Wanderer 181

Chapter 181: The alchemy test

Another month passed since the activation of Enki's second core, and Percy hadn't stopped working on the regeneration pills in that time.

Now that the boy was free from the arduous task of clearing his channels, Percy had asked him to pay attention to what he was doing. After all, observing a trained alchemist at work with one's own body was a unique learning opportunity. Enki would benefit a lot from feeling the mana flowing through his channels, getting used to the visual cues informing him of when he was meant to increase the heat on the concoction and so on.

Of course, Percy's fumbling attempts with his shoddy equipment weren't the most ideal teaching aides, but they would still save the boy years of study down the line. Something that was of paramount importance if Enki truly wanted to work as an alchemist after he was gone.

'Is this going to be enough for the test though?' the boy asked one day.

Percy's success with the pills had been quite mixed. He had managed to brew them many times over, but his results were anything but consistent. Sometimes, he would end up with a pill nearly twice as large as what was needed, indicating a yield approaching 40%! In fact, he got really lucky once, retaining enough of the moss's properties to split it into two pills of acceptable quality!

Then again, there were plenty of times when he failed the brewing process entirely, not even getting to 20%. If this happened during the test, they'd miss their opportunity. This was unavoidable, as he was brewing blindly, so a lot of it ultimately came down to guesswork and luck.

Still, Percy was satisfied with the experience. While he didn't know if they would achieve their goal in the end, his practice here was bound to pay dividends down the line.

Back on Remior, he mainly relied on his eyesight to predict the concoction's reactions during the brewing process. According to what Orin had told him, the best alchemists learned how to combine visual cues with information they glimpsed through Mana Sense, to act with even greater precision.

Now that Percy was forced to rely on Mana Sense alone, he had no choice but to master this auxiliary skill at an accelerated pace, which should have a positive impact on his yield in the long-term. Still, he wanted the Decree too.

'It's the best it's going to get.' he sighed. 'We'll take the test five eruptions from now, after getting some rest.'

In theory, they could have delayed it until he got even better. Unfortunately, he'd already spent way too long on Atlantis. The time of the lotus blooming was rapidly approaching, and he had no idea what had happened with House Tantalus either. For all he knew, his main body might need him back already.

Not just that, but there was no point in delaying much longer. His improvements had already slowed down to a crawl so, unless he got his hands on some better equipment, it would be years until he was confident in passing the test with any certainty. Suffice to say, their best option was to give it a shot right now, and hope they won the coin toss.

'Alright.' the boy spat. 'I just wish we could try it more than once.'

If they could do that, they'd pass for sure. And, technically, there wasn't a hard limit preventing people from retaking the test, though there were a few rules to make it more difficult.

For one, the test required a hefty entrance fee. Enki would have needed years to save up enough money for it by himself. Luckily for him, the multitude of regeneration pills Percy had brewed in the past month were barely enough to cover the expense, though they'd need another month for a second attempt.

Even worse, applicants had to wait 200 eruptions to retake the test after failing it – a period of time longer than 3 months according to Percy's estimates. These rules were intentionally put in place to ensure applicants were serious about it, and that they didn't take the test every other day just for fun.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

***

Enki swam towards a large stone building, approaching the singular window near the top. Luckily, there didn't seem to be a queue today, so he made his way directly towards the guard.

"Here for the test?" the man gurgled in typical Atlantean fashion.

The boy just nodded, handing him a small pouch filled with some fingernail-sized fish scales, giving off a pale greenish sheen.

Accepting the money, the man asked to see his other possessions. Fortunately, he didn't make him lift his skirt, but still frowned upon seeing the shoddy cooking utensil they planned to use as a makeshift cauldron.

"Kid, are you sure you don't want to save up for some proper tools? You're just wasting your money."

Enki shrugged.

"The tools are way more expensive than the entrance fee. I'd need over a thousand eruptions to amass enough scales."

The guard shook his head, but didn't say anything else. Still, he confiscated most of the moss, leaving only enough for a single attempt. Next, he moved aside, gesturing at them to enter.

As soon as they were inside, the man closed the gate behind them, leaving them alone in the room. It was a large circular area, with a single totem-like structure erected in its centre. Enki approached it, as both he and Percy marvelled at its beauty. ɾάɲÑỖ฿ĚŠ

It was seemingly built out of dozens of large pearls, each bigger than a watermelon. They were stacked together into a vertical column, with multiple faces carved into them. Percy was a little taken aback by their wild, toothy expressions, but he knew part of it was just due to how the natives looked. In any case, all the pearls had one important feature in common – they all shone in a deep crimson colour.

'I bet this thing is full of mind mana.'

It wasn't that surprising, considering that Ea's Decree worked similarly to Phoebe's. In any case, he was just glad his clones didn't need mind mana for their second cores anymore, or things could have easily turned ugly.

'Ready?' Enki asked, taking him out of his thoughts.

Unpacking the cauldron and the moss, the kid laid them in front of them, as he waited for Percy to do the honours. As much as he would have liked to pass the test honestly, he knew he wouldn't stand a chance as he was. This was going to be all Percy.

'Might as well.' the latter shrugged. 'Wish me luck.'

Twisting the lid of the sphere off, Percy then tossed the portion of moss the guard had generously allowed them to keep inside. He also threw a sticky piece of yellow mud in there – this was what the locals used to counteract the sea salt. Next, he pulled a trickle of pure mana from his abdomen, pouring it into the pot too. This was how he'd compress the pill later.

Finally, he twisted the top of the sphere back on, as he gathered some fire mana to his fingers, passing it onto the metallic surface of the tool. He felt the sphere instantly rumble, as the ingredients began to bubble within it. Giving the tool a spin, he closed his eyes, letting his mind sink into the inner world of the concoction with his Mana Sense.

The whole thing shone in a dim Orange colour, but he could faintly discern – based on his experience – a few lumps clustering together here and there. Intensifying the flow from his sternum, he upped the heat a little, before spinning the ball the opposite way, to eliminate the pesky lumps before they had the chance to cause trouble.

Several minutes passed, as both Percy and Enki remained quiet, their attention glued to the contents of the sphere. The concoction's hushed rumbles were the only thing softly breaking the oppressive silence of the vast chamber, as beads of oily sweat seeped out of Enki's skin one after another, crowning his forehead.

At some point, Percy could have sworn he caught the totems' many eyes flash a shade brighter than before. Evidently, the structure had begun observing their efforts.

‘I hope this is just an automatic response. I’ve had enough of gods finding out about the Moirais’ Decree…’ he smiled bitterly.

Though there was nothing he could do about it, besides diving back into the brewing process.

In the end, the entire session finished without any climactic turn of events, nor any impossible last-minute hurdle they had to overcome. It didn’t last any longer than his previous attempts either.

Of course, that was not to say that everything had gone smoothly – the concoction still presented him with its standard share of unfortunate surprises – each gnawing at the eventual yield a little.

But they wouldn’t know whether they had succeeded until they looked inside the sphere.

Carefully opening the lid, they gazed at its contents with bated breath, the verdict of their endeavour looming silently over their head. There, a single marble floated quietly. It was among the smallest Percy had crafted, and its condition wasn’t the greatest either. Its surface was full of cracks, though they didn’t detract from its undeniable green lustre.

It was a success!

Although somewhat imperfect, there was no mistaking it!

This was a lesser regeneration pill!

Lifting his head, Percy saw the totem staring at them with what he could only describe as silent approval shimmering in its countless crimson eyes.

Suddenly, the entire column flashed twice as brightly as before, a dense crimson aura radiating outwards, rapidly enveloping them. Clearly, their examiner had found them worthy and was about to grant them their prize!

‘Ea’s Gift! Finally!’

Chapter 182: Alchemist's Eye

A soothing feeling massaged Percy's mind as the totem's gentle radiance seeped into his host's head.

Over the next few minutes, he sensed something sprout, almost like a new window opening in his mind, waiting to be peered through. This would have probably felt bizarre if he hadn't had access to something similar for most of his life already.

'It's actually happening! It's like a brand-new Status taking shape in my head!'

Yet, his celebration was cut short when the totem's glow died down halfway through, leaving the new Decree incomplete. Panicking, Percy tried to access it, but Ea's Gift didn't respond, making him fear something had gone wrong.

'Percy, what's going on? Why did it stop all of a sudden?' Enki asked.

Percy didn't say anything, not having an answer for his host. Opening his eyes, he carefully scanned the glowing pillar in front of them. It was a lot dimmer than before, its colour blinking erratically, almost as if it was unsure as to what it was supposed to do.

'Is it because the mana was split between me and Enki?'

If Ea's Decree affected one's mind like he suspected, it was conceivable the totem would need twice as much mana to grant it to both of them. Had their efforts been doomed to fail from the start?

As if responding to his thoughts, the structure seemed to finally come to a decision. It flashed brightly once more, resuming its work. A new round of crimson soon emanated from it, bathing Enki again.

Percy relaxed as soon as the refreshing feeling in his mind returned. Over the next few minutes, he was content to merely wait there, enjoying the process. What worried him a little, however, was the fact that the totem almost grew entirely dark by the time it was finished.

‘Not looking forward to explaining that to the guard…’

In any case, that was a problem for later.

As soon as the procedure stopped, Percy felt a far more complete sensation in his head – something finally clicking in place. Eager to put his new toy to the test, he reached into the door in his mind, willing Ea’s Gift to manifest.

Though, that was when he ran into another issue.

Unlike before, his efforts didn’t go unanswered this time. However, what happened wasn’t at all what Percy had expected. Rather than Ea’s Gift, it was an intense wave of agony that slammed into his mind like a meteor, making him feel as if his skull had been split in half.

‘Wh-What the fuck?!’ he asked nobody in particular, folding to his knees.

‘Percy? What happened to you?’ Enki asked, seemingly oblivious to his situation.

His voice sounded normal too. The boy clearly wasn’t affected by whatever was causing his pain.

‘Does your head not hurt? Is it just me?’ Percy asked, getting a nod back.

