Wanderer 311

Chapter 311: Leaving the city

As soon as he finished carving the final rune on the chestguard, Percy put it on. Then, he pulled the second layer from his spatial seal, summoning it right on top of the first one, before fastening them together with some reinforced string.

Next, he pulled a third piece of his armour out, and then a fourth, getting used to summoning them directly on his body. Sadly, he still had to fasten them manually, as he couldn't quite get the string to pop out in the shape of an intricate knot. Technically, it should be possible, but it wasn't something he expected to master anytime soon.

'Well, this will still save me a lot of time.'

Donning his armour had never been quicker. Like this, he wouldn't have to always keep it on, but he wouldn't have to spend ages preparing before each fight either. Happy with that, he then poured some mana into the self-repair enchantments to refresh the older components.

The Phantomscale Regalia had changed a little since Goldenfield town. Percy had leveraged everything he'd learned during his fight to further improve it. He'd made some minor adjustments to its shape, to make it more comfortable, and he'd also upgraded the enchantments again.

Now, all three layers possessed the same set of runes: a fusion of a preservation rune and a self-repair enchantment in the interior, and a fusion of the hardness, absorption and concealment runes on the exterior. They were merely pseudo-enchantments, meaning that they didn't do anything new, but they were far more compact than before, allowing him to pack a lot more stuff onto each component.

In theory, he could have dropped some of the modularity now that he could get everything on a single layer. Still, he'd ultimately chosen to keep the armour as it was. Having more copies of the runes made their effects more potent.

Nodding in satisfaction, he then stored everything back to his seal with a single thought.

Then, he walked to the window. Pulling the curtain, he squinted as the dim light of the evening sun poured into the room. The rays were soft, barely illuminating the dingy furniture, but he'd spent the past few hours working in darkness. The lights in his room had stopped working earlier that day, so he'd had to rely on nothing but the teal glow of his own mana.

'Another two days down the drain…' he sighed.

It had already been over three months since he delivered the elixirs to his familiar. Naturally, he'd already finished converting the rest of his stash into Aurora Dew some time ago. Since then, he'd spent his time reforging his armour and weapons, in preparation for their mission.

And it was finally time for it.

Waiting a few more minutes for the sun to fully set, Percy left his room. He approached the innkeeper who was sitting lazily by the reception. He was an old man with snow white hair, a Yellow core pulsing in his chest. Percy handed him a small pouch filled with coins. The last handful he owed the man, along with a small tip. Not that he deserved this: this place was downright atrocious: but Percy felt bad about him.

"Leaving?" the innkeeper asked.

Percy nodded.

"I'm going to miss the smell of your brews." the innkeeper said, a melancholic smile finding its way onto his face. Though it did turn a little brighter as he weighed the pouch, realizing he'd been overpaid.

But Percy didn't pay him much attention, already exiting the building.

"Don't forget to recommend us to your friends!" he heard the old man shout.

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He rolled his eyes. Even if he returned to Twilight City at some point, he'd rather try out his luck elsewhere.

'All this nonsense we had to endure because of Clarity…'

Despite everything they'd done to hide their identities, Percy had spent the past few months living partially in fear of the other shoe dropping. It wasn't just because of her either. Both he and his companions had made several mistakes. Not to mention that the whole thing was inherently risky to begin with.

He was confident that the only reason they'd made it this far undetected had been the poorly drawn posters of him and Nesha. They barely looked like them, even without their flimsy disguises. He guessed they'd been dictated by their fellow Guild members. People they barely knew, who hadn't seen them in years.

'Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We won't be completely safe until we're out of the city.'

After that, it would be the hard part of the plan. Sneaking past the Divine Root… infiltrating a temporal Decree… surviving in there for over a decade while surrounded by hundreds of Green beasts and without being spotted by Acton and his men… growing strong enough to kill a bunch of Blues… and rescuing Micky.

He sighed.

Turning southeast, he headed towards the 72nd district. His companions were probably already there, waiting for him near the east gate. They'd briefly discussed their plan: they'd exit through there, circling around both the city and the Valley in a wide arc, before entering the Decree from the north side. Though Percy wasn't too clear on the details. Nesha would have to bring him up to speed later.

The place was only six districts away, so it didn't take him long to get there. Sure enough, the others had arrived before him, but they didn't make it too obvious. Nesha subtly followed him out of the gate, walking a few dozen metres behind him. As for Elaine, they found her outside, waiting for them about a mile down the road. Only once they were sure nobody else was nearby did they dare to regroup.

Percy scanned his companions up and down, his heart clenching at what lay ahead. Things were about to get really dangerous. They'd have to break over a dozen laws, culminating in the murder of a Holy Child. Suffice to say, that was about the greatest taboo a mortal on Remior could possibly break, far eclipsing all their other crimes.

'But the little shit has it coming.'

Sadly, the gods wouldn't care whether Acton deserved to be killed. Previously, they'd taken a hands-off approach to him and Nesha. They'd sat back, waiting for their lackeys to handle the situation. It was entirely possible they'd get more involved after this.

Or maybe not. It was hard to tell. If these people were anything like Acton himself, there was no telling what they might do…

"Are you guys sure you want to go through with this? I can't promise any of us will survive."

Percy knew he couldn't rescue Micky on his own, but he wouldn't force them to throw their lives away.

"Depends." Elaine shrugged.

"On what?"

"Have you thought of a safer way to rescue him?"

Percy smiled bitterly. He'd obviously considered all the alternatives by now. Nothing else sounded even remotely feasible. He'd thought of sending another clone to Micky and using his seal to smuggle him out of the Valley. Sadly, he couldn't place living animals in it. From what Metatron had explained, it was standard practice for spatial devices to be sterile, to better preserve their contents.

Had it been just that, Percy could have returned to the Vault to commission a different one from the titan. But there was another problem. Apparently, the same enchantment that allowed his seal to interact with his soul prevented it from storing other souls. This was a compromise Metatron had been forced to make while designing it.

Another option had been to possess Micky again, having the clone take over his body, and flying away while Acton slept. This would buy them some time, but Percy knew the Holy Child would chase them down sooner or later. He'd managed to track Micky even before he enslaved him, so Percy was under no delusion they'd ever escape his range. If Acton's connection to the crow worked anything like his own cord, it would easily stretch to the ends of Remior and beyond.

If they ran away now, they'd be giving up on their single best chance at surpassing and defeating the Holy Child.

"No. Entering the Valley is our only shot." he said, his voice tinged with grim certainty.

"Then, I'm sure." Elaine said, not a hint of hesitation in her gaze.

"I'm honestly more worried that I'll hold you two back…" Nesha pitched in. "But I'm not giving up on Micky either. Not a chance."

Percy tossed them another appraising look, once again reminded of how lucky he'd been to have them in his life. Elaine had been this confident bundle of joy and optimism since they were kids, but he'd struck gold with Nesha too.

"Alright. Let's go kill the little psycho..." he said.

Then, he scratched his head.

"…like… fifteen years from now."

Chapter 312: Climbing a cliff

"Did you two wrap everything up before leaving the city?" Percy asked, breaking the oppressive silence of the night.

The trio had been walking for several hours, and they'd likely have to keep going for a few more. Twilight City was dozens of miles across, and the Valley was larger still. On top of that, they had to put some distance from both first, to avoid being spotted by the Divine Root.

"I made sure Martina's collaboration with Alexander ended on an amicable note. She sold the last of the products, completed the mushroom deal, and handed him his share of the profits before going on her merry way."

Percy nodded. This was actually a fortunate side-effect of their deal. Now that they'd handed the mushrooms to their competitors, they'd lost the main source of their revenue. But everyone involved was aware of that, and had willingly chosen to prioritize some short-term profits over a long-term collaboration. Even if Alexander had been greedy enough to want more, the option was no longer on the table.

"What about you?" he asked Elaine.

Granted, his cousin was the lowest risk factor among them, but he still wanted to make sure everything was ok.

She shrugged.

"There wasn't much to do. People at the water manifestation company come and go. Nobody asked any questions when I resigned. As for the second job at the warehouse… it doesn't even exist anymore."

The trio remained silent for a while after that, though Percy and Elaine got a bit tense at some point, when they had to cross one of the Divine Root's supply routes. Apparently, they used it to dump beasts into the Valley. Though Nesha assured them that the next batch wouldn't be delivered until several hours from now.

"Why are we trying to enter from the north side anyway? Is the security weaker there?" Elaine asked at some point.

In the past, Percy had hoped they'd be able to use the bronze badges they'd looted from Jason and the other members of the Divine Root to sneak into the Valley. But he might have been a little naïve about

that. It seemed that each member of the Great House possessed a personal identification code, so they would have been busted relatively easily, even if he and Nesha hadn't been fugitives.

"Kinda." Nesha said, before elaborating.

The perimeter of the Valley was so large that the Divine Root couldn't man it by themselves. They had the Syndicate to pitch in too, and even then, they barely managed.

Not that people tried to sneak in often: in fact, what they were planning to do hadn't been attempted in decades, if not centuries. But the Root did have to keep the beasts contained. After all, they were free to roam the Decree, so they could technically escape from any direction, attacking the city.

To prevent that, the Root and the Syndicate stationed a lot of people along the west, east and south sides of the Valley. Since the south bordered the city directly, they had to bring in the beasts from the east and the west, tossing them inside and making sure they stayed there. These three sides were bounded by a long hill, roughly shaped like the letter 'U'.

As for the north side, it was given a lower priority, for two main reasons. First, even if the beasts escaped from there, they wouldn't pose an immediate danger to the city. Second, crossing it was significantly harder, for both beasts and humans. That's because it ended in a colossal chasm, half a mile wide, and several miles deep.

"Ugh… So, I'm guessing we'll need to climb to the bottom of the chasm, and then up again?" Elaine asked, clearly not very happy about that.

