Wanderer 161

Chapter 161: New runes

While Percy prided himself as a relatively fast reader, he was operating under a strict self-imposed time limit during this visit. Naturally, he couldn't afford to carefully read all seven of the volumes he'd just bought.

Luckily, he didn't need to either. Obviously, he had no intention of learning hundreds of variants of the new runes – he just had to pick the ones most suitable for his current needs. Consequently, he'd devoted the first few days of his reading time to skimming over the books, identifying the best candidates.

The preservation rune had a circular shape in general – like most of the Vault's enchantments – though it differed slightly from the concealment rune he'd previously mastered. It was made of two concentric circles, down from three, though it contained many more curved lines linking the two shapes.

Each sub-variant differed some more from the general case, altering the properties of the enchantment subtly, to make it more suitable for specific applications or mana types. In the end, Percy found 13 variants in total that could be used with soul mana to do what he wanted.

'But only 4 of them work with other mana types too… Hmmm… What if I draw them using my fused mana? Can I get them to work on both souls and corporeal objects at the same time?'

Percy was confident it should work, though it wouldn't be without cost. According to the book, the less specialized the rune was, the lower its efficiency would be in each area, which frankly made sense. Picking a variant suitable for multiple tasks would make its effect about 10~15% less potent.

'It's not that bad. All things considered, it's a small price to pay for versatility. At least, it's better than wasting my time learning two separate variants…'

Beyond that, there were a few more factors to take into consideration. For example, he had to pick a variant that could be overlapped with other runes in general, and his own concealment runes in particular. This would make his life easier later, once he graduated from basic runecrafting and started working on composing the runes together into more complex enchantments.

Suffice to say, it took a fair amount of head scratching, but Percy eventually settled on a variant he deemed to be the best match for his needs.

‘Maybe I could pick a better one if I spent more time on it, but this should be good enough for now.’ he nodded in satisfaction.

Percy wasn’t a magiscript expert, nor was he that well versed in the Vault’s runes. He understood his decision-making process was probably full of blind spots, but he figured he’d done a decent job given the circumstances. Perhaps, he could revisit this in the future once he was more experienced and had the credits to splurge.

Next, he spent the rest of the week practicing with the new rune. Memorizing the shape and getting used to drawing it accurately was a laborious process. That said, it was notably easier the second time around. The more runes he learned, the more he would familiarize himself with the Vault’s language, and the more skilled he’d grow in drawing them precisely.

Sadly, he couldn’t test the enchantment’s effect on souls just yet, as his limited stash of fused mana wasn’t enough for that. However, he could at least tap into the more general effects of the rune by drawing it with earth mana. That should be enough to get him through the challenge.

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’10 days…’ he grimaced.

Getting to an acceptable level with the preservation rune took him a bit longer than he would have liked. It was still within the allotted two weeks, but it didn’t leave him much time to learn the other one. At least, not without extending his trip by a little.

‘Oh well… It can’t be helped. I need a third rune to get through the wave. Also, Nesha’s progress is going to stall if I don’t bring this back to Remior.’

Fortunately, the control rune was easier to learn than the others. In fact, it was by far the simplest rune he'd ever seen. It was only made of a single circle with a cross inside it. There wasn't much to memorize, and even drawing it was trivial.

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Using it, on the other hand, was where the problem lay. After all, the control rune wasn't supposed to be used on its own. Its enchantment allowed it to be turned on and off at will. The person who inscribed it could do that remotely, though anybody could use it by pouring their mana into it. That said, the effect was only valuable once it was combined with a different rune.

Normally, combining runes fell under the field of magiscript, not runecrafting. However, the control rune was much easier to overlap with other runes due to its simplicity, allowing even a novice like Percy to accomplish this. Still, it wasn't exactly trivial either, as the scribe had to visualize two distinct effects while drawing the composite rune, while also keeping their joint function at the forefront of their mind.

'I guess it's something I'll have to learn sooner or later anyway…' he sighed.

The good news was that he didn't need to do that right now. A quick test confirmed the challenge accepted the control rune when drawn separately. This meant he could learn to combine it with the other runes later, after he returned to Remior.

Even better, both his drawing speed and his success rate would skyrocket if he used the control rune to fill the bulk of his quota. He still had to draw 50 concealment runes and 50 preservation runes, but the remaining 200 would be a piece of cake.

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Meeting all the cube's requirements did take a while, but he managed to do it by the end of his fourth week in the Vault.

'Enchantments: Control (General, variant #172), Concealment (General), Preservation (Soul-specialized, variant #31). Difficulty: 1. Runes drawn: 300. Time taken: 5923 rits. Success rate: 95%. Score adjusted due to difficulty: 95%.'

‘Finally!’

“Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 90. Current balance: 160.”

Percy couldn’t help but grin as he saw his balance hit the triple digits for the first time. This was already enough to buy several more books, though he didn’t know how expensive the spell he was interested in would be.

‘Gabe was trying to buy a fire spell using a bonus reward back when we first met…’

This meant that at least some spells were either prohibitively expensive, or only obtainable from the restricted lists. Then again, Gabe had probably been looking for a Refined spell. Or maybe even higher. Percy would be happy with a Crude one, as long as it did what he wanted. He could improve it later.

‘Let’s try earning as many credits as I can first. I’ll browse the database afterwards.’

Next, Percy started the fourth wave. He seriously doubted he’d be able to clear it anytime soon, though he figured it was worth checking the requirements anyway, for future reference.

‘Draw any ten runes 1000 times in total, in under 15000 rits, with at least a 95% success rate. Each individual rune has to be drawn at least 50 times.’

‘Wow... Talk about a steep difficulty curve.’

Becoming sufficiently proficient with ten different runes was a project that could easily take half a year. It was a little disappointing, though it made sense. If Gabe’s combat challenges were anything to go by, getting past the fourth wave required both a blessing and a bloodline. Of course, this wasn’t the case for the magiscript challenge, but its difficulty should scale in an equivalent manner.

And this was still somewhat achievable, relatively speaking. Going by what Gabe had told him, the Green level of the challenge involved proper applications of magiscript, requiring decades of preparation.

'Sadly, I don't have any decades to spare right now…' Percy smiled bitterly.

In the end, reaching this point had taken him a little longer than his original estimates. Though he didn't regret it. At least, he'd already met the primary objectives of his trip. He and Nesha would have the means to continue progressing once he returned. As for any more runes, they'd have to wait for his next visit.

'For now, let's try to speedrun the combat challenges.'

He didn't know how far he'd get, but it would be a waste of his host's oversized body to not even try. He couldn't take his sweet time planning his approach like he'd originally intended, but he could still try earning all the "easy" credits. After that, he'd buy his prize and be on his merry way.

"Let's do it then… Cube. Start the 'gauntlet' challenge, Red level. User ID: WANDERER."

"Authorization granted. Choice confirmed. Wave begins in 18 rits." the soulless voice said.

Percy stretched his limbs, as the parrot awakened from his slumber. He brought the creature up to speed, hastily explaining what this challenge involved.

"Wave begins in 12 rits."

Strictly speaking, the bird wasn't particularly accustomed to fighting. His life back in his home world had been relatively peaceful. Still, a wave of excitement seeped through their bond. Evidently, the parrot was so fed up with runecrafting by now that he was willing to do pretty much anything else.

"Wave begins in 6 rits."

Soon, the familiar black sludge began pouring down the sleek walls. Percy grinned, finding it a little nostalgic.

‘Time to pummel some golems!’

“Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!”

Chapter 162: Farming credits

Unlike the previous times, much less of the black liquid seeped out of the walls. A portion rolled down to the floor, the rest sticking to the cube’s surfaces. Next, the material solidified, coating the room with a thin film of black.

‘That’s a new one…’ Percy frowned. ‘At least, the sack is still there.’

The sludge had merely flowed underneath his supplies, leaving them propped up against the wall. It was quite a relief. Percy would have been forced to rush through the challenges had the cube chosen to rob him of his only source of food.

Scanning his surroundings, he searched for his opponent. Soon, his gaze landed on the only other object – a small orb the size of a tangerine, resting motionless in the middle of the room.

‘Is that the golem?’

As if to answer his question, a series of red lines lit up all over the black sphere. Then, an indentation formed on the floor around it, a square tile sinking about an inch into the ground.

‘What the–?’

With a snapping sound, the tile sprung back at an angle, shooting the sphere at him at a dizzying speed.

Percy barely raised his arms in time, shielding his face as the impact sent a jolt of pain through his bones, causing him to stumble backwards.

But the assault didn't stop there, a second blow landing in his stomach the very next second, this time bringing him to his knees.

'Seriously?! This is the first wave of the Red level?!'

Crouching, he tightened the guard around his face some more, bracing against the follow-up attacks. Sadly for him, the golem didn't even bother aiming for his head anymore, instead randomly slamming into his body from various angles.

'It's ok… It hurts like a bitch… but it's not that dangerous…'

The realization comforted him a little, though he still winced every time the orb crashed into him. He'd have died already had his host been a smaller beast – or even a Red humanoid for that matter. It was only due to the combination of his bulk, his beast affinity and the second core that he could bear the attacks relatively unfazed. Still, he knew he had to fight back at some point if he wanted to get through the challenge.

Unwilling to lift his eyes from the safety of his guard, Percy scanned the room with his Mana Sense, trying to locate the orb. The darn thing kept bouncing from one surface to another, making crisp sounds with each collision.

It took Percy a couple minutes to adjust to the golem's speed. In the meantime, he had to endure several more blows, waiting patiently for his chance to catch the sphere. Fast as it was, he knew the flimsy construct wouldn't survive a second in his grasp.

'There!'

Once the golem was on-course to collide against him head on, he tried to grab it. Sadly, his host's poor reflexes let him down, the orb slipping right through his arms. It delivered yet another painful blow on his chest, knocking the breath out of his lungs.

'Ugh… How annoying!'

Percy stubbornly kept at it for another hour, before accepting that he'd never catch the speedy golem with his bare hands. In fact, he even had the parrot try at some point, hoping the bird would do better than him. That didn't happen, the beast giving up too after a few failures.

'What about the earth mana?'

If he hardened the mana into stone, he could soften the blows some more. But he shook his head. Doing that would spare him some pain, but it wouldn't get him through the wave.

