for that.

Again.

After the second strike, the man knelt on the ground, several fountains of blood pouring out of his body. The silvery thing was greatly damaged too. If the man hadn’t shielded his torso with his arms, he would have died already.

This was it. Aiming for his opponent’s neck, Micky dove one last time, to deliver the finishing blow. So focused was he on doing so, that it was too late to change course once he glimpsed the man’s sinister intentions.

Slamming his fists against one another, the pale guy unleashed the remainder of his mana into a bright shockwave of indigo. The pressure arrested Micky’s momentum, inflicting several nasty burns on them both. Though the man received much less damage from his own mana.

Plopping gracelessly on the ground, Micky still tried to pounce on the man, to tear his throat out, but the latter wasn’t planning to go out without a fight, it seemed. He held the bird back with both hands, as a strange suction force emerged from his palms.

No! This was the thing Percy had warned him about! Micky felt his strength leave his body, as his hunger reached an all-time high. Unwilling to let himself get devoured, he tried to lift his talons, but he couldn’t move his legs. Falling back to his beak, he tried to peck the man’s eye out, but the latter desperately pushed back, keeping him at bay.

At first, Micky had the advantage, inching closer with each snap of his beak. Unfortunately, that didn’t last long. The man started gaining ground as the amber glow faded out of Micky’s body, his power evaporating at a scary rate. At the same time, Micky saw the pale man’s grievous wounds closing in real time, as the latter stole his life one drop at a time.

Just when Micky thought he was a goner, however, he caught a shadow flying towards them rapidly. As for his opponent, he didn’t seem to notice, until the dark ball passed right through his head, leaving nothing but a bloody spring behind.

Only then did the suction force cease, as the headless corpse fell limp on the ground. Micky nearly collapsed too, but somebody propped him up gently at the last second.

“Micky… are you ok?” Nesha’s voice was tinged with concern.

“Hungry…” he replied weakly, causing a faint smile to tug at the girl’s lips.

“Then eat.” she said gesturing at the body, before the two of them looked over at Percy’s side of the battlefield.

“And hurry up. It looks like he’s about to bring you dessert.”

Chapter 127: Wild Art

Percy limped over to the others as he dragged a corpse with each hand, his expression gloomy. He was glad he and Micky had won the fight without casualties, but it would have been better to avoid it entirely.

‘At some point, House Tantalus is going to notice their people are missing…’ he grimaced.

Of course, if they took good care of the bodies and reached the town by then, it shouldn’t be too easy to link the murders to them. Still, the resulting unrest would only make their stay in the Camelot province needlessly complicated.

Reaching his companions, Percy dropped the bodies nearby, before noticing Micky’s state was a little odd. The bird was always keen for a snack – especially when it came to humans for some disturbing reason. Still, his gluttony was strangely exacerbated, but it was tinged with an unusual lethargy. It was as if he was positively famished, yet too tired to go through with his meal. On closer inspection, his plumage was a mess too, many of his feathers charred or torn.

“What happened here?!” he turned to Nesha.

“The guy had a lightning affinity which gave Micky trouble. He managed to push through it but got hit by the bloodline in the end.”

The colour drained from Percy's face, as he realized how close his familiar had come to losing his life. The only reason he had asked him to take care of the mage was because he'd thought the crow could handle it. And it was true Micky was stronger than the average Yellow, but he could still get seriously injured if he let his guard down, apparently.

'And so can I…' he thought sombrely, thinking back to his own fight.

In any case, today's battle would serve as a good wake-up call for both of them. While they had grown a lot stronger during their stay in the Guild, they had a long way to go still. Right now, however, their priority was to get the hell out of here.

"Micky, do you think you'll be able to fly like this?"

The bird continued to peck away at his meal for a few seconds. Eventually, he replied, but only through their connection, as he was too tired to speak.

'Maybe…'

Percy frowned. He did have a few more healing potions, though he was saving them for a rainy day. It wasn't like he was too stingy to use them on Micky if the bird really needed them, but he'd rather hold on to them for a time they might need them more – assuming his familiar could recover on his own, of course.

"Ok then. Eat the cores first before they dissipate. Then, get rid of the bodies too. We'll see how you're feeling afterwards."

Percy and Nesha scanned both battlefields, erasing any bloodstains or traces of magic they could spot, while Micky disposed of the corpses. At least, he could eat a lot more since advancing. It wasn't until a few hours later that the trio was done with their respective tasks.

