Wanderer 241

Chapter 241: Collateral damage

Countless footfalls broke the oppressive silence of the night, as dozens of men marched through the fields. They moved as quietly as they could, but there was only so much such a large group could do to mask their presence.

Most of them were doomed to die tonight, though they didn't seem to care about that, continuing their journey as if it was any other day. Only their leader had his brow creased, various thoughts swirling within his tired mind. Every now and then, he glanced at the letter in his hands, examining the order that had led him to such a risky move.

'To Archibald, Patriarch of House Avalon,

You are hereby ordered to present yourself at the Alchemists' Guild within the next two weeks, to answer for your involvement in withholding the Aurora Dew's recipe from the Divine Order. Furthermore, you are accused of severe negligence, at best, or sedition, at worst, as one of the Divine Root's field agents has gone missing inside your family's territory.

Failure to comply will be considered an admission of guilt and evidence of rebellion. Suffice to say, your penalty will be far more severe in such circumstances and will extend to the rest of your House.

Deimos, Envoy of the Divine Root'

He sighed. At least, the fact that they wanted him to turn himself in, coupled with Percy's wanted posters circulating around Remior were good signs that his grandson had evaded capture.

But he had to show up at the Guild. That much was unavoidable. And his odds of walking out of there a free man weren't that great. This was why he'd decided to do one last thing for his family, to place House Avalon in a better spot in the years to come.

'It's about time.' he thought, glancing at the enemy's headquarters.

Strictly speaking, this was something he'd considered doing many times before. But a family's patriarch couldn't easily leave their territory, lest they left their House open to attack.

Luckily, their circumstances had changed a little over the past few months. Galahad not only had Circulation now, but even a brand-new acid affinity. And he had already opened the new channels, even though he'd yet to extend the boosting art to all of them. Archibald was more confident leaving his son in charge of the family, trusting in his ability to hold his own even against a Violet if it came to it.

This was why he'd even dared to leave the mansion, but he couldn't possibly leave the Camelot province entirely. Not without dealing with House Tantalus once and for all.

"Go." he muttered softly.

The others in his company spread out, circling the enemy headquarters from every direction. Naturally, these weren't real people – each of them sporting an appearance identical to his own. They were his clones! 120 of them in total!

Watching them move, he took a deep breath after another, a series of verdant lines lighting up on his skin, swirling around like vines.

'No room for mistakes.' he sighed, his expression grim.

His objectives were set in stone. He had to exterminate House Tantalus tonight, forever purging this cancer from his family's territory. And he couldn't leave any witnesses behind, or news of Circulation would spread around like wildfire, drawing even more trouble to their province.

A couple of scouts spotted his clones – there were too many of them to hide. Sadly for the nobles, however, Archibald had spotted them much earlier. And the speed of his troops wasn't a joke, covering dozens of metres with each stride. Expertly positioning the clones like chess pieces, he swiftly took out the younger mages before they even got a chance to signal back to their family.

Soon enough, his army invaded through every door and every window in the building, dispatching anyone they encountered in the process. Controlling so many bodies at once was a monumental task, but he'd had centuries to master his bloodline.

The first few seconds went by without a hitch, most of the enemies being fast asleep this late at night. Yet, it was inevitable that something would go wrong eventually.

A single clone sported the physique of a Violet, but it couldn't use magic. Even a Green should be able to hold their own against them. Especially given how many he had to control. Once the first person survived the ambush, everything went downhill.

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"ENEMY ATTACK!" a panicked scream pierced through the bloodshed, alerting the rest of the nobles.

It didn't take long for the mansion to light up in all sorts of colours, the family's Greens and Blues engaging his clones in battle. Archibald clicked his tongue, but he maintained his focus, having expected this.

At first, he held the upper hand. Carried by their momentum, his clones continued to advance deeper into the building, laying waste to its unfortunate residents.

But his opponents eventually regained their bearing. Eventually, the first clone fell, and then the second. The fifth. The twentieth. Broteas himself – a fellow Violet – slaughtered a dozen of them with ease, his lieutenants not falling far behind.

Gritting his teeth, Archibald poured more mana into his troops, activating a spell. The clones' heartbeats sped up, as veins and arteries bulged like roots all over their skin. Their movements grew faster, their attacks more forceful, as they stared at their opponents with bloodshot eyes.

Archibald would have used this from the start if he could, but he didn't want to waste it until they were deep inside the mansion. After all, the clones wouldn't last more than a few minutes under this boost.

The high-ranking nobles were instantly on the back-foot again. The first Blue died not long after the spell took effect, a second joining him a couple minutes later. The Yellows who had grouped up to keep the clones at bay were instantly outmatched. Soon, only Greens or higher remained alive. Before long, a

thick crimson mist spilled out of the mansion, the stench of iron reaching Archibald who stood a hundred metres away.

But it wasn't his clones walking out alive a few minutes later. It was the enemy nobles…

"I didn't think you had it in you, to be honest." Broteas said, his face grim. "But I suppose this is the world we live in, isn't it?"

Archibald didn't reply. His gut churned at the atrocity he'd just committed. And he knew he wasn't even done yet. But he didn't regret it. It was either them, or his family. And House Tantalus had already proven themselves more than willing to do the same.

By now, only 15 people stood in the enemy ranks. Broteas, two Blues and twelve Greens. All the weaklings had already perished. After the severe losses they'd suffered over the last couple of years, catching them by surprise in the middle of the night had been the final nail in the coffin.

"It's over now." Broteas said. "At the end of the day, it's still our victory, isn't it? You'll die tonight, Archibald. You'll die screaming, after you spill the beans on that weird spell boosting your magic. Then, I'll wait for the Divine Root to crush your family, before rebuilding my own from the ashes."

Archibald sighed, allowing Circulation to fizzle out, plopping down weakly.

"If you wanted to do any of that, you should have held your breath…"

Broteas raised an eyebrow, though his confusion didn't last long. A loud, wet cough drew his attention, as he jerked his head towards one of the surviving Greens. The man was on his knees, blood pouring like a waterfall from every orifice on his face.

"What the–?!"

He barely got to ask the question, when a second man met the same fate, followed by a third. By the time he turned back to Archibald, one of the Blues had collapsed too, the Greens already spasming in agony.

Violent streams of mana gushed out of Broteas's pores like rivers, blending into a raging lake around him. It grew and stabilized as it mixed with his domain, threatening to cover the entire battlefield. However, he never got the chance to use it, as a wave of vertigo slammed into his head too, causing him to lose control of his mana, the water splashing out harmlessly.

"Didn't you think it a little strange that I sent over half my clones after you?" Archibald asked.

The man's eyes widened in realization. Had Archibald wanted to maximize his odds of victory, he should have kept the clones as far from him as possible, shouldn't he? Only after taking out all his underlings should he have tried to outnumber a fellow Violet. Unless he had something else in mind…

Getting up, Archibald walked towards Broteas, reading the notification flashing before his eyes.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Secret Art: Vector of Disease – Masterful -> Secret Art: Plaguebringer – Masterful!]

Naturally, he'd had his Secret Art for centuries already, though this was the first time he got to use it at such a large scale. Not to mention how much stronger it had grown, thanks to Circulation and the vastly increased number of clones.

Broteas's spell crumbled, as he started bleeding too. He seemed to have accepted his fate, after seeing the last of his men die.

"Mind answering a question before you finish me?" Broteas asked. "Just where the hell did you learn this spell? I've never even heard of anything like it."

Archibald shrugged.

"I'll tell you if you answer a few questions of my own." he replied, getting a nod back. "Remember that massacre you ordered a couple decades ago?"

Broteas frowned.

“Are you seriously – cough, cough – trying to claim the moral high ground after what you’ve just done tonight?”

“That’s not it.” Archibald said, not bothering to explain.

“…sure.” the man spat. “There was an opportunity to deal a blow to your family, and I took it. I didn’t think much of it. What’s even the big deal? If I’m not mistaken, we only managed to take a few Red-borns out that time, didn’t we? Just collateral damage.” he said, visibly holding back another coughing fit.

Archibald nodded.

“Well, my grandson is the one who taught me the spell. The same grandson the Divine Root is after.”

Broteas laughed, but it came out gurgled.

“You’re kidding right? Isn’t he just a Red-born runt?”

Reaching Broteas, Archibald looked down at him. He stared into his eyes, his expression cold as an iceberg.

“He is. He was lucky enough to escape that massacre, but his parents weren’t. I’m sure he’d be glad to know I used Circulation to take down your family. But that wasn’t what he was thinking about when he taught me the spell.”

The man’s smile soured at the sound of that, but Archibald continued, right as the light finally left Broteas’s eyes.

“…you were just collateral damage.”

Chapter 242: Infinite powder cheat

“What are you even doing?” Elaine asked after Percy nearly stumbled on a pebble.

He shrugged.

“If this works, I’ll never have to condense another crystal in my life.”

It was still dark, the trio walking towards the next town, the crow flying nearby. But Percy didn’t pay much attention to where he stepped, busy with something more important. He held a small teal rod in his hand. It looked like his scythe’s shaft, but it was only the length of his finger. And he was currently carving an enchantment on the middle section. A rather intricate one at that.

“Behold, ladies and gentlecrow. I present you, the infinite powder cheat!” he exclaimed once he was done, pouring some fused mana into the runes.

Sadly, by the time his companions turned to look at him, a wisp of smoke had come out of the enchantment, the darn thing having barely blinked once before getting fried.

“Not seeing it.” Nesha joked, a smug grin plastered all over her face.

“Whatever. Just give me another hour or so.” Percy rolled his eyes, crushing the construct into powder before beginning the process anew.

