Wanderer 191

Chapter 191: Exchange

Over the next several hours, Percy and the troll fought many more rounds. Every time the creature's mana ran out, he gave it a few minutes to refill it. At the same time, the troll consumed one of its verdant mushrooms once every few breaks, to remove its exhaustion too.

As for Percy, he'd already mastered keeping Synchronization active since before leaving the Guild. He hadn't had a choice, as many of his activities depended on it. Of course, that was not to say he wasn't tired. Dodging the troll's relentless onslaught took a lot of effort, and he lacked the means to recover. Still, he pressed on, knowing this was a rare opportunity he couldn't afford to waste.

'Why is it using up all its mushrooms just to help me out though? Aren't they precious?'

He had no idea how the trolls even cultivated them on their bodies, nor how easily they could be replenished, but he struggled to understand why his opponent would go so far for his sake. It wasn't until the creature increased the pressure on him that he realized what was going on.

The troll wasn't doing it for his sake at all!

It was training too!

Evidently, these guys were battle maniacs, just like him!

'Well, that certainly explains their scars. I bet they spend all day sparring against one another…'

At first, it hadn't been immediately obvious, as his own improvements vastly eclipsed the troll's. After all, it couldn't compete with the positive feedback loop between his Foresight spell, his Status and his Sorcerer's Eye. However, the creature still worked hard to hone its own magic, trying to increase the number of projectiles it could launch at once.

'20… 25… 30… 35!' Percy counted, confirming his guess.

He was confident the troll hadn't been able to throw more than thirty snakes at him during their first bout. Its improvements were modest, yet undeniable. But increasing the number of projectiles it could fire wasn't the only thing the creature was working on.

Suddenly, the bolts closed in on him unexpectedly, blocking all his escape paths. The projections that had previously grown clearer shattered at this moment, rendering him unable to predict the spells' trajectories.

Percy twisted his body as he leapt backwards, evading most of the snakes while guarding his vitals with his gauntlets. Still, he was forced to let a few of the attacks land painfully on his legs, drawing some blood. At least, each individual projectile wasn't too dangerous.

'Shit! It's not making my job easy, is it?'

The creature had clearly varied its attack pattern just now, trying to catch him off guard. And it had succeeded too, nullifying his previous efforts to memorize its movements. That said, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. The more the troll pushed back against his Foresight, the stronger the spell would grow once reforged.

Diving back into the fight, Percy opened up the distance to the creature some more, until he managed to adjust to the new pattern. Peering into the troll's body, he observed how the mana flowed through its channels, and how its soul's flickers different from before, trying to rebuild his understanding.

Like that, one man and one troll continued to fight, round after round, hour after hour, in a relentless tug of war between offense and defence, each trying to outgrow one another. Sadly for the troll, however, this was a contest it had never stood a chance of winning…

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Percy tiptoed between the azure snakes, navigating the muddy battlefield with the elegance of a dancer. Over eighty projectiles shone brightly in his eyes, though only half of them were real. The rest were nothing more than projections of a future he had glimpsed.

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Bobbing and weaving, he dodged the majority of them, occasionally swatting one or two with his gauntlets, as he steadily advanced towards the troll. Loud splashes could be heard around him, as azure jets of pressurized water pelted their surroundings one after the other. Many of them landed on the trees, the rotting bark having long been shaved clean, revealing the fresher wood beneath, a few shades lighter.

But Percy didn't pay the noise any heed, having already learned to tune it out some time ago, his focus entirely reserved for his opponent.

Seeing him approach, the creature panicked. It pushed more mana out of its core, increasing both the size and speed of its spells, whilst mixing and matching their patterns in a desperate attempt to stop the human in his tracks.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Percy had long seen through his opponent's magic, the snakes now appearing clearer in his eyes than they ever had before. And they grew clearer still, with each passing moment!

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Wild Art: Foresight – Crude -> Wild Art: Greater Foresight – Refined!]

With a satisfying click, something snapped in place within his mind.

Percy blinked, the tension leaving his brows. When he next opened his eyes, the projections were still there, no longer flickering in and out of existence. Better yet, they seemed to have travelled a few metres further from the actual spells, expanding Percy's window by another second!

Closing the rest of the distance to the troll was now trivial, the creature no longer holding any surprises for him. Percy ignored the remaining spells completely, walking through them with an ease that would have seemed impossible just hours ago.

Realizing it had already lost, the creature finally halted its assault, letting its arms fall weakly by its sides. Upon reaching it, Percy clenched his armoured fist, as the troll closed its eyes, resigned to its fate. It stood there motionless, waiting for the blow to land.

A blow that… never came.

Opening its eyes, the troll blinked twice, seeing Percy's extended hand. It tilted its head in confusion, glancing back and forth between Percy's clenched gauntlet and his grinning expression. Only a few seconds later did it seem to understand something, raising its own fist too, letting it hang in the air for a while. Grabbing the opportunity, Percy bumped fists against the troll, his smile widening in the process.

"Graaakhaak!!" "Groook!" the other trolls exclaimed, their deep voices echoing throughout the gloomy depths of the Trollsden.

Looking at them, Percy noticed their expressions weren't those of anger, but excitement. He could tell they both wanted their own turn at him, having grown sick of waiting for him to finish.

Percy was about to say something, but the troll king beat him to it. Ignoring his second attendant, he leapt forth, covering half the distance towards him. Next, he let out a guttural roar as he slammed his fists against his chest, each blow sending a tremor through the ground.

"Don't tell me you're going to fight the rest of them too?" Nesha groaned.

She hadn't interrupted him either, having patiently remained on the side, ready to intervene had something gone wrong. Percy smiled bitterly. He felt bad about dousing the trolls' excitement, but he could use some sleep right now. He was about to try explaining himself, though the troll king cut him off with a proposal.

"Gahak!!" he grunted, gesturing at his wrists.

It took Percy a moment to realize what he was trying to say.

"You mean these? You want them?" he asked, pointing at his gauntlets.

The creature nodded back, confirming his guess.

But Percy shook his head.

“They are too small for you.” he said, placing his arm next to the other troll’s for comparison.

“I can try making one your size, but it’ll just break after a few weeks.” he added a moment later.

To demonstrate his point, he used his willpower to chip a small piece from one of the components. Still, he wasn’t sure if the king understood him. The creature stared at him in silent contemplation for a few seconds, before gesturing at his other attendant. The third troll then walked forward, drawing some mana from its core. It was only now that Percy realized this guy had a pure affinity too.

“You want me to teach him how to build these?” he asked in amusement, pointing between himself and the troll.

It was true these guys were smarter than the average demi-human, but he wasn’t sure they could learn something as intricate as his Phantomscale Gauntlet spell. Crystallization shouldn’t be too difficult for them, but Reinforcement would definitely be a challenge. Even if they could somehow master the Refined spell, how was he supposed to teach them runecrafting? Could they even forge something as delicate as his fingerguards?

‘Well, I guess I don’t need to show them everything. I could stop at Reinforcement. That should be enough for some short-lived weapons…’

The troll king seemed to have misunderstood the source of his hesitation, however. Thinking Percy was just being stingy, he turned around, before pointing at his back. It was full of mushrooms, both their size and numbers far exceeding the ones on his attendants’ bodies! They glowed more brightly too, and there were two types of them!

Other than the verdant mushrooms rich in life mana that Percy had already seen, there was a second variant, these burning in a blazing red. Naturally, he had no idea what these did, but he wanted them.

“You want to exchange these for Reinforcement?”

Chapter 192: Duel

Percy cracked a smile at the absurdity of the idea. Everyone on Remior wanted to get their hands on the secret behind the Aurora Dew. The thought of sharing it with a tribe of trolls in the middle of nowhere was as rebellious as it was hilarious.

‘But I’m not going to do that.’

He’d worked so hard for this head-start. Risked so much. This was a gamble he couldn’t afford to take. What if somebody stumbled upon this place at some point? Perhaps House Tantalus would conduct an investigation here after the war was over. Or the Divine Root might pass through the Grisly Bog while searching for him. Or, maybe, the townsfolk would delve deeper into the swamp, looking for resources.

Yet, it seemed Percy was just overthinking things.

Seeing his confusion, the troll king grunted, breaking him out of his thoughts. He pointed at Percy’s bag, before gesturing at the mushrooms on his own body. Finally, he slammed his chest with vigour, stomping his feet in the mud, clearing Percy’s misunderstanding. Apparently, it wasn’t a trade the creature had in mind.

“You want to fight for it? Winner takes all?” Percy asked.

The troll king nodded, seemingly understanding the question. Next, he drew a tremendous amount of mana out of his sternum, emptying his core completely. Then, he pulled everything to his hand, as Percy recognized the channels indicative of an earth affinity. A bright flash of brown lit the place up, before condensing into a construct.

A colossal chunk of rock formed – taller than a person – suspended in the air between them. Cracking and crunching sounds emerged as the oversized shard of stone collapsed upon itself, its size shrinking rapidly. But not evenly. Its top end narrowed more than the rest, soon turning into a hilt just thin enough to fit in the troll king’s grasp.

Next, whatever force was holding the construct airborne vanished. The club hit the ground with a deafening boom, the splashing mud doing very little to soften the impact. A shower of stinking dirt drenched Percy and Nesha as a tremor reverberated through the Trollsden.

Ignoring the still-shaking trees, Percy watched in stunned silence as the demi-human picked his weapon up. He lifted it with an ease more befitting a feather than a boulder, raising a gust of wind as he swung it back and forth.

'He's skilled at manipulating his mana too.'

The troll king was definitely strong, but this wasn't a feat he could have pulled off with physical strength alone. Wielding the monstrous club like this clearly took both physical and magical effort. Apparently, the troll king wasn't a caster like the others, though that didn't make him any less dangerous. Backing his bulk with the full force of his core, he could make each swing deadlier than a Yellow's strongest spell. Evidently, the creature was more of a warrior than a mage – his style not that different from Percy's, actually.