Thinking of something, Percy fell back to his regular Status instead. He hoped that the other – more familiar – door in his mind would be able to shed some light into his situation.

Yet, he couldn’t have been more wrong…

Contrary to his expectations, it didn’t work!

For some inexplicable reason, the trusty Decree that had always followed him to the edge of the universe and back had suddenly gone silent, refusing to appear before him!

Even worse, the mere act of calling upon it only intensified his headache further, making his eyes water and his soul squirm!

‘NOOO!!! What’s going on here?! Did the two Decrees mess each other up?!’

If this stunt had somehow caused him to lose Phoebe’s Decree, he’d want to slap himself!

Ignoring the skull-splitting pain, Percy continued his vain efforts to reach to his Status, unwilling to accept this result. Yet, the Decree didn’t respond for several minutes, causing Percy’s panic to grow like a wildfire. ŘÀNôBËş

Just as he was beginning to lose all hope, his efforts finally caused some kind of blurry message to blink into his sight for a few seconds, before fading back out.

Support the creativity of authors by visiting Royal Road for this novel and more.

[Overlapping… %!?”… detected… Calibra*(%*… unavailable… ^&)+… assimilation… underway.]

Seeing that, Percy allowed himself to calm down slightly. The pain in his head was still raging on, stronger than ever, and it wasn’t like this was guaranteed to end well. That said, his Status seemed to be aware of the problem at least. It also seemed to be actively working towards a solution. According to the message, it was currently “calibrating”, or trying to “assimilate” Ea’s Gift.

Either way, there was nothing he could do about it, besides waiting for the results.

‘Percy? You’re scaring me man.’ Enki said, his voice quivering.

It was only now Percy realized his host had been talking to him for a while.

‘I’m sorry. It’s nothing for you to worry about. I’ll deal with it later.’ he replied. ‘More importantly, can you pull up your own version of Ea’s Gift? You shouldn’t be affected by whatever is happening to me.’

Percy still had no idea if he'd end up receiving the new Decree himself, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious to see what it did.

Nodding, the boy then went silent for a second, seemingly reaching into his latest acquisition. Soon, a new panel flashed before their eyes, not unlike how Percy's Status normally worked. Yet, it had a different owner this time.

___

Enki

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Alchemic principles:

___

Percy frowned upon seeing it.

The only common section was the one listing the boy's cores. As for bloodlines, spectral traits, spells or Decrees, there wasn't a word on them. The first two weren't too surprising, as the boy probably didn't have any. But the absence of the other two was a little odd.

He could understand why the Decrees were hidden – this had originally been the case for him too. If this Ea guy was anything like Phoebe, he clearly didn't think mortals needed to know about high-level information like that. But that didn't explain why there weren't any spells.

'Does Enki not know any?'

It was certainly possible, given how little the boy had practiced with his core. Hell, Percy hadn't obtained his first spell until after reaching Orange. Still, he had a hunch there was more to it than that. Did Ea's Gift not even bother listing one's spells?

Its focus seemed entirely different. For one, it acknowledged Enki's budding understanding of the extraction principle. Percy was quite certain that his Status didn't care about alchemy in the slightest, as it had never bothered to list his own knowledge of the three pillars.

'Then, there's the mutation section. I wonder what that's all about.'

Percy didn't even get the chance to talk to his host about it, when the boy let out a pained cry, pressing his palms against his eyes. Both Enki and Percy felt their eyeballs burn intensely, as if somebody had just poured boiling oil into their face. It almost reminded him of the time he and Gabe fought against the golem.

'What's happening to my eyes?!' the boy asked, his voice shaking, as some sticky droplets accumulated in their hands.

Percy didn't even know whether to laugh or cry. His own splitting headache had yet to go away, and now he had to deal with another – probably unrelated – source of agony.

'What the hell is wrong with this Decree?!'

Still, seeing the boy sob made his heart clench. The poor kid didn't deserve so much shit. He was about to speak a few words to console him, when the two heard the gate slam open.

Activating Mana Sense, Percy saw somebody – the guard most likely – swim rapidly towards them. Yet, the man stopped right in his tracks about halfway through, his head jerking in alarm towards the totem.

"Holy One have mercy! Why is the totem so dark?!"

Next, the man turned to Enki, seemingly catching sight of the boy bawling his eyes out.

“Did you actually pass the test with that shoddy cauldron?” he asked in incredulity.

Enki only nodded back.

“Mister… do you know what’s happening to me?”

The guard remained silent for a few seconds before answering, his voice a lot calmer this time.

“Kid, has nobody explained to you how Ea’s Gift works?”

Enki merely shook his head.

“Ha! That must be why you look like your mother just died. Boy, cheer up! This is a good thing!”

“How is it a good thing?” Enki asked bitterly.

Percy, on the other hand, relaxed upon hearing the guard’s words, having put two and two together by now. Sure enough, the man’s next words corroborated his guess.

“What you’re feeling right now are your eyes mutating. The pain should go away in a few eruptions. After that, you’ll have a lifetime to enjoy the new benefits they bring you. Congratulations! You’re now officially an alchemist of Atlantis!”

The man’s words didn’t fully alleviate the boy’s worries, however.

“Mutating? What sort of benefits are we talking about?”

“Have you noticed the strange glow some of our people have in their eyes?” the man asked, getting a nod back.

“Well, that’s what the Alchemist’s Eye looks like. Why do you think the Holy One even bothered disseminating His Gift on our world?”

“I don’t understand. What does Ea’s Gift have to do with one’s eyes? I thought it just listed some important information on our alchemy skills…”

“You’re telling me you worked so hard for this, and you don’t even know why?” the guard asked. “Yes, the Gift does list the alchemic principles you master, but it’s so much more than just a glorified piece of parchment!”

Enki didn’t say anything, waiting for the man to continue.

“The Gift itself is intimately connected to the mutation. Your eyes will draw from your cumulative knowledge of alchemy, allowing you to discern things you wouldn’t otherwise notice. The more alchemic principles you master, the more things you will be able to see!” the guard said with some pride in his voice.

This time, the boy finally calmed down, but Percy wasn’t paying them any attention anymore, his mind drifting elsewhere.

‘Drawing from one’s cumulative knowledge? Will this have a different effect on me when the two Decrees fuse together?’

Chapter 183: Tools for a better future

Following the guard’s explanation, the next couple of weeks passed by in a blur.

Luckily, the man didn’t dwell much on the totem’s strange state. As it turned out, it was a lot more reasonable to assume there was something wrong with the relays supplying the structure with mana, than to guess Enki was possessed by an alien ghost. Who’d have thought?

The guard was then kind enough to escort the blind kid to the local alchemists’ association, even going as far as to hold his hand through the registration process. Better still, the people there were all shocked

upon learning how Enki had managed to pass the test despite all his handicaps, showering him with praise.

‘Percy… I know I should be happy about this, but why do I feel like a fraud?’ the boy asked at the time.

‘Don’t even go there. It’s true I did the test for you, but you’ve absorbed everything I’ve taught you like a sponge. I have no doubt you’ll make a splendid alchemist, especially with Ea’s Gift helping you. Just work hard until you feel like you deserve to be here.’

Percy didn’t say that merely to console his host. He genuinely meant every word. The boy had proven quite hardworking during his stay in Atlantis, whether it was back when he was clearing his channels, or his subsequent alchemy practice. As far as Percy saw it, he’d done nothing more than level the playing field for an unlucky orphan, giving him a chance to make it in the world.

Upon hearing the words of encouragement, the boy nodded enthusiastically, tears glistening by the corners of his still-burning eyes. Suffice to say, it was with great eagerness that he followed the association’s people as they escorted him to his new room, supplying him with brand-new tools and reading materials to further his studies. At that point, Percy was just as excited as his host, keen to put the new equipment to the test, getting a better feel for his newly mastered alchemic principle.

Even better, Enki’s eyes were done mutating about a week later, allowing them to make leaps and strides with their practice.

___

Enki

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Alchemic principles:

___

Much like the guard had explained, Enki's now-glowing eyes allowed him and Percy to peer through the outer layer of the concoction, observing the extraction process of the moss's essence in even greater detail than ever before. And that was just the start.

Even more importantly, the mutation seemed to passively fuse the boy's Mana Sense into his eyes, adding an entirely new dimension to Enki's vision!

Of course, mages could already use their Mana Sense whilst simultaneously looking with their eyes, but the two images didn't blend together nearly as seamlessly, forcing one to consciously sift through the two feeds in their mind.

In Enki's case, his sixth sense naturally bled into his sight, the two working with one another rather than against, achieving things greater than the sum of their parts. Of course, he still had to manually use Mana Sense to observe things outside his line of sight, but even having a part of it passively active was a boon that couldn't be overstated.

'If the association's staff are kind enough to lend us the materials for the cultivation pill, I might be able to demonstrate a few other principles for you.' Percy said.

Sadly, that didn't come to pass. Despite lots of begging, the veteran alchemists refused to just hand the boy everything in the end, arguing that the primary ingredient – the amber pearls – were quite expensive.

This story originates from Royal Road. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

Still, they did gift them all the secondary ingredients, and it wasn't so hard for Percy and Enki to earn enough money to buy a pearl by themselves. With his new tools at hand, and with the Alchemist's Eye aiding him, Percy's brewing yield with the lesser regeneration pill shot through the roof, letting him procure a single pearl within mere days.

The concoction itself failed, as Percy couldn't get the recipe down after one attempt. That said, he still made it far enough through the three stages to properly demonstrate the new principles to his student, registering them in the boy's panel.

___

Alchemic principles:

___

Of course, Enki would still need several months of laborious study to fully wrap his head around the principles, and even longer to actually put them to practice. However, due to how his Alchemist's Eye worked, simply understanding the basics would vastly accelerate his progress. ŗɑ□Ŏ**ƀ**EṢ

And this wasn't everything Percy did for his host.

Having grown fond of the kid over the past two months and, not knowing if they'd ever meet again, he went all out, trying to help him as much as possible before leaving. He explained everything about Circulation and Crystallization, giving the boy numerous tips and tricks as to how they could be used.