Originally, he’d bought the self-repair enchantment mainly for his armour’s maintenance. However, he’d drawn some inspiration while reading the book, thinking of another potential application. He wasn’t completely sure it would work, but he couldn’t see a reason for it not to either. If it did, it would save him several hours of manual labour per day.

The girls didn’t say anything else, allowing him to work in silence. It wasn’t until about an hour later that he held a new rod, engraved with a – hopefully functional – self-repair enchantment this time. To avoid embarrassing himself again, he made sure the runes worked before speaking up.

“Ahem. After some technical difficulties, I’m pleased to present you with the infinite powder cheat.” he said again, this time with more confidence.

“Eh… I get the lack of smoke is supposed to be a good thing, but it still looks like a rod to me.” Elaine said.

Percy grinned. Pinching one end of the construct between his thumb and index finger, he used his willpower to chip a fragment off, shattering it into powder. He didn’t get that much – barely enough to fill a teaspoon – but this could easily be scaled up.

Next, he fused some more of his mana, pouring it into the enchantment again. Unlike before, the runes guzzled down the teal mana even more eagerly, the rod shining a little brighter. At first, nothing happened. Nesha was about to open her mouth again, but she swallowed whatever she was about to say when the broken section of the rod started growing back. A few seconds later, the construct was as good as new.

“This is definitely impressive, though isn’t it a little slow?” Elaine asked.

Nesha was the one to come to his rescue this time, however.

“It’s much better than his old approach.”

In the past, each marble took Percy around seven minutes. Seven exhausting minutes of intense focus. And he needed one of those marbles for each dose of elixir he wanted to convert into Aurora Dew. In other words, while each brewing session only took about 15 minutes in and of itself, he needed to spend 28 minutes condensing crystals beforehand. All in all, nearly two thirds of his daily chores were wasted on Crystallization!

“This is several times faster already. And that’s without optimizing the shape of the construct, or the size of the enchantment. I haven’t used Synchronization either. Not to mention that this is downright effortless. After I fine-tune everything, I’ll be able to pour my mana into it as we travel and get all the powder I want.”

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Elaine whistled, finally realizing how massive this was. Just like that, Percy had removed over two hours of gruelling work from his daily schedule. Or, well… he would, once they found the rainbow grass equivalent he needed.

‘For now, let’s just improve the construct…’

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“What do you guys think?” he asked, holding a strange contraption up for all to see.

It was a teal bust of a crow, about as large as Percy’s fist. A self-repair enchantment had been engraved on the base of its neck, this one over thrice as wide as the one he’d drawn on the rod. A glowing gemstone was held in its beak, attached on both sides. It was as large as the marbles Percy usually made.

Nesha squinted to shield her eyes from the sunlight as she examined the object. It was already late in the morning.

“Looks tacky.”

“I like it. It’s cute.” Elaine disagreed.

Either way, the aesthetics didn’t matter much, as long as it did its job. Percy grabbed the gemstone, snapping it out of the beak. Next, he poured his mana into the enchantment, watching a new gemstone grow in real time, several times faster than before.

“23 seconds!” he exclaimed once the new gemstone was complete, more than satisfied with the result.

And he wasn’t the only one satisfied, apparently.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Spiritforged Effigy – Refined!]

Registering his eleventh Refined spell was no small feat, though he was a bit too tired to enjoy it. Keeping up with the others on foot was tougher on him due to his lower grade, and he'd spent the whole night experimenting with the enchantment.

"Do you want to take a break?" Elaine asked, noticing he was out of breath.

"Nah. We've already lost too much time. I'd rather get to the next town as soon as possible."

She didn't seem very convinced, still looking at him with concern. But she kept her thoughts to herself, respecting his wishes.

He sighed. It wasn't like he didn't want to rest, but he couldn't afford to. This whole Divine Root fiasco was bound to blow in their faces sooner or later, and he needed to progress as much as possible until then. His spells aside, he had to reach Yellow too.

'No slacking for me.'

Shifting his attention elsewhere, his eyes landed on the ethereal cord in his abdomen. This one was connected to his most recent clone, yet he could still perceive it via his mutation. It appeared the evolution of his Secret Art affected all his cords, not just the one linking him to his familiar.

'Does that mean I can use Soul Resonance with my clones too?'

If he could communicate or even exchange mana with them from farther away, it would open so many new doors... His clones would all have access to an endless supply of teal mana, in addition to whatever their hosts' affinities were. He could use that as a trump card in the Vault, and who knew where else…

Then again, he wasn't sure if it was possible. Strictly speaking, he didn't even know how far his connection could currently reach, let alone if he could extend that.

'No harm in trying, I suppose.'

Gathering as much fused mana as he could, he forcefully pushed it through the cord, trying to widen it. The connection did expand slightly as the packet of mana coursed through it, though it snapped back to its previous size a moment later. Not that strange, given how Percy's new spell worked.

'I guess I'll need the clone to cooperate with me from the other side.'

Sadly, it was a little late to discuss that with… well, himself. He'd have to wait a couple days for the clone to return before planning ahead for the next one. In the meantime, he could experiment with his familiar.

'Hey, Micky! Do you want to play around with that thing from yesterday?'

'Right now?' the response was a little lethargic.

The crow wasn't doing much better than he was, having to fly while keeping Regulation up.

'Come on, it'll only take a few minutes to expand the cord. It's much easier to keep it open afterwards.'

'Fine.' the bird groaned.

Percy repeated his earlier actions, this time sending an orb of mana to his familiar. The cord expanded for a moment, before trying to shrink again. Micky didn't allow it, however, bouncing the mana back. The two kept at it for a while, soon managing to return their connection to its empowered state. The resistance seemed to vanish entirely, as the mana began to flow more smoothly through it, their thoughts threatening to spill out against their will.

"Awesome." Percy muttered, having watched the entire process with his eyes this time.

The mana wasn't detectible with Mana Sense while passing through the cord. Percy was confident the connection wasn't located in the physical plane. Perhaps it used the soul plane. Or maybe something even more esoteric.

Still, it was nice to confirm they could indeed tap into this ability at will. He was tempted to play around with Micky's ice mana, but he figured he'd bugged the poor bird enough for today.

With nothing better to do, he grabbed the Effigy from his pocket. He might as well switch his brain off and work on his powder stash as they travelled…

Chapter 243: Unforeseen developments

It took them an entire week to reach the next town. The good news was that bandits never bothered them anymore, probably thanks to Elaine being in the group. Nothing like a Green to ward lowlifes off. Then again, Micky might have preferred to have a snack or two step forward of their own volition…

Either way, it had been a fruitful few days, despite the detour. Percy gradually filled his jar up with powder, one gemstone at a time. He now had more than enough to reforge his armour – after getting some well-deserved rest of course.

He even convinced the crow to let him play around with his ice mana for a couple hours, offering him a chance to do the same with his own affinities in return. Accessing each other's cores from afar presented an additional layer of difficulty, on top of just familiarizing themselves with the new mana types. It was still a work in progress, but Percy hoped they could eventually learn a couple of combination spells.

'It'll make for quite a trump card if we can get it to work. In some ways, it'll be like having four cores…'

The clone also returned about two days in. Percy sent three more clones since, this time 'instructing' each of them to help him practice his Soul Resonance spell. Sadly, the first was a complete dud in that regard. Trying to establish a connection with the main body caused him to return to Remior ahead of time by accident. It was a tricky business, as the clones had to strengthen the cord before wandering too far. Unfortunately, doing so also strengthened the force pulling them home.

Luckily, the next clone did a little better. He managed to reinforce the connection without getting dragged back in the process. He even possessed a horse-like beast on some alien world while communicating with Percy. Admittedly, it required a lot of effort from both of them to maintain the link – probably due to the extreme distances involved. Neither of them could do much else, or the cord would shrink back to its original shape without any way for them to restore it.

‘I guess we’ll just have to practice with it until it becomes second nature…’

It wouldn’t be his first spell that started off difficult to use, only to get easier with training. Either way, this was proof of concept that Soul Resonance would help him in the long run. His bloodline was the source of all his strength, so any improvements to his clones’ abilities were by far the most important.

At any rate, Percy tried something special with the third and final clone. They did manage to empower their connection at first, and he tried to take advantage of that to direct the clone to a specific place. Sadly, the connection got severed soon afterwards, probably because the clone wandered a bit too far. Percy had no idea if he’d reached his intended destination, but the clone was still out three days later, so he was confident he’d found something interesting, at least.

Suffice to say, the whole group was completely exhausted as they reached the town – Percy even more so than the others. He and Nesha were the first to enter the inn as they were in dire need of some shut eye. Once again, Elaine volunteered to stay in the outskirts with Micky. Percy hated that his cousin always drew the short end of the stick, but it couldn’t be helped. Her higher grade meant she could handle a lot more than them before reaching her breaking point.

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‘Percy, wake up!’ Micky cawed through the cord.

Percy groaned, but he didn’t let his complaints leak back to his familiar. He was the one who’d asked the bird to wake him up after sleeping for a few hours, so that he could take over Elaine’s post. He knew he would have slept for over a day if left alone.

Gently lifting Nesha’s arm from his chest, he got up as slowly as he could, trying not to disturb her. His brain still throbbed rather painfully, his feet feeling like mush. He ignored all that, tossing his clothes back on. He was about to leave the room, when his girlfriend spoke.

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“Ugh… how long have we slept?” she asked in a raspy voice.

He sighed. Apparently, he'd woken her up, despite his efforts not to.

"Three hours? Maybe four?" he guessed, looking out of the window.

She remained silent for a second, letting the words sink in.

"…alright. I'll go check out the marketplace before it closes for the night. Maybe we'll get luckier this time."