"Afraid so." Nesha nodded. "And we'll have to do it in under two days."

"How come?" Percy asked.

Nesha sighed.

"The chasm helps with security, so the Root doesn't have guards permanently stationed there. But they still have regular patrols. Unfortunately, their schedule is both erratic, and nearly impossible for

outsiders to get their hands on. I did manage to learn some of it, but my information will be outdated soon."

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Percy grimaced. Even with their enhanced physiques, scaling the cliff twice in such a short time would be tough. More so for him, in fact.

"It's not so bad, is it?" Elaine asked again. "If we run out of time, we'll give up and try again later."

Nesha shook her head.

"Getting the information took a lot of patience and luck. If we miss this chance, it'll easily be another two months before we can make a second attempt. Probably longer."

Needless to say, Percy didn't like what he was hearing, but she wasn't even done yet.

"Worse still, I've heard that the current season is ending in less than a year. It's already going to be tight for us. I'm not sure if we'll make it out before the place is teeming with Holy Children."

"Wow… No pressure there." Percy chuckled.

If everything went according to plan, they'd be in and out in just under nine months. Hopefully, that would be enough. But it certainly meant they had to make it into the Valley this time, or it'd be over.

"Why did it have to be so complicated?" Elaine groaned. "Couldn't this Kronos guy have given everyone a portal to his Decree, like Percy's buddy?"

"Hate to break it to you, but I don't think the three of us would have made the club if he had." he shrugged. "Also, save your frustration for later. You might have to carry me up the last stretch."

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Just reaching the ravine took them the rest of the night. And making it to the bottom took them the whole day too. That only left them about 24 hours to complete the climb.

The good news was that it wasn't necessarily dangerous for them. Even if they slipped and fell, they wouldn't be injured that badly. They had several ways to slow down their descend, propel themselves back to the cliffside, or soften their landing. The problem was that they'd lose a ton of precious time in the process, so they couldn't afford any mistakes.

Strictly speaking, Elaine should be able to propel herself all the way to the top. The average Green wasn't able to fly for a prolonged period of time: certainly not with a water affinity: but she had Circulation too, boosting the strength of her spells and extending her endurance. Unfortunately, the others couldn't, and she wouldn't be able to carry them with her either.

"Are you sure this will hold?" Nesha asked, tugging the reinforced string Percy had wrapped around everyone, linking them all together.

"Remember the troll king? How strong his attacks had been?" he asked back.

Nesha shuddered, likely recalling the demi-human's monstrous club, sending the swamp waters into turmoil with every thunderous strike.

"These strings are a lot stronger than the ones holding my armour together back then." he added, some pride seeping into his voice. And sure enough, his words achieved their intended effect, as Nesha visibly relaxed upon hearing that.

Despite the urgency of the situation, Percy still hoped to get some free time in the Valley to complete his mana strings. Though the Dance took precedence. He was pretty sure both spells would be Masterful, but the latter was more likely to save his skin in a fight.

'Let's focus on making it into the Valley first. Plenty of time to worry about my training afterwards.'

After making sure everyone was secured, he handed each of them a couple of reinforced picks too, to aide them in their climb. Not his most elegant crafts: just a bunch of misshapen scythes really, with thicker edges and much shorter shafts. He'd hastily put them together over a few minutes, without even bothering to engrave any runes on them. But they should be more than strong enough to support their weight.

Satisfied with their preparations, he was about to begin his climb when he saw Elaine staring at something. Following her gaze, he noticed it led to some bones. Not a human's. They had belonged to some kind of alligator. An oversized one, roughly the size of an elephant. This wasn't the first skeleton they'd seen down here, but it was the most complete one.

"I suppose some of the beasts do try to escape. Not sure how many of them succeed." she muttered.

Percy shrugged. Green beasts had tough bodies, but also heavy ones. They couldn't use their mana as freely as a human mage either, so they wouldn't be able to arrest their momentum or protect their heavy frames from the impact. Sure, some might be able to fly away, while others might have an easier time scaling down the cliff with dexterous limbs or clawed digits. Not many though.

Most of them were trapped in the Valley, doomed to stay there until they got killed by a human, eaten by a fellow beast, or starved to death.

All this time, Percy had focused his attention on Acton: and with good reason. The boy would certainly be their greatest adversary inside the Valley. But not the only one.

The beasts wouldn't be easy to handle either. They would be everywhere, and they wouldn't ignore them like they ignored the Holy Child's entourage. Elaine was the only one who could defeat them relatively effortlessly, but she'd need to sleep too. Percy himself was confident he could handle one or two at a time, yet his stamina wasn't limitless either. They'd probably end up surrounded many times during their stay.

Suffice to say, the next decade would be a constant struggle.

He sighed, swinging his handcrafted pick onto the cliff, its dull tip sinking into the rock with a crisp sound.

‘It doesn’t matter. Beasts or humans… or inhuman monsters… I’ll beat them all.’

Chapter 313: Hail of desperation

“You think we’ll make it?” Nesha asked, stabbing her left pick a foot higher than her right.

“Looks like it.” Percy replied, wiping the sweat off his brow with his forearm.

It was already late in the afternoon, but they’d climbed over three quarters of the way. The edge of the cliff was in sight. They could certainly get there by nightfall. They had to.

Granted, Percy wasn’t having a great time. He was breathing heavily, each step a challenge of its own. Keeping Synchronization active was starting to weigh on him, even though it wasn’t usually a problem.

Supporting his own weight wasn’t that hard. Even a Red could have done that: let alone somebody with two Orange cores and a boosting art. But the sheer distance they had to cover, along with the strict time limit, was quite brutal.

And that wasn’t the only issue. They’d all slipped several times. It wasn’t their bodies that kept failing them, nor the picks he’d crafted. It was the stone that crumbled every few metres, sending them plummeting. If they hadn’t tied themselves to each other, they’d still be stuck near the bottom of the ravine, most likely.

‘Just a little farther…’ he sighed.

Not that their troubles would end once they reached the top, but he’d at least get a moment to catch his breath, right?

It appeared it wasn’t going to be so simple, however…

Turning his eyes up, he barely noticed a shadow barrelling towards him. Kicking against the rock, he leapt to the side, narrowly avoiding what would have certainly been a painful collision.

But that was merely the start of his trouble.

Having lost his purchase: as well as his left pick: Percy struggled to stop his fall. Hastily stabbing his remaining tool into the stone, he helplessly watched it carve a deep gash into the material, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake as he slid over a dozen metres down.

The screeching sound of his reinforced mana grinding against the cliff only halted a few moments later, when the rope around his waist finally tensed.

“The hell was that?” Nesha asked, holding the other end.

Even Elaine: who was farther away: had paused, staring at him warily.

Glancing down, Percy tried to make sense of this. The dimming sunlight struggled to reach the base of the cliff, but his mutated eyes saw more than just light. Right there, in the distance, he faintly spotted a tiny Yellow dot, about to go out like a candle in the wind. The owner of what he assumed was a mana core wasn’t moving, having probably turned into a puddle of blood and gore by now.

“A beast?”

He hadn’t seen it clearly, but its size certainly matched its grade. But why had it jumped to its death?

Beasts at the lower grades might not be as intelligent as humans, but they weren’t dumb. Even the weakest Red animals possessed some basic survival instincts.

“More incoming!” Elaine suddenly yelled, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Turning up again, he caught two more shadows falling towards them. One of them missed them entirely, falling in the gap between him and Nesha. As for the other, it was about to hit his cousin, when she effortlessly sliced it in half with a bright flash of azure, the elegant arc of her spell even shielding her from the bloody remains.

At least, Percy had seen them more clearly this time. Two more beasts, also at Yellow. A leopard and a wolf: both a little larger than usual.

‘Weird. They’re not even the same species. What’s going on here?’

The trio all looked up, preparing themselves for another wave. Sure enough, another four beasts plummeted towards them just seconds later.

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“Shit!”

Calling the discarded pick back to his free hand, he dodged one of the beasts. Unlike his companions, he could retrieve his tools if he dropped them, since they were all made of his own mana.

The others dealt with the beasts using their own means. Nesha leapt aside like him, while Elaine fended off one of them with a second construct.

“Elaine, can you protect us from them? We’ll pull you up!”

Any one of them could have made quick work of a few Yellow beasts while standing on solid ground, but the situation didn’t allow for that. Percy couldn’t fight properly without his hands or his mobility. Nesha’s butterflies were certainly lethal, but they didn’t carry enough momentum to push stuff aside. Elaine was the only one who could effortlessly brush multiple beasts away while hanging off a wall.

“Not like this!” she replied.

Percy gritted his teeth, blasting another beast away with a burst of pure mana, nearly sending himself tumbling again. They wouldn’t be able to advance like this. Sadly, Elaine was only linked to Nesha, so it was difficult for them to hold her up.

‘We should have placed her in the middle from the start…’ he smiled bitterly.

It made more sense, as she was the strongest in the group. But hindsight was twenty-twenty, as they said. They hadn't expected to run into a situation like this.

'What's done is done.'

They didn't have time to climb back down, to rearrange their formation. They'd have to think of a different way to deal with this. One solution was to try and adjust the ropes on the spot, but they might get themselves killed in the process.

There was a better way.

"Elaine! Fly to the top and hold them back!"

Completing the climb alone with Nesha would be much riskier, but it was better than having to deal with the raining beasts.

Nodding, she untied the string, activating Circulation. Next, she released two streams of pressurized water from her feet, shooting upwards. Percy could tell her core was draining faster than her boosting art could replenish it, but it would definitely last long enough for her to make the trip.

A couple of beasts fell towards her, slowing her down slightly. But she handled them easily enough, dodging some while knocking others away with her whips. Just moments later, she vanished from view, the flood of beasts soon halting too.

