Wanderer 321

Chapter 321: Signal from an old friend?

Clone #270, maybe: Percy had lost count years ago: was about to look for a random body to possess, when he caught something he hadn't expected to see by the edge of his 'vision'.

It was a soul. A damaged soul, much like the overwhelming majority of his hosts. But this one was different. It was actively calling out to him, and from even farther away than he was used to. He'd never encountered anything like this before.

Yet, he could harbour a guess as to what was happening.

'Erm… I'm gonna need you to help me empower the cord.' he sent to the main body, accompanying the message with a dense packet of mana.

Soon, the original replied, sending some mana of his own.

'And I'm gonna need you to speak faster and send shorter messages. Communicating like this is a pain.'

The clone would have rolled his eyes if he had any. Not so fun to be on the receiving end, was it? Yet he didn't complain, opting to follow the main body's instructions. The two sent the mana back and forth for several minutes, until the spell activated. It did take a bit longer than usual, since the time dilation separating them made things more confusing. But they got there in the end. He even briefed his counterpart in during the process.

'Do you think it's her?' the original asked.

'Probably.'

Naturally, they were talking about the mysterious girl who had taught Percy how to mend his soul and get a spectral trait. They still had no clue how she was able to contact them, or why she hadn't done so in all those years, but it had to be her.

Who else would it be?

Suffice to say, the clone had no intention of approaching her planet without a steady supply of mana backing him up. He wasn't sure it would be enough to protect his life, but he'd rather try his best not to end up like his predecessor.

'Hey, do you want to return here first?' the original suddenly asked. 'Maybe it would be safer if you could drop your piece of the seal with me before heading there. Just in case.'

'Gee, thanks for the concern! We wouldn't want to lose the seal!' the clone snapped back.

'Don't be like that. You know how expensive it was.' the main body replied in an exasperated manner. 'Besides, if you return to me, it won't even be you risking your life. It'll be a new version of us. Also, shorter sentences, remember?'

The clone sighed.

'Can't do. Might miss our chance.'

As much as he would have loved not to be the sucker diving into that deathtrap, they had no idea how long the signal would be around. They couldn't afford to delay for too long. Considering how many years it had taken for the girl to reach out, they didn't want to miss the window. Phoebe knew when they'd get another chance.

Thus, his only option was to risk his life and the seal both.

'Alright. But be quick about it. Remember that a few hours for you are several days on my end. I've asked Nesha and Elaine to cover for me, but there's a limit to how long I can stay awake.'

The clone sent a nod back, before allowing himself to approach what they assumed was the girl's soul. It didn't take him long to accelerate towards it, crossing vast cosmic distances in mere fractions of a second.

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Just as he neared the vicinity of the planet, something bit into him, stopping him in his tracks. Percy didn't even know what the creature looked like, but its teeth hurt like hell as they dug into his soul. However, he didn't let the pain paralyze him, having expected some kind of trouble.

Releasing a lavish burst of mana, he unleashed a rain of needles into the monster's mouth, practically tearing its jaw right off. He had no idea if it was dead, and he had no intention of sticking around to find out. Turning back to the girl, he willed himself to approach her once more. At the same time, he asked the original to refill his reserves, in case he got attacked again.

Sure enough, two more monsters got in his way, each causing a lot of damage to his soul. Armed with an endless supply of mana, Percy wasn't deterred, however. He ensured they both paid dearly for their transgression. By the time he reached his destination, he bore a couple of painful injuries. Luckily, nothing too debilitating.

'Percy?! Is that really you?!' a female voice rang in his mind as soon as he attached himself to her soul.

So, she did remember more than he did. Over the years, he'd wondered if she'd suffered similar injuries to his own when they parted ways. Evidently not.

The next thing he noticed was that she differed from his other hosts a lot. Her wounds weren't that severe. They appeared surgical. Self-inflicted. The girl clearly knew what she was doing, which wasn't surprising, considering that she'd been the one to teach him how to mend his soul.

Either way, her soul was barely as injured as Elaine's or Nesha's had been, when he gave them their new cores. It would likely require minimal effort on her part to heal, even if he wasn't here to help her.

'Percy?'

That was when he remembered she'd asked him a question. It was weird, being the one confused. Usually, he was the one who had to explain to his hosts what was going on.

‘It’s me. But I’m afraid I don’t even remember your name. Or anything else about this place, really. You see… I ran into some trouble after I left…’

Over the next few minutes, he explained what little he could recall. He talked about his dead clone, and about the difficulties he’d encountered when trying to obtain his spectral trait. He even told her about Weaving, as well as what he’d been able to do with it so far.

She remained silent for a while afterwards, seemingly pondering his words.

Percy wanted to ask her a few questions too, but that would have to wait. First, he had to put his counterpart out of his misery.

‘I made it. You can go back to whatever you were doing.’

The last thing he felt was a wave of relief, as both parties stopped trying to hold the connection open.

Of course, it would have been nice if they could have kept Soul Resonance active throughout the trip. He might need more help when it was time to leave, as he’d have to escape from the blockade of monsters again. Sadly, that could easily be years down the line for the main body. They couldn’t afford to have him bogged down for that long: assuming they were even capable of keeping the connection active while one of them slept. The clone would have to find a different way to escape later.

‘Hmm… I didn’t know spectral fiends were that rare outside Melodia. It sounds like you’ve absorbed an Argalios...’ the girl replied, breaking him out of his thoughts.

‘Argalios? Is it considered a strong one? I’m still trying to figure out how to use it properly.’

Strictly speaking, Percy was happy with both Soul Stitching and his up-and-coming mana strings. In fact, every spell he’d incorporated his trait into had already reached Masterful. Still, he did wonder if there was more he could do with it. Sadly, the girl’s next sentence shot his hopes down.

‘Not really... It’s not meant to be used in combat…’ she muttered, before grinning. ‘Ah, but all our best tailors have it! You’d make an excellent fashion designer!’ she said, appearing to derive some satisfaction from his misery.

It only made him even more curious as to what had gone down between them in the past. Had he misjudged their relationship? Weren’t they friends? Or was she just kidding? It was hard to tell, as he could sense some melancholy in her soul. Maybe it wasn’t directed at him.

