Wanderer 211

Chapter 211: Homecoming (5) – Elaine

In the end, it didn't matter much whether Elaine and Nesha rushed or not, as they still had to wait for Percy to wash up too. Owain was a highly impressionable toddler by now, and Elaine had no intention of bringing a veritable caveman along to meet him.

"Looking much better!" she exclaimed once she saw her cousin dressed in some proper clothes for a change. "Though, are you planning to keep that thing on forever?" she asked, pointing at her eyes.

Percy shrugged.

"For the time being, at least. I'd rather not have to explain my mutation to the rest of the family."

"That won't work forever." Elaine insisted. "At some point, everyone will start wondering why Grandpa has taken so long to heal you. You know that, right?"

The bandage Percy had wrapped around his head wasn't enchanted like the one hiding his second core. It didn't have to be, as barely any mana was gathered in his eyes – their effect was mostly passive. Suffice to say, he'd used nothing but a simple strip of cloth to conceal them. Not that it looked any less conspicuous, of course.

"I'm only staying here for a few weeks anyway. I'll reveal my eyes in public as soon as me and Nesha reach our next destination."

"Is that wise?" Nesha pitched in.

"Actually, I think we can spin it in our favour." Percy replied, before elaborating. "Imagine you knew nothing about me, and you just met me for the first time. What would you think of my eyes?"

"I suppose I'd assume it's your bloodline." Nesha said.

“Right?!” Percy grinned. “That’s going to be everyone’s first thought! Naturally, nobody will consider Decrees or mutations! And remember, we’ve already had to disclose our bloodlines when we registered in the Guild. Officially, Percy’s bloodline is Clone…”

Elaine and Nesha exchanged a glance. Indeed, if used correctly, Percy’s strange eyes could easily serve as a mask to divert people’s attention from him and Nesha in the future. At least, it would make it harder for anyone to link him to his real identity.

“But isn’t it going to be suspicious if you show up in public with a pair of glowing eyes, right after ‘Percy’ spent a month wearing a blindfold back home?” Nesha asked again, still not entirely convinced.

“Maybe, but I imagine people are more likely to accept it as a coincidence than guess the truth.” he shrugged. “After all, nobody just gets a second bloodline. Or a mutation. That would be an even greater leap of logic.”

The trio remained silent after that, walking to Mom and Dad’s room. Elaine was about to knock on the door but stopped herself as she caught somebody approaching them by the corner of her eye. In fact, she failed to conceal her surprise upon recognizing the young man walking towards them. She certainly hadn’t expected him of all people to seek Percy out at this time.

“It’s Tristan.” she whispered in Percy’s ear, guessing he might have trouble identifying him based on his grade and soul alone.

“Tristan… My condolences.” Percy said, extending his hand. “I know it’s a few years late, but I really was sorry to hear what happened to Hector.”

Elaine figured Tristan would say something snarky in response, but the young man shocked her by opting to shake Percy’s hand instead.

“I’m the one who should say he’s sorry.” Tristan said, prompting her to raise an eyebrow. “You know… When we heard you’d left for the Alchemists’ Guild, we felt guilty about the way we’d treated you. We were just dumb kids having fun. We’d never meant to take it that far. At least, I know he would have wanted me to apologize on his behalf too…”

Percy chuckled.

“I didn’t leave because of you. I had my own reasons.”

Tristan sighed.

“I figured as much, as soon as I heard what you’ve accomplished. We always made fun of you for your lower grade, but you were more hard-working than both of us combined, weren’t you?”

“Wait, what?” Percy seemed taken aback. “People already know about it? It’s only been like an hour or two since I told Galahad and Baldy…”

“Percy, I don’t think you understand how much of a morale boost this is for our family.” Elaine jumped in. “We’ve been in this war for years. Suddenly learning that House Tantalus is four Greens down isn’t a small thing.”

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“Right.” Tristan bobbed his head in agreement. “Besides, Uncle Galahad had to tell Morgana that she’s no longer getting a petal.”

“Geez… Should I be worried about her trying to murder me? I suppose it must be difficult to believe I’ve pulled this off…” Percy muttered, a hint of anxiety seeping into his voice.

“Don’t worry about it.” Tristan replied. “She was definitely pissed off, but nobody is doubting the information. If Grandpa and Uncle Galahad believed you, that’s enough for the rest of us.”

“That’s good to hear.” Percy exhaled in relief.

Honestly, Elaine was right with him too. Her cousin had worked plenty hard over the years to get this far. He definitely deserved some bloody recognition from their relatives for once.

“You know… it was Rambert who did it.” Tristan said, oblivious to her thoughts. “The one who killed Hector, I mean.” he added after noticing everyone’s confused expressions.

Elaine’s eyebrow shot up at the sound of that. While she’d heard about Hector’s death soon after it happened, this was her first time hearing about this particular detail. As for Percy, he seemed to be at a loss for words too. Thankfully, Tristan just patted his shoulder before walking away.

“Well… That was weird.” Percy said once they were alone.

“Not that weird, honestly.” Elaine said. “Tristan matured a lot over the years. Especially after his brother’s death. Everyone in the family has grown closer during the war too. More… kind, towards one another.”

“Huh… I wish I’d been around to see that.” Percy smiled bitterly.

Indeed. Percy had really been unlucky in this regard. From what Elaine had heard, this wasn’t the first time the environment inside the family had shifted like that. Apparently, things had been similar right after the massacre twenty-odd years ago. Sadly, people had gone back to being self-centred assholes by the time she and Percy were old enough to remember. The same thing would probably repeat itself some time after this war ended…

Shaking the pointless thoughts out of her head, she finally knocked on her parents’ door, getting invited in a couple seconds later. Entering, she felt some second-hand embarrassment as she remembered how messy the place was. Tiptoeing around the towering piles of clothes littering the floor was a genuine struggle. And this wasn’t due to a lack of space either.

Other than Yellow-borns, low-born couples were also given larger rooms with embedded bathrooms, to make life easier for families. Still, Gawain and Ragnelle had somehow managed to run out of space, despite their room being even larger than hers. To their credit, Percy and Nesha didn’t comment on it, at least…

“Uncle Gawain! Congratulations on being a father again! Aunty, it’s been a while!” Percy greeted them.

“Percy? It’s good to see you again.” Dad said. “What happened to your eyes?”

“It’s a long story. Ah, but don’t worry about it! I’m doing fine!” Percy waved the concern away.

“Wow. Little Percy’s all grown up!” Mom exclaimed. “Please excuse the mess! We don’t get visitors too often.”

“Mom. Dad. This is Nesha. Percy’s girlfriend.” Elaine jumped in to introduce the poor girl, after realizing her idiot cousin forgot about her.

“Nice to meet you, Nesha!”

“Welcome to House Avalon!”

“Thanks for having me.”

During the earlier meeting, everyone had agreed to keep Nesha’s status as a noble a secret from the rest of the family, to leave their House some plausible deniability in case they got busted.

“And who’s this handsome young man?” Percy asked, turning to Owain who was playing with his toys in a corner.

Shy as always, the kid got spooked by the attention. Elaine had to pick him up, bringing him closer to Percy and Nesha, who failed to hold back their gasps at the boy’s cuteness.

“Say hello to Percy. He’s your cousin!” she patiently explained.

Sadly, Owain just sucked his thumb in typical Owain fashion, refusing to say a word.

“He can speak.” she chuckled. “He just takes a while to warm up to strangers.”

“Well, that’s a pity…” Percy sighed – rather theatrically too. “And I was looking for somebody to give this amazing ocarina to.” he added, showing the boy a somewhat crudely crafted musical instrument made of wood.

Owain’s eyes widened at the sight before him, as he let go of all his previous misgivings.

“Me! Can I have it, Uncle?” he said in his usual chirpy voice, making Elaine’s heart melt.

Still, she had to go ahead and correct him, like a good older sister.

“Percy is your cousin, not your uncle.”

Owain bobbed his head absentmindedly, his eyes still glued to the object.

“Well, there you go then.” Percy shrugged, handing him the ocarina.

Elaine chuckled as she returned him to his corner, letting him fiddle with his new toy.

“You know he’s gonna get drool all over it, right?” she asked Percy.

“I’ll just make myself a new one later.” he said, prompting Nesha to jut him with her elbow.

“Great!” Mom clapped her hands. “So, I guess the two of you will be staying over for dinner, right?”

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In the end, the whole family had pasta together, as Percy and Nesha recounted their story to Mom and Dad. Or, well… A version of it that was safe to leak, at least.

Owain played with the ocarina until over an hour past his usual bedtime. Eventually, he fell asleep while still holding it. Bidding the couple farewell, the trio snuck out of the room carefully, to avoid waking him up. It wasn't until they were alone in the corridor that Elaine turned to Percy.

"Say… did you get a chance to check Owain's core with your weird new eyes?"

"I did." Percy said, causing her heart to skip a beat.

"And?!"

He shook his head.

"Nothing. I don't think I'll be able to tell his grade or his affinity before he awakens. I guess you'll have to be patient for a couple more years..."

"I see…" she replied, struggling to contain her disappointment.