Percy was about to exhale in relief, when Nesha tugged at the string.

"Come on! We need to hurry!" she yelled, some anxiety seeping into her voice.

Trusting her, Percy pushed his boosting art to the limit, picking up the pace. His picks dug deep holes into the rock one after the other, his bones aching and his muscles tearing with each hurried step.

“Why are we rushing? You know she can handle them for hours, right?” he couldn’t help but ask as he moved closer to Nesha.

She shook her head.

“A patrol unit is going to pass over us in about an hour! I was planning to have us lay low until they left, but that’s no longer possible!”

The colour drained from Percy’s face as he realized how dire the situation was. Regardless of whether Elaine fought the beasts up there or down here, their adversaries wouldn’t miss the commotion. They had to get there before that happened!

‘What’s the deal with these beasts anyway?! Why are they doing this?!’

Clearly, they were hungry. That much was easy to tell. And not just because beasts of that grade always were. Percy hadn’t missed them salivating at the mere sight of him and his companions. Even as they fell to their doom, they stared at them with maddened fury, trying to take a bite.

But was it worth it? Leaping to death for a fleeting snack?

Then again, it wasn’t that strange, given everything he knew about the Valley. The Green beasts had it much better than their weaker counterparts. While they needed more food to survive, they at least had a few options available. They could compete against each other, hunting down the Yellow beasts to stave off their hunger, in a desperate bid to survive a little longer.

Meanwhile, the Yellow beasts were entirely hopeless. They didn’t even make for good opponents for the Holy Children. The only reason the Root even bothered to send them here, was to feed the Green ones, so they wouldn’t die as quickly. The poor creatures were constantly on the run, zoned out of every resource by their overlords. Their only option was to scurry about like rats, trying to delay the inevitable.

From that angle, Percy could see why they’d abandoned all reason upon seeing him and his companions. They might have thought they were easy targets, choosing to gamble their lives in desperation. Perhaps, they’d hoped to survive the landing. Or maybe, they didn’t even care, as long as they managed to grab one last bite before perishing.

‘What a brutal place...’

Turning his gaze ahead, Percy sped forward, a faint smile creeping its way into his face.

Wasn’t this the perfect environment for him?

While he’d fought a few tough opponents over the years, he hadn’t had many chances to hone his combat skills against an endless onslaught of enemies. Hunting the Starry Wasps had been a little like that at the beginning, but it had swiftly grown monotonous, turning into a quest for efficiency than a true life and death struggle.

The only other time he’d experienced something similar, had been against the trolls in the Grisly Bog. But he’d only spent a few weeks fighting in the Trollsden, and the demi-humans hadn’t really pushed him to his limits: with the exception of their leaders, of course.

This time, he’d have a full decade to pit himself against all sorts of monstrous creatures, pushing his spells to the next level.

And he was all for it.

Chapter 314: Entering the Thirsty Valley

Percy finally pushed himself up the edge of the cliff, rolling on his back. His chest was heaving up and down, but he didn’t dare to let go of his boosting art, in case he needed it. Only after failing to spot anything alive with Mana Sense did he allow himself to relax a little.

“How long… till they show up?” he asked between breaths.

“Any minute now.” Nesha replied, not faring much better. “Come on. Let’s grab Elaine and get the hell out of here.”

Listening to her words, he forced himself to his feet. Honestly, he'd have loved to rest a bit longer, but she was right. They'd come too far to get caught at the last stretch.

'No wonder they don't bother guarding this side as much…' he smiled bitterly.

The climb itself was already brutal enough that most Greens would struggle to complete it on their own. At least, that was the case if they didn't have the right affinity or bloodline to help them. And that was without even considering the horde of Yellow beasts leaping towards them near the end.

On top of that, the Thirsty Valley was only useful for a person who had enough elixirs to drink during their stay, as well as the spatial devices to store them. Only nobles would even consider doing it. But no House was dumb enough to risk angering the Divine Root just to save a few decades for some of their members.

Scanning his surroundings, Percy ignored the few corpses littering the ground. There weren't as many of them as he'd expected, and his cousin wasn't here either. She seemed to have gone out of the way to kill everything with blunt damage. It would have been more obvious they'd died to a human's spell had they been cleaved neatly in half.

Still, he wasn't too happy with this. A beast would have eaten the corpses. Or at least, mangled them more. Elaine probably hadn't had the time to handle them better. Grabbing a couple of the more conspicuous bodies, he flung them down the cliff, Nesha helping him along.

Next, he looked ahead, finally spotting the boundary of the temporal Decree. It was rather chaotic, the whole place coated in a turbulent mix of the blue globules he'd seen before, coupled with a wall of white foam.

The bubbles pushed outwards in an accelerated manner: probably thanks to the different flow of time. They slammed into the foam, bursting or losing much of their momentum. Though some of them made it through. They instantly exploded into a cloud of steam and water upon leaving the boundary of the Decree. Much of the steam floated up, while the water fell back inside the fluid, joining the wall of foam.

It was a pretty view, albeit violent.

But Percy didn't have the time to appreciate it. Coating himself in a thick layer of mana, he walked into the Valley, piercing a hole in the boundary.

Soon, he found himself inside. The ground here was made of the same rocky material as outside, but an azure sky now stretched above his head. Countless globules floated around him, though they drifted much more slowly now that his body was also sped up by the titan's magic. Nesha joined him a few seconds later, their eyes widening as they landed on the carnage before them.

Elaine was there, panting. She was covered in blood from head to toe, the azure lines of mana barely shining through it. Though it wasn't her own. Around her, countless bodies lay in crimson pools. Mammals, reptiles and birds. All of them covered in gruesome injuries, very few even moving. The rest were motionless, the blood around them already dry. They'd been dead for hours…

"Took you long enough." she sighed, still fighting against an oversized horse.

"Why didn't you kill them outside?" Percy asked.

For him and Nesha, it had been less than an hour since they last saw her, but she'd been fighting the beasts for nearly a full day. And it appeared a bunch of Greens had joined the party at some point.

"That's what I tried to do, at first." she said, finally cleaving her opponent's head off with a savage slash. "But more kept coming, and they were starting to overwhelm me. I figured I needed the time acceleration to keep up with their numbers. So, I dove in."

Percy nodded. That explained why they'd even been attacked in the first place. From their perspective, it hadn't been that long since they neared the edge of the cliff. But for the denizens of the Valley, their scent had probably lingered in the area for days. No wonder they'd attracted so many of them.

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"Anyway, let's get moving." Nesha said. "We'll have company soon. Human company."

The sight of the dead beasts would certainly raise an eyebrow, but most of them had been slain inside the Valley, almost hidden from view. Hopefully, everything would get picked up by scavengers in the next few minutes. Even if they weren't, the patrol unit was more likely to assume it was beasts massacring each other.

Not wasting a moment, the trio rushed ahead, searching for cover. The whole place was relatively flat. They couldn't see that far to begin with, and they struggled to find any large structures in their surroundings. Maybe there had been more in the past, but millennia of constant fighting had likely shattered everything.

It wasn't until about half a minute later that they spotted a few boulders clustered together in a small formation. They'd have to do.

Getting there wasn't easy. Constantly pushing the toxic bubbles away was quite annoying for him and Nesha. Even Elaine frowned whenever she had to brush one away, clearly not used to them quite yet. But they'd have to learn to live like this, since they'd be here for a while.

They weren't alone either. More beasts kept rushing them, likely driven by the thick scent of blood. Though they were all at Yellow. They hadn't seen any more Greens yet, other than the couple Elaine had already killed.

"Try washing our scent off." Percy suggested.

From what Micky had told him, the beasts were still rational enough to be deterred by a higher grade. It was probably their scent that had attracted the first bunch, and then the blood on his cousin that kept them coming.

She nodded, dousing all three of them: but mainly herself: with a lot of water. Sure enough, the flow of beasts slowed down a lot. Though a few were still desperate enough to attack, Elaine clearly not looking as scary as Acton in their eyes.

There was some kind of spider, almost as tall as Percy. It was covered in short brown fur, its face full of black, beady eyes. But a few had been pulverized at some point in the past, green pus oozing out of them. It was missing a leg too, though it didn't seem to hinder its movements much. A long, deep scar

marred its bulbous abdomen. Percy pulled his scythe out of his storage, cleaving the creature in half after dodging its desperate lunge.

Nesha handled the other one: a regular-looking grizzly bear. She sent a flock of butterflies into its heavy frame, stabbing it full of bloody holes. Meanwhile, Elaine didn't do much. She even deactivated Circulation, getting some respite from the endless fighting.

"How do they even bring so many high-grade beasts in here?" she asked. "They're everywhere! And they're constantly dying!"

"With lots of help." Nesha replied. "Several Houses are involved, including House Ypnos."

"Ypnos? The Great House?" Percy asked.

She nodded.

"They control a lot of wildlands. Forests, jungles, tundras… And they keep pumping those places full of resources and weaker creatures, to accelerate the birth of Yellow and Green beasts. As soon as they find some, they use one of their main bloodlines to sedate them, shipping them over to the Divine Root."

Percy let out a whistle, amazed by this. It was an entire industry! Entire ecosystems carefully maintained… so many people working… countless beasts dying… Just so that a bunch of spoiled Green-borns would get some practice dummies.

And he noticed another thing in her words. Something he'd technically already known, but which he hadn't bothered to think much about. It didn't seem like the Great Houses were just some lucky noble families who'd risen above their peers through mere strength or luck.

Or maybe, that was exactly how they had started, but they'd since embedded themselves far more firmly into the fabric of their world, making them almost indispensable. Impossible to overthrow.

