Wanderer 141

Chapter 141: Demi-humans

A terrible tune pierced through the eerie silence of the bog. It had been going for a while, the amateurish melody driving even the owls and bats away from the area. Had somebody been unfortunate enough to walk nearby, they would have certainly torn their ears out by now.

Suddenly, a mound of mud rose behind Percy, a scaly reptilian head emerging from within, its slit eyes glaring at him in fury. It coiled once, accumulating strength like a spring as its mouth opened wide, droplets of venom coalescing by the tips of its sharp fangs. Then, it snapped right at him, intent on putting the entire swamp out of its misery.

But it never got the chance.

Before its attack even landed, two talons clasped its head, punching a handful of deep holes in its skull. A couple seconds later, Micky was already digging through the snake's body, searching for his snack. As for Percy, he didn't even bother turning around, knowing his familiar had everything under control all along. He continued playing the ocarina, his fingers clumsily tapping the misshapen holes, proliferating the atrocious sound.

"Percy… just stop!" Micky said, taking a break from his dinner at some point.

"Geez, I'm starting to regret teaching you how to speak." Percy replied, though he acquiesced.

Perhaps, they had all suffered enough of his "art" for one night. Well, Nesha certainly had, as she had already kicked him out of the hut a couple hours ago. Though he blamed the crude design of the instrument as much as his own lack of skill.

'Oh well… it's like magic… I'll get better at it with practice…' he shrugged.

The only thing he lamented was how little time he got to spend with Micky ever since the incident. He and Nesha had subtly verified – through a combination of her ability and a few well-placed questions here and there – that the townsfolk had truly bought the rumour about the monstrous crow. Everyone

seemed to believe that Micky was the sole culprit behind the attacks, which suited them just fine. After all, this was the exact story they wanted to reach House Tantalus's ears.

However, it also meant Percy couldn't enter the Grisly Bog openly. Everyone believed there was a dangerous Green beast currently roaming the area, so it would have been strange of him if he showed no fear in getting near. Consequently, he could only ever do this at night, sneaking out of the town secretly. At least, their hut was conveniently located by the edge, which made things a little easier.

"Micky, I suggest you pace yourself if you don't want to run out of food." Percy suddenly warned.

Ever since the bird mastered Circulation with its second core, it had grown even more formidable. Its effect would have normally been somewhat lacklustre by itself, but it seemed to synergize extremely well with Acceleration, making Micky an absolute menace. While the townsfolk had misunderstood the crow's grade, their assumption about its strength wasn't that far from the truth. Percy estimated Micky could hold his own against a real Green beast!

But that was a problem.

After all, they no longer lived beneath the Fungal Spire, where an endless supply of wasps emerged from the hive's depths every day to replenish their ranks. Wild beasts couldn't reproduce nearly as fast as the magical insects. If Micky continued to stuff his face with dozens of Yellow cores per day, he'd probably drive them to extinction by the time they left.

'I suppose this is why higher-grade beasts are so rare outside the Spire…'

Micky wasn't happy hearing he had to go on a diet, but he was smart enough to understand what Percy was saying. He'd already noticed it was getting harder to find food with each passing day.

In any case, this was more of a long-term problem. They'd be lucky if they survived long enough to worry about that. Placing the ocarina in his pocket, Percy leapt up from the half-rotten log. He'd already had enough of a break.

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Pulling some pure mana from his core, he focused it on his index finger, as he began to carve intricate circles on the aged wood. His first few attempts were clumsy – until he got into it – though he got better each time. Every now and then, he wiped away his previous scribbles, not wanting to leave evidence of his presence here, in case he forgot to get rid of them later.

'Conceal the mana…' he repeated like a mantra, visualizing the effect of his bandage in the process.

That was what he wanted from the enchantments – to hide mana from Mana Sense. A simple thing, yet of immense importance to him.

Line after line, rune after rune, refill after refill, Percy kept drawing the symbols until there was no more space on the severed trunk. Even Micky had grown bored of watching him at some point, now leisurely cleaning his feathers with his beak.

"How long has it been?"

"Couple hours?" the bird shrugged.

Percy nodded. He didn't even know if any of the enchantments were functional. Some of them should have been – after all, most of them looked about right by now. Though he'd long decided to stop checking after each attempt, to save himself some time and frustration. His plan was to keep at it for a few more days before examining the results.

"Ok, I'll head back then." he said.

He could've spent some more time in the swamp if he wanted, but he still had to work in the forge during the days – not to mention brewing more Aurora Dew for the three of them. It would probably serve him better to get himself some sleep.

Percy took a few breaths, gathering mana for Synchronization, when Micky stopped him.

"Leave it…" he said, activating his own boosting art.

“Thanks.” Percy said, waving him farewell as he turned away.

He heard the sound of wood breaking, as Micky disposed of the evidence of his runecrafting training. On the way to the town, Percy couldn’t help but throw a glance at the eastern side of the swamp, contemplating a certain rumour he’d heard from the townsfolk. Apparently, a tribe of trolls lived inside the furthest reaches of the Grisly Bog.

Trolls were semi-sentient creatures, much like the wood goblins he had encountered before. Though they were much larger and fiercer. They tended to be born at Orange more often too. Naturally, they still weren’t a match for Percy, nor would they make particularly good meals for his familiar, but that wasn’t what interested him.

‘Should I try making clones out of them?’

Semi-sentients – or demi-humans as they were often referred on Remior – had drawn the short end of the cosmic stick. Smack in the middle between beasts and sentients, they were cursed with the worst aspects of both worlds. They lacked the miraculous affinity that gave beasts their strength, and also the intelligence to make proper use of the other mana types.

However, they were in many ways perfect for Percy’s current needs. Sporting humanoid bodies, developed vocal cords, opposable thumbs, Orange cores, and elemental affinities, he would have an endless array of decent hosts to take to the Vault. Even better, he could pick and choose the best ones, selecting affinities that suited him – a luxury he wasn’t used to. That ought to give him a leg up in the combat challenges.

‘There are plenty of problems with that idea though…’

If he did this, he would be missing out on the chance of stumbling upon something valuable out there. Everything his clones had ever brought back had been a pure coincidence, so he didn’t want to stop rolling the dice on that. After all, he hadn’t forgotten about the Rings of Sacrilege, nor the powerful Decrees waiting for him all over the universe.

And then, there was the issue with opening a portal on Remior. While he was 90% certain that Metatron had no intention, nor the ability to do anything untoward, he wasn’t comfortable taking that risk.

Perhaps, he might have – had it just been his own life on the line – but he'd never forgive himself if he ended up dooming his friends and family out of greed.

'Let's not... though it's still worth paying the trolls a visit at some point.'

If he got lucky, one of them might have an interesting affinity for him to play around with. So far, all his clones had ended up with common ones, which he felt was a waste of his bloodline's potential. At the very least, it would serve him well to understand how some of the more exotic mana types worked, in case he ran into another enemy like that time mage.

Reaching the town, he made sure nobody was up as he snuck into the house, trying not to wake Nesha. She was sleeping on her bed – they'd managed to buy a couple old ones – though the single room in their house was starting to look a little cramped. At least, they didn't have many possessions, and the hut's convenient location meant they could relieve themselves outside.

Still, being a hybrid between a bedroom and a blacksmithing workshop, it was impossible for Nesha to sleep while Percy worked. The heat from the furnace took hours to disperse afterwards too.

'We should expand the house a little at some point…'

Picking a bucket of water, he stepped outside before dousing himself, trying to get rid of some of the swamp's stench. Then he took his boots off, jumping into his own bed. Next, he groaned, calculating he only had a couple hours left until daybreak.

'Uuugghh… so much for taking it easy this time…'

Chapter 142: War

Elaine was trekking through the Whistling Woods with a few others. The soft tunes of the oblong cones were more than a little nostalgic. They made her think back fondly to that time with Percy all those years ago. She hadn't been here all that much since then…

'Those were some peaceful times…' she sighed.

Sadly, she wasn't in the mood to appreciate the forest's serene beauty today. Unlike that day's pilgrimage, their current mission was far more dangerous, a palpable tension settling between the members of their small group. There were only four of them, each being an elite of the family.

"Uncle, do you think they will really attack?" she asked.

Elaine was certain Galahad had heard her, but the man didn't bother replying, focused on scanning the area ahead with his Mana Sense. Instead, it was his son who answered.

"You worry too much cousin." Mordred's lips parted in his usual grin. "There's no way those Tantalus bastards will pass this opportunity to strike."

While Elaine had never liked the boy much – he was an arrogant asshole like his father – she nodded, concentrating on the substance of his words. They were currently tasked with meeting a group of relatives at the other end of the forest, to escort them back to the mansion.

One of House Avalon's most lucrative businesses was lending some of their life users to other affiliated families, to serve as healers for some time. After all, their near monopoly on the affinity was much sought after, letting them earn most of their revenue this way.

As for the hunting missions the rest of them – like Elaine – undertook, they only made peanuts by comparison. Those were mostly meant for their members to gain combat experience, not to make money. And, given House Tantalus's aggression over the past couple of years, there was no doubt in Archibald's mind the rival family would try targeting those very healers, to deal a major blow to their coffers.

"What if they're expecting us?" she asked again.

Besides protecting the healers, their secondary objective was to intercept the attackers, dealing a blow of their own to House Tantalus. This was how the war manifested these days, with the two families seeking opportunities to gnaw at each other's forces.

It was Galahad who replied this time.

“Of course they are. If they have half a brain, that is. It doesn’t matter.”

While her uncle and cousin’s optimism was somewhat contagious, Elaine wasn’t entirely convinced their confidence was warranted. It was true the two of them were some of the most talented Yellow-borns in the family, despite their common affinity and lack of a bloodline. Still, they had no idea how many people their enemies had sent.

