Wanderer 201

Chapter 201: Garden

Grian tried rushing after Percy and Rambert, but Nesha would be damned if she allowed that to happen. Not after all the trouble they had gone through to split them up in the first place. Remaining hidden behind a tree, she moved her butterflies in front of him, blocking his path. At the same time, she crouched even lower, hoping her bandage would continue masking her core's flares.

Drawing a large amount of mana from his sternum, Grian unleashed a barrage of daggers of his own, accurately hitting the butterflies one after the other, shattering them into nothing. Still, Nesha couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the poor display.

'His mana isn't that potent!'

The sheer speed and control of his magic was undeniable, of course. Befitting of his grade. That said, this latest stunt had clearly cost him a lot of his reserves. Then again, it wasn't that surprising. Not all pure users were like Percy. Cursed with the weakest affinity, they were often treated as lesser among their peers, having to put far more effort to keep up.

Growing a little more confident, Nesha drew some more mana from her core, summoning a new set of butterflies, sending them after him before he escaped.

However, it appeared she had been tricked.

Grian's expression morphed into a savage grin, as he manifested more bolts. This time, they were even thinner – more akin to needles than knives – shooting the butterflies down the moment they emerged from behind the tree. Unlike before, he used much less mana to deal with her attack too.

"There you are." he said, turning to face her before casually strolling her way.

At the same time, he created more needles, launching them at the tree. Nesha barely managed to leap out of their path, a series of cyan projectiles drilling dozens of holes through the wood, as well as the ground where she had previously stood.

“A space affinity, huh?” he smiled coldly. “What a waste, at the hands of an Orange-born. You really thought you’d beat me with just that, didn’t you?”

He looked at her with disdain, manifesting countless more cyan needles around him, about to finish her off. But he never got the chance.

“KRAAAAA!!!”

Unleashing a piercing screech, Micky dove in the attack’s path, shielding Nesha with his body. The constructs did draw some blood, though they failed to pierce deeper than an inch into the crow’s flesh.

A pang of guilt gripped her heart as she realized Micky wouldn’t have needed to endure the attack had it not been for her foolishness. Still, she rushed behind another tree, disappearing in the darkness, unwilling to waste the chance the bird had bought her.

She understood this wouldn’t be enough to take Micky down. Just as Grian probably stood at the bottom of all Greens, Percy’s familiar soared above all Yellows. With his two cores and just as many boosting arts, the crow’s flesh wasn’t something that could so easily be penetrated.

Sure enough, Micky took off a moment later, avoiding another round of spells with ease, his injuries having failed to slow him down in the slightest. Grian clicked his tongue in annoyance, though he continued to shoot at the crow, trying to pin him down.

‘I can’t let him get hit again. At some point, it’s going to affect him.’ she thought grimly.

The crow flew circles around the man, Acceleration doing wonders for his speed. That said, dodging the rain of needles was still difficult, a few grazing him every now and then. And it didn’t look like Grian had much trouble keeping the attacks coming, using far less mana than before. At the very least, he seemed content keeping the bird at bay, slowly whittling down his strength without giving him a chance to counterattack. ƦαNổBÊŠ

Carefully observing the two with her Mana Sense, Nesha waited with bated breath for an opening. Eventually, Micky attempted to dive at Grian, only to be driven off with another barrage. Still, that was precisely the chance she had been looking for.

Creating more butterflies, she made them curve towards Grian, as she ran in the opposite direction. Naturally, the man spotted her instantly, pelting her location with more attacks. That said, hitting her on the move was harder. Especially since he had to split his projectiles three ways, to deal with the butterflies while also keeping the crow at a safe distance.

Nesha did her best to guard her vitals, though a few needles still pierced her leg. Sadly, her flesh wasn't nearly as tough as Micky's either, the cyan constructs punching right through, sending her tumbling through the mud.

'At least, it wasn't for nothing.' she smiled bitterly.

Crawling away, she hid behind another tree as she followed the battle through Mana Sense again. Micky hadn't wasted the opportunity she had created for him, diving towards Grian. He allowed himself to get hit by a few needles on the way – clearly having deemed it was a worthwhile sacrifice. He managed to carve a few nasty gouges on the man's left arm and leg, throwing him on the ground. Still, Grian didn't waste any time before fending him off with more needles.

Stolen story; please report.

The good news was that he appeared to have trouble standing afterwards, though Nesha wasn't entirely convinced they had come out on top in this exchange. Sure, their opponent had arguably suffered the worst injuries among the three, but his fighting style was probably affected the least. After all, he fought by staying in one spot and shooting spells at them. Meanwhile, Nesha's immobility meant she couldn't repeat her previous move without giving her life up. Even Micky looked like he had more trouble flying right now.

'Pathetic.' she thought, the back of her head making a soft thud as she hit the tree's trunk with it.

She'd worked so hard over the past two years. For the first time in her life, she'd done everything in her power, just so that she could support Percy and Micky without getting in their way. And for what? Here

she was, as useless as always. It was at that moment that Grian's earlier words rang through her mind again, truer than ever.

'This affinity is really wasted on me, isn't it?'

Taken to its extreme, the space affinity could bridge entire worlds together, overcoming unimaginable distances. And what was she doing with it? She just made a few pretty constructs fly around…

No.

There had to be more she could do.

Right now, her biggest issue was that she betrayed her location every time she tried to get involved. How ridiculous was that? The owner of a space affinity should have complete control over a battlefield! Not hide in some corner, afraid to cast a single spell!

Bringing her hands in front of her chest, she drew some mana between her palms, manifesting another butterfly. This time, she only formed one. Plus, she took extra care to keep all the involved channels hidden behind her bandage, unwilling to draw Grian's attention. Looking at the construct, she couldn't help but crack a faint smile. It really was pretty. She'd definitely grown better at making them.

'But this is a fight to the death, not an art contest.'

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on her mana, trying to dig deeper than before. This was space mana. It had to be capable of something more than just flying around. Scanning the battlefield with her Mana Sense, she allowed her focus to sink into Grian's head. Could she make the butterfly pop right inside that fucker's brain, turning it into mush from within?

'It should be possible, shouldn't it?'

She'd never tried anything of the sort, but this sounded like it was within her affinity's alley. Grian wasn't even that far. Just a couple dozen metres or so.

Concentrating, she tried every mental exercise she could think of, from simply willing the butterfly to appear in a different location, to imagining it dig through the very fabric of space. At first, her efforts seemed to yield no result, but she didn't give up, knowing this was her only means of helping Micky.

Eventually, she noticed something strange.

The butterfly still hovered in the same spot, showing no signs of moving. However, some mana suddenly vanished from her core, a blob of Yellow popping up in a random location near Grian. Naturally, the man instantly unleashed a barrage of needles to bring it down, but Nesha didn't care about that, instead focusing on what she'd done.

'Hmm? It worked… but why like that?'

She'd wanted to teleport her butterfly there, not a random blob of mana from her core. Why did that even happen? Was it because she was more intimately connected with the mana still in her sternum?

Either way, this could work. Did she even need to manifest the butterflies in her hands first? This was space mana, after all. If she could teleport it right out of her core, could she directly form her spells from it at the same time?

Trying again, this time she imagined some mana – the same amount she usually used when creating a butterfly – vanishing from her core. She pictured it materializing as a butterfly inside Grian's head.

Something happened again!

More mana disappeared. This time, it did take the correct shape, though it still didn't go where she wanted it, appearing a few metres away from her target. Spooked, Grian hurriedly put some distance from that spot, before destroying the construct. Though in his panic, he nearly gave Micky another opening to attack, only managing to drive him off at the last second.

Nesha's heart skipped a beat at the sight.

Her latest trick wasn't accurate in the slightest, but it could still work! Getting the butterflies to manifest inside her enemy's body didn't seem possible, and neither did she think she could teleport them a second time after they left her core. However, she should be able to control them remotely like she normally did.

Repeating her actions, she created a second one, and then a third, and a fourth… One butterfly after another popped into existence around Grian, each of them appearing in a random spot in his vicinity.

Taken aback, the enemy mage unleashed much more mana than before, trying to destroy them as soon as they appeared. Still, he seemed to have trouble keeping track of them all at once. Especially since they flew around erratically, making it even harder for him to hit them, as they all tried closing in on him.

Mana kept draining from Nesha's core at a ridiculous rate. It appeared each construct sucked a little more than it normally did too, the very act of teleporting them not without its own cost. Still, she didn't pay that any heed, doing everything in her power to gnaw at Grian's attention.

It wasn't until a minute later that her core dried up completely. In the end, she still failed to land a single hit, the enemy mage having just barely managed to defend himself against the chaotic spell.

That said, her efforts didn't go unrecognized.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Butterfly – Crude -> Chaotic Garden – Refined!]

And her Status wasn't the only one to have appreciated her efforts.

Through Mana Sense, she watched Micky dive towards Grian one last time. The man shot more needles at the crow – as he had been doing during Nesha's assault. However, his half-assed attempts seemed to have finally reached their limits.

The bird dodged most of the needles, choosing to meet the last few head on. Drawing every last drop of mana from his abdomen, he allowed it to shroud him completely, sticking to his plumage. At the same time, he spun through the air, the wind itself fuelling his rotation, swirling right alongside him.

Some of the needles even bounced off him, only a couple actually digging into his flesh. Ignoring the pain, he continued speeding towards Grian, who was in no position to dodge. Reaching him, the crow dug a massive hole in the man's chest, his beak drilling out of his back in a rain of blood and gore.

Nesha exhaled in relief, a faint smile tugging at her lips. Evidently, she wasn't the only one with a brand-new spell…

Chapter 202: Grim Dance (1)

"It was you, wasn't it? Behind all of it." Rambert asked, though he could already guess the answer.