The Divine Root was self-explanatory. However, it appeared the others were also integral to Remior's survival. House Etna was responsible for advancing the local branch of runecrafting. House Asclepius

presided over the flow of information and trade. And, from the looks of it, House Ypnos had this important task all to themselves.

Percy wasn't sure how all the other Great Houses fit into this, but elevating House Avalon to their ranks might not be as simple as producing a single White mage.

'Well, it's not like we need that. As long as everyone is safe, I suppose it doesn't matter…'

Then again, his family was already on course to either unimaginable glory, or complete annihilation. All thanks to him. He sure couldn't see a third way out, given how things were going.

But he shook his head.

None of that mattered right now. They were here for a reason. It was best to focus on that: to make the most of this opportunity.

Soon, the trio reached the stone formation, hiding from plain sight. Elaine offered them a drink too. They'd brought some supplies in their storage of course, but neither their water nor their rations would last a whole decade. They'd have to rely on her for the former, and on the beasts they killed for food.

"Micky! We're in! Where are you guys?" he asked out loud for the girls' benefit, sending his familiar a few images of their surroundings.

The crow soon replied with some images of his own.

'We're dozens of miles away from you right now. Don't head southeast without asking me first. I'll keep you updated.'

Sighing in relief, Percy relayed the information to the others, before asking Elaine to take a quick nap. Granted, they could all use some sleep. They'd experienced a few stressful months, and the past couple of days took the cake. But she had it the worst, as she'd been up a day longer.

He and Nesha would have to guard her for a while, and then she'd do the same for them. After that, they could finally commence their training.

Or, well… that was the plan, at least.

But trouble found them first.

Chapter 315: Rhino

It had barely been twenty minutes since Elaine fell asleep. A few Yellow beasts had invaded the stone formation in that time, searching for food. Nesha had made quick work of them at first, buying Percy time to don his armour.

Not that it was necessary for these weaklings, but he might need it if a stronger one showed up. Perhaps, it would have been prudent to do so before entering the Valley, but it would have only made the climb more difficult.

As soon as he was ready, the two switched places. Percy took over guard duty, while Nesha now watched over Elaine, shielding her from the drifting globules. Neither of them looked forward to holding their ground like this for the next several hours, but it turned out that was the least of their worries.

At some point, a faint tremor reverberated through the ground, causing everything to shake. A second quake followed a moment later, and then a third. And a fourth.

Something massive was approaching.

Slowly at first, but it didn't take long for its thunderous footfalls to grow both louder and more frequent. The monster was now accelerating directly towards them, having probably caught a whiff of their scent.

"Shit. Should I wake Elaine up?" Nesha asked, the colour draining from her face.

Percy shook his head.

“I doubt she’ll manage to sleep through the commotion anyway… But let her try. I’ve got this.”

Clearly, the creature was at Green. He’d only ever faced one of those, and the encounter hadn’t gone very well. Even handicapped by the narrow tunnel, the Starry Knight had been a brutal opponent. One that Percy had barely overcome by the skin of his teeth, mostly due to luck. Worse still, he couldn’t count on the terrain to help him this time, nor on the Starry Queen’s interference to inadvertently hinder it. The Yellow beasts must have noticed too. They’d already stopped attacking, dispersing like rats, desperately running for their lives.

Yet, Percy wasn’t afraid.

He wasn’t the same person he’d been in the Guild. Granted, his cores hadn’t advanced since then, but strength was determined by so much more than one’s grade.

Summoning both of his scythes, he turned them invisible like his armour, clenching them tightly. Walking outside the enclosed space, he turned to the direction the tremors were emanating from, waiting with bated breath.

Soon, the creature came into view. It was a hulking rhino, charging towards him at full speed. The ground shattered beneath its feet, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. Even the pebbles next to Percy bounced up and down, his force absorption runes flaring up on their own to mitigate the shockwaves. The creature wasn’t much larger than a regular rhino, despite being three grades higher.

But all those advancements clearly hadn’t gone to waste. Its pale hide was thick and hard, glistening under the dim light like ivory. It was densely covered in bony spikes, each half as thick as a man’s fist, and twice as long. Yet, they looked like toys compared to the massive horn jutting out of the abomination’s nose, long and sharp like a curved greatsword.

‘Let’s not get impaled by that…’ he smiled.

Percy had probably seen it first, thanks to his mutated eyes. It wasn’t until the monster had covered half the distance separating them that it seemed to have fully locked on him, somehow speeding up even more.

‘Come on then. Time to see how much I’ve grown.’

Pushing Synchronization to its absolute limit, he squatted slightly, taking a fighting stance. He could have activated his trollsfury tattoo too, but he didn’t think the situation was dire enough to waste it.

His gaze sunk into the rhino’s massive frame, tracing the Green mana flowing through its bloodstream, and the silver flames of its soul, flaring like a raging inferno. Instantly, a projection of its body shot in front of it, charging a few steps ahead of the actual creature.

‘So telegraphed…’

Reading its movements was so much easier than Rambert’s or Jason’s. Beasts weren’t weak by any means, but they were certainly predictable, their fighting style simple and straightforward. A good thing too, because Percy couldn’t afford to let a single hit land on his body. He wasn’t confident his armour would hold against this walking calamity, and he had no intention to turn into meat paste today.

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Alas, the time for planning was over, the creature finally upon him.

Percy almost leapt to his left to dodge the charge. However, both Grim Dance and Greater Foresight showed him that was a bad idea. Instead, he switched directions at the last moment, leaping to his right instead, narrowly avoiding getting skewered by its horn.

But he wasn’t out of danger just yet.

Through a series of rapid steps, he danced around the creature’s frame, circling its stomping foreleg, before slashing with both of his scythes.

The weapons ignored the forest of spikes entirely, phasing beneath the rhino’s hide. The teal blades sank into its soul, meeting almost no resistance as they sliced a pair of deep, horizontal gashes into the silver flame.

A Green's soul was far stronger than a Yellow's, but Percy's weapons weren't the same he'd used against the oversized wasp. Not only were his scythes larger and made of reinforced mana, he'd added quite a bunch of powerful enchantments on them a few days ago.

Two of the rhino's legs buckled, though its momentum carried it forward for dozens of metres, as its spiked exoskeleton shredded a wide groove into the stone. The attack had definitely caused a lot of damage, but Percy knew it wasn't enough to finish the beast. It was way too bulky, so the blades of his scythes still hadn't cut deep enough: relatively speaking.

Not wasting the opportunity, he hurled both of them at the creature, taking advantage of its momentary disorientation to inflict another pair of injuries into its soul. They were shallower than the previous ones, since he wasn't there to manually add force to the attacks, but still rather painful.

The rhino let out a terrible roar, but its agony didn't prevent it from climbing back to its feet. It wobbled a little, but it brushed it off, its eyes glaring at Percy with hatred.

Then, it charged forth again.

This time, the shadow in front of its body didn't reach as far ahead. It had clearly wised up, planning to attack more carefully this time.

Either way, Percy was ready for it.

At the last second, the projection swept its head in a wide arc from left to right, trying to cleave him right in half!

Percy barely jumped above the horn in time, but that wasn't the end of it. The rhino then swept upwards, in an attempt to stab him mid-air!

Turning both his weapons corporeal, Percy moved them in front of his body, parrying the attack. He wasn't confident his constructs would hold in a head-on collision with the monster, but its upward slash lacked the forward momentum of its charge, and the full weight of its body.

The impact was still powerful enough to shatter both scythes, the runes on his armour struggling to absorb the shockwave coursing up his arms.

Luckily, he did manage to push himself out of the horn's path, skidding and rolling clumsily along the rhino's back, before falling behind it. The spikes left many cracks and dents on the Phantomscale Regalia, but the self-repair enchantments were already mending them.

Percy looked down at the broken shafts in his hands.

He smiled.

Had this been a week ago, the clash would have left him disarmed. Unfortunately for the beast, it wasn't so easy to destroy his weapons anymore. Pouring some fused mana into the constructs, he watched as the controlled self-repair enchantments did their job. The shafts grew rapidly. Not as rapidly as Percy would have liked, of course.

At least, not at first.

A few inches up the shafts, another enchantment appeared, sucking even more mana to accelerate the process. And then a third, and a fourth. Within mere moments, the shafts were back to full length. If that wasn't enough, a pair of brand-new blades started growing off the ends.

Despite the numerous enchantments working in tandem, Percy still needed about half a minute to fully restore the weapons. Obviously, the rhino wouldn't just wait for him. It was already charging at him once more.

When the beast was about to reach him, Percy tugged at two other constructs with his willpower. The original blades that had broken off his scythes during the previous clash. Shooting upward, they dug into the rhino's soul from below as it ran over them, causing it to stumble.

This gave Percy the chance to sidestep the attack more easily. In fact, he managed to land another debilitating slash with one of his weapons, having almost finished repairing its blade.

And that was just the start of the creature's trouble.

Percy flung both of his scythes at the beast, before calling the discarded blades to his hands. He poured mana into those too, causing more runes to flare. Soon, the blades were back to their original shape, a pair of brand-new shafts growing underneath them.

By the time the rhino recovered from the latest attack, Percy was holding a third and a fourth scythe in his hands!

Needless to say, these weren't the old Soul Harvesters. Through a series of controlled self-repair enchantments distributed evenly along their length, Percy could not only repair them from any part, but he could even duplicate them from the pieces!

The rhino attacked again, but it was slower and clumsier than before. The only thing its reckless charge had earned it was another pair of gashes in its soul.

And that marked the end of the fight.

The two sides went back and forth for a few more minutes, but there wasn't any suspense. Percy's advantage only continued to snowball, as he avoided the attacks with ease, pushing the Grim Dance to its very limit to inflict more injuries with his four weapons.