Alas, she didn’t torture him for too long, offering some information of her own volition.

‘Anyway, it’s not like we spent that much time together during your last visit. I COULD just give you an overview of the things we’ve talked about… But there might be an easy way for you to recover your memories. I can’t promise anything though: it’s not like I’ve met anybody in your situation before.’

Her words didn’t sound too confident, but they were more than enough to stir Percy’s heart. Perhaps, it would be faster for her to just tell him what had happened, but her offer had definitely piqued his interest. Could this method of hers be used on Micky?

‘I would love that: if it’s not too difficult. I’ve spent years trying to make sense of all this.’

Chapter 322: Expedition

The girl: who had reintroduced herself as Sol: opened her eyes, allowing Percy to examine their surroundings. They were alone, in an enclosed space. Smaller than any room he’d ever seen: barely large enough for a single person. In fact, it wasn’t even a room. There wasn’t a ceiling. The walls were made of fabric, stitched together at the top, held up by a metallic pole.

‘A tent?’

They were sitting cross-legged on the ground, atop a bunch of rotting leaves and dried dirt, which only corroborated his guess.

At first, he thought Sol’s people might be primitive, like the natives he’d met in the world with the floating cats. But that didn’t seem quite right. There were plenty of finely crafted objects in here. A stack of books by the corner. A pile of clothes next to that. They didn’t look like they’d been fashioned out of

expensive materials like the Felmarans', but they'd definitely been sewn by more skilled hands. Probably those tailors with the Weaving trait she'd mentioned.

'Is this some kind of camping trip? Or is it a cultural thing?' he asked.

The girl spent a couple seconds in a daze, likely confused by his words.

'Oh! We do have cities with actual buildings in them, if that's what you're asking!' she chuckled. 'You've just caught me in the middle of an expedition. We're pretty far from my hometown right now. Actually, from my whole country.'

'Caught you? Aren't you the one who invited me here?'

She frowned.

'Sort of. But it's not my first attempt to call you back. I used to try every couple of days. Honestly, I'd just assumed you weren't coming back. I've only kept at it out of habit.'

Percy smiled bitterly.

He had no idea why he'd failed to sense her signal before. Was it just bad timing? It wasn't impossible: since the time his clones spent looking for a host barely amounted to a fraction of their adventures. Or maybe it had to do with the distance between the two worlds? After all, attracting a spectral fiend to Remior had been a challenge.

'I'm sorry about that.' he said. 'I would have returned sooner if I could. I hope you didn't think I went back on my promise.'

'Maybe that. Or you never made it home in the first place. Or you couldn't return… I didn't know which one it was, but it didn't really matter… I know it wasn't your fault, but the fact is that I needed your help, and you weren't here.' she replied in an accusatory tone.

She didn’t sound angry though. Her voice was calm, yet Percy didn’t miss the deep sorrow hidden beneath the surface. He had no idea what had happened here, but he couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt over it.

‘Anyway… Let’s try fixing your memory first. I’ll explain everything later.’ she shrugged, getting up.

Percy squinted as she left the tent. It was noon, a yellow sun shining brightly over their heads. A little too brightly, in fact, but otherwise not that different from Remior’s. Looking around, he noticed they were surrounded by several more tents, most of them no bigger than Sol’s. They were all woven out of a light grey silk, much like her clothes. Probably a staple of their culture.

There were trees everywhere too, placing them in some kind of forest. Both the trunks and their leaves had a smooth metallic texture, reflecting the sunlight like mirrors. The glares were honestly quite disorienting for him, but he’d have to get used to it. Looking down at the rotting leaves beneath their feet, he noticed they were a dull grey colour, having lost their lustre.

As Sol walked through the camp, Percy’s attention shifted to the other people they met along the way. The locals looked like humans, though their skin was pitch black, painting a stark contrast against their silver hair and the sclera of their eyes. They had no discernible pupils, making their gazes more unsettling than he cared to admit. But maybe he shouldn’t be one to complain about scary eyes.

They all wore simple clothes like Sol. Skilfully made, but more practical than flashy. And they were mostly identical to one another’s, save for an odd symbol here and there that he couldn’t tell the purpose of. He was tempted to describe them as military uniforms. Maybe. He wasn’t sure.

Another glaring detail was that he could see all their souls! Perhaps not so surprising, considering that his host had a soul affinity, as did everyone else here. Still, he wasn’t used to having hosts with passive Soul Vision.

‘Actually, is it even passive, or is Sol just really paranoid?’

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He could see either one being the case. These people didn't have Ea's Decree: or any Decree, really: but it was possible they'd evolved built-in Soul Vision after countless generations of soul affinity users. Or maybe they were just trained from a young age to keep it on.

Alas, it didn't matter.

As soon as the novelty wore of, he paid more attention to these people. He saw both men and women, but no children or old people. Whatever the purpose of this 'expedition' was, he was willing to bet they weren't here for fun. Nobody bothered to greet anybody, but it didn't seem to be due to a lack of manners. They all appeared busy, their expressions tense and their hurried steps filled with purpose.

'What the hell? Did I land in the middle of a warzone or something?'

He kept his thoughts to himself, still unsure what to even think of Sol. She didn't strike him as a bad person, but she did give him a vastly different vibe to what little he remembered of her. Maybe it was just his amnesia, but he felt something big had happened to her between his two visits.

Eventually, she brought him to a different tent. This one was much larger, and appeared to serve a different function. A strange symbol vaguely reminiscent of an upside down 'R' was embroidered repeatedly along the fabric, though he had no idea what it meant.

His connection to his hosts always gave him some understanding of their language: the letters and words they used on a daily basis: but that didn't include symbols they ran into less frequently.

Most notably, the pungent scent of iron emanated from inside, filling their nostrils.

"Rei, is this a good time?"

"Sol? Is that you?"

"Yeah."

“Sure, come in. We were just finishing up here.”