Travelling to Bogside town, he and his companions hadn't really cared much about Nesha and Percy. They'd heard of them, of course, but they'd thought the two were just a front – a couple of low-born informants House Avalon had placed there. Their actual fighters had to be hiding in the swamp, right?

It was with that mindset that he'd chased Percy through the bog, hoping to squash the pesky insect before his leaders had the chance to join him. Not to mention erasing the sheer humiliation their family had endured when Dranold got caught in that trap.

But the enemy reinforcements he had expected never arrived. Not when he chased Percy through the trees, nor when they tried to ambush him and Grian with those pitfalls. Throughout the whole thing, it had always been just Percy – and maybe his girlfriend too. And yet, despite everything, Percy was still alive. Somehow, he had kept up with him, evading him and even enduring some of his blows, luring him all the way here.

"What even are you?" Rambert asked again, looking up at his opponent's otherworldly figure.

Crouching atop the branch, Percy was clad in an ethereal suit of armour, shimmering in a pale teal light. The armour was cracked in many places, an entire layer almost gone, yet the rest of it was in good condition. What was it made of?! Some kind of metal? Or was that mana?!

Percy's entire frame shone in a rich Orange through Mana Sense. The sheer amount of mana contained within it would put any Yellow to shame. Resting on his shoulder was a huge scythe made of the same material as the armour, its curved edge glinting beneath the moonlight. And then there was the teal smoke pouring out of his back too, flowing into the wind like a cape.

Yet, by far the most ominous trait, were Percy's eyes. Like a pair of gemstones, they shone from within the shadow of his visor, piercing through the darkness. They appeared to stab right into Rambert's soul, their cold gaze sending a shiver down his spine.

But Percy remained silent, clearly not in the mood to chat. Then, he shifted. Robbing the weapon of its colour, he swung his arm at him, presumably flinging the scythe at a ridiculous speed.

Still, it wasn't difficult for Rambert to sidestep the attack. The construct could be observed via Mana Sense if one knew where to look. Besides, Percy had already used this trick over a dozen times. Just the movement of his hand alone was more than enough to betray the weapon's trajectory by now.

Rambert responded with three fireballs of his own, the first blowing the entire upper half of the tree into smithereens, the other two an attempt to catch Percy mid-air.

Percy twisted his body to narrowly evade both of the projectiles, doing so with relaxed grace. And this wasn't the first time tonight he'd done something similar.

'Can he somehow predict my moves?' Rambert wondered.

Though he didn't get the chance to dwell on it for long, as the scythe was already on its way back, about to cut him in half!

But he didn't panic, seeing an opportunity instead. Jumping over it, he sent three more fireballs at Percy. If he wanted his weapon back, he'd have to eat the blasts.

Unwilling to take the risk, Percy chose to dodge instead. Tough as it was, his armour clearly had its limits.

Seeing that his enemy was now unarmed, Rambert capitalized on his advantage, launching a barrage of fireballs at Percy. Each was a little smaller than before, but there were too many of them to dodge them all.

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

Left with no choice, Percy barely avoided whatever he could, as the rest clashed against his armour, peeling the rest of the outer layer off.

Rambert was about to pick up the pace, to try and eat through the second layer too, when he sensed something flying towards him by the corner of his eye.

‘What the?! How?!’

He barely managed to lean back just enough to not get bisected, though the scythe still carved a deep horizontal cut across his chest, missing his heart by an inch.

Ignoring the thick smell of iron and the blood gushing out of his wound, he shifted his attention back to Percy, only to notice the scythe was spinning towards him once more.

Hastily pulling some mana from his core, he allowed it to explode out of his right palm, propelling himself out of the weapon’s path.

Yet, before he even had the chance to catch his breath, the scythe flew at him again, this time coming from his left!

Panicking, he drew even more mana than before, blasting downwards with both hands, shooting himself to the air. But he didn’t allow himself to relax this time, scanning his surroundings with Mana Sense. How was Percy doing this?! The scythe couldn’t possibly move that fast! ŘàQƀE𝑺

Not letting up, Percy shot some throwing stars at him, as the scythe spun towards him from below.

Unleashing two more blasts, Rambert manoeuvred around the attacks, before resorting to his sixth sense again, still trying to make sense of this mess.

Percy continued pressuring him, somehow sending the scythe at him from all sorts of directions, as Rambert tried to piece together what was happening between fleeting glances.

For a couple minutes, the only sound breaking the eerie silence of the bog were the deafening booms of his explosions, as he danced in the air, frantically dodging the insidious weapon.

It wasn't until his mana was down to about half that he finally understood how Percy was doing this, the realization causing him to draw a sharp breath.

'10… 15… 20!'

Percy hadn't just created one scythe. There were dozens of them, scattered around the battlefield, hidden in plain sight! And Rambert wasn't even sure these were all of them – as each of them was both invisible and under the same cloaking enchantment.

'This is why he brought me here!'

Knowing it would only be a matter of time until he lost his life at this rate, Rambert decided to switch things up. Dodging the next two scythes – at least it didn't seem Percy could control too many of them at once – he then propelled himself right at his opponent.

Percy leapt backwards, trying to put more distance between them. At the same time, he sent more of the weapons at Rambert, hoping to slow him down. Still, it was much easier for him to dodge the scythes now that he knew about them, as he always kept track of the nearest ones.

Metre by metre, blast by blast, Rambert slowly closed the gap to Percy, delivering a heavy punch at his torso. Furthermore, he unleashed a hefty amount of mana on impact, supplementing the physical blow with an even stronger explosion. Rambert grinned as he felt something crack beneath his fist, as Percy was sent smashing through a tree.

Though his smile soon soured, noticing two more scythes spin towards him! Caught in an awkward position, Rambert hurriedly jumped upwards, not having time to draw any more mana. He managed to avoid the constructs, though the third one he failed to notice in time. He barely shifted his torso to protect his vitals, but the scythe still sliced through his shoulder, cleaving his left arm off!

‘The bastard got me good…’ he grimaced, landing in a muddy pond with a loud splash, a fountain of blood pumping out of his stump.

Evidently, Percy hadn’t eaten that attack for nothing. Rather, he’d gambled his armour against Rambert’s offensive, hoping to extract an even heavier price in return.

The only silver lining was that the pain of his amputated limb had yet to register. Getting back on his feet, Rambert sidestepped another scythe, his gaze falling on Percy.

Walking towards him, the young man clearly hadn’t escaped the previous scuffle scot-free either. Percy’s chest-plate appeared slightly caved in, countless cracks branching outwards from his sternum. At the same time, some blood trickled down from his helmet, painting a vertical line of crimson all the way to his boot. His steps were uneven too, though his eyes still blazed with determination, just like the first moment Rambert saw them.

Next, Percy called upon two more weapons, this time summoning them to his own hands. He cracked his neck, before dashing towards Rambert, as another pair of scythes flew towards him.

Unwilling to fall behind, Rambert propelled himself forward with an explosion, before drawing even more mana to his one remaining hand, lighting his fist up in a scorching blaze. Locking onto Percy’s weapons with Mana Sense, he paid close attention to the invisible edges. He couldn’t afford to get hit by them again.

The two men dove upon one another, engaging in their final clash…

Chapter 203: Grim Dance (2)

‘Those people we interrogated weren’t kidding about Rambert. The guy is an actual monster…’ Percy thought, his scythe catching nothing but empty air again.

Had it been Broose facing him – or any other Green, really – they would have long been reduced to pieces by now. The sheer speed by which Rambert was adapting to his fighting style was staggering. The man had already grown used to Percy’s invisible constructs, seemingly having no trouble keeping track of them with his Mana Sense any longer.

Even worse, having given up on hitting him with long-ranged attacks or taking him out with a single blow, Rambert had switched to a fast-paced, closed-combat style. He was trying to wear Percy's armour down, one piece at a time, while conserving his mana reserves.

Unlike the heavy blast he had used earlier, Rambert now released lots of tiny explosions all over his body, each giving him a significant but momentary burst of speed. Even down to one arm, he manoeuvred around the battlefield like a hurricane, dodging Percy's scythes while looking for openings of his own to pounce on.

Every time he took a step, a series of fireworks went off, bathing the gloomy swamp in flashes of red and orange. The shockwaves sent the muddy waters rolling and tumbling, as the heat slowly caused them to boil, transforming the landscape into a pond seemingly taken straight out of hell itself.

But Percy was no slouch either.

Initially, his Greater Foresight hadn't been particularly effective, as the surgical application of Rambert's mana was far removed from anything he'd seen before. As time went on, however, Percy's eyes slowly adjusted to his opponent's movements, the spell growing more accurate with every passing moment, expanding the predictive window slightly.

'And I doubt you've seen anything like my moves either.' he grinned.

Percy's own fighting style was arguably even more exotic than Rambert's. He might not have the physique of a Green, or countless explosions to push him along, but he had his own footwork, honed over years of gruelling practice. His moves ranged from the wild swings and wide pivots of the Dance to the much narrower – but no less rapid – strikes of Takeo's style.

The ethereal nature of his constructs too, added an entirely new dimension to his offensive. While scythes were technically two-handed weapons, normally too clunky to be wielded like this, Percy bypassed most of their limitations by taking advantage of their properties. Whenever one of them was about to stab into the ground, or collide into the other, he would phase it out, allowing them to continue on their path unobstructed. Carving a soundless crescent with every swing, the weapons danced with eerie grace, their insidious edges stopping at nothing short of their prey's flesh.

At the same time, broken shards of teal constantly fell off his crumbling armour, as his Mantle oozed into the air, permeating the swamp. Every now and then, he tried to catch Rambert unaware, by manifesting a dagger out of the substance, or summoning another stray scythe from their surroundings. Still, the guy hadn't dropped his guard for a moment, seemingly always ready to react in time.