"GAAAAAALAAAAAAAK!!!" the troll king roared in excitement, his thunderous voice an affront to the ears.

"Alright. I'm up for that." Percy said. "But tomorrow. I'm too tired today to give you a proper duel."

The creature didn't understand him at first, forcing Percy to spend the next hour or so trying to explain the concept of "tomorrow". Suffice to say, the troll king's disappointment was palpable as soon as he realized he had to wait longer. Still, he allowed them to leave in the end, probably aware he wouldn't get the exciting spar he wanted if he tried to force it.

"Couldn't you kill him with your soul mana and just take the mushrooms?" Nesha asked on the way home.

"Sure." he shrugged.

Percy had never truly been in danger. Even in his exhausted state, it wouldn’t have taken much effort to take the creatures out with a couple sneaky spells. He was pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to react to his sickles. Had the trolls been more aggressive, they would have certainly paid the price.

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“But I kinda want to spar with him too. This is a great opportunity to put my new armour to the test.”

It wasn’t like he hadn’t tried using it before, but there was a reason his Status hadn’t registered the upgrade yet. The armour was a lot trickier to wear in a fight than a mere gauntlet or two. Putting it on wasn’t a problem, but for it to be worth the trouble, he had to be able to hold all the pieces together while enduring powerful blows from a Green core. This was something he hadn’t been able to test against the weaker trolls, as their attacks weren’t nearly strong enough to push him to his limits.

Remembering the troll king’s oversized weapon, however, Percy’s lip curled upwards.

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Percy and Nesha were back in the Trollsden, standing some distance away from the cohort of Yellow trolls. The creatures grinned and roared in boiling anticipation, watching him don his armour, one piece at a time. ŖÄ⍰O฿ËṢ

His muscles were already tense, his boosting art active. A thin layer of teal coated his entire body, as he slid the components of his most intricate spell on, one by one. Every time he wore a piece, he manifested a few strings of fused mana, fastening it in place, attaching it first to himself and then to its neighbours. Naturally, he’d already designed the armour to be as easy to equip as possible.

Still, that was a lot of moving parts to keep track of during a heated battle.

Once he was done, he borrowed the mirror Nesha had brought along, checking that everything was in order. His body was covered from head to toe in armour, its pieces softly glowing with an ethereal teal colour. Magical runes could faintly be seen decorating it in various spots, as spiky protrusions jutted out here and there, protecting his joints.

Flexing his limbs, Percy nodded in appreciation as he confirmed how little his movements were inhibited. His vision wasn't affected much either, as he had left plenty of space in front of his eyes, which shone even more brightly than the armour itself, hidden beneath the visor's shadowy veil. Teal smoke poured out of a few carefully placed vents on his shoulders and upper back, already accumulating mana for his Mantle of Deceit, shaping it into a proper cape.

And with just a thought, everything vanished. From his magical boots, all the way to the very tip of his helmet, the entire armour seemingly disappeared, revealing Percy's swollen body beneath it. The next moment, the armour reappeared, as if it was never gone. Being able to turn the spell invisible could be handy when facing an unaware opponent, but there wasn't much point in hiding it from someone who already knew about it.

"GRAAAAAH!!!" the troll king cheered in excitement, summoning his own club once again, preparing for the fight.

Stepping forth, Percy cracked his knuckles and his neck both, before taking his fighting stance.

Unable to wait any longer, the troll rushed at him, as Nesha and the attendants hurried out of the way. The colossal club descended on Percy with a frightening speed as he crossed his hands to block it, intent on taking the attack head on.

Through Mana Sense, he caught the absorption runes glow brighter, seemingly doing their job as the impact sent him sliding back. His bones ached and his organs were rattled as he slammed into a tree, splinters of wood flying all over the place as the trunk nearly split in half. The armour held, however, as did Percy's body. As painful as the blow was, it had failed to cause any serious damage.

'Well, for the most part…'

Percy smiled bitterly as he saw his two shoulderguards glitter from beneath the surface of the murky water, some distance away from him. At the same time, the fingerguards in his left hand made clinking sounds as they collided with one another, hanging loosely within his palm. Unfortunately, he had failed to maintain all the knots in place while eating the powerful blow.

“Again.” he said as he fixed the fingerguards. As for the shoulderguards, he left them in the mud for now. He could retrieve them later, after getting some more practice.

The troll king didn’t need to be told twice, charging forth. Swinging his weapon once more, he tried to bat him right through the tree. That said, Percy was done getting pushed around. Kicking against the trunk, he bolted forth, punching the club with both hands.

Another shocking impact caused the Trollsden to quake, this time both combatants shooting backwards. In the end, the tree didn’t survive the second hit, as Percy tumbled through it. That said, the troll king failed to remain on his feet too. The creature raised a tall wave as he sank into a puddle of mud.

Neither of them stayed on the ground for long, however, both of them climbing back to their feet a moment later, already on course for their third clash. The club slammed into the magical armour once more, as Percy focused on holding all the pieces in place, fighting against the snapping strings and loosening knots. This time, his chestguard came undone, as did both of his kneeguards. But he wasn’t deterred in the slightest, a savage grin carved into his face.

‘Today, I’ll register the spell. Then, I’ll take those mushrooms too.’

Chapter 193: Troll king

A boulder rapidly enlarged in Percy’s pupils, but he ignored it, allowing it to pass through him harmlessly. Naturally, it was just a projection, arriving seconds before the actual attack. Greater Foresight made the troll king’s telegraphed swings laughably easy to dodge, though evading them would only defeat the whole purpose of the spar.

Bracing himself, Percy then received the real club head on, the blood rolling and tumbling in his veins as he skidded on the muddy terrain. With a sickening crunch, he landed on another pile of rotting corpses, the old ribcages crumbling under the weight.

Pulling himself to his feet, he saw the creature hadn’t bothered to pursue. The troll had plopped down instead, breathing heavily. Sighing, Percy let go of his boosting art too, just as happy to take a break as his opponent. Next, he dragged his feet across the ravaged battlefield, scouring the place for the missing pieces of his magical armour, scooping them from the filth. Luckily, he received some welcome help.

“There you go.” Nesha said, handing him the shoulderguards.

“Thanks.” he replied, strapping them back in place.

The pesky things were always the first to come off.

“How close are you?” she asked.

“Close.” he spat, too tired to elaborate.

It had been hours since he began fighting the troll king, and they’d already gone at it for several rounds. At first, he couldn’t last a single exchange without his armour crumbling. Every blow would cause at least a couple of pieces to fall off.

To survive the troll’s onslaught, he had been forced to improvise, blocking the attacks with whatever body parts were still covered, often doing so in all sorts of awkward orientations. It wasn’t like he’d had a choice. He knew he’d have been reduced to a pulp by now if it hadn’t been for the layered defence afforded to him by his spell.

That said, he had improved over time.

By midday, he’d been able to take a hit or two without any knots breaking, giving him some hope. Still, he was a fair distance away from his goal, and the troll king’s attacks weren’t even as strong as a real Green’s.

‘This time for sure.’ he declared with determination.

Fastening the last piece in place, he reactivated Synchronization, staring at the troll king expectantly. Responding to his unspoken challenge, the creature leapt back to his feet, grabbing hold of his weapon.

Digging his heels in place, Percy waited for the hulking monster to arrive, his eyes glued on the attack. Watching the club’s shadow carefully, he adjusted his stance, preparing to absorb the blow in the most favourable angle.

Soon, the two spells connected, Percy feeling as if an entire house had fallen on him. Still, he tensed his muscles and steeled his will, trying to keep the knots on the right side of his body from snapping.

They held!

Regardless, he slid back again as always, the swamp not being the best place to get a proper foothold. Before he even came to a halt, the troll was already upon him for the follow-up.

This time, Percy shifted, opting to use the left side of his body instead. With a well-placed uppercut, he punched the club above his head, deflecting its trajectory. Next, he took the opportunity to sink a blow of his own right under the creature's ribs, sending him reeling back.

Not giving the troll a chance to recover, he leapt after him, trying to land a knee to his face. The demi-human hastily blocked with his club, before pushing Percy away. Neither of them paused to catch their breaths, both rushing back, desperate to mount the pressure on each other.

Another swing. Percy blocked with both arms, the impact nearly knocking his shoulderguards off again. Expecting that, he strengthened the connection at the last second, barely keeping them in place.

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The troll attacked again, this time with a vertical blow. Sidestepping, Percy circled the creature with his footwork, sweeping at its legs with a low kick. One knee buckled, though the other didn't, the troll swatting him aside with a backhand.

Still, Percy didn't let go of the opportunity, rushing back to headbutt the demi-human, pressing him to the ground.

He was about to land another hit, when he caught the club's shadow by the corner of his eye. Realizing he was about to be sent flying, Percy barely strengthened the knots again. Just in time too. The weapon slammed into him the very next second, tossing him a dozen metres up in the air.

By the time he landed, the troll king was ready to greet him with a second swing, blasting him through a tree. All the strings strapping his armour to his body stretched and tensed, as he fought to keep them intact.

He didn't even get a chance to recover before the creature reached him again, landing a third blow, and then a fourth one. The troll king chased him through the swamp, batting him again and again, as Percy slowly lost track of his surroundings. Soon, his entire world was reduced to the magical connections within his head, as he desperately tried to hold them together.

More blows connected.

Each one bruised his bones, shaking his innards. Still, his head hurt the most, almost as if every impact was delivered directly to his mind rather than his flesh. The pieces of his armour shook and recoiled as they received the full brunt of the troll king's fury, yet Percy simply refused to let them fall off.

At some point, his body and mind were both numb to the pain, leaving only clarity behind. There was a rhythm behind the creature's attacks, the blows interspaced by necessary delays. And Percy recognized this pattern. It was the very same he had learnt to read back when he was developing his Foresight spell. Yet, right now, he wasn't observing it with his eyes but feeling it with his body. The blows continued to rain on him, as he grabbed hold of this sensation, using it to survive.

