

Percy marvelled at the intricate vial pinched between his thumb and index finger. For something so valuable, it wasn't that large, its height and thickness not exceeding that of his pinkie.

At least, he didn't have to worry about breaking it if he dropped it by accident. Its hardness wasn't a joke. It was made of a hollowed-out sapphire shard. A bit overkill in his opinion, using such a precious material for a simple container, but at the end of the day it didn't really matter. After all, the vial's contents were easily fifty times more expensive than the gemstone. *Probably more.*

*'Plus, it can be reused.'*

He shrugged, downing the elixir. The liquid was cool and soft as it trickled over his tongue and through his throat, giving him a refreshing feeling. It was bitter, though a hint of apple had clearly been added, to make it easier to swallow for the stereotypical noble able to afford it.

Percy chuckled.

*'I'd drink this even if it tasted like shit.'*

Next, he pulled some mana from his sternum, gathering it in his stomach. Only after allowing it to simmer there for a few minutes did he move it back to his core. It stung every time he reabsorbed it, but he gritted his teeth and kept going, repeating the process over a dozen times before stopping.

The whole cleansing took about half an hour, and his core burned when he was done, as if he had dipped it into a vat of acid.

*'It's worth it.'*

Percy was still getting used to the new elixirs, despite having used them for the past month. They hurt more than the heavily diluted version he'd drunk growing up, but they were more potent too. The good news was, they couldn't be used more than once a day, to avoid injuring oneself, which was great for his sanity. *And his pocket.*

Supposedly, it was possible to advance one's grade via other means, but nobody did that, as it took way too long for it to be worth it. Plus, the cheap elixirs were essentially the same substance as the expensive ones but mixed with water in a ratio of 1:100, which just about made them affordable even for commoners. Well, assuming they didn't horribly mismanage their finances.

Either way, thanks to his grandpa's generosity, Percy could now hopefully cut down the time needed before his next advancement in half, although fifty years were still nothing to scoff at. Perhaps, his second core would benefit from this treatment sooner.

*'If it ever forms.'*

The young man stood up, stretching his limbs.

Baldy wasn't going to visit him today. Even though the plan had been to resume their sessions after the demonstration, it turned out he had shirked his responsibilities for a bit too long. Thus, he had told Percy he'd be extending their break by another day or two, to get everything back in order.

If this was a month ago, he might have thought his grandpa was only making excuses to bail on him, but right now he wasn't concerned about that, seeing Archibald in a new light.

*'Let's just enjoy the day off.'*

Walking out of his room, he headed towards the main hall. That was where his family members picked and turned in missions. The same was true for Red cores, although they could only select low-level missions that involved cleaning or doing other chores inside the House, as they weren't strong enough to survive outside.

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If it was up to Archibald, he wouldn't have let the Yellow-borns out either, as they were too important to risk something happening to them. Still, he understood they wouldn't grow without adversity.

In any case, Percy wasn't going there to pick a mission. He wouldn't have enough time to finish it before his training resumed anyway. No, the young man just wanted to meet people. Anybody would do.

Not that he was particularly fond of his cousins, but after staring at baldy for every waking moment over the past month, he itched to look at a different face.

*'Preferably one with hair.'*

Perhaps, he should have been more careful of what he wished for, however. Soon after entering the hall, his attention was drawn to two loud voices joking and laughing by the counter. And he recognized them.

*'Ugh... Not them, of all people...'*

Hector and Tristan were only a couple years older than him, but they were both Orange-borns, having advanced to Yellow a long time ago. At least, he had slightly closed the gap – *for now* – but he didn't think that would stop them from giving him crap.

Each of his cousins was accompanied by two identical copies of themselves, dressed in simpler, more practical clothes. Last time he'd seen them, they'd only had one.

*'I guess even they have to put some effort in every now and then.'*

Part of him wanted to bolt back to his room. Percy wasn't *afraid* of them, but he wasn't in the mood to deal with this right now. Still, it would look pathetic if he did that. Plus, he did want to get some fresh air for a change. In the end, he shrunk to a corner of the room, trying not to draw much attention.

His cousins were chatting with their older sister, Laudin, who worked behind the counter. Percy didn't know if they were there to pick or turn in a mission, but they sure took their sweet time either way.

There were others in the hall, but not too many. It was late in the morning so the ones heading out had already left, while the ones coming back wouldn't be here until later. He was about to pick one of the least annoying relatives to approach, when his luck ran out.

"Well, well... If it isn't the little goblin!" Hector said, keeping his voice loud enough to make sure everyone heard it.

Percy rolled his eyes, pretending he didn't hear him.

“What?! He's still alive?!” Tristan played along. “I heard he passed out during his promotion! I haven't seen him for a couple of months, so I thought he died in his sleep!”

Turning to face them, Percy activated Soul Vision and imagined himself testing his new spell on his idiot cousins. Yellow or not, the buffoons wouldn't even see the knives coming before they pierced some nasty holes through their souls. Of course, he wasn't petty enough to *torture* somebody over some teasing. Not even *them*. Still, he wasn't above entertaining himself with the thought.

“Seriously?! Who even faints when advancing to *Orange*?!” Hector emphasized his grade on purpose.

Percy heard a few chuckles from the others in the room, but he didn't look. *He wouldn't give them that.*

“Morning assholes.” he said as he approached the duo. “I see you haven’t been slacking off yourselves.” he added, pointing at the clones with his chin.

“Of course. This is *our* family’s prized bloodline, after all. The pride of *our* House.”

Had this come from somebody else, Percy might have thought it was a joke, but seeing Tristan inflate like a pufferfish, he knew the guy meant his words. He shook his head, suppressing a chuckle.

Passing by them, he walked to the board, wanting to browse through the missions, partly to extricate himself from the situation and partly out of genuine curiosity. But his cousins weren’t done with him yet, it seemed. Four silhouettes approached him from behind, nearing him uncomfortably. Turning to face them, he noted the clones’ soulless gazes were even more creepy from up close.

“Percy! We have the perfect mission for you. One suitable for your *talents*.” Hector sneered.

“Right. Help us test out our new clones in the garden. We tried to hunt some goblins in our last mission, but they were too weak. Maybe you can do *slightly* better.” Tristan added.

The corner of Percy’s eye twitched. He’d been trying to not let them bother him too much, but they were starting to grate on his nerves.

He wasn’t going to seriously harm them over something this trivial, but perhaps they did deserve to be taught a lesson. The dysfunctional soul wisps burning in the clones’ chests should be easy to snuff out, setting his cousins back by a couple of months. Maybe they would think twice before annoying him in the future.

However, the soul mana had only begun to coalesce in his fists when he caught a bright flash of azure from the corner of his eyes.

SPLASH