Instead, he tried something different. Pulling a sliver of mana from his abdomen, he formed a cushion of sand on his back, hoping to dampen the golem's momentum. After all, the cube had gone out of its way to prepare the room so that the orb could bounce around more easily. Clearly, it would have trouble doing so otherwise.

Percy nodded, feeling happy about his plan. He thought it had a decent chance of working too. The execution left much to be desired, however. He messed the timing up, receiving another painful hit. The next few attempts didn't go much better either.

'Fuck! This is going to take a while…'

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"Congratulations! Wave 1 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 30. Current balance: 190."

Percy breathed heavily, not particularly happy about the outcome. In the end, his idea to stop the golem using sand worked, but not before several hours of poorly timed blocks and nasty blows. He was certain his body was bruised from head to toe, though that was partially hidden beneath whatever remained of his plumage.

Either way, he wasn't particularly eager to start the next wave. His advantages might have protected him from any serious injuries this time around, but the challenge would only grow more brutal from here on out.

That said, he knew he had to keep going. The sooner he started the next wave, the sooner his suffering would end.

'Maybe the swarm challenge will be easier?'

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"Congratulations! Wave 1 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 30. Current balance: 220."

It wasn't.

The golems in the swarm challenge fought in a similar manner, though each of them was much weaker and smaller. Each was only about as large as a pebble, but there were hundreds of them this time.

Luckily, Percy's makeshift spell worked even better against the smaller golems. They sank into the cushion, making it easy for him to grab them and crush them between his claws, one at a time.

Unfortunately, the wave refused to end until he destroyed every last one of them – a project that took him several hours and even more refills. Suffice to say, his second core's downtime wasn't pleasant for either him or the parrot. Whenever they were out of mana, they had to endure the painful pelting of the remaining orbs.

'Not looking forward to the next wave…'

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“Congratulations! Wave 2 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 60. Current balance: 280.”

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“Congratulations! Wave 2 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…”

“Awarded credits: 60. Current balance: 340.”

‘Please, make it stop…’ Percy groaned, the parrot echoing the sentiment.

He was lying face down in the middle of the room, his limbs sprawled out like a starfish. He did his best to not move a muscle, as even the slightest twitch was pure agony.

There hadn’t been any great surprises during the second waves of the combat challenges. The gauntlet had thrown a bigger, heavier golem at him, while the swarm had mostly increased the number of enemies rather than their individual strength.

Still, Percy would have probably died if he hadn’t grown more proficient in shielding himself with the earth mana over the last couple of days.

‘So much for keeping the bodies in a good condition.’ he smiled bitterly. ‘Metatron isn’t going to be happy.’

Not that he could help it. If the titan didn’t like this, he shouldn’t have made the challenges so damn hard. In any case, Percy had done a decent job getting this far, and he’d even collected a hefty number of credits, though one question remained.

‘Do I keep going?’

He did kinda want to get all the challenges to the third wave. It wasn't just about the rewards either. Clearing the waves was oddly satisfying. Not to mention that he liked round numbers. Something about stopping here felt wrong.

'Oh well… I can always abort the challenge if it gets too dangerous.'

On another note, Percy had discovered that the translation device was a lot tougher than it looked. Admittedly, he discovered this by accident, after forgetting to take it off. It wasn't until a few days in he even remembered he was wearing it, after it had presumably eaten hundreds of blows.

Naturally, his heart had skipped a bit upon realizing how close he'd come to ruining the expensive tool. Luckily, there wasn't a dent on it, prompting him to ask the cube about it. Apparently, it would take a Blue-level attack to actually damage the device.

'I guess it makes sense. What kind of idiot would make a device costing 5000 credits so fragile?'

In any case, Percy caught himself, realizing he was just procrastinating at this point. With a heavy heart, he started the third wave of the swarm challenge, hoping it would be more forgiving than the gauntlet.

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"Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 90. Current balance: 430."

'Don't worry about it…' Percy tried to console his host.

The two were staring at their broken beak, lying on the ground by their feet.

'I'm sure Metatron will fix you as soon as I leave.'

What he wasn't quite as certain about, was whether the titan would be willing to honour their deal the next time he visited. But that was future Percy's problem.

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"Congratulations! Wave 3 has been cleared! Calculating rewards…"

"Awarded credits: 90. Current balance: 520."

'It's done. We've made it…'

Percy could hardly believe it.

He dragged himself against the metallic floor using his one surviving talon, leaving a bloody trail behind him. His other three limbs weren't much help, their joints bent in all the wrong directions.

Eventually, he made it to the remains of the coconuts. By now, all that was left of them was a pink pool of pulp. The sack had mostly survived the gauntlet challenge intact, as the larger golem rarely hit his supplies. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said about the swarm challenge.

Sighing, Percy picked the largest solid piece he could find, squeezing it between his claws, letting a few lukewarm droplets of juice fall into his broken beak. The liquid rolled down his throat, soon causing him to break into a cough.

'Crap! I forgot how salty they are...'

Not only was the exotic fruit terrible for quenching one's thirst, the salt only exacerbated Percy's injuries further, making him wince in pain.

Denied of even this small relief, Percy turned over, resting with his back on the floor. At this point, he just wanted this trip to end. The past few days had been hellish, though the results spoke for themselves.

There was one last thing he needed to do with all the credits he'd earned, before he could put himself and the parrot out of their shared misery.

"Cube… Give me a list of Crude mana conversion spells."

Chapter 163: Mana conversion

Percy had decided to look for a mana conversion spell as an alternative solution to his problem.

He needed a lot of soul mana to lure the mysterious entities from much further away, and he only had two possible sources to tap into – his own recovery, and Micky's ability to devour souls. He was already planning to bolster the latter using the preservation rune he'd recently bought, but he was hoping to improve upon the former too.

While he could regenerate soul mana very rapidly using Synchronization, it also led to a lot of wasted pure mana that he didn't know what to do with. If he could find a way to convert some of that into soul mana, it would give him yet another potent source he could rely on.

'And there's no better place to browse for the right spell than the Vault.' he grinned.

Strictly speaking, mana conversion wasn't some esoteric art – it was something all living beings passively did with every breath.

After all, ambient mana was a mixture of many different affinities. This meant that only a fraction could be taken in directly. Of course, this fraction was the most significant by far, as it could be absorbed without losses. This was why a mage's recovery greatly depended on their environment. For example, a water user would struggle to refill their core in a desert, but they'd have a much easier time doing so in the middle of the ocean.

However, that didn't mean the rest of the ambient mana was useless. Among their many functions, mana cores could also convert other mana types into their own – albeit at an abysmal rate. That said, some conversions were easier than others, and there were also two very special cases:

The beast affinity, and the pure affinity.

Beasts could be considered “universal recipients” to an extent, because they could convert other affinities to their own more efficiently. This was, in fact, what they owed their ridiculous advancement speed to. Of course, it wasn’t smooth sailing for them either. Ambient mana didn’t contain the beast affinity, so they only had their higher conversion rate to rely on. This was why they still struggled to regenerate mana the conventional way, having to keep devouring cores instead. It was also why Micky’s version of Circulation gnawed at his body, draining his stamina.

On the other end of the spectrum, pure users were considered “universal donors”. Pure mana could be more easily converted to other types, which was the main principle behind the magic potions Percy had encountered in the Alchemists’ Guild. It still wasn’t particularly effective – a pure mage might have to empty their core to replenish about 20% of somebody else’s reserves, though most of them learned how to do this at some point. It rarely mattered, but it wasn’t like pure mana had that many uses to begin with.

‘Maybe I can find something slightly better here than what we have on Remior...’

In the end, Percy spent some more time browsing through the database for anything suitable. He wasn’t that surprised to learn that the system had even more on this topic than the runes he had searched for the other day. After all, the pure affinity was the most common in the universe, and this was a somewhat well-known application of it.

The only reason he hadn’t asked Baldy for something of the sort back when he was still at home, was because it wouldn’t have helped him much at the time. His second core had been a grade lower, which meant it would have given him almost nothing. Even now, he didn’t think this would be a particularly useful ability to have in the midst of combat – he was better off just fusing his two affinities into the teal mana.

However, it would certainly help a lot in some niche applications such as the very problem he was currently facing.

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‘Let’s see… Cube, which books have we singled out so far?’

“Evaluating request…”

“Evaluation complete. User has bookmarked a total of 6 items: ‘Universal donor – The advantage of pure mana’, ‘The 10 most efficient mana bestowal spells for beginners’, ‘Affinity-specific mana bestowal’, ‘Absorbing pure mana for non-pure users’, ‘Tips and tricks for soul users’, ‘Fundamentals for new mages’. Total cost: 340 credits. Current balance: 520.”

Percy wasn’t particularly happy with this. Apparently, books on spells – even Crude ones – were several times more expensive than those on runes. He guessed that this disparity was artificially imposed by the gods in charge of the Vault to make magiscript a little more accessible, or to push people working on the combat challenges to try harder.

Worse still, he’d found multiple books that interested him, as there seemed to be a little more to the spell he wanted to create than he’d initially expected. As it turned out, mana conversion could typically be broken into two parts: Mana bestowal and mana absorption. As the names implied, they differed depending on whether one was the bestower or the recipient of the pure mana. The former was arguably the most important, but learning how to absorb the mana more effectively would make one a ‘better patient’, or so to speak. Furthermore, each conversion worked a little differently, so it was possible for a pure user to get better at supporting, say, fire mages, if they practiced a lot with them.

‘I mean… I don’t have to buy all of them…’

Percy could just get the first spell he found, and it would still do alright. His conversion rate might not be great at the start, but he should be able to hit the target 20% after some practice. However, he felt it would be a waste of his talents if he didn’t strive to do a little better. After all, he was in a unique position in that he was both the bestower and the recipient of the mana. He even knew what affinity he wanted to convert the mana to. That meant he could probably work out a very specialized spell that performed a lot better for him than anybody else.

‘That’s so many credits though…’

Percy wanted to cry. He'd suffered through so much crap to amass this much, and he'd have to spend nearly two thirds of it on this. Not to mention how unpleasant the next few days promised to be, assuming his broken body even lasted that long.

He sighed.

'I'm sorry buddy… We'll have to soldier through the pain for a little longer.'

The parrot groaned in protest. Percy could tell how much his host missed his carefree days in the beach. But it couldn't be helped. If the preservation rune didn't get him enough soul mana to attract the creature, it would mean he'd wasted this entire trip.