Percy nodded. They were already cutting it close. It had been early in the afternoon when they arrived, so she'd have to go now. That said, he didn't really expect her to find any deattunement ingredients, as those were much rarer outside the Guild. And there was a good reason for that too.

Pacification reagents like pale carrots, moonflower petals and crystal tulips typically contained ice mana. This was how they delayed the activation rate of other ingredients. It also meant they had several uses outside alchemy, making for excellent coolants to preserve food with, or to alleviate heat during the summer. This was why Percy had found a few in his family's warehouse and why they'd been able to buy some from the last town too.

When it came to deattunement, however, their odds weren't great. Especially considering the sheer volume of ingredients that they required to consistently meet their elixir needs.

'Oh well… I suppose we don't lose much by checking…'

The two left the inn, walking to the town square together. The idea was for him to accompany Nesha there before leaving the town. Fate had other plans for them, however…

Once more, they encountered a lot of atypical commotion, much like the last town. Unlike before, they didn't catch sight of the Divine Root's men directly, though they did hear some curious whispers.

"Is there really a Holy Child in our town?" one of the townsfolk asked.

“He just got here, about an hour ago.” another replied.

“Are you sure you didn’t mistake a regular noble?”

“No way man! Do you think I’m an idiot? He’s a young boy – younger than your son. At Blue. And he has five guards from the Divine Root with him.”

“Again?! Seriously?!” Nesha asked, her features twisting into a grimace.

Percy turned to Nesha, giving her an odd look.

“I thought you said they are headed to the Thirsty Valley!”

“Theyare!” she insisted. “We’ve heard it from multiple sources! Most of them heard it directly from them!”

Percy frowned. This made no sense whatsoever. They’d deliberately strayed off-course to avoid them. Why would anyone travelling to the Thirsty Valley pass through here? It was objectively a horrible route, adding multiple weeks to the journey.

Nesha appeared just as perplexed as him, not having a good explanation. Thinking of something, she gasped.

“Do you think they’re here for us? Maybe somebody recognized us from the posters.”

It wasn’t impossible. There was only so much a beard and a pair of glowing eyes could do to mask one’s appearance. Then again, there were several problems with this idea too.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. We stood right in front of them in the previous town, but nobody moved to arrest us. One of them even glanced at me. And why would they send a Holy Child after us? Has the Divine Root run out of people?”

“Maybe the Holy Child is the only karma user they could find?” Nesha offered an explanation.

But Percy shook his head.

“I checked all their cores. He has a mud affinity. The others are all common.”

Nesha raised an eyebrow.

“Either way, this can’t be a coincidence. We intentionally steered clear of them, and here they are.”

“You’re right.” he nodded. “There’s definitely something fishy going on. Here’s what we’ll do…”

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After explaining his plan to Nesha, he reached out to Micky and Elaine, bringing them up to speed. The idea was for them to leave quietly during the night, much like before. However, they’d do a couple of things differently this time.

They would head the opposite way to their destination. If the Holy Child chased them again, they would know for certain they were being followed. Furthermore, they wouldn’t travel together this time. The plan was to split up into two groups. They’d still meet up in Goldenfield town, but they’d approach from different directions.

Micky and Elaine would do so from the west, while Percy and Nesha would enter from the east. This way, the groups would still be able to communicate via the ethereal cord, and they could also narrow down the Holy Child’s target, depending on which group they ended up chasing.

“I could have used some sleep…” Elaine smiled wryly. In the end, she never got to rest.

Sighing, Percy handed her half a dozen healing potions from his amulet. He generally avoided wasting them unless it was an emergency, but they might help a little given the circumstances. It wasn’t perfect

– her grade would greatly mute the potions' effects. Not to mention that life mana alone couldn't do much about her mental fatigue. Still, it might keep her going for a couple more days.

The two groups bid each other farewell, leaving in opposite directions. Perhaps this really was just one big coincidence and Percy was being paranoid.

But his gut told him they wouldn't be this lucky…

Chapter 244: Acton

Acton picked a branch off the ground, sniffing the broken end a couple of times before tossing it aside. The scent was there, but it was faint. More so than usual.

"Gone again…" he muttered, a grimace marring his face.

There was no doubt his target had spent some time here. But Acton was a few days late. The trail was already rather obscure, vaguely pointing south. A direction most inconvenient…

"Pack your stuff. We're leaving for Goldenfield town in an hour." he said, turning to his guards.

Their expressions soured at the sound of that, as they gave him – and each other – uncertain looks. They had no idea what he was even doing, but they clearly weren't happy with his command. Eventually, the most senior of them summoned the courage to step forward. He bowed politely, before speaking.

"Your Radiance, we cannot do that. Our orders were to escort you to the Thirsty Valley. We've already wasted too much time. Goldenfield town is located exactly opposite to our destination."

Acton clicked his tongue.

"You'll go exactly where I tell you to go! This is as important to me as my core's advancement!" he spat, unleashing his domain on the man.

The guard – Acton couldn't recall his name – instantly fell to his knees. Pathetic. Acton knew his domain wasn't nearly strong enough to subjugate a Green. The fool was faking it to placate him. He thought he wouldn't notice.

Lifting the pressure, Acton turned away. Such trash the Root had sent to accompany him. All of them showering him with praise, treating him like the holiest existence to his face. As they should, of course. But behind his back, they constantly plotted to manipulate him, treating him like a child.

Then again, he didn't really care about the opinions of these ants. His gaze was locked elsewhere – on the people residing in that place. Compared to the rest of Remior, the Order's numbers were just a drop in the bucket. A few thousand people, standing above everyone else. Each of them a priceless treasure to this world.

But gathered in one place, that was still a lot of them. And Acton was at the bottom of the barrel there. Compared to his peers, at least. The only people who truly mattered. After all, so many of them had powerful bloodlines or rare affinities. A few of the older ones had even inherited blessings from the gods themselves.

Meanwhile, what did he have? Just a shitty mud affinity and a weak bloodline. At least, he'd been able to upgrade the useless earth affinity he'd been born with, thanks to the petal. Though he couldn't use it properly just yet – the best he could do was to split it up to use his old earth spells.

Regardless, it wasn't enough. He'd never be important in that place. Not unless he grew stronger. This was why he'd even asked to be escorted to the Thirsty Valley. The sooner he reached Violet, the better.

Sighing, he opened his Status again.

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Acton Parnassus

Mana core:

Bloodline:

Spells:

___

On paper, the ability to control beasts was among the most powerful a mage could ask for. After all, they grew faster than any human could. With sufficient preparation and proper guidance, one should be able to cultivate an entire army of creatures stronger than themselves. In theory, at least.

This was precisely why House Parnassus had received so much attention back when they first manifested the bloodline, tens of thousands of years ago. Even the gods had taken notice, pouring resources into their family, placing them under their protection.

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Consequently, Acton's House was one of the oldest ones still standing. At one point, they'd even been a Great House, propped to that level artificially rather than by their own merits.

'Such a pity the bloodline failed to evolve.'

It was the ability's potential that had brought on all this interest – not its true power. Every registered permutation had been riddled with drawbacks, making it completely impractical. The most serious problem was that it could only be used on beasts weaker than oneself. What good was a Green beast to a Blue? It would barely help in a fight.

Perhaps things would have been different if multiple beasts could be subjugated at once. Sadly, only one could be controlled at a time. Adding the sheer cost and effort required to feed and train the beasts, and the bloodline just wasn't worth the trouble in its current state.

Still, the gods had kept their support up – for a while. Century after century, they had waited, hoping for a mutation to occur. For a version of the bloodline devoid of such restrictions to emerge. All of it in vain.

Once, a promising scion had been born with the ability to tame multiple beasts. Not that many, but still worth exploring further. Unfortunately, that had come at the cost of lowering the subjugated beasts' grade by another step, making this version of the bloodline even weaker than the rest. Efforts had been made to breed that individual with others, to mutate the strain again. Dead-ends.

By now, the House was deemed as a lost cause, left alone to wither. Other families still avoided touching them, afraid of the Order's retaliation. But the members of House Parnassus understood the truth. Their bloodline would never evolve, and it just wasn't good enough for them to thrive with it. Not in their barren lands. Not without the gods' support. Nowadays, they weren't even considered a Great House anymore, lacking a White to lead.

Of course, Acton didn't care about any of that. Not his family's status, nor their history. He was a Green-born! He belonged elsewhere. But he did care that he was stuck with such a useless bloodline.

'I need to find this creature, wherever it is.'

Such a stroke of luck, to pass through the Whistling Woods on the way to the Thirsty Valley!

The sensory side of his bloodline wasn't particularly powerful either. It relied on lingering scents and other subtle hints to grant him a subconscious understanding of his target, pointing him towards it. It wasn't very informative, nor very accurate, though the few things he did learn had been more than enough to pique his interest.

The beast he'd caught wind of was unique in all the best ways. It was only at Yellow, but it left behind an atypical presence. Acton couldn't tell how or why, but it was far stronger than it had any right to be.

At first, this had confused him. It had left him in doubt, uncertain of whether this was even a beast at all. Maybe it was just a person with a weird bloodline? But the broken branches didn't lie. It was a beast. A bird, specifically. A little inconvenient, as it spent a lot of time airborne, leaving fewer traces for him to track.

In any case, he had to capture it! It might not be enough to elevate his status in the Order, but it was the best lead he had. Sure, its low grade was annoying. He'd have to raise it to Green, and later to Blue once he advanced himself. Then again, it was a small price to pay – it would only take some time. Hell, Acton would raze a province to the ground to feed it, if that's what it took.

‘How the hell is it avoiding me though?’