Overall, House Avalon had a slight advantage in the total number of Blues and Greens, but their members were spread thinner, as their side of the province was about 40% larger, and they had a third town to look after. Consequently, Archibald was more conservative when assigning people to missions, unwilling to leave any important locations vulnerable.

‘Depending on who they’ve sent, we could get in trouble.’ she thought grimly. But she kept that to herself, not wanting to impact everyone’s morale.

“Don’t be so tense.” her dad spoke, echoing the others’ words.

Gawain was the fourth and final member of their team – the only Orange-born. While he was the same grade as her and Mordred, he had a few more decades of experience under his belt. Next, he patted her on the shoulder before continuing.

“Your grandpa knows what he’s doing. If he’s only sent the four of us, it means we can handle whoever comes. We’ll definitely win.”

Hearing her father’s reassurance, she nodded. Him, she trusted. Her grandpa too. If they believed they were enough, they had to be.

Soon, they reached the designated spot. The healers wouldn’t arrive for a few more hours, so their job was to secure the area by then. They all double-checked their concealment bandages were in place, as they covertly scoured the perimeter, ensuring that their enemies had yet to get there.

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Elaine was torn, unsure whether it was best to get attacked before or after the healers arrived. On one hand, the healers could give them the edge, supporting them as they fought against House Tantalus's mages. However, it could also be inconvenient to protect their weaker relatives in the midst of combat.

Either way, they didn't get a choice in the matter. Just half an hour later, a snarky voice echoed through the woods, piercing through the cacophony of the whistling cones.

"Well, well… It seems Archibald has finally made a mistake." a man said gleefully, his words sounding like nails against a chalkboard. "Only a Blue and three Greens? House Avalon is in for a rough week."

The bastards didn't even bother hiding, facing their group head on. They had two Blues and five Greens in their ranks, outnumbering them nearly 2:1. Both of their Blues had the bloodline too, their sickly faces making them look even more frightening than they normally would have.

"Me and Mordred will fight two people each. As for you and your daughter, you're going to keep the other three occupied until we're done." Galahad told Gawain, his tone not leaving much room for debate.

Elaine's heart sank, fearing for her dad's life above all else. The image of her newborn brother quickly flashed by her eyes.

'No. I'll be damned if I let Owain grow up without a father.' she decided resolutely.

Suddenly, two waves slammed onto them, making it hard to breathe. These weren't spells, however – there was no mana fuelling them. Just somebody's presence. The Blues'. While each promotion typically strengthened a mage's body and magic by three times, some additional changes came into play once somebody reached the higher grades. That made the gap between Blues and Greens even wider than expected. Elaine didn't fully understand how this ability worked, but it was unique to Blues and above.

Just when she felt like she was about to pass out, a third presence emerged, pushing back against the others, forcing their suffocating auras to recede. Elaine gasped heavily the first chance she got, noting that Galahad's presence was even sharper than his opponents'. He'd certainly beat either of them, if they were to fight separately.

‘But will he be alright against both of them?’

It was hard to say. If he lost, the other fights wouldn’t even matter. Conversely, if the Greens finished first, they could intervene to tip the scales.

Either way, the time for thoughts was over.

The two Blues launched an apocalyptic spell each, aiming at her uncle. The first one exhaled a blazing cloud, wide enough to burn a house to cinders. As for the second, he shot a rain of stone arrows through the cloud, their tips hot-red by the time the emerged from the other side.

Yet Galahad was unfazed. Not missing a beat, he sent forth an indigo flash with a wave of his hand, a bright bolt slamming into the first of the enemies’ projectiles. It moved too fast for her to fully grasp, but it seemed to zig and zag between the rest of the arrows, shattering them into sand one after the other.

‘His control is insane!’ she thought, gaining some new respect for the man.

A fraction of a second later, the light sank into the expanding flame, causing it to explode, a violent shockwave knocking all eight Greens off their feet. Only the Blues remained upright, the two sides staring at each other as the smell of charcoal and ozone permeated the area.

The first of the Blues clicked his tongue, realizing this wouldn’t be as easy of a fight as he’d thought. At the same time, Galahad tossed his son a quick glance, pointing at two of the enemy Greens, getting a nod back. Mordred summoned two indigo javelins in his hands. They paled in comparison to his father’s, but the young man stared at his opponents with the same nonchalance.

Next, he aimed at them, before launching his spells by their feet, forcing them back. They responded with a few attacks of their own, as the three of them inched away from the apocalyptic battlefield of their superiors.

Following their lead, Elaine exchanged a glance with Gawain, as the two put some distance from the Blues too. As for the remaining three Greens, they chased them into the woods like a pack of ravenous wolves. Clearly, everyone was on the same page, nobody willing to stay anywhere close to the ancient monsters longer than they had to.

It wasn't until they were about a mile away that all five of them stopped. Elaine briefly considered continuing to run, to keep their pursuers busy without a fight, but she quickly shook her head. If they refused to engage them, their opponents would just return to aid their leaders.

"Elaine." Gawain spoke softly. "If something happens to me, I want you to run straight to the mansion, and not even look back."

She opened her mouth to protest. Her unwillingness to abandon her father aside, she couldn't betray the others. While she'd never much liked Galahad or Mordred, they were counting on her!

Seeing her struggle, Gawain chuckled, probably guessing what she was thinking. He was good at that. He patted her shoulder again, before speaking one more time.

"In the worst-case scenario, Galahad will be able to escape. He's faster than them, and he's more valuable to the family than any of us. He won't let himself die. Though I doubt the boy will survive if it comes to that. Promise me you won't throw your life away over nothing."

Elaine gritted her teeth, but she nodded in the end. Turning to face their opponents, she saw two of them lick their lips, a lecherous expression plastered all over their ugly mugs as they ogled her. They were already drawing mana from their cores, as was she and her father, all five combatants beginning to manifest their spells.

'Then, I suppose we can't afford to lose...'

Chapter 143: Waves

Only one of the Greens had the bloodline. Not that it mattered much as neither Elaine nor Gawain had an easy time approaching their enemies. A long trail of flames swam through the air, resembling an earthworm, burning holes through the trees' trunks wherever it passed. It chased the two of them without pause, forcing them to keep evading. Whenever it got too close, Elaine chopped it to pieces with her whips, but the fire mage kept pouring mana into the spell. It also didn't help they had the stalagmites to worry about.

"Careful!" Gawain warned, Elaine sidestepping the emerging construct at the last second.

Earth magic was generally slower than other types, but it had its own perks. Beside the fact that the spells were heavier and thus harder to block, it allowed its users to perform deadly sneak attacks by sending their mana through the ground. It travelled a little faster like that too. Elaine's elders had long drilled into her that she was supposed to keep a safe distance from an earth mage, constantly having her Mana Sense glued to the ground while fighting one.

'We'll never get close like this…' she smiled bitterly.

Both her and Gawain's spells worked better at medium range, their whips currently unable to reach their opponents. Between the stalagmites and the fire worms, they struggled to catch their breath too. As for the last guy, he hadn't broken a sweat. He was also an earth mage, but he had only created a single stone golem so far. It was twice as tall as a person, towering over them as it stood guard by their side, ready to block the occasional splash of water that made it there.

'They're more skilled than me too.' she realized.

Their opponents were probably Orange-borns over sixty years old – much like her father – as evident by their slightly older appearance and the finesse of their Refined spells. At least, that was the case for the fire worm dude and the golem guy. The last one was probably a Yellow-born about her age, his stalagmites hardly beyond the threshold of a Crude spell.

Strictly speaking, this was acceptable. Galahad had merely tasked them with keeping the three Greens busy. They didn't have to win. However, Elaine just couldn't shake her worry.

"Will he and Mordred really manage to win their own fights?"

If they failed, none of them would survive today. Not to mention, her current situation wasn't exactly sustainable. Her mana was running out faster than their opponents'. Realizing what she was thinking, her dad spoke.

"Chop a tree down for me, will you?" he whispered as soon as they were out of sight. "I'm going to try something."

Nodding, she sent a crescent slash of azure at the nearest trunk, slicing through the wood like a hot knife through butter. The two leapt back as the tree landed with a heavy thud, sending some dirt in every direction. Ignoring the mud on his clothes, Galahad then summoned a whip of his own, causing it to wrap around the trunk many times, covering it from tip to tip like a yarn stick, shaving it clean of branches and twigs in the process.

“Protect me for a couple seconds.” he instructed.

More hostile spells rained at them, forcing Elaine to spend even more mana to block them. She dismantled the incoming worms, while also digging through the ground to get to the nascent stalagmites before they formed. Of course, this move cost her a lot more than merely dodging. Her reserves had already dropped below the halfway mark by now…

At least, her father didn’t delay, launching his own attack a moment later.

Pulling the tree up, he threw it the opposite way from his enemies, as the aquamarine band stretched and tensed, looking like it was about to snap. But it held. Next, he tugged it with all his might, his brow creasing as the trunk began to spin, gaining momentum. The coil of water unravelled rapidly, chunks of bark flying in all directions as the colossal spear of wood drilled through the air.

Gawain was the one who’d taught Elaine the Whip spell in the first place, though his own version had developed in a slightly different route. Unlike the sharp, slicing constructs his daughter used, Gawain’s version focused on precise control and leveraging mechanical strength. Usually, he used it to entangle and trap his opponents, but that wasn’t all it could do….

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Soon, the attack reached their opponents, the golem guy moving his construct in its path. The stone giant clasped the incoming tree with both hands, as a second golem began to take shape right behind it. Splinters of wood and chips of rock flew in every direction, as the spinning trunk dug into the golem’s chest, pushing it back. Its feet carved two muddy trails on the ground, before the second golem finally formed, supporting its broken brother, bringing him to a halt.