"Cube… buy all six books. And please narrate them for me too… I'm not in any condition to read." he smiled bitterly. "Also, do you have anything to dull my pain for a few days? User ID: WANDERER."

"Authorization granted. Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. WARNING: Books may be purchased in audiobook format free of charge, but an additional charge will be added in the future if you wish to re-purchase them in a different format. Proceed anyway?"

"Ugh… What a stingy piece of shit you are… just do it."

Percy generally preferred holding a physical copy of his books, but he'd just have to forget about these ones later. No way he was spending more of his hard-earned credits than he had to.

"Confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 180."

"Evaluating request…"

"Evaluation complete. 'Simple painkillers' are valued at 1 credit per 30 pills. Each dose is effective for 18000 rits. Proceed with purchase?"

Hearing the cost, Percy wanted to swear. He was starting to see how Gabe had turned so stingy. This wasn't a problem with his friend – it was just what this place did to people. After all, each credit cost so much blood and sweat to earn…

Ultimately, he decided to pay the price, however. He could try gritting through the pain to save himself the credit, but it would just affect his ability to understand the books. Honestly, spending a credit to spare himself a week of agony wasn't that bad a deal.

"Fine." he spat with a heavy heart.

"Confirmed. Deducting credits. New balance: 179. Delivery in 6 rits."

It only took a few second for the pills to be delivered, Percy eagerly tossing the first one down his throat as soon as he could. Then, he asked the cube to begin narrating the books for him, hoping he'd get to the end before his body gave out.

'I think I'm gonna take a break from the Vault for a few months...'

Chapter 164: Self-bestowal

"Another one." Micky said, carrying an oversized rat carcass in his talons.

The distraction caused Percy to mess up the rune he was trying to carve on the snake's body, prompting him to click his tongue in annoyance. Sighing, he shifted his attention to the new corpse, scanning it via Mana Sense. There was an Orange star rapidly dimming in its sternum.

"Micky… I said Yellow beasts only… I wish I could preserve all of them, but I don't have the time. At least, not while keeping up with my other tasks."

Percy had way too much on his plate lately. Besides piling up the dead animals for their operation, he also had to brew elixirs for the group, to keep up the appearance of a professional blacksmith for the townsfolk, and to work on his new spell. Orange beasts just weren't worth the effort. They'd only give Micky a fraction of the mana when the time came.

“I’m trying.” the bird cawed in annoyance. “Yellows are getting harder to find.”

“Alright. Just drop it in that circle for now. I’ll mark it later if I have the time.” Percy said, pointing at yet another preservation rune carved on the ground nearby.

Shimmering in a faint teal colour, it was much larger than those he drew on the creatures’ flesh. And it wasn’t the only one. It was surrounded by dozens of similar circles. Most of them had Yellow carcasses lying on them, only a handful having Orange ones instead.

Had somebody paid close attention to the bodies, they’d notice all of them were covered from head to toe with even more preservation runes. That said, Percy had run into diminishing returns after trying to double down on the enchantment. The runes he carved on the bodies already accounted for over 80% of the effect, so the additional circles underneath them were just icing on the cake. Still, he wanted to preserve every last drop of soul mana they could extract from the animals, to maximize the odds of his experiment working.

Three weeks had already passed since his return from the Vault. He and Micky had amassed over thirty corpses in that time. Sadly, a quick scan via Soul Vision revealed that the first souls were crumbling already, the silver flames over halfway gone.

‘Such a waste… But it can’t be helped…’

Evidently, even the specialized variant of the preservation rune he’d mastered had its limits. While it greatly delayed a soul’s decay, it couldn’t stop it entirely. It merely slowed down the process, stretching it to a little over a month. Still, their stash was already diminishing as fast as they were replenishing it, which meant they wouldn’t gain anything by waiting any longer. Percy would have gone for it already, if there weren’t a couple of things he was holding out on.

“Are you sure House Tantalus hasn’t simply given up on this place?” Nesha asked.

It had already been over two months since they killed the most recent group of Yellows. The enemy House had remained silent in that time. He and Nesha were growing less and less certain those bastards would send a Green after them. He guessed Baldy must’ve done an even better job pressuring them

than he'd expected, as they didn't seem to have the luxury of delegating one of their elites to hunt Micky down just yet.

"I think it's worth waiting a few more weeks. If they do send us a Green, it'll help me massively."

Not that he was looking forward to fighting the powerful mage – it was certainly going to be dangerous – but having another high-grade soul to toss into the mix might just make the difference between success and failure.

Half an hour later, Percy finished carving the runes on the last two carcasses, deciding to finally call it a night. There was still some time before he had to go to bed, but he wanted to work on something else too. And he wasn't the only one rushing his preparations.

"How are the new traps coming along?" he asked.

Nesha had already incorporated the control rune within the traps, and she was currently busy scattering them all over the Grisly Bog, preparing for the ambush.

"Well, I've verified I can control them remotely, though they still break after closing and opening a few times. But that's not a problem, is it? We only need them to close once."

Percy nodded, though he didn't say anything. If they could catch the Green off-guard, they might be able to sever a leg or two. But that was a big if. Each advancement greatly improved a mage's reflexes, sharpening their senses. Even if their opponent failed to notice the traps, they might still be able to escape before Nesha had the chance to close them.

In fact, Percy had given her multiple slabs of stone engraved with concealment runes to place above her traps, to hide them from Mana Sense. It wasn't as good as incorporating the runes directly into the enchantment, but neither Percy nor Nesha were skilled enough to do that just yet.

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'I suppose we'll just have to pray it works…'

Bidding Micky farewell, the two headed home. Suffice to say, the Grisly Bog was already full of traps and preserved bodies by now. They no longer even bothered to hide them – they couldn't. If one of the townsfolk decided to veer into the swamp one day, they'd instantly realize something was off. Luckily, nobody besides Percy or Nesha dared set foot there anymore.

Reaching their house, they took turns washing up outside, before entering their new bedroom. Percy and Nesha had taken a break from their other projects back when his clone was still studying in the Vault, expanding their humble hut a little. It was still rather small, but at least they no longer had to sleep in Percy's workshop, sparing them from breathing in the forge's fumes all night long.

That said, Percy wasn't planning to go to bed just yet.

Pulling all the soul mana from his sternum, he released it out of his pores, emptying his first core. Then, he switched his focus to his abdomen, drawing some pure mana from it, directing it to his sternum.

Naturally, he was going to work on his new spell again.

The Vault's books were extremely helpful, but it still took a lot of effort to master a new spell – even a Crude one. Percy's Status had yet to register it, despite the significant amount of progress he'd made on it over the past few weeks.

'Let's see… I'm supposed to control the rate by which I feed the foreign mana to my soul core…'

Converting mana from other affinities to one's own could be likened to digesting a meal. In this analogy, pure mana was the "easiest on the stomach", but that didn't mean Percy could dump everything in his first core all at once and expect that to work. If he pushed it too far, he could damage his core instead, giving himself mana poisoning. Should that happen, both his capacity and regeneration would drop massively for a few days – a situation best avoided.

On the other hand, if he played it safe and moved too little pure mana into the core, he'd just needlessly slow the conversion down. Much like with a core's purification, this was all about finding the right balance – something that typically required a lot of trial and error.

Luckily for Percy, he could skip a lot of that due to being the owner of both cores, making it several times easier for him to determine when his first core was saturated. In fact, he'd already realized a rudimentary version of the spell weeks ago – he was currently just working on improving it.

'Tonight, for sure!'

Ignoring the beads of sweat accumulating on his forehead, he concentrated on the delicate process, carefully fine-tuning the mana flowing from one core to the other. When the time of the experiment came, he'd have to do this with Synchronization active. For now, he was happy taking it easy though, wanting to perfect the spell first, before adding to the difficulty.

'5%.'

Activating Mana Sense, he watched the droplets of heavy, corporeal mana transform into the softer, ethereal variant, subtly taking advantage of his understanding of both affinities to guide them along – another area where he had an advantage over other pure users.

'10%.'

At some point, Percy realized his pure mana was about to run out, the flow between the two cores slowing down to a trickle. But he didn't let that distract him, as he redoubled his efforts to improve his efficiency, hoping to finally reach the first milestone.

'15%.'

His second core finally dried out, the flow halting completely. Though there was still a sliver of pure mana left in Percy's body, swirling inside his first core. The organ gnawed at it greedily, causing this last strand to shrink at an alarming rate.

'Have I failed again?'

Yet, just as the final dregs of cyan evaporated, one final droplet of silver fell, splashing down with the rest, the Status finally pitching in to announce Percy's accomplishment.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Self-bestowal – Crude!]

Percy couldn't help but grin as he stared at the notification. This wasn't his first spell, nor the most impressive, but registering it filled him with relief. He knew he was on a timer to get everything ready before the enemy scion finally arrived in the town.

'There's still room for improvement though…' he reminded himself, as he gauged the soul mana in his sternum.

In the end, he'd managed to replenish about 20% of it. This could be considered good by Remior's standards. But not by Percy's. He'd already cheated extensively to get here this quickly, by being both the bestower and recipient of the mana. Based on everything he'd learned at the Vault, he was confident he should be able to reach 30% in due time. The only question was whether he'd get there soon enough.

"Did it finally register?" Nesha asked, startling Percy.

It was only now he realized she was still awake. She was playing with that black butterfly of hers again, making it fly above her palm. It had improved greatly over the past few months too, both its shape and its flight looking a lot more elegant than before. It didn't even leak that many motes in its passing anymore.

"Yes." he nodded. "How about yours? Is it Refined yet?"

From what she'd told him, her Status had already registered the spell some time ago, though she hadn't stopped working on it. Percy was actually a little impressed by Nesha's growth – both as a mage and as a person. He'd certainly never expected the day would come when the lazy girl would stay up this late, practicing her magic alongside him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I just don't want to get killed by a Green mage because some Red-born idiot decided to go on a war against an entire House by himself." she rolled her eyes, probably realizing what he was thinking. "And no. It's still Crude. Though I can make a few of them at once."

Percy chuckled at her quip, but he knew she wasn't wrong. An Orange trying to stage an ambush against a Green was probably unprecedented in the entire history of Remior. He was definitely playing with fire. One wrong move, and he'd lose everything.

'But I won't let that happen. I'll make sure we win. House Tantalus is nothing more than a stepping stone for my ambition.'