It made no sense. The darn thing had already done it twice. Acton had stayed in Gentlebreeze town for days, spending every morning and every afternoon scouring the surroundings in search of the creature. By the time he homed into that lake, the beast had been gone for a while. The first time could have been a coincidence, but it happened again. It must’ve left this place half a week ago.

Was it working with humans? Impossible. He’d never heard of another bloodline like his. There shouldn’t be anyone on Remior capable of taming a Yellow beast.

‘Well, other than my family… Did one of my relatives get to it first?’ he wondered, creasing his brow.

It was quite a stretch. His family’s province was located very far from here. But this was the only explanation he could think of. It would explain everything. His relatives would have recognized him in the town. Then, they’d leave, afraid he would snatch their treasured minion from them.

He shrugged. It was annoying, but they couldn’t outrun him forever. His bloodline’s tracking ability grew stronger the more information he gathered about his target. It was only a matter of time until he caught up.

‘If they think I’ll show mercy because of our shared blood, they’re sorely mistaken.’

How dare they defy him?! Those ungrateful relics should be grovelling at his feet, offering him the beast of their own volition. After all, Acton was the best thing to have happened to their rotting family in centuries!

It was thanks to him that the Order had rewarded them so handsomely, despite their countless failures. That trinket they got could level a whole town once detonated!

‘No sense thinking about them, I suppose. If they’re truly involved, I’ll find out soon enough.’

Shaking his head, he headed off, his guards hurrying behind him. Some of them still voiced their protests but he ignored them. If they kept yapping, he might have to kill one of them to remind them of their place. He'd get reprimanded for it later, but it wouldn't be more than a slap on the wrist. A small price to pay, to make sure these fools stopped arguing with him.

This was what it meant to be one of the chosen few.

A Holy Child.

Chapter 245: Under pressure

Percy's hands shook as he tried to mould his mana into the correct shape. This was already his third attempt, but the construct crumbled into powder about half-way through, the fine dust spilling between his trembling fingers.

"Come on… not again!" he groaned, nearly slamming his fist on the table.

Nesha placed her hand on his wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"This isn't helping. You need to calm down."

He looked at her in a daze for a couple seconds, letting the words sink in. Eventually, he placed his other hand on top of hers, nodding.

They had no idea if the Holy Child would follow them to Goldenfield town. It was just speculation on their part. Perhaps they were wrong about the whole thing. Maybe the last couple of towns had been a coincidence. Or maybe, the boy just wouldn't bother venturing even farther from his destination for their sake, whatever it was he wanted.

Regardless, Percy couldn't leave it up to chance. This was why he'd kept Circulation active throughout the journey – risking being seen by a passerby – just to reach the town a couple days sooner. To give himself some extra time to prepare.

"If he does follow us, I need to have this done."

“I know. But you should try taking a deep breath first.”

Healing potions were a poor substitute for sleep, but the group had still been forced to guzzle them down one after the other like crazy to keep going. By now, they’d already wasted about a third of Percy’s stash, and they didn’t have much to show for it.

Still, he had to make the most of his time. To reforge his armour. It might not protect him much from the Holy Child but, at least, he wouldn’t be as defenceless when it came to his guards. Of course, he’d much rather avoid fighting altogether. Sadly, he had no idea if that would even be possible.

Listening to Nesha’s advice, Percy inhaled deeply, forcing himself to relax. She was right. He couldn’t do this with his hands trembling. Whether it was due to the exhaustion or the stress, he had to rein himself in first.

A few minutes later, he grabbed another handful of powder from his jar. The good news was that he had plenty – courtesy of his new spell. But the actual process of crafting the Phantomscale Raiment was very time-consuming in and of itself. He’d had a lot of practice over the last year, but he still wasn’t sure whether he could rebuild all the pieces in the next two days.

Clearing his mind, he began fusing the soft mana with the powder, forming the intermediate materials he needed for the armour.

‘If I’m going to do this, I should do it right… After all, it’s going to stick around this time, thanks to the self-repair enchantment…’

Once he had all the materials ready, he blended them together into the toughest alloy he’d discovered through his experiments, before shaping it into a fingerguard. Or, well… a piece of one.

‘Alright… at least it didn’t break this time…’ he exhaled in relief, flicking the glowing construct twice for good measure.

Next, he set his eyes on its interior, carving the growth and memory runes on top of one another. This was one of the hardest parts, as a single mistake would force him to start over. Only once the

enchantment had been drawn without errors did he fill the empty space with some more reinforced mana, visualizing the intended effect in his mind.

“Did it work?” Nesha asked.

“Let’s find out.” he shrugged.

Chipping a piece off the corner of the construct, he fed some more of his fused mana into the enchantment, watching the fingerguard repair itself soon enough. Nodding in satisfaction, he then began to engrave the second enchantment on the outer side of the object.

This piece was supposed to go in the innermost layer of his armour. In the past, he’d engraved the absorption runes on it, using the hardness runes for the middle layer and the concealment runes for the outer layer. This time, he was planning to do things a little differently, however. He wanted to use his newfound knowledge of magiscript to stack more than one enchantment on each piece.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

‘Let’s see… I want both a hardness and absorption rune here…’ he thought, trying to overlap the symbols.

A true composite enchantment – like self-repair – required one to simultaneously visualize both the joint effect and the effects of its components. Unfortunately, Percy didn’t know of any enchantments involving this specific pair of runes.

Still, based on the things he’d read, it should be possible to consolidate the two symbols into one pseudo-enchantment. It wouldn’t do anything extra – just whatever the runes did separately. That said, it would take less space to draw, allowing Percy to shoehorn both onto the piece.

About half an hour later, he was done, marvelling at the completed construct. Against all odds, the patchwork of runes had worked on the first try too, saving him some precious time.

“One piece down…” he said, though he instinctively slapped his forehead the very next moment, realizing he’d messed up. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” Nesha asked.

Percy sighed. It was easier to show her. Picking the construct up again, he poured more of his fused mana into the self-repair enchantment. Soon, the material lodged into the other runes got pushed out, the engraved symbols slowly closing, like a wound in the process of healing.

“The other runes have to be engraved first, or the self-repair enchantment will erase them automatically… Damn, and I kept reminding myself to be careful about this. I guess the lack of sleep is getting to me.”

With a heavy heart, Percy destroyed the object again, starting over for the fifth time.

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Unfortunately, the self-repair enchantment failed to activate during his next attempt, the hardness rune messing up the one after. By the time Percy managed to craft the construct perfectly, it had already been around two hours.

“Not good enough.” he spat, his features twisting into a grimace. “I’ve still got dozens of pieces. At this rate, it’ll take me a full week.”

“I’m sure you’ll pick up the pace. Just concentrate.” Nesha said, handing him two more potions.

Percy didn’t argue, gulping down the green liquid. On any other day, he might have found the minty flavour refreshing. Right now, it only served as a bitter reminder that he was pouring the potions down the drain. At least, the life mana relieved the tension in his eyelids, lifting the sting off his eyes. Still, his brain felt just as fried as it had five minutes ago.

Sighing, he grabbed another handful of powder, starting work on the second piece.

“Let’s get this one done in under an hour. No room for mistakes.”

***

Minutes became hours, and hours became days, as Percy continued rebuilding his armour one piece at a time. He ignored the light seeping through the curtains – sometimes the bright rays of the sun, others the soft glimmer of the moon – his mind focused on the crafting process alone.

At first, he made several mistakes. Most of them when drawing the self-repair enchantment, but occasionally the forging process went wrong too. Still, he got better with each piece, handing them to Nesha one after the other.

Stacking them onto a pile, she never stopped encouraging him and giving him more potions whenever she felt like he needed them. At the same time, their hearts kept racing, constantly afraid that Micky would reach out, informing them the Divine Root was here.

Luckily, that never happened. In the end, Percy managed to complete the entire armour, confirming that every single enchantment worked as it was meant to.

“One last thing I need to do.” he said, gathering some more of the teal powder.

This time, he allowed his spectral trait to take over, spinning the mana into a thread. It wasn’t nearly thin enough to weave a fabric out of – Percy estimated that goal was still years away – but that didn’t mean it was useless.

It was good enough to fasten the armour pieces together, replacing the need for the soft mana. That way, Percy wouldn’t have to constantly exert himself to hold everything together, which would allow him to better focus on the fight at hand. Even better, the threads would be stronger, making it much harder for the spell to come apart.

“But how are you going to add the self-repair enchantment on the strings?” Nesha asked.

“I won’t. I’ll have to replace them every few days. Still better than reforging the whole armour or having to manually hold it in place.” he explained.

As soon as he was done, he tossed the new strings atop the pile of his armour, before climbing onto the bed. Overall, he’d made several changes to the spell – whether it was the shape of the armour, the reinforced strings, or the upgraded runes. There was no doubt in his mind it was a great deal stronger all-around, but he wasn’t in a rush to put it on. Right now, the best thing he could do would be to get some rest.

‘Micky, how are the two of you doing?’ he asked through the cord.

The response came promptly.

‘We’ve taken turns sleeping and keeping an eye out on the road. Every few hours, Elaine enters the town to check if the Holy Child has entered from a different side. As far as we can tell, they aren’t here yet.’

Percy nodded, feeling a little better. Maybe they really had made a mistake… Of course, he wouldn’t be able to relax completely for a few more days.

‘Wake me up if anything happens.’ he sent back, before relaying the news to Nesha.

The two then shut their eyes, their sheer exhaustion putting them to sleep mere moments later. It still wasn’t clear whether the Holy Child was after them, but one thing was certain:

Whatever ended up happening, Percy was ready for it.

Chapter 246: Frantic escape

‘Percy! They’re here!’ Micky yelled through the cord.