It was hard to tell with any certainty who had the upper hand.

Both of them struck true every now and then. Occasionally, Percy would graze Rambert with one of his weapons, the man's body covered in shallow cuts. This was especially significant, as the guy had already lost a ton of blood thanks to his amputated arm, each additional drop seeping out of his wounds bringing him a second closer to death.

Then again, Rambert had landed plenty of blows himself. They didn't carry the same weight as that first one, but they'd still dealt a lot of damage to Percy's armour. Each of them caused the cracks in the Phantomscale Raiment to expand, as more and more of the enchantments failed with every passing moment. Overall, his armour was dangerously close to failing completely. Should that happen, the very next blow he received would be his last.

Worse still, Percy's body was bruised and battered. Even breathing was painful, that first blow having damaged his lungs to an extent. But he persisted, not allowing the burning agony in his chest to interrupt his rhythm, unwilling to lose Synchronization.

'I need to do something, or I'll die.' he thought grimly.

It was easier said than done. Just keeping up with Rambert took everything he had and then some. There were too many things constantly begging for his attention. Reading his opponent's moves, dodging, weaving his own attacks in between, shifting the constructs from corporeal to ethereal and back whenever he needed to, absorbing the blows through the network of strings holding his armour together… The list was endless.

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'Micky was quite talented himself, wasn't he?' a strange thought suddenly crossed his mind.

The sheer elegance and finesse by which his friend had wielded not one, not two, but a whopping four weapons at once wasn't something Percy would easily forget. Like extensions of his body, Micky had effortlessly manipulated his constructs, unleashing a flurry of blows against that beast.

Despite all his gains over the years, Percy wasn't even close to reaching his pal's skill. And it wasn't just due to the lacking pair of limbs either. In theory, he could replace the missing arms with his willpower, handling another scythe or two without having to touch them. Not in practice though. Ever since Rambert closed the distance between them, Percy had a lot more trouble attacking with his spare constructs. It was just too difficult to hit his opponent without harming himself in the process.

'Is there a way to do better?' he wondered.

While his combat experience couldn't yet compare with the decades Micky had spent fighting in the arena, Percy had his own advantages to fall back to. Namely, his eyes. Was there a way to leverage his mutation once more, to elevate his fighting style to the next level?

The battle raged on, the mud boiling with greater fury, the explosions growing louder and more frequent as Rambert picked up the pace, doing everything he could to murder him. But Percy was unfazed, the faint teal mist leaking from his cape painting a stark contrast against the infernal scenery, the cold glint of his scythes splitting the air with undeniable lethality.

Though one thing was different now.

As the two mages fought for their lives, Percy allowed his focus to sink into the shadowy projection of Rambert's fist, faintly glimpsing a future not yet realized. This was nothing new by itself, though one small detail had changed. Along with Rambert's attacks, Percy tried to visualize his own – to better understand how the two would clash, and what the outcome would be.

Of course, his Greater Foresight worked by reading a person's intentions through the flickers of their soul, or the flares of their core. Naturally, Percy didn't have the luxury of examining himself in the midst of combat, meaning that his spell failed to capture the essence of his own moves. But that was ok. He didn't need any help, as he was already privy to his own thoughts, even without the aid of a spell. If anything, his moves appeared even clearer inside his mind.

Two sets of actions – two opposing wills – fought for dominance over the swamp. Each tried to exert control over the battle, to steer it into a different direction. And wherever they met, blood was drawn, or mana-forged constructs shattered.

Soon, Percy realized he might have bitten off way more than he could chew. Reading the flow of the entire fight was, frankly, impossible. Even keeping up with the present moment was a tall order – especially against such a fearsome opponent. Let alone trying to peer into the endless possibilities the future might hold.

'It doesn't matter. This is enough.' he thought, his eyes burning with determination.

He didn't need to see the future. Not all of it, at least. A tiny piece would do. He only needed to give himself a small opening. That would be plenty. And it was only a matter of time too. Perhaps not with every clash, but once every couple of minutes his and Rambert's movements were bound to align in a slightly favourable manner. And, sure enough…

'There!'

Sidestepping a brutal blow leaving a blazing trail behind it, he swung at Rambert's torso, trying to cleave it right in half. The man easily leapt above the weapon, avoiding it. He was already rolling in the air, about to land a hit on Percy's face with his backhand.

Percy didn't panic, however. He merely watched the burning fist enlarge in his eyes, a faint grin hidden behind his helmet. If Rambert stayed on this course of action, he would lose another hand!

Sadly, it wasn't meant to be.

The Green seemed to notice something was off the very last second, releasing a small blast from his palm instead, pushing himself out of the way. Percy crouched to avoid the scorching air blowing at his face, as a scythe spun right through the spot where Rambert had been in just a moment ago.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance, but didn't give up. Letting go of one of the weapons he was holding, Percy grabbed the new one at a more favourable angle, before pouncing towards his opponent, pressing on his advantage.

Rambert was suddenly on the backfoot, clumsily dodging Percy's wild swings, desperately trying to restore his footing into something more sustainable.

Though Percy wasn't having it. He'd worked hard to get this far – he wasn't about to let it go to waste. Unleashing a flurry of attacks, he did everything in his power to land a hit. Just one good slash was all it would take!

The scythes kept missing Rambert by a hair's breadth, as the latter abandoned all caution, consuming his mana thrice as rapidly as before, barely dodging the lethal swings by the skin of his teeth.

Percy was about to push himself even further, when he caught wind of a sudden counterattack his opponent had brewed up. Apparently, the talented Green wasn't about to go down so easily.

Releasing a significant amount of mana all at once, Rambert unleashed a powerful explosion between them, forcing Percy to leap backwards, bringing his offensive to an abrupt end.

And that was only the beginning.

Realizing that caution and patience weren't going to get him anywhere, the fire mage leapt after Percy himself this time, fuelling his attacks with even more mana than before. The sheer rate by which he was draining his core wasn't sustainable – he would run out in the next minute or so!

'Getting desperate, are we?' Percy smiled coldly.

Impulsive as it was, Rambert's strategy was brutally effective, however. Within mere moments, he landed several more hits on Percy's armour, smashing the second layer into bits. Even the final layer was already damaged severely. Percy doubted it would last longer than Rambert's remaining mana.

'Bring it on then! Let's see who gives out first!'

Chapter 204: Grim Dance (3)

Percy swung both scythes at Rambert, hoping to trap him within their lethal embrace. The man leapt above the closing stranglehold with relative ease, before trying to land a blow of his own.

But Percy wasn't deterred so easily. Letting go of his weapons, he used a third scythe to divert the attack. The construct still shattered in the process, unable to survive the full brunt of the Green's fury. Yet, that was merely the start. Percy doubled down with another slash from a fourth scythe, soon discarding it for a fifth after that also failed.

Like that, the two men fought with everything on the line, hinging everything on their battle's final act. Whenever Rambert's fist made contact, Percy's armour crumbled. Without the hardness runes keeping the pieces stable, the absorption runes alone struggled to fend the powerful attacks off. At the same time, Percy's bones cracked, his flesh turning to mush beneath the armour, bloodied patches already exposed in several locations.

But he wasn't without his own victories.

Using the scattered weapons as disposable replacements for his own, he pressed onward with greater confidence, inflicting more injuries on Rambert. The man's already pale skin had grown even paler, making him resemble a corpse more than a living person by now, his gaunt body animated through sheer grit and unyielding rage.

Though Percy couldn't care less about his opponent. He even ignored his own pain, or the very real possibility of death looming around the corner. Instead, he allowed himself to fall into a trance, grasping at a new opportunity emerging by the edge of his consciousness.

Swapping his scythes one after the other, he failed to properly wield them all, often resorting to all sorts of awkward grips out of necessity. Sometimes, he held one with his elbow, other times even using his armpits. Suffice to say, the circus act wasn't particularly effective, unless his goal was to make Rambert laugh.

Still, the feeling of the mana-fuelled constructs pressing against the inside of his joints inevitably jogged some long-buried memories, bringing them to the surface of his mind. These weren't merely his own. They were experiences he had shared with a friend all those years ago. Naturally, they were from the colosseum back on Huehue, from when Micky demonstrated how he fought.

Doing his best to remember, Percy capitalized on the lingering remnants of muscle memory, trying to reconstruct part of his friend's style, and to adapt it to his current needs. After all, he couldn't use it in its original state, as many of his circumstances were different, from his affinity to his physiology, and to the very nature of his weapons.

At first, he made several mistakes. He'd accidentally drop a scythe at an inconvenient moment, or swing it without putting enough force behind the attack. And Rambert made sure to punish him each time, making his situation even more dire.

But Percy wasn't an amateur, and this wasn't the first time he'd tried replicating Micky's style over the years. In fact, his growing connection to his teal constructs only made his job easier. At the same time, his heart beat wildly, just like it had on that fateful day.

Little by little, he improved, making fewer errors, as his weapons' shafts rolled along his limbs, their edges spinning elegantly in ever-shifting arcs around his body, carving an inviolable zone of death in their passing.

Still, he wasn't as good as Micky. This was nothing but a cheap imitation. Or at least, that was the case until his Status spoke.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Wild Art: Grim Dance – Refined!]

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A refreshing wave of clarity washed over his mind, his blossoming understanding of the fighting style growing ever firmer, as the shadows of his own moves finally emerged before his eyes. Though these worked differently from the projections created by Greater Foresight. Those were formed by reading his opponent's intentions, predicting their moves. In other words, it was a tool which relied on external stimuli.