That said, Enki was unlikely to meet the requirements for the boosting art anytime soon. Even when he did, it was entirely possible he'd fail to figure out the correct patterns for the mana flow. At any rate, it was going to be a dozen times harder for him than it had been for Percy, since he wouldn't have anybody to demonstrate the spell for him.

As for Crystallization, the boy shouldn't have as much trouble mastering it, as the technique itself wasn't anything complicated. However, it remained to be seen whether he'd figure out how to bond the powder into the cultivation pills or reinforce his constructs like Percy.

And the same was true for affinity fusion.

'Thank you, Percy… For everything. For saving my life. And for fixing it.' the boy said, two streams of tears flowing out into the room.

‘Just be careful not to let others find out about any of these things. They can get you into a ton of trouble. And buy more concealment bandages the first chance you get. The ones I crafted won’t last forever.’

The boy nodded.

Percy had sewn him a few more of them, but he didn’t have the time to teach him runecrafting too. Then again, they definitely had at least some rudimentary understanding of the art on Atlantis. Getting some basic enchantments shouldn’t be too difficult for the budding alchemist.

‘Like I said a while ago, I can’t give you all the answers. But I can give you the tools to figure them out. The rest will be up to you.’

Saying that, Percy then began removing his soul from Enki’s injuries one by one, allowing them to resume their recovery as his main body’s pull grew stronger. His headache was still killing him, and his Status had yet to assimilate the new Decree, but he couldn’t delay his return any longer. At this point, his best hope was that joining with the rest of his soul would speed up the process.

‘But Percy… Are you sure you want to be sharing all these things with a stranger? This is all world-altering knowledge.’

‘I’m sure.’ Percy said without a moment’s hesitation.

He’d already thought long and hard about this issue.

Truth be told, Percy had always been extremely cautious with what secrets he revealed during his travels, afraid to accidentally give one of Remior’s enemies the means to conquer his world. Hell, he had yet to even reveal these breakthroughs to his own people, making the situation even more precarious.

But it wasn’t like this knowledge would be lost, even if something was to happen to him.

Circulation would eventually leak out of the Avalon House into the rest of Remior. Plus, Orin would disseminate the Aurora Dew's recipe sooner or later. By temporarily withholding the information, Percy had merely carved a brief window of opportunity for himself to get a little ahead. Nothing more, nothing less.

Besides, he'd never forgive himself if he stinted his first student's growth out of selfishness.

'What happens if I make a mistake one day, and your secrets leak out?' the boy asked, still concerned about that. 'What if our allies are enemies with your people?'

'Kid. I don't want you to worry about any of that stuff. Telling you these things was MY decision, and I promise you I won't regret it, no matter what. Put your own life first! If you have to, feel free to volunteer these secrets!'

Yet, the boy wasn't quite convinced.

'But these are ALL of your secrets! What if you end up dying one day because of me?'

Percy chuckled in response. Next, he pulled his soul wisp from even more of Enki's injuries, while continuing to talk to his student – no, his new friend, through the whole thing.

'You know. I used to worry about that… But do you have any idea how many amazing things I've come across… within what? Just 7? 8 years? If the day ever comes when your people think it's a good idea to act against the home of Percival Avalon, tell them to ask themselves one important question first.'

'What question?' the boy asked, receiving his answer as Percy's wisp finally got whisked out.

'How many more places has Percy visited since Atlantis?'

Chapter 184: Advancing in the Grisly Bog

The swamp reeked of decay as Percy and Nesha dragged their feet through the murky waters. Each step sucked their boots deeper into the mud, almost like the bog itself was trying to pull them under.

Had this been a year ago, they might have been attacked by an oversized crocodile or python by now. Luckily – or perhaps unluckily – the local wildlife had really taken a hit during Micky's reign of terror. Whatever animals had survived to this day had done so by learning to keep their heads low. Consequently, the only living things they had to worry about at the moment were the irritating insects constantly buzzing in their faces.

"So, are you going to carry this stuff everywhere?" Nesha asked, staring at the oversized sack slung over Percy's back.

Its contents were spacious enough to fit a human body, though that wasn't what was inside it. Every time Percy moved, countless objects rolled and tumbled within the bag, making crisp metallic sounds upon colliding with one another. Thanks to the multitude of concealment runes he'd sewn on the fabric, it was impossible for anybody to peer inside through Mana Sense. Of course, Nesha was already familiar with its contents, having spent months watching Percy forge them, one by one.

"What's the alternative?" he shrugged. "We need to be ready. House Tantalus could attack us any day now."

Despite his words, Percy wasn't particularly happy with this arrangement either.

Naturally, the sack contained the pieces of his magical armour. It had actually been over a month since Percy completed his new spell. That said, he hadn't had a proper opportunity to use it just yet. Even worse, he'd been forced to replace the components a couple times already. Plus, he would continue having to do so once every few weeks, until their enemies deigned to show up.

"If they attack us right now, we're screwed." Nesha said, her expression grim.

Normally, it was Micky's job to patrol around the town, keeping an eye out for them. Unfortunately, the crow was otherwise occupied today.

"Huh, can you imagine?" Percy chuckled. "How unlucky would that be? They don't show up for weeks, and then they pick the one day we're not paying attention?"

But it couldn't be helped. There was a reason Micky couldn't tend to his job today, and it was the same reason why Percy and Nesha had come to the swamp. That said, it wasn't a bad thing per se…

The first strands of Orange had appeared in the bird's second core!

'He's finally caught up to me fully…' Percy smiled wryly.

Not that he wasn't happy for his friend – Micky's strength was essentially his. Still, he couldn't help but compare his familiar's rapid advancement speed with his own more sluggish pace. Of course, the bird's second core didn't advance any faster than a human's – it was just the Aurora Dew doing all the heavy lifting. However, Micky's first core would likely reach Green over a century before Percy did.

'Oh well… Best not allow some petty envy to ruin a good day.' he decided, shaking any unnecessary thoughts out of his mind.

Soon, the two reached a clearing amidst the dense thicket, the warm midday rays illuminating a large circular area. There, they saw Micky perched atop a boulder, an empty gemstone vial lying carelessly by his talons. The bird didn't react upon seeing them, immersed within his inner world as he was.

Technically, the crow didn't need any bodyguards. Nothing in the swamp dared approach him anymore. Still, Percy wanted to keep watch over his familiar during the promotion, as it generally took a little longer than a regular cleansing session.

'I only wish he could have used his own beast mana for this…' Percy sighed.

Reading on this site? This novel is published elsewhere. Support the author by seeking out the original.

Naturally, this was one of the first things they had checked as soon as Micky awakened his second core. And it had actually worked – to an extent. Due to his control over his own mana, Micky could direct it to remove the impurities in his second core in an acceptable manner, without having it undergo pacification, redirection or deattunement.

It wasn't as perfect as drinking an elixir, a few mistakes here and there lowering the cleansing efficiency slightly. That said, the difference was small enough that they could stomach it, to save thousands of doses of elixir down the line.

At least, this would have been the case had Percy never invented the Aurora Dew. Once the cyan powder came into the fold, things got a great deal more complicated. It was even harder for Micky to prevent his beast mana from reacting with the crystallized pure mana, as the two were essentially polar opposites.

Their only option would be to have the bird use the cyan paste separately, but that would only lower his advancement speed even more. Considering everything, Micky would be losing a lot of valuable time over nothing. Consequently, there was no choice but to have him use Aurora Dew like him and Nesha.

'It can't be helped. I won't be stingy with Micky – he deserves better than that.'

Oblivious to his thoughts, the crow eventually sent him some images of his second core, letting him watch the process. The last drops of the elixir were nearly exhausted, but the Orange strands had already began to dominate the core, twisting and banding together as they rapidly consumed their weaker cousins.

At the same time, they violently lashed out against the ethereal organ's inner walls, scraping even more impurities than one should generally cleanse within a single session. Suffice to say, this wasn't sustainable in the long-term. Overindulging like this could permanently damage one's core if done often. Still, advancements were special occasions.

Soon, all the free space inside the core was occupied by thick strands of Orange, exerting a great amount of pressure on the organ. With nowhere else to go, the strands had no choice but to finally fuse together a moment later. The mana condensed into a blob with a satisfying click, splashing down at the core's base, filling around a third of its capacity.

As for the rest of it, it only took Micky a few minutes to replenish, letting out a content caw as a wave of vitality flooded his body.

"Congratulations Micky!" Nesha exclaimed.

Percy couldn't suppress a grin tugging at his lips either, though his next words weren't quite as celebratory.

"Now go do your job before we all get killed."

"Party pooper." the bird spat back, but he acquiesced.

They both knew Micky was just as eager to put his newfound power to the test. Taking off, the crow activated his boosting arts as he sped out of the swamp. Apparently, Micky wasn't satisfied with breaking the advancement record today – he wanted to break the speed one too.

"I don't know about you, but I suddenly feel a lot more confident about taking on the Greens." Nesha said as soon as they were alone.

By now, they were operating under the assumption that House Tantalus would send at least two of them. Percy intended to take one down by himself, so Nesha and Micky would have to team up against the second.

"He's strong all right, but I wish I had the time to teach him another spell or two."

Micky was already as smart as a human. Circulation and Acceleration weren't bad, but the bird should be capable of a lot more than that. At the very least, Percy wanted to teach him some form of mana conversion at some point.

In the same way that his own pure mana was more suitable to feed other affinities, Micky's beast core should have an easier time transforming other mana types into its own. With a little guidance, he might even be able to solve his stamina problem.

Percy doubted the bird would be able to keep his Yellow core fed during a fight, but replenishing his strength afterwards might not be so difficult. Like that, they wouldn't have to remain fixed at locations like the Fungal Spire or the Grisly Bog, giving them more freedom to roam Remior.

‘He’ll still need to hunt to advance, but at least we won’t have to worry about him starving to death if we can’t find a good place…’

In any case, Percy had had too much on his plate over the past few months. But he’d definitely invest some more time into his familiar the first chance he got.