Chapter 165: Ambush

In the end, three more months passed in relative quiet.

Naturally, Percy hadn't stopped sending out clones in that time, hoping one of them would stumble upon something interesting. Sadly, that hadn't happened. He hadn't bothered to return to the Vault either, as none of his recent hosts seemed suited for the combat challenges. Of course, he could have tried learning some more runes – he definitely had enough credits. That said, he didn't have time to practice them, busy as he was.

Things on Remior hadn't changed much either. Everyone had continued working on their projects, Percy and Nesha both making great strides with their new spells. Percy's Self-bestowal had improved noticeably by now, though his Status had yet to acknowledge that.

As for Micky, he had continued his relentless hunt for Yellow beasts, eating their cores before delivering their bodies to Percy, dumping them in the preservation runes. By now, they'd wasted dozens upon dozens of souls, fighting to maintain their stash. In fact, Percy was afraid they were close to driving the Yellow beasts to extinction. At least, Micky no longer managed to find one every day.

Watching the souls crumble, Percy was beginning to reconsider his plan. They'd have to go through with the experiment in the next couple of weeks, regardless of whether an enemy arrived in that time. Delaying any longer would hurt more than it helped.

Luckily for him, the noble finally reached Bogside town just days later.

"What do you think?" Nesha bit her lip.

Percy could tell she was nervous, and he didn't blame her for it either. Talking and planning about ambushing a Green and actually going through with it were two entirely different things.

The two observed the man from a distance. He was standing just outside the tavern, chatting with Fegan – presumably discussing the bog's situation with the old man. He wore the same standard attire as all the other nobles of House Tantalus, his elegant silken robes adorned with his family's insignia – a man's face sporting a set of strangely elongated canines. Though his was green.

Under different circumstances, Percy and Nesha might have looked suspicious spying on him. But they weren't alone. Half the town was doing the same, ogling the powerful noble in curiosity. After all, it wasn't every day a Green visited them.

"Not the strongest they've got. Not the weakest either." Percy whispered back.

The man didn't have the bloodline – his skin was a healthy shade of pink. He didn't look that young either, meaning he was probably an older Orange-born. This wasn't a good thing, as it meant he was more experienced. Other distinguishing features included a bald head and a scruffy ginger beard.

"According to our information, he's either Grian, or his cousin, Broose." Percy elaborated.

He sure hoped it was the former, as Grian had a pure affinity. If it was Broose, they'd have a tougher time. But it was a coin toss at this point.

"Are you sure you still want to go through with this?" Nesha asked, clenching her fists. "It's not too late to call it off. Just tell Micky to hide until he's gone."

But Percy shook his head.

"Forget it. I haven't spent the last four months carving preservation runes day in and day out only to give up when the guy finally shows up. Besides, there's no escaping this now."

"How so?" Nesha furrowed her brow.

“Need I remind you that the swamp is full of traps and other traces of activity? No way he misses all that.” Percy explained, before continuing. “If he goes in, he’ll know there are humans working with Micky. After that, he’ll interrogate the townsfolk until they all figure out it’s us.”

“What if we run away now? We can circle around the province and escape towards your family’s mansion.”

“There’s no guarantee he won’t catch up. I don’t know about you, but if I’m going to face him, I’d much rather do so in the swamp, taking advantage of all our arrangements.”

Nesha swallowed hard, the finality of their situation hitting her. There was only one way out of this, and it was over that man’s corpse.

“So, how do we handle it then? Have Micky keep him busy until nightfall?”

“No way. I’m not leaving Micky alone with him. Let’s head to the swamp now, before he’s done talking to Fegan.”

“What if somebody comes looking for us later? It’ll look suspicious if we disappear right before this guy goes missing.” Nesha said.

But Percy only smiled bitterly in return.

“That’s tomorrow’s problem. For now, let’s focus on surviving.”

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The sunlight barely pierced through the dense canopies, softly illuminating the muddy waters of the Grisly Bog.

Percy and Nesha had split up, each hiding behind a different tree. A Green's spells were more than powerful enough to kill them both in one fell swoop, so they figured it was best to not stay clustered together.

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They'd also wrapped more home-made bandages around their torsos, to hide their grades and, in Percy's case, his mana channels once he used Synchronization. Not that it would make much of a difference, but he'd gladly take any edge he could get.

As for where they got them from? Naturally, he'd crafted them himself, engraving the preservation runes on a few long strips of linen. They weren't as good as the one Baldy had given him, nor the ones Nesha had purchased for Micky back in the Alchemists' Guild.

But it couldn't be helped. Percy didn't have access to the enchanted silk those were made of. Instead, he'd embroidered their interior with reinforced cyan constructs, meaning they wouldn't last very long, nor would the cover they provided be as ironclad.

'Oh well… They'll have to do.'

The rhythmic squelch of boots trudging through the muddy waters broke him out of his thoughts. The sounds were interspaced with the occasional crunch of a twig breaking – betraying their opponent's arrival.

Percy's heart pounded heavily in his chest, thrumming with both excitement and fear in equal measure. And he knew this feeling, having experienced it a few times before. It was the same he'd felt back when he ambushed Rick and his goons, or when he fought against the Starry Knight. This was a fight he couldn't guess the outcome of.

Biting his tongue, he forced himself to calm down, breathing as deeply and as quietly as he could manage, directing the ambient mana to his two cores. At the same time, he nodded at Nesha who was hiding some distance away. Next, he coordinated with Micky too.

'Don't approach him. Just fly in the vicinity and be ready to intervene if one of us needs backup.'

Percy knew Micky was strong, but he couldn't risk his friend getting close to the powerful mage.

The trio patiently waited for their opponent to draw nearer, mentally preparing for the difficult fight ahead. And soon, it was upon them.

'He's about to step on a trap!' Percy grinned.

This wasn't some big coincidence either. He and Nesha had practically filled the place up with them. It was never a question of if it would happen. Only when.

That said, their window to act would be brief, and he refused to waste it. Taking another deep breath, he forced his boosting art to take effect, clenching the invisible scythe tightly in his grasp. The cyan and silver motes leaked out of his pores, soon blending into a teal halo, enveloping his reddening skin as he accumulated fused mana.

'I sure hope the concealment rune works.' he thought, rushing to complete his preparations in time.

Percy had carved one on the tree's trunk too, to hide the sudden spike of mana until the last second. Shifting his weight on his backfoot, he extended his right hand – the one holding the weapon – backwards, tensing his muscles.

Then, he sprung forth using all the strength he could muster, throwing the Soul Harvester through the trunk, its sinister edge spinning soundlessly towards the enemy mage.

The scythe covered half the distance in an instant. Percy's heart skipped a beat, thinking it was going to land.

But it wasn't meant to be.

The experienced noble noticed something was off at the last second, instinctively stepping out of the crescent blade's path. Unfortunately for him, however, his foot landed right on top of a pitfall!

Not wasting a moment, the girl triggered the pocket rune, causing him to fall through the collapsing ground. Sadly, he barely sank a few inches before hardening a sheet of dirt underneath his feet, arresting his momentum.

Realizing this was the best they were going to get, Nesha toggled the enchantment again, managing to slice the man's left foot off as he leapt out of the trap. The earth mage let out a pained groan as a fountain of blood poured out of the stump.

But he didn't let the injury distract him, immediately rolling on the muddy ground, narrowly evading the barrage of teal projectiles raining down at him. Percy clicked his tongue in annoyance, lamenting the fact that the throwing stars weren't engraved with concealment runes like his scythe.

That wasn't the end of their offensive, however, as a handful of black butterflies rapidly zigged and zagged around the trees, homing onto the noble from several directions. At the same time, Nesha activated all the other pitfalls around him, trying to destabilize the ground.

Yet, the man wasn't having it.

Pulling a ridiculous amount of earth mana from his sternum, he sent a violent shockwave underneath him, crushing all the traps into dust. At the same time, five stone pillars rose from the ground, accurately slamming into the butterflies, one after the other. The earth constructs shattered upon impact, but so did Nesha's spells. While space mana was powerful and destructive, it could still be overpowered with enough brute force.

Luckily, Percy had one last trick up his sleeve.

Reaching out to his scythe – which was currently lodged in the ground a few metres behind the earth mage – he pulled it towards him, while robbing it of its substance.

Spinning through the air at a frightening speed, the now-incorporeal construct was on course to chop the oblivious noble right in half!

The man was still trying to get back to his foot when the weapon reached him. He did notice it again but, between the scythe's close proximity, and the agonizing pain of his injury, he reacted a second too late this time. Granted, he barely managed to avoid a lethal wound, but he failed to dodge the construct entirely.

Willing the scythe to materialize, Percy watched a flash of teal illuminate the gloomy bog, slicing through the man's arm. The severed limb splashed into the mud a moment later, as another fountain of blood gushed out of the wound.

Falling to his knees, the colour drained from the Green's face, the man looking like he was about to pass out. Though he didn't let that happen. Experienced as he was, he gritted his teeth, forcing himself to keep looking at his opponents, keenly aware that his life would be forfeit should he feint here.

Percy smirked, thinking they had this in the bag, when he noticed something strange through Mana Sense.

"Shit! DODGE!" he warned his companion as he caught the man's sinister intention at the last second.

Leaping to one side, he barely avoided getting impaled by a stalagmite, before shifting his attention to Nesha. The girl hadn't reacted as quickly as him, the construct rending a chunk of flesh off her thigh. It wasn't lethal, but she wouldn't be able to stay in the fight.

Turning back to the earth mage, he saw the pain in his expression was strangely muted, a subtle grin now replacing it. The bastard was just baiting them before…

But that was only the beginning, as the guy manifested two massive javelins, each thicker than Percy's arm. Next, he launched one towards him and one towards Nesha, evidently intent on finishing her with this move.

"Micky!"

A comet of green and amber dove towards the javelin at a ridiculous speed, crushing it in his talons. Following Percy's earlier instructions, he snatched Nesha up, flying away before the earth mage had the chance to follow up. Though a few words seeped through their bond a moment later, tinged with worry.

‘What about you?’

‘What else?’ Percy shrugged.

‘I’ll finish the job.’

Chapter 166: Slugfest

Fighting against a Green by himself was arguably reckless, but the man was already two limbs down. If Percy couldn’t even beat him in this state, then it would just mean their plan had been doomed from the start.

“Just who are you people?! Are you members of House Avalon?!”