He could have made more scythes if he wanted, to surround the beast from every direction, like he'd done against Rambert. But he didn't see a need for that. This was more than enough to put the creature out of its misery. Besides, he didn't want to fill his spatial seal with constructs. Plus, he still had some trouble handling that many weapons. This was one of the skills he was planning to work on during his stay in the Valley.

Alas, the rhino wouldn't live to see that day. Breathing its last, it collapsed once more, shattering the ground beneath it for the final time as Percy's Status notified him of the upgrade.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Soul Harvester: Refined -> Replicating Soul Harvester: Refined!]

Chapter 316: Sharpness

‘Still Refined, huh?’

Percy wasn’t too surprised by the lower tier, since the runework on his new scythes wasn’t as extensive as his cauldron’s, and even that hadn’t reached Masterful yet. But there was no doubt in his mind that both spells were getting closer.

It wasn’t just the self-repair enchantments he’d added to the weapons either. He’d alternated them with another pseudo-enchantment of his own creation. One composed of three different runes.

The first, were the concealment runes he’d always drawn on the Soul Harvester. Combined with his mana’s natural invisibility, they turned his weapons exceedingly insidious, catching his opponents by surprise. Maybe not the rhino though, since its bulk would have made it difficult for it to avoid his attacks regardless.

Next were the hardness runes he usually drew on his armour. They made his weapons more durable too. He would have loved to add some preservation runes into the mix, but that was a luxury he couldn’t afford at the moment. Fusing more than three runes together was still a challenge for him: at least if they weren’t mostly control runes. In any case, the preservation runes weren’t necessary, as the self-repairs provided him with a better way to maintain the constructs.

Instead, he’d saved the final slot for a brand-new type of runes he’d mastered recently: the sharpness runes. They were described in one of the books he’d bought from the Vault during his last trip there, though he hadn’t had much time to study them during his stay in Twilight City.

That’s why he had cheated.

Percy had handed the book, the translation device and some teal powder to one of his clones, asking him to search for a demi-human host. Bribing the creature with some food, he then spent a few days to upgrade his scythe while he worked on his armour with his main body.

Ideally, he would have liked to outsource the armour too, to save a couple more days. Sadly, the Phantomscale Regalia needed a lot more time and mana than the Soul Harvester, so the clone's limited stash wouldn't have sufficed.

Regardless, the clone had completed the task without fail, bringing the scythe back upon his return. The sharpness runes were one of the main reasons Percy had been able to slice the rhino's soul with such ease.

"Are you done playing with your scythes?" Nesha asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Elaine was standing by her side, having woken up at some point during his fight.

"Go back to sleep. I promise we'll wake you up if we run into more trouble than we can handle." he said.

But his cousin pointed at the rhino's corpse.

"Should we move to a different spot first? The bodies are going to attract scavengers soon."

"They won't." Percy shook his head.

None of his own kills had shed a single drop of blood, since their injuries had been dealt directly to their souls. Walking up to the colossal body, he slashed at it a few more times, to accelerate the degradation of the silver flame. As soon as it had fully dispersed, he placed his hand on it, causing the corpse to vanish.

At the same time, it appeared inside his seal. It couldn't contain living things, but the rhino wasn't alive anymore, its soul already gone. Of course, it did take much of the space in there. Percy didn't have the full seal on him, as he'd given a quarter to Micky, and another quarter to his latest clone. He currently only had half, which meant the cube was only about five metres across. By the time he stuffed the rest of the bodies into the seal, it was almost full.

'Oh well… I'll dump them later. After we all get some sleep.'

There were a couple of bodies drenched in blood: the ones that Nesha had slain at the start. Elaine washed them with her mana, before Percy stored them too. They probably hadn't eliminated the stench entirely, but Percy was sure the rest of the Valley smelled just as strongly, if not more, given the constant carnage transpiring everywhere. Satisfied with that, Elaine went to sleep, as the others guarded her.

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The next few hours were relatively uneventful. They did get attacked by more Yellow beasts, but Percy didn't have much trouble dealing with them. By the time Elaine woke up, the dome of bubbles and foam above their heads had gone dark, the sun having already set. For the rest of Remior, it would rise again in a few hours, but for the three of them, it wouldn't do so for another week.

Shrugging, Percy took a short nap next, followed by Nesha. None of them had had their fill, but they'd rested enough to at least be functional. They all understood the first few months would be quite exhausting. Either Percy or Elaine had to be awake at all times, as they were the strongest combatants: the only ones capable of handling the Green beasts. In the future, Nesha would be able to sleep at the same time as one of them, but only after they learned to instinctively keep the globules at bay. Until then, they needed a third person to watch over the one who slept.

'We'll get there in due time...'

Once everyone was feeling better, they decided to take a short break to grab a bite. Taking out the corpse of the rhino once more, Percy asked Elaine to chop a leg off, before storing it in his seal again. The blood attracted more beasts, but the two of them fought side-by-side this time, to fend them off. Meanwhile, Nesha took her sweet time roasting the meat over a campfire. It took ages for the monster's flesh to cook, and it was still hard enough that they nearly broke their teeth on it. At that point, they vowed to only eat the Yellow ones from now on.

With their minds somewhat rested and their bellies somewhat full, the trio then headed off, looking for more shelter. The rock formation they'd used up until now wasn't terrible, but they figured it would be a good idea to explore the area, and to find a few more potential camping spots, in case one of them was compromised.

Consulting with Micky, Percy led his companions to the southwest, after confirming the Holy Child's entourage was elsewhere.

One thing they all made sure to stay on top of, was their cleansing sessions. Whenever their cores stopped burning, they drank a dose of Aurora Dew, ensuring they never delayed their advancement by a single second. Developing their spells would definitely help when they clashed with the Holy Child, but reaching the next grade was the easily the most important factor that would determine whether they managed to rescue Micky. Getting there a few days earlier might be the difference between having to face three Blues, or five.

Other than that, they decided to take it a bit easy during their first week here, to give themselves a chance to adapt to the bizarre environment. And there was a lot to get used to: the endless onslaught of beasts, the floating globules, the lack of sleep. It wasn't just the static stuff either. They had to constantly be aware of Acton's movements, and to also face the influx of beasts coming into the Valley from the east and west sides every few days: whenever the Divine Root dumped a new shipment into the Decree. By all accounts, this place was a living hell, gnawing at them both mentally and physically.

But they persisted.

They fought.

And they slaughtered everything dumb enough to attack them.

Percy hadn't started working on the Dance yet. It was a big project, and he needed to fully have his mind in the game before he tackled it. He wanted to get over the sleep deprivation and the globules first. But that didn't mean he'd remained idle. He focused on his scythes for now, honing his fighting style.

Nesha hadn't worked out the Circulation patterns for either of her cores yet. She hadn't even finished tempering the earth channels, though she had cleared them all. Right now, she was working on something different though. It was something to do with her butterflies, but Percy wasn't sure what exactly.

Meanwhile, Elaine didn't have any new affinity or channels to work on, and she couldn't improve her boosting art either. Not until Percy made some progress with it, to pave the way forward. But that didn't mean she was lazing around. According to her, her Slippery Step had upgraded to Refined when she flew up the cliff, leaving no more Crude spells in her Status. She was already working on reaching Masterful.

Needless to say, all of their projects were ambitious. Each would likely require months: if not years: to complete.

But that was fine.

They had plenty of time to get there. After all, this was exactly why they'd fought so hard to reach this place.

If there was one sour spot, it was Percy's clones. He continued to send them out whenever possible, of course. Sadly, they took much longer to return. From their perspective, they only spent a couple days away each time. But for him, they always took over a month to get back.

It was something he'd already expected, though it still stung to imagine all the opportunities he was giving up on.

Alas, this was the price he had to pay to train here. Besides, a decade was a long time. Sure, he'd miss out on a lot of adventures in that time, but he should still be able to send out over a hundred clones before his fight with Acton. One of them was bound to find something useful.

Yet, the first round of improvements in the group didn't come from outside Remior, but from inside the Thirsty Valley, just a few months later…

Chapter 317: Execution

The gorilla swung its fist down, about to flatten Nesha like a pancake. Percy and Elaine were too far to save her, currently locked up with the creature's packmates. But she didn't need help.

Right when the attack was about to hit, something strange happened.

Nesha took a step back. Just a single, quick step. But her foot landed over a dozen metres behind her, her leg stretching like a rubber band. Next, the rest of her body stretched, and then snapped back, letting the creature's fist hit nothing but empty space.

The punch still pulverized the ground where she'd stood a moment ago, sending a rain of splinters all over the place. But Nesha was completely unharmed, already preparing her next spell.

Naturally, it wasn't her body that had changed shape. It was the space between the two spots that she'd compressed, allowing her to traverse it more easily. What's more, this was merely a Crude spell: Space Squeeze! Evidently, even the simplest applications of a rare affinity were quite flashy!

She hadn't developed it by accident either. Her previous lack of mobility had bothered her for a long time, having been one of her greatest weaknesses. It was the reason she had been unable to fully participate in the fights against Grian, Jason and the Divine Root. Even though her offensive power wasn't lacking, it would have only taken a single hit to eliminate her, unless she had somebody covering for her. And that wasn't always an option.

Admittedly, the spell did eat a lot of mana, despite its low tier. Or perhaps, because of it. But that was ultimately a small price to pay, to preserve her life.

And it wasn't the only thing she'd been working on…

'Third time's the charm…' she thought, focusing on the mana inside her core.

The gorilla was furious. It let out a savage roar as it pounded its chest, each thunderous shockwave sending the air around it into turmoil. Then, it landed on all fours, charging towards her. Even like this, it towered over her, but she didn't let fear get in her way.

Splitting part of her attention, Nesha concentrated on the Green core thrumming inside the creature's hulking frame. She couldn't see it as clearly as Percy, but that was fine. She only needed to track its location.