An attack landed.

The strings tensed.

The armour vibrated.

'I only need to strengthen the connections at the time of the impact.' he realized.

Anticipating the blow, he reinforced the knots right before it landed, weathering the oncoming storm. Then, he allowed them to relax the very next moment, accumulating strength for the following attack. Giving the strings a chance to 'rest' was just as important, it seemed.

Like a punching bag, the troll king continued to pummel him, sometimes through a tree, other times to the air, never ceasing his relentless barrage for a second.

But Percy no longer cared to dodge, or even to open his eyes. He knew his body would survive as long as his armour protected it. And his armour would continue to do so as long as he held it in place. At least, the creature hadn't given him any indication he could put a scratch on the pieces themselves.

Swing after swing, Percy absorbed the blows, the previously disparate bonds between the components starting to feel more like muscles than dead objects. Like his lungs, they breathed. Sometimes they tensed, other times they laxed. A network of magic, dispersing the concentrated force of the troll king's attacks into something he could withstand.

At some point, the attacks ceased.

Opening his eyes, he saw the creature kneeling, propping himself up on his knuckles, his weapon carelessly abandoned on the ground nearby. The troll king was breathing heavily, making wheezing sounds as he greedily inhaled as much air as he could.

Percy tried to stand up. Everything hurt. His armour had protected him, but his body was still sore. Battered. But he was the first to climb back to his feet. Unwilling to admit defeat, the demi-human followed. He grabbed the club, using it as a cane to push himself up.

"Why aren't you using your fancy mushrooms to recover?" Percy asked, unsure if the creature understood him.

The troll chuckled in response, however, shaking his head. It appeared he was too proud to resort to that, to lose to Percy in sheer grit. Dragging the weapon through the mud, he walked up to him, raising it high in the sky. Releasing a guttural bellow, he swung it again, resuming his onslaught.

But Percy didn't close his eyes this time.

Observing the club's shadow, he let the weapon connect, tapping on his newfound understanding. Like before, he allowed the network of strings to absorb and disseminate the blow, though he took it a step further.

As the monstrous demi-human continued to push him around the Trollsden, Percy honed his spell, localizing his focus. Wherever the club landed, the knots tensed. Then, they laxed, as the ones next to them tensed instead, like a wave of resistance rippling through his frame.

At first, he made a few mistakes, several pieces threatening to come undone. Soon, he improved, noticing that less and less force reached his body with each blow. As the impact was transferred from piece to piece, the cascading absorption runes did their job, nullifying the attacks completely.

Realizing something, the troll king stopped. It stared at Percy in incredulity, unable to comprehend how he could still stand, nor why he was looking at him defiantly.

“If you’re still holding anything back, I suggest you use it.” Percy said as his Status spoke.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Phantomscale Gauntlet – Refined -> Phantomscale Raiment – Refined!]

Chapter 194: Fury

The troll king scanned Percy from head to toe for several seconds, seemingly contemplating his words. Eventually, he appeared to have made his mind up, nodding with determination.

Accepting that he was no longer a match for the human as he was, he decided to finally let go of his pride. First, he stabbed his club into the ground, before letting go, leaving it upright. Then, he reached for his back, squeezing one of the crimson mushrooms. Percy recognized a rush of mostly fire mana sinking into the creature’s frame, spreading through it.

Whatever it did, it wasn’t a painless endeavour in the slightest.

The troll king’s bulbous eyes quivered, his pupils taking on a reddish hue. He gritted his teeth, a few of them making cracking sounds, threatening to shatter. The creature’s muscles visibly shook, before swelling – in a manner not too dissimilar to what Synchronization did to Percy. However, it wasn’t his mana channels spreading raw power through his body, but the boiling blood in his vessels. Like snakes, his veins bulged and squirmed along his skin.

Percy readied his stance, waiting for his opponent to attack. Though the troll wasn't done preparing quite yet, it seemed. He pinched a second mushroom, and then a third, releasing a pained groan as he continued to push his body far beyond its limits.

It wasn't until a minute or two later that the creature regained his composure. He picked his weapon up, lifting it horizontally before his torso. Grabbing each end with a different hand, he pulled the misshapen boulder apart, splitting it in two uneven halves. These crumbled further into pebbles, rolling up his forearms.

'Copying me?' Percy grinned.

He watched as the chunks of earth condensed into a pair of oversized gauntlets, clearly inspired by his own. Of course, the crude constructs were a far cry from the Phantomscale Gauntlets, both their design and the lack of runes leaving much to be desired. Still, between the troll king's higher grade and nominally stronger affinity, Percy had no doubt they'd pack quite a punch. Literally.

"Bring it on then!" he taunted.

The creature didn't need to be told twice. Tensing his calves for a moment, the troll king pounced on him with a speed that would have seemed impossible just seconds ago. Percy barely dodged the first punch, his opponent's newfound agility shrinking the prediction window greatly.

But that was only the beginning.

The second blow was even harder to evade, the third one landing squarely on his chest. The network of strings nullified much of the force, though whatever dregs remained were still enough to knock the breath out of his lungs, sending him flying backwards.

'Strong!'

By the time he arrested his momentum, the troll king was already upon him again, a new rain of fists – some fake, some real – appearing before him. Suffice to say, Percy was instantly on the backfoot, trying to dodge as many as he could. A few he sidestepped, weaving and bobbing to narrowly evade others, letting a couple glance him.

But the troll king didn't give up. Between whatever the mushrooms had done to him, and his change of weapons, his attacks had grown several times quicker, yet without losing much of their previous strength.

'Shit. I can't find an opening!' Percy thought grimly.

He had his hands full just defending against the flurry of punches. Then again, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Over the past month, Percy had developed not one, but two Refined spells, focusing on different aspects of defence. Yet, neither Greater Foresight nor the Phantomscale Raiment had been properly woven into his fighting style, nor had he pushed either to its very limits.

'Might as well then.'

Over the next hour or so, Percy took advantage of the troll king's temporary boost, using his furious assault as a whetstone to hone his magic. With the Dance of the Savage Gods as the fabric, he tried to stitch the disparate components of his arsenal together. Tiptoeing around the battlefield, he taught himself when to dodge and when to block, sharpening his instincts and his footwork both, learning how to best leverage his new tools.

Initially, he was clearly on the losing side, eating way more blows than he cared to admit, getting pummelled through trees and muddy pools alike. At some point, however, he started finding openings in the troll king's movements. Perhaps it was the indiscriminate effect of the mushrooms taking its toll on the monster's body, or maybe it was just Percy's improvements giving him an edge. Either way, opportunities began to flash before his mutated eyes one after the other.

Seamlessly shifting to Takeo's style, he seized every chance his opponent gave him, responding to the assault with blows of his own. At first, Percy's punches didn't even faze the troll, however. His gauntlets were great for absorbing impacts, but not so much for delivering them.

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Yet, where there's a will, there's a way.

Soon, Percy started taking advantage of the creature's momentum, using the troll's inertia to reinforce his own blows, essentially causing his opponent to fall into his punches.

'Let's see how much more of this you can take…'

However, Percy wasn't the only one using this bout to improve. Getting used to his new weapons, the troll king soon grew even faster still, sharpening his new instincts, learning alongside Percy how to fight at this level. ***Ra***ℕộʙÊş

Every now and then, the effect of the fire mana showed signs of declining, forcing the creature to consume more of the crimson mushrooms, desperately clawing more strength out of his body. Of course, this boost came with a hefty price, but the troll king didn't pay that any heed. He used some of the green mushrooms every few minutes, restoring his stamina and undoing some of the damage.

Watching him, Percy knew this wasn't sustainable. The creature would eventually run out of mushrooms, or his body would fall apart at some point. And sure, that was probably true. That said, it seemed the demi-human hadn't run out of surprises for him just yet. As the mushrooms on the troll's hunchback grew scarcer, he gradually straightened his spine, his bones creaking as they settled in place. At the same time, the monster's movements grew even faster, his undeniable handicap slowly lifting.

'Just a little longer… His boost is going to run out in a couple more minutes…'

Gritting his teeth, Percy persisted, ignoring the painful blows slamming into his armour, rattling his organs. The two combatants pressed on even more fiercely than before, commencing the final act of today's duel, both of them too stubborn to accept defeat.

One fought gracelessly, not unlike a wild beast. The other danced around him elegantly, taking a technique that had already been honed for millennia, adapting it into his own, intent on elevating it further still. Yet, despite all his efforts, Percy could tell he was falling behind. Not by much – the difference to his opponent was downright minuscule, almost imperceptible. But, having fought the troll king for several hours already, he could tell where it was headed.

'I need to do something. I need an edge.'

Four more fist shadows rained upon Percy. The first three he dodged, though the last one was about to land right in his face. His helmet would probably save his life even if he got hit, but the troll wouldn't miss his chance to punish him further.

Deciding to take a gamble, Percy allowed his focus to sink into the components of his armour once more. Yet, he wasn't trying to negate the attack this time.

The instant before the punch connected, Percy suddenly gained an unexpected burst of speed, his figure shifting out of the fist's path like a teal blur. Suffice to say, the troll king raised an eyebrow at this turn of events, though Percy didn't give him a chance to comprehend what had happened.

Taking two swift steps – far faster than any of his prior movements – he circled around the demi-human, putting all his weight before a cleaving hook. The creature barely turned his head in time to receive the blow right to his face, his right tusk shattering in an explosion of yellowed shrapnel.

Not allowing his focus to waver, the troll king still went for a counterattack, trying to swat Percy aside with his backhand. It didn't do much, as Percy blocked with a crossed guard, sliding a couple metres back before diving in for another clash.

The two continued their fight for a few more minutes, before a similar situation repeated itself. Pinning Percy in a corner, the troll king was about to land a savage blow, when Percy blurred out of the way at the last second, responding with another brutal counter. This time, he dug his fist in the creature's liver, bringing him to his knees.