As for the Grim Dance, it drew its strength from within, fuelled by Percy's own thoughts. It was more of a learning aide, showing him how his moves would manifest a second in advance, giving him an opportunity to adjust them – to perfect them – before committing. Working in tandem with his mutation, the new spell finally lifted a heavy load off his tired mind. It allowed him to improve several times faster than before, while giving him the freedom to experiment some more.

Percy swung his scythes again. Seeing Rambert avoid the initial strike, he let go of the weapons, sending them after him. And that was just the start. Not giving his opponent a chance to breathe, Percy grabbed another pair of scythes from his surroundings before chasing after Rambert.

Rambert was taken aback by the sudden shift in momentum. Surviving the relentless barrage was a struggle, as scythes flew all over the place. Some were still held in Percy's hands, others rolling down his limbs, many spinning towards Rambert from random directions. Countless crescents clawed at him, most of them above ground – though a few stabbed at him from beneath his feet, trying to catch him off guard.

Wielding three, or four, or even more of them at once, Percy used every nook and cranny of his body, and every last drop of his willpower. He turned the very battlefield into a demon's maw, its many fangs biting hungrily at his opponent.

Rambert did his utmost to evade the attacks. But it was futile. One cut about halfway into his thigh, nearly slicing his leg off. Another headed towards his heart again. Pivoting at the last second, he prevented the worst of it, though the weapon still shaved a slice of skin off, drawing even more blood.

Soon, Rambert's feet wobbled, as the damage he had endured over the course of the fight finally reached a critical point. Even if the blood loss hadn't taken its toll, his core was almost empty. Either way, he was screwed.

Flashing Percy a hateful glare, he called upon whatever dregs of mana he could still summon, rushing at him for his final stand. And he instantly paid a price for that. Three more scythes carved deep into his flesh – one into his forearm, two more on his torso. Still, he ignored them, gritting his teeth as he opened his bloodied palm, aiming at a gap in Percy's armour.

It almost worked too, Rambert's sudden move being too quick for Percy to evade completely. Shifting his body slightly, he instead forced the Green's grip to land in a different spot – one still guarded by a loose plate of mana.

Clicking his tongue, Rambert closed his fist at the last second, punching Percy with as much strength as he could muster.

A wet cough escaped Percy's lips, as he was sent smashing through another tree, the remains of his armour finally falling apart.

"Nice… try…" Percy spat amidst pants, speaking for the first time since the start of the fight.

Rambert's final move hadn't been random. Percy knew his opponent had tried to use his bloodline, to save his own life. But he'd be damned if he allowed Rambert to recover.

"Would you look at that… he can actually speak…" Rambert chuckled weakly. "For a moment there… I thought you were mute."

Neither of them spoke over the next few minutes. Nor did they move. They couldn't.

Darkness took over the swamp once more, as the shards of Percy's armour sank into the mud, robbing the place of even their dim light. Silence prevailed too, only occasionally broken by the two men's soft, ragged breaths. The only evidence of the apocalyptic battle that had taken place mere moments ago, was the scent of charred wood blending with the stench of spoilt eggs.

But it was ok. As bad as Percy's injuries were, Rambert's were worse. The man would bleed out long before he did.

'Micky… how are things on your end?' he asked through the cord, finally getting a chance to check up on his companions.

Though he never took his gaze off Rambert for even a second. Percy wouldn't allow himself to relax until the guy was dead.

'We won.' the response was prompt, but tired.

A faint smile took root by the corner of Percy's lips. Their work wasn't over quite yet, of course. He'd need help standing up, and they'd also have to clean the place up before leaving the Grisly Bog for good.

But the worst of it was over. Despite the shocking force that House Tantalus had chosen to unleash on them, they had prevailed. Together, two Yellows and one Orange had defeated a group of three Greens.

'Yes, buddy… Yes we did...'

Chapter 205: Rending Tornado

It wasn't until late the following night that the trio left the area.

Their injuries weren't nearly as fatal as those of their opponents, but they were still quite serious. Micky's wings were full of small holes, making it difficult for him to fly. And rather painful. While Nesha wasn't in any danger of bleeding out, she couldn't walk on her maimed leg. As for Percy, he had it the worst among the three. His whole body was swollen, his skin purple and bleeding in many spots.

"Such a waste…" he sighed, looking at the handful of green mushrooms left in his spatial amulet.

Most of his stash had been destroyed inside the trap they killed Dranold with. The rest, they'd consumed to fix the worst of their injuries, just barely allowing them to move. Naturally, the mushrooms were far less effective when eaten raw. Sadly, Percy didn't have the time or mental capacity to figure out how to brew them into potions right now.

"Do you want to take a detour to the Trollsden before we go? We can get some more from the trolls." Nesha suggested.

He grimaced at the sound of that. Honestly, he'd spent enough time in the Grisly Bog to last him a lifetime. Even over the past day, he and Micky had stayed in the swamp, having plenty of tasks to tend to.

Among them, was cleaning up the various battlefields, getting rid of any lingering runes. The enchantments Percy used weren't anything special, but the Vault's script still differed from Remior's. He'd rather not deal with the fallout if somebody stumbled upon them by accident. Being hunted for the Aurora Dew was bad enough.

Plus, he also wanted to salvage some of his constructs' pieces. Obviously, they didn't bother scooping every last shard from the filth. It was too much work. Especially limping and in pain as they were. That

said, they managed to collect some of the still-intact scythes and the largest fragments they could find. All in all, Percy retrieved about 20% of his teal powder, adding another week or two of accumulation to his trusty jar. Not that he was looking forward to replenishing the rest, or reforging his armour.

“Nah. Let’s leave it. Honestly, I just want to go home right now.”

He could ask Baldy to help him grow more mushrooms once he was back at the mansion. Percy had a hunch his grandpa’s clones would be an excellent place to plant the parasitic mushrooms on. With any luck, Archibald’s Violet life mana would accelerate their growth too. And there was another favour he wanted from him...

“How did the townsfolk treat you, by the way?” he asked, changing the topic.

Since he couldn’t exactly appear in front of others until he came up with a way to hide his glowing eyes, the job of scavenging through their house’s rubble had fallen on Nesha. Not that she’d found much. Just a couple of vials of Dranold’s elixirs that had miraculously survived the implosion, along with another mushroom or two.

“Most of them, like a hero. They offered us some food and a place to stay – if we wanted. But I declined.”

Percy nodded. This was what they had agreed on. As nice as it would be to rest for a few days before travelling, they wanted to reach his family’s mansion before their enemies caught wind of their latest losses.

“What about the snitches?”

“Ha! You should have seen the looks on their faces! Are you sure you don’t want to get back at them though?”

Percy shrugged. Truth be told, he had considered it. The bastards definitely deserved to be punished for what they had tried to do to him and Nesha. But at the end of the day, he didn’t care enough to waste more time on such small-minded people. They weren’t worth it.

“Did you tell the others about it?” he asked.

Nesha nodded.

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“Then, that’s enough.”

Their neighbours wouldn’t treat them too kindly moving forward. Not after such a betrayal. And that was the least of their problems too. After all, they were the ones who had reported Percy and Nesha to House Tantalus, only for the family to end up with three more dead Greens. Naturally, this wouldn’t look great on their informants.

Shaking the pointless thoughts out of his head, Percy wrapped his hand around Nesha. The two supported each other, trudging through the swamp, heading west. Micky walked beside them, apparently not finding flying to be particularly pleasant at the moment.

Technically, their current location could be considered an extension of the Grisly Bog, though it wasn’t treated as such by mapmakers – or anyone else, really. The trees here were much scarcer, and the soil less mushy. Even the wildlife rarely went beyond the occasional Red critter.

Had they travelled along a proper road, the trip to House Avalon would only take them a few days. However, that wasn’t an option. They had to circle around the province to avoid running into more of House Tantalus’s people. Suffice to say, the extra distance, coupled with the rough terrain would greatly extend the trip. Their poor condition wouldn’t do them any favours either. Everything considered, they’d probably need over a week to reach their destination.

"It’s not going to be as bad after we cross river Glein." Percy said after noticing his companions’ sour expressions.

While this was his first time making this trip, he did remember a few details about the area. The soil was supposed to be firmer on the other side, as the swamp gradually transitioned into a proper forest. That, in turn, grew denser and denser, until it was populated with the unique variety of trees with the melodic cones that the Whistling Woods were known for.

That would be a much safer direction to approach his family from. Not that it was impossible for House Tantalus to venture in that area, but it was far less of a certainty. Especially given their current lack of manpower – that Percy and Nesha themselves had contributed to.

His words did seem to cheer the others up a little. Still, this promised to be a long and tedious trip. To kill some time, Percy opened his Status, checking up on his familiar. From what Nesha told him, the crow had probably registered or upgraded a spell.

___

Mictlantecuhtli (Percival's familiar)

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Spells:

Decrees:

___

Percy couldn’t help but crack a smile.

‘Upgraded to Refined? Way to go Micky!’

The bird didn’t say anything, but Percy didn’t miss the wave of pride seeping through the cord. And honestly, it was well deserved too. Getting that far as a Yellow was no small feat. It was proof that his familiar had worked hard over the past two years, like him.

‘As did Nesha.’ he thought, squeezing her shoulder gently.

The girl had arguably progressed the most out of the three. Sure, the sheer number of Refined spells he had registered vastly eclipsed hers, despite his lower grade. Still, he had plenty of advantages aiding him, while she had started completely from scratch.

Over the next few minutes, he asked the others for some more details of their fight against Grian, hoping to understand his familiar’s new spell a little better. Unlike Acceleration, which used much less air mana over a prolonged period of time, the Rending Tornado consumed nearly all of Micky’s reserves to deliver one powerful, deadly strike. Should the crow resort to this move at the wrong moment, or fail to finish his opponent with it, he’d end up in a world of trouble. Luckily, the bird had already proven smart enough to use it wisely.