Before Sol even got the chance to enter, a man staggered out of what Percy assumed was the medic’s tent, his left arm ending in a stump just below the elbow. The wrappings were frayed at the edges, damp with an orange liquid: an odd colour for blood, but maybe so was red. The whole mess was slung in a crude linen sling around the man’s neck. His face was ashen: well, just a slightly lighter shade of pitch black, really. His jaw was clenched tightly from the pain, his features tired.

Sol gave the poor guy an empathetic nod before entering the tent, where they found a woman washing her hands in a basin, trying to scrub the orange liquid off her skin. She looked to be in her twenties, but even with an Orange core, she could easily be a lot older than that. Her hair was the same silver colour as everyone else’s, but it was straight and barely reached her shoulders, whereas Sol’s was wavy and hung a bit lower than that.

Turning around, the woman raised an eyebrow upon looking at them.

“Girl, did you cut your soul up again? How many times do I need to tell you it’s bad for your health?” Rei asked, her tone harsh but full of worry.

Sol rolled her eyes. Or well… Percy thought she did. He had no clue what the point of that would be without pupils, but it felt the same as when he did it.

“Please. Everyone cuts their soul up at some point. Hell, you’ve done it too, haven’t you?”

“Once or twice! In our lifetimes! Not every week! And we do it because we have to, to absorb our fiend!”

Sol sighed.

“It’s not like I did it for fun... Actually, that’s why I’m here. I was hoping you could help a friend of mine.”

Confused, Rei scanned the place, looking for a third person.

“In here.” Sol said, pointing in the area around her neck with her thumb. That was where the largest part of Percy’s wisp had taken ‘root’.

Tilting her head, Rei stared at her for a while, likely examining her with Soul Vision. It was only a few moments later that she gasped, probably noticing the extra soul sitting inside her friend’s body.

“Is that…?”

Sol nodded.

“Holy shit! When you told me you let your weird, talking fiend go, hoping it would come back on its own later, I thought you were nuts! You’re telling me, it returned of its own volition?! Or wait… is it another one like it?!”

Sol was about to reply, but Percy beat her to it, finding Rei’s words more than a little irritating.

“Hello, I’m Percy. I very much hope Sol made it clear to you that I’m not a spectral fiend. I’m a person. A he.”

His outburst seemed to startle the medic for a moment, but she regained her wit soon after, her expression shifting to curiosity.

“Fascinating… Never seen anything like it. But does it even do anything? Sounds like too much trouble if all it does is talk.”

Percy wanted to rub his temples, finding it impossible to communicate with this woman. Forcing himself to calm down, he opted out of the conversation again, letting Sol do the talking.

“I don’t know. He promised me a bunch of cool stuff the last time around, but he’s lost his memories. Either way, you know our rules: I have to at least try to make the most out of my trait. Any chance you can fix him?”

“I can give it a shot.” the woman shrugged.

Turning around, she opened a satchel sitting behind her, sifting through her stuff, looking for something. Percy grabbed the opportunity to consult with his host again, suddenly feeling a little unsure about all this.

‘Hold on a moment. What exactly is she going to do to me?’

While he’d love to recover his memories, he was hesitant to trust a person who kept referring to him as ‘it’. The bloody saws, syringes and bandages he saw scattered all over the tent didn’t inspire much trust either.

Besides, was this woman even capable of helping? Only a tiny piece of his predecessor’s wisp had made it to Remior, before getting diluted inside the rest of his soul. Then, Percy had fashioned hundreds of clones after that, over the span of several years. He couldn’t help but wonder whether his lost memories even existed.

Hell, even Micky hadn’t been in that poor a state. Granted, the damage his friend had taken had been just as bad, but at least Percy had shoved all of him directly into the crow…

Sol chuckled, noticing him staring at the bloody saw.

‘Don’t worry. Rei only uses that stuff to treat physical injuries. Your treatment won’t be as intrusive. Worst case, she just fails, and I’ll brief you in on everything.’

Soon, the woman found what she had been looking for. Percy’s eyes widened as he realized how similar her approach was to what he’d tried to do for Micky.

Rei was holding a musical instrument, vaguely reminiscent of a harmonica.

Chapter 323: Treatment

‘Rei has absorbed a fiend called Synthetis. It has granted her the Composing trait, which boosts her musical talent far beyond a regular person’s. You’ll be amazed by what she can dig out of your soul with that, combined with Soul Vision.’ Sol explained after sensing Percy’s shock.

Maybe he shouldn’t have been so surprised though. If he had managed to stumble upon something similar by himself, it wasn’t that strange an entire world of people with soul affinities had figured it out, especially with a dedicated spectral trait to help them. If anything, it was more impressive he’d accomplished the same without it. Then again, his bloodline was probably even better.

‘Man, if I had the trait too, maybe Micky would have recovered his lost memories already…’

“Are you ready to start?” the medic asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

He nodded, feeling a little better about the whole thing. Like Sol had said, the worst that could happen was Rei failing to help him. He wasn’t that worried about getting hurt anymore.

The woman blew into the instrument, playing a gentle tune. She was definitely good at this, the sound coming out smooth and crisp. But it wasn’t anything noteworthy either. It was a simple melody, consisting of just a few notes. Percy raised an eyebrow, not feeling any different.

At first, he thought they were pulling his leg. Rei’s expression was dead serious, however. She was deeply engrossed in her music. At the same time, she was looking directly at Percy’s soul, examining it carefully as her eyes burned with mana.

Suddenly, she did something strange.

She varied the notes abruptly, shifting to a different tune entirely. It was deeper, and less playful. She kept at it for a couple minutes, before trying a third tune, and a fourth, seemingly searching for something.

Interestingly, she didn’t just vary the holes she plugged with her fingers, or the tune’s tempo. It went further than that. She even changed the way she breathed, adding various effects to the sounds. Sometimes, they came out soft like whispers, others raspy or shaky.

‘She’s trying to find something that resonates with you.’ Sol explained.

That made sense. When it came to his familiar, Percy had been able to skip this step entirely. After all, he’d played him the very tune that Micky himself had taught him. Something the gladiator had learned from his mother when he was little, and which he had kept close to his heart his whole life. Obviously, it couldn’t get much more emotional than that.