Only after receiving a few more blows did the demi-human recover again enough to push Percy back, resuming the brawl for a while longer, just to get punished with a knee to his face a few seconds later. Uncertainty overcame the troll's expression, as he failed to grasp how Percy could tap into those momentary boosts each time.

'If only you knew…' Percy smiled bitterly.

Naturally, his heightened bursts of speed hadn't come out of nowhere. They were all hard-earned, with Percy putting his very life on the line for each and every one.

One feature of his Phantomscale Raiment that he hadn't used before, was its ability to turn incorporeal at will. Earlier, he hadn't really had a good application for it, though the narrow brawl against the troll king had given him an idea.

By robbing his armour of its substance, he could remove some of the weight bogging him down, allowing him to move a little faster. Of course, the price for this boost was that he had to completely forsake the protection afforded to him by the spell, leaving him vulnerable to the troll's attacks.

Should he fail to dodge, the demi-human's savage blows were guaranteed to turn him into minced meat. Additionally, should he mess up the transition, he could easily cause the armour to fall apart, leaving him without it for the rest of the battle.

'But I won't make a mistake. I won't allow myself to.'

In the end, the troll king lost without even understanding what had happened. Laying with his back on the ground, he panted heavily, his battered limbs splayed out like a starfish, his thick hide bruised in countless spots. Even worse, the effect of the mushrooms finally ran out, causing his body to shrivel like a dried waterskin, his expression twisting into one of agony.

Percy on the other hand wasn't doing much better. While he had won, today's battle had taken everything he had and then some, as he'd pushed both his mind and his body far beyond their limits.

Still, a satisfied grin tugged at his lips. One that even his rugged breaths failed to fully break. The troll king had been a worthy opponent. Arguably, the strongest Yellow he had ever met. In the past few hours alone, he'd progressed more than he would have after fighting the weaker trolls for months.

And… that was without even taking his prize into account.

Turning to the king's attendants, Percy's grin widened further still, his unspoken request eliciting nods of understanding – and even ones of respect – from the creatures.

It was finally time to see what those mushrooms were all about…

Chapter 195: To the victor go the spoils

The troll's second attendant – the one Percy hadn't personally fought – rushed out to tend to its leader's injuries. Pulling a few of the verdant mushrooms out of its body, it brought them to the king's mouth before crushing them into paste.

Percy didn't interrupt, partly because he didn't wish the troll king any harm, and partly because he was genuinely interested in seeing the mushrooms work. Learning from the experts would only save him a lot of head-scratching later.

'They're less effective when eaten…'

He watched the life mana spread through the creature's frame, though its effect was greatly muted compared to earlier. Evidently, cultivating the fungi in their own bodies wasn't just some weird fashion statement, but a practical consideration.

"You're not actually going to plant mushrooms under your skin, are you?" Nesha asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Ha! Don't you think they'd look good on my shoulders?" Percy chuckled.

The girl rolled her eyes, but didn't bother responding.

Of course, he wasn't really going to do that. From the first moment he'd laid eyes on the mushrooms, he'd been thinking of brewing potions out of them. Strictly speaking, the green ones weren't anything revolutionary. Just another ingredient rich in Orange life mana – like countless others that could be found all across Remior. While Percy wasn't sure if the Guild's alchemists were familiar with these particular mushrooms, there was no doubt they could be brewed into healing potions, on par with the ones he'd bought in the past.

This was something he had been interested in since before coming to the Trollsden. After all, these potions were still somewhat handy for him and Nesha for the time being, and his stash had already dried out. Plus, his recent mastery of the extraction principle, coupled with his mutated eyes would make his job a great deal easier.

‘But I’m more curious about the red ones…’

Now, those were something he hadn’t come across before. Maybe the Guild’s alchemist hadn’t found any ingredients like that in the past, or maybe a potion that enhanced one’s physical strength just wasn’t that useful for the average mage. Unlike Percy whose fighting style and boosting art both relied heavily on his physique, others mostly fought by hurling their spells at one another. Either way, he wanted to know more about them.

It wasn’t until about an hour and a dozen green mushrooms later that the troll king’s condition seemed to stabilize. At the very least, he didn’t look like he was going to die if left unattended. Still, it would probably take him days – if not weeks – to recover completely. His body was withered and weak, his eyes drooping. One thing was for certain – the crimson mushrooms had pulled quite a number on him.

‘Useful or not, I’ll have to be careful with them.’ Percy thought grimly.

Unaware of Percy’s thoughts, the attendants then grunted at him, capturing his attention. No longer concerned with their leader’s survival, the trolls were finally free to lead him to his prize. To their credit, the creatures appeared to have every intention of honouring their king’s promise. Even better, they seemed to have dropped any thoughts of challenging him to another duel.

The water affinity troll appeared to say something to its companion – likely telling him to stay with their king. Next, he walked towards a certain direction, gesturing at Percy and Nesha to follow. Thus, a man, a woman and a demi-human delved further and further into the depths of the Trollsden, in an area untouched by civilization. The longer the trio walked, the taller the trees in their path became. Older too, their barks rotting and peeling.

As for the artificial graveyards by their roots, they expanded greatly too, the skeletal remains of the trolls’ ancestors growing denser by the second. The same was true for the mushrooms cultivated there, the whitecaps both larger and more numerous than the ones they left in their wake.

And that wasn’t everything. As the interweaving canopies of the ancient trees blotted out what little moonlight had previously sept through, a different source of light took its place, illuminating the swamp. Soon, some green mushrooms began to appear amidst the whitecaps – the same ones Percy had seen on the trolls’ bodies. At first, the magical mushrooms were both small and rare. Still, they started to dominate the area before long, bathing the bog in a soft green light.

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“Wow. The place is full of them.” Nesha said, keeping her voice down.

“Yeah…” Percy nodded. “No wonder they were so open to giving them away.”

That said, he didn’t miss the conspicuous absence of crimson mushrooms in their surroundings. And those were arguably more important for him, as he didn’t know if he could find a different ingredient with a similar effect. But there was nothing he could do, besides hope that the trolls had more of them somewhere.

Eventually, the attendant led them to a clearing.

Finally, the tall trees gave way, allowing the gentle moonlight to blend with the eerie glow of the verdant mushrooms, their combined lime-coloured lustre reflecting off the shallow waters of the swamp. This area wasn’t that large, and neither was it empty. It was densely packed with leather tents and totems of bone. And it was pretty crowded too. Dozens of trolls sat around the campfires set up on a few dry patches of soil. Most of them were busy tending to some routine task such as roasting some whitecaps by the fire or crafting simple wooden tools. These trolls were definitely adults, but they weren’t quite as tall as the ones Percy and Nesha had seen before. r̲aNôBƐṢ

“Are these their females?” Nesha asked, her voice hushed.

Percy shrugged, tentatively agreeing with her guess. Apparently, all the male trolls were assigned to the outskirts of the Trollsden, protecting the heart of their homeland where the more vulnerable members of their society resided. The women weren’t the only ones here. Many smaller trolls were running all over the place, yelling and tossing handfuls of mud at one another, immersed in all sorts of primitive games. Percy smiled at the sight, tilting his head to avoid a ball of dirt thrown at him by accident.

It was at this moment that their arrival seemed to have caught everyone’s notice, however. Sharp breaths and exclamations could be heard from everywhere, as the female trolls approached the trio, pulling their children behind them. Though they didn’t do anything drastic just yet. Instead, they turned to the Yellow troll, unspoken questions lingering on their expressions.

“GAAAHUUUK!” the king’s attendant said, before making all sorts of signs and gestures, trying to explain the situation to the women.

He pretended to swing a massive club, or to crouch, seemingly in imitation of the troll king’s hunched back. Every now and then, he pointed at Percy, before throwing a few rapid punches in the empty air in front of him. The trolls’ gazes shifted between the two, as awed expressions soon began to overtake their confusion.

“I think you just got yourself some new fans.” Nesha teased, jabbing him with her elbow.

Percy just ignored her, patiently waiting for their escort to finish whatever he was doing. It wasn’t until half an hour later that the interrogation reached its conclusion. By now, the female trolls looked at him with fear and respect, as even the children seemed to have understood something, not daring to stare at him for too long. Honestly, it was a little uncomfortable. Percy wanted nothing more than to receive his mushrooms and get out of this place.

Luckily, his guide didn’t keep him waiting much longer. He gestured at them to follow him once more, before delving back into the trees. This time, they only walked a couple dozen metres, however, before reaching a rather strange place. Percy’s eyes widened as he saw a colossal tree – wider and taller than any other he’d seen in the entire bog. The air around it felt heavier, almost suffocating, as if centuries of reverence and death had soaked into the soil. Its base was covered in troll skeletons, though these were larger too, their bones thick and sturdy.

“Is this where they bury all their leaders?” he wondered, his tone solemn.

There was one more thing that corroborated that guess. Unlike all the previous mushroom farms they had seen, this place was covered in only one type. The crimson ones. They pulsed faintly, casting shadows that seemed to shift like watchful spirits.

“Glak.” the attendant said, keeping his voice low. Apparently, he wasn’t willing to disrespect this place either.

“Am I allowed to take them?” Percy asked, getting a nod back.

Manifesting a cyan sickle, he harvested enough mushrooms to fill his bag, though he left most of them untouched.

“Should we return for the rest later?” Nesha asked.

“Nah. Let’s not be too greedy. Besides, whether we have 20 or 200, they’ll still run out sooner or later. I’ll have to find a way to grow more of them.” Percy said.

Once he was done, the attendant escorted them back the way they had come. However, they did stop at a few more spots for Percy to collect some of the green mushrooms too. Beyond that, the troll also took the opportunity to show them how to plant the mushrooms in their bodies. Apparently, it was as simple as cutting a shallow wound into one’s skin and burying a few spores in it.

‘Informative, but I’d rather do that to corpses than living people.’

It wasn’t until they had returned to the troll king’s side that the attendant finally waved them goodbye, letting them continue the rest of the way by themselves.