Percy wasn’t that surprised by the accurate guess, but he wasn’t that interested in chatting either.

Dashing forward, he launched another round of throwing stars, not even bothering to turn them invisible this time – the guy would just spot them through Mana Sense.

The earth mage hopped out of the way using his one good leg. His movements looked a little silly, but he didn’t get hit even once, evading all the constructs without fail. Not just that, but Percy didn’t miss the ripples of earth mana spreading through the ground every time the man’s foot landed in the mud.

‘Nice try.’ Percy leapt out of the way whenever his opponent’s soul flared, dodging the rising stalagmites.

Still, this wasn’t going to work. Even with Synchronization active and two cores at his disposal, Percy couldn’t possibly match a Green’s regeneration. At this rate, he would run out of mana first.

Calling the scythe back, he threw it at his opponent, following it by another barrage of teal daggers. The man dodged everything again, but he was forced to use some mana at the end, propelling himself out of a dagger’s path.

‘Good. This can work.’ Percy grinned, pulling the Soul Harvester towards him once more, pressing on his advantage.

The scythe’s attacks didn’t cost him any mana, so he could keep spamming them to drain his opponent. Of course, he was certain the man could easily shatter the weapon to pieces if he managed to grab a hold of it. Sadly for him, however, this wasn’t an option – not as long as Percy kept it in its incorporeal state.

That said, the earth mage didn’t allow himself to remain passive either. Intensifying his own efforts to pin Percy down, he unleashed a relentless onslaught of powerful spells. He shot lots of compact stone arrows at ridiculous speeds, pairing them with insidious stalagmites that stabbed from various angles.

Percy had to keep his Soul Vision glued to his opponent’s soul, and his Mana Sense fixed on the ground beneath his feet, barely giving himself the briefest of margins to dodge the deadly attacks. Like that, the two men danced on the battlefield, the splashing waters of the swamp breaking the sombre silence of the Grisly Bog.

On one side, Broose had the overwhelming advantage afforded to him by his higher grade and his many decades of experience, as well as the confidence that came with it. Unfortunately for him, he was also missing two limbs, leaking a scary amount of blood with every passing second.

On the other side, Percy had his own tools to rely on, desperately trying to bridge the monumental gap to his monstrous opponent. His boosting art and twin cores worked together to elevate his physique beyond a Yellow’s, but even that wasn’t enough by itself. He had to supplement his lacking reflexes with the foresight afforded to him by Soul Vision, and to bolster his subpar agility with the grace and precision of his two fighting styles. As for the difference in mana regeneration? His only choice was to whittle Broose’s mana pool down, one spell at a time, by exploiting the scythe he had painstakingly created.

In other words, Percy had to use everything at his disposal – and then some – hoping it would be enough.

But it was! Or seemed to be, at least. At some point, Percy noticed his opponent’s attack had come a second too late. He didn’t think much of it at first, but it happened again a minute later. And then a third

time, even sooner than that. Once or twice could be written off as a mistake, but this was starting to look like a pattern.

‘Either he’s trying to bait me again, or the blood loss is finally getting to him.’

Both were possible – the guy had already proven he was as cunning as a fox. But he was human too, and he’d already lost a ton of blood by now.

Not willing to miss what might be a huge opportunity, Percy prepared his mantle again, launching another barrage of throwing stars, while simultaneously pulling the scythe towards him.

Unable to dodge both attacks, Broose chose to evade the far deadlier Harvester, allowing some of the throwing stars to hit him. He winced as three of them sank a couple inches into his soul, his knee visibly shaking from the pain. But he didn’t let himself collapse just yet. Still, Percy knew it was only a matter of time.

‘Not a bluff then. He really is at the end of the rope.’

Capitalizing on this, Percy repeated the same tactic, forcing his opponent to eat another handful of small attacks, gnawing away at his endurance one shallow wound at a time.

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But the experienced Green wasn’t going to give up this easily, it seemed.

The third time Percy tried this, Broose dodged the scythe again, though he didn’t even bother to avoid the throwing stars, letting them hit him all at once. The damage caused his soul to shudder, but he ignored it. He glared hatefully at Percy, his eyes bloodshot, a savage grin plastered all over his face.

At the same time, a large amount of mana gushed out of his sternum – this was everything the man had left! – before unleashing several spells at Percy, all at once.

Three stalagmites shot at him from various angles, forcing him to tiptoe around two of them, twisting his torso at an unnatural angle to narrowly escape the third one. But that was just the beginning, as four stone arrows arrived next, right when Percy was in no position to dodge them properly.

He did manage to avoid two of them, but the third one pierced a hole in his shoulder, all but disabling his left arm entirely. As for the last one, it was heading straight towards Percy's heart – he couldn't evade it!

Gritting his teeth, Percy turned the Soul Harvester corporeal, rotating its shaft to block the arrow.

It worked – sort of – as the two constructs collided against one another, shattering in a rain of shrapnel. Percy had escaped certain death, but he didn't come out of this unscathed either.

Coughing a mouthful of blood, he fell to his knees, half a dozen shards of his own spell lodged into his torso. One had even grazed his cheek, leaving a shallow cut right below his eye. Had it flown a couple inches to the left, Percy might have died already.

'Fuck. This was his goal all along.' he realized grimly, looking up at the earth mage.

He was grinning at him!

The man had probably realized he couldn't win unless he robbed Percy of his weapon first. After all, the scythe was quite the cheat! It packed more of a punch than a Yellow's spell, and Percy could keep spamming it at no cost. And… the only way to rob Percy of his weapon had been to force him to block with it!

'It doesn't matter. His condition is just as shitty as mine. No… it's even worse. He's out of mana!'

Broose was breathing heavily, his core empty. Apparently, this last move had cost him the last of his reserves.

'I can't let him recover!'

Knowing this was his chance, Percy smashed the three stalagmites trapping him, freeing his body before rising to his feet. Even the slightest movement hurt, but he had to kill his opponent before he began casting spells again!

Ignoring his injuries, he dashed towards him as quickly as he could manage, while drawing the Soul Harvester towards him. More than half of the shaft was broken, but the piece holding the blade could still be used in a fight.

As soon as he reached Broose, he swung the broken weapon down at him, trying to chop the man's soul to pieces.

But the latter hopped out of the way without much difficulty. He didn't seem to struggle detecting the weapon either, as its enchantment had come undone in many places, a series of cracks ruining the few remaining concealment runes.

Percy wasn't one to be deterred so easily, however. Pivoting around the earth mage, he slashed at him horizontally, aiming right below his ribs.

Broose leapt backwards to avoid the attack, before diving forward again, trying to land a hook with his remaining fist. Percy hurriedly ducked, feeling a rush of air brush over his hair. He was keenly aware he'd lose his head should the Green's punch connect.

'Then, I guess I just won't give you the chance.'

Spitting a mouthful of blood at his enemy's face, Percy rushed him again, stabbing at his torso.

The man twisted his body to avoid it, having probably seen through the clumsy sneak attack via Mana Sense. Next, he punched at Percy's stomach.

Percy had to move the scythe's blade in the way, to absorb some of the impact. The teal construct shattered into more shards as Percy was sent back, his feet carving two wide trails through the mud.

Not giving up, he summoned the shards to his hand, one of them stabbing his palm by accident. But he ignored the pain, tossing them at Broose, hoping he'd have a tougher time avoiding them like this.

The latter hopped away from the first one, ducked beneath the second, only allowing the third to graze his arm, before sending two more stalagmites stabbing at Percy, exhausting his reserves again.

Percy pushed against the first stalagmite, using it as a crutch to dodge the second, before drawing the shards to him once more, trying to hit his opponent from behind. At the same time, he also emptied his own cores, throwing a few teal daggers too.

Finally, the earth mage failed miserably, getting hit by most of the projectiles. Two of the shards stabbed into his back, a handful of the knives digging into his soul. But none of the constructs had enough force behind them to rip a Green's soul apart.

Left with no other choice, Percy dashed forward, slamming into his opponent with as much strength as he could muster, knocking him into the mud.

Broose tried to fight back, but Percy didn't let him, punching with his one good hand again and again, trying to pummel the enemy's skull into a pulp.

Eventually, the man managed to land a hit of his own on Percy's stomach, causing him to cough another mouthful of blood.

Uncaring about the sweet taste of iron in his mouth, and unbothered by the sticky liquid dirtying his chin, Percy resumed his assault, hoping his opponent would give out before he did.

The two continued their brutal slugfest, Percy's flesh bruising and his bones cracking every time his opponent connected. Luckily for him, Broose had already lost most of his strength, his attacks barely a shadow of what they should've been. This was the only reason Percy had even lasted this long.

Neither of them bothered to replenish their mana anymore – it was impossible as both combatants were constantly out of breath. At this point, Percy was just happy Synchronization was still active – the few dregs of mana swirling around his channels were the only things keeping him alive.

Whoever ended up winning, this fight was destined to end by one's fist.

Everything blurred in Percy's vision, as he continued to unleash everything he had at his opponent. In the end, he didn't even register when the man breathed his last. The only thing that gave Percy pause was when he saw Broose's soul beginning to crumble.

Exhaling in relief, he wanted nothing more than to plop back and rest. But he couldn't do that just yet. He didn't worry about Nesha as much – Micky should have taken her to where they'd stashed some of their spare healing potions.

But there was one thing he still had to do.

'The operation! I need to get Micky to eat his soul, or everything will have been for nothing!'

Chapter 167: Operation

Percy fought against the pain and exhaustion to keep his eyes open, waiting for the others to return. Doing so proved almost as difficult as the battle itself.

Eventually, he heard the rhythmic flap of Micky's wings. Tilting his head up, he saw the crow approach rapidly, dropping Nesha in a murky pond a few metres away, before landing next to him.

"Are you ok?! What happened here?!" the girl asked, scanning the ravaged battlefield.

It was full of craters and broken pieces of stone jutting out of the swamp waters, along with the occasional shard of teal faintly shimmering beneath the surface. Percy remained silent, merely pointing at Broose's body, lying motionless by his side. That was explanation enough.

Nodding in understanding, Nesha then limped over. The bleeding in her leg had stopped, but her injury wasn't fully healed. Percy didn't miss the two vials clenched tightly in her hand, a verdant liquid swirling inside. They should've been more than enough to complete her recovery. Evidently, she'd chosen to hold on to them instead.

'For me…' Percy almost teared up.