‘With this, all three of us ended up with new Refined spells!’

Granted, the events of the past few days had been exceedingly dangerous. Even with all of their – arguably paranoid – preparations, they had barely managed to survive the ambush. And Percy was keenly aware that they owed their survival to his lucky trip to Atlantis. After all, they had already planned to face off against House Tantalus since before his clone ended up in Enki’s body.

He’d really thought that their traps and his Phantomscale Raiment would be enough. And they might have been, if their enemies had only sent two Greens like they had expected. Or if Rambert hadn’t been among them. However, the final clash had been so close that Percy was sure he wouldn’t have survived it without both of his Wild Arts.

‘I’ve got to be more careful in the future.’ he decided.

It was true that risks often came hand-in-hand with rewards, as was the case here. And Percy needed that, if he hoped to ever realize his ambitions. But he’d need to prepare himself better the next time, as he wouldn’t always get so lucky.

Especially since it wasn’t just his own life on the line anymore…

Chapter 206: Food

“I’m hungry.” Micky complained for the billionth time.

“Alright. I suppose we could all use a break.” Percy sighed.

At least, they’d already crossed the river a while ago, so the place didn’t stink of rot anymore, ruining their appetite. Walking over to the nearest tree with Nesha by his side, they sat on an exposed root. Next, he opened his spatial amulet, tossing a chunk of meat to his familiar. A poor replacement for a mana core – even a Red one – but they weren’t in any condition to hunt for live prey. Nor had they seen any in a while. Finally, he grabbed a loaf of bread, splitting it with Nesha.

“Gods, I miss Freddy’s Honey Rolls so damn much!” he groaned, nearly breaking a tooth on his stale meal. “If I could go back in time, I swear I’d kidnap him.”

“I think your buddy really dodged an arrow there.” Nesha chuckled. “I doubt he’d enjoy hiding from the Divine Root alongside us.”

Turning to Micky – who had already finished his own food – however, her smile faded.

“Say, what are we going to do about him? Our supplies will run out in a few days.”

Percy nodded. This was something he’d been thinking about for a while. He and Nesha would be fine, as they’d reach his family’s place by then. But Micky was a different story. There was a reason why beasts above Red were aggressive, dangerous and rare. Naturally, it was all caused by their insatiable appetite, as their bodies demanded a ridiculous amount of food and mana to survive.

This was obviously why they had left for the Fungal Spire in the first place – in addition to his own need for elixirs, of course. And the problem was even worse now, as the crow had evolved again, making the Whistling Woods an even poorer habitat for him.

“I suppose there’s only one solution.” he said. “Micky! Come over here!”

The bird acquiesced, waddling over clumsily. His injuries had improved a little since they left the Grisly Bog, though not as much as they would have if he had more food. Flying wasn't impossible for him, though he still preferred walking for now.

In any case, the crow didn't seem to care about his wounds much, reaching him and Nesha promptly, some excitement glinting in his silver eyes. Seeing him like that, a pang of pity gripped Percy's chest. The poor thing probably thought he was going to get more food.

'Well, he's not entirely wrong.'

Though it wouldn't be real food. Just a substitute, to quell his hunger. Hopefully.

"What is it?" the familiar asked.

"I'll show you one of my spells. I'll need you to start working on it as soon as possible. I think it'll help with your hunger." Percy explained.

Hearing that, Micky's head drooped in disappointment. Though, to his credit, he didn't complain. Clearly, he also wanted to do something about this.

Naturally, Percy was thinking of his Soul Conversion – or, well, a version of that suitable for Micky's affinities. This hadn't been an option for them back when they left for the Guild, for multiple reasons. Most importantly, the crow had lacked the cognitive ability to understand the process back then. Not to mention that they hadn't even repaired his second core yet. And Percy hadn't been able to spare any of his own soul mana for his familiar, as he'd also had his own injuries sapping at his reserves.

It wasn't until recently that Percy even considered this approach, the books he had read in the Vault opening new doors for him. Though it hadn't been a priority while Micky could still hunt in the Grisly Bog. They'd had other, more pressing concerns to worry about at the time.

"Will he be able to do this in the next few days though? Didn't you spend months on it?" Nesha pointed out.

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But Percy shook his head.

“It took me several months to upgrade it to Refined. It would be nice if he can get there, but even a Crude variant would improve his situation. If he could convert 15~20% of his air mana, it would do wonders for his body’s needs.”

He was confident in that assessment, though there was something he’d left unsaid. It wouldn’t be easy, nor particularly pleasant for the bird. Due to the grade disparity between his two cores, as well as the low conversion rate at the start, Micky would have to spend several hours per day to sustain himself.

‘Then again, that isn’t necessarily a bad thing. The more practice he gets, the faster his efficiency will improve.’

Over the next couple of hours, Percy demonstrated his Refined spell a few times, having Micky observe the mana flow between his cores. Additionally, he went a step further, sending his familiar a few images and thoughts through the cord, to better explain everything.

It wasn’t until they were back on the move that Micky started practicing the conversion himself, Percy paying him close attention. Initially, it didn’t go well. The crow was careful not to send too much of his mana to his beast core at once – as Percy had instructed – though the conversion lacked direction. Without Micky properly guiding the process, his core simply devoured the mana automatically, wasting nearly all of it.

‘I really hope he gets better at it soon…’ Percy thought.

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The trio continued on their arduous journey for two more days, until they were well within the Whistling Woods. By now, they could hear the nostalgic tunes of the cones rattling in the wind, and Percy even started recognizing some of the scenery. They’d already reached their old haunts!

“So, we’re almost there I’m guessing?” Nesha asked after Percy pointed out the spot where Micky had advanced to Orange all those years ago.

“Yeah… We can reach my place in a few hours if we want. Though, I’d rather get Micky’s situation sorted first.”

Nesha nodded, letting him focus on his familiar. The crow had improved a lot over the past couple of days, his wounds having nearly closed. His conversion rate had also climbed steadily, and he even asked to be fed less frequently, which was a great sign that Percy’s plan had merit.

That said, the bird’s efficiency was still lower than they’d like. At this rate, Percy was afraid that Micky would struggle to survive off the scarce food here, even if he spent all day using his new spell. Of course, it was just a matter of time until Micky improved enough, but time was the one resource they were currently short of.

‘Hmmm… His lack of experience aside, the situation is the complete opposite of mine.’ Percy couldn’t help but notice.

In his case, his pure mana was a lot more malleable, almost as if it wanted to transform into something else. It was mostly his soul core’s ability to assimilate it that was lacking, making his job harder. For Micky, it was the other way around. His air mana felt a lot more rigid, as if it was too fixated in its own ways to bother changing into something else. Instead, it was Micky’s beast core that did all the heavy lifting, forcefully replacing the mana’s qualities with its own. Comparing the two of them, an idea suddenly flashed in Percy’s mind. If this worked, it might solve the problem.

‘Is this even possible?’

Percy couldn’t think of a reason why not. In any case, they had nothing to lose even if it failed. Calling Micky over, he explained what he had in mind, getting a nod back. Drawing some mana from both of his cores, Percy fused it, before pushing it through the cord.

As early as when they joined the Guild, he had learned that the ethereal cord only accepted soul mana. Still, while they’d never had much of a reason to try this, he was confident his teal mana in its incorporeal state would work just as well. It was functionally identical to soul mana, after all.

Sure enough, the fused mana soon flowed through the cord without much difficulty, reaching Micky.

“Try feeding that into your core.”

Micky did as he was told, under Percy’s supervision. Of course, neither of them expected this to work on the first try. The crow had never wielded this type of mana in his life, let alone having any experience using it to fuel his latest spell.

They couldn’t have been more wrong, however.

As if the two were made for one another, Micky’s beast core greedily absorbed the fused mana, converting it with even greater eagerness than ever before. On the other side, the mana itself was quite agreeable, happy to meld into its surroundings, to be restructured into a new type. Though it seemed to have a little more trouble doing so than Percy’s pure mana. Apparently, the portion made of soul mana held the substance back from its full potential.

‘Still, this is nearly double Micky’s previous efficiency…’ Percy grinned.

It would be a little annoying, as he’d have to keep fusing and sending his mana to Micky over the next few days, but it should buy the bird time to improve some more. It shouldn’t be long before he could sustain himself on his own.

“You look happy.” Nesha noticed. “Have you solved it?”

“We should be good for now.” Percy replied, before turning to Micky. “Just don’t slack on the spell. The sooner you stop relying on me, the better. And keep an eye out for people. This place is busier than the swamp.”

Only after he got a nod back from Micky did he and Nesha leave him behind – after dropping him a few doses of Aurora Dew to last him for a while of course. Next, they headed to his family’s mansion.

It was finally time to meet Elaine and Baldy again!

Chapter 207: Homecoming (1) – Galahad

Galahad pushed through the crowd, making his way to the centre of the room, curious to see what the commotion was all about.

The Main Hall had always been one of the busiest places in the mansion, serving both as a lounge for everyone to mingle in, as well as the spot where they could pick their missions from. That said, things had changed a little since the advent of the war. Nowadays, the family avoided assigning non-essential missions, as Archibald was afraid of risking people's lives unnecessarily.

However, this only made the place busier than before. Not only was there a higher concentration of people inside the building, but everyone seemed more inclined to spend time with their relatives during these uncertain months. Due to that, the family's management had installed more couches and tables, turning the place a little more comfortable and welcoming.

Still, that wasn't what was going through Galahad's mind right now. Another thing that had changed in recent years was how few outsiders visited them nowadays. Naturally, anyone coming in was bound to draw a lot of attention. Ignoring the sharp gasps and hushed whispers, he finally reached the source of all this unrest.

Two people.