It wasn't until she dropped the two off to Percy's old room – luckily, they hadn't repurposed it – that she spoke again.

"What are your plans for tomorrow, anyway?"

"Well, Grandpa agreed to help Nesha train." Percy said, prompting her and Nesha to hi-five one another.

Percy rolled his eyes at them before continuing.

"As for me… Grandpa has agreed to help me too, with a different project."

"A somewhat nastier one."

Chapter 212: Homecoming (6) – Micky

‘I wish Percy was here…’ Micky lamented as he stuffed his face with the fifth goblin core.

While the Whistling Woods were a nostalgic place for both of them, it was especially so for him. After all, some of his earliest memories were of him and Percy hunting here together. From back when he was little more than a young, dumb chick. A single Red core, no spells, nor any shred of intelligence worth mentioning. Every single kill had been hard-earned. A constant struggle between life and death. And the food had been so fulfilling too, each meal more than enough to fill his belly.

Nowadays? Not so much… The place even looked different than it did in the past. To him at least. The same trees that used to tower over him like colossal pillars of aged wood had shrunk many-a-time. Even the thickest branches on their crowns had difficulty supporting his current weight. If it wasn’t for the melodic tune of the cones sounding the same as they swayed in the wind, he might have thought this was another forest entirely.

‘Should I look for more goblins?’ he wondered.

Both their flesh and their cores tasted just like he remembered them, though they hardly qualified as snacks right now. In the end, he shook his head, knowing it wouldn’t be worth the effort. He’d burn through more stamina searching for the next group than he’d get back after consuming them.

His best bet was to master the new spell, like Percy had instructed him to. Flying to the largest tree he could find, he sat upon the sturdiest-looking branch. It creaked and groaned as it bent but, luckily, it didn’t snap. Adjusting himself slightly to better conceal himself within the dense canopy, he turned his focus inwards. Next, he pulled another sliver of air mana into his first core, beginning the conversion process anew.

The efficiency was abysmal as usual. And it didn’t help his stomach was constantly grumbling at him either. Sure, Percy sent him a morsel of fused mana whenever he had the chance, but those moments were a little scarcer than he would have liked. Though it couldn’t be helped – Micky understood his partner was busy spending time with his family today.

Micky had intentionally downplayed the sheer extent of his hunger too, to avoid worrying Percy and Nesha. The truth was, he’d never had it nearly this bad before. It was like his very body was about to start eating itself. The beast mana violently thrashed against his blood vessels, gnawing at their walls, desperately trying to break his own flesh down to sustain him.

‘It doesn’t matter. I need to get through this on my own. I can’t keep relying on him forever…’ he thought, his eyes glinting with determination.

Back when Micky was younger, he hadn’t put much thought into this. But he knew better now. Percy always based his decisions on what was best for him. That had been the case when they travelled to the Fungal Spire, as well as the Grisly Bog. Sure, Percy had had his own reasons for going there too, but a huge part had been about finding a good place for Micky to live in. To hide in. To hunt in. To thrive in. Even going behind the Divine Order to sell the Aurora Dew had largely been to earn the money for Micky’s second core.

The thought of having somebody looking after him warmed his heart up, but also stabbed it full of guilt. The last thing he wanted was to be a burden, dragging his companions down. Restricting their every move. Forcing them to keep accommodating him. No. He had to figure this out.

‘Yet, it’s easier said than done.’

He couldn’t be certain, but he didn’t think his efficiency had improved at all today. At this rate, it would be weeks until he managed to reach an acceptable level. Assuming he didn’t starve before then.

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‘I guess my air mana can’t compare with Percy’s fused mana. It contains the pure affinity after all…’

Micky actually understood a little about how affinity fusion worked. Percy had explained it to him in detail, back when he was trying to help him fuse his own mana types. It wasn’t until after he reached Yellow that they understood it wouldn’t work like that for him. Their current theory was that his mutations were his version of affinity fusion.

The thought caused him to instinctively halt the conversion process, a new idea taking root in his tired mind. Tossing his plumage a glance, his gaze landed on the dark green feathers decorating it. Supposedly, those were the very spots where his two mana types met and combined.

‘Hmm… How does that even work? Was it a one-time thing that happened when I evolved? Or is my body continuously doing it passively?’

Micky never bothered to think this deeply about his magic. Percy was better at this sort of thing than him. But perhaps, this was exactly the kind of mindset he needed to rid himself of, if he wanted to stop being a burden. So far, all of his spells he'd either stumbled upon by accident thanks to his mutation, or been taught by Percy how to use them. And he saw how much trouble Percy had run into, trying to elevate his spells to the Masterful tier.

'I'll never get far if I wait for him to do all my work for me…'

Micky had often been reminded that he was a unique existence. In all likelihood, there was nobody else in the universe with the same combination of affinities as him. It made him strong and unpredictable, sure, but it also meant he had to be more proactive if he was to ever tap into his potential. Making his mind up, he activated Mana Sense, concentrating on his feathers. He had a hunch he was onto something…

'Huh? There's definitely some mana flowing there!' he noticed after a couple minutes.

He'd never paid much attention to this. Especially since beast mana had a natural tendency of circulating around his body to begin with. However, his feathers were drawing a little more than normal. And there was a faint trickle – barely perceptible – coming from his abdomen too.

'I guess both of my theories are correct. The bulk of it must've happened when I evolved, but the feathers are still constantly drawing mana to sustain themselves.'

Thinking of something, he pulled some more mana from his second core, about to hack at the conversion spell once more. Only this time, instead of moving the mana directly to his sternum, he took a detour, steering it to his plumage. Soon, his feathers lit up, as a coat of mana enveloped them. This was essentially the same process as his Acceleration spell, after all. But Micky didn't try to fly, nor did he withdraw his mana. Instead, he allowed it to remain there, soaking his feathers as he contemplated his next move.

'I could just use Circulation to move the beast mana to my sternum. But that would only burn my stamina faster than I can replenish it…'

Circulation essentially sped his blood flow up, consuming his energy at a rapid pace in exchange for a boost in strength. What if he did the opposite?

Figuring he had little to lose, he tried to manually reverse the flow, actively fighting against his body's instincts. It was actually even harder to execute than his boosting art. It just felt so wrong. Within mere moments, a wave of numbness overcame him, as if a million ants had been poured inside his veins, crawling through his very flesh. At the same time, he felt profoundly weak, a sense of vertigo slamming into his head.

Micky was about to stop, but he hesitated. It was working! The beast mana wasn't quite flowing in reverse, but it had slowed down a little. The difference wasn't huge, but this might allow him to better conserve his strength!

Of course, he had still failed at his original goal. He couldn't see any mana flowing from his feathers to his core, so he hadn't managed to improve the conversion process just yet. That said, he was confident that was still possible, with some more effort. At the very least, his new breakthrough should buy him some more precious time.

Curious to see whether his efforts had been recognized by Percy's Status, he reached out to him through their connection, explaining the situation, asking him to check for him. Of course, he still glossed over how dire his circumstances were, not seeing a need to worry him just yet.

Sure enough, the response came back swiftly, Percy even making the effort to give Micky the experience every person on Remior was privy to.

'Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Wild Art: Hibernation – Crude!'

Chapter 213: Homecoming (7) – Rambert

Several days earlier

A frog hopped atop a protrusion jutting out of the mud, its rhythmic croaks echoing within the depths of the bog. Big mistake on its part…

Suddenly, a mound of dirt surged outwards, startling the poor creature. Frightened, it leapt away, trying to escape. But it wasn't nearly quick enough. Catching up in an instant, the object snapped shut around the frog, trapping it in an iron grip. Over the next second or two, the critter visibly shrivelled, its very life sucked right out of its tiny frame. Its skin sank inwards, wrapping around the bones tightly. At the same time, mud flowed down the culprit, soon revealing a few patches of skin beneath the filth.

It was a person's hand!

Though it wasn't in much better shape than the frog. It was pale as milk, covered in lots of nasty cuts caked in dried blood. It was nearly desiccated too, the almost-skeletal fingers looking even worse than the critter did. At least, that was the case at first. Soon, the frog was reduced to nothing, its drained body crumbling into fine dust. It trickled through the gaps between the digits, scattering silently in the soft breeze.

With difficulty, Rambert pushed himself to his feet, coughing erratically as he struggled to spit the viscous sludge out of his lungs. The water's texture was both slimy and grainy, the aftertaste of rot and decay making him gag. But that was the least of his problems. Even standing was painful, as one of his legs was injured badly, threatening to buckle. Looking up, he tried to locate the sun through the dense canopies of the trees around him.

'It's morning…' he guessed, based on whatever gentle rays managed to pierce through the branches.

Orienting himself, he limped towards a certain direction, shifting most of his weight to his good leg. Next, he checked the stump on his shoulder. Blood still spilled from it, though it wasn't as bad as before – mostly because he'd lost a ton already. If he didn't have the physique of a Green, his body wouldn't even be able to move right now.

Looking down at his clothes, he noticed they were torn from the fight. An even larger patch was missing right around where his insignia used to be. Ignoring that for now, he tore another strip out, wrapping it tightly around his shoulder, trying to halt the blood flow. It definitely helped a little, but it didn't stop entirely.