But Rei didn’t know anything about Percy. She had to experiment, until she saw some results. And experiment she did, for several minutes. She clearly tried every trick she could think of, searching for a response. But for a long time, nothing seemed to work. Percy was beginning to lose all hope, thinking this might be a lost cause after all.

That was when it happened.

Blowing into the instrument for the billionth time, Rei produced a familiar sound: one that pierced right through him, giving his host goosebumps by proxy. And Percy recognized the nostalgic tune, having many fond memories associated with it.

It was the sound the cones made, in the Whistling Woods! Rei had somehow reproduced it, merely by throwing things at the wall until they stuck!

She clearly noticed she was onto something too, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. Emboldened, she used these notes as the foundation, as she expanded on the melody, adding more features: testing other possibilities. It didn’t take her long to make more progress, starting a new round of experimentation every time Percy’s soul responded positively.

At some point, Percy’s jaw almost hit the floor, realizing how closely Rei’s tune had approached Micky’s!

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Leaving aside how impressive it was that she’d recreated the whole thing with so little to go by, Percy wasn’t surprised this was the melody she had chosen: the one that best resonated with him.

He didn't share Micky's history, but this was an emotional tune for him too. It marked his first meeting with his closest friend. And it was something he had since spent years playing on his shoddy ocarina, simply because of how much he liked it. Plus, he'd done all of that without even knowing it was the key to unlocking his familiar's past.

'It's a little eerie though, coming from a complete stranger…'

Even more notably, Rei was a lot better at it than him. As much as he hated to admit it, she was better than Micky and his mother too. Somehow, the woman had managed to reproduce the whole melody, despite having never heard it before. Neither the simplicity of her instrument, nor her lacking pair of hands seemed to hinder her in the slightest. Percy wasn't even sure how she was able to overlap so many notes. Was she whistling as she blew at the harmonica?

'Probably her trait's doing.'

In any case, Percy ignored all of that, allowing himself to sink into the tune, his eyes welling with tears. It was a little embarrassing, but he didn't care. How much had he missed this sound? It was so much better than his poor attempts at it… Sadly, he'd have to wait for his friend to regain his memory before he could hear it again: the non-butchered version, at least.

Something else happened as he immersed himself in the melody.

Memories flashed in his mind, one after the other. It was like a gate had opened, leaving his soul more receptive. But the memories were random, at first. His time in the damp cell, his fight beneath the crimson sun. Even his training alongside his familiar as they hunted goblins in the Whistling Woods. Brewing alongside Enki, having lunch with Klatz and Lyn…

'Focus on our meeting.' Sol gently advised him.

He nodded, taking advantage of this strange state to bring their previous encounter to the forefront of his mind. He thought of the spectral fiends that had attacked him earlier that day, suspecting that something similar had happened the last time around.

Sure enough, a few more memories emerged. They didn't contain any images or sounds: only feelings. Not that strange, since the fiends had attacked him while he'd been a disembodied soul. They were faint at first, but they grew clearer as he focused on them, trying to remember.

He'd been less equipped to handle the creatures back then, hadn't he? His mana had run out quickly, leaving him exposed to them. He'd been attacked on the way out too. At first, he'd been under the protection of some spell.

'Mi's spell: Sol's father.' he remembered.

But the fiends had stripped him of his flimsy defences, one of them even swallowing him whole. He'd fought to escape, with barely anything left of him by the time he did.

Next, he shifted his focus to his actual time with Sol. He thought of his Mend spell, causing the memories of her lessons to flood his mind. He thought back to the time he'd lured the spectral fiend on Remior, which helped him recall Sol's instructions pertaining to that.

Despite his efforts, there were still a few gaps he failed to patch up. Noticing that, Sol pitched in, prodding him along.

'At first, you entered my mana channels. I pushed you to my core, and I tried to absorb you. You protested, claiming you weren't a fiend, but I didn't believe you. You resisted, and we both got hurt. Later, we negotiated again, and we reached an understanding…'

Along with her words, she showed him her side of the events. It wasn't the same as if he had experienced it himself, mainly because their connection at the time had been incomplete, so her perspective was very different from his own.

But it was enough.

Sol's words, her memories, and the ones he had already recovered all blended together, helping him recall the rest. Of course, he knew this only worked due to Rei's tune still playing in the background, stirring his soul.

By the time it was all over, the sun was about to set, evident by the dim rays that barely spilled through the flaps in the tent. Percy was breathing heavily, this whole thing having taken its toll on him.

“Thank you.” he said, looking at Rei. “But I still don’t get it. How is any of this possible? Figuring out an entire song just by looking at my soul… Helping me recall memories I shouldn’t even have anymore… There was barely anything left of me by the time I made it home!”

The woman shrugged.

“You know surprisingly little about souls, despite being one yourself, don’t you?”

He raised an eyebrow, not sure if he agreed with her assessment. Sure, there was always more to learn, but he considered himself a bit of an expert on the topic. As far as he could tell, he was the only person in the universe capable of possessing others. Even among soul users, he wasn’t sure how common it was to traverse the soul plane. And when it came to soul mana specifically, he’d learnt a lot over the years. He understood its lethality and its insidiousness, but also its ability to heal, or to read another’s intentions.

Yet, Rei made it sound as if he had misunderstood something fundamental about it.

She sighed.

“You don’t look convinced… So, let me ask you… What do you think a soul is?”

Chapter 324: What do you think a soul is?

Percy pondered over Rei’s question. At first, he thought it was a simple one: that she was just patronizing him. But the more he considered it, the more he realized he couldn’t come up with a good answer.

‘A soul… it’s who we are, isn’t it? Deep down. Beneath the flesh, and even robbed of our memories…’

This had to be true. After all, Micky had lost all his memories, but he still had the same soul. So, that should make him the same person…

Or should it? Weren't a person's memories an integral part of themselves? Their experiences helped shape their personalities, and to inform their choices and actions. Was there even anything left without them?

Then… did that mean that souls were just blank pieces of paper?

"I don't know." he conceded after a while.