Suddenly, something unexpected happened, capturing Percy’s attention. For a moment there, he felt his ethereal cord vibrate – the one in his stomach, not his sternum. Evidently, his clone was finally on the way back.

‘About damn time.’

This one had stayed away for over two months, shattering all previous records. Percy wasn’t as worried that something bad had happened, as he hadn’t felt any atypical response from the cord – unlike the time with the mysterious girl.

Whatever had delayed his clone was probably a good thing. Rubbing his hands in anticipation, Percy brought Nesha up to speed as the two headed back to their hut. He’d rather be in the safety of his home by the time the clone arrived.

That said, Percy might not have been as eager to reunite with his clone had he any idea how painful the next couple of days were about to be…

Chapter 185: Ea’s Decree

Percy had no idea what to expect from this latest clone of his, but whatever it was, it had to be a lot, right?

And, well... Reality didn’t disappoint.

The silver meteor punched through Percy’s soul like a molten dagger, leaving him gasping for air as memories, pain, and pressure ruthlessly slammed into his mind.

The crushing weight of an ocean… the frigid embrace of an abyss… a dead orphan… an ambitious venture… exotic knowledge… a narrow success… a selfless decision… a grateful student… a stern warning…

Percy would need a lot more time to properly sift through everything, but a boatload of memories wasn't the only thing the clone had brought. By far the most noteworthy was arguably the new Decree! But there was more still. A spell upgrade, a new alchemic principle and… a mutation?

Suffice to say, it took him a couple moments to fully grasp why his head felt like it had been cracked open by a hatchet, or why his eyes felt like they were on fire. Evidently, his new improvements came with their fair share of growing pains. But it should ultimately be a good thing, right?

"Percy! What's going on?!" Nesha cried out in alarm.

The poor girl had never seen one of his clones cause this much damage upon their return. Not that Percy had, either.

He forced himself to stand with difficulty, gesturing at Nesha that everything was fine – or would be. Next, he fumbled his way to his bed, nearly tripping on his jar of powder, blind as he was. Only once he was sitting on the familiar mattress did he try opening his Status again, hoping he hadn't just crippled himself out of greed.

___

P????a? A?a???

Ma?a ????:

B????????:

M??a????:

Sp????a? ??a??:

Sp???s:

A????m?? p?????p??s:

D?????s:

___

‘Ugh…’ Percy winced as the page opened, the very act tuning his pain up to eleven.

That said, it wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been. Unlike back on Atlantis, he was at least able to open his Status – on the first try no less. Even better, after a quick count, he confirmed that all the sections were there – both the old and the new. The only thing left was to figure out how to fill them up properly.

‘Maybe I just need to go over my spells one by one, to help it register them again?’

Not the most groundbreaking idea, but he felt it was worth a try.

Starting with the easiest one, Percy pulled some mana from both of his cores, fusing it into a sliver of teal, before tossing a handful of throwing stars against the wall. Nesha jumped back in surprise.

Percy didn’t bother explaining himself, as he dove back into his spell list.

___

___

Suffice to say, seeing part of his Status restored caused his heart to skip a beat. And the change went so much deeper than a couple of words… As soon as the entry corrected itself, Percy felt something click inside his head – almost as if a broken shard snapped back into place, a smidge of fog lifted from his aching mind. ₹aɴ**O**βĚŞ

At the same time, something flowed into his eyes. It wasn't mana, nor blood. It was something more ethereal – almost like the thoughts and feelings he regularly shared with his familiar through their connection. If he had to put his finger on what it was… it was information… knowledge… ideas…

If you stumble upon this tale on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

'Alright, I suppose this is the way to go.'

"Percy! Will you pause for a second and tell me what's happening to you? You're scaring me!" Nesha snapped at him, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"I'm sorry to worry you. Just hold on for a little longer. Whatever this is, I think I know how to fix it." he said, not going into too much detail.

Next, he began casting his spells one after another. Grabbing some teal powder from the pot, he started with two of the easiest ones, spending the next half an hour forging a new scythe. He had no doubt that the weapon was laughably misshapen, but his Status didn't seem to mind, recognizing the entries for both Reinforcement and the Soul Harvester.

Moving a trickle of pure mana into his sternum, he then began refilling his first core until Soul Conversion registered too.

The following part was a little trickier, because his clone had only registered the spell upgrade while they were separated. Digging into his memories was still quite painful, but Percy eventually managed to remember how Soul Stitching worked, using it to accelerate his soul's recovery. As a bonus, using his Spectral Art lifted the fog off his Weaving trait too.

By now, Percy was doing a great deal better, graduating from feeling like somebody had cracked his skull open to feeling like somebody had… cracked his skull open… gently?

In any case, there was only one path forward, and it was to keep going until every word in his Status was back to normal.

‘Ok… Now for the toughest entries.’

Ironically, his only Crude spell was the hardest to reproduce. At the very least, Percy had no intention of creating a new familiar on the spot. Luckily, trying to pull up Micky’s Status seemed to do the trick, sparing him the trouble.

The next spell was his Phantomscale Gauntlet. The Status hadn’t registered the upgrade to the full-body armour yet – maybe because he hadn’t used it properly – which made his life a little easier. Still, reforging 54 pieces of his magical gauntlet was going to take days, and that’s if he wasn’t doing it blind. Fortunately, the first couple of components seemed to jog the broken Decree’s memory, saving him a great amount of time there as well.

‘That only leaves one entry… in the spell section, at least.’

Taking a few breaths, Percy directed the mana to both of his cores as he slowly activated his boosting art. As soon as the entire section was repaired, Percy’s headache died down greatly, allowing him to exhale in relief.

However, that only lasted a second, before another unexpected complication emerged.

His eyes – which were still burning as painfully as before – reacted to the new spell in a way they hadn’t during his previous attempts. A powerful attraction emanated from them, pulling a ridiculous amount of mana from Percy’s body, as a wave of vertigo now accompanied the pain, making him sick.

Percy wanted to deactivate Synchronization, but he didn’t dare too. Given how violently his eyes were devouring his mana, he was afraid he might seriously injure himself if he failed to meet their demands.

‘Oh well… I’m sure this will stop at some point.’ he shrugged. ‘What next?’

His spell and spectral trait sections were already back in order, which left his mana cores, his mutation, his bloodline, the alchemical principles and his Decrees. Some of that he hadn't a clue how he was meant to fix. Still, some weren't as complicated.

Activating Mana Sense, he scanned both of his cores, marvelling at their Orange lustre. He'd already used both of his affinities for his spells, so this last morsel of information was the final clue his Status needed to fix the first section.

Unfortunately, this trivial action introduced yet another problem.

'Shit, now I can't deactivate Mana Sense either.'

By now, he'd be a fool if he couldn't recognize the pattern. The only two things he couldn't deactivate were his Mana Sense and Synchronization. Or, more precisely, it was the passive Soul Vision afforded to him by his boosting art.

Percy already knew from Enki that the Alchemist's Eye tended to passively incorporate Mana Sense into its features. Evidently, Percy's version intended to go a step further down that route.

Whatever the reason was, the influx of information brought about by his sixth sense put a lot of strain on Percy's already tired mind. He honestly had no idea how much longer he'd last like this.

Still, there was only one way forward, and it was to complete what he'd set out to do.

Gritting his teeth, he delved into his memories, trying to visualize the act of brewing an elixir. Naturally, he wanted to use that to repair the alchemic principles in his Status. It would have been better to actually brew an elixir than to rely merely on his imagination, but he didn't have any nectar at hand, nor was he in any state to practice the delicate art at the moment.

It took several minutes, but the principles eventually snapped in place one after the other, each of them washing his mind in a soothing wave of relief, alleviating more and more of the crushing pressure.

Next was his bloodline…

‘Might as well then…’ he clicked his tongue.

Perhaps, he could repair Clone through his imagination alone, but there was something else the clone could help out with. In any case, the most recent crater in his stomach was already nearly healed – between Soul Stitching and Synchronization, his recovery speed had reached an all-time high.

Actually preparing the clone took a few more hours – especially with his eyes snatching a significant part of his mana. And naturally, Percy hated every second of it, wanting nothing more than for this shitty day to end. But he pulled through, eventually.

‘Alright… Only the Decrees left…’

Scanning the final section, he was positively surprised to see that most of the Decrees had snapped back in place too. Between his discovery of his second core, as well as his use of both his bloodline and his Status, only two remained.

Metatron’s and Ea’s.

Wanting to leave his latest acquisition for last, Percy then waited for his clone to return. It didn’t take that long, as he’d already instructed him to jump into the first body he found, open a portal to the Vault, and then rush right back to Remior without entering it.

And soon, the clone did come back, informing him of his success as the fourth Decree revealed itself within his Status.

‘Only the final touch is left…’

Percy had done everything on a whim, but he was confident his efforts to manually rebuild his Status one entry at a time had helped. At least, his dulled headache seemed to corroborate that guess.

“Nesha.”

“Hmmm?”

“Wish me luck.”

The girl didn’t say anything, but she grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly.

With only one last step before him, Percy then tugged at the new window in his mind, calling upon Ea’s Gift. No second tab opened, but the new Decree still responded to his thoughts, as it finally melted wholeheartedly into his Status, relieving him of the last traces of pain, as the words settled in front of him.

Chapter 186: Sorcerer’s Eye

Upon seeing the new Decree take shape in his Status, Percy was ecstatic and, most of all, relieved.

The weeks of blindly brewing pills in an air-tight cooking pot at the bottom of an alien ocean, and the several hours spent in agony trying to repair his Status…

It had all been worth it! He could finally get some well-deserved rest!

Or so he thought.

While his Status was back in order, his mutation was still underway. His headache might have disappeared, but his eyes still felt like they were on fire, greedily absorbing his mana without end, forcing him to keep both Synchronization and Mana Sense active. Too scared to interrupt the process half-way through, Percy was left with no choice but to grit his teeth and soldier through it, running his boosting art at full power for however long his eyes demanded.