Startled, Percy nearly messed up the rune he was carving on his scythe. It had already been a few hours since he and Nesha woke up, and he’d decided to take advantage of that to reforge his weapons too.

“Wait, you mean you can see them approaching? From the west side?” he asked out loud, for Nesha’s benefit.

Micky sent a mental nod back, causing him to raise an eyebrow. This was strange. While they’d split up on purpose, to determine whether the Holy Child was after him and Nesha or something else, he’d always thought the former was more likely.

“Evidently not…” he muttered.

Guessing what he was thinking, Nesha pitched in.

“Do you think he’s chasing after Elaine? She’s pretty, and he’s a teenage boy. Maybe she piqued his fancy?”

Percy couldn’t help but wrinkle his nose at the sound of that.

“Doubt it. If he saw her, he would have made a move right then and there. No point in chasing her across Remior. Besides, how would he track her?”

Nesha shrugged.

“If he’s not after us, and he’s not after Elaine, that only leaves one possibility.”

Both their eyes widened simultaneously, realizing what this meant.

“Micky, you need to get out of there RIGHT NOW!” he yelled, forgetting he was still in the inn. Nesha had to cover his mouth.

‘Too late!’ the crow replied. ‘He’s running after me!’

Percy's heart skipped a beat. This was bad! Really bad! Usually, they didn't think twice about having Micky act as a scout. Nobody would pay much attention to a bird flying several miles away, spying secretly from afar. Unless they were actively hunting him, of course…

But he couldn't afford to panic. His familiar's life depended on him maintaining his composure. Biting his tongue, Percy forced himself to calm down, countless thoughts swirling within his mind. There had to be a way out of this.

"Listen to me very carefully." he said a moment later, this time keeping his voice down. "Your priority is to put some distance from Elaine. Whatever happens, you can't let them see her with you. Understand?"

Between his two cores and Acceleration, Micky was a great deal faster than Elaine. He should be able to outrun the Holy Child – for a while at least. But the same couldn't be said about her. If she got spotted, she was done for.

'Understood. Where should I go?'

Percy rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to come up with a viable plan.

"For now, I want you to circle around the town and lead them back to the same spot."

Some confusion seeped through the cord, though Micky didn't question his judgement, eventually sending a mental nod back.

"What's that going to accomplish?" Nesha asked.

"It'll buy us time to intercept them. I just hope Elaine realizes she has to meet up with us here."

Their greatest problem right now was that he had no way to get in touch with his cousin. Not without Micky relaying their messages. Hopefully, she'd understand she wasn't supposed to follow Micky after seeing him fly away from her. Either way, there was nothing Percy could do about that, other than to trust her.

Not wasting a moment, he grabbed the largest piece of his armour from the pile – the chestguard – putting it on. Catching his drift, Nesha passed him the next piece, along with some reinforced string, helping him fasten it in place.

Overall, the Phantomscale Raiment looked very different than it had against Rambert. Percy had learned a lot from their fight, modifying the spell extensively. To start, many pieces had been reshaped, to give him greater freedom of movement. Some of the surfaces had been made flatter and wider, to let him draw larger runes on them. He'd also moved the holes around a little, to better accommodate the network of strings holding them together, so that his armour would be better at absorbing impacts. Furthermore, he'd added more vents throughout his body, to account for the additional mana leaking out while he used the trollsfury potion.

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Finally, there were the new runes. Other than the self-repair enchantment that had replaced all the preservation runes in the interior of the armour, he had added a lot to the exterior too. The innermost two layers were now engraved with both the hardness and absorption runes. As for the armour's shell, it now had hardness runes fused together with the concealment runes, making the whole thing far sturdier than ever before.

"Percy… I know you are at your strongest, but I still doubt we can beat a Blue." Nesha said once they were done, her voice tinged with concern.

"Of course not. And we won't even try to do that."

She tilted her head.

"At the end of the day, there's nothing we can do to stop the Holy Child. Our only option is to have Micky lure him away and ditch him somewhere. But we can make things easier for him, at least." he elaborated.

"The guards?"

He nodded.

“Powerful as he is, he’s just an impulsive kid. Now that he’s caught sight of his target, I bet he’ll rush ahead, leaving his guards behind. I don’t think they can keep up with him. We’ll wait for him to leave, before ambushing the others outside the town. If we can kill them all, it’ll take some pressure off Micky.”

“That definitely sounds more manageable, but that’s still five Greens we’re talking about. Are you sure we can beat them?” she asked, unconvinced.

“We won’t. Me and Elaine will.” Percy replied, grabbing his scythes.

He’d made four of them, though the last one was still missing a few concealment runes. It would have to do. Walking towards the door, he turned all his constructs invisible. He’d rather not draw any attention before leaving the town.

“I want to help.” Nesha said, biting her lip.

“Sorry.” he shook his head, closing the door behind him.

He knew it was frustrating for her, but he couldn’t let her join. She was very close to mastering Circulation – she’d already started tempering her channels – but she wasn’t there just yet. Nor did she have any of her traps at hand. As useful as her spell was, she wouldn’t last a minute surrounded by so many powerful opponents.

Not that Percy and Elaine had it much better, of course. Percy estimated he’d have to take two of the guards on, leaving the other three for his cousin. It wouldn’t be an easy fight for either of them.

Rushing out of the inn, he headed west, hoping to run into Elaine. Luckily, he did find her right as he neared the gate.

‘That’s one thing going according to plan, at least.’ he exhaled in relief.

“Percy!” she exclaimed upon seeing him, running towards him. “They’re chasing Mic–” she tried to whisper once she got closer, but he raised his hand to stop her.

“I know. How confident are you in taking three Greens on by yourself?” he asked.

Suffice to say, attacking the Divine Root – and a Holy Child’s entourage no less – was a grave crime. He and Nesha were too far gone already, but Elaine hadn’t done anything too incriminating until now. Whatever happened, they couldn’t leave any survivors behind.

“I’ll do it.” she replied, not a hint of hesitation in her voice.

Percy nodded, gesturing at her to follow. As much as he hated himself for involving her, he knew he didn’t stand a shadow of a chance without her help. Plus, she cared about Micky as much as he did. He had no idea what that bastard wanted from his familiar, but they couldn’t leave him alone.

‘How close are you?’ he asked through the cord.

At the same time, he scanned the scenery outside the gate, looking for a good spot to lay in wait. That hill might do. It was where Micky and Elaine had camped over the past few days.

‘I’ll be there in five minutes. The kid is still behind me. Do you want me to try losing him?’

‘No. For now, I need you to stay in his sight. What about the others? Are they with him?’

‘They fell behind some time ago. Probably a couple miles behind the kid. Maybe more.’

‘Try to lure him about a hundred metres from the hill, but don’t get too close. I want the Greens to pass near there, but I don’t want the kid to spot us in his Mana Sense.’

Bringing Elaine up to speed, the two then rushed to the ambush spot, his heart racing in his chest.

“Elaine, do you know of any good hunting spots in the vicinity?” he asked.

Taking the guards out was only half the plan. Micky would have to lose the Holy Child too, or it would have all been for nothing. Unfortunately, the crow couldn’t possibly outrun the boy without going all out, which meant he’d eat through his stamina in no time.

Consequently, he’d need to consume a few Yellow cores to recharge once he reached his destination. Then, he’d have to find a river or some other body of water to hopefully erase his scent, before circling around and meeting with them.

“There is a small patch of desert a couple weeks southwest from here. I’ve hunted scorpions there before.” she said, giving him some more detailed directions.

Percy relayed her words to Micky, explaining the plan.

‘The only thing left is to execute it…’

Soon, Micky informed him that he and the Holy Child were almost there. Percy moved in front of Elaine, to hopefully hide her mana signature with his armour’s concealment runes. Both of them crouched to make themselves look smaller, holding their breaths.

A second later, they saw the boy running in the distance at an insane speed, the ground cracking wherever he stepped. Luckily, he didn’t as much as glance their way, too busy chasing after his prey. Only once he was gone did they start pumping mana into their channels, activating their boosting arts.

‘So far, so good.’ Percy thought, catching sight of the Greens rapidly approaching them.

It was time to deal the Divine Root another slap.

Chapter 247: Elaine vs Divine Root

Elaine swallowed hard as the Greens approached. Common affinities or not, these people were from the Divine Root. Even with Circulation, taking on three of them wouldn’t be easy. Still, it wasn’t herself she was worried about…

‘Will he be alright?’ she stole a glance at her cousin.

She knew he’d beaten Greens before, but always one at a time and with ample preparations. Plus, she’d never seen it in person. The last time she watched Percy fight; he barely managed to stun a goblin. And, technically, his grade hadn’t even changed since then. Could he really handle this?

Besides the upcoming fight, his current condition also worried her a little. Percy had already downed the potion, an overwhelming surge of mana spilling out of his pores, shrouding his body in a swirling teal fog. Soon, it faded from her eyes like the rest of his constructs, only visible through Mana Sense. His skin was flushed red, blood bubbling from countless expanding cuts as his muscles swelled more than they were ever meant to. Yet, he seemed unfazed by the pain – probably used to putting himself through hell by now.

His glowing eyes stayed locked on their opponents instead, like a predator observing his prey. His fingers tightened around the invisible scythes in his grasp. One of them rested propped against a boulder for now – the one not fully cloaked. He clearly wanted to keep the element of surprise as long as possible, though they both knew it wouldn’t last beyond the first attack, if that. His armour was invisible too, though it wasn’t hard for her to make its shape out – partly because she already knew about it, and partly due to the way it displaced the mist.

‘It doesn’t matter. He’ll be fine as soon as he drinks a few healing potions. We just need to survive until then…’

There was no turning back now. Their opponents would notice their presence in mere moments, if they hadn’t already. And Percy’s potion wouldn’t last long. She had to wrap her own fight up quickly; in case he needed backup.