The woman nodded, having probably expected that response.

"Nothing wrong with that. Our ancestors spent millennia asking that very question. The answer we have settled on, is that your soul is a record of everything you are."

"Everything I am?" he raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. Every place you've ever been to, every person you've ever met, every thought that has ever crossed your mind, every feeling you've ever felt... all your memories: even the ones you have long forgotten… they're engraved deeply inside you. On every inch of your soul."

Percy's eyes widened, having never expected that. If this was true, it was no wonder she'd been able to do what she'd just done.

Actually, that even explained why the life clones his relatives created were so undeveloped. They were mindless creatures, incapable of truly experiencing anything by themselves. As for newborns, they were blank slates. More malleable, and open to outside influence.

Then, both of his earlier answers were correct in a way. Souls weren't the same as one's memories: they went deeper than that. But they were also inextricably linked to them, even if those experiences weren't directly remembered.

"Does that mean it's literally impossible to completely forget anything?" he asked.

“In theory. As long as you’ve lived through something, it’s part of you forever.” she shrugged. “But you’ve got to understand, there’s a limit to what we’ve been able to test. Before today, at least. Other people die long before they shrink to your current size, let alone any more injured than this. It’s the main reason I still think you’re just a fiend, lying to us.”

Percy clicked his tongue, but didn’t reply. He was grateful to her for helping him, but he wasn’t interested in trying to convince her of his origin. On the flipside, he wouldn’t mind discussing more philosophy with her: this information might come in handy one day. But something else took precedence.

“I see… thank you again for helping me remember. I suppose I’ll need some time to digest all of that.” he said, nodding at the medic politely, before shifting his attention to his host.

One thing he’d confirmed upon recovering his memories, was how much Sol had changed since their previous meeting. Back then, she’d been an arguably spoiled and self-absorbed teenager, resulting in some friction between them.

Sure, it had been a few years since then, so she was bound to have changed a little, but he couldn’t help but think that she’d matured a lot faster than she was supposed to, her youthful innocence long gone.

‘Sol… what happened to you?’

She sighed. Waving Rei goodbye, she exited the tent, remaining quiet until they reached her own. It was night already, the traffic around the camp having died down a lot. It wasn’t until she entered her tent, sitting where Percy had first found her, that she replied.

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‘Our town got attacked not long after you left. My dad fought to protect our home, but he got killed...’

At the same time, she showed Percy a few images of the event. A man whose face he’d never seen before, but whose voice he faintly recognized. He was covered in blood, fighting against a bunch of

scaled beasts that vaguely resembled wolves. There were others fighting alongside him. Sol was among them, though her spells looked a bit clumsy for a Yellow's. She'd clearly never fought before that day.

As soon as the flashes stopped, Percy noticed two streams rolling down his cheeks, dripping from his chin.

'Sol… I'm so sorry… Is this why you are here now?'

She nodded.

'My friends told me not to join the hunters. That it wasn't a place for me. That I'd get killed without any experience or a proper trait… But I know they were just trying to protect me. Truth is, the hunters were more than happy to have me. Turns out, being a Yellow is more valuable than any combat trait… And I wanted to make a difference.'

Percy wasn't sure what to say to that. On the one hand, it would be hypocritical of him to criticize her after all the reckless stuff he'd done on Remior. On the other, he couldn't help but think she was gambling with her life just to cope with her grief.

'Are you sure this is what you want to be doing? What your dad would have wanted for you?'

She chuckled, but it was hollow.

'I'm not a child anymore, Percy… Risking my life is the last thing I want. I don't like fighting much either: never have. But I don't have a choice. Our enemies are already attacking our cities. The fight is coming to each and every one of us, sooner or later. Perhaps, if Yellows like me had been more proactive, we could have prevented this. Stopped things from getting this bad… Maybe my dad would still be…'

She failed to complete her sentence, but Percy could feel the bitter lump stuck in her throat. He was torn between consoling her and asking more about the situation. He had no idea how he could help, until he learned more about this world.

In the end, he didn't get a chance to do either, however.

“ENEMY ATTACK!” somebody screamed.

At the same time, a pained shriek sounded in a different direction. Sol was already on her feet, shooting out of the tent, mana gathering in her hands.

It was pure chaos out there.

A cacophony of footsteps, screams and hisses. Strange shapes pierced through some of the tents, as splashes of orange were barely visible under the faint starlight. It didn’t look like there was a moon on Melodia. Not tonight, at least.

Sol didn’t waste a moment joining the battle. She shaped her mana into a dozen bird-like constructs, shooting them at the enemies. It was difficult to make out their colour in the darkness, but Soul Vision more than made up for it, the silver silhouettes burning clearly within their bodies, tracing their shape.

They were beasts, but not the same species that had killed her father. These resembled snakes: somewhat: though their circular maws were filled with rows of serrated teeth, dripping with liquid. The droplets sizzled whenever they landed on something else.

Sol’s attacks sank into their bodies, piercing the creatures’ souls full of holes. The ones she had attacked were both at Yellow like her, but Percy was amazed that they still stood after the attack. In his experience, soul magic was extremely lethal to anything of the same grade: often even a grade higher than that.

‘Have the beasts on this world evolved sturdier souls, to survive against these people?’

Either way, the creatures had turned toward Sol, abandoning their previous victims. They lunged forth, though a second barrage finished them off before they reached her. Two of them. Resistant as they were, soul mana was still a potent weapon.

Scanning their surroundings, Percy noticed similar scenes playing out around the camp. After the initial surprise had faded, the sapients were doing a better job holding their ground. There were Yellows and Oranges on both sides, though neither had brought any Reds in this place.

One battlefield stood out, in the middle of the camp. Three Green snakes and over a dozen Yellows besieged a Green humanoid. A rare Green-born most likely: since Melodia didn't seem to possess a means of advancement. The leader of this expedition.

The natives were disadvantaged in that their affinity had no defensive power, nor did it grant them any mobility. The only thing they had going for them was the danger their spells posed. Luckily, that was more than enough to give the monsters some pause, keeping the more cautious ones at bay.

