Wanderer 54

Chapter 54: Orin

Lukewarm.

If Orin had to pick a word to describe his life, it would be that. He enjoyed what he did of course – enough to forget about the bitterness in his past, but his daily routine hadn't changed much in a long time.

It had been several centuries since he left home to join the Guild as an aspiring alchemist. He still missed his family from time to time, his House having long been destroyed.

Not being there for his parents and sister in their final moments was one of his few regrets. Still, he understood he couldn't have changed much even if he'd stayed. Born with an Orange core, Orin hadn't even reached Green back when the disaster struck.

His only solace was he didn't have to worry about the brutality running rampant across Remior as long as he remained within the walls of the Guild. Nobody dared to stir trouble under the noses of both the Divine Order and the Great Houses.

Even better was he'd found his true calling here. Harnessing nature for humanity's sake, using the raw nectar to refine elixirs – Remior's lifeblood – was Orin's greatest passion in life.

Something about the art truly resonated with him. Perhaps it was the respect it garnered from mortals and gods alike. Maybe it was the satisfaction he drew knowing he personally contributed to his world's survival. Or it could just be that challenging himself to improve every day, to find new ways of increasing his yield was a ton of fun.

In fact, if there was one thing the old codger liked as much as brewing, it was mentoring youngsters and passing along the art to the next generation.

'If only they cared half as much to learn.'

The Guild didn't exactly lack manpower. Sure, they couldn't provide for the Red-borns of Remior, but who cared about them anyway?

There were plenty of elixirs to go around for the Orange-borns and above. Plus, new members kept joining the Guild in droves. Most of them picked up alchemy too – sooner or later. Even the lazier ones eventually managed to save up enough points.

However, Orin had a soft spot for the rare few who bothered learning the art properly – paying as much attention to the underlying theory as they did for demonstrations and lessons.

That was why he'd been so excited when he first saw Percy in the library. Sure, the boy had probably been driven there by his empty pockets – not a pure appreciation for the subject. Still, it warmed Orin's heart to see somebody diving into the books in earnest. The others who only blindly copied their elders rarely surpassed a yield of 35%. They also never brought any new insights into the field, causing it to stagnate.

So great had his enthusiasm been, that his dejection had been equally grand seeing the boy give up mere minutes after starting.

'Huh, just like the rest of them.' he'd thought at the time.

But to Orin's great shock, the boy had returned the next day, at about the same time – if a few minutes earlier perhaps. Percy had picked up the books again, resuming exactly where he had left off.

The old alchemist hadn't missed the youngster swallowing a dose of a red potion too. He'd recognised it of course – Orin had brewed a lot of the Guild's potions personally. Not many of his peers cared much about this lesser branch of alchemy.

'Smart. This is one of the best uses for the enlightenment potions.'

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It was only at that point Orin realized Percy hadn't left the previous night out of boredom, but necessity.

Over the following few days, he paid more attention to the context clues. Percy always arrived at the library at around the same time – just before midnight. He never stayed longer than an hour, but he always had a distraught expression when leaving. Clearly, the boy wanted to keep reading, but had to cut his trips short.

His eyes were also tired the whole time. There was never a speck of dust on the young man's orange robe – the self-cleaning runes doing their job admirably – but Orin didn't miss the traces of dried sweat all over his face.

'He spends all day hunting!' Orin had realized.

It wasn't that strange for a new member to spend a lot of time on the Spire. It was common for newcomers to do that. After all, it was the easiest way to save up enough points before switching to alchemy. That said, the vast majority were Orange-borns who didn't need more than 8 to 10 hours of work to cover their needs.

This was his first time meeting a boy who was not only willing to learn the art the hard way, but who struggled to find enough time for it. The revelation made his heart quiver, to the point he no longer minded offering to answer Percy's questions. Originally, Orin had regretted the words as soon as they'd left his mouth.

He'd volunteered to mentor others in the past, but that never went well. The youngsters tended to ask simple questions at first. However, they kept demanding more and more, until eventually it all turned into a one-to-one lesson, with Orin spoon-feeding them everything.

But that wasn't what Percy did.

For the most part, the boy had done his best to study by himself. Even when he seemed stuck, he went back to the books, trying to figure out the answer on his own. Very rarely did he take Orin up on his offer and, even then, he only asked specific questions related to the problem he was facing.

Over time, the old man truly came to appreciate Percy's work ethic and his dedication. The boy never missed a day, although he only used a potion every other night. Apparently, it was the most he could afford.

Once a month, the young man seemed to take a break from hunting for a few days. Orin was curious, but he didn't ask, respecting the boy's privacy. Percy almost lived in the library during those days, taking the opportunity to get a lot more reading done than usual.

Sadly, he didn't use the potions at that time, as they didn't last very long, and he didn't have the funds to keep guzzling them down one after another. He also seemed to endure some headaches during those days. Maybe he suffered from some chronic illness?

In any case, Orin had come to lament Percy's lower grade.

He felt it was a true injustice that such a hard-working young man was cursed with the lowest birthright on Remior. Then again, perhaps it was a blessing. Maybe the boy wouldn't have been so passionate about learning if he'd grown up with a silver spoon in his mouth like the rest.

Either way, the young man kept visiting the library, night after night, month after month. Through the scarce scraps of time he could invest into alchemy, Percy slowly devoured all the books Orin recommended, even rereading a couple of them. Eventually, the old alchemist watched the boy return the final book to its shelf, his expression an odd cocktail of triumph and dejection.

"Congratulations Percy!" he said. "You've read everything we have on alchemy!"

"Thank you, sir. I couldn't have made it this far without your help."

Orin shook his head.

"I didn't do much. I barely gave you a couple tips here and there. What do you plan to do next? I bet you're itching to try brewing an elixir yourself, aren't you?"

The boy smiled bitterly but didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

"Six months." Orin said.

Percy tilted his head.

“I’ll provide the materials you need for the next six months, four hours per day. You can keep any elixir you manage to brew too, so even if your yield is horrible at the start, you might be able to make up for the shorter hunting trips in due time.”

The boy’s jaw slackened. Orin chuckled at the sight. Only about a minute later did Percy seem to find the words.

“Sir, I can’t express how grateful I am… But may I ask why?”

Orin shrugged.

“Why not? I’m filthy rich. It won’t really affect me if I buy you some nectar.”

Percy still appeared confused.

“I mean, I get that. Still, wouldn’t it be cheaper if you gave some more free lectures like before? That way, a lot more people would benefit than just me.”

The old alchemist scoffed.

“I could do that, but why bother? Most of those kids can afford the lessons and the materials by themselves if they put a tiny bit more effort. I’d rather help the one who actually needs it.”

Percy’s eyes glistened with tears. He looked like he was about to hug him too. Orin chuckled, placing his hand on the boy’s forehead to keep him at bay.

“But I meant it when I said it’s only for six months. There’s no guarantee you’ll manage to brew any elixir by then.”

“What you get out of this is up to you.”