Sure, he was the one who'd bought the potions in the first place, but it was the thought that counted. That said, he shoved the pointless thoughts to the back of his mind for now. They had more urgent things to worry about.

"Grab the corpse and take it to the others. Then, eat them all, starting from the strongest one." he told Micky. "And hurry up. We'll only get one shot at this."

The crow didn't hesitate. Scooping Broose's body, he took off promptly. But Nesha didn't seem as convinced this was a good idea.

"Are you sure this is the time to be experimenting with your soul? How about resting first?" she asked, though she still handed him the potions.

"The longer we delay, the less soul mana we'll be able to extract from the carcasses." Percy shook his head. "I don't know about you, but I've gone through too much shit to mess it up now."

Then, he pulled the last shard out of his chest, wincing in the process. Finally, he accepted the vials, uncorking them both before gulping them down, one after the other.

At first, blood gushed out of his wounds, but it slowed down to a trickle as soon as the potions took effect. About a minute later, the soreness in his muscles faded a little too, his exhaustion partially muted. He still wasn't in the best condition, but he should at least be functional.

He tossed the empty vials one last glance before placing them in his pocket. Sadly, these had been the last of their potions. They'd have to be a lot more careful moving forward, as they no longer had the means to heal if they got injured.

'I should have read up on potions while I was still in the Guild.' he smiled bitterly.

Of course, it wasn't like he'd had much spare time back then. His schedule had been packed with more important things. Besides, the potions would only grow less effective with each promotion.

Sighing, he walked over to a boulder sticking out of the water's surface, sitting on it cross-legged. Taking a deep breath, he directed the ambient mana to his cores, activating his boosting art.

'No time to waste. I need to refill my reserves by the time Micky starts sending me mana.'

"Nesha… can you please watch over me for a couple of hours?" he asked his companion.

The last thing he needed was to be interrupted by a wild beast during the delicate procedure. Nesha didn't say anything, but he saw her nod by the corner of his eye. She might not be the most skilled combatant, but she shouldn't have much trouble keeping a Yellow beast at bay. Not that there were many of those left in the swamp…

Next, Percy thought back to the scattered memories of his unfortunate clone, recalling how he was meant to proceed. Gathering some soul mana to his index finger, he inflicted a series of shallow incisions along his limbs and torso. It might have not been necessary, as his soul was plenty banged up already, but he didn't want to stray from his "instructions".

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'It's best to do it properly. Maybe those cuts are placed there for a reason…'

Percy finished his preparations just in time, as a river of soul mana gushed through the cord, filling his frame up in an instant. Obviously, this mana was from Broose, its quantity and quality reminding him of the Starry Knight's. Unwilling to waste a single drop, Percy directed it to his wounds, supplementing it with mana from his channels. Nesha let out a surprised yelp, probably not having expected him to release such a colossal amount of soul mana from his body.

But he wasn't done just yet.

As soon as his first core reached an equilibrium, absorbing ambient mana from his lungs as quickly as it came, Percy moved some pure mana from his abdomen to his sternum. Next, he carefully poured as much into his first core as it could safely handle. The action made him feel bloated, the organ struggling to process the two streams of mana at once.

Yet, Percy wasn't deterred. Capitalizing on the technique he'd spent the last couple of months mastering, he began the arduous process of converting one affinity to the other, adding a third source of soul mana to the mix.

'This is all so complicated…' Percy groaned, his head throbbing in pain.

There were way too many disparate tasks straining his already tired mind, and he had to juggle them all perfectly, as even the tiniest mistake could throw the whole operation in disarray. He had to keep enough mana in his channels to prevent Synchronization from fizzling out prematurely, and he also had to maintain Self-bestowal at a precise margin.

And finally, there was one last thing he needed to worry about.

As the three rivers of soul mana rushed out of his wounds, he brought all his memories of death and suffering to the forefront of his mind, trying to lace the mana with the right scent, to make it more enticing for his target.

'Come on… Take a bite, will you? I went through so much trouble to prepare the perfect meal for you!'

Seconds became minutes, as Percy fought against his own body to keep everything in an equilibrium, the promise of power pushing him forward. Strictly speaking, he still didn't know what exact benefit the mysterious creature might give him once he absorbed it, but his clone had made one thing clear:

It was worth it.

However, the first complication emerged sooner than Percy would have liked. No, his target had yet to approach. And no, he hadn't made a mistake either. Instead, it was Micky who suddenly stopped feeding him mana.

'What happened?! Don't tell me Broose's soul has run out already?!'

Not that he was keeping track of time, but he felt it hadn't been nearly long enough. Had he simply been too absorbed in the operation to register the passage of time, or had the man's soul deteriorated too much?

Either way, Micky didn't say anything. Instead, he responded by moving on to the Yellow corpses, a new trickle of mana soon flowing through the cord. Of course, it paled in comparison with the last one, but it couldn't be helped.

'It is what it is, I suppose…' Percy sighed, returning to the task at hand.

This would certainly make things more difficult, but it didn't necessarily mean they'd failed. That was something they'd only determine at the end, after they'd fully exhausted every last drop of mana. Right now, his best bet was to keep going for as long as he could.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed Synchronization even further, delving into a dangerous territory. His channels burned, as his cores felt like they were about to burst, but the flow of soul mana strengthened ever so slightly. That said, this wasn't enough to make up for the loss.

Next, he switched his attention to the Self-bestowal spell. It worked tirelessly to transform the mana from one affinity to the other. But it wasn't good enough. Not fast enough.

Pushing the technique along, one small nudge at a time, Percy risked giving himself mana poisoning to eek a few more drops of soul mana out of the spell. At the same time, he delved even deeper into the conversion process, focusing on the very natures of the involved affinities.

Pure and soul mana were different in many ways, but similar in others. Both appeared soft and weak at first, with pure mana making for flimsy constructs that crumbled easily, and soul mana not even perceptible to the naked eye, nor particularly effective in a fight when used blindly. In fact, Percy had personally suffered from this perceived "weakness" of each of his cores at different times.

'But that's just an illusion, isn't it?'

Neither of these mana types was truly as they seemed. When used correctly, soul mana was one of the deadliest. By now, he had already honed it into the sharpest, most potent weapon in his arsenal. And

that was without mentioning its utility in mending and preserving souls, or the unprecedented interaction with his Clone bloodline that had given him so much.

And the same was true for pure mana. While it was widely considered the weakest affinity, that only held true for those too ignorant of its many uses. Whether it was the revolutionary elixirs that had turned Remior upside down, or the reinforced constructs that elevated his cyan mana into a true pillar of his arsenal, pure mana held its fair share of secrets once one dug deep enough.

'Both of them are brimming with untapped potential!'

At that moment, something clicked in Percy's mind, as his understanding and appreciation of the two affinities rose to a new level. Responding to his thoughts, the cyan mana in his sternum began to shift even more rapidly, seemingly eager to transform. His soul core, too, started devouring the substance with even greater zeal, as Percy's Status finally pitched in.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Self-bestowal – Crude -> Soul Conversion – Refined!]

Chapter 168: Outcome

Seeing the notification, Percy couldn't help but crack a smile. This wasn't what he'd set out to accomplish, but it now meant that even if the operation ended up failing, it wouldn't have all been for nothing. That said, he wasn't going to give up so easily either.

'Let's make it two for two.'

Leaning onto his newly upgraded spell, he intensified his efforts in releasing the mana out of his body. Opening his eyes, he couldn't help but draw a sharp breath as he gazed at the scene before him, almost messing up his boosting art's rhythm!

Everywhere he looked, he was surrounded by a thick, silver mist. He had no idea how far it reached, but it was definitely beyond the edge of his sight. And, judging by Nesha's awestruck expression, she could probably see the substance too, even without Soul Vision. It was dense enough to be visible to the naked eye!

But Percy didn't allow himself to get distracted.

Diving back into the task at hand, he used both of his Refined spells, continuously pouring more mana out of his body, pushing it outwards into the cosmos. Or, well… at least, that's what he hoped he was doing.

Either way, he kept at it for a long time, only stopping when, at some point, he noticed the mana had stop seeping through the cord. Creasing his brow, he was about to ask Micky what happened, but the crow beat him to it.

'I'm sorry, Percy. That was the last body.' Micky said, sounding a little disappointed.

Truth be told, Percy wasn't feeling much better. By now, he'd had to face the fact that this was unlikely to work. He was already well into the tail end of the operation, his current output a mere shadow of what he'd started with. Despite their excessive preparations and the many risks they'd undertaken, it appeared they had still failed to lure the mysterious creature to Remior.

'How much mana do I even need?! Or is that even the problem?! Is it possible the technique just doesn't work for humans?'

Lots of questions were floating around Percy's mind, though he hadn't halted his efforts quite yet. He knew his odds of succeeding dwindled with every passing minute, but he figured he should see this to the very end – just to be thorough. He'd come this far, after all.

Synchronization was the first of his spells to give out – which happened a few hours later. Perhaps, it might have lasted a while longer had he attempted the experiment in a better state, but he'd chosen to do this right after barely surviving a brutal fight.

Soul Conversion didn't put as much of a strain on his body, but there wasn't much point keeping it active by itself. Without the boosting art, he didn't even have any pure mana to convert. With a heavy heart, Percy finally let go of the spell, realizing it just wasn't meant to be.

He was about to draw upon whatever dregs of mana were still coursing around his channels, to patch the tears in his soul, when he caught something glinting by the corner of his eye.

Raising an eyebrow, he examined it more closely. The object glowed in a silver colour, somehow bright enough to even pierce through the dense fog in his surroundings. And it grew brighter still by the second, apparently heading straight towards him! If this was any other day, his first assumption would have been that his clone was on the way back to Remior… But he hadn't sent one!

'Don't tell me?!' his heart skipped a beat, though his next thought caused the colour to drain from his face. 'Shit. I'm out of mana!'

So focused had he been on actually luring the creature over, that he forgot he was supposed to keep part of his reserves on the side, so that he could actually handle it if he succeeded.

Panicking, he began to breathe rapidly again, forcing some of the mana he'd just released back into his core. Unable to gauge how much time he had left, he hoped he'd be able to replenish enough mana to protect himself.

The good news was that it didn't take much effort to gather it, nor did it need to be converted. The silver mist in his surroundings was already filled to the brim with soul mana. His own soul mana. Percy was practically swimming in it, as it flowed back into his core with a single thought, filling it up rapidly. That said, his channels protested loudly over his efforts, burning intensely wherever the mana flowed.