"Feeling any better?"

“A bit.” Micky said.

He did look a little livelier. Of course, it wasn’t that surprising, as beasts tended to recover faster than humans, especially after eating. Still, Percy couldn’t help but exhale in relief after confirming his familiar was ok.

“Let’s hold on to the potions for now then.” he said.

His own injury would make the rest of the journey a pain, but he’d live.

Next, Percy stuffed his enemies’ clothes into the spatial amulet. There was barely any space left, and he didn’t much enjoy getting blood all over his stuff, but it wasn’t like he had much of an option. They couldn’t exactly leave the evidence in the scene of the crime.

He did briefly consider replacing his own stinky clothes with a fine set of silken robes, but he quickly shot the idea down, berating himself for even considering it. Dressing in House Tantalus’s colours while travelling in their territory was about the dumbest move possible.

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‘Right up there with picking a fight with the Divine Order.’ he chuckled bitterly.

After confirming they had cleaned up to the best of their ability, the group left, continuing towards Bogside town. They moved much faster than before, both Percy and Micky ignoring their injuries, their sense of urgency tuned up to eleven.

“Thanks for saving him.” he told Nesha.

“I’d have intervened sooner if I wasn’t afraid of hitting Micky by mistake. Or setting that guy after me.” she shrugged.

Percy didn't disagree, knowing she was telling the truth. Having been brought up to speed on the fight, he was sure even that final blast she'd killed the lightning mage with had been a gamble. Her poor eyesight certainly hadn't done her any favours either. Had she hit Micky instead, they'd be having a very different conversation right now. Assuming they were even alive.

"You should really spend some time learning how to use your mana." he said. "It's really a waste of a very powerful affinity…" he trailed off, realizing it wasn't any of his business.

Percy fully expected Nesha to ignore his unsolicited advice, but she surprised him by nodding.

"I know. I'll spend some time on it once we settle down."

Leaving it at that, he turned to Micky, looking at him fly in the distance. From Percy's location, the crow appeared as little more than a black dot in the sky, though he could tell flying was especially painful. Still feeling guilty over letting him get hurt, he was about to send some consoling thoughts over. However, the bird beat him to it, reaching out first.

'Percy… New spell…'

Contrary to his tired exterior, Micky's thoughts seemed strangely enthusiastic.

'During the fight?' Percy asked, getting a mental affirmation back. 'Can you show me?'

Micky remained silent for a few seconds, as Percy could tell how badly his familiar wanted to demonstrate his new trick. Still…

'Later…' he ultimately replied.

Percy smiled, as he felt the crow's disappointment oozing through the cord. Micky's state must have been quite poor if he could resist the temptation to show off. That said, he did send the next best thing – memories of the new spell.

Watching his familiar shift the air mana along his feathers, fine-tuning its effect on his flight and manifesting the green vortices behind his wings' tips, Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. This was definitely some high-quality stuff – the Status should have registered it.

Opening Micky's tab, he soon confirmed that was the case.

___

Mictlantecuhtli (Percival's familiar)

Mana cores:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

'Wild Art?'

Percy had never heard of such a thing before. His best guess was that it was something along the same vein as his own Secret Art. The latter was simply a spell that involved one's bloodline – according to baldy. Was a Wild Art a spell involving a beast's mutation? He sure couldn't think of a better explanation, though that was still a little odd.

'Why is there even a term for it?'

As far as he could tell, Micky was a completely unprecedented existence. Back when she created her Decree, countless millennia ago, Phoebe couldn't have possibly predicted a beast with multiple cores – or even a beast with a Status for that matter.

Maybe the Status was simply flexible enough to adapt to new circumstances. That wasn't impossible, as it had already done that a few times in Percy's experience. For instance, he was pretty sure it wasn't meant to list one's Decrees, though that had changed when Percy obtained a new one.

'I suppose even the fact that it comes up with creative names when registering new spells is proof it has some level of intelligence...'

Though it wasn't perfect. While Phoebe had indeed done an admirable job accommodating for the unexpected, she had clearly not ironed out all the kinks in her Decree. An inconvenience Percy had spotted was that neither he nor Micky got notified when the latter registered a new spell. The only way to know was to manually check the Status later.

'It's not the end of the world, really, but I wonder what other variants of this Decree exist out there.'

Gabe had already explained this was a relatively common Decree, so Percy itched to look at a better version. If he got lucky, he might even be able to upgrade his own in the process, unlocking an extra feature or two.