Elaine grimaced as Gawain clicked his tongue. This manoeuvre had cost them both way too much, for way too little. But they didn't get the chance to worry about that for long, as the others continued pelting their location with spells.

'There's no other way.' Elaine made her mind up as she took a deep breath, and then another.

Ever since she mastered Circulation, she had actually never used it in a fight. Not even once. Her fear of bringing trouble to her family aside, this was Percy's secret. She'd been conscious not to resort to it unless she was backed to a corner. Sadly, the day for that seemed to have finally arrived…

Oblivious to her thoughts, both their opponents and Gawain continued to duke it out, as a river of mana flooded her channels. It was an odd sensation, the intensity of the flow causing her pathways to swell and burn, while the refreshing coolness of the water mana soothed them at the same time. Honestly, she was a little rusty, as it had been months since the last time she'd practiced it. Still, she vividly remembered the pattern she had so painstakingly devised. Aquamarine lines soon lit up all over her skin, drawing shapes akin to waves in their passing. Her muscles tensed too, her spells growing a touch more potent.

"Elaine? What is this?!" Gawain asked, taken aback by the sight.

Naturally, she hadn't even told her parents about the technique. While she loved them and trusted them more than anyone else in the world, this wasn't her secret to spill.

'I'm sorry Percy.' a pang of guilt gripped her chest, but she quickly shook those thoughts away.

In any case, she knew he wouldn't blame her. After all, this was a matter of life and death. Besides, Gawain wouldn't leak the news. The only thing she had to worry about was making sure nobody else would.

The enemy spells intensified as they also realized something was wrong, but it was too late. Having left any lingering concerns over her dwindling reserves long behind her, she summoned five whips in each hand, ripping the blazing worm to shreds. At the same time, she carved deep grooves through the dirt, uprooting the earth mana before it had the chance to do much.

Step by step, she accelerated as she dashed toward her opponents, unwilling to let any of them escape. Her father advanced right alongside her, struggling a little to keep up with her speed. Their enemies seemed to hesitate at last, finally realizing just how fucked they were.

Suddenly, the stalagmite boy bolted off, abandoning his elders!

“Dad, stop him! We can’t let him live!” she yelled in panic.

Though she didn’t have to. Gawain was already one step ahead, having rushed after the kid before she’d even uttered a word.

The remaining two mages glanced at each other, probably contemplating their options. Though they stayed in the end. They must’ve determined their best chance was to work together to take her down. The first one repaired both golems, using what little mana he had left to summon a third. At the same time, the fire mage formed about a dozen worms, all of them diving towards Elaine from various directions, closing in like a devil’s claws.

But she didn’t care.

Pivoting on her feet, she spun as she neared her enemies. Her whips grew longer and sharper, making shrill sounds as they sliced and diced everything in their path. Whether it was trees, rocks or spells, it didn’t matter, as the Kraken’s Gambit shredded everything indiscriminately. Mundane specks of brown and grey fell on the ground, as glowing motes of orange faded into nothing.

‘I’m sorry…’ she closed her eyes upon reaching her targets, two bitter streams rolling down her cheeks.

She knew it was ill-advised to look away during a fight, but she just couldn’t help it. This wasn’t the first time she’d killed somebody – this disgusting war had already forced her to take many lives over the past couple of years – but it never got any easier for her.

Leaving only her Mana Sense active, she first watched the remaining constructs get chopped to pieces, before seeing the two Green cores fall on the ground. A moment later, they had already begun to dim. Only then did she deactivate her boosting art, turning away, unable to look at the mangled corpses.

Her father returned a minute later. His core was nearly empty, but she could tell through the calmness in his expression that he'd managed to eliminate the last guy. The frightened kid had probably been a poor match for the more experienced mage.

Of course, she didn't miss the questions lingering in Gawain's eyes, but he didn't say anything. They both knew this wasn't the time for that. The two of them embraced each other in silence, as they caught their breath, preparing to aid their relatives.

'I hope they're ok…'

Chapter 144: Two things

Archibald contemplated the latest reports as he radiated dense life mana from his palm, focusing it on his son's stump. Even for a powerful Violet core, regrowing a Blue's arm would take several hours. And that was taking into account his more sophisticated approach, chiselled to perfection after centuries of healing people. Blindly pouring mana into a wound like a brute would still work, but it would take so much longer.

"How did the other fronts go?" Galahad asked, not even flinching at the excruciating pain as his flesh and bones squirmed.

"About as well as you'd expect."

When forming the group of four for the escort mission, Archibald had naturally given himself some leeway, in case House Tantalus sent more people than expected. Originally, he'd thought Galahad and Mordred would be plenty to deal with any complications. Still, he'd underestimated how keen their enemies had been to get to the healers.

'I suppose it makes sense.'

Life users were their family's greatest strength, as well as a huge thorn in their rivals' sides. Not to mention the two women in the group of healers those degenerates wanted to place their filthy hands on.

Luckily, House Tantalus had failed in the end. Their Blues did manage to escape with their lives, but their injuries were no better than Galahad's. Even with Drain, they'd need longer to fix them – not to mention how many lives they'd have to take. As for their Greens, all five were dead.

'Sending Elaine was the right move.'

While he'd hoped it wouldn't come to that, Archibald had sent his granddaughter to serve as a final trump card, just in case things went south. He knew the girl could turn the tides in a pinch, though that had come with its own cost. Now Gawain had learned of Circulation too.

It wasn't the end of the world – Archibald trusted this son of his – but this was how it started. What if two years from now Gawain was forced to reveal it to save somebody else? They could try all they wanted to keep a lid on the secret, but their family had already existed for centuries, and they very much hoped it would continue to do so for many more.

'Sooner or later, everyone will know it… And then, it can easily leak out…'

But what choice did they have? Should Elaine have allowed everyone to die? What if Galahad had died too? That would have been a catastrophic blow to their House.

'What's done is done. The best we can do now is to slow down the leakage until Galahad reaches Violet.'

Very few Houses had two Violet cores, so this should place them in the top twenty about a century from now. Adding Circulation to the mix, and only the Great Houses or the Divine Order would be able to pressure them into handing the technique over. There wasn't much they could do about that, but they'd be in a better position to negotiate an acceptable deal, to fend the weaker families off until Archibald reached White.

'In fact, I should probably teach him Circulation too.' he decided.

His successor's life was almost as valuable as the secret itself. After all, should he die, or should the secret leak before his promotion, their entire House would face annihilation…

“How many casualties on their side?” Galahad asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“A dozen Greens and twenty Yellows.”

House Tantalus had chosen to weaken their position in many other contested locations, to gather enough people to send on the ambitious mission. Other than the five Greens who had died in the Whistling Woods, the rival family had ended up suffering many more losses for their greed.

“That ought to douse their aggression for a few months.” Galahad nodded.

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But Archibald clenched his fist, not feeling happy about it at all. Indeed, they’d come out on top this time, but this constant tit-for-tat had taken many lives on their side too. If this continued, they’d lose half their people by the time the lotus bloomed.

‘If only I could just march in there and kill them all!’

Archibald was much stronger than the enemy leader, Broteas. He was confident in killing him in a frontal confrontation, along with many of his men. But could he take the whole family out without leaving a single witness behind? Probably not.

Moreover, Violet cores couldn’t easily leave their homes. After all, they were the last line of defence protecting the children and the non-combatants of the family. The massacre twenty or so years ago had happened precisely when House Tantalus had lured Archibald away from the mansion. Not that he’d had much of a choice at the time, as they could have easily lost two Blues had he not done that.

“It won’t.” Archibald said. “They’ll keep throwing everything they have at us. They know how much stronger you’ll become once you get a petal.”

Galahad was arguably the strongest Blue core in the entire Camelot province. Suffice to say, House Avalon would benefit more from the lotus than their rivals. This was something they were all keenly aware of.

“Speaking of which, we have yet to discuss what to do with the remaining two petals.” Galahad said, changing the topic.

Archibald could already guess what his son wanted. Naturally, he intended for all three petals to end in the hands of Yellow-borns, as they had the highest long-term potential. House Avalon currently possessed seven Blues, but one of them was an Orange-born – Archibald’s younger cousin, Accolon. Of the remaining six, four had the life affinity and one already had water. This only left Galahad as a candidate for a petal. Consequently, the other two would have to go to Greens.

“Your son will naturally get a petal.”

Mordred was just as talented as his father – perhaps even more so. At least, the boy had handled his own opponents even better than his father had dealt with his. He was arguably the strongest Green in the family – on par with Elaine when she used her boosting art. Not that anyone knew about that, but she couldn’t use a petal anyway.

“Of course.” Galahad chuckled. “I was talking about the last one. Maybe Emrys or Morgana? I could make a strong case for either of them.”

But Archibald shook his head, eliciting a frown from his son. He’d allowed this injustice to persist for long enough. Circulation was the pillar their family would be relying on for a long time to come, and the boy who’d brought them this gift had yet to be properly compensated for his contribution.

In fact, Archibald was currently worried about his grandson, as they hadn’t heard from him in months. The more time that passed, the more scared he grew that Percy was indeed involved with the Aurora Dew. Of course, it was possible the chaos in the Guild had simply prevented him from writing back.

Either way, he wasn’t going to let the boy miss out on this opportunity.

“I actually had somebody else in mind…” he grinned.

“Oh?”

“I’ll tell you after I’m done fixing your arm. You might have put on a brave face against the pain, but this… it just might make you pass out.”