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'Pipe down already. We'll get some rest as soon as this is ove–'

He didn't even get to complete that thought, when something slammed into him like a meteor. The shockwave shook his very soul, reminding him of when his clones returned. Though, instead of latching into its rightful place inside a crater in his stomach, this object tried to forcefully squeeze through the shallow cuts, worming its way into Percy's channels! What's more, it lashed out violently against its surroundings, trying to tear Percy's soul apart from within!

'What the fuck is this?!'

The pain was agonizing, but he'd always known this was some kind of living creature he was inviting into his body. Drawing some of his recently replenished mana, he surrounded the intruder from every direction, blocking its paths.

The creature wasn't having it, however, biting against the interior of Percy's channels, trying to dig itself out of the blockade.

Gritting his teeth, Percy clamped down on it forcefully, trying to trap it in place.

It resisted, thrashing against the mana, trying to extricate itself from its shackles. It appeared to be on the losing side, but Percy still hesitated to bring this thing into his core. What if it caused him some serious injury?

However, he shook his head a moment later, realizing he was being silly.

A mana core was even sturdier than one's channels. He'd also have a lot more mana there, not to mention much greater control over it. If the creature failed to fight its way out of the channel, it wouldn't stand a chance inside the core.

Making up his mind, he finally pushed the creature along the narrow tube, slowly forcing it into his sternum. Once it fell inside, he unleashed all the mana he could muster against it, squeezing it into a tiny ball.

'Not as tough now, are you?'

He couldn't help but exhale in relief. The hardest part was already behind him. The only thing left was to absorb the creature and reap his reward – whatever that was.

"Percy? What happened to you? Did it work?" Nesha fired a barrage of questions, her voice tinged with concern.

Opening his eyes, Percy noticed she was giving him a weird look. She must've watched him as he fought to contain the mysterious creature, though she'd ultimately chosen not to say anything, not wanting to disturb him during the critical moment. Micky was there too, having returned at some point.

"It's fine. I'm fine. I've got everything under control." he hurriedly explained, his friends' expressions easing.

"Micky, can you help me figure out what this thing is?"

Strictly speaking, Percy knew how he was meant to proceed, but he'd rather figure out what exactly he was dealing with before absorbing it into his soul. Especially since the procedure was supposed to be irreversible, as far as he could tell.

Heeding his request, the crow inched closer, peering into Percy's sternum with its innate Soul Vision, as Percy did the same. It was hard for them to discern the creature's shape, compressed as it was. Percy cautiously loosened his hold over it, letting it stretch a little. Though he didn't see much, only catching a glimpse of what he thought was a bug's leg.

"Got anything?" he asked his familiar.

"Not sure. I think it looks like a spider…"

Nodding, Percy continued observing the creature for a couple minutes, trying to piece together its appearance from the momentary twists and turns in its shape. In the end, he somewhat agreed with Micky's assessment.

The creature did resemble a spider – at least to the extent that it resembled any animal he was familiar with. Though it seemed to have a few too many legs. While he failed to count all of them, he was pretty confident it had over a dozen. Moreover, the twig-like limbs appeared to bend in every which direction. Whatever the creature used them for, it wasn't to walk on solid ground.

'Oh well… Let's face it… It could have looked like anything, and I'd still absorb it.' he shrugged.

Swirling the mana inside his core, he peeled layer after layer of the creature's body, causing it to squirm in pain. Honestly, this part made Percy feel a little bad – even triggering some traumatic memory for a second there. But he didn't stop. He couldn't let a spider's feelings stand between him and his goals.

Percy watched the severed chunks of the creature's body dissolve in his core, before sending some of the mana through his channels, spreading the substance around his soul. And, perhaps not unexpectedly, this action caused an immediate reaction.

Wherever the mana travelled, Percy felt his body itch. It was as if somebody had emptied a bucket of ants inside him, the tiny pests crawling all over his organs. Except, this feeling didn't affect his flesh, but his soul. And just like with soul pain, this unpleasant sensation was a hundred times more intense than the physical equivalent.

If he wasn't sitting already, he was certain his knees would have buckled, as he desperately tried scratching the uncomfortable feeling out of his skin. Sadly for him, this wasn't something he could fix with his fingers.

Still, he maintained enough awareness to keep an eye inside his sternum, unwilling to let the creature loose in his core. The latter kept its resistance up, struggling to free itself to no avail, its body dissolving rapidly amidst the rotating vortex of mana.

This went on for a couple minutes, though to Percy they felt closer to hours.

Luckily for him, the itching vanished without a trace as soon as the creature did. Whatever this operation had done to his soul, it was over. At this point, Percy wanted nothing more than to go to sleep, the past few days having been downright hellish.

Yet, it would be remiss of him if he allowed himself to pass out before confirming one last thing…

Spectral trait:

Chapter 169: Truth

A stray ray of sunlight licked Percy's eyelid, causing him to wrinkle his nose in irritation. He didn't wake up until a couple minutes later, however. The first thing he noticed was the stench of rotting wood and

spoilt eggs. Not the most pleasant scent to come to, though it didn't take him long to recognize where he was, having spent months training in this very place.

'Why was I asleep in the middle of the swamp?'

A rush of memories soon followed, reminding him of yesterday's events. Or, well… At least he hoped they were yesterday's.

Shifting a little, he realized he was sitting against a tree's trunk. Apparently, his companions had been kind enough to not leave him rolling in the mud. Nesha was sleeping in a similar position a few paces away. Tracing Micky's location through the cord, he soon found him perched up on a branch nearby, scanning their surroundings.

'Update?'

'You finished doing the thing. Then you went to sleep. We took turns watching over you. It's been longer than a day.'

Percy nodded. There were plenty of things he had to take care of, but one of them took precedence over everything else. Not missing a beat, he pulled up his Status again, this time taking the chance to examine it more closely.

Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

Bloodline:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Decrees:

As usual, the section with his spells was a complete mess. The Status seemed to group them based on their tier, but didn't bother sorting them beyond that. At least, they weren't in chronological order, and Percy couldn't spot any other pattern either. Not just that, but he could swear their order sometimes changed randomly for no apparent reason.

'The more I learn about it, the more shortcomings Phoebe's Decree seems to have.'

Percy didn't want to be too ungrateful towards the titaness – her handiwork had done wonders for his sanity over the years. That said, he had to admit the Status had plenty of room for improvement…

In any case, he shook the pointless thoughts out of his head, his eyes moving to the most recent addition. Not that the question marks were particularly informative, but at least it meant the operation had been a success.

'I suppose whatever the trait does, I'll notice sooner or later. Hopefully, its name will update when the time comes, to help me figure it out.'

Truth be told, Percy would much rather just receive his reward directly than have to solve another riddle. He'd earned it – having worked for months on this project! But it couldn't be helped. He very much doubted even the temple's evaluations could shed light on something this exotic.

"You're awake!" Nesha exclaimed, startling him.

"I've been up for hours." Percy rolled his eyes, trying his best to maintain his composure. "I just didn't want to disturb your beauty sleep."

"Nice try." she smirked. "Truthseeker bloodline, remember?"

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Shrugging, Percy didn't dwell on his poorly executed prank much. He pulled against the tree's trunk to yank himself to his feet. The movement hurt, his body beyond sore. His mind wasn't doing much better, his brain feeling like mush. Even his channels burned quite intensely, despite having sat idle for so many hours. The thought of missing several doses of Aurora Dew stung the most, however.

'And I'll have to skip a few more.' he grimaced. 'Best not to push my cores too far.'

Not that losing a week off his next promotion was the end of the world – certainly not when it was over a decade away. But he'd rather not get into the habit of thinking like that. Growing up, he'd heard plenty of stories of lazy nobles who'd needlessly delayed their advancements by skipping cleansing sessions willy-nilly. Hell, if he wasn't mistaken, Uncle Gareth had wasted quite a few years like that, reaching Green half a decade later than he was meant to.

"I think you should be more worried about the mess we're in." Nesha said, guessing what he was thinking about.

"It's not that bad. No matter what we do, House Tantalus isn't going to send a Blue after us." he replied, before elaborating.

Following their latest stunt, the enemy family was bound to realize the culprit wasn't just some wild beast running rampant in the bog. Their first suspect would naturally be House Avalon. And technically, they'd be correct – despite the fact that Percy hadn't coordinated with his relatives.

That said, they only had five Blues, so they couldn't afford to remove them from their posts. Not even for a few days. If they did that, Baldy was guaranteed to pounce on their weakness, dealing a blow far more severe than anything Percy and Nesha had done so far.

Consequently, House Tantalus only had two viable options. Either they'd ignore Bogside town completely, or they'd have to send more Greens – if and when they could afford to spare them.

"What if the war ends without us knowing? Or if you've misjudged how valuable this town is?"

"I haven't. Both their towns are valuable, but not as much as several Greens – which is what they'll lose if they give my grandfather an opening. As for the war, I wouldn't worry about that. Wars all over

Remior will only keep escalating until the lotus blooms. Probably for a while after that too, until all the losers are eliminated."

Nesha remained silent for a few minutes, contemplating his words. In the end, she nodded, apparently not disagreeing with any of it. While she wasn't the most experienced in a fight, she probably understood politics even better than he did, having studied them her whole life.

"So, what's the plan then? Do we just stay here, waiting for the next Green to come our way? That sounds a little dangerous."

She wasn't wrong. Even with all their preparations, Percy had barely managed to kill Broose by the skin of his teeth. The next person House Tantalus sent would be a lot stronger.

"For now, let's head back to the town. We need to gauge the situation there before we plan our next move."

"What's there to gauge?!" Nesha asked in protest. "The cat is out of the bag! The guy went into the bog, never to return! If we show up all injured after being gone for two days, they'll know it was us!"

"Of course." Percy nodded. "What I meant to say is, we need to gauge their stance towards all this."

Nesha tilted her head in confusion, prompting him to explain.

"We'll tell them the truth. And we'll see how they react."

"Are you crazy?! We're still in enemy territory! They'll rat us out to their masters! And that's only if they don't attack us themselves!"

"Nesha, I don't know if you've noticed, but we've done them a favour. These people are afraid of House Tantalus. They'd have revolted a long time ago if they could."