'I can't afford to lose another drop.' he thought grimly.

Taking a few deep breaths, he gathered some mana in his core. Next, he ripped another patch of cloth from his garments, stuffing it in his mouth. Finally, he pulled the mana to his remaining hand, pressing it against the wound. His flesh hissed under the sizzling heat, a wave of agony slamming into his brain.

“GGGGHHHHHHHHH!!!”

Rambert’s teeth cut through the dirty silk, grinding against one another, cracking sounds reverberating through his skull. They hurt like a bitch too, though not nearly as much as his shoulder. But he didn’t pause. He had to cauterize the wound. It wasn’t until a minute or two later that he finally stopped. He breathed heavily, trying to regain his bearing as he scanned his injury. It still oozed blood, though it was much better than before.

‘It’s the best I can do right now…’ he sighed.

Taking off, he allowed his Mana Sense to spread through his surroundings, keeping an eye out for more critters. A body released several times more life mana when broken down by his bloodline than what would fit inside a core of the same grade. Even then, a few Red squirrels wouldn’t do much for him – definitely not worth actively hunting them down – but he wasn’t going to pass on them if they were dumb enough to cross his path.

‘Should I return to the town?’ he wondered. The peasants would make for a much better tonic than small animals.

He considered it for a few seconds, before shaking his head. There were several problems with that idea, not the least of which being the fact that he was unlikely to pull it off. He couldn’t take on the whole town by himself on a good day. Let alone in his present state. The townsfolk would finish him off and try to pin the crime on Percy and his girlfriend.

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‘I fucking hate them so damn much!’ he thought, launching a bolt of fire with a wave of his hand.

It pierced through a nearby tree, its trunk exploding into a rain of splinters as the acrid scent of burnt charcoal assaulted his nose. The act did little to vent his frustration, however. His physical pain aside,

the sheer humiliation of getting his ass handed to him by a Red-born was a stain he'd never wash away in this life.

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Luckily, he had found a couple more animals on the way, but he'd chosen to keep their carcasses intact, to munch on during the journey. They were more useful as food, partly because life mana couldn't entirely replace nutrition.

Returning to his family had taken longer than he'd like. Normally, it was a two-day trip – shorter if he rushed. Not like this, however. By the time he made it to the mansion, just over half a week had passed. At least, he'd had a chance to cool down and evaluate his situation. His current priority should be to heal.

Entering the building, he made his way towards Father's office, ignoring the startled gasps and long stares he got from his relatives. Most of them took a few seconds to recognize him, but nobody tried to stop him, as his core still blazed in a burning Green, the remnants of his clothes the unmistakable colours of House Tantalus. Or maybe they were just scared to approach. He probably looked like a reanimated corpse right now…

He only paused once he stood outside the door, hesitating.

Returning home after a failure was a novel experience for Rambert. Normally, he was the one delivering the good news to Broteas. Reporting how everything had gone to shit was typically a shame reserved for the others.

'I hope this doesn't change things between us...'

Steeling his resolve, he was about to knock, when he heard shouts coming out of the room.

"Lord Broteas, I still think it was a mistake to attack House Avalon in the first place!" Elder Nak – the oldest Blue in the family – yelled. "Look at what has happened! We lost more people than they did!"

“Not this nonsense again!” Father shouted back. “As always, you can’t look beyond what’s right in front of your nose, Nak! You think I had an option?! What do you think will happen once Galahad gets a petal?!”

“Uncle… We’ve already tried to assassinate that bastard, but we all know how that ended. I don’t think we’ll get another chance. The lotus will bloom in a few weeks…” Halcard said.

Halcard was another Blue – technically Rambert’s cousin, though he was a few centuries older than him.

“You think I don’t know that?! I still can’t understand how you and Lendin managed to lose to him together!”

The meeting went on for another hour or so, Rambert waiting patiently by the entrance, not daring to interrupt. The last thing his father and his elders needed to hear right now was how the mission to the Grisly Bog had ended. Listening patiently to the heated debate, he understood once more just how badly the war was going for his House. That said, the people in the office didn’t seem to have the slightest clue of what they were truly up against.

‘If Percy taught his relatives half the tricks he used to take me down, we never stood a chance…’

Eventually, the meeting ended, the elders leaving the office. Seeing Rambert there, they flashed him curious glances, but nobody seemed in the mood to ask him any questions. Ignoring them, he strode into the office, causing Broteas to raise an eyebrow.

“Don’t tell me you fucked up too, Rambert.” Father spoke sombrely, his barely concealed rage boiling beneath the veneer of calm.

“They had four Greens stationed in the bog!” Rambert lied through his teeth, too embarrassed to look Broteas in the eye. “I didn’t even get to see their faces properly!”

“This is all happening because of my cursed affinity!” Father snapped. “Why the hell couldn’t I have any other element?!”

Rambert knew what he was talking about, as they'd had this conversation many times. Unfortunately, Broteas had a water affinity already, meaning that he couldn't boost his strength with a petal. They had two Blues who could, but their House would still benefit less from the exotic treasure than their rivals. If it hadn't been for that, they wouldn't have needed to take such a massive gamble with this war.

"Can I still get mine?" Rambert asked cautiously.

Perhaps, this wasn't the best time to bring the topic up, but this was one of the main things stressing him out right now.

"You have the nerve to ask me that?! After losing both Grian and Dranold?! After showing up looking like… this?!" Father gestured at him, his face distorting in disgust.

Rambert swallowed hard. He wanted to protest, but chose to hold his tongue instead, not wanting to pour any more oil in the fire. Fortunately, Broteas exhaled in defeat a moment later, before speaking.

"You're lucky everyone else in this family is an even greater disappointment than you." he waved at him dismissively.

Rambert hurried to leave the room while he was still ahead, but his father spoke again, stopping him in his tracks.

"Can you even fix your body? You look like a complete mess. I'd rather not waste the petal on you just for you to die a week later."

Rambert couldn't help but clench his fist upon hearing his father's callous words. He cared more about wasting resources than his well-being. Then again, that wasn't anything new – it just rarely applied to Rambert, as he was more useful than most.

"You don't have to worry about that." he spat, before leaving the room.

It was another lie, of course. Rambert wasn't entirely sure he could recover from this. But he was certain of one thing…

He'd do whatever he had to, to survive.

Chapter 215: Domain

In the end, Percy managed to brew a couple healing potions by nightfall. In fact, things went even more smoothly than he'd originally expected. He only wasted a handful of mushrooms before learning to extract their essence properly. If he'd known it would be this easy, he would have brewed some before fighting Rambert. If nothing else, they would have made his trip home less unpleasant.

That said, his yield was still much lower than he'd like, but he figured it would climb rather quickly as he brewed more doses tomorrow.

'I shouldn't use more than a quarter of my stash.' he decided, taking a mental inventory of his newly grown resources.

According to his calculations, that should get him a few dozen doses. That would be plenty to last them for months, assuming they didn't get into too much trouble. He could always brew more later, if they ran out, though he'd rather save most of the mushrooms to experiment with the other type of potions.

Satisfied with his plan, he was about to pack his stuff away for the night, when he heard another knock.

'Hmmm? Grandpa again? Have they finished training for today?'

Tossing his blindfold back on, just in case, he made his way to the door. Opening, he was surprised to see somebody else standing there, however.

"Uncle Galahad? What brings you here?"

While their relationship wasn't nearly as strained as it used to be, he didn't expect to get very chummy with his uncle either.

“Meet me in the third training room by sunrise.” the man spat before walking away, not bothering to elaborate.

‘Weird, but ok.’ he shrugged.

Admittedly, Percy had a bunch of things on his plate, but he didn’t mind taking some time to see what his uncle wanted from him. Of course, he didn’t exactly appreciate being bossed around like a kid. Then again, Galahad was a few centuries older than him. At least, he hadn’t detected any hint of his uncle’s previous disdain towards him just now…

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Come morning, Percy reached the agreed upon location, finding Galahad already there waiting for him. He was meditating on a mat by the centre of the room, an empty vial sitting by his side.

‘Wow. He’s punctual, if nothing else.’

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Percy also downed two doses of Aurora Dew. Next, he sat opposite his uncle, silently accompanying him in his cleansing session. It wasn’t until half an hour later that both of them were done.

“You must be wondering why I called you here.” Galahad spoke, opening his eyes.

Percy didn’t say anything in response, but he did toss him a ‘duh’ glance back.

“When Father taught me Circulation, he asked me to thank you for the art. And to apologize for the way I’d treated you.”

“Huh, is that why you brought me here?” Percy chuckled. “Too embarrassed to be seen apologizing to a Red-born?”

“No.” Galahad replied calmly. If he took any offense from that jab, he didn’t show it.

“I brought you here because I don’t believe in empty words. I’d rather speak with actions.”

“Meaning?”

“Starting today, I’ll spar with you for two hours every morning. Until the lotus blooms, at least.”

Hearing that, Percy couldn’t help but crease his brow. He didn’t doubt the experienced Blue had a lot to teach him, but he struggled to imagine himself lasting a second against his uncle. Even the weakest Blue on Remior was currently an insurmountable obstacle for him, let alone somebody at the top of the grade.