Yet, one of them wasn't an outsider at all, despite how long it had been since the last time anybody saw him. Most curious was Percy's appearance. His gruesome wounds aside, he wasn't wearing the family's colours like the day he had left the mansion, nor was he wearing the Guild's robes.

While nobody ever spared the boy much thought – other than the brief period when they wanted him to stop guzzling down elixirs – it wasn't a great secret he had gone to the Alchemists' Guild. Most people assumed he was still stuck there, the Divine Root not letting anyone enter or leave easily following the Aurora Dew fiasco.

'Did he give up earlier than that?' Galahad wondered.

It was the only logical explanation. How else would he have escaped the blockade? Perhaps, he had failed to make a living as an alchemist – it wouldn't be that strange – and was forced to leave with his tail tucked between his legs. Next, he must have tried his luck outside, only to fail there as well, before

ultimately returning home. At least, that was what Galahad would have assumed in the past. Though he'd long decided to stop making assumptions about the boy.

'No… He's not even a boy anymore.' he soon corrected himself.

Percy's outward appearance was arguably more pitiful than ever before. The torn scraps he was wearing, and the numerous injuries still oozing blood aside, it was the filthy bandage looping around his head that was the most lamentable by far. Had Percy gone blind? That would certainly explain why he had returned. Eyeballs were intricate organs. While they were relatively small, it would take a powerful and experienced healer like Archibald to repair them.

'But then… why is he smiling?'

Percy's expression wasn't that of a scared kid anymore, nor was it that of a defeated man. There wasn't any sign that he had abandoned his ambitions, nor any trace of shame in returning home like this. Instead, he radiated the unyielding confidence of a victor, the unmistakable shine of triumph. Even more strangely, he didn't act like a blind person either. He slowly scanned the room, his non-existent gaze seemingly landing on Galahad of all people. It then examined him from head to toe, as if Percy could still somehow see! And through the blindfold too!

'No. It's more than that.'

It was as if Percy could peer right through his flesh, observing his soul. The very notion sent a chill down Galahad's spine.

"Uncle, is Grandpa in his office?" Percy asked, his voice hoarse but oddly calm.

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"Come. I'll take you there." Galahad replied.

Turning around, he headed towards Father's office, Percy and his girlfriend right behind him. Had this been before, Galahad wouldn't have even spared his nephew a moment. He would have chastised him

for ruining his opportunity and embarrassing their family in the Guild. Then, he would have admonished him for seeking to waste more of Archibald's time.

But he no longer knew what to even think. At the very least, the boosting art Percy had contributed to the family was a treasure valuable enough to warrant the bare minimum of respect. Maybe Father's blatant favouritism towards him hadn't been an error in the old man's judgement?

'Was I wrong to treat him like that?'

That shouldn't be the case, right? At the end of the day, the most important thing was somebody's grade at birth. Even if a Red-born had a special or prodigious bloodline, they were better off just passing it along to the next generation than to try using it themselves. After all, there was a limit to how much they could accomplish with a weaker core and a shorter lifespan.

There was no doubt that Circulation was valuable, but Percy didn't need to be given expensive elixirs, did he? He had plenty of time to have many kids with his bloodline, and to bring more interesting techniques to their family as he was, without robbing them of a stronger fighter they could deploy on the front lines. Why waste resources on him, just to bolster his pitiful personal strength?

"Baldy taught you Circulation, didn't he?" Percy suddenly asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"How can you tell?" he asked, halting his steps.

"Other than your strange behaviour, you mean?" Percy chuckled. "All the channels in your body are developed more than the average person's."

Questions clawed at Galahad's mind, but only one escaped his lips.

"Do you disapprove? Surely, I'm the last person you'd want to have it, am I not?"

Surprisingly, Percy shook his head.

“I admit I’ve never liked you much. Frankly, I think you’re an asshole.” he said, completely uncaring about the difference in age, status or power. “But I understand why he did it. If the future leader of the family – and our second strongest mage – can’t even be trusted with a secret, House Avalon is doomed anyway.”

Hearing his nephew’s response, Galahad resumed his walk down the corridor.

“And do you even care? You haven’t been around in what? Seven years?”

“About the family as a whole? Not that much. But there are people I care about here. And their survival might depend on you one day. Honestly, I was planning to tell Baldy to teach you the technique.”

Galahad raised an eyebrow, though he didn’t say anything else. Soon, the three reached their destination. Knocking on Father’s door, he waited respectfully for a couple minutes to be allowed in.

A strange concoction of surprise, joy and concern painted the old man’s face as Percy walked through the door. It was by far the most expressive Galahad had seen Father in months. Standing up, an orange glint shifted on Archibald’s shaved head as it reflected the afternoon sunlight coming through the window. Some moisture even seemed to gather by the corner of his eyes, though it was gone as soon as he blinked.

Stepping forth, he hugged the young man firmly but also gently. At the same time, a powerful wave of life mana gushed out of his core, shrouding Percy from head to toe, the cuts and bruises along his body closing and fading within mere moments. Still, the old man seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Been a while, hasn’t it?” Percy was the first to speak, a grin plastered on his face by the time Father let go. Then, he pulled the girl forward, placing his arm around her back.

“I know there’s a lot to catch up on, but first things first. This is my friend, Nesha of House Veritas. We’ve spent the last three years working, travelling and living together. Grandpa, can you please heal her too?”

“It’s nice to meet you, Nesha.” Archibald offered his hand.

“Likewise.” she replied, grabbing it.

Next, another burst of life mana bathed the office in a vibrant green colour. The girl recovered even faster than Percy did, her wounds not nearly as serious, nor as numerous as his.

Archibald opened his mouth again, seemingly about to speak. Though he hesitated, exchanging a glance with Galahad, a silent question lingering between them. Percy chuckled, probably guessing what they were thinking of.

“Ah, you don’t have to worry about what you say in front of her. Honestly, she knows more about me than either of you at this point.”

Before the two even had a chance to respond to that, Percy pulled the bandage off his head, opening his eyes. It was only now that Galahad realized it wasn’t an injury Percy was trying to conceal from the rest of their family, but something else entirely…

Galahad and Archibald found themselves speechless once more – as they examined Percy’s glowing teal eyes, his slit pupils staring at them ominously. Shrugging, the young man then pulled two chairs, passing one to Nesha before plopping down on the other.

“I’m sure you’ve got a lot of questions.”

Chapter 208: Homecoming (2) – Percy

Percy was about to start explaining everything to his uncle and grandpa, when somebody knocked on the door. And they did so rather eagerly too. Grabbing his bandage again from Baldy’s desk, he was about to put it back on, though he relaxed upon hearing the person speak.

“Grandpa, is Percy here?!”

It was a chirpy female voice – though a little more mature than Percy remembered. Still, he would have recognized it anywhere, regardless of how long it had been.

“Come in.” Archibald said.

Elaine didn’t even waste a second, spilling into the office like a flood. Her gaze instantly landed on Percy, her eyebrows briefly shooting up as she noticed his mutation. But she didn’t dwell much on it.

“Seriously?! You come home after being gone for 7 years and quiet for the last 2, and you don’t even bother to look for me?!” she asked, some bitterness seeping through.

“You were going to be my next stop.” Percy smiled wryly.

Elaine opened her mouth, seemingly about to snap at him again, but she held herself back upon seeing the caked blood still dirtying his clothes. Her anger faded the very next instant, as she rushed at him, hugging him tightly. Percy felt his bones creak – as always, his cousin wasn’t the best at controlling her own strength.

“Geez, I hope you don’t hug your baby brother like this.” he spat out with difficulty, getting a chuckle back.

“So, are you not going to introduce me to your friend?” Elaine asked with a hint of playfulness.

“Ahem. Like I just told the others, this is Nesha. We actually registered on the same day, though we didn’t really get to know each other until years later.”

“Really? So, you’re just colleagues?” Elaine jabbed at him mischievously with her elbow, nearly bruising his ribs again.

“Look. It’s going to be a long story, so just grab a chair and sit like the others.” Percy rolled his eyes as he dodged the question. Though he did catch a hint of red flushing on Nesha’s cheeks.

Next, he looked at the others in the room, a little surprised they hadn’t interrupted his little reunion with Elaine. Not Baldy as much, but that prick, Galahad, was acting rather oddly today. It wasn’t like he had suddenly changed his entire worldview just because he’d learned Circulation. Percy hadn’t missed the faint traces of disdain in his uncle’s eyes – the man was still struggling to wrap his head around him

and his bloodline. That said, he clearly wasn't in a rush to outwardly dismiss or insult him anymore, opting to try and understand him a little better instead.

'Oh well… I don't even care…'

The only thing Percy wanted from his uncle was for him to be a strong and trustworthy leader for their family – in case something happened to Baldy. And that was something Archibald himself could vouch for, otherwise he wouldn't have taught him Circulation in the first place. Beyond that, Percy wasn't interested in improving his own relationship with the man.

Shrugging, he then proceeded to give his relatives a quick summary of his time in the Guild, as well as his clones' adventures. Apparently, it wasn't until now that Galahad finally understood how his bloodline even worked, or how it had allowed him to accomplish what he had.

Even Baldy and Elaine stared at him wide-eyed as he talked about the world of the floating cats, the demonic infestation in Takeo's world, the bizarre technology in the Vault of Magic, or the underwater world of Atlantis. This was the first time they were hearing that the Status everyone on Remior enjoyed actually came from a Decree – the very qualification a god needed to call themselves a titan. Their jaws fell upon learning that his new eyes were the result of a brand-new Decree – which was also an excellent opportunity for him to flex his second core to his uncle.