“Percy… are you sure you don’t want to check all those women and children for a rare affinity? That was your original reason for coming here, wasn’t it?”

“It was…” he sighed.

That said, the thought of possessing a troll child after all the trust the creatures had shown him left a poor taste in his mouth.

“Leave it. We’ve gained more than enough from this place anyway.” he added after a moment.

His new spells aside, he had two brand-new ingredients to play around with. Once he figured out how to cultivate the mushrooms and brew them into potions, he’d get even stronger…

Chapter 196: Shadows and rainbows

The fields shone in all sorts of vibrant colours beneath the bright sunlight. It wasn't wheat nor any other mundane crop that was planted here, however. Instead, it was a strange magical fern, glittering in a faint Red within one's Mana Sense. Its leaves ranged from pale blues to fiery reds, to piercing yellows and exotic pinks in one's regular vision.

And, completing the magical scenery, the rhythmic chirps of crickets added a soothing melody to this tapestry of natural beauty. It was almost enough to cover the occasional grunts of the farmers and the dull thuds of their rakes stabbing into the moist dirt. Though there was little it could do to mask the acrid blend of sweat and fertilized soil assaulting the nose.

Either way, Jason wasn't in the mood to appreciate any of this. He'd spent weeks travelling to this latest destination, praying to Phoebe it wouldn't be another dead-end. Yet, it wasn't until the last day or so – when he had already approached enough to determine what sort of place this was – that his hopes were dashed once again.

"Fucking waste of time!" he spat, his clenched fists drained of all colour.

He was tempted to toss the objects against the ground to quell his anger, but he held himself back. The last thing he needed was to add more misleading karma threads to the items. Both the Aurora Dew and Nesha's clothes had pointed him to this location – among many others, each more useless than the last. This time, the trails had already split up, leading to multiple people, many of them among the farmers working here. But it didn't take a genius to figure out that none of them were his targets.

"Hey! You there!" he yelled at the nearest person to whom both sets of threads were attached.

"M-My lord?" the farmhand stuttered, taken aback.

He dropped the rake in his panic, hurrying towards Jason. Though he didn't say anything upon reaching him, seemingly struggling to find the right words. Luckily for him, Jason had plenty of questions for him.

"What do you people grow in this place?" he asked.

"My lord, our humble town lives off the production of Rainbow Grass and Coloured Silk."

Jason already had a few guesses, but he wasn't as quick to voice them. He waited patiently instead, prompting the commoner to elaborate.

"Rainbow Grass is the colourful plant you see all around you. Each batch takes a few months to grow. We harvest them three times a year."

Jason clicked his tongue.

"That doesn't explain anything. Do you have any idea what connection these objects might have to you?"

Next, he showed him the gemstone vial, a turquoise liquid shimmering within, as well as a set of yellow robes. The man tilted his head as he gazed at the two items, his shock slowly replaced by confusion. It wasn't until a few moments later that he replied.

"Sorry, my lord… I don't know much about the Rainbow Grass itself – just how to tend to it, like my father taught me, and his father taught him. Others are responsible for exporting our produce. Perhaps, one of them might know more."

Jason was about to snap. Noticing that, the man hurriedly spoke again.

"That said, I think I know about the clothes!"

"Go on."

"Well… if you look closely at the plants, you will notice lots of tiny silkworms crawling on their leaves. Each individual insect only eats a single colour of leaves its whole life. It then produces a cocoon of the same colour, from which we extract the silk. From what I've been told, it's great for weaving enchanted clothes." **r**ÂŊộƀĘŝ

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Jason nodded. He'd heard of this material before. It wasn't just the Alchemists' Guild that crafted their robes out of this silk. Many noble Houses did the same, including the Divine Root. But it wasn't the fabric of Nesha's clothes he was trying to determine.

At least he wasn't without clues. The peasant's useless input aside, he could already harbour a guess as to how the Rainbow Grass was related to the objects.

'It should be a magical reagent. Judging from its lower grade, it's probably a secondary ingredient of the Aurora Dew.'

Back when they had first arrived at the Alchemists' Guild, neither he nor Deimos had been very familiar with alchemy. For better or for worse, their mission had forced them to pick a couple of things here and there, however.

From what he understood, most reagents on Remior fell into one of two categories. The Orange ones were barely potent enough to serve as the primary ingredients for some subpar potions that the low-borns sometimes used.

As for the Red materials, they were too inert to brew into any potion worth a damn, though that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It allowed them to be used as secondary ingredients, to modify the effects of both elixirs and potions – assuming they had a suitable property, of course.

"This should buy me some more time at least." he sighed in relief.

Naturally, Deimos's patience was already wearing thin after Jason's repeated failures. Sadly, no matter how much the man berated him or pressured him, it wasn't like Jason could magically turn himself luckier. All he could do was to follow all the disparate trails one by one, until he located their targets.

The good news was that he hadn't come up entirely empty-handed this time.

Taking a strange device vaguely reminiscent of a pocket watch out of his robes, he pressed a button on its side to unlatch its lid. It was made of a silvery metal, its surface adorned with runes inside-out. Pouring some of his karma mana into the object, he watched as many of the symbols lit up in a multitude of colours. Though a few of them remained dim.

This artifact was just one half of a pair. The two objects had been designed specifically for him and Deimos to use. After all, one side had to pour karma mana into their watch for this to work, the other side fuelling theirs with sound mana. Suffice to say, this wasn't a pair of affinities that could easily be found elsewhere.

In any case, Jason stared at the object with bated breath, waiting for his superior to pick up the call. It wasn't until about a minute later that the rest of the symbols lit up, shimmering in a dull grey colour.

"Jason? Any news from your end?" Deimos asked.

"I haven't found them yet, if that's what you're asking." Jason replied.

He could already feel the bubbling volcano on the other side of the line about to erupt, but he hurriedly spoke again, not giving it a chance.

"I think I may have discovered another ingredient though."

That seemed to do the trick, dousing Deimos's fury with some cold water. The man hadn't stopped pressuring the Guild's alchemists into deciphering the recipe over the last two years, clearly unwilling to put all his eggs in one basket.

Of course, the results left much to be desired. The old coots hadn't managed to work out the recipe just yet, but that didn't mean they hadn't made any progress. At the very least, they had determined that regular elixirs formed the base of the Aurora Dew. After all, their effect was nearly identical, and there were many other tell-tale signs that they were brewed in a similar manner.

However, they had yet to figure out what Nesha's partner had done to the elixirs to elevate them to the next stage, allowing them to be consumed more frequently. With any luck, Jason's latest discovery would help with that.

"Well?" Deimos asked.

“The dose you gave me is connected to a plant called Rainbow Grass. Wasted two months getting here too, so I hope it’s worth it.” Jason said.

Next, he snapped the device shut, ending the call before Deimos had the chance to lash out at him again.

‘This should keep him off my back for a few more weeks...’

Taking his top off, Jason laid it on the ground in front of him, before placing Nesha’s folded robes and the vial on top of it. He had to do this every time, to avoid adding any additional threads to the objects.

Gathering some mana to his eyes again, he reactivated his Karmic Vision, carefully adjusting it until only the most prominent threads remained in focus. Next, he scrutinized them one by one, ignoring those that weren’t shared, or those he had already investigated.

‘These two… They seem to extend somewhere southwest of the Guild…’

Obviously, Jason had no idea how far these threads reached. The other ends could be as close as twenty miles away, or as far as the other side of Remior. Shrugging, he picked the objects up before wearing his robe again. Either way, he had to investigate all the trails.

‘If memory serves, the nearest populated areas in that direction are the Sentin and Camelot provinces… That’s not too bad. They’re only a few weeks away…’

Chapter 197: Truthseeker

Orin struggled to keep a straight face as he watched his elders – wise Violet cores who had been doing this for even longer than him, fumble their way around their cauldrons. They all understood – even better than him – that deattuning the elixirs twice in a row wouldn’t give them the result they wanted.

Still, Deimos simply refused to hear it. Upon learning that Rainbow Grass was involved in the recipe, he had pressured the alchemists to incorporate it by force, hoping against all odds it would work. And technically, he wasn’t wrong. After all, Rainbow Grass was the key to brewing the Aurora Dew. That said, they were all just missing one important step in-between.

‘Lord Paracelsus has a pure affinity too… if only he knew…’ he smiled bitterly.

At Violet, the veteran alchemist wouldn’t even need any practice to condense the crystals. It would only take him a few seconds. Hell, he had probably done it many times by accident over the centuries – he just hadn’t considered the crystals’ potential applications in alchemy – not unlike everyone else on Remior. Orin was confident they would all be pulling their hairs out a couple decades from now, as soon as they learned the solution had been right under their noses all along.

‘Assuming they don’t find Percy before then...’

The boy had no idea just how lucky he had gotten. Orin too. Had this been a few years back, when the Veritas House was still active, the Divine Root would have already brought one of their truth-seekers to interrogate the alchemists. Had that happened, Orin would have inadvertently spilled the beans by now, dooming everyone involved.

It wasn’t like their Truthseeker bloodline was the only one of its type to exist, but no other variant was nearly as accurate… as… absolute as theirs. Even the runner-up, the Truthreader bloodline that House Asclepius had – and from which the former had been derived – wasn’t remotely as good. Any experienced mage could trick it rather easily. Its best use was to sniff out lies from ignorant peasants who didn’t know any better.

Orin was counting his lucky stars that somebody had decided to eliminate the House at some point. Nobody knew exactly what had motivated the extermination, but the most logical guess was that somebody high up didn’t want such a dangerous bloodline to even exist. Perhaps the leader of some Great House had done something damning. Something they didn’t want ever brought to light.

And, as luck would have it, Percy had even taken the lone survivor – that Nesha girl – out with him. It was the only reason Orin’s head was attached to his shoulders right now.

‘It’s probably for the best anyway…’ he sighed, diving back to his work.