“I know what you’re thinking, but these won’t be regular spars. I have a very specific objective in mind.” Galahad said. “Of course, I won’t force you to do it against your will, but I believe you’ll be grateful for these lessons sooner or later.”

“Domain?” Percy asked, having realized something.

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Galahad nodded, confirming his guess.

“Based on what you’ve told us, you seem to be capable of fighting Greens. Unlike Greens, however, I doubt you can withstand a Blue’s domain.”

Domain was the special ability that all mages unlocked as soon as they advanced to Blue. Its greatest advantage was that it didn’t require a shred of mana. Fuelled entirely by its owner’s willpower, it was best known as an efficient and powerful tool for subjugating those significantly weaker.

Of course, domains were much more than glorified flyswatters. If one was sufficiently skilled with theirs, they could potentially incorporate it within their magic too, allowing them to employ their domain against equal or stronger opponents. If used correctly, it could potentially tilt the scales of a difficult battle in one’s favour.

“You want to prepare me to fight against Blues?” he asked.

“Not exactly. If you end up targeted by a Blue, you and your girlfriend will die, regardless of what I teach you. Simple as that.”

“Then, what’s the point?” Percy asked, not disagreeing with Galahad’s assessment in the slightest.

Suffice to say, he wasn’t under the delusion that he would be able to hold his own against a Blue anytime soon. Even if he ignored the existence of domains entirely, the colossal gap between Greens and Blues wasn’t something he could bridge in the foreseeable future.

“Well, to start with, I want to drill into your head how important it is to avoid provoking a Blue in the first place. If you keep going down this reckless path, you’re going to get yourself in serious trouble. Beyond that, maybe this training will bear fruit a few years down the line.”

Percy nodded. He’d do everything in his power to avoid being targeted by a Blue, but it wouldn’t hurt to be able to at least move inside a domain. Either way, getting trained by the most talented Blue in the province was definitely a unique opportunity.

“So, how are we going to do it?”

“It’s simple, really. I’ll unleash my domain on you, and you’ll do everything you can to not suffocate. Bonus points if you can stay on your feet.”

Percy was about to ask more questions, but his uncle never gave him the chance. The very next moment, a powerful pressure descended upon him, squeezing the very air out of his lungs. Landing on his knees with a muted thud, Percy struggled to even lift his eyes enough to look at his uncle. He knew that there was nothing happening to his body physically. This was all in his head. But it didn’t make it any less real.

‘How come he’s such a prick even when he’s trying to be nice?’ Percy smiled wryly. Or tried to, at least. Even twitching his lips was quite a slog, given the circumstances.

Of course, this wasn't his first time experiencing a domain. He was quite certain that the Starry Queen had employed one against him, back during his escape from the Fungal Spire. In theory, his uncle's domain shouldn't even qualify as a breeze compared to a Violet's. Then again, he'd never felt the queen's domain directly. Just whatever cheap knock-off she could manifest while possessing the Starry Knight.

'Better focus on this, or he's going to laugh at me.' he shook the pointless thoughts out of his head.

Gritting his teeth, he dragged the tip of his thumb across his palm, before pulling the faintest sliver of soul mana from his core. Repeating the exact set of actions that had allowed him to break free of the queen's domain the previous time, he stabbed himself with a hastily crafted construct, using the pain to clear his mind. Standing up was still difficult, but the jolt of agony did allow him to take a breath, at least.

Greedily inhaling one mouthful of air after another, he slowly pushed more and more mana into his channels, activating his boosting art. It took him three times as long as it usually did, but Synchronization eventually took effect. A wave of power washed over him, as his body transformed in its usual manner.

Percy lifted his eyes just in time to catch a hint of surprise in his uncle's expression. With some more effort, he managed to climb back to his feet, failing to suppress a smug grin.

"Interesting." Galahad muttered.

Percy could've sworn he saw the faintest shadow of a smile tugging at his uncle's lips for a moment there. But it was gone the very next instant.

"I guess I don't have to hold back. Not as much, at least." Galahad added a second later.

Before the words even left his mouth, a second wave of pressure slammed onto Percy. It took him by surprise too, sending him face-first into the floor even more forcefully.

At the same time, his uncle's domain felt entirely different from before. It was several times stronger, of course, but that was merely the beginning. Beyond the sharp increase in the sheer quantity of the pressure, its quality seemed to have taken a drastic shift too.

Percy's muscles grew numb, as a jolt of electricity ran up and down his skin, prickling his flesh. All the hair on his body stood on end, as he could even smell a blend of ozone and charred wood mixing in the air, wisps of smoke coming out of the floor.

Percy was about to call his uncle out for cheating – he wasn't supposed to add mana to his domain. But he held himself back upon failing to spot a single mote leaving Galahad's core.

'Seriously?! Is this still just his domain?!'

Unlike before, the pressure had evolved into something tangible – directly affecting the environment. Percy had some difficulty believing that one could accomplish this solely with their presence. But there was no denying the facts.

"What you experienced earlier was nothing more than the most basic domain. All Blues get that right after advancing. A veteran can take it much further, however. We can infuse our very understanding of magic into our domain, giving it new features. What you're feeling is my lightning affinity giving a different flavour to the domain, stunning and burning your body."

A splitting headache thrummed within Percy's skull, as he struggled to register his uncle's words. Just like that, the domain had grown over five times as troublesome, to the point that his previous tricks weren't enough to snap him out of it any longer.

Of course, Percy had heard about domains before, but it wasn't until now that he truly understood how terrifying they could be. He smiled bitterly, Galahad's demonstration having made one thing crystal clear…

'Ugh… It's going to be one hell of a month, isn't it?'

Chapter 216: Crimson mushrooms

Percy's training session only lasted a couple of hours, though to him they felt closer to years. And that was despite Galahad cutting him some slack every few minutes or so, to keep him from passing out. By the time they were done, Percy wasn't even sure he had improved in the slightest. If this training was useful, it wouldn't show for a while…

Dragging his tired feet through the corridor, he wanted nothing more than to take a quick shower and go to bed. Of course, he couldn't actually do that. It was still rather early in the morning, and he had a ton of things begging for his attention.

'It's only a few more weeks of this. I guess I'll have to soldier through it.'

Sighing, he entered his lab, only to find somebody else waiting for him there.

"Good morning!" Elaine greeted him. "Don't tell me you plan to spend all your time home holed up in a room?"

"I don't have much of a choice." Percy shrugged. "This is the first time in two years I don't have to constantly look over my shoulder. It's a golden opportunity for some last-minute preparations before we head out."

Elaine pouted at the sound of that, but she didn't press him. She probably understood how important these next few days would be, given the perils waiting for them in their upcoming trip.

"Say, do you mind if I spend some time with Micky then?" she asked. "I've missed him too, you know."

"Knock yourself out. He's currently trying to learn a new spell in the Whistling Woods."

"Will I be disturbing him?"

Percy shook his head.

"Just help him catch a meal or two, and you'll make up for it."

Next, he took out several vials from his amulet, tossing them in a pouch.

“Since you’re going, would you please take these to him? I’ve packed some Aurora Dew for you too. It’s enough to last both of you for a week.”

Elaine drew a sharp breath upon hearing that.

“Seriously?! I thought Uncle told you not to give us any! Besides, aren’t you running low already?!”

Seeing her reaction, Percy failed to suppress a chuckle.

“Nobody has to know. Besides, we’re good for another couple of months or so. Between me, Micky and Nesha, we’re already drinking 12 doses per day. Taking that up to 15 won’t make that much of a difference…”

“You sure?” Elaine asked again, still not entirely convinced.

“As long as you never forget who your best cousin is.” Percy grinned.

Elaine rolled her eyes, though she still squeezed him in one heck of a hug before leaving.

‘It’s official. My relatives have teamed up to kill me.’ Percy thought amidst coughs as soon as she was gone.

That said, he felt better knowing she’d be watching over Micky over the next few days. He understood the bird was struggling more than he’d let on. Then again, it would be hypocritical of him to call the crow out on it, given all the reckless things he’d done himself over the years.

‘I hope he manages to get the spell down.’

In theory, it should be fine. Between the fused mana he was regularly sending him, the bird's new Hibernation spell, and his growing understanding of mana conversion, Percy was confident his familiar would figure it out.

'Alright. No sense in worrying about him.' he thought.

Micky and Nesha had their training to focus on, and Percy had plenty of tasks of his own. Closing the door, he removed his blindfold before walking to his desk. Then, he took out all his supplies, as well as his alchemy equipment, scanning everything carefully while planning how to best manage his time.

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'I still have a little under three weeks left until the lotus blooms… I need to brew more Aurora Dew, more healing potions, rebuild my weapons and work on my projects…'

Realizing he couldn't possibly fit everything in his schedule, Percy understood he would have to prioritize the most important things.

Sadly, that meant shelving his Phantomscale Raiment for now. As powerful as it was, he knew he didn't have anywhere near enough powder for it, nor the time to reforge all the pieces. Let alone how difficult it would be to maintain it while on the move. While it was a crucial part of his arsenal, the thrice-evolved Refined spell was prohibitively impractical.