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Of course, he did water some specific elements down, not wanting to worry everyone. While he'd talked about the mysterious girl he had possessed and the spectral trait he had acquired as a result of that, he didn't go into detail about how that clone had died on the way back to Remior. As for the Vault, he avoided mentioning his dealings with Metatron, or the corresponding Decree, making it sound like his adventure there was more of a one-off experience than a recurring thing.

However, he didn't shy away from bringing up his and Nesha's connection to the Aurora Dew, as that was relevant to his family.

"Have you lost your damn mind?!" Galahad yelled, losing his composure for the first time. "What madness possessed you, to pick a fight with the Divine Order?! And to even bring this nonsense to our doorstep?!"

Percy shrugged.

“I haven’t brought anything to your doorstep, as long as nobody speaks of this conversation again. Why do you think I didn’t involve our House in the first place? If anything goes wrong, just disown me and say I did this behind your backs. It’s the truth anyway…”

Nobody spoke for a while, everyone seemingly trying to wrap their minds around this revelation. Even Baldy and Elaine found the confirmation of his involvement more shocking than anything else he had shared, despite having previously suspected it – by their own admission. In the end, it was Archibald who broke the silence first.

“Why bring it up now, then?”

“Like I said, I didn’t want to involve you – especially since I had no way of talking to you in person before now. However, now that I’m here, I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t even give you the option to benefit from the new elixirs. If you want, we can find a way for me to brew a few doses. Maybe just for the people in this room, since we don’t want it to leak.”

Next, he turned to face Galahad directly.

“Uncle, I know this is risky, but it can also be a huge boon for our family. If you could shave a few years off your next advancement, it would place our House in a better spot.”

Seeing that Percy was only thinking of them in even bringing this up, Galahad’s expression mellowed somewhat, as he discussed the issue with Archibald over the next few minutes. In the end, he shook his head, however.

“It’s tempting, but it’s probably unwise of us to accept.” he ultimately said.

Percy nodded, not pressing the issue. Honestly, he’d expected this reaction. While he and Nesha had the freedom to travel around Remior and hide from the Divine Root, this wasn’t an option for Baldy or Galahad. They couldn’t exactly bring the whole family around with them, after all. They had too many people to care for, so they couldn’t risk the secret leaking out one day.

“Very well.” he said. “I’m still hoping to get one of the petals, however.”

Galahad sighed.

“Father mentioned you might want one, back when he taught me Circulation. Honestly, I’m still against it.”

“Seriously?!” it was Elaine’s turn to snap, the girl having mostly remained quiet during the previous conversation. “Even after what he’s done for our family?! That’s just unfair!”

But the man shook his head.

“It is unfair. I’m not denying it. And if I ever become the leader of House Avalon, I can promise you now that I won’t be a fair leader.”

Galahad’s declaration left Elaine speechless, the girl struggling to find the right response. In the end, the man just continued.

“A leader’s responsibility is to ensure the family survives and thrives, not that every member feels like they’re treated fairly. Circulation has greatly boosted my power, as it has yours, and Father’s. But there is no reason why we should give up a petal to a Red-born for it, either. Besides, we can’t even justify it. We can’t speak about any of Percy’s accomplishments, so how would we explain this to the others?”

Then, he flashed Baldy a quick glance, before turning to Percy.

“That said, I’m not the current leader of the family. Father is. If he wants to go through with this madness, I can’t stop him, nor will I try.”

Percy looked at Baldy too, curious about his reaction. The man didn’t say a word, seemingly torn between Galahad’s scathing words and his unwillingness to let him down. Then, Percy chuckled.

“You aren’t wrong, Uncle. But I’ve had plenty of time to think about this issue, and I haven’t returned home empty-handed. I’ve brought something tangible to exchange for the petal, so that nobody can criticize your decision.”

“Oh?” Baldy tilted his head, the others in the room sharing in his confusion. Even Nesha didn’t look like she knew where he was going with this.

Opening his spatial amulet, Percy took out a small pouch he had stuffed in a corner, before tossing it on Baldy’s desk. The man then opened it, spilling its contents on the aged wood for all to see. The thick scent of iron soon permeated the room, as he sifted through the pile, lining the torn pieces of fabric next to one another.

Elaine wrinkled her nose in disgust, though her eyes remained glued to the objects, much like everyone else’s. 19 of them in total, of which 15 where yellow and 4 were green, all depicting the same insignia – that of a man’s face sporting a set of strangely elongated canines.

And all of them were drenched in blood…

Chapter 209: Homecoming (3) – Archibald

“How?!” Galahad asked, unable to fathom how Nesha and Percy could have possibly taken a single Green out. Let alone four of them.

Even Archibald was taken aback, though he did know a little more than his son. Percy hadn’t mentioned Micky earlier, but the crow should have progressed a lot after all these years. Between that, and all the other shocking secrets Percy had claimed from the stars above their heads, it wasn’t impossible for him to have caught a Green by surprise. Besides, at the end of the day…

“Does it even matter?” he asked.

Whether Percy had poisoned them in their sleep, or faced them head on in a duel, the end result was the same. No Green besides Elaine and Mordred had contributed as much to their family over the years. However Percy had done this, it was definitely enough to warrant him the last petal.

“Do you know their names?” Galahad asked, still having trouble believing it.

“That one is from an earth user called Broose. We actually killed him over a year ago. As for the other three, they are much more recent. They belonged to Dranold, Grian and Rambert.”

Everyone drew a sharp breath upon hearing that. Naturally, they’d been in this war long enough to have a decent idea of their enemies’ ranks. The difference between killing a random Green and taking down Rambert – of all people – couldn’t be overstated. The young man had already slain plenty of their own mages.

“Are you certain?” Galahad pressed again.

“Of course. Pale guy with red hair. Had the bloodline and a fire affinity. Fought by using lots of small explosions on his body to propel himself. I took him down personally.”

Now, even Archibald was starting to get curious. While he definitely expected more from Percy than his son did, climbing to the level where he could take on a genius Green in such a short span was still unfathomable.

“Anyway, is that enough to justify my petal?” Percy asked, seemingly oblivious to their inner turmoil.

“Honestly, Percy, I would have given you one regardless. While I respect Galahad’s opinion, I don’t share it. Giving us Circulation is more than enough in my eyes. And now, I doubt anyone else will dare complain. Not after the news of your accomplishments spread.” Archibald said.

Percy nodded, exhaling in relief. Seeing his grandson work so hard for this opportunity, Archibald felt his heart clench.

“Anyway, how is the war going?” Percy asked, changing the topic. “We were pretty cut off from news over the past two years.”

Next, the young man proceeded to talk about his and Nesha’s stay in Bogside town, and how they had kept their heads low while staging one ambush after another in the dark depths of the nearby swamp.

Of course, he glossed over many details, though he did share enough for everyone to understand the sheer danger the two of them had faced.

“The situation is a little calmer on our end, probably thanks to your contributions too.” Galahad explained. “Little by little, we gnawed at their forces, eking out lots of small victories here and there. Overall, they lost more people than we did, forcing them to fall behind the river. Nowadays, they’ve really slowed down their offensive, probably worried we might start invading their own side of the province next.”

Percy spent a minute or two digesting the information, before Archibald spoke again.

“So, what are your current plans?” he asked. “Are you only here for the lotus?”

“Wait, what?!” Elaine exclaimed, clearly not having considered that. “You’re going to leave again?!”

“Afraid so.” Percy sighed. “Look, Elaine… One thing I’ve come to realize over the past few years is that I like travelling and seeing new places, whether that’s on Remior or elsewhere. Besides, I can’t grow while holing up here, nor do I want to bring you guys any more trouble than I already have.”

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“But you just got here!” she said, not quite ready to hear this.

“Hey, I’m not going right away. We’ll be here for another month or so. It’s plenty of time to catch up!” he shrugged.

“Where are you going next?” Archibald cut in, still curious about his grandson’s plans.

“I originally wanted to snatch some elixirs from House Tantalus to restock our stash… I’m not sure if that will be possible, but I do know the next best place to get elixirs from…” Percy said. “And it’s also conveniently close to the best place to drink them.”

Galahad slammed his fist on the desk upon hearing that.

“Are you seriously going to keep pushing your luck like this?!”

“Hey, we are already wanted criminals.” Percy shrugged. “What’s the harm in breaking another law or two?”

“Wait, what are they talking about?” Nesha asked, joining the conversation for the first time.

Archibald rolled his eyes at the sight. Evidently, that irresponsible grandson of his hadn’t even brought his girlfriend up to speed.

“You’re talking about the Thirsty Valley, aren’t you?” Archibald asked, getting a nod back. “That’s a bold move. Then again, you’ve never shied away from those, have you?”

Nesha drew a sharp breath upon hearing that, putting two and two together. Though Elaine still seemed confused.

“Grandpa, can you please explain what you’re all talking about?” she asked.

He sighed.

“As you know, the fastest way to advance is using the elixirs.” he said, Elaine bobbing her head in agreement.

“Strictly speaking, the same thing is true for the members of the Divine Order. That said, they have a way to speed the process up even further.”

“Speed up?! You mean they can cleanse their cores faster than everyone else?!”

“Yes and no.” Archibald said, before elaborating. “There is a special location on Remior, where time passes many times faster than everywhere else. Unfortunately, this asset has a limited capacity, which is why it isn’t publicly available. The Divine Order reserves this place for their own members – as well as the people of the Divine Root. Of course, it doesn’t give them an advantage in terms of their lifespan – spending 100 years inside the Thirsty Valley still brings them a century closer to death. But it does allow them to advance faster than the rest of Remior.”

“Or, more importantly, the rest of the universe.” Galahad added. “After all, the gods of other races are the Divine Order’s opponents. Not mortals like us.”

“Based on what I know now, I’m guessing this place is probably a Decree.” Percy pitched in.