Nesha stayed up with him the first night, keeping him company. She gave him some excuse, saying she didn’t feel comfortable sleeping when House Tantalus could attack them at any time. She claimed she was worried Percy wouldn’t be able to fight – or even run – like this, so it would be up to her to get him out of town.

It was all true of course, but Percy could tell there was more to it than that.

Feeling her genuine worry warmed his heart up, reminding him he wasn't on this journey alone. Besides Nesha and Micky, there was also Baldy and Elaine out there, fighting alongside him against their common enemy. They might have not coordinated – or hell, even spoken – in the last two years, but it was because of them, applying pressure on all fronts, that Percy had been able to develop peacefully during his stay in Bogside town.

The second night, he asked Nesha to just go to sleep and not worry about him. She argued back a little, but her exhaustion won out in the end. Besides, Micky would warn them if something were to happen. It wasn't until the third day that Percy's eyes finally finished mutating. Naturally, he was quite eager to discover all their secrets, but something else took precedence.

***

"Nggghhh… What happened?" Percy asked upon waking up, his voice raspy. "Have they attacked yet?"

"Finally done sleeping?" Nesha asked back.

"Why? How long has it been?"

"Over two days since you passed out. And no. At this point, I don't think they will."

Percy nodded.

They'd known this was a possibility since the start. The lotus was going to bloom in just four short months, so they'd have to return to the Avalon mansion soon regardless.

Sitting up on the bed, he turned towards Nesha, both of them drawing a sharp breath as soon as they exchanged glances. He wasn't sure what she was surprised about, but his shock was due to the bizarre sight before him.

Concealed within her figure, he spotted a person-shaped silhouette of silver, flowing like a liquid flame through her body, flickering and wavering with her every thought. In her sternum, a bright Yellow star thrummed against her chest. Strictly speaking, neither of these things was new to him, but he'd never seen them like this before.

Nesha's flesh, soul and core were interwoven seamlessly with one another, revealing details to Percy's mind that he had previously been unable to glimpse. Usually, whenever he focused on one of his senses, the others would blur and fade out a little, meaning he could only ever partially observe an object. Right now, however, the three channels in his mind were fully integrated with one another, almost as if he had grown two more heads and just as many pairs of eyes.

"Your eyes! They're glowing!" the girl exclaimed.

Ah, right. That. It was only now that Percy remembered this would be a permanent side-effect of the Decree. With everything else happening, he hadn't even considered this, though it might prove troublesome if it ended up garnering him unwanted attention. ŔĂŅÓ**B**EȘ

"How bad is it?"

"Very. If you go out like this, expect people to stare."

"Shit." he spat. "Could you please go fetch me a mirror from Dylan's? I need to know what I'm dealing with."

Nesha nodded before heading out.

Percy then picked his tools up from the spatial amulet, along with a few elixirs, setting his equipment on a table. Next, he grabbed a bowl, filling it up with some teal powder from his stash.

'I'll be damned if I let myself get bogged down by the negatives of my new Decree before even getting to enjoy the positives.'

Honestly, they could use a few more doses of Aurora Dew, their stock having fallen a little behind during the past week. Still, Percy would be lying if he said that's what was going through his mind right now. No. First and foremost, he wanted to play with his new toy!

The results were immediate, and staggering.

Whether it was his extensive practice brewing with just Mana Sense, or his new eyes mixing his senses together, he could see cues in the concoction he would have certainly missed before. He could tell when a lump was about to form a second before it did, and he could more accurately estimate the correct temperature and pressure needed to deal with it.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

Overall, both his brewing time and his yield saw massive improvements by the end of the session.

'Wow. 50%! And less than 20 minutes!'

It was shocking, considering he normally needed around 25 minutes, only successfully converting around 46% of the elixir into Aurora Dew. But this was just the start.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new alchemic principle: Bonding]

Percy grinned.

He was pretty sure this was a new feature exclusive to him and him alone. Phoebe's Decree only ever notified people of a new spell and didn't even list alchemic principles. As for Ea's Gift, he hadn't seen it present Enki with any notifications either.

'Can I do even better now?' he wondered.

Now that his eyes had gained another principle to draw knowledge from, that should increase his yield even more, right?

Sure enough, the next session only took him 15 minutes, and he ended up with a 56% yield!

Of course, brewing elixir into Aurora Dew was a two-step process, down from the regular three-step process of converting nectar into elixir. After a quick calculation, Percy estimated his actual brewing yield – at least when compared to the Guild's alchemists – should have jumped from around 32% to over 42%.

'Holy shit. That's insane!'

It might not appear like a large increase to the uninitiated, but Percy was well aware of how difficult even the slightest improvement was after 30%. Hell, Orin had been doing this for centuries, and his yield was 'only' 44% – just two points higher than this!

"Are you done playing around?" Nesha asked.

It was only now that Percy realized she had returned. That said, she should have been here for a while, clearly hesitant to interrupt him.

Grabbing the mirror, Percy examined his eyes. They glowed brightly, much like the Atlanteans', but his were a different colour. Shining in a pale teal, his irises were split down the middle by a vertical pupil.

"Can't you turn it off or something?"

"Afraid not."

It was a little inconvenient, but Percy would have to avoid meeting people from now on. At least until he found a solution.

'Crap. Will all my clones have to spend several days growing new eyeballs from now on?'

That was another issue he hadn’t considered. Perhaps he could skip all this if he didn’t link himself to his hosts’ eyes, but that wouldn’t be much better.

In any case, that was a problem for later. Percy had yet to fully explore his new mutation. Pulling up his Status, he read everything from beginning to end, appreciating the recent additions.

___

Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

Bloodline:

Mutations:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

As expected, the description of the Sorcerer's Eye was nearly identical to that for the Alchemist’s Eye, save for one minor detail. Rather than drawing from the knowledge listed in Ea’s Gift, it would now draw it from Percy’s expanded Status.

‘But that is massive… After all, there’s so much in there…’

While Ea’s Gift was merely a tool for alchemy, the new version of Percy’s Status covered a far wider variety of topics. If his eyes could draw information from all of them, he could hardly imagine all the possible applications.

‘I suppose that’s just something I’m going to have to explore over time.’

Shrugging, he then pulled his familiar’s Status up too, to see if anything had changed there.

___

Mictlantecuhtli (Percival's familiar)

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

Percy’s eyes widened upon seeing the new section listing Micky’s previously hidden mutations. While he had often referred to them as such, he had no idea they belonged in the same category as his Sorcerer’s Eye.

Had Ea drawn inspiration from the beast affinity when designing his Decree? Or was this just some kind of coincidence? Perhaps, he’d merely reached a similar result through completely unrelated means?

Either way, gaining the ability to see Micky's mutations was a fortunate accident. Not that there was anything there Percy hadn't previously inferred, but it could be helpful if he gained any new mutations during his next evolution.

"Nesha… Wanna head back to the swamp?" he suddenly asked.

"Sure, I guess. It's not like I have anything better to do. But what do you want from there?"

"Well… I haven't had my fill of the new Decree yet, and I know the perfect place to put it to the test."

"Where?"

"Remember that tribe of trolls we've heard about a while back? I think it's finally time to pay them a visit."

Chapter 187: Foresight

"Do you think this place will recover after we leave?" Nesha asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

"Sure." Percy shrugged.

Micky rarely hunted the Red or Orange beasts of the swamp. He only ever indulged in them if he failed to find something else to eat. The lower-grade animals vastly outnumbered the Yellow variants too, so the ecosystem should bounce back within a few years. At least, Percy hoped it would.

After all, the bog wasn't just a patch of wilderness. It was a cornerstone of the town's fragile economy. While Percy and Nesha's exploits had brought the townsfolk peace and safety – a pair of arguably more important commodities – that did little for their bleeding pockets.

Even after uncovering the truth behind the mysterious 'guardian spirit', fear kept the residents away from the swamp. Nobody in their right mind would dare place themselves between two warring Houses for a couple coins. Besides, even if they were braver, there weren't that many resources here anymore.

Soon, Percy and Nesha pushed into a part of the bog untouched by human hands. The dense undergrowth felt primal, each gnarled branch and mossy root a barrier against intruders. Even Micky avoided this area – not out of fear, but indifference. The swamp trolls that dwelled here were mostly Reds and Oranges, which didn't make for great snacks.

Still, collectively, the creatures were more dangerous than any lone Yellow beast. This was why predators and humans alike tended to leave this place alone, even before Percy's group came along.

"Why are we here again?" Nesha asked.

"Call it curiosity." Percy replied, sidestepping her question.

In truth, he was here for more than idle exploration. Unlike beasts, demi-humans had the potential to develop a rare affinity for him to study. That alone was plenty reason to check this place out while they still had the chance. But that wasn't everything.

Percy hoped to use this opportunity to explore his new ocular abilities, while searching this place for anything else of interest, thus killing three birds with one stone.

"Alright. Just be careful. From what I've heard, these things are a lot more dangerous than their grade implies." the girl said, a hint of worry seeping in her voice.

Percy nodded, brushing aside a curtain of vines. The swamp seemed to breathe around them, shadows shifting as they ventured deeper. Had Micky been with them, they'd have found the trolls already. Sadly, the crow was out patrolling again.

'Oh well… we'll run into them sooner or later.'

Luckily for them, it turned out to be sooner.

A rustling ahead froze them both in their tracks. Moments later, their quarry emerged. Strictly speaking, it wasn't that strange. The creatures had no need to hide, as they probably weren't used to intruders in their territory.

"Wow. It's bigger than I expected." Nesha murmured.

Indeed, the creature was twice as tall as a goblin, standing a full head taller than Percy. Its bulky build exceeded that of an adult human too. Even at Red, this thing would likely cause some serious damage if it landed a hit with its oversized stone club. Its skin looked especially rough, its blueish green hide covered in warts and granules. Two long tusks jutted out of the creature's mouth, pointing towards them.

Suffice to say, their sudden appearance startled the creature, though it didn't seem frightened enough to run away. Standing at a distance, it stared at them warily through its bulbous eyes, likely contemplating whether to attack them or call its tribemates.