Initially, he had felt guilty over his deal with Percy. What if these twenty years ended up costing Remior everything in the end? Could Orin really carry such a heavy responsibility on his shoulders?

But after seeing Hermes and Deimos's conduct over the past two years, he had slowly come around. People like them might be the very shield that protects Remior from their enemies, but they certainly didn't have everyone's wellbeing at the forefront of their minds either.

By now, Orin was convinced that publicizing the recipe would hurt the majority of people. Right now, there was only enough elixir for Orange-borns and above – in other words, around 40% of the population. What would happen if half of it was wasted during the conversion to Aurora Dew, and the recipients of the new elixir suddenly required three times as much per day?

It was simple math – less than 7% of the population would get Aurora Dew! It wouldn't even be enough for all the Yellow-borns, let alone the Orange-borns!

Even worse, the unlucky fraction of Yellow-borns wouldn't accept getting downgraded to the diluted elixirs. The most likely outcome was that they would outlaw the very act of diluting or drinking an elixir for Red-borns and Orange-borns, starving the rest of the population completely. And it still wouldn't be enough.

Everything considered, 92% of the population would likely remain stuck at the grade they were born at their whole lives. Somebody like Orin would never even reach Yellow, let alone Blue. In fact, all these people would become entirely inconsequential, as they wouldn't even be useful as cannon fodder in wars anymore, meaning they might end up treated worse than livestock.

It wasn't all gloom and doom, of course.

Remior would get more gods eventually. When that happened, they would probably elevate the world's standing, leading to everyone's quality of life improving. But how many tens of thousands of years would it take for that to happen? How many millions of people would suffer until then?

If the Divine Order truly cared about the common folk, perhaps there were ways to mitigate the problem. For example, they could enforce a law that ensured everyone got access to at least the diluted elixirs. Or another one that had a smaller number of Yellow-borns compete for Aurora Dew based on their merits.

'Yeah, as if.' he chuckled. These people, frankly, didn't give a shit.

Soon, the veteran alchemists called the session off for the day. It was already getting late, and everyone was tired. Deimos protested, of course. In his eyes, every idle second was a second wasted. But the elders shut his complaints down with some scathing words. Divine Root or not, there was apparently a limit to how much shit they were willing to take from a Blue.

On the way home, Orin couldn't help but revisit his plan for disseminating the recipe when the time came. Obviously, he couldn't just come out and say he had been sitting on it for twenty years. That would be the quickest way to get himself skinned alive.

'Either I write it down and leave it somewhere anonymously, or I pretend I rediscovered it on my own by accident.'

Neither option was completely risk-free. If somebody found out he was lying, he'd be screwed. Then again, there wasn't much point in stressing over this right now. He had plenty of time to make up his mind. Besides, if Percy got caught, or otherwise leaked the recipe on his own by then, it would absolve Orin of the responsibility.

Shrugging, he was about to go to sleep, when he heard somebody knocking on the door. Naturally, his mind instantly went to all sorts of dark places, though he still walked up to his house's entrance. Opening, he was relieved that it wasn't a Guild official, nor a member of the Divine Root standing there. Instead, it was a plump man in orange robes.

"How may I help you?" Orin asked, still raising an eyebrow at the unexpected visit.

"Sir, I'm sorry to disturb you this late. You don't know me, but I'm Freddy – one of Percy's friends."

"Freddy? Ah!" Orin's expression eased, putting two and two together. "I have heard of you, actually! Percy didn't have that many friends after all." he chuckled.

"You mean, he mentioned me?"

"Of course! You're the one he bought those Honey Rolls from every night, right?" Orin asked, getting a nod back. "So, what brings you here?"

Freddy's expression soured at the sound of that. He looked down at his feet for a moment, before gazing back at Orin.

"Sir, I don't know if you are aware, but Percy has been missing for a long time. Nearly two years, in fact. It's really strange. He almost never skipped a day visiting my stand for ages. Then, he suddenly disappears, never to be seen again. I've spoken to lots of people since then. I've even scoured the first and second levels of the hunting grounds on my own, but I haven't found any traces of him."

Orin remained silent for a second. He still had no idea how Percy and Nesha had even escaped from the settlement – assuming that they had, of course – but it wasn't hard to guess why Percy hadn't told Freddy anything. He clearly didn't want to get his buddy involved in his mess.

Misunderstanding his silence for confusion, Freddy spoke again.

"Sir, after exhausting all other avenues, I came to ask you if you have any idea what might have happened to Percy. You were his alchemy mentor, weren't you?"

"I haven't seen the boy in years." Orin muttered. "I assumed he just locked himself in a room, working, as he often did. Is he really missing?"

Freddy nodded, before voicing another request.

"I apologize in advance for my rudeness, sir, but could you please look for him on the third level? That idiot always did reckless things like that. I would have gone myself, but I can't survive out there on my own…"

Orin couldn't help but clench his fist. He wanted to tell this youngster the truth. But it was better for everyone involved if he remained in the dark. Even better, he had to get him to stop poking around, before anybody caught wind of Percy's connection to him, or the suspicious circumstances of his disappearance.

"Young man… I suggest you forget about it." he said drily. "People go missing on the Fungal Spire all the time. Especially those who bite more than they can chew on a regular basis. Like Percy."

“But sir, I–”

Orin raised his hand to stop him.

“I said, forget it. I liked the boy. He was smart and hard-working. But two years are a long time. If he really went missing that long ago, chances are that he’s dead. If he thought it was a good idea to go hunting on the third level, I doubt there will be any trace of him left.”

Next, he closed the door, not giving Freddy the chance to utter another word. He walked back to his room, taking his robes off. Brushing his hand over a rune, he switched the light off, before resting on his bed.

At the same time, he couldn’t stop thinking about his student and the colossal mess he had brought upon everyone. The Divine Root aside, those old coots would slap the boy to death if they knew it was his fault they were forced to break their backs trying to reproduce this recipe.

‘Percy… whatever it is you’re doing out there, I hope you’re making the most of this opportunity you’ve carved out for yourself…’

Chapter 198: Three

With steady hands, Percy distilled the turquoise gel, pouring the Aurora Dew into the vial, filling nearly a quarter of it. And this was the third one this batch. Two more rested on the desk, filled and corked.

“Man, I love these eyes so darn much!” he grinned.

Besides his stash lasting a little longer thanks to his improved yield, Percy’s new mutation had also reduced the time he needed to prepare everyone’s doses. Before Atlantis, it used to take him nearly six hours per day, on average. Nowadays, it only took him close to four. Still a hefty amount, but it left him more time to invest in his other tasks.

And he did need that, as there were plenty of things begging for his attention. For instance, he had been forced to replace all his constructs over the past few days. His brawl with the troll king hadn’t left any

visible damage on them, but it had already been a couple of weeks since he crafted them. Surely, the intense fight had knocked a few more days off the spell's lifespan.

"You look like you're in a good mood today." Nesha noted as she entered the house.

"Yeah!" Percy said, his smile expanding. "Just finished all the chores! I can finally put some time into my new projects!"

Then, he handed her one of the freshly brewed elixirs, before grabbing two for himself – one from his desk and one from his amulet. Opening them, he downed their contents as he began revolving his mana inside his stomach, using his Whirlpool of Four Streams technique to cleanse both of his cores. Nesha didn't say anything, focusing on purifying her own.

"Working with the mushrooms again?" she asked as soon as they were done.

"Nah. I've put that on the side for now. I'd rather focus on the mana threads."

Figuring out the recipe for his new potions was definitely easier than creating a Masterful spell. That said, there were a few additional difficulties that made this a bad time to work on that. For one, he didn't have the means nor the time to cultivate more mushrooms at the moment. After all, they wouldn't even be staying here a month from now. Plus, he would probably need some secondary ingredients for the potions, and Bogside town wasn't exactly known for its access to magical reagents.

"How are things on your end?" he asked, changing the topic.

He wasn't the only one who had a role to play in the upcoming ambush. Nesha's traps didn't last indefinitely either. And she'd planted dozens of them around the swamp. Naturally, she also had to replace them every now and then.

"The north and east fields are up to date. But the runes planted in the west field are probably close to expiring."

"How long do you need to get those fixed too?"

“Hmmm… I suppose I can have it done by the end of the week.”

“Alright.” Percy nodded. “I guess we’ll have to lure the Greens to the other locations if they attack before then. How about the other ones?”

“Are you kidding?” Nesha appeared offended at the question. “I replenish those every two days or so. I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I wasn’t certain we could rely on them.”

Of course, the odds of getting attacked in the little time they had left were quite low. Percy and Nesha had already decided to leave Bogside town around two weeks from now regardless. That said, they hadn’t relaxed their preparations in the slightest. They both knew that a moment of complacency combined with some bad luck would be more than enough to spell their doom.

Grabbing a handful of teal powder from the jar, Percy sat at his desk. Then, he pulled some mana from his cores, about to start working on his spell again, when Nesha suddenly moved a chair next to him, sitting by his side. He flashed her a questioning look, getting a playful smile back.

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“How about you take a break for an hour or two?” she asked, resting her chin on his shoulder.

Percy’s heart skipped a beat as her moist breath licked his cheek. Sighing, he returned the powder to the jar so that they wouldn’t spill it on the floor by accident. Following that, he wrapped his arm around Nesha, giving her a small peck on the lips, which she reciprocated.

Suffice to say, their relationship had evolved a little beyond that of mere collaborators by now. Some subtle tension had existed between them since their frantic escape from the Guild. Beyond that, getting closer was the inevitable conclusion for two healthy adults cohabiting inside a tiny house for nearly two years.

Then again, it had taken quite a while for their feelings to truly blossom. At first, the pressure they were both under hadn’t left much room for romance to take root. It wasn’t until Percy’s return from Atlantis

that things picked up. The scare they both experienced when he nearly crippled his Status made them realize it might be better to take their chances now, while they still could.

‘Let me know if anything goes wrong.’ Percy told Micky as he pulled the curtains.