Feeling the shrinking distance between them, she pushed forth a packet of mana, hoping it would meet its target.

The monster was about to reach her when it stumbled, its features twisting in agony. It fell to its knees, barely holding itself up with its knuckles.

That was when something truly appalling happened.

Mounds of flesh squirmed under its fur, before exploding in a rain of blood and gore, a flock of black butterflies flying out in every direction!

The gorilla was still alive, as she'd failed to teleport any of her constructs directly inside its skull, but it wouldn't be able to continue fighting like this.

Listening to its gurgled howls, Nesha felt bad for the creature. She launched another barrage of butterflies, this time into its head, finally putting it out of its misery. The Status didn't miss its cue either, celebrating her first solo victory against a Green beast with an announcement of its own.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Chaotic Garden: Refined -> Chaotic Execution: Refined!]

For a long time, she'd been unable to control the exact spot where the butterflies manifested. The best she had been able to do was to surround her opponents and attack them from every direction. But she'd known this was only a testament to her own lack of skill. There wasn't any reason why she shouldn't be able to send her constructs directly inside an enemy's body.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Since she entered the Valley, she'd resolved herself to eliminate all of her weaknesses, one by one. The lack of mobility and the randomness of her attacks were just two examples. By the time she was done, she fully intended to develop a few earth spells as well, and to master Circulation with both of her cores.

In fact, she'd already drawn some inspiration from her other spells to solve the issue of her space channels. The problem was that many of them led to dead-ends, but perhaps that was only to be expected for a space affinity user. Since she could stretch the space around her and even teleport her butterflies, couldn't she do the same with the mana inside her channels?

Figuring out the specifics was still a work in progress, but she felt more confident than ever that she would complete the pattern sooner or later.

‘Hopefully the other one isn’t as complicated…’

Other than that, it would be nice if she could learn Percy’s dance moves too, combining them with her new movement spell. Of course, she’d have to go a different route with it, because she had no intention of fighting in melee range like her companions. Her affinity was more suitable for keeping her distance from her opponents, taking them down from afar using her spells and her traps.

If possible, she’d like to dip her toes into affinity fusion too, though that might be asking for too much. She had no idea what a fusion of earth and space would even look like.

“Wow, did you seriously rip a Green beast apart from the inside?” Percy asked, finishing off his own gorilla.

This time, they’d been attacked by a whole pack of them. A large one too, with four Green specimens and dozens of Yellows. Finding even a single Green beast was rare, so House Ypnos had really lucked out with these guys. It was a pity they were about to get wiped out, but they’d made for decent opponents, at least. Elaine was about to dispatch the last of the two Greens she was facing, the surviving Yellows having already dispersed.

“You saw that? I told you it was possible!” she grinned. “Now, I’m the strongest one in the group!”

“Dream on!” he chuckled. “I should be able to predict where the butterflies will appear after seeing the spell a couple more times. As for Elaine, I bet she can take you out before you even use it.”

Nesha shrugged.

“Only if you guys see me casting.” she said, thinking of something else. “Reckon I could snipe Acton with this?”

Percy rubbed his chin, pondering her question. But he shook his head a minute later.

“You’ll struggle to get close enough. Even if you do, I’m pretty sure his domain will mess with it.”

She frowned, but she didn't disagree with his assessment. Leaving aside whether she'd be personally affected by the domain, her constructs certainly would be, once she tried to teleport them inside the kid's body. After all, spells were essentially a mix of mana and willpower, and domains were thick with willpower too. It would interfere with her control.

"Don't let Mr. Grumpy here spoil your achievement!" Elaine said, joining the conversation. "It's an impressive spell. You should be able to assassinate anyone below Blue with it!"

"I'm not trying to 'spoil' her achievement." Percy rolled his eyes. "I just don't want her to think she can go ambushing Blues just because of a spell upgrade. It's the quickest way to get killed."

"Hey, I'm not an idiot, you know!" Nesha said. "I've no interest in playing hero. I'll leave the Blues to you two monsters. I'll just support you from a distance. Or keep their Greens busy. Assuming they even have Greens left by the time we fight them…"

Reminded of the tall obstacles before them, everyone fell silent. The gap they had to close was colossal, and their enemies weren't exactly fiddling with their thumbs either. The only way to stand a chance was to work several times harder than them.

But it wasn't all gloom and doom.

It had been over three months since they entered the Valley, and everyone was improving rapidly. Even more notably, they'd adjusted to the environment by now, settling into their new routine. All three of them had grown noticeably stronger, having a much easier time fighting the beasts. Even Nesha could hold her own against a Green now, though it might be a while longer until she felt confident protecting the whole group by herself.

They'd learned to passively shield themselves from the globules too. Technically, they could have cheated, by having Percy forge a suit of armour for each of them. But they ultimately chose to learn how to deal with the globules properly, since they'd be staying in here for a while. Besides, neither she nor Elaine would be able to use the armour well in a fight.

Without access to Percy's mana, they wouldn't be able to turn it invisible or intangible. The runes would still offer some protection, but without the ability to control the network of strings holding everything

together, they wouldn't be able to properly absorb the impacts. The armour would fall apart after the first hit. Finally, they wouldn't be able to feed the self-repair enchantments if the armour got damaged.

In any case, everyone was able to get more sleep nowadays, and their fights weren't as difficult.

"Hey, Percy? Think you can start working on the Dance?" Elaine suddenly asked. "Unlike Nesha, I don't have a fancy new affinity to work on. I'll be busy trying to upgrade my other spells for the next few years, but it would be nice if you could figure it out by then."

Percy nodded, looking just as excited as her.

"Tomorrow."

Chapter 318: Cores and channels

Elaine and Nesha were fighting against a pack of Yellow hyenas led by a Green matriarch. They could have made quick work of them, of course, but they held back many of their tricks, focused on honing others.

As for Percy, he didn't participate. Relying on his companions to keep him safe, he concentrated on something else. Semi-hidden at the foot of a medium-sized boulder, he was sitting cross-legged, his eyes closed and his boosting art running. Only Circulation though, not Synchronization. And with just the pure mana.

Upgrading the soul component of the spell was going to be a whole other challenge, but he wasn't interested in doing that right now. That would come later. For the time being, he was content just copying what Tlaloc had shown him on Felmara.

'My channels aren't exactly the same as his. I hope that's not a problem…'

Due to his different physiology compared to Micky's people, and the odd placement of his second core, Percy had been forced to modify Circulation a little when he first learned it. The changes were small, as the overall shape of his mana network and the corresponding pattern were just shifted slightly. Still, Percy wasn't sure if this would remain the case while practicing the final part of the technique.

He shrugged.

‘Only one way to know, I guess.’

Carefully recalling the Green-born’s demonstration, he focused on all the new components of the spell. He had to allow the mana to spill out of his pores, use it to induce a secondary flow outside his body, shape it into whirlpools linked with his mana channels to increase its efficiency, allow the ambient mana to mix with his own, and use his channels to refine the ambient mana before it even reached his core…

There was a lot there, and the specifics were a bit fuzzy in his mind. He’d only caught a fleeting glimpse of the spell before everything went to shit. From afar. And with lots of other things going through his mind at the time. Worse still, several months had passed since then.

But it was okay. He remembered plenty. The rest… he could figure out.

Starting with the first step, he pushed Circulation to its limits, fully saturating every inch of his body with mana. Next, he allowed some of it to leave his pores, forming a thin cyan layer around his skin.

This wasn’t that novel by itself. Every mage had to push mana outside their body whenever they wanted to cast a spell. And Percy had inadvertently stepped an inch closer to the Dance on his own, via Synchronization and his Mantle of Deceit. There was too much mana to store in his body, so he was used to keeping some outside as a temporary storage: a buffer until he cast a spell with it. The only difference was that this shroud was always static. Closer to a stagnant pool of water than a river. It never contributed to the flow itself, remaining separate from his boosting art. This was what he had to change to complete the spell.

‘What if I try to reabsorb it?’

Mages typically drew ambient mana into their lungs, before refining it inside their cores, converting it to their own affinity and adding their willpower. As for mana channels, they were mostly there to expel the mana from their bodies, and to cast spells with it.

Technically, it was possible to pull ambient mana through their channels. In fact, that was what every child had to do to clear the first couple of channels and activate their core. But the process was far slower, taking a few days at minimum.

Either way, the mana currently coating Percy's body wasn't ambient mana. It was his own. He could easily absorb it whichever way he wanted. Moving a large chunk of the cyan mana to his nose, he breathed it in. Since it already belonged to him, it coursed through his body without obstruction, passing first through his core and then his channels, before getting expelled from his pores again. Finally, it reached his nose and his lungs for the second time, completing the cycle.

Over the next few minutes, he continued to recycle his mana as he drew some ambient mana from the air around him as well, to refill his channels. By the time he got used to it, he felt a little different. His muscles had grown stronger, his mind clearer. In fact, this was how it felt whenever he activated the boosting art in the first place, proving he was on the right path.

That said, the change was minuscule. He wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't looked for it. If he had to put a number, he'd grown about 2~3% stronger. Still quite impressive, given how easily he had accomplished it.

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'Wait, no… this boost is going to disappear immediately once I get in a fight.'

Right now, Percy was merely recycling his own mana. When he started using it, he'd have to replenish it with ambient mana from his surroundings. He could only breathe so fast, and his lungs had a limited capacity. He'd inevitably have to dilute this secondary flow, which would rob him of the new boost.

Replenishing the lost mana was something he already had to juggle when using his boosting art, but he usually only had to worry about keeping his output equal or lower to his input. If he breathed in his own mana, he was essentially reducing his input even further, which wasn't sustainable.