Sol ignored all that, rushing towards the perimeter, at a spot where her people were losing. Three beasts were swallowing just as many bodies, their brethren having almost overwhelmed the last four. A Yellow and three Oranges.

Unfortunately, she wasn't fast enough. By the time she reached them, an Orange snake had landed a nasty bite on the Yellow's leg, opening a way for the rest to decimate the squad. Watching the creatures tear the bodies to shreds made both Sol and Percy sick. But they suppressed the urge to throw up, as they had a bigger problem to deal with.

While half of the creatures were busy fighting over the bodies, the rest had shifted their attention to the newcomer. There were three Yellows and twice as many Oranges, all facing her, their souls ablaze with unconcealed hunger.

It was bad: way too many for her to fight by herself.

That was when Percy spoke, his voice brimming with determination.

'Sol… I wasn't there for your father… but I'm here now. Let me help you.'

Chapter 325: Sol

Sol didn't pay Percy much attention, nodding absentmindedly. Her eyes were glued to her opponents: the horrific beasts now coming after her.

The Yellows were a touch smarter than their weaker brethren though. They waited for them to toss themselves in the line of fire, so that they could reap the fruit of their work afterwards.

Sure enough, two dumb Oranges were the first to spring forth, only for their souls to end up full of holes. But Sol had used up over a third of her mana in the attack, her fear causing her to pour a little more into the spell than she'd meant to. Her reserves wouldn't last long if she kept fighting like this!

Luckily, Percy had already replenished more than that on her behalf, taking deep breaths one after the other.

'What is he even trying to do?'

Was he happy just boosting her regeneration? But his words had made it sound like he had something else in mind.

Right before he left Melodia, he'd asked her to temper her soul and her mana channels for some reason. She had no idea what that had been about, but she'd followed through, mostly because it hadn't been that difficult. Much like everyone else, she'd had a stronger soul already, having pushed herself to her limits in preparation to safely absorb a fiend.

Shifting her attention back to the creatures, she fired another round of projectiles at them, killing another of the weaklings. At the same time, she landed a few nasty wounds on two of their leaders, hoping to scare them off. But it might have had the opposite effect, as the monsters now hissed in fury.

Abandoning all caution, they spread out, lunging towards her from every direction, clearly willing to suffer however many casualties they had to, to sink their venom-drenched fangs into her flesh. That was when Percy spoke again.

'This next bit is gonna hurt a little.'

She didn't get a chance to ask what he meant, when he flooded her channels with mana, mounting the pressure inside her soul. At the same time, he took over her legs, sidestepping one of her opponents' attacks. The beast had tried to sneak up on her from behind. And it would have succeeded too: she hadn't even noticed!

But she wasn't in the mood to rejoice, as more creatures leapt towards her, trying to rip her to shreds. If that wasn't enough, she felt her channels swell, about to burst, as countless tears began to form on her soul. It hurt so fucking much too, making her flinch. Was Percy actually trying to help, or had he turned against her?!

Yet, something peculiar happened. The monsters grew slower mid-air. No: it was she who had grown faster! Her muscles welled with power, her senses sharper. A series of silver lines lit up on her flesh, painting a stark contrast against her dark skin. They swirled violently around her core, resembling a maelstrom. And she felt stronger! Far stronger than ever before!

By the time the creatures reached her, she was holding two weapons in her hands, their blades curved like crescent moons.

Dancing around the beasts with eerie grace, Percy took control of her arms too. He sliced into the creatures' souls, the silver flames within their bodies parting like wet paper under the cold edge of his weapons. Their serpentine frames twisted and turned to avoid them, but he didn't seem deterred in the slightest, the blades always finding their mark, like an executioner's axe delivering its grim sentence.

'Don't just stare in a daze! Help me out here!' he yelled, snapping her out of her thoughts.

So shocked had she been at the sheer ease with which he'd slaughtered the creatures, that she hadn't even noticed there were dozens more slithering towards her. Whether they'd recognized her as a dangerous opponent or a tastier snack, she didn't know: but they'd clearly taken notice of that weird spell boosting her strength.

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Expelling some mana from her body, she formed a couple more projectiles, launching them towards the incoming beasts. She was conservative about it though, only firing a handful of them this time. Partly because it was harder to shape them without her hands, and partly because she didn't want to overdraw her mana and get in Percy's way.

Still, her mana was way more responsive and twice as potent, the lethality of her constructs shooting through the roof. Even better, her core refilled faster than she could drain it, allowing her to unleash an endless barrage of spells against the beasts, slaughtering everything unlucky enough to get hit.

Like that, the two fought side by side.

Sol shot down anything she could from afar. Several monsters still made it through, but Percy was extremely skilled in close combat. He comfortably dodged their attacks, tearing their souls apart with those weapons of his.

It was bizarre. Everyone knew Soul Vision allowed one to glimpse their opponent's intentions to an extent, but Percy seemed to take it to a whole new level. He was already moving to avoid many attacks before they even started. And he still clicked his tongue in frustration: almost like he was disappointed by Sol's body.

'Seriously?' she frowned, but didn't say anything.

What little mana he'd brought with him was at Orange, so she really hadn't expected much from him. At most, she'd hoped he could share those fancy runes he'd promised before.

In fact, she'd almost given up trying to call him back to Melodia many a time. She'd only kept at it because of her moral obligation to make use of her trait, and because she'd obtained it under her father's supervision. It was one of her fondest memories by his side, so she felt that she honoured him by persisting. The last thing she had expected was that Percy would be such a skilled combatant, turning her very body into an instrument of death.

Their opponents died one after the other, not shedding a single drop of blood. The curved blades pierced soundlessly through flesh and soul alike, robbing the creatures' eyes of their savage lustre.

Five… Ten… Twenty…

No matter how many came: Orange or Yellow: they all met the same fate, a storm of dried leaves the only proof of Percy's passing as he blitzed through the battlefield like a whirlwind.

Still, no matter how many they slaughtered, more abominations came, with no end in sight. Sol's newfound hope began to waver again, making her question for the second time tonight whether she'd live to see the sun rise again.

However, their efforts hadn't been for naught.