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In the end, their ‘break’ lasted a little longer than planned. It was dark outside by the time they finished. Usually, Percy preferred not to waste time that could otherwise be spent productively, but he made an exception for this, allowing himself to mess around with Nesha every now and then. It was probably good for his mind anyway.

Getting up gently, to avoid waking Nesha up, Percy tossed his clothes on before returning to his desk. He picked up some powder again, intent on spending at least a couple hours working on the mana threads. Distractions aside, he understood he’d never complete his ambitious project if he didn’t put in the effort. ɾäɴǑɮĘ***S***

Blending the soft mana with the powder, he allowed his gaze to sink deep into the process as three sets of grains began to form. Some were long and narrow like hairs, others short and stubby like rice, while the rest were small and round – sort of like tiny pebbles.

Suffice to say, Percy had already added a third intermediate step to the process, increasing the number of variables once more. Luckily, his Sorcerer’s Eye helped him here as well, allowing him to better channel his trait’s intuition, accelerating the development of the mana threads massively.

‘Still too thick…’ he grimaced a few minutes later, looking at his latest construct.

A quick tug revealed it was rather strong, though it wasn’t nearly thin nor flexible enough to be woven into a fabric just yet. Even worse, the rapid improvements afforded to him by his mutation had already started to slow down. The rest of the distance to his goal promised to be quite a slog.

“Not there yet?” Nesha asked.

It was only now that Percy noticed she had woken up at some point, watching him work.

“I knew it would be tough from the start, but I still underestimated it. I’m probably a couple years away – at least – and that’s despite my new eyes doing all the heavy lifting. I can’t even imagine how long it would have taken without them.”

“Percy… You do realize Masterful spells are meant for Violets and Whites, right? Even Blues rarely create one. I wouldn’t worry too much about it. In fact, I’m more annoyed that you jumped out of bed to do more work.” she pouted.

“Hey, you’re the one who fell asleep first.” he quipped back.

“I’m not apologizing for loving myself a good nap. It’s my most charming feature.” she replied.

“Well, being a workaholic is mine.” Percy fired back.

The two stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. She was the first to laugh, though he soon followed.

“You know… I’ll miss this place once we’re gone.” she said after a while.

“Really? Remind me again, who was it that kept complaining about the bad smell and the leaking house back when we first got here?”

“What can I say? It grew on me.” she shrugged.

“We can come back.”

“How?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t know if my grandpa will manage to eliminate House Tantalus anytime soon, but it doesn’t matter. If he doesn’t, I’ll finish the job myself. One day. This town will naturally fall under my family’s control when that happens.”

“Dreaming much?” she chuckled.

“Do you doubt I can do it?” he asked.

She appeared to ponder for a second or two, before shaking her head.

“Nah. I’m sure you’ll pull it off. Eventually.” she said, a mischievous smile tugging at her lips. “Though our hair might have greyed out by then.”

Percy was about to argue back, when a wave of panic suddenly slammed into him like a crazed horse, oozing through the ethereal cord.

“Micky?!” his chair scraped against the floor as he shot up, his pulse hammering. “What’s wrong?!” he asked out loud, for Nesha’s benefit.

‘They’re here!’

The crow’s response shook Percy to his core. This was something they had never stopped preparing for over the past year, though the situation still felt surreal.

“Are you sure it’s them?”

‘Yes. House Tantalus. Greens.’

Percy nodded, as Nesha stared at him with bated breath.

“How many?” he asked.

They knew the enemy family was bound to send somebody stronger than Broose this time, though they still couldn't stretch their forces too thin. Percy and Nesha were confident there would be two Greens.

Unfortunately, Micky's response caused the colour to drain from his face, however.

'Three.'

Chapter 199: Eviction

"How long till they get here?" Percy asked, forcing himself to calm down.

While he and Nesha were expecting two enemies to arrive, they had prepared for more. Their ambush might be a great deal trickier to pull off now, but they could do it – as long as they made everything count.

'About an hour.' Micky said.

"Alright. Keep your eyes on them. And fly lower. Try not to be seen."

Strictly speaking, it wouldn't be the end of the world if Micky got spotted. After all, House Tantalus already knew there was some kind of avian beast involved in all this. That said, some elements of Percy's preparations would work better if their enemies thought they were catching them by surprise. This was why he had instructed Micky to deactivate his boosting arts whenever he was flying by the north side of the town, to make himself less conspicuous.

The enemy Greens had probably chosen to attack in the middle of the night thinking they were giving themselves an advantage. Little did they know, they were about to regret that decision. The shadowy veil of the night sky did more to cover Micky than it did them. The fools were about to walk right into a trap.

"One hour." he said, relaying the information to Nesha. "Start packing." he added, getting a nod back.

Naturally, they couldn't fit everything inside the spatial amulet, but there was a lot more space in it right now than when they had first arrived here. After all, Percy had already used up over 80% of his stashed elixirs and rainbow grass over the past two years.

The jar was the first item Nesha stored. There wasn't too much powder left in it, as he'd consumed most of it to craft his constructs. Still, there were a few weeks of accumulation left that he'd rather not lose if it could be helped.

Next were the mushrooms. Nesha stored as many as the artifact could fit, splitting the space evenly between the green and red variants. Sadly, she did have to leave some out, as they'd taken way too many from the Trollsden. Suffice to say, each abandoned mushroom was like a stab in Percy's heart, especially since he'd yet to figure out how to grow more of them.

'It's for the best. We don't want the house to look too empty…'

Leaving Nesha alone, he then began working on his own preparations for the ambush. Opening his sack, he picked the components of his armour one by one, sliding them in place. At the same time, he took deep breaths, bringing his boosting art to the verge of activating. Though he stopped before the final step, not in a hurry to make his body light up just yet.

About ten minutes after Micky's original message, they were both done. Percy sighed as he tossed one last glance around their humble abode. He'd never forget the decrepit condition they had found it in, nor the hours he and Nesha had spent rebuilding it to their liking, one plank at a time.

Countless bittersweet memories swirled within his mind. He keenly remembered Nesha discarding piles upon piles of stones she had ruined with her magic, trying to build him his forge. Or all the times he'd had to patch the ceiling in the middle of the night when it leaked water. This was the place where he had forged his scythes and his armour. And finally, it was where he and Nesha grew closer…

"This is the last time we get to be here, isn't it?" she asked, grabbing his hand.

"It is." he replied, his voice quivering.

Even if they managed to defeat House Tantalus and return to Bogside town in the future, Percy knew this place was unlikely to survive.

“Let’s go. There’s no time to waste.” he said, pulling her out. Though he didn’t miss her picking his ocarina up from his pillow right before they left, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

The two rushed out of the town, scurrying into the swamp. But they didn’t travel too far in. They hid in one of the spots they had previously agreed on, keeping their eyes on the house. Then, they used the next few minutes going over the plan for the billionth time, making slight adjustments based on the latest circumstances.

‘They’re here.’ Micky said at some point, drawing Percy’s attention.

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‘Ok, go to the designated location. And… Micky?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Keep her safe for me.’

‘Of course.’ the crow replied without hesitation.

Percy squeezed his hand to let Nesha know, as the two fixated their eyes on the hut, waiting with bated breath. Soon, a group of seven men appeared in their sight. Only three of them wore the noble family’s colours, however. As for the other four, both Percy and Nesha recognized them, having seen them many times around the town. ℝ𝐚ℕÔ𝐛ËŠ

‘How could they be so stupid?’ he couldn’t help but ask himself.

It wasn’t like they had anything to gain from snitching on him and Nesha. Maybe the idiots thought they were ingratiating themselves to the noble House, or that they would get a free pass the next time an

owner of the Drain bloodline visited their town. Either way, they were too dumb, or too scared to imagine a better world for themselves and their families.

But Percy shook his head. Whatever had motivated these people to do this, it wasn't important. The only thing that mattered right now, was eliminating all three of their enemies. Shifting his focus to the nobles, he scanned them from head to toe, trying to discern any information he could about them.

'Bald with a ginger beard… then that's Grian this time.'

This was Broose's cousin, possibly here to avenge him. But that was a good thing. The man had a pure affinity, which should make him far easier to handle than the others. As for the second man in the group, Percy didn't recognize him. The guy had short black hair and no other features that stood out. There were easily half a dozen possible matches, at least based on his outdated information. Though the last one wasn't too difficult to identify…

'Rambert. Wow. They really brought out the heavy hitters this time.'

Rambert was one of the younger Greens of the family – around Percy's age. Yet that didn't make him weak in the slightest. If anything, he was one of their most promising talents, only falling short of Mordred and Elaine in the entire province. And Percy was certain it was him. There was no mistake. He was the only Yellow-born redhead with the bloodline, his pale skin painting a stark contrast against his deep crimson hair.

Seeing him here, Percy suddenly felt a lot more pressure. From what he'd heard, the guy had never lost a duel against anyone his grade. Then again, this was a good thing. The more high-profile his targets were, the heavier the blow to the enemy family once they were dead.

'Now we just have to make them dead.'

Percy and Nesha watched as the four traitors led the nobles right outside their house, pointing at it ominously. With next to no warning, one of the Greens – the one who Percy hadn't recognized – pulled some mana from his core, unleashing a barrage of water droplets on the house, punching dozens of holes through the wall. About a quarter of the roof collapsed too, though the rest survived.

Turning to Nesha, he flashed her a questioning look.

“Sixty.” she muttered soundlessly.

Percy nodded. It was far from ideal, but 60% would have to do.

Looking back at the nobles, he watched as one of them – the same person who’d just ruined their house – kicked at whatever was left of the door, forcing his way in. His expression was nonchalant, without a hint of care for the devastation he’d just unleashed. Had anyone been inside, they’d be dead by now. Then again, these people definitely knew the place was empty, having probably scanned it with their Mana Sense already.

“Nothing here! Just some glowing mushrooms!” the guy shouted once he was inside.