One of the incoming Greens suddenly snapped his head in their direction, sensing something was off. As if on cue, Percy lunged from his hiding spot, hurling two scythes toward him before following up with a flurry of throwing stars.

Elaine didn’t wait to see the outcome. Her focus shifted to the leftmost trio. She shot forward, channelling mana to her feet and skidding across the grassy terrain. At the same time, she raised her palms and unleashed a barrage of small, azure projectiles at the startled mages.

Both Pressure Blast and Slippery Step were Crude spells, but she could feel they were close to an upgrade. She hadn't learned them at random either. The same fight that forced her to reveal Circulation to her father had also exposed her biggest weaknesses – limited range and poor mobility. She had no intention of letting those shortcomings hold her back again.

The Greens dodged her attack, quickly regaining their composure. Their eyes flickered between her and Percy, weighing their options, as if considering whether to gang up on her cousin first.

"Like hell I'll let you!" she snarled, stepping between them and Percy, mana coiling around her fingers as she manifested a set of glowing whips.

Undeterred, they unleashed a barrage of spells at her. A few large fireballs, some water arrows – faster and more condensed than her own shots – and a wave of earth mana rippling towards her feet. She clicked her tongue – this was going to be rather annoying.

Shredding the projectiles into harmless motes, she slid away from the earth mana right as it pierced towards her in the shape of a spear. Despite avoiding all of their attacks, she couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the sight, however. She'd seen earth users use similar attacks before, but this was different. It was faster and smoother than she was used to. It didn't look like regular stone either. It glistened in a dark colour, resembling obsidian.

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'A blessing?'

Not that strange, considering where her opponents had come from…

Outwardly, Elaine didn't divert her gaze from the trio in front of her for a second. Still, she couldn't help but scan the area behind her with Mana Sense, worried about Percy. He was fine. Not that he had it easy – his fight was just as tough as hers. But he wasn't at a clear disadvantage either.

'Ok. I guess I'll just have to trust him.' she nodded.

Without wasting another moment, she went on the offensive, rushing towards the earth mage. Water splashed wherever she stepped, mixed with torn blades of grass. And she kept picking up speed as she dashed in a straight line, determined to cut the enemy ranks short.

The mages responded in kind, raining more spells at her.

But she didn't pay them any heed, forming more whips in her hands, turning them thinner and longer. Whatever attack neared her, she sliced and diced, not giving her opponents the chance to touch even a single hair on her head.

The only spells she had to be careful of were the ones coming from below. Not that it was impossible to uproot the earth mana before it caused harm, but it would cost a lot of mana. Even with her boosting art active, she knew she had to pace herself for her reserves to last.

Like demonic fangs, the obsidian constructs bit upwards, Elaine weaving and bobbing as they forced her to vary her path. Still, she persisted, closing into the earth mage with every step.

Realizing the danger he was in, he ran backwards, sending more and more spells to block her way with every passing second. His teammates pitched in too, spreading out in opposite directions, trying to pincer her in with their own spells.

Elaine never stopped parrying them, but each impact put a drain on her core. Her mana was running out faster than she could breathe it in. Even worse, the earth mage kept his distance from her, doing an admirable job filling her path with obstacles.

'Nice try.' her lip curled upwards.

After fighting for years in the war against House Tantalus, she wasn't the inexperienced girl she'd once been. Taking a sharp turn, she ignored the earth mage entirely, closing into the fire mage instead.

Taken by surprise and without his buddies to help him, the guy panicked, stumbling backwards as she spun, activating the Kraken's Gambit. She didn't even care about the airborne projectiles anymore, all of them shattered into nothing by her spell.

The sickening sound of torn flesh and shredded bones never came, however. Blinking once, Elaine saw the figure in front of her fade away. The fire mage stood a few dozen metres further back, still hurling fireballs at her. She didn't care about the weak attacks too much, blocking them with her Refined spell as she racked her brain to understand what had just happened.

'Illusion? Some kind of bloodline?'

This was bad. These people clearly had all sorts of trump cards up their sleeves. Even worse, her core was already halfway empty, thanks to her costly move just now. And that was just the start of her trouble.

The fire mage and the earth mage fired more spells at her, but the water mage had turned towards Percy instead, shooting a flurry of water arrows at him. Her cousin had already put his own opponents on the backfoot, but the sneak attack caught him by surprise.

The pressurised blasts knocked him off his feet, violently slamming him into the ground as teal fragments splintered off his armour. The outer layer was half broken, even the one beneath it taking serious damage as the invisible spell regained its colour.

Gritting her teeth, she allowed her whips to disperse before pelting the man's location with a barrage of her own blasts, stopping him in his tracks. Still, the damage was done, as Percy rolled on the grass, struggling to dodge his own opponents' attacks.

'Damn you, Elaine! You had one job!'

As much as she wanted to berate herself further, she knew this wasn't the time, however. The trio had launched more spells at her, and she didn't even have her whips this time to block them. Instead, she dodged them as best as she could, trying to think of a way out.

'Closing into them isn't an option…' she grimaced.

She'd already tried that, but they clearly had way too many tricks to deal with her. At least, she didn't think she could kill them fast enough, and trying would only give them a chance to go after Percy again.

Besides, the Kraken's Gambit was way too expensive. She had to rely on her Slippery Step for defence and the Pressure Blast for offense. But could she really win this with just a couple of Crude spells?

Either way, it appeared she had no choice but to try…

Chapter 248: Sniping

Forcing her racing heartbeat to calm down, she scanned the battlefield with Mana Sense, observing her opponents carefully. Whenever they attacked, she dodged with minimal movement, doing her best to conserve her mana. At the same time, she took one deep breath after another, slowly refilling her core.

'How does he make his own spells so much faster than mine?' she wondered, thinking back to the water mage's arrows.

The only silver lining about this messy battle was that she had a perfect example in front of her, to help her improve her magic. And it didn't take her very long to come up with a hypothesis.

'It has to be the air resistance. At least to an extent.'

By shaping his attacks into arrows, he could propel them through the air much faster than hers. Still, that couldn't be everything. A huge factor was the caster's ability to compress the water, as well as the force they shot it with. And she really had no excuse for losing in that department. Not with Circulation filling her body with strength.

As soon as she recovered some more of her mana, Elaine began her counterattack, aiming at the water mage. He was the only one who hadn't shown a blessing nor a bloodline just yet. He might have one anyway but, for now, he seemed to be the easiest target. That said, she didn't allow herself to lose sight of the others, constantly tracking their movements via Mana Sense.

Sidestepping all the hostile attacks, she focused on him as she reshaped her projectiles into arrows no different than his. It didn't take long for her to see an improvement either. Her arrows could still use a lot of work, but they were already a little faster than before. The water mage noticed that too, raising an eyebrow as he realized she was copying him. Still, the distance separating them gave him plenty of time to dodge.

‘Let’s see how much longer you can keep the upper hand.’ she smirked.

Taking full advantage of her boosting art, she compressed each of her arrows even further before loosing it. Not only that, but she put more power behind them too, making each more lethal than the last. Over the next few minutes, her constructs changed shape again, now resembling crossbow bolts more than they did arrows, letting out a shrill cry as they pierced through the air.

‘How do you like that?! I bet you can’t push yours this far!’

Before long, the water mage couldn’t even fight back, too busy dodging her attacks by the skin of his teeth. Still, his teammates didn’t let him suffer much, pressuring Elaine into slowing down her onslaught. At least, they did so at first…

At some point, the fire mage turned towards Percy again, aiming a fireball at him, thinking she hadn’t noticed.

“Not this time.” she spat, intercepting the spell midair, before shifting her focus to him.

The guy appeared genuinely taken aback as an aquamarine bolt pierced through his chest. But she didn’t let herself celebrate, knowing it wouldn’t be this easy. Sure enough, the fire mage faded again, appearing a few metres away unharmed.

‘He can hide himself, but not his spells. If he could, he would have already hit Percy with it.’ she realized.

It was a good thing to know, and her own spell was developing nicely too, though a new problem had presented itself. The obsidian spears weren’t that difficult to dodge individually, but the earth mage had already filled the battlefield with them, blocking her line of sight. That much wasn’t an issue by itself, as she could still spot everyone through Mana Sense. Still, it was harder to get a clean shot at her opponents, and her mobility was starting to be impacted too.

In theory, it wouldn’t be difficult to clear out her surroundings using her whips, but that was probably what the bastard wanted. To get her to empty her core again…

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Elaine clicked her tongue, but she wasn't deterred. Annoying as they were, they made for excellent whetstones to hone her magic. And she was improving rapidly, now that she had a perfect case study to observe.

Of course, she didn't know how long it had been. Nor how her cousin was doing. Perhaps, his potion was about to run out. Or maybe, it already had. But she couldn't afford to lift her attention from her opponents again. In any case, she had yet to be stabbed in the back, so the worst-case scenario probably hadn't come to pass.

She'd been way too arrogant to think she could kill three members of the Divine Root quickly and still have the strength to assist Percy. Not only that, but she should have shown more trust towards her cousin. At the very least, he'd handled his end of the fight just fine. He certainly wasn't the one who'd messed up.

Turning back towards the water mage, she fired another bolt at him, this time trying to pierce through an obsidian construct. The water mana did drill a hole through it, but it had slowed down greatly by the time it emerged out of the other side, splashing harmlessly on the next obstacle it encountered.

'This is such a foreign fighting style to me…' she grimaced.

While she'd developed her new spells to eliminate her weaknesses, she never thought she'd be relying on them exclusively. Certainly not in such a difficult fight. Her whips, she'd honed her whole life. First through her father's tutelage, and then through years of combat. The Kraken's Gambit was the spell she was proudest of. Her specialization. Her expertise.