'Better not get greedy though. I have plenty on my plate already…'

Percy suppressed his excitement, reminding himself he hadn't even fully digested the gains from his previous trips. He still had to incorporate Sengo's teachings into his magic, and there was also the project of returning to the Vault.

Impatient to resume his training, Percy picked up the pace some more, while planning out his next steps. Frankly, he couldn't wait to finally reach their destination.

Luckily, they were on course to do so by nightfall.

Chapter 128: Grisly Bog

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Nesha asked as Percy wrapped the bloody garments around a large stone, tossing it in the murky swamp. A few bubbles rose to the surface, releasing a putrid stench of rot upon popping.

The group had already reached Bogside town, though they hadn't entered it yet. Entering while wearing his bloodstained bandit clothes and coming from the direction where they had killed the guards would only spell trouble down the line. Instead, they had circled around the town, stopping by the Grisly Bog to get Micky settled first.

"It would be riskier to leave them in our possession. If somebody saw them, they'd know it was us. Plus, I don't have enough space to keep them in the amulet forever." Percy said, pinching his nose.

"I get that, but wouldn't it be better to leave them where they died than bring them here, in the vicinity of the town where we'll be staying?" Nesha didn't let go.

"Nesha… If it gets to the point that House Tantalus is combing the swamp waters with a spoon, we'll be fucked either way." he said, putting the debate to rest.

Suddenly, a large shape rushed out of the swamp, drenching Percy in a splash of brown water. It was a crocodile, though it was twice as long as a normal one, coated in a layer of spiky scales. It pounced on the duo, opening its oversized maw wide, preparing to chomp the unsuspecting humans down.

Sadly for it, however, the humans weren't quite as unsuspecting as it had thought.

Right before the beast reached them, a second shape rushed their way, this one smaller but much, much faster. Its plumage was covered in dense amber lines that branched out of its heart and sternum both, reaching every corner of its body. As for its feathers, they were softly glowing in a green colour, with two vortices swirling behind the tips of its wings. Naturally, it was Micky, who had already warned Percy of the crocodile, having spotted it via Soul Vision long before it revealed itself.

Flying over the monster's neck, the crow slammed it to the ground, as his talons carved a path through the tough scales, releasing sparks in the process. Blood gushed out wherever they passed, as the Yellow beast's soul was cleanly split in two. Carried by inertia, the lifeless carcass then slid in the mud for a couple more feet, before Percy stopped it with his boot.

"Great. Because I didn't stink enough before." he groaned, trying to swipe some of the blood and the swamp water off his clothes.

“At least Micky seems to be doing better.” Nesha shrugged.

Percy couldn’t help but click his tongue in annoyance seeing that she was dry as a leaf in the desert, having used him as a shield. But he shook his head, not in the mood to get into an argument. Anyway, he was going to throw the bandit clothes away as soon as he procured some clean ones.

“Yeah. If only I could heal by stuffing my face full of mana cores…” he replied, shifting the weight off his injured leg as he tossed his familiar an envious glance.

“Are you going to be alright here?” he asked the crow.

Micky was busy digging through the crocodile’s sternum for his snack, so he only replied through their bond.

‘Good.’

“Just remember this isn’t the ground level of the Spire. There are Yellow beasts everywhere.” Percy warned again.

The young man knew none of these animals should pose much of a threat to his familiar – but only as long as he remained careful. Of course, that was assuming he didn’t run into a Green one. Luckily, those were quite rare on Remior. The Fungal Spire was an exception, as its extremely mana-rich environment allowed higher grades to thrive.

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“So, what’s the plan?” Nesha asked, bringing him out of his thoughts.

“I can’t go into the town looking like this. Can you buy me some clothes?” Percy asked.

She nodded, prompting him to look inside the amulet for some change. However, he frowned a second later, realizing they had a problem.

“Shit. The only money we have is from the Guild…” he said, his face twisting into a grimace.

“You haven’t travelled much, have you?” Nesha asked, clearly not as concerned as him.

Percy raised an eyebrow, though he didn’t say anything, waiting for her to elaborate.

“The Guild’s currency is just as widespread as gold and silver across Remior. At least, I’ve never heard of a place that didn’t accept it.”

Next, she proceeded to give him a quick rundown of the exchange rates. Apparently, one silver coin was valued at about 1.4 contribution points, with gold coins a hundred times more expensive, and copper coins a hundred times cheaper. r

“Won’t it give away the fact that we came from the Guild though?” Percy asked.