***

“Father, you can’t be serious! What madness compels you to continuously give that runt so much?!” Galahad asked in outrage as they walked down the corridor.

Archibald opened the door to the same training room he and his grandkids had used a few years back, leading his son inside. Next, he tossed him some enchanted bands to place on his wrists and ankles, before replying.

“That’s why I brought you here, son. To show you.” he said, taking a deep breath, and then another.

Galahad’s expression was initially one of anger and confusion, though his features soon began to shift into shock as he watched the verdant lines swirl like vines on his father’s skin. Archibald’s sternum thrummed with an intensity no Violet core had any right to.

“I can see you have many questions.” Archibald said with a smile, getting a nod back.

“Naturally, I’ll answer them all, but I’ll need you to do two things for me. First, you’ll bow your head and apologize to your nephew the next time you see him, for the way you’ve treated him.”

Galahad opened his mouth, seemingly about to protest, but Archibald raised a hand to stop him.

“And I’ll apologize alongside you. After all, it’s HIS technique I’m about to teach you without his permission.”

This time, Galahad’s eyes widened in realization.

“Does this have something to do with his bloodline? Is this why you’ve been treating him so generously?”

“Generously?” Archibald chuckled bitterly. “We’ve driven him out of the mansion, sending him to fend for himself in the Alchemists’ Guild. Not a day goes by that I don’t regret it. And for what?! Because we were too stingy to give him a few elixirs?”

“Father… Just what does his bloodline do exactly?”

“You’ll have to ask him yourself. He’ll tell you if he wants to.”

Galahad remained silent for a while. While he was generally a proud man, and not very kind towards those he viewed as his lessers, he was neither ungrateful, nor stupid. He certainly understood Percy’s importance now.

“What’s the second thing?” Galahad asked after a while.

“Hm?”

“You said you wanted me to do two things. The first was to apologize to the kid.”

“Ah right!” Archibald said, only now remembering why he’d brought him here.

“Get down and start doing push-ups.”

Chapter 145: Caught

Percy scanned the sea of souls, looking for his next host. Having grown more proficient at drawing the concealment runes, he was ready to return to the Vault for his next lesson.

Initially, he’d thought to look for an Orange or Green body this time. According to Gabe, higher grade challenges yielded exponentially more credits, and those were the two grades he had personally experienced – so he’d have some idea of what to expect.

But he'd changed his mind.

Realistically, he doubted he'd even get through the first wave of the combat challenges with a beast clone. They were tough, even for mages with bloodlines and blessings. Let alone for somebody who couldn't cast a single spell.

'My only chance to earn some credits is to grind my way up from the Red magiscript challenge.'

The rewards would be minuscule at the start, but if his budding understanding of runecrafting could get him through the first couple of waves, he should manage to purchase some more reading material. Enough for him to keep going.

He did consider asking his friend for a loan, but he quickly shot the idea down. He'd already imposed on Gabe way too much. The guy had his own problems to deal with – whether it was his gruesome injuries, the two cores he had to support, his own training, or his worry over his future in the artificial world. It might take Percy a little longer, but he wanted to stand on his own two feet.

'Or however many feet I end up with, I suppose…'

In any case, Percy was trying to pick between two Red beasts, when something else caught his attention.

'What the hell is that?!' he wondered, glancing at a strange Yellow soul different from any he had seen before.

Percy was pretty confident it wasn't on its deathbed. He had sent enough clones by now to tell that this person was essentially healthy. Yet, somehow, they were not rejecting him, radiating a powerful attractive force instead! In fact, it was almost like they were intentionally inviting him to possess them!

Curious, he approached. This was obviously suspicious, but he'd never seen anything like this and, in his experience, new was good. Soon, several more souls popped up in his surroundings. Most of them appeared normal, but a significant fraction behaved exactly like the first one. They 'looked' wounded, though it was as if their injuries were artificially exaggerated. It reminded Percy of chumming the waters to lure a fish in.

Part of him wanted to bolt. He had no idea what was up with this place, but he had a gut feeling that remaining here could spell trouble. Still, he hesitated to peer away. This was unlike anything he'd encountered before. He'd never even heard of anybody who could interact with the plane of souls like him, yet this seemed like an entire culture of people who regularly did just that – to some extent.

'Do they all have a soul affinity?!'

It was a bizarre thought. From what he'd seen, his affinity was one of the rarest. At least, he'd never met anyone else with it. But the idea that some race of people could be born with a disproportional proclivity towards a specific affinity wasn't new to him. Everyone on Huehue was stuck with the pure affinity. Even his family's bloodline affected his relatives in a similar manner, giving many of them the life affinity.

'Well, now what do I do?'

This could easily be some kind of trap, but it was also a unique opportunity. Whatever these people were after was probably unrelated to him. After all, he doubted another wanderer existed, otherwise Metatron wouldn't have been so keen to recruit him.

'I could play it safe and go for an Orange host…'

The good news was that he had a lot of options. He spotted people all the way from Red to Yellow in this state. A Red host might be too weak to get much done with. They might not even know anything useful for him to learn. Conversely, a powerful one could be difficult to deal with if they ended up being hostile.

Fuelled to the brim with teal mana, he estimated an Orange core was about the most he could safely handle. If they proved to have malicious intentions towards him, he should be able to fight his way out of the body. Happy with his analysis, he was about to go for it, when he felt a piercing pain in his "side" as something slammed into him like a cannonball.

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‘What the fuck?!’ he cursed in shock, trying to extricate himself from his aggressor.

Whatever it was, it had chomped down on his soul, showing no intention of letting go. The creature thrashed about, trying to tear a chunk off. The pain was excruciating, though he could handle that, having experienced many gruesome injuries with his soul over the years. Percy was more unsettled by the principle behind this situation – if not downright frightened. He’d never met another soul in the space between worlds, much less one capable of attacking him!

Forcing himself to calm down, he drew some of the fused mana, stabbing right into the creature’s maw with a hastily made knife. It seemed to do something as the monster shuddered, its jaw opening slightly, easing the pain on his soul a little. Though it refused to let go entirely.

Stubborn as he was, Percy didn’t give up either, pushing the construct even deeper in, trying to locate its brain – assuming it even had one. At first, it didn’t do anything, but he continued to stab around blindly, trying to fend the monster off.

‘If only I could see what the hell I was dealing with!’

Sadly, this wasn’t an option. Strictly speaking, he wasn’t even sure it was a living creature. It definitely seemed to behave like one, but it might just be a spell, cast by the residents of the mysterious world.

One clone and one disembodied monster fought for what felt like hours, with their survival on the line, as Percy expended more and more of his stashed mana, inflicting all sorts of nasty wounds on his attacker. To his relief, the abomination eventually let go. Perhaps, he’d weakened it, or maybe it had decided its meal wasn’t worth the hassle. ***r***

Either way, Percy wasn’t exactly in the mood to celebrate. By now, he was down to a third of his reserves, his soul wisp severely injured. The ethereal cord linking him to his main body was already pulling at him intensely. Perhaps, he’d spent way too long in this place, or maybe it was his poor condition cutting his trip short. Whatever the case, he had to make a decision, and he had to do it fast.

‘Do I return to Remior, or give this place a shot?’

Worst-case scenario, he'd get himself destroyed. It would certainly be unpleasant for him, but it honestly wouldn't be the end of the world for his main body. While he'd lose the clone's memories, the original Percy would be fine. He was confident he would recover completely given some time.

Technically, there was a chance he'd permanently lose another chunk, but he seriously doubted that was the case. The scar in his sternum had probably remained because of the ethereal cord linking him to his familiar. If the clone got destroyed entirely, the wound would likely close.

'Even if I end up trapped, I can probably self-destruct with what little mana I have left.'

Just as he was contemplating his choices, two more creatures bit at him, shaking him out of his thoughts. At first, he panicked, thinking he couldn't possibly deal with them in his current state. However, he soon realized they were much smaller than the last one.

'No. You fucking don't!!'

Expelling another costly burst of mana, he cleaved the creatures right off him, leaving his stash down to a fifth of his original reserves. It wouldn't be enough to fix a regular host, but these people didn't seem like they'd need too many patches.

'To hell with it, I'll do it!'

Having decided to take a gamble, he rushed towards the nearest soul he could find. The first two were completely healthy, only the third one being in this peculiar condition. It was at Yellow – stronger than he had initially planned for – but he no longer had the luxury to delay. More monsters could attack any moment now. And he sorely lacked the means to defend himself for a third time.

The strange soul enlarged in his vision, as he finally escaped to "safety", finding himself in the somewhat familiar position inside somebody's body. Though he felt extremely crammed this time, his soul wisp having to squeeze to a fraction of its size to fit. The cracks in this person's soul were tiny, not leaving him any space to move.

Suddenly, he felt something pushing him in a certain direction. It was as if he was clogging a narrow pipe, and somebody was filling one end with water. Though it wasn't water – it was something else he recognized.

'Soul mana!'

But he couldn't control it, as it clearly belonged to somebody else, filled to the brim with their willpower. Without his core, he couldn't replace it with his own.

The mana continued to push, as the friction against the pipe's walls hurt him, scraping chunks of his soul away from him. He was about to beg his host to stop whatever it was they were doing, when he finally popped out one end, finding himself inside a slightly larger space. It was still small, but at least it didn't hurt as much to be there. It contained even more soul mana than the pipe, his host finally allowing it to flood Percy, soothing his injuries slightly.

'Am I inside this person's mana core?!'

His connection to his new host was significantly weaker than any of his previous ones, as he hadn't interfaced with their soul as much, and thus couldn't tap into their body, nor their senses. A few seconds later, his host spoke to somebody, their words inadvertently seeping into Percy's mind. At least, the connection seemed to bundle the words with their corresponding meaning, allowing him to understand them – a minor convenience in an otherwise shitty situation.