But she quickly shook her head, realizing how stupid these thoughts were.

'I'm acting like a spoiled brat. No wonder I'm in my twenties with only two Refined spells…'

Did Percy ever complain over having to learn something new? When he suddenly had to master an entirely new affinity all of a sudden? Or when he found himself with a familiar he had to take care of? Or when he had to pick alchemy up and learn to brew his own elixirs, because there was simply no other

way for him to advance? Or when he bargained with a titan to master runecrafting, because it would be a waste not to? Or every time he ripped his soul up, to use his bloodline, or Circulation, or get his spectral trait?

Of course not. He never complained. He was grateful for all these opportunities. Always making the most of them, because he knew he didn't have the luxury of letting them slip by. And he excelled in everything in the end, not through talent, but sheer effort.

Meanwhile, what did Elaine do? She'd turned him down when he offered to teach her runecrafting. She stuck with what she was comfortable with. Drank the elixirs he brewed for her. And she still had the gall to look down on him.

Gritting her teeth, she pointed her palm against her opponent again.

A spear punched up at her.

She sidestepped it.

Three fireballs were coming her way. She ignored those. Sadly for their caster, the earth constructs inhibited him as much as they did her. Instead, she focused on the water mage and him alone.

A blob of water gathered in her hand. She compressed it into a marble. But she didn't stop, pressing it more and more, as it vibrated, threatening to explode right then and there, shredding her own hand into minced meat.

Another black pillar was about to emerge beneath her feet. This time, she merely flung her free arm, using a rough whip to dig the earth mana out before it coalesced.

Her focus was still on her opponent, who was watching her carefully, unsure what she was up to.

She let go.

Unlike before, she didn't fire many bolts. That would only be a waste of mana. And focus. No. She only needed one. A good one. One fast enough that he couldn't dodge it. One sharp enough, to pierce through everything in its path.

An azure flash shone through the battlefield, the cool light reflecting off the smooth pillars. It was accompanied by a deafening boom, rattling them, as Elaine felt her very bones shake, a wave of pain spreading up her arm.

But her gaze never wavered. It followed her attack, through the hole in the construct. And the one behind it. And the one behind that. All the way to the hole in the guy's torso, a lake of blood soaking his robes as he collapsed.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Pressure Blast – Crude -> Demersal Sniping – Refined!]

Elaine didn't care much about the notification right now. Part of her wanted to look away from the carnage. But she was no longer a kid, nor was this a war she'd been thrust into out of her control. No. Her involvement was the result of her own choices. Averting her gaze would be hypocritical of her.

She scanned the corpse, taking the gruesome sight in for a few seconds. Only then did she allow her senses to brush over the battlefield, settling on the other two. Their expressions were still marred by shock, their attacks having long stopped.

They weren't stupid. They could tell it was over. Sure, the spell had eaten quite a chunk of her mana, and her hand still hurt like a bitch.

But she could keep going, and the others knew that they were screwed without their teammate. Slaughtering them both wouldn't take more than a minute…

Chapter 249: Regalia

A few minutes earlier

The Green twisted his body into the space between the two scythes, narrowly evading the spinning blades. Still, the last-second manoeuvre left him in an awkward orientation, forcing him to eat several throwing stars right to his soul. He landed on the grass with a muted thud, spasming in pain.

As much as Percy wanted to follow up with a finisher, the guy's teammate had already launched a few wind blades at him, each cutting shrilly through the air.

Percy barely managed to avoid most of them, though one still hooked around his leg, making a crisp ting against his armour. The good news was that the reinforced construct held, the hardness runes ensuring the attack left little more than a shallow scratch on the legguard. A scratch that was already closing as the self-repair enchantment devoured part of the Shroud.

'Wow. I guess the two spells complement each other nicely.'

He hadn't really planned for this. The Shroud enveloped his body out of necessity, as the mana gushed out of his pores faster than he could use it. It tightly wrapped around his armour like a strip of cloth, since that was simply the best way to keep it from dissipating until he shaped it into an attack. Luckily, the runes seemed to benefit from the abundance of mana in the meantime. Overall, it did give his armour an almost regal appearance. Percy currently looked like a magical knight cloaked in an eerie fog. Or, well… he would have – if his mana was visible.

That said, the force on his leg still tripped him, bringing him down to one knee. By then, the first mage had stood up again, supporting his teammate with some wind crescents of his own.

'So, they both have an air affinity…' Percy realised, rolling out of the way.

It wasn't the best possible matchup for him – their high mobility would make landing his spells a pain. Not the worst either though. At least, their attacks didn't pack as much of a punch as fire or lightning magic might. Getting through his armour wouldn't be that easy for them either.

Percy ignored the crescents, not even glancing at them as they dug deep grooves through the soil where he previously stood. Instead, he hurled his third scythe at the first opponent. The guy struggled to conceal his pained expression, still suffering from soul damage. At the same time, Percy called the other pair of scythes back, trying to catch him from behind.

More attacks flew towards Percy in the meantime, though their shadows preceded them. His eyes had already adjusted to his enemies' common affinity. The fact that they fought in the same manner didn't

work in their favour either. Sure enough, Percy didn't have much trouble evading the attacks, though his target wasn't as lucky.

One of the scythes nicked his thigh, eliciting a pained cry. He clearly hadn't expected three to surround him at once. Percy called the fourth one to his hand too, estimating he'd already exhausted the element of surprise by now.

'It was a good start. I just need to keep pressuring the injured one.'

Letting the Grim Dance run rampant, Percy allowed the shadows of his opponents' attacks to blend with his own, taking control of the battle's flow. He showered the first guy with a rain of scythes, knives and throwing stars, instantly putting him on the backfoot.

That said, inflicting more wounds didn't prove nearly as easy. The guy did an admirable job propelling himself out of the attacks' paths with some expertly placed bursts of wind. Still, Percy did land a few here and there, the man's injuries noticeably gnawing at his reaction speed.

Of course, several air spells hit Percy too – he couldn't dodge them all. Fortunately, he didn't need to, his armour allowing him to shrug most of the damage off, his Shroud helping him undo the rest.

Suffice to say, he was still in a lot of pain, though that was mostly self-inflicted. It was his own potion breaking his body down from within. It tore his tendons apart with every step he took, nearly ripping his arms out of their sockets every time he swung them. Yet, he gritted his teeth, knowing he needed the boost to win. And that it wouldn't last for much longer.

'At least, they're weaker than Jason…'

Percy was keenly aware of how lucky he was. Not that he was afraid of losing a rematch against the karma user – certainly not now that he had his armour. But he doubted he could handle two opponents at that level. Fortunately, it appeared that not all the Root's Greens were nearly as strong.

He was about to redouble his attacks on the injured guy, when something unexpected happened. A powerful blast splashed into him from the side, slamming him into the ground a few metres away. His

armour cracked – the spell clearly had a lot more concentrated force behind it than what his own opponents had demonstrated.

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And this was just the start. A second projectile followed, and then a third. Teal fragments flew off him as his armour's outer layer got peeled off, his bones creaking in protest.

Ignoring the pain, Percy gathered the teal fog in front of him to serve as a cushion. It barely helped, sapping some strength from the blasts – though they still pierced through the soft mana without much difficulty. He focused on the network of threads holding his armour together, trying to keep the reinforced strings from snapping. The whole spell would come undone should that happen.

The self-repair enchantments all over his body greedily drank his mana, doing what they could to restore the construct. Still, the runes couldn't fix themselves, so any component damaged beyond a certain threshold was lost for good. This was one of the few drawbacks of his armour's modularity. An issue he couldn't solve quite yet…

Either way, he gritted his teeth, absorbing the attacks as best as he could, trying to minimize the damage. His only option was to trust his cousin to stop the assailant. And she had to do it fast.

Unfortunately, it wasn't until after the fifth blow that the barrage came to a halt. And the damage was already done.

His opponents didn't waste their chance, taking advantage of the interference to pile more spells onto him. Even worse, he wasn't sure he could endure them all given the current state of his armour.

Percy clumsily evaded whatever he could, grimacing as the rest caused the cracks to expand. The self-repair runes fought like crazy to restore whatever was still salvageable, though teal shards kept falling rapidly as the spell crumbled faster than he could mend it.

'I need to cut their momentum short.' he realized, pulling two of his scythes from behind the first mage.

Of course, the man wouldn't fall for this trick again. That said, the distraction did cause the barrage to slow a little, giving Percy a chance to extricate himself.

Admittedly, things weren't going very well. Percy's body was as banged up as his armour at this point, if not more. Still, he could win this as long as his cousin didn't let her opponents sneak up on him again.

'Come on Elaine… I'm counting on you.'

Shifting his focus back to his enemies, he thought hard as to how he could turn this around. The first of them was already injured rather severely, but it would take Percy a while to kill him. The potion wouldn't last that long. Percy estimated he only had a couple minutes at best.

The situation was rather bleak, though a spark of hope lit up in his eyes as he glanced at the crater he'd formed on the ground during the attack. That could work.

Oblivious to his thoughts, his opponents never stopped pressuring him, launching one spell at him after another. Percy allowed himself to fall in their tempo, slowly backtracking as they advanced towards him.

'Just a little farther…'

It wasn't until half a minute later that everything was in place. If this didn't work, he'd die not long after. And Elaine would soon follow.

'Here goes nothing.'

Dodging a wave of attacks, he hurled both of his scythes at the injured mage, pulling the last two from behind him. At the same time, he tore off over 80% of his Shroud, turning it into a wave of throwing stars to supplement his main weapons.