'Alright. I can see why Micky's ancestors learned to absorb mana directly from their pores…'

It was tantamount to breathing with every inch of their body: at least as far as their mana intake was concerned. It was the only way to boost not only their capacity, but also their mana regeneration. This was especially important, because mana kept outside the body tended to leak over time, meaning they would have to absorb an even greater volume to benefit from it.

The only question was… how did they do it?

'I suppose I can worry about absorbing and converting the ambient mana later. For now, let's focus on the breathing part.'

Percy stopped moving the excess mana to his nose and slowed down his breaths, allowing his channels to empty slightly. Next, he absorbed the cyan film directly through his skin, pulling the mana through some channels, and expelling it through others. It wouldn't have looked any different to the naked eye, but Percy's eyes were a little more special than that. He instantly noticed the motes snaking in and out of his body, forming lots of tiny loops.

He kept this up for a few minutes, until he grew accustomed to the feeling. Then, he added some more mana to the system, saturating his channels again. And the effect was immediate!

His strength grew by a couple percentage points once more!

Next, he re-established the other external flow passing through his lungs, pushing the boosting art a little further still.

'5%. Not bad. But again, it'll crumble the moment I try to add more ambient mana to the mix…'

At least, the mana looping through his skin wouldn't be affected, but a 3% boost was barely worth mentioning. Percy was a lot greedier than that. He had to find a way to boost his regeneration as much as his capacity. Clearly, he had to draw the ambient mana through his channels: there was no avoiding that.

But there were two problems with that idea. First, the flow would be slow and inefficient: as mentioned previously. Not just that, but both his channels and core were already saturated. He couldn't fit any

more inside his body, nor could he make it flow any faster than it already was. This was why he even needed to create an external flow in the first place.

'Okay. That explains why Tlaloc had to use his own mana to refine the ambient mana outside his core. But how is such a thing even possible?'

Mana cores were extremely intricate organs, with lots of functions. As far as Percy could tell, every core was equipped with some innate concepts corresponding to one's affinity. This was what allowed them to cleanse mana of other types and to assume control of it. How could he seize the ambient mana without his core's help?

Through his mana channels, perhaps?

But that didn't make any sense! It was widely known that mana channels were different from a core. Sure, they could store and transmit mana, but they lacked most of a core's key functions… didn't they?

'Or maybe that's wrong?'

Perhaps, the distinction between one's core and mana channels wasn't as clear as he thought it was…

Micky's Regulation did work differently from Percy's Soul Conversion. It allowed him to convert some of the ice mana to beast mana as it travelled through his veins: his channels, essentially. Percy had chalked this up to a feature unique to the beast affinity. But maybe it was a broader property of mana channels.

'Actually, how does Circulation even work?'

Obviously, it allowed him to absorb and store more mana in his body. But it affected so much more than merely his capacity and regeneration… Why did it enhance his physical strength? His muscles weren't fuelled by mana, so where was the extra power coming from?

'Come to think of it, activating the boosting art has always felt a bit like when my cores advance to the next grade…'

It wasn't exactly the same. The feeling was shallower. Weaker. Temporary. Still, Circulation did offer the same holistic improvements to Percy's very existence. From strengthening his body, to sharpening his senses and calming his mind.

He'd always thought of his tempered channels as an "extension of his core", and the boosting art as "elevating his strength by half a grade", because that was effectively what the spell did. But perhaps, this was more literal than he had thought.

'Well, that can't be completely right.'

He knew for a fact that the Dance didn't triple one's lifespan. If it did, then Yellow-borns on both Huehue and Felmara would have been able to reach godhood, yet neither of the two planets was considered a greater spring.

It seemed the spell's effect was less substantial than a true advancement. It increased the quantity of one's mana, but not its quality: its grade. Perhaps, that was the difference between boosting one's strength and extending their lifespan.

In any case, that didn't matter right now. If his mana channels could truly function like an extension of his core, then he should be able to refine the ambient mana in there.

Happy with his guess, he grinned.

'Now we're getting somewhere.'

Chapter 319: Ambient mana

Several months had passed inside the Valley.

Everyone was making good progress towards the next grade, having never missed a single cleansing session. None of Acton's guards had advanced either, which was great news.

Other than that, Elaine and Nesha were both growing stronger by the day, constantly fighting against the beasts and honing their magic. They'd registered a couple new Crude spells each, with Nesha having even started practicing with her earth affinity.

In fact, she was this close to mastering Circulation with her space mana too, having made a ton of progress with the corresponding pattern. She said the trick had been to teleport her mana from one channel to another, essentially closing a few invisible loops in her body. There was still some work to be done, but it looked like she'd have the technique down by the end of their first year in here.

"Ugh… I'm so sick of sitting all day!" Percy groaned.

He wanted to join them, itching to stretch his limbs and get some combat practice of his own. But he'd decided his time was better spent focusing on his boosting art, at least until he could use it while fighting. That way, he'd be improving on two fronts at the same time.

Sadly, progress was slow.

He knew he was on the right track: not only because his ideas made sense in his mind, but also because he'd seen Tlaloc do something similar in the past. Still, putting everything to practice proved quite difficult. Pushing the ambient mana through his channels felt like trying to pump tar through a thin water pipe.

'Not that surprising, really.' he smiled bitterly.

It was common knowledge that ambient mana was made of all sorts of mana types. And each of them wanted to do its own thing: to move through his body in a different manner. This was why each affinity had its own set of mana channels.

But Percy only had a pure affinity: at least for the purposes of this exercise. His core tugged at a specific component of the ambient mana, forcing it to pass through the corresponding pathways. Naturally, the other types resisted, dragging the pure mana down and slowing everything to a crawl. It was so bad, in fact, that injecting ambient mana into his body actually made his boosting art weaker than plain old Circulation, making him second guess everything.

‘No, I’m on the right track here. This HAS to be it. I’m just missing something…’

The good news was that he’d at least proven his hypothesis correct. By the end of the first week, he’d managed to convert part of the ambient mana into his own affinity, without ever allowing it to enter his core. Clearly, his channels could indeed reproduce some of the functions of his core: albeit inefficiently.

The problem was that pure cores were already bad at converting other types into their own, and his channels were even worse than his core. He could only convert a tiny amount after having it flow through his body for several minutes, and the output wasn’t even worth mentioning.

But what was he doing wrong?

In theory, he could keep at it for years, and his efficiency was bound to increase slightly. Still, at the abysmal rate he was improving, he doubted he’d get any good at this for centuries. And Tlaloc clearly wasn’t that old.

Thinking back to the Green-born’s demonstration, Percy compared it to what he was currently doing. It was the same thing: the internal pattern of Circulation hadn’t changed, and he was trying to convert the ambient mana inside his body, just like his friend had done. The only difference was that he hadn’t added the whirlpools yet, because he didn’t want to pull more ambient mana until he figured out what to do with it.

‘Maybe that’s the issue?’ he suddenly thought, raising an eyebrow.

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He was used to breaking complex problems into simpler tasks, to tackle them more easily. Learn how to absorb ambient mana, figure out how to convert it, scale the whole thing up… Usually, this mindset worked for him, whether it was in alchemy, runecrafting, or other spells he’d developed in the past. But perhaps, this time it was standing in his way instead.

‘How would a greater quantity of ambient mana help me convert it faster though?’

He pondered over that idea for a couple of minutes, before ultimately shaking his head. He felt he was onto something, but increasing the quantity alone wasn't the answer. Maybe he had to begin the conversion process before the ambient mana even entered his body?

The final part of the technique: or External Flow as the Felmarans had called it: involved extending the flow outside one's body, to boost their capacity and regeneration further. But if one's mana channels functioned as an extension of their core, then didn't this external flow serve as an extension of their mana channels?

It had to be, because even the small flows he'd added had immediately boosted his physical strength. In other words, he had to essentially turn not only his whole body, but even the air around it into an extension of his mana core!

'If I'm right about this, the conversion has to happen in three stages.'

First, he'd begin the process outside his body, partially converting the ambient mana into his affinity. The efficiency was bound to be even lower than inside his channels, but it wasn't a closed space, so he could attempt this at a much higher scale.

Next, he would pull the primed mana into his body, continuing the conversion while circulating it around his pathways. It would flow much faster too, as the ratio of pure mana would be much higher by that point.

Finally, whatever mana reached his core would barely require further processing, so he could apply the final touch there, completing the conversion.

'It's kinda like how cows digest food in stages…'

In other words, the whirlpools did more than merely pulling the ambient mana. No wonder he hadn't been able to get far without them. It simply wasn't possible to master all the components of the Dance individually: he had to practice everything together.

Happy with his deductions, he decided to give it a shot. He expelled some of his mana from his pores, but he didn't let it stick closely to his skin this time. Instead, he allowed it to scatter, to mix with the air, enveloping his body in a thin, cyan mist.

Next, he tried to pull it back.

The ambient mana resisted again, but not as much as before, since the pure component made up a greater ratio. It was still way too slow, however. He had to do better.

He visualized his core, burning like an Orange star in his abdomen. And the channels, spreading out from his core, reaching every corner of his body. Finally, the tiny flows exiting and entering his body.

Saying that everything was connected was one thing, but truly believing it was another. This was a new idea to him, so he had to let go of all his previous preconceptions.

He tried to think of his channels as roots, and of the tiny flows passing through his pores as hairs, extending out of those roots. The flow wasn't uniform either. Whenever he inhaled, he felt his core burn, before sending a pulse rippling through his channels, spilling out of his skin. Whenever he exhaled, the pressure inside his body eased slightly, causing the ambient mana to enter his skin.

The whole system was one. It was alive. It was connected.

As he repeated his actions, Percy fell into a rhythm. A slow rhythm, at first. The mist outside his body was faint, and the ambient mana resisted. The flow inside his channels was a complete slog, and his conversion rate was abysmal.

But he focused on stability, rather than speed or efficiency. The most important thing was to keep the spell active. From there, he could make all sorts of incremental improvements, until it surpassed his old boosting art.