In order to pile on her and Percy, the beasts had been forced to stop pressuring the other hunters, giving them a chance to breathe. Even more importantly, their valiant efforts had lit up a spark, making everyone fight with renewed vigour, pushing the beasts back.

More beasts died. More people did too.

It felt like an eternity had passed by the time the killing had stopped, only one side left standing. The creatures had fought to their last breath, choosing death over starvation. But they still lost.

Oddly enough, the Greens' fight had been the last to end. The beast leaders were more cautious than their offspring, unwilling to risk their lives against Doh. He, on the other hand, knew that the entire expedition would be doomed if he were to die, so he'd prioritized his own safety too. Not out of selfishness, but duty.

It was only when the rest of the beasts had been uprooted that the hunters were able to help their leader slaughter the last of the abominations.

Of course, nobody was in the mood to celebrate. They'd won, yes, but nearly half the hunters had died in the process. And these weren't their first casualties either. Everyone knew the silver forest was still full of abominations no less harrowing than the ones they'd just killed. The next attack might just wipe them out completely. Maybe tomorrow, or the night after. Hell, they could get attacked in the next minute, for all they knew.

Suffice to say, the atmosphere in the camp was more than a little gloomy, an oppressive silence settling over the place. Everyone was already busy tending to the injured and cleaning up the mess. And they did so in a hurry.

After all, they'd have to get a move on later, if they were to ever reach their destination. Granted, everyone was exhausted from the fight, but they couldn't afford to skip a second day. Technically, they'd taken yesterday to rest. Little good it did them, in the end.

She sighed.

Though there was one silver lining.

A singular piece of good news, saving everyone from the brink of despair.

All the survivors were looking at her weirdly, marvelling at the glowing lines still burning brightly beneath her skin. Her actions hadn't gone unnoticed, and everyone was aware of what she represented. Their gazes were grateful, full of cautious optimism.

As was her own.

Perhaps, they stood a chance after all…

Chapter 326: The strongest fiend

"And you said its name was Percy?" Doh – the Green-born asked.

After they were done burying the dead and packing their supplies, he had allowed his men to take a short break for about an hour, before ordering them to set off. As tired as everyone was, it appeared they needed to get moving again. Only then did he pull Sol aside, clearly still trying to wrap his head around last night's events.

She nodded, sparking some interest in his eyes.

"First time I'm hearing of it." he said. "I kinda wish I didn't already have a trait – I would have loved a shot at getting that one."

Percy rolled his eyes, no longer bothering to correct these people. He decided to leave the explaining to his host, paying attention to their conversation.

Sol shook her head.

“Sir, you don’t actually need my trait. It simply allows me to call my fiend back to Melodia more easily. He says that anybody can learn that spell we used. And he’s even given me permission to teach everyone.”

The fiend in question had already figured out some things about this world – some by asking Sol, others by piecing together random bits of information from here and there.

Apparently, the enemies threatening their country weren’t from an opposing faction of sapients like he’d originally assumed. They were beasts. And not any organized force of them – just lots of individuals and packs of various sizes, much like the one they’d faced the night before.

People living in lesser and greater springs didn’t consider beasts to be a major threat. The sapients there had the means to advance at a much more sustainable – albeit slightly slower – rate, so they didn’t have much trouble culling the ever-climbing population of beasts. If anything, the creatures were seen as a valuable resource to be taken advantage of, in all sorts of ways.

But barren worlds like Melodia were a different story.

Here, the beasts were no weaker than the people. Disorganized as they may be, their numbers far exceeded the sapients, making it extremely difficult for the latter to hold their ground. The problem was further exacerbated by the fact that there was only a single landmass on the planet, so Sol’s people had no choice but to share it with the wildlife. Their ancestors had barely managed to seize some land by the corner of the continent, carving a tiny country for themselves. One that they constantly had to defend from the invading fauna.

It wasn’t all bad though.

At least, the beast population regulated itself – to an extent. Whenever it neared the breaking point, the creatures razed their own habitants to the ground before migrating en masse, in search of food. No

matter what they did, they'd inevitably run out, causing countless species to go extinct, leaving a few of the luckier ones to repopulate the continent.

This created cycles of abundance and scarcity on the planet. Currently, Sol's people were facing one of the nastier beast tides in history. One that threatened to wipe them all out if they failed to last until the end.

"How quickly can it teach us?" Doh asked.

"The preparation alone will easily take a month or two for most people." Sol said. "And that's only because our souls are already strong enough to bear the technique. Still, you'll all need some time to clear and temper your remaining channels…"

The Green nodded, his expression grim, likely aware it would be hard. The hunters had to keep moving and fighting against the beasts. At the same time, this was their best chance to make it.

"What about the spell itself? I imagine circulating the mana in that fancy pattern isn't a breeze either."

She sighed.

"Normally, mastering that takes some time too, but it should become trivial once we reach the Mirror Lake. At least, it'll make the return trip easier."

Getting to that place was the very goal of the expedition. According to Sol, the soul mana in the air was even richer there than the rest of Melodia. Even more importantly, something about it allowed people who trained in its vicinity to make rapid progress with their soul magic. It gave them endless inspiration, letting them overcome most roadblocks with ease.

In a way, it could be considered a kind of holy land for soul affinity users.

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“Why didn’t you guys build your country around the Mirror Lake in the first place?” Percy suddenly asked, jumping into the conversation. “It sounds like the most valuable location on the whole planet.”

Doh frowned for a moment, before realizing who had spoken.

“You must be the so-called Percy… First of all, let me personally thank you for saving my people. We would have probably still made it through the night without you, but we’d have lost many more hunters in the process. And every last life might make the difference in the end.”

The so-called Percy’s eyelid twitched, but it didn’t say anything, allowing the man to answer it.

“Our ancestors did attempt to do that in the past. They took advantage of a low tide, building a settlement next to the lake. Sadly, it’s impossible to defend. The area is incredibly rich in both mana and natural resources. Even if we destroy everything, it just grows back again. It didn’t take long for the emerging beasts to attack. They flooded the settlement before their population even approached the tipping point, wiping our people out.”