It was a well-known fact that Phoebe wasn’t the first titan to lead the Divine Order – though most people on Remior didn’t really understand the implications of such a title. The previous titans had either died or otherwise disappeared by now, but their Decrees should still be around, at least according to the information Percy had just revealed.

“It’s possible.” Archibald agreed. “Based on what Guinevere once told me, Remior has had three titans in total. The first was Iapetus, the owner of a life affinity. I bet he is the reason why we have bloodlines. As for the second one – Phoebe’s predecessor – he was Kronos, the owner of a time affinity…”

“I don’t like this, Percy…” Elaine muttered, her voice shaky. “It sounds like an unnecessary risk.”

But Percy shook his head.

“It’s a risk, but not an unnecessary one. The Divine Root is already looking for us, and they’ll find us eventually. I can’t afford to wait entire decades or centuries to advance. Besides, the city near the Thirsty Valley is a good place to buy elixirs and other materials I need for my projects.”

Elaine didn’t seem particularly happy about his explanation, though she let it go for now, apparently unwilling to spoil the limited time they had left with petty arguments. Next, everyone agreed to bring the meeting to an end, having already covered all the urgent matters. Galahad went off to tend to his own responsibilities, while Elaine took Nesha out to show her around the mansion. Only Percy remained in Archibald’s office, saying he had a few more things to discuss with him.

“How’s Micky?” Archibald asked once they were alone.

“Better than ever.” Percy smiled. “He can speak normally now, and he is currently teaching himself how to survive without as much food.”

Archibald nodded.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“A couple of favours, actually.” Percy said, before elaborating. “I’m teaching Nesha Circulation, but the physical training is taking forever. I was hoping you could help her out for a few weeks – if you’re not busy with the war, that is.”

“It’s fine. Like we mentioned earlier, things are a bit quieter right now. Galahad can take care of things for a while.”

“You’re the best, Grandpa!” Percy said, trying to hug him again.

Archibald pushed him back, rolling his eyes at his grandson’s antics.

“What’s the other thing?”

Percy flashed him a sheepish grin.

“Well, about that… Do you think I could borrow a clone or two from you? And… uhm… when I say borrow… Sure, you can have them back after I’m done with them, but I don’t think you’ll want them.”

“What for?” Archibald creased his brow at the odd request.

“I want to plant a few magical mushrooms on them.”

Chapter 210: Homecoming (4) – Nesha

Nesha stood still, basking in the water’s warmth as dozens of tiny rivulets splashed on her shoulders, before trickling down her back, gently caressing her. Only after a few minutes of silent appreciation did she begrudgingly step out of the stream. She didn’t want to keep Elaine waiting for too long.

Picking an expensive-looking glass bottle from a marble shelf on the wall, she opened it, dripping a viscous liquid that smelled of lavender in her hand. Next, she applied it to her hair, bubbles forming as she scrubbed away the accumulated dirt and grime.

‘Gods, I missed this so damn much…’

Naturally, she hadn’t had a proper shower since before their escape from the Guild. And not for a lack of wanting one. Sadly, for the longest time she’d had no choice but to wash herself with whatever laughable amount of cold water would fit in a barrel. Which, for the record, hadn’t always been enough to rid herself of the swamp’s stench.

Though, it wasn’t her time in the Guild flashing through her mind right now, but a series of nostalgic memories from even further back. Scenes from a tender age long past, within walls long destroyed... Not that she’d enjoyed her childhood much at the time, yet she couldn’t help but miss it – and even that asshole of a father – now that they were all gone.

‘Despite everything, I was so lucky to be born to a noble House.’ she sighed.

Most nobles took simple pleasures like warm showers or fresh food for granted. And Nesha wasn’t an exception. It took living for two years among commoners for her eyes to open to the hardships the have-nots faced on a daily basis. Of course, even nobles were deprived of such amenities when they were travelling, but that was just a temporary arrangement. Not having a proper house to return to was downright depressing…

That said, her time in Bogside town hadn’t been all bad. Her relationship with Percy aside, the sheer progress she had made with her magic was far beyond what she would have thought possible. And she wasn’t just thinking of her Refined spell. The runes she had studied alongside Percy were – quite literally

– out of this world. Much like him, Nesha had actually grown rather interested in the field after all this time.

Overcome by curiosity, she leaned forward, trying to make out the runes carved on the wall. They were there for controlling the water's flow and temperature, much like the ones she had used in the Guild. Sadly, her poor eyesight in tandem with the thick layer of steam filling the room didn't make her job easy. Thankfully, she wasn't in a rush…

'Wow! These are really crude!' she realized as she traced their contours with her fingers.

There was no doubt the enchantments were functional, but they were far bulkier than they needed to be for such a simple task. Not to mention the rather expensive materials they seemed to have been engraved on. Such a waste. Before Bogside town, Nesha hadn't really been in a position to criticize Remior's runecrafting techniques, though things were different now.

'I wonder how House Etna would react if they saw our runes…' she couldn't help but chuckle at the thought.

House Etna was another of the seven Great Houses, and they were the leading authorities on runecrafting. Most noble families on Remior commissioned their enchantments from them. Even the Alchemists' Guild had probably employed their services back when they built their settlement all those thousands of years ago. Percy's spatial amulet had likely been crafted by one of their experts too. Suffice to say, if the old geezers in charge of the family were to see how much more compact and effective the Vault's runes were, they'd stop at nothing to get their hands on them.

'Better be extra careful then.' she thought, a shiver washing away her amusement. 'The last thing we need is another Great House after us…'

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

Stepping beneath the water again, she allowed it to wash away the foam in her hair. Next, she brushed her hand over the runes once more, stopping the flow. Finally, she grabbed a towel hanging on a nearby rack, drying herself. Only then did she walk out of the bathroom, after wrapping the towel around herself.

“Must’ve been a while since you had a proper shower.” Elaine smiled as she saw her, handing her a set of neatly folded robes.

“Sorry I took so long!” Nesha hurriedly said, her cheeks heating up.

“Ha! You call that long?!” Elaine’s grin only grew wider, however. “Every time I take a shower after a long mission, I get people banging on the door to check if I’m still alive!”

Nesha nodded, her own lips curling up as she ran her fingers over the soft silk. Wearing something nicer than the rough patches of linen she’d grown used to was yet another small pleasure she’d been looking forward to.

“How did my jerk cousin get you to spend two years in such a lousy place, anyway?” Elaine suddenly asked, probably noticing something from her expression.

Nesha shrugged.

“He didn’t. I followed him of my own volition. Initially, I did it for the sake of growing stronger, though I’ve come to enjoy spending time with him and Micky. Besides, it’s not like I had anywhere else to go.”

Elaine raised an eyebrow.

“Forgive me if I misunderstood something, but I was under the impression the Guild only recruits nobles. Couldn’t you go back to your own House?”

Nesha sighed, placing the clothes on the nearby bed before sitting. They were currently in Elaine’s room, the girl having been kind enough to lend her her private bathroom. Apparently, the Yellow-borns in House Avalon were given better accommodations than everyone else. Not that different from House Veritas, actually…

“My House no longer exists. I’m all that’s left.” Nesha said, her voice cracking a little more than she would have liked. She was surprised at it too, not having realized she still felt so strongly about it.

Elaine gasped, covering her mouth with both hands.

Nesha was about to speak, to let her know it wasn't that big a deal, though Elaine moved first. Sitting beside her, she grabbed her hand.

"Nesha… I'm so sorry to hear that… Percy should have brought you here right away, instead of making you live in those conditions! I swear I'll give that idiot a piece of my mind later!"

Nesha shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. I admit I'm not completely over it, but it has been nearly a decade since it happened."

"Do you know who did it?" Elaine asked again.

"I do know which family attacked us. But I've been thinking… They couldn't have pulled it off by themselves. There's probably someone higher up, pulling the strings…"

Elaine remained silent for a couple minutes.

"Is that why you're trying to get stronger?" she eventually asked.

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" Nesha chuckled. "A lone Orange-born, going up against an entire noble House? Possibly a Great House, too?"

"Not nearly as ridiculous as… whatever Percy's trying to accomplish. And I think he might actually pull it off one day too. I mean, a Red-born killing Greens? That's insane!"

"I know, right?! It's why I chose to follow him in the first place. I figured if I can accomplish even a fraction of what he does, taking my revenge won't be as… hopeless." she said.

Though, thinking of something, she sighed.

“Then again, keeping up with Percy might be even harder…”

“Well, regardless.” Elaine slapped her thigh before standing up. “You’ve always got a home here. Even if you break up with Percy one day, I’ll ask Grandpa to let you stay!”

“Y-You don’t have to do that!” Nesha panicked.

“Are you kidding me?! An Orange-born with a rare bloodline, a space affinity, who knows runecrafting and Circulation?! Any family would be lucky to have you! Hell, you’ll be the one doing us a favour!”

“I don’t know Circulation yet…” Nesha muttered weakly, taken aback by Elaine’s warmth and straightforwardness.

“I’m sure you’ll learn it in no time with Grandpa helping you!” Elaine insisted. “You should have seen how much trouble it gave me, but I still figured it out in the end. And you’re more talented than me too. I mean, going from zero to a Refined spell in only two years?! That’s amazing!”

Nesha squeezed Elaine’s hand tightly.

“Thanks, Elaine. For everything...”

The aquamarine-haired girl flashed her another radiant smile, her face beaming even more brightly than before, somehow.

“I didn’t even do anything!”

Next, Elaine pulled her to her feet too, dragging her along.

“Come on! Percy must’ve finished talking to Grandpa by now! I want you both to meet Owain!”

“Hold on, Elaine!” Nesha struggled to keep up with the enthusiastic girl.

“Let me dress first! I’m not even wearing shoes!”