'I should make a push to learn some basic magiscript during my next visit to the Vault.' he decided.

He already had an idea as to how he could eliminate the armour's greatest drawback. But that was for later. Right now, he could only afford the dust and time for a couple of his weapons, as they were far simpler to craft and replace. That said, he couldn't exactly make too many of those either.

'Two scythes. It's not ideal, but it's probably the most efficient use of my current supplies…'

Estimating how much powder that would leave him with, he nodded in satisfaction upon realizing it would be enough to convert the last few doses of elixirs into Aurora Dew without having to condense more crystals.

Next, his eyes fell on the mushrooms again, as he reevaluated his decision not to use too many up. The healing potions were laughably easy to brew, and they were far more compact to store than an equivalent quantity of mushrooms. Perhaps, he was better off brewing more of them, now that his amulet had some space, as it wouldn't be as easy in the future. After all, the greatest challenge was growing the mushrooms themselves. If he planted them on regular corpses, it would likely take a lot longer than on Baldy's clones.

'I'll ask him to give me another one or two. I can pay him back with some of the red mushrooms. Maybe he can use them to empower his clones or something.'

Having made his mind up, he calculated how much time all these tasks would consume. Between Galahad's lessons and alchemy, he'd need to spend all his remaining mornings, as well as the better part of his afternoons, leaving him only the evenings to work on something else. Replacing his scythes wouldn't take too long by comparison: just a night or two. As for the rest of his time, he could spend it either on his mana threads, or on the second variant of potions.

'It's probably better to focus on the latter. The potions will help me a lot sooner.'

Happy with the plan, he grabbed one of the crimson mushrooms from the desk, tearing a chunk off, before tossing it in his mouth. He wasn't looking forward to the aftereffects, but there was no better place to experiment on this than in a house full of life users. Besides, it had to be done. He couldn't work on the potions without first understanding how the ingredients worked.

'It's fine. The troll used dozens of them before ruining his body. And he'd even injected them straight into his blood. Eating a single piece shouldn't be too troublesome.' he thought as he chewed the chunk down.

Its texture was soft and spongy, its flavour quite spicy. Percy was forced to wash it down with some water, before focusing his Mana Sense on his stomach. Within seconds, he saw a wave of mana spread outwards rapidly, heating his body up. Everywhere it passed, his blood boiled, and his organs burned.

It didn't take long for it to reach his heart either, at which point the changes accelerated greatly. Thrumming violently within his chest, his heart pumped more blood into his arteries, helping the mana travel farther. Soon, his skin began to redden, his muscles tensing, in a manner quite similar to what Synchronization did. However, there weren't any glowing lines of mana on his body, but veins bulging from head to toe, much like what had happened to the troll king a few weeks ago.

Taking a seat, he waited for a few minutes until the effect of the mushroom fizzled out, his heartrate dropping back to normal. The wave of energy previously coursing through his muscles was replaced by some lingering soreness and fatigue. Nothing he couldn't recover from after a good night's sleep, but that was partly because of the low dosage, and partly because he hadn't tried exerting himself.

'Ok… It's not the most pleasant sensation, but this much is manageable.'

Of course, a single piece of one mushroom wasn't nearly potent enough to help him in a fight either. If he brewed this into a proper potion, and drank a bunch of those at once, he was confident he could use them alongside Synchronization, strengthening his body beyond its usual limits. In fact, he even hoped the potion would temporarily increase his capacity for the boosting art, letting him keep some more mana inside his channels.

The only challenge was figuring out how to mitigate the side-effects to a safe level, so that he wouldn't kill himself in the process. Admittedly, a rather important detail to worry about.

'Obviously, the green mushrooms are the key.'

This was what the troll king had relied on, though his attempts had been rather clumsy. Percy understood that using two foreign sources of mana at the same time was highly inefficient, as they would inevitably interfere with one another, lowering their efficacy.

That was largely why the creature had been forced to keep consuming both types of mushrooms. Also, why his body had ended up in such a crappy state afterwards. If Percy was to follow in the demi-human's footsteps, he'd have to approach this in a more sophisticated manner.

'Luckily, I already know everything I need to accomplish this.' he grinned.

Chapter 217: New recipe

Percy spent the next few hours brewing Aurora Dew and healing potions, though his mind had drifted elsewhere. He was thinking over his idea, fleshing out the details. Alchemic principles were typically quite broad and could be applied in several ways. While pacification, redirection and deattunement were generally considered the pillars of elixir making, there was no reason why he couldn't use them while brewing potions too.

'In fact, that's probably how the Guild's alchemists brew some of the potions I've seen before…' he reminded himself.

This was something he had deduced years ago, but his understanding of alchemy had grown a lot since then. By now, he was confident he could even pinpoint the exact steps his colleagues had taken when designing their recipes.

The healing and magic potions were the simplest ones, only involving a single primary ingredient each, as well as the extraction principle. The enlightenment potions were probably a step beyond that, requiring a round of pacification too: maybe more: to get them to last for hours. As for the rejuvenation potions, they were easily the most complex of the bunch. Not only did they involve two primary ingredients, they likely needed a round of deattunement to blend them without issue, as well as several rounds of pacification to stretch their effect overnight.

What Percy hoped to do with the mushrooms would fall somewhere between the enlightenment potions and the rejuvenation potions in difficulty. Pacifying the essence of the green mushrooms would cause the healing potions to act in a delayed manner. That way, they'd behave more like regeneration potions: enhancing the body's natural recovery over a prolonged period of time. Thinking back, he was confident the moss he'd used on Atlantis was actually a naturally pacified ingredient.

In any case, the slower regeneration definitely aligned better with his current needs. After all, it wasn't a sudden spike of healing that he needed, but a more extended effect, which lasted as long as the boost of the crimson mushrooms did. Like that, it would more easily counteract the damage, before it had the chance to spread and accumulate in his body.

As for deattunement, it could help him combine the two ingredients more smoothly, so that they wouldn't mess with one another. Of course, neither life nor fire mana were quite as aggressive as beast mana, but they weren't exactly docile either. If he could prevent them from lowering each other's efficacy, the resulting potion would be both safer and more potent.

‘I should break it into four steps: Extraction, pacification, deattunement and extraction.’

The recipe was pretty much set in stone. The life mushrooms had to be extracted first, as he only wanted pacification to affect them. The crimson mushrooms already acted slowly enough. Next, he had to deattune the resulting regeneration potion, before extracting the crimson mushrooms directly within it. Suffice to say, going through so many steps would negatively affect his yield.

Then again, that wasn’t a huge problem. First of all, while growing more mushrooms wasn’t always convenient, it wasn’t remotely as difficult as procuring more nectar. Besides, he didn’t need much of the potion. He only wanted to have a couple of doses available to keep as a trump card in case of an emergency. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t really use it more often than that, as he doubted he could completely eliminate the side-effects.

‘Ok. Assuming this works, I’ll need two types of secondary ingredients.’

Luckily, Percy had some crushed rainbow grass left, as he’d packed more than he needed before leaving the Guild. Unless the mushrooms proved incompatible with it for whatever reason: which was unlikely: he probably had deattunement covered. Sadly, he didn’t have anything suitable for pacification on him.

‘Hopefully Baldy can help with that.’

As far as Percy knew, his family didn’t have any active alchemists right now. House Avalon made enough money to cover their needs via other ventures: whether that was through the towns they owned, or through the healers they lent to their allies. It had been centuries since they last needed to send one of their members to the Guild.

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However, they’d probably accumulated a ton of junk in their warehouse over the years, and some ingredients could survive for a long time before going bad. If he got lucky, he might find a batch or two that he could use.

‘Alright, I’ll go ask him in a couple hours. He’s probably still training with Nesha right now…’

Activating Synchronization, Percy began fusing and sending his mana over to Micky for the next hour or so, hoping this would be enough to top him up. From what the crow told him, he'd already met up with Elaine, and she was currently out looking for some food to bring him.

Apparently, Micky had even made some progress in consuming his air mana through his mutated feathers, confirming that this was indeed a more efficient way to go about it. Currently, he was working on fully integrating this variant of mana conversion into Hibernation.

'Wow. This will definitely be a Refined spell once it's done.' Percy whistled in appreciation. 'Keep it up, buddy!'

Once he was sure his familiar was alright, Percy stored his alchemy equipment away, leaving only his jar outside. With his boosting art active, he grabbed a handful of teal powder, before starting to work on replacing his first scythe. All his reinforced constructs were made of five variants of teal mana nowadays: regular mana, crystallized mana, and three intermediate steps.

While his mana threads weren't up to par quite yet, he did constantly discover stronger and stronger 'alloys' to use for his armour and weapons while experimenting. Of course, he had already run into diminishing returns, with the improvements being both scarce and modest. But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He took that as an indication that he was getting closer and closer to his goal.

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'I'll craft the second one tomorrow…' he exhaled, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Packing everything else up, he only left the newly forged scythe in the lab. Sadly, it was too large to fit in his amulet, and he didn't want to carry it around the house either. Turning it invisible, he propped it up against a wall, hoping none of his relatives would come snooping overnight.