The voice sounded female, but he wasn't sure how well his preconceived notions translated to the natives.

"Dad! It worked! I've caught one!"

Chapter 146: Spectral fiend

Percy listened to the girl talk to her father for a while, trying to piece together the situation from her words alone. Sadly, he couldn't tap into her ears due to their weaker connection, so he couldn't access the man's side of the conversation.

Apparently, she was under the impression she had captured a kind of creature she referred to as a "spectral fiend". Percy couldn't be certain, but he strongly suspected the monsters that had attacked him in the vicinity of this world fell in that category. It was quite eye-opening, as he hadn't even known soul-based entities existed out there, roaming the universe. He guessed they were relatively scarce, as that would explain why he'd never encountered any, but he did make a mental note to be more careful from now on.

'So, these people are intentionally injuring themselves and leaking soul mana from their bodies, to lure the creatures and trap them in their cores…'

That still didn't explain what they planned to do with the fiend once they caught one, nor why they had failed to identify him as something else. Perking up, he continued following the conversation, hoping for some answers.

"No, I don't think it has four heads..." she said with some disappointment evident in her voice. "Let me check again real quick."

A wave of mana brushed over Percy, though it felt different than before. The mana had purpose behind it, seemingly scanning his soul for something rather than blindly accumulating in his wounds to mend them. This only confirmed his guess that the natives knew a lot of valuable soul spells he could learn. Granted, he had to get out of this mess first.

"Er… I'm not sure what it is. It doesn't have a defined appearance. It's more of a blob. Maybe it's damaged?" she wondered.

Percy would have rolled his eyes if he had any. Of course he was "damaged"! He was just a soul clone – a severed piece of his main body's soul! Not to mention all the other crap he'd endured over the last few hours.

Though he focused on the other thing the girl had said. Apparently, there was more than one type of spectral fiend. She and her father were currently trying to identify which one she'd captured.

"You're right. Whatever it is, it's not like I have a choice anyway. I'll try absorbing it." she said, shocking Percy.

‘Wh-What?! Absorb me?! That’s not what I signed up for!’

Panicking, he reached out to the walls of her core, trying to strengthen his connection to her, as more mana began accumulating around him, preparing for some intricate spell.

‘Wait! Whatever you’re doing, stop!!’ he yelled, hoping she could hear him.

Luckily, he seemed to have gotten through to her, as she hesitated, the spell fizzling out before it even formed.

“You can speak?!” she asked in disbelief. “No, not you dad! The fiend – I know it’s crazy, but I think it just talked to me!”

Capitalizing on this, Percy hurriedly reached out again.

‘Yes! I’m not sure what these fiends are, but I’m not one of them! I’m a person like you, from a faraway place. I ended up in your body by… accident.’ he replied, choosing his words carefully.

“Nice try buddy, but I’m not buying it.” the girl said, dashing his hopes. “It’s saying it’s not a fiend, though it HAS to be lying, right? How else would I have captured it?”

It was annoying, but Percy had no idea how to explain himself. He hadn’t spotted any souls above Yellow back when he was observing this world. Clearly, they didn’t have any means of advancement, which meant they didn’t have any gods either. Suffice to say, they couldn’t produce any Decrees, so they wouldn’t know what a bloodline was.

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Still, he tried.

‘Look, I have no idea what your goal is, but it won’t work. You’ll just hurt both of us, as I’m NOT a fiend! Why don’t you play it safe and just let me go? You can always capture another one later! You might even end up with that four-headed one you wanted!’

“That’s not how it works...” she sighed. “We don’t get to choose what fiend we attract. The type is fixed for each person, as it has to do with the very nature of their soul. It doesn’t matter how many times I do this, I’ll only end up with more of you.”

‘Yeah… I sincerely doubt that.’ Percy wanted to bang his head against the wall. His host was stubborn as a mule. Grasping at straws, he tried offering an alternative.

“Why don’t you get somebody else to capture the type you want then? Isn’t it possible to pass the fiend over to you?”

“It doesn’t work.” she shot the idea down. “People have tried it, but it always ends badly. You’re only supposed to absorb the type that naturally comes to you. Anything else is incompatible. Suffice to say, the trait I’ll get after absorbing you is also fixed.”

The implications were interesting. It appeared the people of this world all shared the soul affinity, but that didn’t mean they had the same starting point. Other than the usual diversity of grade at birth, they apparently differed based on the type of fiend they could absorb. Percy still didn’t know what these traits did, but he could already imagine some were better than others, giving their owners an advantage over their peers.

‘I wonder if I can learn to absorb a fiend too with my main body…’

Oblivious to his thoughts, however, the girl stirred her mana up once more, clearly done talking. Percy wanted to swear. Technically, he had enough mana left to free himself if he really wanted. He was weaker than her – especially given the circumstances – but he was also right inside her most vulnerable spot.

Her core.

Spectral fiends were probably unable to fight back while trapped, as the natives' technique seemed to compress and distort one's body, robbing the creatures of their claws and fangs. That didn't apply to him, however. He was pretty sure he could still form a teal dagger to rip the girl's soul apart from within.

But he couldn't bring himself to do that. His host might be annoying, but she was just a dumb kid trying to get stronger. Murdering his way out was a bit much.

'Should I self-destruct?'

It would suck big time, but his main body would recover after a couple of months. Though he'd lose all his memories of this place.

Sadly, the girl didn't wait for him to decide. Suddenly, a powerful pressure descended on him from all directions, as the mana began to spin around him, grating his soul. With each revolution, he felt more pieces chip away, as his wisp continued to shrink, a wave of untold agony overcoming him.

'Fuuuuucckkk!' he screamed, as he forced himself to the core's walls. 'Stop this right now, or we'll both get hurt!' he warned, pulling all of his mana out, forging the thinnest needle he could manage.

But the girl ignored him, showing no intention of pausing. Left with no choice, Percy stabbed at her core, nicking it. This elicited a strong reaction from his host.

"Aaaahhh!! What are you doing?!" she shrieked.

Yet, she didn't stop, so neither did Percy. The relentless tornado of soul mana continued to peel layer after layer of his wisp off, as he left one scratch after another in her core. For now, the wounds wouldn't be lethal, but fuck if they didn't hurt!

Both parties stubbornly continued for several minutes, as Percy's soul shrunk to about a third of its original size.

'I can't keep this up…' he smiled bitterly.

If he kept hurting the girl, he might actually cause some permanent damage. There was also the question of what would happen to him if he allowed her to fully absorb him. He could already sense a faint ethereal cord beginning to coalesce. It was still just a pale imitation of the real connection he shared with his clones and Micky, but if this continued, his main body might end up with a slot permanently occupied by this random stranger.

Yet, just when he was about to turn his mana against himself to self-destruct, the spell finally halted.

“Ok…! I give up…! Just… stop this!” the girl cried amidst sobs.

Percy would have sighed in relief, though his situation was far from enviable. At this point, his thoughts were groggy, and his soul hurt all over. Hell, he didn’t even know if he’d survive the return trip like this.

‘Whatever… let’s just see what I’m dealing with here…’ he decided, pulling his Status up while still in contact with his host’s core. Though he ignored the usual suspects, focusing only on the important things.

Sol (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:

Spectral trait:

Chapter 147: Beacon

‘Holy shit… Whatever she did actually worked…’

Percy struggled to believe it, but the evidence was right there, in his Status. His host had actually obtained a trait from him! Did that mean his clone qualified as a spectral fiend?

It was bizarre, yet he wasn’t in the mood to think about it too deeply. The whole experience had left him tired and weak. He felt like he was about to pass out any moment now.

Suddenly, the soul mana in his surroundings stirred, carrying him in a certain direction. Squeezing through Sol's channels was still rather painful, but it wasn't as bad as before. He had already shrunk a great deal, so he didn't get compressed nearly as much. It didn't take much prodding for her to push him along the narrow tube, before expelling him from her body, stuffing him into another container. At least, this one was more spacious than her core…

'Wh-What are they doing?!' he wondered, but didn't have the strength to do much else.

He was no longer in contact with anybody's soul, so he couldn't even communicate with these people. His main body's pull was at an all-time high, but whatever they had placed him in prevented him from leaving. Out of options, he lashed out against the walls of his new abode, before his exhaustion won out, his consciousness fading to black.

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The next time he came to, he noted his condition was slightly better. He felt a steady supply of soul mana warming him up, gently licking his wounds, healing him slowly. That said, it would take years to restore him to his original state at this rate. At least, this arrangement kept him from degrading further.

'Hello?! Can anyone hear me?!' he asked, touching the walls of the container.

No reply. It didn't seem like he was inside a person this time.

'Well, I suppose it was a fun trip while it lasted… Or not really…' he sighed internally, checking his reserves.

Suffice to say, he barely had any mana left. He'd used most of it while fighting the spectral fiends before entering this world. Afterwards, he'd used whatever dregs had remained to forge that needle he'd stabbed Sol with. Though he did manage to recover some of that.

In theory, he could make something sharp with it to self-destruct. This promised to be a tedious, painful and messy task, but he should be able to do it with some effort, dismantling his clone one tiny piece at a time. That ought to free up the connection to his main body.

‘And all this because she couldn’t hold on for a couple minutes, to discuss things like a civilized person…’ he groaned in annoyance.

However, something happened when he thought back to the stubborn girl. It was strange, as he had none of his usual senses in this state, and the container even blocked his ability to feel injured souls in his vicinity. Yet, somehow, he could tell which way Sol was!

It wasn’t quite at the level of his connection to his main body or Micky though. If he had to describe it, this was more like a ‘nascent cord’, a step weaker than the real thing. He doubted they’d be able to communicate or transfer any mana through it.