“Nine out of ten people who carry contribution points have never stepped foot there.” she shook her head.

Percy exhaled in relief. That was one less thing they’d have to worry about, at least. Of course, they still couldn’t reveal too much money, or they might blow their cover as commoners.

“Make sure to enter the town from the other side. And try to be seen by as few people as possible. It’s better if nobody is sure when exactly we arrived.” he advised.

“Do I look like I can go on a stealth mission?” Nesha asked in an irritated tone, pointing at her eyes. “We’ll be lucky if I manage to spot the shops.”

Percy scratched his head in embarrassment, realizing it might not be that wise to send the girl with the poor eyesight stumbling through the town in the middle of the night.

“On second thought, maybe it’s better to wait until sunrise then. We don’t even know if there’s anything open this late.”

Nesha groaned, clearly as impatient to wash up and sleep on a proper bed as he was. But she didn’t argue back, knowing his words made sense.

“Do we have any rations left?” she suddenly asked.

Percy sifted through the amulet, also feeling quite hungry. Even the disgusting smell of rotten eggs failed to quell his appetite, as they hadn’t eaten anything since before the fight against the members of House Tantalus. Though he came up empty-handed a few seconds later.

“None. But we do have some crocodile meat, if Micky leaves us any.”

After managing to steal a hindleg each from the carcass – much to the crow’s dismay – the two walked some distance away from the water, setting up camp at a spot that stank a little less. Lighting up a fire, Nesha began roasting their dinner, as Percy looked for a dry place for her to sleep. It would be best if she didn’t walk into the town covered in mud tomorrow.

“Say, can you give me a second core?” Nesha asked out of the blue.

Percy’s eyes widened, caught off-guard by the request. Naturally, he’d long considered the possibility of intentionally disseminating the Moirais’ Decree, even before he learned what it was called. In fact, they’d discussed it with baldy at length back when he was still at home.

Of course, that hadn’t been an option at the time. Back then, Percy had spent over a year trying to patch his own soul up, and he hadn’t even been close to dying. The prospect of injuring somebody to the verge of death and then hoping to save them in time was, frankly…

“Too dangerous.”

His only success had been Gabe, and even then, they had used a god's mana to fix his damaged soul. Percy had no idea if he could replicate the feat. The only other situation that came close was back when he saved Nesha inside the hive. It was true her injuries at the time had been quite severe, and he did manage to heal her, by relying on the mana Micky got from the Starry Knight's soul.

Still, there was no guarantee it would work a second time, nor could they kill a Green on demand. Plus, the actual process of possessing somebody always damaged their soul some more, so that could easily leave his host past the point of no return. Overall, this just wasn't something Percy wanted to test on a friend.

"I'm willing to take the risk." Nesha said, her eyes glinting with resolve.

"But I'm not." Percy said. "Nesha… I suggest you stop trying to look for an easy way to get stronger. You think I haven't noticed how you're putting off training with your affinity?"

Nesha bit her lip upon being called out.

"I've never really trained with it. I don't even know how to go about it." she muttered weakly, before raising her voice. "Why do you care anyway?! Worst case scenario, you'll have one less person to brew elixirs for!"

Percy sighed.

"How about you walk me through your grand plan. Let's say I help you out and we succeed. What then? Do you think you'll instantly become an expert on using the new core? You'll have to train with it too, you know."

Nesha clenched her fists, but didn't say anything. Eventually, Percy spoke again.

"Listen. I'll give you some tips to get you started, but you'll have to put in the work."

Chapter 129: Bogside Town

"What did you tell them?" Percy asked, watching Nesha return with some folded clothes held in one hand, a bucket of water in the other.

The sun was already at its apex, the girl having taken all morning for the round trip. In fact, Percy had started getting worried at some point, thinking it might have not been too wise to send her alone in that state. He also felt a little guilty over the harsh things he'd said the night before, though he knew she had to hear them.

"The truth. More or less. I just said my travelling companion wasn't presentable, and he was too embarrassed to walk in public looking like that. I obviously didn't go into details, but they're going to see you later, so I couldn't just hide your existence entirely."

Percy nodded, as he finally took the dreaded tunic off, using it to wipe some grime off him. Next, he took the bucket from Nesha, washing up as well as he could. Which wasn't that well. At least, his skin was visible by the time he was done. Sadly, he didn't have anything clean to dry himself with, so he just used his pure mana to get most of the water off him, before donning his new clothes. The linen fabric was cheap and unassuming, but it was really soft, and a hundred times more comfortable than the mismatched leather pieces.