"Crap. This one can't use magic." Percy clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"How can you tell?"

"Its mana channels are all blocked."

"You can see that from here?" Nesha struggled to contain her surprise.

When a creature wasn't actively using its mana, it was much harder to spot its channels. Typically, one would need to get very close, examining it carefully to hopefully spot the faintest trickles passively flowing through. It was definitely not the kind of thing one could reliably pull off from thirty paces away.

"Neat, huh?"

Uninterested in their conversation, the troll then let out a guttural roar, its previous uncertainty seemingly evaporating as its deep voice reverberated through the swamp. Having made its mind up, it

didn’t even bother waiting for its friends to arrive. It charged towards the pesky humans, its club raised high.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

Percy let go of the sack, the pieces of his magical armour clinking against one another as they hit the ground. Then, he motioned for Nesha to stay back as he strode ahead, his demeanour almost casual. He didn’t bother using his spells, figuring his two Orange cores should be plenty to cover for the gap in mass – on the off-chance he got hit. ƦⓐNȩÒ฿€ş

Though he wasn’t planning to.

When the troll’s massive weapon came down, he sidestepped effortlessly. The club slammed into the swamp floor, sending up a spray of mud and water.

‘SIow.’ Percy thought, his gaze studying the troll’s soul.

His enhanced vision painted the creature in shifting light, every flicker of its silver silhouette betraying its intent. Had this been a week ago, he would have had to dial down the mana gathered in his eyes, to examine the creature from this close.

But there was no need for that anymore.

The new eyes took care of that, constantly adjusting themselves, ensuring the creature’s soul was always as clear as a glass of water.

Another flicker of the troll’s soul betrayed its boiling fury. Percy was experienced enough by now to tell that a follow-up attack was coming.

Sure enough, the creature swung again, this time with greater force. Percy evaded it with a step back, his movements unhurried. This only seemed to infuriate the troll further, however.

It persisted in its relentless assault, as Percy dodged its wild swings one after the other, not bothering to fight back. He was content with merely protecting himself, using this opportunity to adjust to his improved eyesight, relearning how to read his opponent's intentions with far greater skill than ever before.

The blows never stopped coming, each attack a brand-new lesson, the silver silhouette revealing patterns he'd never noticed in the past.

"Percy, we've got company!" Nesha called out.

Allowing his Mana Sense to expand outwards, Percy soon detected five more of the creatures emerging from the undergrowth, their bestial growls piercing through the oppressive silence of the swamp. Two of them were at Orange too, their frames a little larger – more imposing.

Putting some distance from his opponent – it wasn't hard, the poor thing was panting heavily by now – he scanned the newcomers with his eyes, making a couple more details out.

"The leaders are both mages." he noted out loud – for Nesha's benefit.

Evidently, it was only the more talented trolls that bothered to learn magic. Lacking the means to advance, the Red variants probably struggled to get enough value out of their cores to justify the effort.

"Can you keep them busy for a few minutes?" Percy asked. "There's something I want to test."

At any rate, the group didn't pose much of a threat to them. At Yellow, Nesha might even be able to take them on unarmed, let alone if she used her magic. Though things might get a bit dicey if they allowed a few more groups to surround them.

"Should I just kill them?"

"Nah. No need. If I find an interesting one, I might make a clone out of it, but let's not butcher the poor things unless we have to."

It wasn't like Percy was above harming the creatures if there was some concrete benefit to be had, but he wasn't a fan of senseless cruelty either.

The girl nodded, summoning a handful of black butterflies. Sending them after the trolls, she forced them to back away, keeping them all at bay.

Meanwhile, Percy shifted his eyes back to his opponent, waiting for it to make a move.

Not missing its cue, the troll rushed at him again, having recovered some of its stamina already.

Allowing himself to fall into a trance, Percy resumed dodging the creature's attacks once more, as he tried to further his understanding of the soul's movements. He had been able to foresee his opponents' attacks for a long time, but that skill had always been imprecise, undeveloped. A wild flicker of the silver silhouette betrayed the intention to move, but Percy was quickly coming to realize there was so much more to it than that.

Not every twitch was equal!

If the lower part of the soul flared more intensely, it typically meant the creature was about to move its legs, not its arms. And vice versa. Yet, that was just the beginning. Based on how aggressively it flickered, he could discern whether the troll was going to step towards him, closing the gap, or away from him, trying to put some distance.

When its movements were wilder, they betrayed the creature's fury, suggesting it was about to attack him head on. But sometimes they were subtle, twisting slyly, indicating a feint or a sneak attack. The intensity of the flickers was often correlated with the interval between intent and action. The most intense flares were followed by swift attacks, whereas if the silhouette was to simmer over several seconds, it meant the creature was planning ahead.

And the way they blended together with the movements of its flesh mattered too – something Percy hadn't been able to focus on before his mutation.

'Fascinating… But I'm messing it up by dodging too quickly.'

Percy could tell he was on the verge of something big – a third image vaguely forming before his eyes, outside flesh and soul. Still, evading the attacks before they even formed only gave the troll a chance to adjust its course, causing the image to blur again.

Deciding to take a risk, Percy neared the creature some more, shrinking the margin of safety he'd given himself, dodging the troll's furious blows by a hair's breadth.

He felt the violent rush of wind brush by his ears and by his scalp, each time coming this close to shattering his skull into splinters, as he delved deeper and deeper into the faint image before his eyes, trying to pin it down.

More time passed, as Percy danced with death himself as his partner, gambling his life on the altar of magic.

'There!' he suddenly thought, his heart missing a beat.

As soul and flesh bled together into one, Percy saw it. A projection of the troll's club, passing through his very face, a secondbefore the creature even began its attack!

It felt real, he could almost hear his teeth cracking and taste the iron in his mouth. Yet none of it actually happened. Never before had Percy predicted an attack with such precision.

With unprecedented ease, he ducked the real blow with time to spare, delivering a heavy punch in the creature's stomach, his fist sinking an inch into the troll's abs.

The creature slid back through the mud, a splash of spittle and bile raining on Percy as it stared at him in incredulity. But he wasn't paying the troll any attention, his thoughts occupied by his breakthrough.

'A full second ahead!'

It might not sound like much in the grand scheme of things, but, in the midst of combat? It was a lifetime. And Percy's Status thought so too.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Wild Art: Foresight – Crude!]

Chapter 188: Casters

“A little help here would be nice!” Nesha yelled, capturing Percy’s attention.

Only now did he realize that more trolls had gathered, about a dozen of them surrounding them in total. At least, the newcomers were all Reds, only the first two capable of casting magic. Still, they put a lot of pressure on the girl, who struggled to keep them all away with her butterflies.

“Leave the casters to me.” he said, rushing towards the leaders. “If more of them show up, stop going easy.”

Not missing their cue, the Oranges exchanged a quick glance before switching targets, trying to pin Percy down with their spells.

‘Fire and water…’ he clicked his tongue as he leapt out of the way.

Neither of these affinities were worth his time. Then again, that was to be expected. Assuming the trolls were even capable of using rare affinities, he’d probably have to go through dozens of them until he found one. But that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. His new spell had plenty of room for improvement, so he could just hone it against these willing whetstones.

Taking a few deep breaths, he kept his distance until his boosting art took effect. He wanted to practice, yes, but he wasn’t suicidal. Fighting two Orange casters barehanded could get dangerous.

The creatures didn’t wait for him, continuing to pelt his location with blasts of blue and red. Still, they failed to prevent him from activating Synchronization, the two sets of lines lighting up along his reddening skin, beads of sweat seeping out of his pores as motes of cyan and silver mixed into wisps of teal.

Suffice to say, Percy no longer had any difficulty dodging the spells.

Realizing they wouldn't get anywhere with magic alone, the troll casters clenched their clubs tightly – they were even larger and heavier than those wielded by their subordinates. Then, they rushed at Percy, intent on drowning him in attacks both arcane and mundane.

Of course, he didn't sit still either. Drawing some mana from his abdomen, he shaped it into a cyan rod, ready to greet his opponents. This was the old variant of the Quarterstaff – he didn't have time for Reinforcement. Still, it should be plenty for this.

More spells descended on him, forcing him to crush them all into motes of mana one after another. The trolls reached him a second later. Percy scanned them with his eyes, the projections of their swings taking shape, betraying the trajectory of the clubs.

'It's even easier than before!' he grinned.

Capitalizing on the intimate connection between his Status and his latest mutation, his new spell became second nature for him the instant it registered. Unlike mere minutes ago, he no longer expended much effort to visualize the trolls' physical attacks, his eyes seemingly doing everything by themselves.

'But it doesn't work for magic…'

Having designed the spell by observing the interaction between one's flesh and soul meant that he had left the third aspect of one's existence out of the equation, as it didn't account for the flow of mana. That said, this unfortunate blind spot was precisely what he aimed to fix during this fight.

'Three projectiles… No. Four!' he corrected himself as a series of pressurized blobs rained on him.

With a quick spin of his weapon, he crushed the constructs into a harmless drizzle, his staff cracking already. Percy certainly hadn't missed that. In any case, he didn't get the chance to dwell on it, as a fireball enlarged before his eyes, about to melt his face off. It was followed by two club projections flinging at him from either side.

Ducking below the flames, he tiptoed around the trolls, avoiding their attacks with some well-placed footwork. Next, he responded to them with a few swift blows of his own, slamming their joints with the

now-repaired rod. One of them fell to its knees, the other groaning in pain, giving Percy a chance to disengage. Checking up on Nesha, he confirmed she was doing alright before diving back into his own fight.

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

More time passed, as Percy fought to expand the scope of his spell, trying to force magic under its purview. It was hard. Mana manipulation encompassed too many possibilities. Way more than flesh did, at least. After all, one's limbs could only bend in so many ways, whereas a spell could take an infinite number of shapes, from arrows, to spears, to bolts, to swords… to sickles and butterflies, even. And there were too many affinities and bloodlines giving the mana all sorts of unique flavours beyond that.