‘Is this what the Status meant by “Beacon”?’

Was this half-baked connection Sol’s new trait?

Not the most optimal outcome for either of them. Once he destroyed his clone, the connection would probably be lost. He didn’t think it would get transferred to his main body. Even if it somehow did, would he be able to sense her location all the way from Remior? Without the clone’s memories, he wouldn’t even know about this place.

‘I don’t think it’s great for her either.’

The girl had made it clear she could only ever absorb a single fiend. He still wasn’t sure if this qualified, but it was entirely possible she had just wasted her only slot, filling it up with something useless.

‘Well… Not my problem…’

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Whatever the case was, she’d brought it upon herself. Percy was about to draw his fused mana out again, when the container shook.

“Ber kan il theig?”a female voice asked.

He recognized her, though she sounded a little muted compared to when he was inside her core. More importantly, he couldn’t understand the words like this.

‘I can hear you!’ he yelled back.

“Tam keliz!” she exclaimed.

She must’ve heard him, though she was talking to somebody else now. Her dad, probably.

“Ber kan il gimaz?” the vessel shook again as another voice spoke, this one male.

A few minutes and some more gibberish later, the three of them established they wouldn’t get anything done like this. Just when Percy thought they would release him, destroy him, or place him in some dusty cabinet and forget about him, he felt a powerful suction force pulling him out of the container. Soon, he was back in somebody’s mana channels, following the path to their core.

“I’m warning you! If you try anything funny again, I’m going to destroy you this time!” Sol spoke.

‘Warning ME?!’ Percy sneered. ‘Should I remind you who it was that tried to absorb me in the first place?’ he fired back.

At least, it was nice they could understand each other again.

“Look. We clearly got off on the wrong foot.” she sighed, taking a step back. “I’ll admit I shouldn’t have done that, as soon as you apologize for everything else.”

Her audacity left him speechless.

Still, rather than continuing the pointless argument, he figured it was more productive to move past it. Focusing on her words, he realized her tone was a lot different than before. During their previous interaction, she had acted all smug and entirely uninterested in hearing him out. Right now, things were different. While her half-assed apology left much to be desired, she appeared genuinely interested in mending the broken bridges. For some reason.

'What changed?' he cut to the chase, too tired to beat around the bush.

The girl exhaled in exasperation.

"I suppose you wouldn't know…" she said, before elaborating. "Naturally, every kid has some idea of what fiend they'd like to absorb, but like I've previously explained, that's not up to them. We're all stuck with whatever we happen to get."

'So?'

"So, our ancestors have long drilled into us the importance of accepting our trait regardless. Whether we like it or not, our most important job is to figure out how to make the most of it, to serve our society to the best of our ability. Refusing to do so is a big taboo."

Percy nodded, thinking they probably had some means of identifying their trait even without a Status.

"And what does that mean for you?" he asked again.

"What else?!" she snapped. "I'm stuck with the most useless trait ever! As far as I can tell, the only thing it does is letting you sense my location."

'I fail to see how that's my problem.'

"It's your problem, because it's now my civic duty to make YOU useful, somehow!"

'Not sure if you've noticed, but there isn't even that much of me left.'

Next, Percy explained how his clones worked. He talked about the many adventures he'd had, though he obviously left a few of the more sensitive things out. That said, he did make it clear just how many things he could teach her.

Of course, he had no intention of teaching her Circulation, nor did he know if they had any ingredients suitable for alchemy. Still, he didn't mind passing along Sengo's craft or showing her how to draw runes.

"So, you can hide your mana with this enchantment?! Our hunters will be able to sneak up to their prey more easily!" she whistled in appreciation. "Teach me!"

'Girl, you're not listening. The runes are too complicated to describe like this. I'll need to tap into your eyes and hands to demonstrate any of the things I've mentioned. Sadly, that's not an option right now.'

Percy had already tried to strengthen his connection to her, but it wasn't working.

"What if I let you return to your main body? Do you promise to come back after you recover?"

Percy didn't know whether to cry or laugh at her naivete. She'd trapped him, injured him, trapped him some more, and now she even wanted him to bend over backwards to serve her. But he swallowed the harsh words he was about to speak.

'I don't know if I can find the way here. It depends on how far that trait of yours can reach me. Either way, that's not the only problem. I won't survive the trip like this.'

Percy was confident he'd get eaten by a fiend long before he escaped this place. He was positively tiny, and without any means of defending himself. Hell, his soul might even crumble on its own on the way to Remior.

"Crap! Why does everything have to be so complicated?!" Sol groaned.

'Because of you…' Percy wanted to roll his eyes.

But he spoke again a few seconds later, offering a solution.

‘Listen. It’s not all bad. I won’t be able to escape as I am, but there might be a way for both of us to benefit.’

“How so?” she asked with some hope in her voice.

‘You’ll help me recover as much as possible and replenish my mana stash until I’m ready to survive the trip. Naturally, you’ll also explain what you’re doing, teaching me how to heal my soul more efficiently. Consider that my payment for all the shit you’ve put me through.’

Percy hadn’t missed how her soul injuries had improved. Clearly, these people knew what they were doing.

“And how do I know you’ll really come back afterwards?”

‘You don’t.’ he said.

He could practically feel her bubbling protest, but he stopped her in her tracks.

‘Look. If you ever want to see me again, here’s what you’re going to do. You’ll accept some accountability over your damn mess and start showing some good will. Do that, and I might come back here, if and when it suits me.’

Chapter 148: Good will

Delivering his ultimatum, Percy doubted Sol would accept his terms. He’d made a whole lot of demands, promising very little in return. It wasn’t like he could help it though. After all, he couldn’t give her much in his current state. Any favours from his end would have to wait until he recovered.

Surprisingly, the girl agreed – against all odds.

‘I guess she’s serious about making the most of her trait.’

Either way, this appeared to be quite a novel experience for them both. Percy could tell his host wasn’t used to swallowing her pride and working with others. Meanwhile, this was a first for him too, as he was stuck in one place, unable to interact with the world around him. Without access to the girl’s senses, he couldn’t see what her house was like, or how big her town or city was. Hell, Percy still had no idea what the locals even looked like, or how they used their soul mana.

‘All the more reason to come back then…’

While their initial interaction had been a little rocky, he didn’t hold it against the girl. Percy could tell she was rather young too – maybe in her mid-teens? In any case, he very much intended to uphold his end of the deal, returning to this place the first chance he got. After all, there was plenty of value to be gained here. Of course, that was assuming he managed to return to Remior first…

Sadly, their results in that area were rather mixed. At Yellow, Sol was among the most magically gifted class of natives, so there was hardly a better place to find soul mana than right inside her core. Despite that, it was already a struggle for her to prevent Percy’s condition from deteriorating further, let alone helping him recover.

‘I don’t think my clones were ever meant to heal on their own…’ he thought bitterly.

The severed chunks of his soul he crafted his clones out of weren’t exactly dead, but they couldn’t be considered alive either. His bloodline allowed them to survive for an extended period of time on their own, yet repairing the isolated wisps outside his body was a tall order. Both Sol and her father – Mi, as he’d come to learn – were currently working together to that end. They were focusing their efforts, fighting an uphill battle to fix Percy’s soul faster than it broke.

Watching the father and daughter operate on him over the last couple of days, Percy had learned a lot about healing soul injuries. While he was no stranger to mending his soul – having done this countless times since discovering his affinity – he now understood just how crude his methods were by comparison.

Blindly flooding a wound with mana and hoping it closed was the healing equivalent of tossing orbs of soul mana at the wood goblins to kill them. Suffice to say, there was plenty more to the art once he dug a little deeper.

For example, Sol had shown him that applying soul mana uniformly along a wound's surface was inefficient. It was better to focus it in several interspaced locations, growing lots of thin tendrils. Afterwards, the gaps between the tendrils could be filled a lot more easily.

'It's really eye opening…'

This wasn't something he would have ever discovered on his own. At least, not without decades upon decades of tests. Percy couldn't wait to learn more from these people. This was a veritable treasure trove for a soul affinity user like him!

And that was just the beginning.

Another thing he'd learned was that healing a wound directly was ill-advised. It was better to use the mana to activate and enhance the soul's natural regeneration. The results appeared slower at the beginning, but the gains accumulated over time, resulting in a much faster and more complete recovery with a mere fraction of the cost.

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Finally, there was one last nifty trick they'd shown him.

"Hey, stop dozing off!" Sol said in an irritated tone. "If you want this to work, we need your cooperation!"

'Easy for you to say…' Percy protested. 'I have trouble even staying awake.'

Apparently, the healing was more effective if the patient actively participated in the process. This was a unique aspect of soul-based injuries, as people had a much stronger connection to their soul than they did to their flesh. With some prodding, Percy could help the mana along, guiding his soul to grow.

Of course, this wasn't always applicable, as the patient needed to have some rudimentary understanding of souls and soul mana at the very least. Suffice to say, Percy wouldn't be able to use it when healing others, but it was definitely helpful when dealing with his own injuries.

Yet, even with all this, the three had barely made any progress. Percy's clone had grown slightly larger, though the improvements had started to slow down by the third day. Despite all the measures they'd taken, and all the sophisticated healing techniques, his deterioration was beginning to gain ground over his recovery.

'At this rate, I'll stop improving by the end of the week.' he thought grimly.

"Father says you'll have to make the trip soon." Sol suddenly said, confirming his suspicions.

It wasn't ideal, because he estimated he'd only reach about two thirds of his original size before he began to shrink again. Even worse, his own mana stash was all but exhausted, so they'd have to work on supplying him with some of Sol's.