Finally, the two headed to the town together, still having lots of items on their agenda for today. As soon as they entered, Percy looked around curiously, this being his first time in a commoner town on Remior. It definitely wasn't as bad as the primitive village he had encountered on the world with the brown fog, but it wasn't nearly as majestic as the Alchemists' Guild either.

There weren't any mushrooms looming over their heads, nor any colourful motes bathing the place in their lustre – just the warm rays of the midday sun. Nobody had bothered to dress the streets in cobblestone either, the locals happy to walk on simple roads of paved dirt. As for the houses, most of them were wooden huts, lining up either side of the streets.

The petite buildings looked nothing like his family's grandiose mansion, their exteriors full of patches and holes, their walls marred with mould and rot. The acrid scent of old wood permeated the place, mixed with the even worse odours of piss and excrement. As for the people, they were all dressed in cheap, ragged clothes – not unlike his own. What surprised him the most was that he couldn't see anybody at Green!

'On second thought, maybe it's not that strange…'

While Yellow-born commoners emerged at the same rate as nobles, they rarely remained commoners for long. Most Houses were eager to recruit them, marrying them into their families. It was actually the opposite situation from how Red-borns were treated – often getting kicked out of their families and left to leave as commoners.

Of course, Orange-borns could still reach Green as they aged, but peasants rarely got to live that long, often getting killed in wars or games between noble Houses. Still, there should have been some of them around. Mentally noting to look into this later, Percy then turned to Nesha.

“I imagine you’ve asked around about the shops?”

“Yes. There should be a glassmaker a couple blocks away.”

It didn’t take them long to find the place, the soft jingle of a bell ringing as they opened the door of the humble shop.

“Good morning!” a female voice said absentmindedly, as the two spotted a middle-aged lady with her back facing them, looking for something on a shelf. Only after she turned around did her brow crease. “Oh? Newcomers to the town?”

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“Do you not get them often?” Percy asked, noticing her reaction was a little strange.

The lady seemed somewhat taken aback by his question, shifting nervously on her feet.

“O-Oh, no. No. It’s just, I was a little surprised is all. We get newcomers all the time.” she said, clearly trying to sound calm.

Percy didn’t miss the traces of unease in her tone though. Nesha also flashed him a quick glance.

‘So, she’s lying, huh? Does that have to do with the mysterious absence of Green cores in the town?’

Outwardly, he simply smiled.

“Do you make eyewear by any chance? My friend here lost her own, and she was hoping to buy a new pair.”

Happy to change the topic, the shop owner gestured at a different shelf, were multiple pairs of glasses were lined up. Their designs were somewhat crude, but that made sense. It would be strange to expect the same quality of glasses they could buy in the Guild, or get commissioned by their Houses. Nesha tried a few pairs, not looking particularly happy with any of them. Seemingly lowering her expectations, she eventually settled on one, before turning to the lady.

“I’ll take these for now, but would it be possible to order a customized pair halfway between these and these?” she asked.

“Sure, they’ll take about two weeks to make though. I’ll also need you to pay half their cost in advance. Together, it’ll be a silver and sixty coppers.”

Percy handed her two red coins and three brown chips, getting a few coppers back. Then, he and Nesha bid her farewell, leaving the shop.

“What do you think the deal is with this place?” Nesha whispered after adjusting her new glasses.

“My guess? House Tantalus.” Percy replied, keeping his voice down too.

Due to his enemies’… peculiarities, it was entirely possible they treated the commoners under their jurisdiction like livestock, using them to feed their bloodline’s insatiable appetite. It was just speculation but, given what he knew about the noble House and their blatant disregard for human life, Percy was confident it was spot on.

It would also explain the mysterious absence of Greens in the town. After all, what better people to kill first than the strongest of the locals? That way, the towns under House Tantalus’s control would never amass enough strength to revolt.

“Disgusting.” Nesha spat.

With their mood completely ruined, and their stomachs churned, the two continued their shopping in silence, buying some supplies for their new life. They kept their expenses to a minimum, while also asking around for a cheap place to stay. They had plenty of money to splurge if they wanted, but they had to stick to their roles.