'Worst case scenario, I'll have to answer a bunch of awkward questions.' he shrugged.

Having sorted everything, he headed to Baldy's office, hoping to catch him there. He ought to have finished training Nesha by now. A couple minutes later, Percy knocked on the door, getting invited in almost immediately: to his relief.

“How’s Galahad treating you?” Archibald cut straight to the chase.

“Huh, I didn’t know he told you about it. The training is definitely tough, but I appreciate it.”

Baldy nodded.

“He’s not a bad person…” he sighed. “A little stern, perhaps. And quite prejudiced against low-borns. But he does want what’s best for our family.”

Percy remained silent for a moment. He pulled a chair across from Baldy, before plopping down.

“I get that, but that’s exactly why I was surprised by his offer. After all, your hopes of starting a new branch of the Clone bloodline are going to get dashed when I leave. Isn’t training me a waste of his time? From the family’s perspective, I mean.”

But Archibald shook his head.

“I think he’s starting to see you as more than just your bloodline. As he should. He’d be a fool to not realize your potential by now. I can’t speak about your grade or lifespan, but I can tell you one thing. I’d be surprised if your fighting strength doesn’t surpass mine at some point.”

Hearing his grandpa’s high praise, Percy failed to suppress a smile. Reaching a Violet’s strength as a Red-born wasn’t a small feat. And he did feel confident he’d get there, given how far he’d come in less than a decade.

That said, fighting strength wouldn’t be enough to reach his goals. Sure, it would help him: both in protecting himself and earning whatever resources he needed: but it wouldn’t extend his lifespan. Only advancements could. This was why he had to keep drinking Aurora Dew, and to keep searching the cosmos for another solution. It was also why he had to leave his family’s mansion, to head to the Thirsty Valley. Currently, it was the fastest way for him to reach Yellow.

“How’s Nesha doing?” he asked, changing the topic.

“She’s working hard. Very hard. Harder than the three of us did back in the day, actually. After all, I only have less than a month with her, whereas we spent several back then.”

“Do you think her body will be ready for Circulation by the time we leave?” Percy asked, though he could already guess the answer.

“Unlikely. But she’ll be close. Between the training she did on her own over the past few years and my accelerated sessions, she’s over halfway there.”

Percy nodded.

“What about your fancy mushrooms?” Baldy asked. “I trust you won’t let my clones’ sacrifice go to waste?”

“About that…” Percy grinned.

“This is actually why I’m here.”

Chapter 218: A favourable deal

Over the next hour or so, Percy brought Baldy up to speed on the mushrooms. Of course, he’d already briefed him on his plans previously, but it wasn’t until now that he’d come to understand his ingredients better.

At first, he didn’t expect his grandpa to be too interested. They already had a lot of healers at home, so the green mushrooms would only be useful for people heading out on missions: and only if they didn’t have a life user accompanying them. Naturally, this didn’t happen very often. It was generally a dumb idea for a group to not include a healer: doubly so given their abundance in House Avalon.

Even then, all their Yellow-borns reached Green by the time they were old enough to be allowed out, making potions essentially useless for them. Let alone their raw ingredients, which were even less potent. In theory, Red-borns might benefit more from the mushrooms. Sadly, they were rarely strong

enough to risk going on missions. Not to mention how few of those the family even had left, ever since the massacre.

This all meant that the green mushrooms would only be used in some niche circumstances. Specifically, if and when a group of young Orange-borns decided to head out unaccompanied by a life user: for whatever reason.

“They wouldn’t be worth it if they were more troublesome to cultivate.” Archibald explained. “But things are different, given how easily I can replenish them.”

Percy nodded. The best thing about the mushrooms was that they didn’t need any dedicated infrastructure, nor personnel to grow. Archibald could easily maintain a stock in their warehouse by himself. He’d only need to give up a clone whenever they were close to running out.

Sure, they wouldn’t be too effective. Not without an alchemist to brew them into proper potions. Nor would they be needed often. Still, it would be handy to have a few around for an emergency. At the very least, it was easier than purchasing normal healing potions from the Guild. Additionally, Percy could brew his family their first batch before leaving.

“What about the red ones? Their effect is a little more exotic. I was hoping they might be useful when consumed by your clones.”

Baldy shook his head, however.

“Each of my clones would need several hundreds of mushrooms to get a boost. More than I can produce by sacrificing one. Even then, the effect would be minimal. Besides, I already have a spell that does something similar.”

Hearing that, Percy deflated. He had certainly hoped his latest acquisitions would prove useful for his House, to curb his guilt over all the time and attention he was siphoning from his grandpa again.

“But that’s not to say they’re useless.” Archibald added a moment later, causing him to perk up. “I may not personally need them, but many of our younger people have yet to master our family’s Secret Arts. They’ll be more effective on their clones too, thanks to their lower grades.”

His words rekindled Percy's enthusiasm somewhat. Yet there was still an issue to solve.

"Do you think they're safe to use in a battle though?" Percy asked. "You saw what happened when I planted them into your clones."

Baldy grimaced upon remembering that.

"Looking at my own mutilated body is something I'll never get used to, no matter how many times I see it. Still, it's not that big of a problem. It only happened because I wasn't there to supervise the process. Withholding my mana from the mushrooms to slow their growth down would be trivial otherwise."

The two spoke for a while longer, ironing out the details of their arrangement. Archibald agreed to give him a couple more clones, which Percy would exclusively use to grow green mushrooms. He didn't need any more of the red ones: he already had plenty of those. Over the next few weeks, he would brew as many as he could into healing potions. That was both to extend his own stash, and to leave any excess he couldn't fit into his amulet behind, for his family. Additionally, Baldy would allow him to take any secondary ingredients he wanted from the warehouse: assuming they even had any, of course.

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'I'm definitely getting the better end of the deal here…' he thought, a fuzzy feeling worming its way into his heart.

Clearly, his grandpa had heavily skewed the exchange in his favour, looking for any excuse to help him out. After all, the four clones he had received were easily worth 10000 contribution points. Probably more. Meanwhile, the potions Percy would be giving them in return barely cost a fraction of that. And that was without even mentioning the free training he and Nesha were getting.

"Thanks. I'll make it up to you, when I can." he said.

"Just focus on your own progress." Archibald said, casually waving away his concerns. "You've done plenty for us too."

Not arguing the point further, Percy bid the man farewell, before heading to the warehouse. There, he found his uncle Gareth on guard duty, along with another guy whose name he didn't quite remember. A quick scan via Mana Sense revealed that this person was at Yellow: probably a relatively young Orange-born: though he wasn't sure how distantly they were related.

Either way, it was already nearly midnight: way too late for new acquaintances. Explaining his reason for being there, he handed the two a written permit Baldy had given him, asking to be allowed inside. They complied of course, even offering to help him search due to his apparent blindness.

'It'd be so much faster by myself…' he couldn't help but roll his eyes from behind the blindfold as he sifted through the place.

Even partially obstructed by the cloth, his enhanced vision had already picked up on a couple mana-rich spots that his regular Mana Sense had missed. Unfortunately, he still had to maintain the façade around others.

In the end, it took the three a couple hours to search the whole place up, with some mixed results. Percy was positively surprised to have found a couple crates of alchemical reagents: even recognizing a few pacification ingredients among them. Unfortunately, the boxes were positively ancient, covered in an inch-deep layer of dust.

And their contents weren't much better. The overwhelming majority of the reagents had long gone inert, not a shred of mana left within them. And that was despite magical plants generally having a much longer shelf-life than mundane ones. In fact, several even crumbled to powder in his hands as he tried picking them up.

'A few pale carrots… Some moonflower petals…' he creased his brow as he tallied the surviving reagents.

There wasn't much. Barely enough for him to brew a handful of doses: if everything went well. Granted, this was all he really needed, though it also meant he didn't have much leeway for experimentation. He'd have to get the recipe down in the first couple of attempts, to avoid wasting his limited supplies. Which was made even more complicated by the fact that he'd have to use a different ingredient each time.

‘Alright. I guess I should probably test the other steps separately, to get more familiar with those, since I’ll only get a couple shots at pacification.’

It would inevitably cost him a few more mushrooms, but those were more disposable, given the circumstances.

Helping his relatives put everything else back, he thanked them before returning to his room. It wasn’t until he was alone that he finally took his blindfold off again. Well, Nesha was technically there too, but she was sleeping so heavily she hadn’t even noticed him enter. Tossing her a glance, he didn’t miss the traces of exhaustion still marring her pretty face, as she was sprawled over the bed like a starfish.

‘Baldy wasn’t kidding about her. She’s really giving it her all…’

Sighing, he pulled the curtain open, looking at the starlit sky blanketing the heavens. To his relief, it didn’t seem the sun was quite ready to rise just yet, though he knew he barely had a couple hours left. Taking off his clothes, he carefully pushed Nesha to one side, trying his best not to disturb her as he joined her.

‘Imagine the look on Galahad’s face if I sleep in.’ he thought, barely suppressing a chuckle.

It was tempting, really. Not just as payback for all the shit he’d given him in the past, but also because he really wasn’t in the mood for another one of those brutal training sessions. In the end, he shook his head, however. No sense in antagonizing the man now that their relationship had finally turned around. Besides, as tough as it was, Percy knew he had struck quite a bargain there.

Forcing all the stressful thoughts out of his mind, he allowed his head to sink into his soft, nostalgic pillow, a more positive note taking hold of him right before he fell asleep.

‘16 more days until the lotus blooms…’

Chapter 219: Brown potion

Two weeks went by in a flash, as everyone pushed themselves to their very limits.

Percy didn't actually get to spend much time with Nesha. Even when the two got a few minutes together, they were typically too tired to talk. From what little they did speak, however, he understood she was already well on her way to mastering Circulation.

He knew she had already cleared her remaining channels a long time ago, as merely opening them didn't require her body to be trained. That said, she wouldn't be able to temper them, nor could she experiment with her mana flow until her physique was fully honed. Admittedly, this was still a few months away, despite all the time she'd saved with Baldy's help.

As for Percy, he'd also made a ton of progress on multiple fronts. Not all of them, though.

"I… don't think… this will work..." he spat between pants, droplets of sweat dripping off his chin one after the other.

"Percy… Don't be too greedy now. You've done remarkably well given your grade. I doubt there are many Yellows who can resist even the most basic domain. Let alone an Orange hoping to withstand mine." Galahad consoled in a manner somewhat atypical of him.

Percy sighed, knowing his uncle was right. Despite all his hard work, the best he'd managed to accomplish was to remain conscious for a prolonged period of time. Still, he couldn't even twitch a muscle after all these gruelling sessions.

'I guess this is all I'll be able to do before my next advancement.'

He only hoped his efforts wouldn't be for nothing, even if their results weren't immediately obvious.

"In any case… Thanks for all the help." he said as soon as he managed to steady his breath. "If nothing else, this was certainly illuminating."

Galahad nodded.

Percy turned around to leave, when his uncle's next words froze him in his steps.

“I am sorry for the way I treated you, you know.”

Looking back at Galahad, Percy caught a fleeting hint of sadness: regret, even. One he’d never expected to see in the man’s expression.

“Heh. Don’t get all sentimental on me now.” he chuckled. “Cold indifference suits you better.”

“I’m sure it does.” Galahad replied, letting his lips curl upwards. “I just want you to know that House Avalon was lucky to have you. It’s not an easy thing to admit: especially not for an aspiring leader: but I honestly believe we’d be better off if I hadn’t contributed in pushing you out.”

Percy remained silent for a couple of seconds, letting the words sink in.

It was true, Galahad was quite influential in the family. While Percy’s decision to leave had ultimately been his, things might have been different had Baldy agreed to give him the elixirs he’d needed back in the day. Had that been the case, he might have sought out a different solution for Micky too, and never gone to the Alchemists’ Guild.

But it was too late for regrets. Two doses of elixirs weren’t remotely enough anymore. Percy currently needed 22 of them! Per day! There was no way they could possibly justify such an outlandish expenditure to the rest of their family. Not without spilling all his secrets. Maybe not even after doing that. Not to mention the mess he had raised back in the Guild. The Divine Root was bound to come for him sooner or later. Right now, every second he spent with his family was a risk for everyone involved.

“No sense in regretting the past, Uncle.” he said. “If I hadn’t left, I wouldn’t have met Nesha. The Aurora Dew might have never come to be either. It’s impossible to say which way is better.”

The last thing Percy heard was a sigh, as he closed the door behind him, leaving the training room. Galahad’s words swirled within his mind for a few more minutes, as he walked over to his lab. But he shook them away by the time he arrived. He still had some work ahead of him, and he couldn’t afford to be distracted.

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Fortunately, his other projects had been a lot more successful. His scythes had been ready for a while now. In fact, he'd even recycled them once already, a couple days ago. His alchemical ventures had progressed just as smoothly too, if not better. To his great joy, Percy had finished converting his remaining elixirs to Aurora Dew, and three clones' worth of mushrooms into healing potions. By now, his spatial amulet was packed to the brim with supplies, the excess already handed over to Baldy.

'The only thing left is to make the final push for the other potion.' he thought, his eyes burning with determination.

Closing the curtains, he took out his equipment, preparing everything. He'd already familiarized himself with most of the steps in his free time. He'd practiced extracting both of the mushrooms' essences separately, as well as deattuning and mixing them together.

Admittedly, it wouldn't be exactly the same when he did everything in the correct order. That said, he was at least confident his only potential point of failure would be the pacification step: which he hadn't had a chance to practice like the rest.

"Here goes nothing." he said, pouring four vials of healing potions inside his cauldron.

Next, he grabbed a handful of white powder, adding it to the concoction, before turning the heat up. Percy had actually mixed the crushed pale carrots with the moonflower petals, to end up with a more homogenized resource. A rather bold move.

Normally, adding multiple secondary ingredients during the same step was ill-advised. If Orin was here, he'd probably want to slap him. After all, introducing too many variables drastically reduced one's yield. However, Percy estimated he was better off doing this, ensuring that all three of his attempts were as similar to one another as possible. Using a different reagent each time would likely hurt him more.

'So far, so good.' he thought as he played around with the enchantments, responding to the concoction's whims.

Objectively speaking, the session was going terribly, as he'd already ruined a third of the ingredients less than a minute in. He wasn't deterred in the slightest, however, his enhanced eyes gathering valuable feedback with every passing moment. Information that would help him greatly in his next attempt.

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‘Not a single drop…’ he smiled bitterly, staring at the inert sludge inside the cauldron.

He’d known not to expect anything from the first batch, though he’d secretly hoped to salvage at least some of it. This was just a single step of pacification, after all. Nothing too revolutionary.

‘It is what it is. I just need to make the last two batches count.’

Washing his equipment over a wooden basin, he left everything to dry by the window for a few minutes, as he allowed the gentle breeze to soothe some of his fatigue away. It wasn’t until an hour later that he was in the right headspace to give this another shot.

This time, Percy was better prepared right off the bat. Avoiding some crucial mistakes he’d made early on the previous time, he preserved a lot of the ingredients as he progressed through the session. That said, he didn’t allow himself to relax for a second, knowing he was still doing far worse than he would be with some proper practice.

***

‘180 drops.’ he estimated, distilling the foam inside a couple of vials.

Shaking them a little, he spent a few moments appreciating the pale green liquid swirling within them. These were essentially regeneration potions now. They could be more useful in a fight than regular healing potions under some circumstances, but he figured the potions he actually wanted to brew would help him more.

Mentally calculating what this output meant for his yield, Percy soon grimaced. Nearly two doses were infinitely better than zero, but he’d still started his attempt with four vials of healing potions. Had he been better at this, he should have preserved more than three quarters of that.

‘And I’ll still lose more in the next steps…’

He shrugged. The only thing he could do was to try and improve from here on out.

***

The third attempt got him around two and a half vials of regeneration potion, bringing the total to just over four. Still not perfect, but good enough. There were some inevitable losses during the final two steps too, though not nearly as many as before.

By the time he was completely done, Percy had collected two and a half vials of a brown syrupy liquid. Its appearance somewhat resembled the rejuvenation potion he had used before, though its colour was a little closer to yellow. It smelled of mint, yet it also left a lingering burn in his nose, subtly hinting at its spicy flavour. Some bubbles faintly fizzed through its volume, as the fluid struggled to contain the magical fury sealed within it.

'This should barely be enough to affect my body for a few minutes.'

He could probably withstand a little more than that, thanks to his second core and his boosting art. Well, assuming the recipe worked in reality as it did in his mind. Still, it was better not to drink too much on his first try, since he wouldn't have an opportunity to actually test the potion's effects before then.

Pouring the three vials inside a small leather flask: for easier access: he hung it to his waist, nodding in satisfaction. Hopefully he'd never have to use it, but just having it with him already made him a little more confident in leaving the mansion without his trusty armour.

He knew what to call it too, having settled on its name a long time ago.

The trollsfury potion.

Chapter 220: Regulation

Percy allowed his thoughts to sink into the ethereal cord in his sternum, watching the live feed provided by Micky with bated breath, as the crow shared his senses with him.

His blood flow had greatly slowed, an oppressive feeling of numbness enveloping his body from beak to talon. Micky didn't seem deterred in the slightest, however, already used to the weakness brought about by Hibernation. Instead, he focused his attention on fine-tuning the spell to the best of his ability. The beast mana travelling through the bird's veins had halted almost entirely, massively lowering his expenditure. And that was merely the beginning!

In some places, the mana even flowed in reverse, swimming upstream through the crow's arteries, fighting against the current of blood. All of those tiny rivulets stemmed from the roots of Micky's mutated feathers: now dimmer than ever before, despite constantly being flooded with a ton of air mana from his abdomen. The beast mana headed straight into Micky's core, carrying some traces of air mana with it!

Even more interesting was the fact that the air mana appeared to rapidly decrease throughout its journey. Only half of what Micky drew from his feathers ever reached his core, the rest of it consumed along the way. Unlike Percy's Soul Conversion: which solely took place inside his first core: in Micky's case, the spell's effect seemed to span his whole body. Contrary to other affinities, the beast mana greedily chipped away at the air mana with every chance it got!

In the end, only about 20% of it got converted. Barely enough to qualify as a Crude spell on its own, though the additional component of Hibernation made it a great deal more impressive. Still, Micky clearly had his work cut out for him, his new spell having plenty of room for improvement. That said, this was already good enough for them to finally solve their issue for the time being.

The crow's Status had noticed too, the entry having changed since the last time Percy checked it, a couple days ago.

'Congratulations, buddy! Your spell has evolved: Wild Art: Hibernation: Crude -> Wild Art: Regulation: Refined!'

Admittedly, Percy felt a little silly reproducing the notifications for his familiar. But he didn't want his pal to miss out on one of the most thrilling parts of practicing magic. While his Status had grown more comprehensive since incorporating Ea's Decree: to the point it registered more than just spells for him – it still failed to properly extend all its features over to Micky.

'Maybe next time I upgrade it…' he sighed.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Micky allowed himself to relax, a wave of exhaustion oozing through the bond. It was accompanied by some lingering traces of hunger he hadn't quite managed to quash. Still, it was all dwarfed by the sheer exhilaration and overwhelming pride the familiar felt over his accomplishment.

'You can stop sending me mana now!' Micky said.

'Are you sure this is enough?' Percy asked back, not entirely convinced.

Micky remained silent for a couple seconds, before sending a mental nod.

'It won't be pleasant, but I think I can go on for weeks like this, without having to eat much more than you guys.'

Percy exhaled in relief upon hearing that. While he'd been confident in his idea, it had all been theoretical until just now. And truth be told, they'd have needed a spell like this sooner or later, even if they'd never left the Grisly Bog. After all, Micky's core would eventually advance again, his hunger growing right alongside it. The Fungal Spire was pretty much the only place on Remior where Micky would always be able to eat his fill. Until Violet, at least.

'But now, he can mitigate it as long as his second core keeps up!'

Of course, this still wasn't a permanent solution. Unfortunately, Micky's second core was growing more slowly. It was bound to fall behind the other one eventually. Percy estimated it would reach Yellow before the first one hit Green, but he wasn't sure it would get to Green before the first one reached Blue.

Well, at any rate, they should be good for the next few decades, at least. As Micky's conversion rate continued to climb, he'd grow more comfortable too. Right now, he'd have to keep the spell active for several hours per day, not to mention dealing with the fatigue it left behind afterwards. However, he should eventually cut that time down massively. And they had many years to come up with something better, before the gap between his cores widened again.

'Is Elaine still with you?' Percy asked, changing the topic.

‘No. She left once I assured her I’d be ok. She should be back in the mansion soon, if not already. She said she wants to spend some more time with you and Nesha before we all leave.’

Percy nodded. His short ‘vacation’ was finally nearing its end. According to what Baldy had explained, their family should be receiving their petals within the next couple of hours!

‘I can’t believe it’s already been five years since Hermes’s message.’ Percy smiled.

So much had happened since that first time he ever heard a god speak. His growth aside, he’d somehow managed to piss that very same god off! Who’d have thought?! Not to mention his even more bizarre dealings with a different god: a foreign titan, no less!

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Bidding Micky farewell, he closed the connection, heading to Baldy’s office. Getting there, he found the room quite crowded. In addition to his grandpa, Elaine and Nesha were also waiting for him. Galahad and Mordred were present too, likely waiting for their own petals.

Upon taking a seat next to Nesha, Percy caught Mordred tossing him a fleeting glance. He couldn’t make out his cousin’s expression through his blindfold, but he did notice traces of curiosity flickering within the young man’s soul. The two were essentially complete strangers, having never interacted much in the past.

Mordred’s presence was undeniable, however, making Percy inadvertently feel even more on edge than he had while facing Rambert, despite knowing his cousin wasn’t his enemy. If he hadn’t explicitly been told otherwise, he might have even guessed his family’s resident prodigy had awakened his domain ahead of time.

At any rate, Galahad didn’t seem to have spilled any of Percy’s secrets to his son. Annoyingly, it did mean Percy had to keep the blindfold on during the meeting though.

“Ahem. Now that we’re all here, I should explain what’s about to happen.” Archibald said, drawing everyone’s attention.

Nobody else spoke, waiting for him to continue.

“Every noble House was contacted by the Divine Root a few weeks after Hermes’s first message. We were given some more detailed information about how the petals are going to be disseminated. While today marks the official 5-year anniversary since the message, the lotus has already bloomed. Nearly a week ago, in fact. The petals are already being delivered, with some provinces getting theirs a little sooner than others. Ours will be handed to us by an emissary of the Divine Order: a demigod: later today.”

Everyone in the room drew a sharp breath upon hearing that. Elaine was the first to speak, however, voicing the question at the forefront of all their minds.

“They’re sending their demigods?! As errand boys?!”

Even Galahad seemed surprised at this. Percy wasn’t sure anyone here: Baldy included: had ever personally seen a White. Let alone a demigod, standing at a level above even the leaders of the Great Houses. Technically, the Order’s demigods were still considered mortals, though they were just a step beneath divinity. Supposedly, any of them had the potential to take that very step at any given moment. In other words, the person delivering them their petals today could just as easily be a god tomorrow!

‘Well, on paper.’ Percy smiled.

Obviously, it was a little more complicated than that. Only the tiniest fraction of demigods had ever managed to shed their mortal coil in Remior’s long history, despite each of them having a lifespan of tens of millennia. Either way, assigning them to such a menial chore was unprecedented. Insulting, even.

Archibald shrugged.

“They didn’t really have a choice. The last thing anybody wants is to see such a valuable treasure wasted. As Hermes has already mentioned, the petals only last a little over three weeks before withering. Even for Violets and Whites, that’s not necessarily enough time to reach the most remote Houses. Not to mention how inconvenient it is for a leader to leave his headquarters for months on end…”

A few others spoke up, firing more questions, though Percy tuned them out, his thoughts lingering on something else.

'I hope the demigod doesn't suspect anything about me…'

It would probably be fine, otherwise Archibald would have warned him already. These people weren't personally involved in the search for him and Nesha. Nor would they be likely to bother with something so far beneath them. Still, Percy had plenty of secrets he didn't want to leak, and he had no idea how perceptive such a lofty existence could be. Perhaps it would be safer for him to hide in his room until the emissary was gone. Just to be safe.

"I'm more surprised the gods haven't decided to withhold the petals from everyone, to force us all to help them search for the culprits behind the Aurora Dew." Mordred said, completely oblivious to the fact that those very culprits were sitting right next to him.

"What would be the point in that?" Galahad asked back. "The overwhelming majority of mortals would already gladly hand them over to the Order if they could. Besides, Hermes has already given us his word about the lotus. Going back on it would only tarnish his reputation."

Mordred was about to reply, when somebody knocked on the door.

"Father, there is a high-profile visitor waiting in the main hall. He wishes to speak to you." Uncle Gareth said.

Everyone in the room exchanged glances with one another. The demigod had arrived a little sooner than they were expecting.

"Is His Grace here for the petals?" Baldy asked as he hurriedly stood up, walking towards the door.

Gareth's next words caught everyone by surprise, however.

"'His Grace'?! Sure, he's from the Divine Root alright, but why are you being so respectful towards him? He's just a kid at Green. I think he said his name was Jason?"

Nesha grabbed Percy's hand, clenching it tightly. It trembled, betraying her inner turmoil. At the same time, several pairs of eyes turned towards them, as Percy felt the blood drain from his face, his very breath growing cold inside his lungs.

'Seriously?! NOW?! You must be fucking kidding me!'

It felt like a bad dream. Of course, he and Nesha had always known this day would come, but he'd hoped to get a few more months of freedom before their pursuers caught up to them. He certainly hadn't expected this to happen mere hours before he finally got his petal! And after all the trouble he'd gone through to earn it, too!

But, perhaps, he should be grateful it had taken them this long in the first place. It would've been even worse a year ago, or earlier…

Baldy had frozen in his steps too. Turning towards his grandson, he placed his hand on Percy's shoulder, squeezing it gently. The moment felt so damn fleeting, his heart racing in his chest. Grandson and grandpa exchanged a silent glance, conveying a thousand unspoken words with that gesture.

Percy wanted to pull his blindfold off so badly. To get one last look at his grandpa's face. Elaine's too. Who knew if he'd ever see either of them again?!

He was about to do it, when Nesha squeezed his hand even more tightly. Baldy did the same to his shoulder. Keeping the façade about his eyes up was important. Now, more than ever. Not that they didn't trust Mordred, but their leeway for unnecessary risks had just been cut short...

Letting go, Baldy walked out of the office, as Percy turned towards Elaine for a fraction of a second. He didn't utter a word, however. Neither did she, nor anybody else in the room. They couldn't afford to delay any longer, nor implicate anyone more than they already had.

He and Nesha bolted out of the room, hoping Baldy would buy them enough time to get as far from this place as possible. One thought rang crystal clear in everyone's mind.

Things were about to go to shit...