Through his Sorcerer’s Eye, Percy watched the man’s silhouette walk to the centre of the house, stomping on one of the mushrooms, probably examining it with his boot. Then, Percy checked up on the other two, clicking his tongue upon seeing they had no intention of joining their friend inside the ruined house.

“Good enough.” he whispered. “Do it.”

Nesha tightened her grip as her core flared up.

“Dranold! Get the hell out of there!” Rambert suddenly yelled, being the first to notice something was off.

The unfortunate water user heeded his teammate’s instructions a moment too late, however. Before he even moved an inch, the countless pocket runes Nesha had planted all over the place lit up, the concealment runes buried alongside them failing to hide them any longer!

Realizing the danger he was in, the mage tried to jump through the hole in the roof. But he wasn’t fast enough!

Countless distortions manifested all around him – visible to the naked eye – as the walls, the ceiling and the floor of the house all shrunk and twisted. Even worse, the tears in space soon bled into one another, interacting violently as they fought over the same strips of reality, pulling and stretching, and crushing everything in their path!

By the time Dranold reached the hole, his surroundings were unrecognizable. The wooden hut was down to a third of its size, crunched into a misshapen ball, with him smack in the middle. He must've realized he wasn't going to escape when a powerful force stopped him right in his tracks, dragging him back to the centre of the house.

Unleashing every drop of mana from his core, he tried to force his way out. But it just wasn't meant to be. Nesha might be a grade lower than him, but the sheer devastation she'd carved into this place wasn't something a lone Green could easily overcome.

With a sickening crunch, an entire segment of reality collapsed upon itself, as all sorts of colours blended together, from the dull brown of the planks, to the vibrant green of the man's silken robes, to the unique pink of human skin. Then, it all exploded with a deafening boom, as splinters of wood and bloody chunks of flesh rained all over the town, an eyeball even landing by Percy's foot.

Just like that, House Tantalus succeeded in evicting him and Nesha from their new home. The nostalgic scents of the old wood and the forge's fumes were something he would never smell again. That said, the price their enemies had paid to do this was steep indeed…

'Two more to go.'

Chapter 200: Chase

"Run. Don't look back." Percy whispered, letting go of Nesha's hand.

He didn't even glance at her as she bolted off. His eyes were still glued to their remaining enemies. Taking a deep breath, he finally pushed the mana in his channels past the point of no return, activating Synchronization. At the same time, he grabbed the invisible scythe he'd left propped up against the tree's trunk.

Naturally, the nobles caught sight of him immediately, the motes leaking out of Percy's body painting a stark contrast against the darkness of the swamp. But that was the idea. Nesha couldn't move as fast as him, so he had to keep the Greens occupied for a few minutes, to buy her time.

Percy kicked Dranold's eye right towards Rambert before dashing into the bog, hoping this would be enough of a provocation. It must've worked like a charm too – if the rush of infuriated footfalls thundering behind him was anything to go by. In fact, a second set followed after the first, Grian probably just a step behind the hot-blooded youth.

'Good. Now I just have to not get caught…' Percy thought, speeding towards the next location. The plan was to take the long way there, to give Nesha the chance to arrive before they did.

Running away, he took extra care to weave between the trees, trying to block the nobles' line of sight whenever he could. This was crucial, if he wanted to survive. After all, even his boosting art and two cores weren't enough for him to outrun a Green in a straight line. His only other advantage was that he was covered in concealment runes from head to toe, making it harder for them to detect him through obstacles.

Still, the glowing trail he left behind him ensured they never lost track of him for very long. Their heavy stomps were interspaced with muddy splashes – depending on where they stepped. They grew louder by the second, as the distance separating the two parties shortened with every breath.

But Percy didn't let fear slog his pace. He navigated through the familiar landscape with the confidence of a veteran. Tossing a barrage of throwing stars behind him, he tried catching them off-guard multiple times. He had long engraved concealment runes on many of the trees too, making his attacks almost impossible to see coming. The projectiles phased through the rotting trunks, stabbing at the nobles from all sorts of insidious angles.

This seemed to do the trick, slowing the two a little, buying Percy a few more precious moments. Still, the nobles never got hit, always managing to dodge the projectiles at the last second. Not that it mattered much. It wasn't like the flimsy spells would have done much damage had they landed.

At some point, the mages grew impatient. Percy caught a bright flash of orange by the corner of his eye. It was accompanied by a deafening explosion, followed by the sound of cracking wood. Soon, trees started collapsing behind him one after the other, as Rambert continued smashing through them with his fire magic. Blazing through everything in his path, the young mage was about to reach Percy!

'Too little too late.' Percy smirked.

They were already at the second location.

Gripping his scythe tightly, he turned around, catching sight of his opponents for the first time in a while. The greatest downside of his concealment runes was that they inhibited his own Mana Sense too. Still, his mutated eyes picked up the slack, swiftly bringing him up to speed.

Not missing a beat, Rambert launched an enormous fireball at him, trying to reduce him to cinders.

Percy leapt out of the way, positioning himself such that the two nobles were lined up behind one another. Next, he hurled his weapon at them with all his strength.

At the same time, the blazing spell exploded right by his side, the blast shrouding him in a blanket of fire the following instant. Luckily, his armour didn't let the second-hand flames scorch his skin. Unbothered by the heat, Percy's gaze remained fixed on his scythe as it spun towards Rambert.

Once again, the young talent noticed the attack at the last second, probably being on guard against the concealed constructs by now. Still, the short window to act forced him to dodge at an awkward angle. As for Grian, he had an even tougher time evading the Soul Harvester, only realizing the danger he was in after seeing his companion's reaction.

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Both nobles landed clumsily on the ground. But that was just the beginning. Soon, a series of pocket runes lit up beneath them, forcing them to roll away before they sank into the pitfalls.

'So far, so good...' Percy thought.

Not letting up, he launched another barrage of throwing stars against Rambert as he called his scythe back to him. At the same time, a flock of black butterflies wormed their way around the trees, rapidly descending upon Grian.

As soon as the Soul Harvester returned to Percy's hand, he tossed it at Rambert again, keeping up the pressure. He forced the young man to keep zigging and zagging around the traps, evading the onslaught by the skin of his teeth. And Grian didn't seem to be faring much better, as Nesha did something similar with her own spell.

Of course, this was never going to last. Rambert was the first to escape the traps, as Percy's mana dropped dangerously low. Climbing to his feet, the young Green snarled, before dashing towards him once more. Not wasting a second, Percy turned around, bolting off again, as the sound of cracking wood began anew, Rambert burning down everything in his path to get to him.

However, Percy struggled to keep his lips from curling upwards as he heard only a single set of footfalls chasing after him.

Naturally, he and Nesha hadn't expected to deal any serious damage just now. Unlike Broose, their opponents had seen both the pocket runes and Percy's constructs this time, making it far more difficult to catch them by surprise. Suffice to say, killing or even crippling the nobles in this brief exchange would have been a tall order. That was why they hadn't even tried that. Instead, their goal had merely been to split the two up, to handle them more easily!

'Good. Keep coming after me, you bastard!'

That said, escaping the enraged Green wasn't particularly easy. Rambert utterly obliterated everything in his path, leaving a trail of devastation behind him as he sped towards Percy. Judging from the sheer rate by which he was closing in, he was probably using his flames to propel himself forward too. Such a manoeuvre was bound to be costly to his mana reserves, though the young man likely had plenty left to deal with him.

Gritting his teeth, Percy only focused on dodging any direct blows, as those packed enough force to potentially damage his armour. Other than that, he ignored the explosions entirely, relying on his spell to shield him from the heat.

'I bet he's scratching his head in confusion right about now.' he chuckled, catching a glimpse of Rambert's grimace at some point.

The young man couldn't perceive his armour, so he was probably struggling to understand how Percy had even survived this long. That said, they both knew this couldn't go on forever. Even if Percy never made a mistake while dodging, the rising temperature would eventually cook him alive.

Luckily, the two were already close to the final ambush spot.

Picking up the pace, Percy tried to cover the last stretch of ground to his destination. In his excitement, however, he finally made an error in judgement, failing to dodge one of Rambert's attacks. This time, the fireball exploded right on top of him, shattering his armour, blasting him through a tree. Though Rambert clearly wasn't satisfied just yet, sending two more spells at him, trying to finish him off.

Percy – having somehow survived the first attack – barely managed to evade the follow-ups. That said, the projectiles still landed close to him, the resulting explosions pushing him around like a boat trapped in a storm.

The only silver lining was that smoke filled the entire area in the aftermath of Rambert's attack, shrouding Percy while he got back to his feet. Still, he soon noticed yet another fireball coming his way.

'He can spot me through Mana Sense!' Percy realized, narrowly evading the blow.

It was only now that he managed a fleeting glance at his armour. The Phantomscale Raiment wasn't entirely destroyed. In fact, the second and third layers – arguably the most important ones, were still intact. However, a large chunk of the outermost layer had already been peeled off. Whatever remained of the concealment runes wasn't remotely enough to hide him from Mana Sense any longer.

Shrugging, he dodged the next fireball by leaping atop a nearby tree. Squatting on a thick branch, he looked down at Rambert, calling his scythe back to his hand. At the same time, he allowed his armour to turn visible again. There was no point trying to hide it now that the cat was out of the bag.

'I hope the others are alright…' he thought.

But he shook his head. This wasn't the time to be worrying about Nesha and Micky. He had his own fight to focus on, as they did theirs.

Realizing Percy wasn't going down so easily, Rambert steadied himself. He didn't rush to attack again, allowing the smoke to disperse as the two stared at each other.

Seeing that his opponent had chosen to take him seriously, at last, Percy couldn't help but feel a hint of respect bubbling up. While the two stood on opposite sides, he knew there weren't many Greens on Remior capable of letting go of their pride, acknowledging an Orange core as a worthy foe.

The roaring flames crackled all around them, as the two locked eyes. Both were keenly aware that, come sunrise, only one of them would draw breath…