'Do you think we can take a short break?' he asked. 'I want to test something.'

Mana cores were the very organs responsible for seizing control over ambient mana, allowing their owner to convert it to their affinity, while attaching their willpower to it. Percy had been able to use his hosts' cores in the past, adding his willpower to the mana thanks to their bond. However, he didn't know if that was possible right now, given his half-baked connection to Sol. If he couldn't do this, he'd have to fight his way through the horde of spectral fiends essentially unarmed…

Listening to him, the girl paused the recovery process, allowing Percy to give this a try. The latter reached out at the core's walls, trying to enhance their connection as well as the circumstances would allow. It wasn't much but, at least, he was in direct contact with Sol's core, so he was able to tap into it a little better than the rest of her body.

'Let's see… Can you try withdrawing your willpower from the mana?'

From his current perspective, the girl's grasp on her mana was firm and borderline unshakeable. He was too weak to pry it from her control. If he wanted to snatch some for his own use, he needed her to actively relinquish her hold on the substance.

Heeding his request, the girl did that to the best of her ability, as Percy tried again. It was still difficult, but he did manage to seize a sliver of mana eventually. Granted, it was way too little to make a difference.

'Ugh… It'll take me days to gather enough…'

They couldn't afford to pause the healing until then. The only solution would be to do both at the same time, with Percy trying to restock his reserves as Sol and Mi continued to mend his soul.

"Well, this sucks. If you're focused on that, you won't be able to help with the healing either." Sol pitched in.

Percy nodded. It was even worse. It would be harder for her to ease her control on the mana while using it to heal him too. Like this, they'd run out of time even faster.

'Well, there's no helping it.' he sent her the mental equivalent of a shrug. 'Having some mana to defend myself is just as important as my soul's integrity. I suppose we'll have to do both things to the best of our ability…'

"Make those three things." she said after a moment's hesitation.

Percy frowned.

'What do you mean?'

"You have a soul affinity with your main body, don't you? Since you didn't seem to know anything about the spectral fiends, I suppose it's safe to assume you don't have a trait either, right?"

Percy's heart would have skipped a beat if he had one. But he didn't say anything, letting her continue.

"I'll use what little time we have left to explain how to attract, capture and absorb a fiend into your soul."

And there it was. Percy naturally wanted to learn this above all else, though he'd decided to not push his luck too far. He was already glad Sol had agreed to demonstrate her healing art and help him escape this place with no guarantee he'd come back.

'I thought you'd keep this as a bargaining chip to force me to return.'

"That was my intention at first." she admitted. "But I considered your earlier words. Percy… I wasn't lying when I said I intend to make the most of my trait. In this case, it means establishing a good relationship with you."

'Meaning?'

"Meaning, that I'm going to start demonstrating some good will."

Chapter 149: Blockade

"…multiple shallow incisions in your soul, before intentionally leaking soul mana through them to lure the fiends…"

Percy struggled to keep himself awake as he listened to Sol's explanation for the dozenth time.

"…push it through your channels until it reaches your core and then clamp down on it as hard as you can with your mana. You need to do that before it has the chance to go on a rampage…"

It was hard, because he also had to focus on helping her and her father with the healing process, while snatching as much of her mana as he could, one drop at a time.

"…slowly grind it to nothing, while disseminating the mana throughout your soul to absorb its tra–"

‘Sol… I think that’s about all we can do…’ he suddenly said, cutting her short.

He didn’t know if he would retain any of this information later – despite the several times she’d repeated it – but the size of his clone’s wisp had already plateaued. Everyone involved knew it would only be downhill from here.

“So, is this it? Are you ready to go for it?” she asked.

‘”Ready” might be a strong word…’ he smiled bitterly. ‘But let’s go with “yes”.’

“Yeah, that’s what Percy just told me. Delaying at this point will only make things worse.” she said, probably speaking to her dad.

Percy felt his consciousness slipping, but he stubbornly held on. It would be quite a pity to pass out now and waste all their efforts. After all, whether they succeeded or not, it wouldn’t be much longer until his suffering was over.

Soon, some more foreign mana enveloped him. It didn’t belong to Sol, though he recognized its owner, as Mi had spent the last couple of days assisting with his recovery. Though he was pouring a lot more mana into his daughter’s core right now.

Allowing foreign mana into one’s core – and especially such a massive amount all at once – was tantamount to giving a stranger the power to determine one’s life or death. Suffice to say, mages generally avoided it, unless they deeply trusted the other party.

But Percy shook the pointless thoughts out of his mind, as the mana shrouded him, forming a thick layer around him.

‘Is this to shield me, or to make me less appealing to the fiends?’

He was definitely interested in hearing more about it, though he ultimately refrained from asking. Unfortunately, he had neither the time, nor the mental capacity to learn another trick right now. Whatever this was, it would have to wait until he returned.

"All done…" Sol said, though her voice trailed off, as if she was hesitating about something.

"Percy… I'm sorry about earlier. You were right. All this would have been avoided had we talked things out, but I was too eager to get myself a trait to wait and listen." she added a moment later.

Suffice to say, Percy was taken aback by her apology, not having expected this from the girl. Evidently, he'd misjudged her. As it turned out, she wasn't that bad a person once he got to know her. She was just an impulsive teenager.

In fact, Percy felt a little guilty, as he knew he was partly at fault for this mess too. After all, he was the one who'd put himself in this precarious position in the first place. Not to mention how self-centred he'd been during their subsequent cooperation.

'Don't beat yourself up too much. If you hadn't tried to absorb me, I wouldn't even have the means to return here. This might all end up for the best.'

Feeling a little bad that he'd ended up taking more than he'd given, he decided to throw a little bonus at them. Something he wasn't originally planning on sharing.

'And one more thing… By the next time we meet, make sure to strengthen your soul as much as possible. I don't have a method that would work for you, but I'm sure you'll find a way. After that, clear and temper ALL your mana channels as much as possible.'

"What for?"

'It's a surprise.'

Leaving it at that, the two bid each other farewell, before the girl finally expelled Percy from her pores, allowing him to drift away into the distance. Naturally, he was still blind and deaf, completely incapable of telling where he was going or what lied before him.

But that was ok. He didn't need to do that, as the cord pulling him to his main body would take care of navigation. And boy did it do just that, as it forcefully yanked him right off, dragging him away from this world the name of which he had yet to hear, pulling his disembodied wisp through the cosmos.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

'Fuck! Does it have to be so fast?!' he wondered, his very soul trembling under the pressure.

His only hope was that his speed would allow him to pass through the blockade of fiends undetected. A hope soon dashed…

Suddenly, he felt a powerful force clamp down on his side. If this was a fiend's jaw, it certainly appeared many times larger than any he'd encountered before. Though perhaps that was due to his own smaller size.

Luckily, the oversized teeth slid right off him, tearing a mouthful of Mi's mana along the way. Evidently, Mi's spell had applied some kind of oily coat around him, making it much harder for the creatures to grab a hold of him.

'But it won't last long…'

Percy didn't know if he was still in the vicinity of Sol's world. He shouldn't be, right? Given his current speed, and what he knew about the plane of souls, he should have already travelled halfway across the cosmos by now. Then again, he might not be travelling as quickly as he'd thought. Perhaps, his perception of time was skewed, as it often was in this place.

'Or are the fiends chasing me all the way to Remior?!'

In any case, it didn't seem like getting away was going to be easy…

A second fiend bit down at him, followed by a third and a fourth. Mi's shield held, but it was thinning fast. Percy would be lucky if it managed to fend another blow.

Out of options, he began to draw upon the mana he had snatched from Sol. In the end, he'd barely replenished a fraction of his stash, but it would have to do. Gathering it at a point within his wisp, he willed it to coalesce into a thin needle. He didn't know where the next attack would come from, so he'd have to wait until after he took some damage to try and fend off his pursuer.

Some unknown period of time later, another fiend swiped at him with its claw, peeling the final layer of Mi's mana off, as well as a chunk of Percy's clone with it. Just like that, he was already back to the terrible state he'd spent the last few days recovering from!

But he didn't panic, only clenching the needle more tightly.

It wasn't long until the next fiend reached him, though this attack went down a little differently to what he was expecting. Rather than getting bitten or mangled directly, Percy merely felt something close around him, as a powerful force fought against his main body's pull, dragging him away from Remior.

'Shit! It's a large one!'

This was probably the largest fiend he'd encountered so far. Unlike the others, this one didn't threaten the integrity of his soul directly, happy to swallow him whole. Of course, that was plenty problematic in and of itself.

Given the creature's size, it would be even harder to fight his way out with the tiny needle. And he did have to fight his way out, as the fiend was already pulling him further and further from his destination, undoing all his hard work!

'No, you don't!'

Lashing out with as much strength as he could muster, he fought to dig a path out of the creature's stomach – that was where he assumed he was, though he hadn't felt himself splash into acid. Still, he did feel an intense burning sensation envelop him, trying to dissolve his soul into nothing.

Swiftly running out of time, Percy pushed more and more of his stashed mana into the construct, stabbing at the fiend repeatedly, causing it to spasm.

'This isn't working…'

He was taking more damage than the creature, shrinking rapidly. Even his mental faculties were starting to get affected, causing him to grow groggy. His exhaustion was piling up, and his memories faded one after the other, as his past became harder and harder to recall. At some point, he even caught himself sitting motionless inside the monster's belly, having momentarily forgotten his purpose!

'No. I can't afford to stop. If I can't bust myself out, it's over!' he thought, harnessing the agonizing pain to jolt himself awake.

Unleashing a barrage of lunges with renewed vigour, Percy desperately fought to extricate himself from the trap. At the same time, he focused on what mattered the most, keeping it at the very forefront of his collapsing mind.