But magic still operated under strict rules and, before long, Percy began to slowly wrap his head around them.

A spell needed mana to take shape, and that had to come from somewhere. In most cases, that somewhere was the caster's sternum. Of course, it could flow through a multitude of channels, but those were still finite. Not to mention, Percy had plenty of time to read its movement ahead of the attack. ŗÅŊ**o**BEŜ

Even more importantly, some affinities favoured specific patterns over others. For example, the trolls had never tried to shoot a single spell through their feet. Had one of them possessed an earth affinity, that might have been different, but water and fire were best utilized through one's palms.

Additionally, water spells were more flexible and easier to control, though no individual projectile was particularly deadly by itself. The water casting troll tried to trap Percy using a barrage of smaller constructs raining at him from various angles, primarily aiming to knock him off his feet.

On the other hand, the fire user couldn't control its mana nearly as well, focusing on head on attacks instead. That said, what the fireballs lacked in manoeuvrability, they made up for in sheer lethality, pressuring Percy to dodge or block every last one of them without fail.

'Finally!' Percy grinned as he spotted the first few faint shadows precede his opponents' spells.

Of course, it had taken way longer than he cared to admit, and he wasn't anywhere near done. Still, the contrast between the two affinities made it a little easier for him to predict their patterns, as he got more used to the trolls' rhythm. Sadly, this was about the most he could accomplish today, as the first traces of exhaustion took root in his mind.

A quick glance revealed that Nesha wasn't doing much better. She struggled to keep fifteen butterflies active, clumsily holding just as many Reds at bay. She was panting heavily too, though she hadn't complained in a long time – to her credit. Evidently, she took this opportunity to practice her magic as seriously as him.

"Let's call it a day." he said.

What scarce rays pierced through the thicket revealed the sun was close to setting. In any case, Percy suspected his forthcoming spell upgrade would be Refined, so he hadn't really expected to get it done in one go.

Nesha nodded, spooking the trolls with a burst of mana. At the same time, Percy knocked both his opponents off their feet, before sprinting towards his sack. The two then ran away, leaving an entire tribe of trolls staring dumbfounded at their backs. Still, none of them dared to chase, probably having realized how brutally outmatched they truly were.

"What was that spell you were practicing?" Nesha asked once they had returned to Micky's clearing.

The crow was back from his duties too, carelessly munching on some oversized frog atop his boulder, not paying them much attention.

Percy took a few moments to bring her up to speed, explaining how his Soul Vision worked, and how his new mutation had allowed him to elevate the ability to a proper spell.

"Wow. This Sorcerer's Eye sounds insane." she whistled in appreciation. "Say, do you think I'll get that too, when you give me a second core?"

Percy shrugged.

Naturally, he hadn't forgotten his promise to her. With Soul Stitching now at hand, he felt more confident than ever passing her the Moirais' Decree. Though he wasn't sure about Ea's.

"The clone I made a couple days ago didn't get the mutation. I'm not sure if that's because I can't pass this Decree along, or because my Status was still a mess at the time. We'll have to wait until my current clone returns."

Nesha nodded, not saying anything else.

Whether or not House Tantalus gave them a good fight, Percy intended to use his remaining time in the Grisly Bog wisely. He'd already sent another clone out before visiting the trolls, and he wasn't done with them either. His current plan was to keep fighting against more of the demi-humans over the next few weeks, testing his Foresight against different affinities, while looking for a suitable target to possess.

'But that's tomorrow's problem.'

They still had some time to kill today, so he took his trusty ocarina from his pocket, plopping down on the boulder. Moments later, a high-pitched tune broke through the gloomy silence, bouncing from tree to tree, permeating the bog. While the poorly crafted instrument twisted a note every now and then, neither Nesha nor Micky complained as much anymore.

Percy had grown a lot better at this over the past two years, his music no longer an insult to the ears!

The trio banded closer together, enjoying the humble tune as they gazed at the bright moonlight, appreciating what little time they had left in this place…

Chapter 189: Trollsden

Percy wasn't sure if the central area of the swamp had a name. He certainly hadn't heard the townsfolk mention one if it did, and he was confident the trolls couldn't give it one either. From what he'd seen, the creatures could only communicate by gestures, grunts and growls. Thus, at the risk of looking silly later, he'd taken it upon himself to give the place a monicker, to make it easier to refer to.

The Trollsden.

Over the next few weeks, he and Nesha continued to visit the place daily – whenever Percy wasn't busy with his chores, at least. Micky joined them too, whenever he was both free and sufficiently bored.

Every time they ventured into the Trollsden, they entered from a different side, to avoid meeting the same trolls over and over. As they'd come to learn, the creatures were split in several small tribes, each consisting of six to eight individuals. Most of them were typically Reds, with a single Orange caster leading them. And these pocket-sized groups tended to be highly territorial, never straying far from their own homes.

Suffice to say, the two groups that had joined up to attack them on the first day had been outliers, as nothing similar had happened since. Percy guessed the two Orange leaders might have been siblings or something, overcoming the societal expectations of their kin to give themselves an advantage over other tribes.

That said, it wasn't like he particularly cared about the trolls' social structures much either. During each venture, they sought out a new tribe to challenge, giving Percy an opportunity to test his developing Foresight spell against different elemental affinities and flavours of casting.

"I think it's close to evolving!" he said, a shit-eating grin plastered all over his face.

Laying face-up on the ground in front of him, a troll chieftain gasped for air. As for its subordinates, they weren't doing much better. Evidently, Nesha had improved a lot too, keeping the creatures occupied without exerting herself all that much.

"Have you found an affinity you like?" she asked.

The question wiped the smile off his face, however.

"Nope." he sighed. "Only elemental and pure affinities across the board."

"I mean… that's not too strange. We've only fought a few dozen tribes so far. Statistically, they shouldn't have been enough."

“I know. I guess I just hoped we’d get lucky.” he shrugged.

The two disengaged from their defeated opponents, putting some distance from them. The good thing about the trolls was they never attacked them a second time. Apparently, they were smart enough to understand how outmatched they were after getting their asses handed to them for several hours in a row. That, coupled with Percy’s unwillingness to harm them did wonders in dousing their aggression. Well… most of the time at least. Every now and then, they did stumble upon a stubborn chieftain who didn’t know when to quit.

After waiting for Micky to join them, the trio took a break from their tasks to drink their midday dose of Aurora Dew together. Naturally, Percy hadn’t stopped brewing for them, their stash of elixirs dwindling with each passing day.

Luckily, the recent spike in his brewing yield would stretch their supplies for a month longer than they had originally planned. However, stealing more elixirs from House Tantalus’s warehouse was looking more and more unlikely. The war didn’t seem like it was close to ending, and Percy had yet to find a way to infiltrate the enemy family.

‘Will I still have to implicate Baldy in the Aurora Dew mess after all?’

Percy had intentionally avoided dealing with his family back in the Guild, precisely to avoid bringing them unnecessary trouble. And that had proven to be the right choice. Unlike him and Nesha who could just run and hide from the Divine Root, his grandpa couldn’t exactly do that – he had an entire House to lead. R̲ȦNŎ**B**Ę̱ş

Ensure your favorite authors get the support they deserve. Read this novel on the original website.

Then again, Percy wasn’t sure where to find a different source of elixirs as things stood. He did have some ideas, but they needed a lot of the darn things. In any case, he’d just have to discuss everything with Baldy once he returned home. This wasn’t something he could solve right now. Nor was it particularly urgent either.

“Wanna delve a little deeper today?” he suddenly asked, shaking the pointless thoughts out of his head.

So far, they'd only explored the outskirts of the Trollsden, but the place was quite massive. And they were already running out of new tribes to challenge in the outer ring.

"Sure. I suppose it's still early today." Nesha shrugged.

Bidding the crow farewell, the two then entered the Trollsden again, walking past the trolls, ignoring the nasty glares they were giving them. The further they ventured into the swamp, the more the stench of rot and decay intensified too. And that wasn't a coincidence.

While the trolls were opportunistic carnivores, occasionally snacking on any unfortunate critter dumb enough to approach them, there wasn't enough meat in the Grisly Bog to sustain their numbers. Neither could they easily expand outwards, their fear of stepping on the humans' toes deeply ingrained in their bones. Thus, the creatures had found another way to keep their bellies full, without risking their lives.

"Yuck. Are these things even edible?" Nesha wrinkled her nose, examining the base of a nearby tree.

The wood appeared old and damaged, as did the multitude of deteriorating carcasses carelessly piled up among its roots. Some of the corpses might have been there for months, reduced to skeletons by now, while others were a little fresher, the meat still slowly melting off the bones.

And amidst this intentionally designed mess, Percy and Nesha saw the food the trolls cultivated to sustain themselves. Growing on spoilt flesh and decaying roots alike, countless whitecap mushrooms blanketed the area. Some of them jutted out of a skull's eye sockets, others neatly lining the spaces between a creature's ribs.

By far the most disturbing detail, however, was the fact that many of the corpses appeared to have belonged to the trolls themselves! They fed their own dead to the mushrooms, and then ate those!

"Trust me, you don't want to see the kinds of things some of my clones have eaten." Percy chuckled.

He wasn't as bothered by the sight before him. His adventures had long numbed him to the idea of doing what one had to, to survive. If anything, the tiny mushrooms looked cute – nostalgic even, reminding him of his time in the Guild.

Of course, these mundane fungi were as far removed from their colossal cousins as they could be, not a speck of mana flowing through them. Still, they were clearly as important to the trolls as the Fungal Spire was to the rest of Remior.

Continuing their journey, Percy and Nesha saw more scenes like that, at some point every single tree in their path having been transformed into a grim mushroom farm. Though they hadn't met any more trolls in a while, for some reason.

"Are the tribes in the outskirts assigned there on purpose, to guard the perimeter or something?" Nesha wondered out loud at some point.

"Well, it would explain why all their food has been left unguarded, but that still leaves a lot of questions…" Percy wasn't quite as convinced.