In the end, they were told about an abandoned house in a corner of the town. Apparently, they could stay there for free. It was tiny and its condition left much to be desired, but its owner had died years ago, so nobody would care much if they took it.

“Are you actually planning to work as a blacksmith?” Nesha asked, probably recalling what he’d told the guards the day before.

Percy nodded. He did need to put up the appearance of working during his stay here, and any opportunity to put Sengo’s teachings to practice would help him incorporate them in his magic. Plus, he could help people out in the process, which was what he’d promised to do. Of course, he didn’t think he’d be particularly good at it – it wasn’t an art one could master after a single demonstration. That said, the locals’ standards were lower too, and being an amateur would only make his act more believable.

“Though, I guess these people might need their houses repaired more than they need steel tools…” he smiled bitterly, looking at the shoddy huts. Most of them probably leaked water whenever it rained.

Still, they were unlikely to trust a complete stranger with their houses. Furthermore, he didn’t even know if he could find all the materials he needed to make concrete here. Finally, concrete would be harder to explain than a slightly more sophisticated approach to metallurgy.

‘Let’s leave it for some other time…’

Arriving at their new abode, they quickly noticed it was in an even worse state than they had been led to believe. Decrepit might be an apt term. The hut was tiny, half of it collapsed. It would take them a few days to patch it up into something liveable. At least, their higher grades would help with the physical labour involved.

Percy shrugged.

‘I guess I would have had to renovate the place anyway, to build myself a workshop.’

He had no idea how to recreate Sengo’s contraptions, but a simple stone forge and an anvil shouldn’t be too difficult to put together. As for the tools and materials, they could try selling some monster parts from the bog, though he’d rather not make it too obvious that they could hunt Yellow beasts. The weaker he and Nesha appeared, the less likely to connect them to the murders, or the Guild.

‘At least, we won’t starve…’

Chapter 130: Karma

A blond young man stood outside a stone house, pinching a gemstone vial between his thumb and index finger. A turquoise liquid swirled inside, giving the onlookers pause. They all stood some distance from Jason, torn between their fear of the Divine Root and their curiosity over these new elixirs.

As for Jason himself, he wasn’t paying them any attention, focusing on the Aurora Dew itself. Gathering some mana in his eyes, he activated Karmic Vision, watching countless thin threads of all colours appear in the world. They branched out from every object and every person, stretching into the distance.

‘Too much.’ he squinted as the dizzying tapestry manifested all around him.

Unable to discern anything noteworthy through the tangled web, Jason lowered the intensity of mana in his eyes, dialling his magical sense down a notch. That filtered many of the threads out, leaving only the most prominent ones. Sadly, they were still way too many to make out anything important.

People who didn’t have a karma affinity would probably be surprised at just how many of these invisible connections existed in the world. Every time two objects interacted, a new thread formed. They did fade away slowly, and they could even disappear entirely given enough time, but they could also grow brighter if the objects in question continued to interact.

‘It was never going to work with just the elixir.’ he smiled bitterly.

Jason had already tried to locate the alchemist many times, but there were dozens if not hundreds of threads attached to the substance. Technically, he could filter out the ones connected to the vial if he moved the liquid to a different container. However, there were plenty fixed to the elixir itself. After all, it had been brewed from multiple materials, each of which had been harvested by somebody else, from various places across Remior. And each of them had probably been handled by many hands too, before eventually ending in the Alchemists' Guild.

'Luckily, we have more clues now.' he grinned.

Taking some clothes from that Nesha girl's house, he cross-referenced their threads with the ones attached to the Aurora Dew. There were too many to sift through, but he didn't care about all of them. The only ones that mattered were the shared ones, as one of those would take him to the girl. This allowed him to cut the number down massively.

'That's only on the elixir… That one is only on the clothes… I tracked those three yesterday… Hmmm… Let's see where this one leads.'

Suffice to say, investigating all the trails one by one was a time-consuming process. However, Jason wasn't too bothered, having been trained for this job his whole life. It was his specialty – the role he had been assigned since a young age. Using his rare affinity to accomplish something only a handful of people on Remior were capable of filled him with pride and purpose. So, he hadn't let his failures over the past few weeks get to him.

'I'll find that bitch soon enough.'

Eventually, the trail led him to another stone house in the settlement. Knocking on the door, he waited for a few seconds, until a young man in a yellow robed opened. Initially, the guy sported an annoyed expression. He looked like he was about to swear, though he quickly swallowed his words the very next moment, the colour draining from his face upon seeing Jason standing there.