'There are only three things I need to remember.'

His promise to Sol, the healing art they had taught him and the method to absorb a fiend.

That was it – all this clone currently amounted to. Nothing else mattered. His main body already possessed all his other memories, and the universe didn't really need a second Percy. His one and only job was to bring these latest acquisitions back to Remior. Everything else was disposable.

Percy stabbed and kept stabbing, as more and more of his soul melted down, his size shrinking. And with it, more memories faded, one after the other.

His life in the Avalon mansion?

Gone.

Elaine? The pilgrimage to Phoebe's temple? His time with Baldy? Huehue? Micky? The Guild? The Vault? Gabe? Nesha? Sengo? Metatron?

All gone.

It wasn't important.

'Injure myself… Lure a fiend… Absorb it… Heal… Return to Sol… Injure myself… Lure a fiend…'

His mind was on a loop, repeating the girl's teachings, while never pausing his assault on the creature for even a second.

In the end, Percy failed to dig a hole through its stomach, however. It simply wasn't meant to be. He was way too weak, and the fiend way too large.

But his efforts hadn't been for naught either. He did manage to irritate the monster enough to spit him right out, into the endless void.

Not that he was in the mood to celebrate, of course…

At this point, almost nothing remained of Percy. His mind was nearly gone, and he lacked the mental capacity to even comprehend his situation. His thoughts had been reduced to vague words and blurry images.

'Injure… Lure… Absorb… Heal… Return… Injure…'

Had something attacked him again, he wouldn't have stood a chance. As fate would have it, however, that didn't happen. Maybe he was too tiny for the fiends to bother with. Or maybe the large one had carried him away from the rest of its kin before throwing him up.

Either way, the cord continued to pull him towards Remior, as he picked up more speed with each passing second.

At this point, Percy couldn't even be considered a person. He had been reduced to nothing more than a damaged message!

But the message did reach his main body, eventually. What the original Percy would manage to make out from the scattered memories remained to be seen, though one thing was certain…

Percy had died today.

Chapter 150: Harvester

Earlier

The four remaining nobles of House Tantalus stared at their companion's lifeless body as it sank into the bog's stale waters. They struggled to comprehend how their comrade had dropped dead out of the blue.

But the culprit, Percy, didn't much care about their thoughts, watching Micky dive towards them at a dizzying speed, his plumage lit up in amber and green.

"Watch out! It's the bird!" the only woman in the group yelled.

But she was a little too late. By the time the rest had managed to draw some mana out, the crow had already reached his first target, carving six nasty gashes through the man's back, ripping his very soul to shreds.

The rest hastily threw their half-baked spells at Micky, trying to knock him out of the sky. Sadly for them, they hit nothing but empty air, the crow already fading in the distance.

"After it!" another man shouted – their leader most likely.

Micky was their target after all – the very reason their family had sent them to this place. Of course, Percy could already tell from their rattled expressions that they had expected a regular Green beast. Not… whatever Micky was. And, unfortunately for them, this wasn't their only mistake today.

Percy followed the group in silence, crouching through the dense undergrowth. The fools had yet to notice him, busy chasing his familiar as they were. What they had failed to realize, however, was that the crow wasn't the one being hunted.

They were.

The crow intentionally slowed down to keep them on its trail. Like that, one bird and four mages slowly trekked through the swamp, as Micky guided them right where he and Percy wanted them.

"Uggghhhh!" "Eeekk!"

Two of them shouted as the muddy ground gave way beneath their feet. It collapsed, causing them to drop into a pair of pitfalls reaching up to their waist, a flood of grimy water rushing at them from all directions, trying to drown them.

Naturally, the traps weren't mundane – they had been crafted by Nesha, using her budding understanding of the "pocket" rune. This rune was far from the only one necessary to craft a spatial amulet, as the magical trinkets were complex devices involving multiple enchantments.

However, it was arguably the most important one. As the name implied, it was responsible for the pocket dimension that was the bread and butter of the artifacts. All the other enchantments were auxiliary, meant for holding everything together and giving the amulets other features of convenience, such as letting them open or close at will.

Sadly, Nesha hadn't had access to the other runes, nor the time to master them. Suffice to say, she wouldn't be making Percy a new amulet anytime soon. That said, carving a few crude versions of the "pocket" rune on some flat slabs of stone hadn't been too difficult.

'If only she could close them at will, it would have made everything simpler…' Percy smiled bitterly.

Currently, Nesha could only remotely trigger the traps, to impair their opponents. In the future, she might be able to do even more useful things with them, such as directly splitting her enemies' bodies in half. A project to work towards.

Glancing around, Percy soon found his companion hidden behind a nearby tree. He nodded at her, signalling her to disengage. She'd already done more than enough. Staying here any longer could be dangerous, as her personal magic could still use some work.

"Help us!" one of the trapped nobles yelled at their last member.

He was clawing against the mud, trying to swim out of the trap. Unfortunately for him, the vacuum around him was still drawing a powerful current, making it much harder to extricate himself.

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As for the last noble, he rushed back to his companions, looking like he was about to drag them out of the traps, when Micky dove at him to stop him. The mage was forced to unleash a hastily prepared flamethrower spell he'd kept at the ready, doing his best to fend the bird off.

The crow would clearly need some time to get through the man's defences, but neither he nor Percy worried too much. They could already see the guy's reserves dwindling far more quickly than the bird's, without getting him much in return.

'Finally, it's time to put my new toy to the test.' Percy grinned, clenching his construct tightly.

The downside of his latest spell was that it took a lot of time to prepare, which meant he wouldn't be able to repair it in the middle of the fight, if it broke. On the flip side, it was far more durable than anything else he'd crafted out of mana over the years, which meant it hadn't been too difficult to retrieve it earlier and to continue using it.

Percy watched his familiar methodically force his opponent away from the others, waiting for them to free themselves. Naturally, he could have taken advantage of their impairment to finish them off, but he'd chosen not to do that.

He wanted to use this opportunity to test his magic, to continue improving. House Tantalus would keep sending stronger and stronger people at them, as would the rest of Remior. Neither he nor Micky had the luxury of halting their growth and stagnating.

Only once the nobles were out did Percy rush at them, Synchronization at full power. They seemed intent on chasing after Micky and their comrade, but Percy wouldn't give them the chance.

Closing the gap to the woman, he swung the invisible weapon at her, forcing her to unleash a burst of air mana to dodge it.

Percy didn't wait for either of them to respond, before pivoting on his feet, already delivering a second strike at the other mage.

The latter barely had the chance to manifest a stone sabre in his hand, clumsily parrying the blow. Percy felt his weapon bend from the impact, as the powerful shockwave rippled through his body.

But it held!

For the first time, his construct had endured a full on collision against a Yellow spell and its owner's physical strength at once, without a single crack forming!

Not giving Percy a chance to celebrate, the guy was already swinging at him with a second sabre, as a rocky spike emerged from behind him. As for the air mage, she hadn't remained idle either, already charging a miniature tornado between her palms, clearly planning on unleashing it upon him.

Having glimpsed his opponent's intention via Soul Vision, Percy circled around him with some well-placed footwork, dodging the stone spike and the man's slash both, as he tried to deliver another attack of his own at the man's temple. At the same time, he made his way behind him, to use him as a cover from his companion's magic.

And it worked like a charm, the air mage pausing her spell in hesitation. As ruthless as House Tantalus's nobles were, they still clearly had some compassion towards one another.

‘Or maybe she just doesn’t want to get into trouble for injuring him…’

The man raised his first sabre to block once more, but Percy didn’t stop there, as the two continued to exchange blow after blow.

His opponent tried to throw many external attacks into the mix, but Percy applied more pressure at him to keep them at a minimum, while using his Soul Vision to dodge whatever slipped through the cracks. Meanwhile, he maintained his position behind the guy, making the air mage’s life impossible.

“How annoying!” the earth mage spat at some point, as he delivered a powerful slash against Percy, forcing him back.

He looked like he was about to pounce on him, but Percy smirked. Shifting the force to one leg, he changed to Takeo’s stance while robbing his weapon of its substance.

Next, he lunged upon the earth mage even faster than before, reaching him first, his construct no longer inhibited by inertia or air resistance.

The guy couldn’t actually see the invisible weapon, but he could still vaguely predict its trajectory by watching Percy’s movements. His eyes widened in shock as he observed the change in Percy’s style, hurriedly raising his sabre to block the weapon closing into his temple.

But he was in for a nasty surprise this time. Naturally, the incorporeal construct phased right through the stone spells, delivering a powerful impact on the man’s soul, causing it to shake violently. Stumbling backward, he looked like he was about to collapse, but Percy didn’t let him.

“Where do you think you’re going? You’re my meat shield, remember?” Percy grinned, grabbing him by the collar.

The woman clicked her tongue in annoyance, apparently contemplating whether to ignore her companion’s well-being, unleashing her spell indiscriminately at them both.

That said, Percy had no intention of waiting for her to make her mind up. Tossing the “hostage” at her, he ran right behind him, leaping above the body at the last second.

Descending upon the air mage, he swung his weapon at her.

Backed to a corner, she unleashed a burst of mana like before, trying to dodge to the side.

However, she’d gravely miscalculated this time. While she indeed managed to evade the shaft of Percy’s weapon, having roughly estimated its location, his latest construct was not a quarterstaff…

Having deliberately used the blunt ends against the earth mage, Percy had intentionally misled them both into reaching this false conclusion.

What his opponent couldn’t have expected, was the weapon’s long, crescent blade, cleaving her soul right in half!

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Quarterstaff – Crude + Parting Gift – Crude -> Soul Harvester – Refined!]