“So what?! You think you’ll just tell them a few flowery words and get them to march behind you against a noble House?! They only have a few untrained Yellows and Oranges!”

“I don’t need them to “march behind me”, or even help us against the Greens. Just to keep turning a blind eye to our actions. The current arrangement already works for everyone. The evil House Avalon is ambushing House Tantalus’s people inside the Grisly Bog, while the innocent commoners of Bogside town don’t know anything about it. They only need to maintain our cover as a Red-born blacksmith living with his wife, and they get to live peacefully with their loved ones. It’s a win-win.”

Nesha shook her head.

“That sounds great on paper. But there are hundreds of them. All it takes is one coward to go behind everyone’s back, and we’ll be the ones who get ambushed.”

“Then, it’s lucky we have somebody who can recognize lies, isn’t it?” Percy grinned. “We just need to ask some well-placed questions here and there and we’ll know if anyone intends to snitch on us.”

Nesha exhaled in defeat. This wasn’t the first idiotic plan Percy had forced on her, and it probably wouldn’t be the last. But hey, hadn’t everything turned out fine so far?

“Let’s assume this works. We’ve only bought ourselves more time until the next group arrives. How do we kill them?” she asked, changing the topic.

“Well, I’ve got nothing concrete just yet, but the last fight gave me a few ideas. I’ll start working on a new spell as soon as I bring a couple more runes from the Vault. And I’ll need your help with something too.”

The two bid Micky farewell, before heading back. On the way, Percy brought Nesha up to speed on his plans. By the time they arrived they’d even discussed how to approach the townsfolk.

Entering the town, they made their way to the centre, ignoring the gasps and exclamations of the residents. If the caked mud and bloodstains on their clothes hadn’t clued them in already, the grisly trophy Percy paraded through the streets certainly did.

The two only stopped once they were outside the tavern, facing a crowd of people headed by Fegan. Percy tossed Broose's torn robes on the ground in front of them, the bloodied garments eliciting another round of sharp breaths and worried whispers from their audience. But he didn't let their growing unease deter him, looking at them confidently before speaking.

"My name is Percival of House Avalon."

Chapter 170: Snitches and stitches

At first, the townsfolk stared at the ill-begotten tatters of silk in stunned silence. Over the next two minutes, Percy watched the colour drain from their faces, their eyes widening with panic. But still, nobody dared to utter a sound. It wasn't until another minute later that somebody finally broke the oppressive stillness.

"What have you done?!" a man cried, his voice quivering.

"Those cursed life-suckers will have our heads!" another shouted.

Like a spark igniting dry tinder, the second voice set the crowd alight. Mutters and whispers rippled through the gathering. Many of the residents covered their mouths as they spoke, some casting nervous glances at Percy and Nesha, while others pointed at them with trembling fingers. Soon, their fear began to transform into quiet accusations.

"Everyone, calm down!" Fegan raised his hand, causing the chatter to die down.

Then he took a step forward, approaching Percy.

"Young man… While I'm sure you have a lot to tell us and, believe me, everyone here is dying to hear you out, there are a couple things I'm going to need you to clarify beforehand."

Percy didn't say anything, merely nodding at the old man to speak.

"Is the owner of those clothes dead?"

“Yes.”

“And is it safe to assume the other nobles who disappeared over the past few months are too?”

“Naturally. Or did you think they’d gathered together to have a year-long picnic in the swamp?” this time it was Nesha who pitched in.

Percy glared at her to drop the sarcasm. Sure, it was a dumb question, but they wanted to win these people over, not to antagonize them.

‘Where did the outburst even come from? Is she still pissed off at them for nearly getting her killed last year?’

Either way, if Fegan took any offense, he didn’t show it. He cleared his throat before speaking again.

“May I ask how this is possible? Don’t take it the wrong way, but I don’t think the two of you could have accomplished all this by yourselves.”

“We aren’t alone.” Percy replied with a half-truth. “As for the details, trust me, you’re better off not knowing them.”

The old man nodded, clearly sharing the sentiment. He was about to say something else, but somebody from the crowd butted in again.

“We should hand them over!”

“That’s right! Maybe the nobles won’t blame us if we distance ourselves from this!” somebody agreed.

Hearing them, Percy carefully scanned the crowd, trying to discern the prevailing opinions. A few of them nodded along with the men who’d spoken, too scared to defy their masters. But the majority

grimaced or clicked their tongues instead, evidently not as fond of their overlords. It was one of them who spoke next.

“You idiots! Can’t you even recognize what’s good for you?! How many of our people died this year?! Zero!” Mr. Dylan said, vouching for Percy.

And he wasn’t alone.

“Yes! I can’t believe your first reaction is to sell your saviours off to those bastards! We should be building statues of them, not stabbing them in the back! You should all be ashamed of yourselves!” a woman yelled, berating her neighbours.

The faction opposing Percy didn’t give up though.

“You’re acting as if they’re doing this for our sake. This is nothing more than a war between two noble Houses – and we’re the ones caught in the middle. I’ve no clue who’s going to win, but I’d rather not piss off the people who own us.”

The heated debate continued for a few minutes, as men and women from both sides argued with one another. At times, Percy was tempted to defend himself, but he ultimately held back. He figured it was best to let them speak their minds first, getting everything out there before making his case.

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Eventually, it was Fegan who cut the discussion short.

“Ok, that’s enough. We’ve heard both differing opinions, but Percy and Nesha have yet to tell us why they chose to come forward today.”

He turned to Percy, looking him in the eye for a second before continuing.

“Young man… I admit we got off on the wrong foot all those months ago. And I was the one at fault. You’ve done a lot of good for our town – whether it was your intention or not – but you’ve also kept many secrets from us and put us all at risk. Would you care to explain what you’re trying to accomplish?”

“What’s there to explain? I’m glad my actions have improved your lives, but I admit that wasn’t my goal in coming here. I have my own reasons for targeting House Tantalus. Like some people have said, you all just happened to get caught in the middle.”

“So, why tell us now? And what are you going to do next?” Fegan asked. “Are you leaving?”

“Honestly, I’d have kept it a secret if I could. Sadly, it wasn’t an option this time. But no. I’ve no intention of going anywhere. Though, that will depend on your stance.”

“This is madness!” somebody interrupted. “They’ll get us all killed!”

But Mr. Dylan slapped the guy to shut him up.

“Just let him finish.”

Seeing hundreds of pairs of eyes return to him, Percy continued.

“I’m not asking you to help us, nor to fight House Tantalus alongside us. Just pretend you didn’t hear any of this. Let us keep doing what we’ve been doing in secret. That’s all we want.”

“Can you guarantee House Avalon will win?” Fegan asked.

Percy shook his head.

“Naturally not. But what difference does it make? We’re the ones taking all the risk. If we lose, we die. Nobody will blame you. Not to mention, regardless of whether we win or lose, every person with the Drain bloodline we kill is one less person slaughtering your loved ones in the years to come.”

“Basically, you only need to keep your mouths shut.” Nesha jumped in. “Simple enough?”

More chatter ensued, as the two sides argued some more, before Fegan ultimately put the issue up for a vote. In the end, the side supporting Percy and Nesha won by over 300 votes to the opposition’s 25. It was an overwhelming victory – which made sense, really. The townsfolk didn’t have much to lose by covering for them. Like Percy and Nesha had said, all they had to do was literally nothing, and they’d come out ahead either way.

That said, 25 people were plenty enough for somebody to do something dumb and screw things for everyone. Keeping her bloodline a secret, Nesha took the opportunity during the discussions to pick those people off one by one, discreetly asking them a couple of questions here and there, to determine whether they intended to behave.

“Well?” Percy asked once they were back in their house.

The girl shook her head.

“Like I told you, it’s impossible. I’ve identified at least 5 people who I’m confident will screw everything up. Unless you want to try assassinating them, we should get the hell out of here.”

But Percy grinned.

“We aren’t going anywhere.” he said, causing Nesha to raise an eyebrow. “Obviously, there was always the chance of things turning out this way. But we can make it work in our favour.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t sure if House Tantalus would continue throwing people at us after losing Broose. Too much risk, and too many unknowns. But what if they had a clearer idea of what they were getting into, and even thought they were going to catch us off-guard?”

“You’re intentionally baiting them over! You want people to snitch on us!” Nesha realized.

“Well, no. It would have been simpler if they could just do as they were told. It’ll be much harder to lure the Greens over to the swamp like this. But we can give them a warm welcome here – in the town – instead.”

Nesha gave him a long look, seemingly reevaluating the person she’d chosen to follow. But she didn’t say anything. They’d already discussed several aspects of Percy’s plan. The only thing left was to piece everything together.

Percy didn’t speak either, instead grabbing the sewing kit Mr. Dylan had generously given him earlier. Honestly, Percy had wanted to pay for it, but the man had refused to accept any money. He’d even offered to waive the cost of the pig iron in their future dealings, though Percy wasn’t planning to continue posing as a blacksmith now that their cover was up. Micky provided them with more than enough food to get by, and they no longer needed to hide their money either.

Threading the needle, Percy then lifted his shirt, trying to stitch one of the nastier cuts the potions had failed to close. Having grown in a house full of life users, and then spent half a decade in a place where one could easily buy healing potions, Percy had never learned how to apply basic first aid.

But how hard could it be?

Yet, the moment he was about to pierce his skin, something strange happened. It was almost as if some primal instinct took over, guiding his hand forward. Before he even realized what was happening, he’d finished patching his wound up – adding 7 stitches in total.

‘What the hell? This was easier than I thought it’d be…’

Thinking of something, Percy then took his shirt off, examining it closely. His fight against Broose had left it full of holes. Perhaps he was better off just buying a new one, but walking around in patched rags would better sell the image of a harmless peasant. Either way, there was something he wanted to test.

Passing another linen thread into the needle, he began working on his shirt, allowing the same strange feeling to overcome him. Percy had never felt anything like that before. It was almost like he finally found his true calling after a lifetime of searching!

Not even a minute later, he was done.

Staring at the formerly banged up piece of cloth, he marvelled at his handiwork. One could still spot the stitches if they looked closely but, overall, the shirt had been repaired near-seamlessly. Not just that, but Percy had accomplished this with the speed and efficiency more befitting of a master tailor than an amateur.

Growing more and more certain of his guess, he opened his Status again. As it turned out, he wouldn't have to wait that long for his answer…

Spectral trait: