## Wanderer 221

Chapter 221: Jason

Earlier

Jason had grown sick of tasting his own blood, but he couldn't help it. Biting his cheek was a habit he'd inadvertently picked up over the last couple of months. By now, it had grown a little out of hand.

He'd already chosen to ignore multiple calls from Deimos, afraid his boss might order him to return to the Guild. Of course, not answering was a serious offense in and of itself, but he could still play dumb later. Defying a direct order, on the other hand, wasn't something he'd be able to downplay as easily.

'I really hope this is the one…' he grimaced as he continued to follow the latest trail.

Eventually, a large wooden mansion faintly appeared on the horizon, drawing his attention. And the two karmic threads were pointing straight towards it!

'A noble House? It has to be one, right?'

This was certainly more promising than the shitty towns and fields the last couple of threads had led him to. On second thought, it wasn't that surprising. He'd already exhausted more than half of the trails, so he just had to be getting closer to Nesha.

'Well, unless she's also dead.'

One possibility he hadn't given as much thought to was one where the alchemist had murdered both of his accomplices: Percy and Nesha. Should that be the case, the threads extending out of her clothes might never lead him to his target.

'I suppose there's no sense in worrying about that. If that's the case, I'm screwed anyway.' he shrugged. 'What province was this again? Camelot, or Sentin?'

Getting a little closer, he managed to make the insignia out, carved on several spots along the outer walls. It depicted two faces, looking away from one another. Digging through his memories, he tried to recall which families had a similar symbol.

'Hmm… Briareus… Cottus… Avalon?'

Jason froze in his tracks upon thinking of that last possibility. Avalon?! As in, Percival Avalon?! The dead runt?! No. That couldn't be the case. Why would Nesha or the alchemist visit the family of their dead collaborator?

Merely avoiding their own families wouldn't have been that strange. After all, Nesha's House was already destroyed. The alchemist might not want to stay at a conspicuous location either. But there were so many alternatives to choose from, if they just wanted to divert attention. Why pick Percy's House? The only possibility that made sense was that the boy was still alive.

'Why would they even keep him around? Did they grow fond of him? Or maybe the alchemist was a relative of his to start with?'

Jason's heart skipped a beat, as countless possibilities swirled within his mind. He still had no idea what to make of this mess, but it didn't really matter. The odds of having finally stumbled upon something important had just shot through the roof!

Taking out the device, he was about to activate it, though he hesitated. If he contacted Deimos now, there was no going back. His superior was bound to lash out at him over his failures, and the missed calls. All would be forgiven if his current lead yielded a result, of course. But if not…

'It's not like I have a choice. I doubt I'll get another chance anyway. If this one is a dead-end, I'm screwed. It's best to know what I'm dealing with…'

Making his mind up, he opened the watch, pouring his mana into it. He barely had to wait a moment, before the other side picked the call up.

"JASON!!" a furious voice yelled, barely a second later. "If you ignore one more of my calls, I swear I'm going to skin you alive!! HOW DARE YOU DISAPPEAR FOR WEEKS ON END?!?!"

Having expected the outburst, Jason had already leaned away from the device, though the sheer fury contained therein still caused him to flinch.

“Deimos, just shut up and listen! None of that matters! I think I’ve got some real results this time!” he hurriedly said, before his boss had a chance to interrupt him again.

Deimos remained silent for a few seconds, letting his words sink in. When he next spoke, he did so far more calmly, some cautious optimism inadvertently spilling into his voice.

“If you’re lying to me, I’ll give you exactly one chance to reconsider.” he grumbled through gritted teeth.

“Look. I can’t be 100% sure, ok? But I’m confident in this one. The thread has led me to House Avalon.” Jason doubled down. “Can you check if there’s anyone else in the Guild from that family? Besides the Red-born, I mean.”

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Deimos hung up without saying anything. It wasn’t until about an hour later that he called Jason again.

“Nobody. House Avalon hasn’t sent anybody else here in decades.”

“I see. Well, Nesha has to be around, otherwise her clothes wouldn’t have brought me here. Percy has to be too, as nothing else makes sense. I don’t know if the alchemist is with them, but I’ll make them spill his whereabouts out regardless.”

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Activating his Karmic Vision, Jason saw the threads were already on the move. He wasn’t deterred in the slightest, however, his lips only parting into a grin. The fact that they’d chosen to run away as soon as he arrived could only mean that he was correct.

‘Run then. As far as you can. You won’t escape this time.’

He could chase after them right away, though he’d rather speak to the family’s leader first: to gauge the House’s stance on the culprits. It was the Divine Root’s protocol to do so in cases like this, to not give their adversaries a chance to come up with believable excuses.

‘I’ve missed doing my job properly so damn much…’

As for his targets, they were no longer of any concern. He’d only need a couple hours to catch up to them, now that he’d singled out the correct threads.

Resting one leg over the other, he leaned back, sinking into the couch. This was the first time he was able to relax in years. Ignoring the hushed whispers of the local nobles, he patiently waited for the Violet to arrive.

“Forgive me for the delay.” a bald man said, stepping into the hall. “You’ve chosen a rather strange day to visit. You see, we’re expecting the emissary of the Divine Order to arrive.”

“Oh? Is that today?” Jason raised an eyebrow.

So long had he been on the move, he hadn’t even registered the passage of time. Not that he was particularly concerned with the lotus. The petals weren’t even compatible with his affinity.

“You must be Archibald, then?” he asked again with a shrug after not getting a reply to his last question.

The man nodded, before speaking.

“I won’t presume to know what matter was important enough to bring the Divine Root to our doorsteps, but I’ll do my best to entertain you.”

“Really now?” Jason asked nonchalantly. “Why do I have this sneaking suspicion you know exactly what I’m here for?”

Archibald remained silent, however.

“Fine. I’ll play along. I’m looking for Nesha Veritas. And Percival of your House. I know they were here just minutes ago, so don’t even try to pretend otherwise. I’m sure at least one of your relatives will crumble under the slightest bit of pressure.” Jason said, gesturing at the other nobles.

“Did you come into my home to threaten me, boy?!” the powerful Violet hissed.

At the same time, a suffocating domain descended upon Jason, pressing him into the pillows. The latter’s smile only widened, however. He could sense the old man was holding back a great deal. No way his domain was weaker than Deimos’s. Naturally, he just didn’t dare harm a single hair on his head. And they both knew it.

“Threatening you isn’t quite as serious a crime as inhibiting the Divine Root’s official investigation. Or would you like to personally explain to the gods of the Divine Order why everyone on Remior is still drinking the regular elixirs, after all this time?”

The man’s features softened as he withdrew his domain. The fury in his face all but evaporated, replaced by some unconcealed concern.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you deny the two people I’ve mentioned were here? Or that they came here from the Alchemists’ Guild?”

Archibald appeared to ponder the questions for a few seconds.

“I do not. It’s true my grandson used to be in the Guild. He left our house years ago, of his own accord, after we denied him the elixirs he needed for his growth. A rather common story on Remior, is it not?”

“You do know the Guild has been on lockdown since Hermes’s message, right?”

“Naturally. Percy claimed he’d left months before the incident. You can’t really blame me for believing him either. Are you telling me a young low-born like him somehow got involved in such a grand matter? Or that he managed to slip through the Guild’s perimeter without anybody finding him for years?”

Jason could smell something fishy going on. Archibald’s words made sense, but he couldn’t shake the impression the man had intentionally delayed meeting with him, buying time for his grandson to escape.

‘Well, if either of them knew of my affinity, they wouldn’t have counted on that.’ he struggled to suppress a smirk.

For now, his best bet was to get the man to implicate himself further.

“What about the girl? Didn’t you question where your grandson picked her up? Also, was there a third person with them?”

Archibald furrowed his brow, appearing to seriously ponder the questions.

“It was just the two of them. Of course I asked Percy about his girlfriend. Our House is in the middle of a war right now. We can’t let outsiders join willy nilly. Honestly, I didn’t even know she was a noble. They both showed up in filthy rags, claiming she was a commoner he’d met in some town.”

“You understand how serious the repercussions will be if you’re lying to me, right?” Jason asked.

“Do you take me for a fool? I’ve lived dozens of times longer than you, boy.” Archibald stared him in the eyes, completely unfazed. If he was lying, he was good at it. “This is the first I’m hearing of my grandson’s involvement in this matter. House Avalon had nothing to do with this. We’ll fully cooperate with your investigation.”

Glancing around at his relatives, Archibald then raised his voice for all to hear.

“From now on, Percy is excommunicated from the family, until such time as the Divine Root determines his innocence. If he tries to contact any of you, you are to arrest him on sight, and deliver him straight to me. His girlfriend too.”

Jason shrugged. This hadn’t been particularly helpful. Guilty or not, the old fox clearly knew to say all the right words. Either way, it didn’t matter. The fate of House Avalon was something for his superiors to decide. His only remaining responsibility was to capture the culprits. Then, he could finally wash his hands of this nonsense.

Leaving the mansion, he activated his ocular technique once more, pinpointing the conspicuous threads he’d identified earlier. They’d already travelled a few degrees to the north, probably varying their paths to ditch him.

‘A bunch of fools.’

Such tactics might have worked on anybody else, but not him. Against a karma user, their best bet had been to escape in a straight line, prioritizing distance above all else. Not that it would have made much of a difference, though. At most, it would have bought them another hour or two.

Cracking his neck, he sped after them, eager to finally get his hands on the bastards that had screwed with him for so fucking long…

Chapter 222: Diplomacy (1)

Percy dragged Nesha through the Whistling Woods, the two sprinting in the darkness. The moonless sky wasn’t doing them any favours as they struggled to avoid crashing into a tree. Plus, they were out of breath already. Still, he ignored the exhaustion, striving to buy as much time as possible as hentemplated their situation. Several scenarios flashed through his tired mind, each worse than the previous one.

Naturally, he was under no delusions that they would escape without anfrontation this time. If their enemies had managed to track them all the way here, they clearly possessed some magical means of locating them. Perhaps a specialized bloodline, or an artifact. Percy had no idea what it was exactly, but it didn’t really matter. The only thing theyuldntrol, was how to react once they were found.

Then again, heuldn't exactly decide on the besturse of action either. Not without knowing what they were up against. If the Root had sent any Blues after them, they were already out of luck. His training sessions with Galahad had made that abundantly clear. His only hope was that it would be overkill. Surely, even the Divine Rootuldn't afford to have their Blues roaming Remior for years on end, looking for them.

'It's not like we'll have a much easier time against their Greens though…' he smiled bitterly.

Unlike their carefully prepared ambush in Bogside town, he wasn't in anyndition to fight at that level right now. They hadn't set any traps up, not to mention that he currently lacked the majority of hisnstructs. In fact, he was glad he'd even had the presence of mind to grab his two scythes before rushing out of the mansion, so that he wouldn't be entirely unarmed.

Hismpanions weren't faring much better either. Nesha had dark bags under her eyes. A healing potion would help with that, but there was only so much sheuld do with a single spell in her arsenal. As for Micky, he was doing worse than either of them. The crow had already met up with them and was currently flying in their vicinity. Still, Percy wouldn't even let his familiar fight a Yellow right now. Let alone a Green.

'Also, these people are likely to be elites among elites. Even stronger than the likes of Rambert or Mordred.'

Worse still, was the fact that heuldn't just run away. Even if heuldme up with a way to ditch his pursuers, he didn't only have himself to worry about. While he was certainly glad they'd managed to evade divery for so long, this was arguably one of the worst possible moments for them to be found: smoked right out of his family's mansion. If he failed to handle this properly, his loved onesuld easily pay the price.

"Stop." he muttered, pulling Nesha to a halt.

The girl acquiesced, though she did flash him a questioning look.

"We'll have tonfront them at some point, whether in a fight, or through diplomacy. Either way, I'd rather not be out of breath when it happens."

Nodding, she ampanied him to a nearby tree, the two of them sitting by its roots. Micky landed some distance away too.

Next, the trio proceeded to go over various possibilities, discussing how to deal with each of them, all the while keeping their senses out for any intruders…

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“Well, well… Who do we have here?” a snarky voice pierced through the cphony of the whistlingnes. “I was wondering why the two of you had stopped moving. Did you get tired? Or did you actually think you’d travelled far enough to ditch me?”

Percy failed to see the nemer’s face, having put his blindfold back on while waiting for him. He’d take it off if he had to: obviously: but the situation hadn’t devolved that far.

‘Just one Green.’ he noted, not finding anybody else.

It wasn’t going to be an easy fight, given their current state. Still, it was about the best theyuld have hoped for. Then again, he’d rather try something else before falling back to violence.

“Who are you?” Nesha was the first to speak.

“Yeah... No. I’ve already done the ‘playing dumb’ routine once today. Don’t even bother wasting more of my time. Not after fucking my life up for the last two years.” the Green replied, his voice devoid of humour. “Right now, your best bet is to tell me who brewed the Aurora Dew, and where I can find him. Trust me, you don’t want to play games with me.”

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“That can be arranged.” Percy said calmly. “Before that, I also want auple of reassurances from you. Or better yet, from your boss.”

The Green chuckled.

“Do you honestly think you’re in a position to be making demands?!” he snarled. “If you wanted to negotiate, you should have done so two years ago!”

Ignoring the quip, Percy tossed him a gemstone vial, a turquoise liquid swirling inside.

“It’s me. I’m the one you’re looking for. I know it’s a little late, but two years aren’t that long in the grand scheme of things. I’ll share the recipe with everyone, and we’ll all get our happy ending. Do you have any way tontact your boss? We’ll gladly ampany you to the nearest town if you need to send a letter.”

A wave of amusement rippled through the Green’s soul.

“You?! Do you seriously expect me to believe that crap?!”

“Do you see anybody else with us? Or do you think we pulled the Aurora Dew out of thin air?” Nesha asked.

“Howuld he have possibly succeeded where every alchemist on Remior has failed? For thousands of years, at that?” the Green didn’t relent.

“It’s simple, really. I looked where nobody else did. It’s all thanks to my bloodline. I trust you don’t have the patience for my life story, do you?” Percy fired back.

“Wouldn’t you rather pass the responsibility of assessing the validity of our claims to your superior?” Nesha pitched in with a question of her own.

The man appeared to ponder their request for a few snds.

“Fine. I’ll play along. We’ve already been in this ridiculous dance for years. I suppose a few more minutes won’t change anything.”

Taking something out of his pocket, he drew some mana from hisre, pouring it into the object. A series of runes that Percy failed to identify soon lit up on the device. Though he was more focused on the man's strange mana type than the item.

'What affinity is that? I've never seen this one before. Is this how he was able to find us?'

On one hand, it was rather troublesome. Escaping would be impossible as long as this person drew breath. Conversely, it also meant the solution to their problem was standing right in front of them.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the manntinued pouring mana into the device for a few snds, until the rest of the inscriptions lit up.

"Jason? Any updates?"

The voice was a little difficult to make out. Between the whistling trees and the fact that Jason was standing over a hundred feet away, the quality was terrible. Still, both Nesha and Percy had advanced a few times, their hearing significantly better than a Red's.

"Boss, I've caught up to the culprits. They haven't made any attempt to resist so far."

"Is the alchemist with them? What of Archibald?"

"The old man played dumb. I have no idea if he was actually involved with them. As to your first question, no. It's just Nesha and Percy here. Percy claims he's the mastermind behind the elixirs."

A loud sardonic laughter rang through the device.

"Please tell me you haven't bought that nonsense."

"Naturally not. But they said they're willing tome peacefully as long as they can get some assurances from you. I figured I'd let you make the decision. They can hear you."

“…”

“Very well. Percy, was it? Have you any idea of the kind of mess you and yourmpanions have created? How about you stop playing games with the fate of our world, and just spill the beans already?”

“With all due respect, sir. The Aurora Dew is a recipe of my creation. If you: or anybody else: wants it, you should ask for it nicely. What gives you the right to make demands, threats, or snarkymments?”

Jason swallowed hard. Hard enough for Percy to hear.

“YOU INSOLENT PIECE OF SHIT!!!” the man’s voice boomed through the artifact, causing the inscriptions to flicker violently. “Your grandpa wouldn’t dare speak to me this way! Let alone a trashy Red-born, still wet behind the ears!”

“Yeah, well… My grandpa doesn’t have the recipe you want. I do. I’m sure you can have your boy kill us, cripple us, or whatever else… But trust me. The easiest way for you to get what you want is to play nicely. Or would you risk me dying and taking the recipe down with me?”

“…”

“Can you even prove your ridiculous claim? You can’t seriously expect me to believe that crap just based on your word alone.”

Percy shrugged.

“The primary ingredient for the Aurora Dew are the regular elixirs. The next step is to add a mystery ingredient that massively accelerates are’s rvery. That’s what allows the Aurora Dew to bensumed three times as often. Finally, rainbow grass is the only sndary ingredient I found that is suitable to deattune the Aurora Dew a snd time. It has to be mixed at a much higher temperature too. I’m guessing your alchemists have already figured much of that out by themselves. I’m also willing to bet you’re still missing the most important ingredient. Am I wrong?”

The man remained silent for a minute or two, seemingly digesting the information. At some point, Jason felt the need to interject.

“Boss, I forgot to mention that they also have some Aurora Dew on them. I still find all this a little farfetched, but these are the facts.”

“Well?” Percy asked, pressing the man for an answer.

“…I admit that you’ve crafted quite the story there. Still, you don’t need to be an alchemist to know all that. The real culprituld have told you and given you a few doses to turn you into a scapegoat. Frankly, I’ve no idea why you’d sacrifice your own future for somebody else, but I’ve seen people do dumber things before.”

Percy failed to suppress a chuckle.

“So what? Even if that was true, Iuld still tell you what the last ingredient is. And even if I don’t know it, I’m still your best hope of catching this imaginary alchemist. Either way, it’s in your best interest that weme willingly. Or are you so petty that you’d sabotage your entire mission just to hurt us?”

“…”

“Very well. What assurances do you want from me exactly?”

Chapter 223: Diplomacy (2)

“To start with, I need your word that nobody will harm me or Nesha.”

“That’s not really up to me, is it?” the man asked back. “I can promise you the Divine Root won’t mistreat you as long as you cooperate, but I can’t speak for the Divine Order. The gods do as they please. And you’ve kept them waiting for way too long.”

Truth be told, Percy had expected a response along those lines. Still, that didn’t mean he would accept it.

“Not good enough. If you can’t even guarantee our safety, why the hell would we risk our lives to come quietly? Relay the request to the ones above: if you need to: and get back to us. We’ll wait.”

Jason’s superior didn’t reply immediately, seemingly considering it.

“My name is Deimos.” the man sighed eventually. “Hermes is actually my father. It’s going to be a tough ask on my part, but I think I can get him to agree to your terms with some pleading.”

Deimos sounded sincere, but Percy didn’t miss Nesha’s core flaring slightly by the corner of his eye, specifically upon hearing the second half of the man’s statement. This was the signal they’d agreed upon.

‘He’s lying!’

Not necessarily about being Hermes’s son: that part seemed truthful. Rather, it was his ability to plead for leniency on their behalf that appeared somewhat dubious. But why would Deimos do something this dumb? Surely, he knew about Nesha’s bloodline by now…

‘Is he gambling on it not working properly through the device?’

“Well? Does that suffice?” Deimos asked again, oblivious to the fact that they were already onto him. “Honestly, I thought you’d want me to go easy on your family too. Do you not care about them?”

“Fuck them.” Percy spat without a moment’s hesitation. “Why do you think I was forced to leave for the Guild in the first place? If it hadn’t been for those stingy assholes, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

“Hahahaha! Ruthless! I’m starting to like you kid. Perhaps we got off on the wrong foot. If your and Nesha’s safety is all you want, I suppose we can let bygones be bygon–”

“No.” Percy said, interrupting Deimos. “I never said this was everything. 50 doses of elixir every single day. For the rest of my life. Promise me that, and I’ll follow Jason back to the Guild right this instant.”

Jason drew a sharp breath upon hearing that, his flickering soul betraying his inner turmoil. Deimos fell silent too, seemingly taken aback by the outlandish request. Not for very long, though…

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR DAMN MIND?!” the man erupted.

“Not really.” Percy shrugged, unfazed by their reactions. “You know damn well we were able to earn way more than that on our own. For months on end. With virtually no backing, and while having to keep our heads low. The recipe is easily worth thousands of times as much, if not millions. Don’t tell me the Divine Order can’t afford it.”

“Whether they can afford it is beside the point. These are holy existences we’re talking about! The ones who keep our world safe! On principle, we can’t just have any random mortal extorting us! Let alone a Red-born runt! What kind of precedent would this set?!”

“How about a precedent that you are generous enough to properly encourage and reward magical breakthroughs? That you respect those capable and creative enough to revolutionize magic as we know it?” Percy insisted. “If you can’t even see that, you’re just a bunch of short-sighted fools.”

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“…”

“Kid, save your breath.” Deimos eventually sighed. “I’m not the one you need to convince. Terms like these would have been difficult to accept even if you’d negotiated with us properly, two years ago. Let alone after we’ve backed you to a corner.”

“I’m aware. Why do you think I chose to ran away in the first place? But these are my terms. Take it or leave it.”

Seeing the negotiations rapidly going south, Percy started taking one deep breath after another, filling his channels with mana. Their adversaries didn’t pick up on that, however, as Deimos offered a compromise a few seconds later.

“Here’s what we can do. I’m willing to give you a fifth of what you asked, out of my own pocket. I couldn’t afford a copper more than that, even if I wanted to.”

Percy had to suppress a chuckle after seeing Nesha’s core flare up more times than there were words in Deimos’s statement. Outwardly, Percy showed no sign of seeing through his façade, however. Instead, he kept his thoughts to himself, to let his enemies believe he was seriously considering their counteroffer. At the same time, he continued building his reserves up, feeling his boosting art take effect.

Deimos might be under the impression that he was deceiving Percy, but the opposite was equally true. After all, Percy had never really expected them to agree to his demands. Nor had he any intention of letting Jason go. Not after guessing he was the one responsible for locating them. But, while Deimos’s goal had been to trick them into surrendering peacefully, Percy was aiming for something entirely different.

‘I just hope this was enough.’

Contrary to what he’d told Deimos, he did care about his family. Very much so, in fact. But he couldn’t let them know that, to spare his relatives from their wrath. And then, there was Orin. Percy had to convince Deimos that he was solely responsible for the Aurora Dew, to give his mentor some plausible deniability.

Of course, he didn’t really know what had happened to the old alchemist, but he assumed he was still alive and well. If not, the Divine Root would have already learned the recipe. That said, things would change now that they’d discovered the extent of Percy’s involvement. It wasn’t a huge secret that Orin had mentored him.

“I see how it is.” Deimos said, having seemingly picked up on something, after seeing Percy remain silent for too long. “Jason. Break all their limbs and drag them both to the Guild. Just make sure to keep them alive.”

“Roger that.” Jason replied a little too eagerly. Though his boss hadn’t even waited for that, the runes on the artifact already dim.

“Go.” Percy whispered, having discussed this with Nesha beforehand.

“Be careful.” she replied, bolting off.

Percy didn’t spare her another glance, turning his attention to Jason as the glowing lines lit up on his body, one after another. His muscles tensed too, his skin reddening as Synchronization fully activated. But he didn’t stop there, grabbing the flask strung by his waist, cleaving its lid off with a hastily crafted construct. Without a moment’s hesitation, he gulped its contents down with one swift motion, not having the luxury to complain about the potion’s peculiar flavour stinging his tongue and throat both.

Truth be told, Percy hadn’t thought he’d have to resort to his latest creation mere days after brewing it. Still, he didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. As risky as it was, he knew his companions would only slow him down right now. And there was no other way to hold his own against the likes of Jason without his armour.

‘Please work!’ he pleaded as a rush of burning mana spread out of his stomach, swiftly enveloping his flesh.

Within seconds, his blood began to boil, as his veins bulged and squirmed along his skin, painting a stark contrast against the glowing lines brought about by his boosting art. His muscles swelled even more than before, some blood inevitably oozing out of his body as his skin tore in several spots, having stretched beyond its limits. The blood didn’t trickle down either. Instead, it bubbled and frothed by the wounds, traces of crimson joining the teal fog leaking out of his pores.

Percy winced, feeling his body tearing itself from within. But he couldn’t afford to dwell on the pain, pulling his blindfold off just in time to see Jason sprinting towards him. A lot of that weird mana was gushing out of the man’s sternum too, as he was already preparing his own magic. Percy’s heart skipped a beat at the sight: though that might have more to do with his racing pulse than fear.

‘At least the bastard is ignoring Nesha for now…’ he couldn’t help but grin.

It was another key goal during their previous negotiations. To make himself important enough so that his enemies would focus on him first. Not that it would matter much if he ended up dying.

With a subtle wave, he called upon the invisible pair of scythes propped up against a nearby tree, drawing them to his hands. Percy was perfectly aware that he'd be at a severe disadvantage as soon as the potion expired. If losing its help wasn't enough to do him in, its severe side-effects might. And his already short window to act would continue to shrink with every passing second.

'Fifteen minutes, tops. I have to make sure he's dead by then…'

Chapter 224: Trollsfury potion

Three orbs of mana rapidly flew towards Percy, each a separate colour.

'Do they all do different things, or is that just how this weird mana type looks?'

Suffice to say, he hadn't the slightest idea what would happen if he got hit, but it didn't really matter. Whatever it was, he couldn't afford to let a Green's spell touch him. Certainly not without his armour. Somehow, he'd have to dodge every single attack.

Leaping out of the way, he evaded the bolts. The red and blue ones were the easiest, being a little farther away. Though he did nearly get glanced by the yellow one. If it hadn't been for the potion drawing even more strength out of his body, the battle would have ended already. Though such power wasn't without its cost…

Steadying his footing, Percy ignored his aching muscles. He did the same with his heart thrumming against his chest, or the violent storm rolling within every vein. Even the tiniest movement placed a huge strain on him, but he couldn't help it. He needed to use every advantage he could to stand a chance.

His eyes fell back on Jason: who was already about to launch his next attack: when a series of cracking sounds came from behind him. It was as if somebody was digging at a dried patch of dirt with an oversized shovel. Unable to turn around, he observed the situation with his Mana Sense instead. Three blobs of Green mana were attached to the ground, swiftly pulling it towards him, trying to rip it from the earth.

'What the hell is this?!'

Percy didn't get the chance to dwell on it for long, however, as Jason sent a few more bolts after him, forcing him to sidestep again. The same scenario repeated itself too. Wherever the mana landed, it stuck to the ground, slowly pulling it up.

Suddenly, Jason grinned, his cold smile sending a chill down Percy's spine. At the same time, his core flared up, a large amount of mana disappearing from within.

Percy raised an eyebrow, unable to guess what his opponent was up to. While his Greater Foresight still warned him of the mana's trajectory, it remained completely silent about its effects. Not that strange, considering he had no understanding of this affinity whatsoever. Luckily: or perhaps, unluckily: he got his answer soon enough…

The chunks of dirt were torn out with even greater force, flying towards Percy. Sidestepping them wasn't that difficult, but that was just the start of his troubles. They didn't fly very far, before slowing down, eventually coming to a halt mid-air, a few dozen metres away. Next, they snapped back at him like stretched rubber bands, seemingly determined to hit him.

'How is he doing this?' Percy wondered, as Jason resumed sending orbs of mana at him too, trying to overwhelm him.

It was a well-known fact that Greens had greater control over their mana. Not to mention a top talent like Jason. Still, the way he seemed to individually command so many disjoint objects simultaneously was quite bizarre, to say the least.

'Unless he isn't… Are they chasing me on their own?'

Struggling to avoid over a dozen objects shooting at him from every direction, Percy decided to go on the defensive, until he knew what he was dealing with. Putting some distance from Jason, he zigged and zagged through the trees, using them as cover while trying to figure out what his opponent was doing.

The patches of dirt continued to rain at him, though plenty of them crashed against the trees, exploding into dust clouds. Still, that didn't seem to deter them in the slightest, as the loose pebbles resumed their flight towards him the very next second, stubbornly homing into him.

‘Yeah… No way he’s controlling over a hundred objects separately. He’s definitely enchanted them to do this by themselves. The only question is, how?!’

Either way, a pebble or two wouldn’t do too much damage if they hit him, but they would still distract him enough to possibly spell his doom. Percy had no choice but to keep running through the woods, all the while trying to decipher the inner workings of Jason’s strange affinity.

At some point, Percy noticed something rather peculiar. Glancing behind him, he saw a series of small craters, lining up into a trail. And, thinking back, this was exactly the path he’d just taken over the last couple of minutes.

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‘Hmmm? He seems to go out of his way to only target the spots I’ve stepped on. Is that a requirement for them to chase me?’

An idea flashed through his mind. Pretending he was about to land in a certain location, Percy tried to bait Jason into launching another projectile towards him. It worked like a charm too. Twisting his body mid-air, Percy avoided the bolt while ensuring he never set foot on that spot.

Watching the orange bolt sink into the ground, Percy’s lips curled upwards after seeing it remain still several seconds later. Apparently, Jason’s spell worked by tapping into some invisible connection between himself and objects he’d previously touched, sending them after him.

‘This must be related to the way he tracked us down…’ he thought, though his smile soon turned into a grimace. ‘This doesn’t really help me, does it? I can’t just stop touching things…’

The more projectiles Jason shot at him, the more Percy was forced to dodge. That, in turn, meant he’d step on more places, giving Jason even more ammunition. A vicious cycle. Especially so, considering that the man appeared to conserve his mana quite well. He was never going to run out at this rate, and Percy couldn’t possibly escape either. Not to mention…

‘Shit, I can’t afford to waste any more time. The potion won’t last much longer…’

Percy's greatest problem was that he still didn't completely understand Jason's affinity. Approaching him before his eyes fully adapted to his attacks would be suicidal. Yet, delaying wasn't an option either.

Making his mind up, Percy pushed even more mana into his channels, taking advantage of the potion's effect to overload Synchronization further. A reckless move, seeing how much trouble he already had keeping his body together.

"Ugghhh…" Percy let out a pained groan, his knee nearly buckling as he dodged another bolt at an awkward angle.

But he didn't pay that any heed, focused on flooding his body with even more raw power. His muscles pressed his organs inwards, as his joints threatened to come apart every time they bent or stretched. The cuts along his skin widened too, rivers of blood soaking his clothes. The life mana desperately tried to close them, of course, but it couldn't possibly keep up with the damage.

Knowing he'd only run out of time even faster this way, Percy gritted his teeth, rushing back towards his opponent. More projectiles flew at him: some magical, some mundane. He dodged whatever he could, while batting the rest into dust with his scythe's shaft. Picking up speed, he ran towards his prey with determination, his eyes locked onto Jason's.

The Green mage raised an eyebrow at that sight, though he didn't appear particularly worried. Drawing more mana from his core, he tuned his own assault up to eleven, trying to stop Percy in his tracks. He did so by launching even more colourful bolts, one after the other. The objects he'd previously enchanted seemed to grow quicker too.

'Sending them after me costs mana…' Percy already knew that, but that wasn't everything. 'He can speed them up, but that consumes even more.'

Parrying the pebbles got harder and harder as the number of objects stabbing at him increased. At some point, Percy had to start ignoring the smaller ones, enduring the pain as many of them pierced into his skin, drawing even more blood. Another realization soon hit him, however…

'There are fewer of them than there should be!'

By now, Jason had unleashed hundreds of projectiles at him, each having collided against something several times already. Had they all kept chasing him, he would have long drowned into an avalanche of dirt and rock.

Smashing another stone into fragments, Percy paid closer attention to them, as well as his opponent's core. Jason's expenditure instantly flared up, the Green glow soon dimming from many of the smaller shards.

'The more objects he controls, the faster they sap at his mana!'

As obscure as Jason's affinity was, it clearly operated within strict rules, and under certain limits. The man couldn't keep all the objects enchanted indefinitely, or his core would be dried out in seconds. He had to constantly decide which of the objects would help him the most, letting go of the least useful ones.

Suddenly, a narrow shard: sharp as a knife: pierced through Percy's eye. Yet, it did no damage. It wasn't a real stone: just a projection, brought about by his Greater Foresight. At last, his spell had begun to affect the mundane projectiles too, his understanding of the affinity having climbed to a new level!

Resuming his advance, Percy allowed shadows of the Grim Dance to mix with the rest, estimating the results of his own movements. This allowed him to gauge which attacks he should evade, and which he was better off parrying.

His scythes spun soundlessly through the air, materializing only when they were about to land on a piece of stone, shattering it into sand. His steps grew more elegant too, as he strode forward, pivoting, hopping and weaving with greater confidence than ever before.

Jason couldn't help but frown upon seeing him close the distance between them, though he didn't seem particularly worried just yet.

'Let's see how much longer you can keep your composure…' Percy smiled coldly, before hurling the first of his scythes at him with next to no warning.

He kept the second to defend himself, but that didn't mean this was all he had to attack with. By now, he'd accumulated a ton of fused mana, a thick shroud of teal with hints of crimson enveloping his body. Grabbing a chunk of it with his free hand, he flicked it at his opponent, sending a rain of throwing stars right behind the Soul Harvester.

Jason's lips curled upwards, however, as he stood in the same spot, showing no intention of moving an inch, up until the very moment the projectiles were right upon him…

Chapter 225: Shroud

With a wave of his hand, Jason released a colossal amount of mana in front of him, covering all of Percy's projectiles like a blanket. At first, both the scythe and the throwing stars continued to stab at him, though they slowed down rapidly. Mere inches before tearing into his pupil, the Soul Harvester came to a complete halt, the rest of the constructs following.

'The hell?!'

The weirdest thing was that Percy's mana had been in its incorporeal state the whole time. Whatever Jason's affinity was, it could interact with soul mana directly! Not something Percy encountered very often. The last time had been nearly two years ago, against that time mage.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Jason poured more mana into Percy's spells. Soon, he overcame the willpower embedded within them, pushing them back. Slowly at first, they travelled in reverse, steadily picking up speed as they flew towards Percy!

He tried to dodge, of course, but his opponent showed no intention of making things easy for him. Jason sent the enchanted objects after Percy, surrounding him from every direction, cutting off his escape routes.

'Shit, I can't block everything!'

Out of options, Percy used his one remaining scythe to crush as many chunks of dirt as he could, gritting his teeth as he let the smaller ones hit him. At the same time, he willed his own constructs to shatter, moments before they stabbed into his soul.

The throwing stars turned into wisps of smoke, joining the rest of the fused mana around his body. Jason let go of them too, probably minding his expenditure. The good news was that Percy could now recycle the mana into a new round of projectiles. Sadly, the same couldn't be said about his scythe…

With a heavy heart, he destroyed the corrupted Soul Harvester, his expression souring as a wave of teal powder showered him. Alas, it was preferrable to having his soul cleaved in half. And by his own spell, no less…

'Now I'm one weapon down… And I can't even hit him. Whatever I throw at him, he'll just send back…'

Jason wouldn't wait for him to figure things out, however. Pressing upon his advantage, he resumed his onslaught, sending more colourful bolts after Percy. His joints protested as he strove to dodge them all. Unlike the enchanted objects, Percy couldn't let the foreign mana touch his weapon, or he'd lose it too. And things continued going downhill, as the bolts landed on the ground, bringing more patches of dirt to life, sending them after him.

At some point, Percy dodged a large chunk of rock: mostly by accident: his knees buckling as he coughed out a mouthful of blood. His channels also felt more saturated than before, even though the same amount of mana was coursing through them. Evidently, neither his body nor the potion's effect were going to last much longer.

'I need to do something. And I need to do it fast!'

It was easier said than done, however. Jason was different from the other Greens he'd faced in the past. Not much stronger, necessarily, but certainly calmer. Colder. More calculating. His moves weren't as flashy as the others, but his entire fighting style was surgically designed for him to maintain the upper hand. The way he chose which objects to enchant or let go of ensured his mana expenditure was minimal. His ability to deflect attacks thrown at him was arguably the perfect defence. His homing attacks weren't as damaging, but they were troublesome to handle. And to top it all off, it was impossible to escape from him: the ultimate tracker. His entire kit seemed to revolve around slowly and safely wearing his opponents down.

Thinking back, Percy had only achieved a single minor 'victory' against Jason since the start of the battle. Specifically, when he managed to retrieve the fused mana Jason had redirected towards him. Jason had probably consumed more mana to commandeer each of Percy's constructs than Percy himself had spent creating them.

‘Can I scale that interaction up?’ he wondered, raising an eyebrow at the thought.

Capitalizing on his singular advantage was common sense, but there were several problems with that idea. To start, his Mantle of Deceit had never really been much of a finisher: not since he began fighting Greens. Whether in their corporeal or ethereal state, the small constructs wouldn’t do much damage against a strong opponent. This was one of the main reasons why he had developed the Soul Harvester to begin with. Then again, he’d never had access to nearly as much fused mana as he did right now. As a side-effect of the potion and his supercharged boosting art, Percy had a ridiculous amount of teal smoke surrounding his body.

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‘Maybe it can work. I just need to figure out how to make the most of it…’

A few more colourful bolts flew towards Percy, seemingly about to hit him. Unlike before, however, he wasn’t as quick to dodge, doing something else instead. Grabbing a handful of teal mana, he shaped it into just as many throwing stars as there were bolts. Next, he relied on the projections afforded to him by Greater Foresight, to accurately estimate the trajectory of Jason’s attacks, before throwing a projectile at each one.

Percy couldn’t help but crack a smile upon seeing the colourful mana sink into his constructs. The projectiles themselves didn’t seem to be affected in the slightest, however, flying into the distance. Percy tried to call them back, to retrieve his mana, though Jason had clearly learned from his previous mistake. Rather than return towards Percy, the throwing stars flew away even faster, soon falling outside his reach.

‘Ok. So, he can tap into a connection both ways, to repel or to attract two objects from one another.’

Still, this was a positive result, all things considered. Even though he had lost some of his mana, it had probably cost Jason more. It must have: to override Percy’s control over his own spell. More importantly, Percy had prevented Jason from enchanting more patches of dirt, leaving him with fewer objects to send after him.

Grinning, Percy stopped moving around. Using his scythe, he crushed the last chunks of dirt, as he continued to intercept all of Jason's spells with his own. At the same time, he accumulated more mana, preparing his counterattack.

'Let's see how you deal with this one.'

Perhaps one or two throwing stars wouldn't do much against a Green. Even a couple dozen might not be enough. But what about a hundred?

With a wave of his hand, Percy unleashed nearly half of his fused mana, sending a rain of projectiles at Jason. Furthermore, he varied their trajectories slightly, making them close into his opponent from a wide range of angles.

Remaining calm, Jason released a lot of mana, stopping the throwing stars in their tracks. Due to their spread, it cost him more than it would have otherwise. He repelled whatever he could into the distance, though he was still forced to send a few back at Percy, letting him recover a fraction of his mana.

Percy wasn't deterred, continuing to push his body to its limits, pumping out as much mana as he could, trying to recover any dregs he could from his surroundings. By the time the throwing stars returned, he was ready to launch a second barrage. And then a third, after a similar situation played out…

The only thing different from one wave to the next was the number of projectiles, as well as their size and spread. Carefully scanning both Jason's mana reserves and his reactions, Percy fine-tuned his attacks to maximize his opponent's consumption, while minimizing his own. He was already gaining ground with each exchange, but a Green's reserves weren't a joke, and time wasn't on his side.

'Come on! Just run out already!'

The pressure in the air was palpable, as Percy pushed himself beyond his limits, rapidly improving with each barrage. Never before had he had so much mana to play around with. And, as his projectiles grew sharper, their formations more elaborate, their trajectories more insidious, his Status finally chipped in.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Mantle of Deceit: Refined -> Shroud of Deceit: Refined!]

Oblivious to Percy's notification, Jason watched the latest wave of throwing stars close in. He didn't seem to be in a rush to stop the attack, probably realizing he couldn't sustain the expenditure for much longer.

Yet, just when Percy thought he was finally going to land a hit, Jason smirked, some more mana vanishing from his core.

'What is he up to now?'

With no warning, Jason shot backwards like an arrow, at a speed Percy had never seen a human move before. And that was just the start. A few metres later, Jason took a steep turn, and then another. His movements were bizarre, to say the least. Unnatural. But they were effective too, as Jason bolted away uninterrupted, comfortably avoiding all the attacks.

'How?!'

The scariest part wasn't Jason's speed alone, but the sheer finesse of his movements. On closer inspection, Percy realized what was happening. Jason hadn't twitched a muscle, his body seemingly dragged along the air by an invisible rope attached to his back, like a marionette pulled by a string.

'He's using his affinity on himself! But why didn't he do this earlier?'

Jason could have saved a lot of mana by pulling this trick out a minute or two ago. Then again, it wasn't that hard to figure out why he'd chosen not too…

Coughing another mouthful of blood, Percy fell to his palms. A wave of weakness flooded his body, a slap of vertigo ringing his skull.

'He was just buying time for my potion to run out!'

Indeed, why would Jason reveal all his trump cards? It would have only given Percy a chance to adjust course or run away. All he had to do was spend a bit more mana to give him some false hope, keeping this charade of a fight going for a while longer.

Grimacing, Percy looked up at his grinning opponent, evaluating his options. Yet, just when he was considering whether to stay or run, something unexpected happened. Both combatants jerked their heads in a certain direction, watching somebody emerge from the woods. Perhaps they would have noticed him sooner, had they not been as engrossed in the battle, or had the whistling cones not masked the newcomer's steps.

"Who the hell are you?" Jason asked.

But Percy didn't have to, recognizing him despite his horrific appearance.

'Rambert…'

Chapter 226: The prey and the predator

"I'm Rambert of House Tantalus." the newcomer replied in a hoarse, raspy voice. Pushing each word out of his lungs appeared like quite the challenge.

"Tantalus?" Jason tilted his head. "Ah! Your families have been fighting over this province, right? But what the hell happened to you? Did you skip your vegetables as a child or something?"

Rambert's expression soured upon hearing the ill-concealed ridicule, though he didn't refute Jason, fully cognisant of his poor state. He was still missing the arm Percy had chopped off during their fight, his entire body pale and shrivelled. Countless infected cuts covered him from head to toe, each of them oozing some disturbing brown sludge: a little too viscous and off coloured to be described as blood. If he wasn't moving and talking, one could easily mistake him for a corpse. And not a particularly fresh one, at that.

"What do you think?! This asshole did this to me!" he snarled, some hatred spilling into his voice as he pointed towards Percy with a shaky finger. "It's been weeks, and I still haven't managed to fix myself!"

"Right. I suppose that would explain the rather strong karmic thread linking you two." Jason shrugged. "I'd have laughed at you for getting your ass handed to you by an Orange, had I not spent the last 15 minutes fighting the little monster."

‘Karmic? Is that what his affinity is?’ Percy focused on the most interesting part, tuning the rest of their conversation out.

At the same time, he discreetly grabbed a couple healing potions from his pocket, silently uncorking them with his thumb.

“Honestly, I’d no idea this bastard had pissed the Divine Root off too. I suppose you won’t let me kill him?” Rambert asked.

“Afraid not. My boss wants him alive.” Jason replied. “How did you even find us this quickly? Isn’t your family based on the other side of the river?”

Rambert grimaced, but he wasn’t quite ready to give up just yet, apparently.

“It is, but we’ve been infiltrating their territories in search of easy pickings since the start of the war. And the two of you have raised quite a commotion. At least, tell me he won’t have a good end.”

Jason grinned.

“That much, I can guarantee. Deimos has never been a patient man, and this piece of shit has screwed with us for way too long. I’m pretty sure he will take great pleasure in gutting him himself.”

Then, he turned towards Percy, who had remained silent during their brief conversation.

“The only thing I’m not sure about is how long it’ll take for him to spill all his secrets. He’s shown me quite a few interesting tricks tonight…”

Undeterred by Jason’s predatory gaze, Percy swiftly turned around, chugging down the potions as he dashed into the trees. He nearly stumbled too: even staying on his wobbling feet being quite the struggle. Let alone keeping Synchronization active. But he didn’t have a choice. If he stayed here, he was done for.

Jason didn't seem surprised, nor particularly annoyed by Percy's escape attempt. He casually strolled behind him, launching one karmic bolt after the other, forcing him to clumsily dodge each of them by the skin of his teeth. Suffice to say, all of Percy's bones screamed in agony every time he rolled on the ground or collided against a tree. Still, he had to pick himself up quickly each time, lest the enchanted projectiles turn him into a pincushion.

Through Mana Sense, Percy saw Rambert following behind them. Though he hadn't interfered, seemingly content enjoying the sadistic show for now.

The only good news was that the healing potions were doing their job. The first two had already alleviated some of his pain and exhaustion, allowing him to keep moving. And he'd stashed quite a few of them in his pockets before the battle, preparing for the worst-case scenario. By the time he downed the sixth one, he was already doing much better: almost as if he'd never drank that trollsfury potion. Then again, he was at a severe disadvantage without its help. As things stood, dodging Jason's attacks was about the most he could manage.

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"I've got to hand it to you, you're quite resourceful." Jason said a couple minutes later, pausing his attacks. "I'm starting to believe you really are an alchemist. A genius one at that. Not to mention your second core, your weird spells… and a sharp mind for battle too. Out of respect for all that, I'll give you one final chance to come with me willingly."

Percy took a few more steps before stopping as well. Turning around, he couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"How dumb do you think I am? It hasn't even been 5 minutes since you promised Rambert I'll be tortured to death."

Jason shrugged.

"Oh, don't take me wrong. That's still going to happen: there's no avoiding that. But it doesn't have to start tonight. You can at least walk back to the Guild on your own two feet. It sure beats having to carry you."

Percy chuckled.

“Thanks for the generous offer. I’m sorry I can’t reciprocate…”

Suddenly, several black butterflies materialized in random spots around Jason, each of them flying rapidly towards him. Taken by surprise, he unleashed a wide burst of karma mana: wider than any he’d used against Percy’s constructs: to ensure he intercepted all of them.

Having already been warned about Jason’s affinity, Nesha destroyed her butterflies the moment they got corrupted. She was supposed to change spots too, to make it harder for Jason to track her, though Percy couldn’t tell if she’d done that. Either way, he wouldn’t waste the opening she’d created for him.

His body didn’t produce as much mana without the potion, but Percy had gone out of his way to preserve as much of his shroud as possible. Pulling a hefty amount of it, he swiftly launched a wave of throwing stars against his opponent.

“Tsch. Did you honestly believe your girlfriend would be enough to make a difference?” Jason merely used his earlier trick to pull himself away from the attack’s path.

His features shifted to shock, however, as soon as he noticed the fireballs closing onto him from behind.

“The fuck are you doing?!” Jason swore, barely managing to avoid the attacks.

Sadly for him, he never got a chance to catch his breath, however. Soon, a second round of butterflies materialized around him, followed by another wave of throwing stars. Finally, Rambert pitched in again with some more fireballs, as the three of them used everything they had to box Jason in.

Panicking, the karma mage unleashed a tremendous wave of colourful mana from his body, freezing most of the spells to a halt. But not all of them. A Green’s willpower wasn’t nearly as easy for him to override as Percy’s or Nesha’s, the fireballs still trudging through the air towards him, pushing against his control.

Perhaps he could have won the tug-of-war, but it would have cost him more effort, mana and time. Either way, the projectiles were already dangerously close to him before he even made his mind up.

Rambert detonated them all, Jason barely managing to pull himself away from their blast radius in time to avoid any serious injuries. Still, all these costly moves had already brought his reserves down to about a quarter of his capacity.

“Again!” Percy yelled, this time putting every last mote of mana into the shroud, sacrificing Synchronization to unleash the widest wave of throwing stars he was currently capable of. The others didn’t shy away either, with Nesha manifesting a third round of butterflies, and Rambert sending more fireballs at Jason.

Doing everything he could to survive, Jason zigged and zagged through the air, making full use of his rare affinity to dodge the storm of attacks, his core draining at a scary rate. By the time all the spells were dealt with, he didn’t even have enough juice to seize control of the Soul Harvester spinning towards him.

Leaping out of the scythe’s path using his legs alone, he barely managed to lift his head up in time to see a near-skeletal hand close around his throat, before pressing him violently against the ground.

“Why…?” Jason gasped as his fellow Green tried to choke him.

“I hate him. Probably more than you do, I bet.” Rambert spat, before sighing. “But I don’t have a choice. He’s my only chance to survive.”

Jason’s eyes widened at the sound of that, though he didn’t bother replying. Grabbing Rambert’s wrist, he tried to push it away. At first, it seemed to work too. Jason didn’t have much trouble overpowering his peer, given the difference in their physical condition.

However, there was one crucial difference between them that brute force alone couldn’t bridge so easily. Jason was already out of mana, and Rambert wasn’t.

Before the latter’s hand moved even an inch back, a bright orange flash emerged from the decaying palm. A deafening boom soon followed, drowning the ever-present tunes of the surrounding trees for a few seconds.

Yet, Percy's eyes had remained locked on Jason throughout the whole exchange. It wasn't until the man's headless corpse became visible through the smoke that he allowed himself to plop down weakly.

## Chapter 227: Rambert

"For a second there, I wasn't sure you'd help us." Percy said.

"What choice did I even have?" Rambert shrugged as he walked closer.

The only reason he was alive was because Percy had turned him into a clone. Of course, Percy had been pretty banged up after their battle, but Micky had made things easier for him by eating Grian's soul.

"I've upheld my end of the bargain. Betrayed my House for you. Even rushed here to save you from the fucking Divine Root. It's time to do your part."

Percy nodded. Naturally, Rambert wouldn't have helped the man who'd killed him out of kindness. His hastily stitched-up soul wouldn't hold by itself. Percy had intentionally left the seals incomplete, as a fail-safe in case Rambert decided to betray him.

And that wasn't even the biggest issue. Ironically, it was the Moirais' Decree that did the most harm, by sucking out any life mana Rambert tried to use to heal his body. This was why he was still in this decrepit state despite his bloodline. Even after slaughtering every single resident of Bogside town, it wouldn't have been enough to repair his second core. Not that Percy would have ever allowed him to commit such an atrocity – of course.

Currently, there was only one person in the entire province capable of fixing Rambert in time, and he couldn't even hope to set up a meeting with Archibald unless Percy talked to his grandpa first.

"I promised you a chance, not a certainty. And things have gotten even more complicated since then. Before we dive into the details, I'll need to confirm a few things with you." Percy replied.

Walking by his side, Nesha helped him up. She looked a little better than before, the potion having lifted the bulk of her exhaustion. Still, Percy wouldn't have involved her in this fight if he could've helped it.

While she'd already proven herself, her mobility and defences were lacking. Had the fight lasted longer, or had Percy not already deciphered Jason's abilities, things could have gone badly. This was why he'd hoped to take him down by himself. Sadly, things hadn't gone to plan…

"Just do what you must." Rambert nodded.

"To start, I'll need your word that you'll never tell a soul about my secrets. In fact, you shouldn't even mention me or Nesha again."

Rambert grimaced upon hearing his first demand. Percy didn't press him either, waiting for him to come to terms. Of course, they both knew that Rambert hated him with a passion – it wasn't like he'd hidden it – but he'd have to make some concessions if he wanted to walk out of this forest alive.

Even giving him this chance was merely out of principle. Now that Percy had gotten everything he needed from Rambert, it would be easier and safer to just dispose of him. Whether Rambert survived would all depend on his answers.

"Fine." Rambert spat after a while. "I won't pretend to like it, but I've seen enough that I don't ever want to involve myself with you again. Besides, I'm sure the Divine Root will get to you soon enough…"

Percy listened to Rambert's answer while paying close attention to Nesha with his Mana Sense. Only after failing to get a reaction did he allow himself to relax.

"Next, swear you'll never lay a finger on any member of House Avalon."

"Tsch. A bit much, isn't it?!" Rambert snarled.

"Rambert, I'm not playing games with you. Do as I ask or our deal is off." Percy stared at him coldly.

"Listen, pal… I've no intention of participating in this war a moment longer. Or even staying in this province for that matter. My family is bound to figure out I've robbed them clean, if they haven't already. I want nothing more than to get healed and run halfway across Remior."

“That’s not what I asked.” Percy didn’t relent.

But Rambert gritted his teeth.

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“Look. I’ve got no beef with your House. If I’m willing to put down my feud with you, then why would I give a shit about anyone else? But those are hundreds of people we’re talking about, all of whom hate me. I’m going to defend myself if anybody attacks me.”

Nesha’s core remained still once more, confirming Rambert’s sincerity. Of course, it wasn’t exactly the answer Percy was looking for, but it was fair.

“Good enough. Last question. How many innocent people have you fed to your bloodline?”

This time, Percy didn’t even need to wait for Nesha to know he’d struck a nerve. At least, he hadn’t missed the cold shiver jolting through the man’s soul.

“I’ve… had to do it a few times that I’m not proud of…” Rambert replied, looking away in what appeared to be genuine shame.

Still, Percy hadn’t missed Nesha’s core flaring up the moment the word ‘few’ popped up.

“Under thirty?”

“Yes.”

A lie.

“Any children among them?”

“No.”

Another lie. The poor guy had no idea he had a truth-seeker scrutinizing his every word. By now, Percy had already made his mind up, though he still wanted to know one more thing.

“Why did you do it?”

“You don’t know what Drain is like, ok? It’s nothing like your bloodline, giving you everything you could have ever hoped for. For me, it’s just a curse. It just erodes at my sanity and my self-control, until I give in.”

Percy nodded. He knew it wasn’t entirely their fault, though none of the members of House Tantalus he’d met had shown much regret in their actions.

“I can’t really say I understand, but that’s beside the point. I’m sure you’ll do it again, sooner or later. And your next victim will be on me. Sorry.”

“You bastard! WE HAD A DEAL!!!” Rambert yelled, his core lighting up in fury as he leapt towards Percy, his hand igniting.

Sadly for him, he didn’t even get to reach his target before his eyes glazed over. By the time the corpse landed on the ground, Percy’s wisp had returned to him, conveniently flooding his mind with an influx of memories. Of course, his clone had kept him relatively informed during the past month, though some details were easier to comprehend this way.

“Micky! Two Green cores for you!” Percy yelled.

Soon, the crow waddled over eagerly, having remained by Nesha’s side throughout the fight. He hadn’t been in a condition to intervene, though his involvement couldn’t be understated, regardless. After all, it was through him that Percy had managed to coordinate with Nesha.

In any case, the familiar started with Jason's body, apparently finding it a great deal more appetizing. Percy ignored him, searching Rambert's corpse instead. It didn't take him long to find the five spatial amulets the dead mage had stolen from his family's vault, stuffing them with elixirs.

"Wow! How many are there?" Nesha asked.

"According to our estimates, around 175 thousand doses. Their entire stash for the next three years." Percy replied, checking the storage devices one after the other.

"That much?!" Nesha was taken aback.

Percy shrugged.

"It's a little more than the standard, but they've also lost a lot of people during the war. It must've massively cut their consumption down…"

Each of the amulets was no larger than his own, containing about one cubic metre of space. Naturally, that was plenty to accommodate tens of thousands of the pinky-sized vials, though Rambert had still been forced to pack them quite tightly to make all of them fit.

"Percy… with this much…" Nesha spoke again, apparently having done the math in her head.

"Indeed. They should last us for well over a decade. Enough for all of us to advance. And we can do that even faster, once we make it to the Thirsty Valley…"

Next, he scratched his head upon thinking of a problem.

"I'm almost out of rainbow grass. We'll need to get more within the next couple of months."

"It won't be easy. Now that the Divine Root knows it's part of the recipe, they'll have their eyes out for any large movements."

Percy sighed. It was true, though he didn't regret telling Deimos about it. He still hoped they wouldn't give Orin much trouble. Besides, they'd probably figured that part out already. At any rate, this meant they'd have to be more careful when procuring it. That, or Percy would have to find a different deattunement ingredient to replace it – neither of which was going to be easy.

"At least, Jason is dead. Hopefully, they don't have any other karma users."

Neither he nor Nesha said anything else. Instead, they took a seat by the base of a nearby tree, watching Micky as he disposed of the bodies. It was a rather disturbing scene, as always, but Percy was happy to see his familiar a lot more energetic than he'd been in weeks. As good as Regulation was, it couldn't entirely replace a proper meal.

'It'll make our journey easier, at least…' he smiled.

Next, he looked down in his hand, fiddling with a small box he'd also looted from Rambert. An unexpected treasure.

"What's that?" Nesha asked, apparently only now noticing it.

Percy's lips couldn't help but part upon hearing the question, revealing a bright, toothy grin. Opening the latch on the box, he lifted its lid, as both of their eyes landed on the aquamarine-coloured object shimmering within.

It looked a little like a petal, though it was rather oblong. Furthermore, it had an oval hole in its middle, the rest of its surface looping around it. In fact, its glow seemed to travel in wave-like patterns around the petal, almost giving it the appearance of a river…

"Is that what I think it is?!" Nesha seemed to have put two and two together.

"Yeap…"

[END OF BOOK 2: PHANTOM OF THE HAUNTED BOG]

Chapter 228: Lotus of a Myriad Rivers

The lotus… a priceless treasure Percy had wanted since before he'd even learned of its existence. The only object he'd ever heard of capable of changing one's affinity. And he'd gone through so much trouble to earn a petal from his family too, only for the opportunity to be ripped out of his hands at the very last moment.

'It's lucky I had a backup plan…'

Of course, this so-called 'backup plan' had only really become available over the past month. Before turning Rambert into a clone, Percy hadn't known the man was due a petal from his family. Nor had he expected to need his help to take down Jason, for that matter. These had all been coincidences.

The only thing he'd wanted at the time, had been for Rambert to loot his family's warehouse for him, to replenish his dwindling stash of elixirs. This was why he'd even settled in Bogside town in the first place. Suffice to say, getting this far had taken Percy a little longer than expected, since he'd wanted to wait for a Green host to maximize his odds. Sure, he could have made the attempt with Broose, but he'd needed the man's soul for a different project at the time. And the enemy House had really taken their sweet time sending the next batch of Greens after them since then.

"So, what are you going to do with it?" Nesha suddenly asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

A good question. Had Percy obtained a petal a couple years ago, he would have consumed it without a moment's hesitation. Even common elements were generally regarded as superior to the pure affinity, and Percy honestly needed any boost he could get. Then again, he hadn't stopped finding new uses for his second core since he got it, his pure affinity now being as integral to his arsenal as his soul affinity.

"Losing Crystallization would be inconvenient. Same with Synchronization. But those aren't dealbreakers by themselves." he said, getting a nod back.

In theory, he didn't need to personally produce the crystals for the Aurora Dew. Pure affinity users were all over the place, so it wouldn't be that difficult to outsource the job. Sure, he'd have to look for somebody trustworthy, and to spend some time training them in the spell, but it would be dumber to ruin his future prospects just because of some minor inconvenience.

As for Synchronization, he would be able to use it again as soon as he opened up his new channels. Elaine had already proven it was possible. Sure, it would leave him weaker for a few months, but that was ultimately a small price to pay.

“But I’m not that keen on losing the Phantomscale Raiment, the Soul Harvester or the mana threads I’ve been working towards.” he added after a minute.

Percy had really struck gold with his affinity fusion – or at least the uses he’d found for it. And not because of the pure affinity itself, but rather all the external influences he’d been able to weave into his kit. Namely, the Vault’s runecrafting, and his spectral trait.

Obviously, the water affinity should be compatible with his soul mana too, but there was no way to tell if it would synergize as well with his other assets. The truth was, Percy had already made his mind up for months now. He wasn’t the one who would be eating it.

“Micky. Come over here. I’ve got something for you.”

The familiar was just about done devouring the corpses, the potent mana contained within their cores having done wonders for his situation. Listening to Percy, he walked over, curious to see what this was all about.

“Eat this. Direct the mana it releases towards your second core.” Percy said, handing him the glowing petal.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? Won’t Micky lose access to his spells, same as you?” Nesha asked.

“It’s not the same.” Percy shook his head.

It was a well-known fact that composite affinity users could still access their component elements with some effort. After all, the two mana types would continue to coexist within Micky’s core, as neither of them would be able to override the other – unlike what would have happened to Percy.

In fact, Percy knew a little more about the issue than most, as the Moirais' books had actually mentioned it. Apparently, the process of breaking a composite affinity into its components was known as affinity fission. As the name implied, it was the polar opposite of affinity fusion, and it took about the same amount of effort.

"With some practice, Micky will be able to use his air magic again. Not to mention all the new doors it will open for him. In his case, there's no dilemma whatsoever. This is a net upgrade."

Nesha didn't say anything else. The two just watched as the oversized crow gulped the glowing petal down. Micky sent Percy his thoughts and feelings too, to let him oversee the process. The first thing Percy sensed, was the refreshing feeling trickling down the bird's throat. It was as if Micky had just drank a mouthful of the freshest, coolest water. The moment it splashed within the crow's stomach, the petal dissolved almost immediately – as if it had never been solid to begin with.

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Following his earlier instructions, Micky then used his air mana as a carrier, guiding the dissolved petal into his abdomen, in a process reminiscent of core purification. It was only once the petal arrived at its destination that it stopped behaving like an elixir entirely, doing something completely different. Latching on the core's walls, the substance soon began to seep through them, infecting the entire organ inside out. It wasn't like a physical substance either. It felt almost like Micky's core had been invaded by a brand-new idea.

'Are core affinities ultimately just concepts?' Percy couldn't help but wonder.

While mortals like him often viewed magic in terms of elements and abilities, gods experienced the same things from a different perspective entirely. From what little he knew about them, the lofty deities standing at the pinnacle of magic didn't differentiate themselves based on grades, or the colours of their cores, but the sheer number of concepts they had mastered. The blessings some mortals were lucky to inherit from their divine parents, were nothing more than concepts themselves.

Oblivious to Percy's thoughts, the two concepts continued to fight for control over Micky's core. His air affinity embodied excitement and freedom. It playfully jumped around the core, not particularly welcoming to its guest. Meanwhile, the water affinity moved more calmly, trying to chill the organ down, to make it more in line with its preferences.

The air affinity seemed to dominate at first – perhaps due to having the home advantage initially. Things appeared to turn around, however, once the rest of the dissolved petal was brought to the crow's abdomen. The water affinity soon gained ground, only stopping once the two forces were evenly matched.

'Now what's going to happen?' Percy's heart skipped a beat at the sight.

Logically, he knew this was how things were supposed to go, though he couldn't help but worry as he observed the two parties warring within his familiar's body. If they continued at this rate, they'd rip the crow to shreds.

Fortunately, that didn't happen. Unable to gain an advantage, the two affinities seemed to accept their fate a few minutes later, calming down. It appeared they would be sharing the core, after all.

'No wonder the lotus is only compatible with other elemental affinities.' Percy realized.

Had there been a rare affinity in there, he wasn't sure the two concepts would have reached an equilibrium as easily. And let's not even imagine what would have happened if Micky had already possessed a composite affinity. Throwing a third element into the mix would have easily been catastrophic.

"How are you feeling?" Nesha asked, apparently having also realized the process had come to an amicable conclusion.

"Like crap." Micky spat. "My second core feels different. I can't even pull any mana from it."

"Don't worry about it." Percy said. "This is supposed to happen. You won't be able to access it unless you open your new channels. Well, you can still pull the air mana through the old channels, but you'll need to separate it from the rest first."

"Wait, what? How am I going to use Regulation then?" Micky panicked.

“Just use Hibernation for now, to reduce your expenditure. I’ll feed you some of my fused mana until then.”

Suffice to say, Micky wasn’t very keen to lose access to his latest spell, though it couldn’t be helped. This was ultimately a good thing. Even if they ignored the new affinity itself, Circulation would grow a great deal stronger once the crow mastered the new patterns. After all, his second core would be connected to a whopping three sets of mana channels, letting him store a lot more mana inside his body.

In any case, Percy and Nesha had a lot more cleaning up to do before they left the area, but he couldn’t help opening his Status first, curious to see all the changes to both his and Micky’s pages.

___

Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

Bloodline:

Mutations:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

___

Mictlantecuhtli (Percival's familiar)

Mana cores:

Mutations:

Spells:

Decrees:

Chapter 229: Future

‘Ice, huh?’

Interesting, but not that surprising. All the composite affinities were widely known, so Percy had a pretty good idea what they were getting ahead of time. He still had no clue what Micky could use the new affinity for, though he certainly hoped the bird would get another mutation or two the next time his beast core advanced.

“Percy, we need to get out of here.” Nesha reminded him.

He nodded. It would be a while until Deimos figured out what had happened to Jason, but that didn’t mean they could afford to waste their precious head-start. Of course, they still had some unfinished business in the Whistling Woods. Sighing, Percy walked over to Jason’s mutilated corpse – just the man’s bloodied belongings, really, as Micky had already devoured anything even remotely edible. Percy doubted he'd get as much stuff as he’d looted from Rambert, but a scion of the Divine Root ought to have some valuables of his own.

“Such a pity we can’t keep this.” he said, picking the communication device up.

Percy would have liked to examine its enchantments a little longer. It was definitely one of the most advanced pieces of tech he'd seen on Remior. Engraved with multiple interconnected runes, it could even be considered a nascent version of magiscript. Its scope still fell short of the Vault's standards, but he could learn a thing or two studying it.

That said, he couldn't risk the possibility that Deimos could track it down. Besides, he couldn't even activate it without the correct affinities. Tossing it by Nesha's feet, Percy watched her tear it to shreds with a couple of butterflies, before stomping the fragments into dust and scattering them in the wind. That ought to have been enough.

"Hmmm? Is this what I think it is?" Percy asked, picking a familiar-looking object from among the tattered robes.

"Wow, these assholes are filthy rich, aren't they?" Nesha echoed his feelings, also recognizing the spatial amulet.

Generally, each of them cost over a million contribution points to commission. Most noble families kept a few in their warehouses, usually reserving them for their Blues. Anyone below that wasn't important enough to be carrying the equivalent of eight months of elixirs on their person. Then again, the Divine Root wasn't a regular House either. They probably had more money than they knew what to do with.

"What's inside it?" Nesha asked again.

Shrugging, Percy opened the device before scanning its contents. Though he failed to suppress a grimace soon after.

"Tsch. I'm sure he had more elixirs when he started his mission, but he's drank most of them by now. Only a few weeks left."

"Is that everything?"

"Well, he does have a couple dozen healing potions. Other than that, it's mostly money, food and fancy clothes. The money and the food we can keep, I guess. But the clothes we'll have to get rid of…"

There was also a dose of Aurora Dew in there, along with a few yellow Guild robes. Percy guessed these were the things Jason had relied on to locate them. Storing the consumables away, he poured all the garments into a pile on the ground. He and Nesha would have to get changed too. They hadn't had the chance earlier, given the urgency of their escape, but they couldn't afford to look like nobles from here on out. Luckily, they'd had the foresight to pack a few clean linen outfits within their first couple of days at the mansion.

"Hey, what's that?" Nesha asked, pointing at a bronze badge glinting among the man's robes.

The narrative has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

It depicted a series of roots emerging from the underside of a cloud – the Divine Root's insignia.

"I guess it's like his identification or something." Percy said. "It's enchanted."

"Should we destroy it too?"

"No. The enchantment is quite simple. It's not releasing much mana either. I doubt anybody can track it from afar. It's probably just there to verify the authenticity of the badge, and to tell it apart from others."

"What's the point in keeping it, though?"

"Well, we are trying to infiltrate the Thirsty Valley. Maybe it'll help." he shrugged.

Separating the man's belongings into two piles, Percy left Nesha and Micky in charge of destroying the first one, while taking his sweet time storing anything they wanted to keep within the spatial amulets. Percy's original amulet, as well as the five he had taken from House Tantalus were already full, but the new one had a lot more space.

By the time they were done, the sun had already come out. Percy tossed his surroundings one last look – he had no idea when he'd next have a chance to visit home. Possibly never. The trio was about to head out, when they heard the sound of footsteps.

“Who’s there?” Percy asked, drawing mana out of both cores. His companions prepared themselves too, though everyone relaxed once they caught sight of the newcomer.

“Elaine?! What are you doing here?!” Nesha asked.

“Hey guys! I’ve spent all night looking for you!” Elaine greeted; an apologetic smile plastered all over her face. “Thank Phoebe you’re all ok! I wanted to come with you from the beginning, but I couldn’t leave without telling my parents goodbye. I don’t know if I’ll ever see them, or Owain again.”