"Do you know a Nesha Veritas?" Jason asked, cutting to the chase.

The man stared at him in confusion for a moment, before shaking his head.

“Are you an alchemist, or are you friends with one?” Jason asked again, getting the same answer back.

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He frowned, unsure why the guy seemed so clueless. He didn’t look like he had the balls to lie to him, and the karmic threads never lied either. Nesha and the Aurora Dew both shared a connection to this place for some reason.

‘Maybe it’s just something tangential.’ he reasoned, guessing this was another dead-end.

Though he didn’t give up just yet.

“How long have you been living in this house?”

“I only moved in two weeks ago.” the man finally found the courage to speak, his answer causing Jason to raise an eyebrow.

If the previous owner left right around when they arrived at the Guild, he could very easily be Nesha’s collaborator – the very person they were after! R

“Oh? Do you have any idea who lived here before you?”

Unfortunately, the young man hadn’t a clue. He merely directed Jason to the official building in charge of housing.

‘I’ll find you, whoever you are…’

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“Well?” Deimos asked, waiting for his daily report.

Jason grimaced, the prospect of returning to his superior for the billionth time without any tangible results made his blood boil. Sadly, today’s investigation had failed again.

“I followed a new trail today. It took me to the house of some boy who was last spotted about a month ago, so I really thought he was the one.”

Deimos perked up at the sound of that, which only pissed Jason off more.

“And?”

“Nothing. He was just some Red-born runt from House Avalon. He was young and he’d only been in the Guild for a few years. I don’t know if he was one of Nesha’s regulars at the gambling den who happened to get close to the vial by accident, or if Nesha hired him at some point to deliver the elixirs somewhere. Either way, he couldn’t be our target.”

Deimos nodded, though Jason didn’t miss his boss’s clenched fists and gritted teeth.

“It would still be a good idea to interrogate him. He might know where the girl is, or he’ll at least help you locate her more easily. Where did he go?”

“Who knows?” Jason shrugged. “He couldn’t have escaped the Guild by himself, and I doubt Nesha was sentimental enough to bring him along. Since he isn’t in the settlement, they must’ve killed him and fed him to the wasps to cover their tracks.”

Deimos rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Jason. I’ve always considered you my most capable subordinate, but you’ve really let me down over the past few weeks.”

Hearing his boss chastise him, it was Jason’s turn to clench his fists.

“What do you want me to do?! I’ve busted my ass looking fo–”

Deimos raised a hand to stop him.

“Just shut up and listen. If we go back to my father empty-handed, we’re fucked. So, whatever it is you’re doing, do it faster. Use the boy’s possessions too. He’s clearly just a side-character, but he was still involved with them. If you can find his corpse, it’s going to accelerate your search.”

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‘It’s easier said than done.’ Jason grimaced, standing in that Red-born’s house, having already kicked its new tenant out.

Unfortunately, that Percy hadn’t left any traces here before leaving. All his possessions were gone, even the last stain having been scrubbed from the floor by the time he had left. There was nothing to track him down with!

‘Strange. Even if Nesha killed him, why would she bother wiping his house clean but not her own?’

Maybe the boy had done it himself, paranoid about Nesha tracking him down. Not that it did him much good in the end…

‘Ugggghhhh!! What a fucking mess this is!’

Of course, there was the house itself and the furniture inside, but those weren’t Percy’s personal possessions. They had changed many owners before him, and even the new guy had filled them up with new threads by now. Trying to cross-reference them with the other clues was only going to complicate things more.

Their only option at this point was to fall back to the Aurora Dew and Nesha’s clothes, exhausting the remaining trails. Sadly, they’d already investigated most of the threads leading somewhere inside the settlement, so they’d have to start looking at the ones extending outside.

‘There’s over a dozen of those…’

The worst part was that they stretched all over Remior, so investigating each one could take several months. If they got lucky, they might find Nesha after the first one, but if not, their search could easily last years.

Realizing how precarious his situation was, Jason kicked the bed away in rage, splitting its frame in half. The pieces exploded to splinters and shreds of cloth as they slammed against the wall.

Rubbing his temples, Jason tried to calm himself down. It was ultimately a gamble – whether or not they could locate the culprits before the Order’s patience ran out. Still, one thing was for certain. At least one of those shared threads did lead to Nesha.

‘And if I do find you, I swear I’m going to rip your head off your shoulders and smash it to pieces.’