Falling into a trance, Percy didn't even register the flow of time, until his companions called out to him. As much as they would have liked to let him continue practicing, Nesha still wasn't strong enough to guard the group by herself, so Percy had to take over whenever Elaine needed to sleep.

But that was fine.

As soon as she woke up, he grabbed the opportunity to sleep for a few hours himself, before resuming his training.

It was better the second day. By the time he had to stop again, the mist had grown a little thicker, and the mana was flowing a little faster inside his body. He'd converted more of it too.

The third day was better still. The fourth too. As was the week after, and the week after that. Two months later, Percy felt some movement in the cyan mist.

The flows in and out of his skin had grown strong enough that the faint outline of a whirlpool was beginning to form. It helped gather even more ambient mana, and to push it into his body even more forcefully. The effect of the boosting art was more potent too, though it was still a little weaker than Circulation.

But Percy was happy.

He was improving a lot faster than he'd done during the months leading to his most recent breakthrough.

And, what happened just one month after that allowed him to spend more time training.

Chapter 320: A bit of a situation

It had been around eleven months since they entered the Valley when Nesha finally managed to activate Circulation. Her version involved lots of black circles of various sizes decorating her body, many of them seemingly disconnected from one another.

The visuals aside, the boosting art bumped her fighting strength noticeably. Between that, and her other spell upgrades, she had finally reached a level where she could take care of the group's security by herself. Splitting the day with Elaine, she allowed Percy to spend more time on his own project.

And that didn't even mark the end of her growth: only a significant milestone. She was still making rapid progress with her earth affinity. It was currently at Orange, but it should reach Yellow in six to seven months. As for the corresponding pattern, everyone was optimistic it wouldn't be as difficult to figure out. Not only was she more experienced in this, but it was just a common affinity. When both of those things happened, Percy should be able to teach her Synchronization too, which would boost her strength by another level.

If there was one thing she'd fallen behind on, it was her runecrafting. She hadn't had as much time to work on it until now, but things were going to change. Mastering the enchantments for the spatial amulets wasn't as pressing as it had been before, since they had more storage space than they knew what to do with at the moment.

Thus, she chose to focus on her traps instead.

Her controlled pocket runes had already proven themselves deadly, and she'd hid a few underground in several spots around the Valley: in case of an emergency. But there was plenty of room for improvement. Ideally, she wanted to work the concealment runes and the preservation runes directly into the enchantment, so that her traps would both last longer and be more difficult to detect, without having to rely on a separate concealment rune to cover them. She didn't need to sleep twelve hours a day, so she still had some downtime during Elaine's shift to work on all that.

In any case, Percy benefited just as much from her power-up, if not more.

The girls didn't even complain that he sat around all day. After all, combat practice was technically a good thing, and he was missing out on it. Other than that, Nesha was more than happy with everything he'd done for her, and all the runecrafting books he'd lent her. Elaine was on the same page, plus she wanted him to figure out the Dance. The sooner he did, the sooner he could teach her too.

So, just like that, Percy continued to spend day after day working on his spell.

The whirlpools spiralling towards his pores grew larger and more defined. The twin flows entering and exiting his skin caused them to rotate faster, and to push the ambient mana into his body with even greater strength. His conversion rate climbed too. Not inside his core, since that had already plateaued years ago. That was a given, after passively converting ambient to pure mana with every breath for so long. But both his channels and the ethereal flow outside his body grew better at 'digesting' the external mana: the former more so than the latter.

Several more months had passed by the time the next major change occurred.

Nesha and Elaine both advanced their second cores, a few days apart from one another! Elaine, in particular, had grown extremely powerful. Even though she only had a single affinity, the power afforded to her by two Green cores wasn't a joke. Especially when she used Circulation.

The group even floated the idea of ambushing Acton ahead of time. Leaving the boy's domain aside, Elaine was probably stronger than him when it came to brute strength alone. It wasn't impossible to take him out if she had the element of surprise. It would be tough. And risky. Percy and Nesha handling five Greens by themselves wouldn't be easy either. But it wasn't necessarily impossible. At least, it wasn't clear that waiting a decade would put them in a better position, given how many more Blues they'd have to fight.

Sadly, it turned out this wasn't even on the table.

When he mentioned this to Micky, the crow informed them that the first of the kid's bodyguards had already reached Blue, a couple weeks ago. The next one shouldn't be long either.

Left with no other choice, the trio dove back to their training.

A few months later, Nesha finally got a handle on her earth pattern. It took the form of brown lines that resembled fissures, making her look a little like a cracked statue. Upgrading it to Synchronization was relatively straightforward: Percy had already explained how she was meant to use the two instances of Circulation in tandem, to push her body past its limits.

But she'd have to get more accustomed to the spells before she could attempt it, as it required fine control over her mana. Anything short of that, and she could easily injure herself. Unfortunately, Elaine couldn't upgrade her boosting art in the same way. Though it did grow slightly stronger upon integrating her new core into the pattern.

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Not long after that, Percy finally joined them in fighting against the beasts.

With the Dance still incomplete, and without using the other half of his boosting art, he wasn't confident in fighting Greens. That said, he was more than capable of slaughtering the Yellows.

His appearance while using the spell had changed quite a bit too. The cyan lines on his skin shone brighter than ever before, and that was just the start. They seemed to extend out of his body in several spots, forming glowing trails that followed him as he moved around.

If one paid closer attention, they'd quickly notice these cyan ribbons weren't static. They were elongated whirlpools, swirling rapidly as they drew ambient mana from the air, delivering it to his body. Other than that, he was shrouded in a faint cloud of cyan mist, giving him an almost sacred look.

Unfortunately, Percy wasn't too happy with his new spell.

'Tsch. I knew it would be harder to keep it up while fighting.'

Unlike Circulation: which took effect mainly inside his body: the final part of the Dance was a lot easier to disturb. His fluctuating mana expenditure shattered the fragile balance he had painstakingly created. His erratic movements on the battlefield made it difficult for the mist and the whirlpools to keep up with him, forcing him to devote a lot of effort into maintaining the technique. Consequently, its efficiency dropped by several points during a fight, making it almost comically weak.

'Mastering this is going to take even longer than I thought…' he smiled bitterly.

That said, the path forward was clear. The more used he got to the complex spell, the more robust it would be. The faster the whirlpools spun, the harder it would be for his movements to disturb them. If anything, the way he danced around the battlefield was ultimately a good thing. Right now, it was holding him back, but it should eventually allow him to collect more ambient mana from his surroundings than if he was to stand still. Rhaziel's people were probably missing out on that, having foolishly discarded the physical components of the technique.

But fine-tuning everything and pushing the spell to its very limits would easily take a few more years. Maybe longer.

‘Will it even be possible for Elaine to learn it in time?’

He could try to explain what he was currently doing and the principles behind it, to get her started. However, his demonstration would be a poor substitute for Tlaloc’s. Even worse, she’d have to make several adjustments to the spell, since nobody had a clue how the water affinity even interacted with ambient mana. Perhaps, the whirlpools in the final product would take on a vastly different shape in her case.

If that wasn’t enough, Elaine had zero practice in mana conversion. Unlike Percy, who had two affinities and who had spent some time in the past learning to more deliberately transfer mana between his cores, Elaine would have to work on this from scratch, alongside the Dance.

‘If she can’t learn it in time, beating the Blues is going to be so much harder…’

With a Blue core and the Dance, Elaine would have probably been able to handle the entire group by herself. Now, it very much looked like Percy would have to chip in, taking on one of them. It would all depend on how many of them advanced.

‘Oh well… We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.’

On a more positive note, Percy’s involvement lifted some pressure off his companions, giving Nesha more time to invest in runecrafting. In fact, Elaine also expressed some interest in it for the first time, probably realizing she didn’t have as many avenues to grow, despite her higher starting point. She knew it would be years before she got any good at it, but she seemed to have resolved herself to at least try.

And that wasn’t the only thing she did. She took it upon herself to replace everyone’s tattoos whenever they faded. Percy had brewed a lot of ink of both types before leaving Twilight City, but there was no way Martina’s tattoos would have lasted a decade. Even though they’d never been pushed to the point of having to use them, they still replaced them whenever necessary, in case they bit off more than they could chew one day.

More years passed.

The group continued to improve. Nesha registered Synchronization and even completed her new traps, spreading them all over the temporal Decree, hidden underground.

Percy made great strides with the Dance, getting used to fighting with it. It was already more potent than the pure half of Synchronization, and he'd even started using soul mana alongside it: although he hadn't tried to elevate that to the Dance yet.

Suffice to say, his combat strength finally caught up to its previous level, and continued climbing rapidly from there. The spell hadn't registered yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time. In fact, he resumed working on his fighting style too, hoping to get better at manipulating his scythes.

Elaine had also started practicing the Dance at some point. As soon as Percy was able to fight Green beasts again, he took over some of her responsibilities, giving her the chance to work on her boosting art. Once he was certain that his approach was correct, he taught her his methods. Unfortunately, she was still having as much trouble with it as they'd feared she would…

Separated by a few dozen miles, their enemies improved too. A couple more guards reached Blue, bringing the total number to four. One of them was guaranteed to remain at Green, but the last one still hung in the air. This was almost the worst-case scenario!

If that wasn't enough, Micky told Percy that everyone had grown much stronger, with Acton making the most progress with his magic. Apparently, the: now young man: could use his mud affinity well, and he was currently busy upgrading all his spells with it.

With all the new information, the parameters surrounding the eventual confrontation were starting to grow clearer in Percy's mind. A few questions remained unanswered for now, but that would change the closer they moved to the fateful day.

However, something unexpected happened one day. Something that could potentially shake things up.

One of his clones ran into a bit of a situation…