“What do you mean?” Percy asked, not liking where this was going.

“What else? I’m coming along. To the Thirsty Valley. And wherever you end up going after that.”

“Have you lost your mind?!” Percy snapped. “Go back to the mansion before anybody sees you with us! This isn’t a game, Elaine! You can easily ruin your whole future!”

Elaine rolled her eyes at his outburst.

“Percy, I’m not an idiot. I know damn well what I’m doing. I’ve already discussed it with Grandpa and Uncle Galahad at length.”

Percy was taken aback.

“You’re telling me, Galahad agreed to let the family’s most promising Green leave with a banished criminal?”

“Well… not exactly. He was against it.” Elaine reluctantly admitted. “But Grandpa was ok with it. Look! He gave me this!” she replied, dangling yet another spatial amulet in front of Percy and Nesha.

“He even allowed me to bring three months of elixirs with me. FYI, that’s the maximum anybody can take on a mission.” she added a moment later. “Oh, but officially I’m just going out to hunt scorpions again for a few months. No need to bust my cover if I can help it.”

Percy’s jaw would have hit the ground if it wasn’t attached to his face. It took him a whole minute to find the words to reply.

“Why the hell would he do that?! I already feel like shit for all the trouble I’ve caused. The last thing I want is to have this on my conscience too…” he muttered.

Elaine shook her head, however.

“Percy… do you know the difference between Galahad and Grandpa?” she asked.

“What sort of question is that? I guess Galahad is a bigger jerk?”

Elaine chuckled.

“Yes, but that’s not what I’m talking about. It’s true that both of them have warmed up to you after coming to terms with your potential, but Uncle Galahad is still a step behind. He only sees you as an asset. He would like to have you around, if possible, but not if the price is too high.”

Percy nodded, though he still had no clue where Elaine was going with this.

“Well, Grandpa is different. By now, he understands the truth about you. As do I.”

“What truth?”

“You’re the future of House Avalon, Percy! You’re more important than any of us will ever be. The things you have already achieved are more than our entire family has managed in 2000 years! One day, we will all be defined and remembered by the way you lived! No price is too high to ensure your safety!”

Percy didn't know what to say in response to that. That was quite the high praise. And he knew his cousin was sincere about it too. Still, it did little to curb his guilt.

"What if House Avalon comes to be hated by the rest of Remior because of me?"

Elaine pulled him into a tight embrace, before replying.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the future of Remior too, Percy. Even if those idiots are blind to it…"

Neither Percy nor Nesha said anything more to dissuade Elaine. She'd already made it quite clear that she had no intention of turning back. Instead, they brought her up to speed on the events of the previous night, before the group of four finally set out.

Percy still wasn't too happy about this, but there was no denying that Elaine was quite a powerful helper to bring along. Using Circulation, his cousin could probably beat even the likes of Jason. Just like that, their group's fighting strength had shot through the roof.

And there was one more thing she was bringing to the table.

'I suppose Micky just gained himself a teacher…'

Chapter 230: Noland

'Gods, I missed sending out clones so damn much!'

By now, Percy's bloodline was more than just a fancy ability or a means of growing stronger. It was a way of life. A source of endless adventures. A window into the wider cosmos. Part of who he was. Sadly, his circumstances had robbed him of this joy over the past few months.

Atlantis had been a wakeup call. His intention at the time had been to keep the trips short and infrequent, to leave the connection available in case House Tantalus attacked. After all, he'd needed to have an ethereal cord ready to possess the enemy Green. Suffice to say, things hadn't gone to plan. While there was no denying his time in the underwater world had been among his most fruitful adventures yet, it had also lasted several weeks, making the whole thing quite risky.

Had his clone not returned by the time Rambert arrived in Bogside town, Percy would have forever missed his chance to infiltrate the enemy House. Not only would he have failed to procure the elixirs, he would have lost his only shot at a petal too. And that's without even considering that Jason might have captured him. Consequently, Percy had chosen to put his trips on hold until after the mission was over.

'Oh well. Maybe I'll be able to have more clones at Yellow.'

The greatest improvement to his ability to maintain multiple connections had occurred once his second core reached Orange. Strengthening his presence, the promotion had allowed him to keep a familiar and a clone at the same time without losing himself in the process. Before then, he'd had to deal with all sorts of problems whenever his soul was splintered. Alas, it would be a while before he could test out that theory.

'In any case… I'd better focus on the here and now. Hello? Anybody there?'

Turning his attention back to his latest host, Percy reached out, hoping to interact with them. They were at Orange this time. A sapient too. And a rather healthy one at that. Luckily, he didn't have to wait very long for a response.

'Thank the shimmering crystals beneath! Please help me!' a distraught voice rang within Percy's mind.

'Can you give me a quick summary of your situation first?' Percy asked. 'Knowing what I'm dealing with would make things a lot easier.'

'The situation? Well… what's there to tell? I was too busy enjoying my meal to notice the tunnel behind me had collapsed. By the time I realized, I was already gasping for air…'

Percy would have frowned if he could.

'Were you exploring in a mine or something?'

A wave of confusion soon seeped through their connection, however. It wasn't like his host hadn't understood the question. They just found it a little strange Percy would ask that.

'How else am I supposed to be spending my days?'

'Gotcha.' Percy spat back, already harbouring some guesses about his host.

Without wasting a moment, he allowed his instincts to take over, using his stashed mana to patch the guy's soul up.

'I'm Percy, by the way.' he said a few minutes later, once he was nearly done.

'Noland.' his host replied.

Tying the final batch of strings into a preservation rune, Percy allowed his soul to slip into the remaining gaps, tapping into Noland's senses. An overwhelming amount of pressure surrounded him from every direction, reminding him a little of his time in Enki's body. Though the pressure was even higher here, somehow, than it had been at the bottom of the ocean! It was dark too. Also, hot. Really hot. And moving even an inch was almost impossible. As if Noland had been buried alive.

'Ok. I'm out of moves here. Do you have any idea what's going on?' he asked.

Luckily, his host didn't appear particularly worried. He merely shrugged, before moving in a certain way. He brushed his arms against his torso, pushing the tips of his hands towards his head. Percy felt their clawed fingers stab through soil, as the dirt pressed against their nails. Once Noland had fully stretched his arms, he moved them aside, pushing the dirt away while propelling his body forward. With the ease befitting of a native, Nolan practically swam through the ground itself, making it a point to hold his breath throughout the process.

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‘I’m 90% sure this is the way I came from…’ he said, completely oblivious to Percy’s sheer awe. ‘Hopefully…’

He didn’t even get to the end of the sentence, when the ground in front of him collapsed, letting him spill out into a different tunnel. This one was wider, and already dug, allowing Noland to stand up without much effort. More importantly, it was filled with air. Opening his lips, Percy’s host inhaled one mouthful after another, greedily filling his lungs as if his life depended on it.

‘Do your people spend all their time underground?’ Percy asked.

At the same time, he scanned Noland’s body as best as he could. Unfortunately, the guy’s eyesight wasn’t the best. Luckily, a few glowing crystals illuminated the tunnel to an extent, allowing him to barely make out his host’s features. Noland’s body was humanoid – for the most part. However, it was covered in dense fur from head to toe.

This was one of those times Percy would have loved to have his Sorcerer’s Eye at hand. Sadly, he had discovered soon after his return from Atlantis that his clones didn’t inherit the mutation. He wasn’t sure why – perhaps it was because the Decree could only grant the mutation once, or because the part responsible for granting it had broken when it got modified. Either way, it meant he wouldn’t be able to access his fancy eyes during his adventures, nor would he be able to pass them along to his companions. Then again, it wasn’t all bad. At least, he wouldn’t have to spend a few days in pain each time. And he wouldn’t have to worry about giving Metatron more freebies either…

‘Of course!’ Noland replied, breaking him out of his thoughts. ‘Why would anybody wander close to the surface? It’s freezing cold out there. Not to mention how thin the air is.’

Percy shrugged. He had a lot more questions. He would like to know how there was even breathable air down here, for one. But he figured he’d consult with his Status first.

___

Noland (Percival’s clone)

Mana cores:

Spectral trait:

Spells:

Alchemic principles:

Decrees:

___

‘No new Decree… But this is my first time running into a gravity affinity.’ Percy noted.

If nothing else, he definitely wanted to see the rare mana type at work.

‘Whoa! What the hell is that?!’ Nolan exclaimed upon seeing the Status.

‘Tell you what. I’ll answer your questions, as long as you answer some of mine.’ Percy offered, getting a nod back.

Over the next few minutes, host and guest chatted, bringing each other up to speed. Percy explained how his bloodline allowed him to possess dying bodies, and the kinds of things he hoped to get out of his travels. As for Noland, he shared a little more about his life and this world.

Apparently, this place was called Subterra. Contrary to most places Percy had been to, the surface itself wasn’t liveable, but the situation was better for a few dozen miles below that. The temperature was more bearable, so the natives had only had to adapt to the pressure so they could survive. A fairly widespread type of blue moss was singlehandedly responsible for pumping the underground tunnels full of breathable air, allowing the local wildlife to flourish.

In terms of their magical progress, Noland's people had drawn the short end of the stick. Once again, Percy had found himself on a world lacking a means of advancement, limiting the indigenous population to the lower grades.

'Noland… How would you rate your life here, on a scale of one to ten?' Percy suddenly asked.

Noland raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question.

'Weird thing to ask, but I'd have to go with a low two. On a good day.' he said, pretty much in line with Percy's expectations.

Based on what his host had shared, Percy had seen this coming. After all, Noland was – by his own admission – a bit of a loner. He'd run away from his family from a young age, preferring to wander Subterra by himself. Life here wasn't particularly easy either. Even moving around was tough and rife with dangers. Accidents like the one that had nearly claimed the man's life happened nearly every day.

'How about this… I can offer you a one-way trip to a different hell, if you want it.' Percy suggested. 'It's not necessarily better, mind you. Just… different.'

'I'm listening.'