For one, most of the troll tribes they'd encountered had shown no intention of cooperating with one another. How would they have all organized to such an extent?

Even more importantly, they would have never allowed them to pass had that been the case. Outmatched or not, who would give an intruder free access to their food?

"Yeah. It's strange. They should have done everything in their power to stop us…" Nesha agreed after listening to his reasoning.

Suddenly, Percy stopped in his tracks, causing her to raise an eyebrow.

"Unless they didn't need to…" he muttered.

"What do you mean?" Nesha asked.

But Percy didn't respond, merely gesturing at her to be quiet. Far in the distance, he faintly spotted a shadow shifting within the depths. It was too dark to make out, but his eyes captured more than just light nowadays.

Right there, walking amidst the trees, he saw it. It was a tall silhouette, shimmering in a faint silver. It was even bulkier than the trolls he had met so far, though it was hunched over. He even spotted a hint of Yellow sparkling in its chest. Soon, two more silhouettes appeared by the first one's sides. These weren't quite as big, though they were still larger than the regular trolls – all of them at Yellow.

Well, that certainly explained who had commanded the other tribes, as well as why the weaker creatures had allowed them to reach the centre of the Trollsden.

"They thought we wouldn't survive anyway." Percy said, his lips curling upward.

Dropping the sack by his feet, he took a deep breath, and then another, activating his boosting art. The trolls had clearly hoped their leaders would take care of them, but they had gravely miscalculated.

After all, a few Yellow mages were exactly what Percy currently needed!

Chapter 190: Honourable

Before Synchronization was even done activating, Percy rummaged through his sack, hastily putting as many pieces of his armour on as he could manage. Not that he wasn't confident beating a few Yellow demi-humans without it, but there wasn't any harm in playing it safe. Regardless, he only got to don his gauntlets by the time the creatures reached them.

'They'll have to do.' he shrugged.

The trolls themselves were downright massive, Percy's head barely reaching up to their chest. The one in the middle was even taller than the others, despite its hunchback. Their thick hide was marred in warts and granules like their weaker kin, but, unlike the others, these three were covered from head to toe in crisscrossing scars. Some were deeper too – trophies from a lifetime of fighting, apparently.

Even more strangely, these trolls had something else growing on their bodies that the others had lacked. Mushrooms. And not the mundane, edible whitecaps Percy and Nesha had seen on the way here. No, these shone brightly in his vision, shimmering in a deep Orange colour. Not only that, but they softly glowed in the regular part of his sight too, sporting a strange green lustre.

Unfazed by Percy's observation, the trolls strolled casually towards them, each of their thunderous steps lifting a screen of mud. Their heavy frames sank a few inches into the bog from one footfall to the next, but they didn't seem to mind it much, apparently well-used to their habitat by now. Their attention was glued to their guests instead, their bulbous eyes scanning Percy and Nesha up and down.

"Take the one to the left. I'll handle the oth–"

Percy didn't even get to complete his sentence when the trolls suddenly halted, still thirty or so yards away from them. Then, the one in the middle – their king probably – gestured at one of his attendants to step forward.

"Are they challenging us to single combat?" Nesha asked in incredulity.

That was a sign of intelligence neither of them was used to seeing in demi-humans. Then again, the creatures weren't that much dumber than sapients, and these three in particular stood atop their species' ladder. Their higher grade coupled with decades of wisdom had clearly left their mark.

"Well, I guess declining at this point would be rude."

Stepping forward, he waited for Nesha and the other trolls to put some distance from them, giving them space. The two combatants then eyed one another for a couple seconds, sizing each other up. This troll was the leanest of the three, though it still looked stronger than the Orange variants. Sapients didn't transform when advancing – that was a unique feature of beasts, due to their affinity. Suffice to say, Percy didn't know if it was just a coincidence these three were a little larger, or something else.

Maybe semi-sentients carried some traces of beast mana in their bodies? Or, perhaps, the Yellow-born trolls just lived long enough to hone their physique further than the rest?

'Or any other number of explanations…'

In any case, it didn't really matter. The creature was unarmed, its posture carrying the aura of an experienced mage. Satisfied with his assessment, Percy waited patiently for his opponent to make the first move. And the troll didn't stand on ceremony either. It didn't move an inch from its spot, but Percy didn't miss its soul and core flaring up, a trickle of mana flowing down to its feet.

‘Earth?’ he raised an eyebrow. ‘No. Water!’

He’d seen enough of both affinities by now to tell their channels apart. That said, he was surprised to see a water mage use their mana like this. Not that it was impossible for them to take advantage of their environment like earth users regularly did, but it was much harder right now, given the circumstances. All the water in the swamp was mixed with soil, slowing down its movements.

‘Still disappointing though.’ he sighed.

Another common affinity. It seemed there wasn’t anything of interest in the Grisly Bog…

Yet, Percy’s disappointment didn’t last long. As soon as the troll was done spreading its mana, it finally activated its spell. Suddenly, dozens of aquamarine bolts shot at Percy from every direction, zigging and zagging through the air like snakes!

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

‘The hell?!’

Percy hurriedly leapt backwards, dodging about half the projectiles, crushing a few more with his armoured hands. Still, two of them reached him, leaving some nasty cuts. The first stretched diagonally across his chest, the other vertically along his upper forearm.

“How?”

The troll was grinning smugly, clearly amused by his surprise. Though it didn’t seem to have any intention of letting him go. Pressing on its advantage, it unleashed more spells, the magical attacks raining upon Percy one after the other. And they all had one thing in common. They all shone in a bright aquamarine light, not a speck of dirt bogging them down.

‘I’ve never seen a Yellow mage use their mana so skilfully!’

The difficulty in extracting clear water from the mud so quickly was simply staggering. Not to mention controlling so many constructs at the same time with such finesse. Evidently, Percy had underestimated the creatures, betrayed by his preconceived notions about them.

“Want help?” Nesha asked, though that only prompted the other trolls to growl angrily.

“No. I’ll handle it.” Percy spat between pants, as he continued to evade the attacks to the best of his ability.

As it turned out, this wasn’t the walk in the park he was expecting. Then again, this was a good thing.

If he wanted, he could probably end the fight with a few invisible throwing stars. While the troll had proven to be a formidable opponent in some areas, Percy doubted it was fast enough to dodge his own attacks, given its bulk. RaNoBEš

But why would he do that? Wasn’t this exactly the kind of training he needed?

Settling at a more comfortable distance from the troll, Percy danced through the onslaught of spells, focused on evading only the most dangerous attacks, while allowing some of them to scrape him out of necessity.

The projectiles were both numerous and chaotic, though there was still a clear rhythm behind them – an unavoidable delay between one attack and the next, albeit small. After all, the troll had to channel the mana through the dense swamp water before unleashing it against Percy.

Letting his gaze sink deeper into his opponent’s frame, Percy allowed Foresight to do its job, faint projections appearing in his vision, preceding the water snakes by mere inches. After a month of nonstop training, the spell had already started working on magic, though it wasn’t nearly as effortless, nor as complete as it was for physical blows.

‘At least, not yet.’ he grinned.

Little by little, Percy got used to the pace and the patterns of the projectiles. With each blow he avoided, the projections grew clearer, as both his reactions and his eyesight were slowly honed to perfection. At the same time, he never allowed himself to relax. Whenever he got used to the troll's speed, he took a step forward, inching closer to the creature with each passing minute. No matter what, he had to keep pushing himself to the very edge of his ability, treading the fine line between life and death. That was always the fastest way to improve.

'Hmm? Why did he stop?' Percy wondered at some point, as the onslaught of spells ended abruptly.

So absorbed had he been on predicting his opponent's attacks, he had failed to spot the traces of exhaustion accumulating on the creature's soul. The troll panted heavily, its core completely dried out, its previous nonchalance nowhere to be seen.

Its companions too had realized they had stumbled upon a formidable opponent today. They glared at him silently, their expressions sombre. Though, to their credit, they hadn't moved to interfere yet, apparently intent on honouring the terms of the fight.

'That's more than I would expect from a human.' Percy nodded in appreciation, feeling some newfound respect towards the creatures.

Next, his eyes fell back on his opponent, the troll still trying to catch its breath. Honestly, this was only to be expected. While the creature's sheer skill in mana manipulation was arguably impressive, at the end of the day, it was still 'just' a Yellow. It never stood a chance of keeping up with Percy in a prolonged battle.

"Take your time. I'll wait." he shouted, not knowing whether the trolls could understand him.

Then again, actions spoke louder than words. If they couldn't understand his words, they certainly got the message once he turned around, walking to a nearby tree before leaning on its trunk. He'd have taken a seat too, but the roots were covered in mushrooms and rotting carcasses.

Under other circumstances, allowing his opponent to recover might have been foolish. But not right now. After all, he had never intended to harm the trolls, nor did he much care about winning. His priority right now was only the evolution of his spell – nothing more, nothing less. And he doubted he'd find a better sparring partner.

Yet, this simple gesture seemed to be received well by the creatures.

“Garruuk!” the troll grunted, capturing his attention.

Then, it turned towards its leader, apparently waiting for permission to do something. Only after the bulky troll nodded did the water mage look back at Percy. Next, it moved one of three stubby fingers on its oversized hand, pointing at a green mushroom growing on its shoulder.

‘What is it trying to show me?’

The troll didn’t leave him in suspense for long, its following action answering his question. Pinching the mushroom with all three of its digits, it squeezed it tightly, as Percy followed a splash of mana flowing into its skin, spreading through its body. Soon, the troll’s exhaustion was visibly lifted, as its muscles relaxed, and its rugged breath settled down.

And, of course, Percy would be a fool if he failed to recognize what had happened. Between his mutated eyes, the extraction principle he had mastered, and the dozens of potions he had consumed, he couldn’t have possibly mistaken the potent life mana restoring the troll’s stamina.

He still had no idea what the trolls were up to, revealing such a valuable secret to him so easily, but he was certain of one thing as he stared at the glowing mushrooms with greed.

‘I need to get my hands on some of those…’