His opponent didn't panic, however, despite being surrounded by spells in every direction. He was already moving to avoid the constructs, well accustomed to the routine by now. Sadly for him, Percy had forced him to step right where he wanted him. And he'd planned a small surprise there.

With a wave of his hand, Percy called some more mana back to him. This time, it wasn't his scythes, nor the throwing stars, however. He was looking at the crater behind the air mage. The very crater that he'd dug into just minutes ago. Or, more specifically, the invisible shards of his broken armour that lay there.

Just like that, a wave of shrapnel sank into the man's back, a shocked expression painting his face.

The shards might have not been as sharp as the throwing stars, but they were made of reinforced mana, packing quite a punch. And dozens of fragments landed into the guy's soul, leaving it full of holes.

Percy knew this was more than enough to kill him, so he didn't even bother looking at him for a second longer, his focus already shifting to the remaining opponent.

Grabbing the pair of scythes that had just returned to him, he took advantage of the second guy's surprise as he hurled them towards him, following up with more projectiles from his Shroud.

To his credit, the man recovered quickly enough to dodge most of them, though Percy had anticipated it to an extent, having spread the throwing stars as widely as possible. A few found their mark, stabbing into the guy's lower body. His knees buckled as he finally got to experience the agonizing soul pain his late comrade had suffered repeatedly.

'Tsch. Not enough.' Percy clicked his tongue.

He was already out of spare scythes and out of mana. Even worse, his opponent would regain his wits within moments. If he failed to finish him now, he might never get a second chance.

Thinking on his feet, he willed the remaining layers of his armour to shatter, grabbing as many shards as his hands could hold, before hurling them at the mage.

The guy tried to leap out of the way, but he failed to summon enough strength in his legs. He barely managed to sway to the side, several shards still finding their mark, lodging themselves in his torso.

Unsure whether this was enough, Percy called upon the rest of the fragments he'd just shed off his spell, drawing them to his hands. A few actually stabbed into his flesh, but he didn't care. He launched them at his opponent too, pinning him into the ground with another wave.

And he didn't stop there either, doing it a third time, and a fourth.

By the time he saw his opponent's soul fizz away into nothing, blood was pouring out of Percy's hands – even more so than the rest of his body. But it didn't matter. It was done.

[Congratulations! Your spells have merged: Shroud of Deceit – Refined + Phantomscale Raiment – Refined -> Spectral Art: Phantomscale Regalia – Masterful!]

Chapter 250: Masterful

Normally, Percy would have just ignored the notification. It wasn't the first spell he'd upgraded, nor would it be the last. Plus, he had plenty of things on his plate right now. Whether it was the potion's backlash, Elaine's fight, or his familiar getting chased by a Blue, everything took precedence. Still, his heart skipped a beat upon reading the spell's tier.

'Masterful?! Just like that?!'

Suffice to say, he hadn't expected to reach that level at this time. He'd long accepted that his first Masterful spell would register once he figured out the mana threads his spectral trait had commissioned. A project that might not be completed until years from now.

Then again, it wasn't that strange his new spell qualified. Both his armour and his Shroud had already evolved multiple times while remaining in the Refined tier – three in total. That ought to have brought them both on the verge of an upgrade, and that was without considering the most recent round of improvements to the Phantomscale Raiment.

And, in hindsight, the emergent spell involved way too many moving parts – too many requirements – to have stayed Refined. It made use of Crystallization, Reinforcement, his spectral trait, affinity fusion, runecrafting and magiscript… Hell, he needed two cores, Synchronization and a specialized potion just to produce enough mana to keep it active!

Not to mention how well the two spells synergized with one another. The Shroud acted as both a fourth layer for his armour, but also as the perfect fuel for its enchantments. Beyond that, his latest trick of discarding the Raiment and turning its fragments into projectiles was quite similar to how he normally used the Shroud in the first place.

'Yeah… On second thought, I suppose it makes sense…'

In the end, he allowed himself a momentary grin before shifting his attention to his other problems. By now, the potion's effect had already expired, a wave of weakness spreading over his shredded body. Plopping down on the grass, he struggled to lift his arms. They felt heavy, as if they'd just turned to stone. Even grabbing the healing potions in his pockets was a monumental task, as was uncorking them and chugging them down.

It wasn't until a few seconds later that the life mana did its job, finally pushing back against his exhaustion a little, closing his wounds just enough to minimize his blood loss. Yet, it took a total of eight doses before he could move around normally. Only then did he allow his gaze to brush over the rest of the battlefield.

'She seems to be doing alright.' he exhaled in relief.

Truth be told, Elaine appeared to be at a disadvantage. This was partly because she was relying solely on her Crude spells to keep her opponents at bay, and partly because her surroundings were littered with obsidian pillars inhibiting her mobility and line of sight.

Still, this perceived weakness was just an illusion. The only reason she was on the backfoot was because she was being careful not to let her enemies sneak past her again. Had she been allowed to fight freely, she would have probably won by now.

'Her opponents clearly know what they're doing though…' Percy acknowledged.

They could tell they were outmatched, but they were experienced enough to take advantage of their numbers and of the other battle happening in parallel to their own. Like that, they prevented Elaine from focusing on any one of them for too long, allowing them to keep her busy.

‘Still, they’ve already lost.’

Originally, they had aimed to buy time for their comrades to kill him and come to their aid. By now, they’d already noticed this wasn’t going to happen. At least, Percy didn’t miss the despair marring their expressions.

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Calling the scythes back to his hands, he reactivated his boosting art, preparing to intervene should his cousin need any help, or should her opponents try anything funny. He was much weaker without the armour, of course, and he’d rather not drink another dose of the potion so soon if he could avoid it. Still, he was confident in keeping one of the Greens busy for a while if he had to.

‘Let’s not intervene until she needs me to…’

Percy wasn’t in a hurry to butt in. As worried as he was about Micky, he knew there was nothing more they could do to help him, besides maybe sending him some mana.

On the other hand, he could tell his cousin was on the cusp of a breakthrough. She was obviously working on upgrading her spell, her water arrows growing sharper and faster with every second. As tough as her fight was, it was also a precious opportunity he didn’t want to rob her of.

Over the next several minutes, he carefully observed her battle, while sending all his excess mana to Micky. From what the crow said, the Holy Child was still hot on his tail, but the bird was able to keep him at a safe distance. Adding in the teal mana keeping his stamina up, and he shouldn’t have much trouble reaching his destination in time.

Soon, a change occurred in the battlefield, drawing Percy’s attention. Elaine focused a lot of mana in her palm, compressing it to a small marble at first, and then a glowing azure dot, before unleashing it towards the other water mage with a deafening boom.

A bright flash filled the scene as a shockwave rippled outwards, all the way to Percy’s feet. Still, his eyes were glued on the devastation his cousin had just unleashed. Several obsidian spears had been pierced

cleanly, in a straight line to the man's chest. The poor guy's blood was already pooling on the ground, his eyes glazed over.

Moments later, the other two ran away, sprinting in different directions. A waste of time. Elaine shouldn't have much trouble killing the first one and catching up to the second by herself.

Still, to avoid any accidents, Percy hurled his scythes in front of the fire mage, blocking his path as his cousin went after the other one. The guy shot a few fireballs at him in a panic, though it wasn't very difficult for him to avoid them.

Percy kept him occupied for a few more seconds from a safe distance, buying time for his cousin to deal with the other one before coming over.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?! Ambushing the Divine Root?! A Holy Child's entourage?! You'll be hunted to the ends of Remior for this!" the guy said, resorting to threats upon realizing he couldn't escape.

Percy sighed.

"A little late to worry about that…"

The guy raised an eyebrow at first, seemingly puzzled by his response. It wasn't until a moment later that his pupils dilated, the realization dawning on him.

"It's you, isn't it?! The Ghost Alchemist! The one on the posters!"

Percy shrugged, but he didn't deny it. They had to kill this guy either way.

"Huh, then you're even more screwed than I thought!" the man chuckled. "You might think it's not a big deal since you're already fugitives, but people will come to investigate what happened. You've just brought more trouble to yourselves. Why would you even do such a thing?"

“I didn’t have a choice. Your boss is currently chasing after my friend.” Percy said.

The man frowned.

“The crow? It did seem a little too smart for a lone beast. Still, is it worth messing with a Holy Child for a bird?”

“Let me flip the question.” Percy replied. “Is it worth for everyone to lose their shit over that brat? To spoil him rotten? To let him do whatever he wants – harm whomever he wants – with no consequences? How long have you even travelled with him? I bet he hasn’t treated you guys very nicely either.”

The mage didn’t reply immediately, seemingly pondering Percy’s words.

“What choice do we even have? Our world can only exist as long as people like him are there to hold the sky up. Does it even matter how they treat us? We’d all be dead without them. Not just me, but my family too. Same goes for you, and those you love. It is what it is.”

Percy remained silent. He didn’t really have a good response for that. As much as he hated it, he knew the man wasn’t wrong. He could try spouting some grandstanding nonsense all day long about not wanting to be protected by scum like that Holy Child, but it would be nothing more than hollow bullshit.

The truth was that everyone did depend on the Divine Order. For all their flaws, Remior was better off for them. The only thing he could do, was to further his resolve in changing the status quo one day.

Not saying anything else, he hurled his scythe at the fire mage. The guy didn’t even resist, knowing he couldn’t escape. Soon, the weapon cleanly bisected his soul, as the fifth and final member of the Divine Root’s squad dropped dead.

Percy glanced around. The place was a complete mess. They had to clean everything up before anybody saw it. Assuming that hadn’t happened already.

His expression fell as his eyes landed on some teal fragments littering the grass some distance away.

‘So much for never having to reforge my armour again…’