Percy nodded.

So that’s why they resorted to sending small expeditions there, and only whenever things grew truly desperate.

“But will this even help?” he asked, looking at the few remaining survivors.

There were barely fifty or sixty people left. Even assuming that some of them made it to the Mirror Lake, he struggled to imagine what they could learn there in just a couple of months. It would have to be something crazy, to turn the whole situation around. Weren’t they better off just joining the force defending their cities?

Doh smiled bitterly, probably guessing his thoughts.

“That’s a common concern among our people. This is why we didn’t send a team to the lake earlier, when the situation wasn’t as dire. As you may imagine, few of these expeditions yield anything valuable.

The last time was thousands of years ago, and we've failed countless times since. But it's not like we have a choice. The way things are going, we're going to get wiped out by the end of the decade, unless something changes drastically."

Percy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow, finally realizing why everyone in the camp looked so distraught. It wasn't just their personal safety they were concerned with, but all of their loved ones' too.

Though Doh wasn't done, offering a more optimistic outlook.

"Ah, but things aren't that hopeless! The fact is, we do find something valuable every now and then. The method to absorb spectral fiends actually came from the Mirror Lake! Some of our ancestors got really lucky once. It's the main reason we've even lasted this long."

Percy nodded, sinking back to his own thoughts.

He now knew why Sol and her people wanted to reach that place so badly. Though he harboured some guesses of his own about the topic, not being the ignorant kid he'd once been. He strongly suspected the Mirror Lake was an Elemental Source.

This was something he'd learned about back on Felmara, in one of Mrs. Lia's Cosmic Studies classes. Elemental Sources were even rarer than greater springs, since there could only be one in the whole universe for each mana type. They passively converted ambient mana into the corresponding affinity, almost like gigantic mana cores embedded in the very surface of the planet they found themselves on.

They were considered strategic resources that major factions fought over, but not all of their locations were known.

If he was right, the Mirror Lake was the reason all of Sol's people were blessed with a soul affinity. It was a little like the lotus in that sense, though the latter was just a temporary object capable of changing the affinity of a few people. Meanwhile, Elemental Sources were permanent, and could influence an entire world, forcing everyone to develop mana cores of the corresponding type from birth.

'Not sure if these people would consider it a blessing though...'

Granted, soul affinities were normally rare and powerful, but not necessarily worth losing access to every other mana type. A specialist was only useful if he was special, after all. In this case, it simply narrowed the scope of their magic needlessly, which was likely part of the reason their situation was so bad.

Even worse, these people were completely oblivious to the enormous threat looming over their heads. If a major faction learned about this, the beasts would be the least of their worries. Most likely, Melodia would suffer the same fate as Huehue.

'Actually, does Huehue possess an Elemental Source too?'

All of Micky's people were stuck with a pure affinity, though that might be a coincidence. Percy didn't know if there were any concepts associated with it like the other mana types, so it might just be some defect they were born with.

In any case, Sol spent a few minutes addressing the growing crowd beside her, explaining how they were supposed to temper their channels, before letting them work on that by themselves. It would be a race against time to grow strong enough to make the round trip.

At least, Percy's existence had removed the element of uncertainty from the expedition. Now, they'd no longer have to rely on luck to discover something useful at the Mirror Lake. They already had a most promising spell to master, so it was just a question of time and effort.

In theory, it might have been safer for them to turn around and abandon the expedition entirely. It would take them a little longer to learn Circulation without the lake's help, but they could do that behind the relative safety of their walls. Unfortunately, they had already travelled most of the distance, so they were closer to the Mirror Lake than their country. Right now, it was probably safer for them to press onward, mastering the boosting art as soon as possible.

Of course, Percy wasn't helping them solely out of kindness.

Sure, he felt bad about these people, so he wanted to help his host. But that wasn't his only motive. He was quite interested in the Elemental Source too. His main body was still working on the pure component of the Dance. He was close to registering it, but he hadn't had the time to even attempt the soul part yet. It was looking increasingly unlikely that he'd get there in time to use it against Acton.

‘But this changes everything! I might be able to figure it out ahead of time if we make it to the lake!’

Chapter 327: Dream

The sun shone brightly over the lush forest, its blinding rays bouncing off the smooth surfaces. They banished even the tiniest shadow from existence, immersing the exhausted hunters in a world of light.

So intense was it, that Percy regularly disconnected himself from his host’s eyes, wholly incapable of enduring the sights during the height of noon. Hell, this place was so bright, it made even the white districts of Twilight City look like their profane neighbours by comparison. It was only during the mornings and evenings that he managed to marvel at the almost sacred realm he found himself trekking in.

The ferns and trees carried some of the familiar traces that all plant life in the universe seemed to share. But they differed in many ways too. He hadn’t noticed at first, but the bark and leaves were often covered in tiny barbs, likely to discourage the hungry beasts from taking a bite. The trunks were thinner, as was the foliage, probably because there was more sunlight than the poor plants knew what to do with.

It was beautiful, even if there was too much on the hunters’ minds to appreciate it. It was alien, even though Percy had been to hundreds of worlds already, each stranger than the last. It was dream-like, even if the nightmare kept rearing its ugly head.

Every now and then, they saw traces of battle. Old bones and orange bloodstains nearly licked clean. Shattered earth and scarred trees. A record of Melodia’s brutal history, carved in every corner of the forest.

The days and nights were a little longer than Remior’s, the starving abominations attacking at least once before each sunrise. Everyone fought together to fend them off, though a couple people always lost their lives at minimum.

But they never paused. They never stopped moving forward or fighting for their world’s salvation. While they walked, they cleared their channels. While they ate, they tempered them. Even while battling for their lives, they practiced the movements Percy showed them.

They took shifts every night, some on guard duty while the rest slept: at least for as long as the cruel beasts allowed them. Though a few people didn't seem to require sleep at all, likely due to a spectral trait.

He and Sol weren't slacking either.

Occasionally, he left her in charge of Circulation, teaching her how to use it by herself. He instructed her on her footwork. Granted, she'd never trained her body much, but this version luckily only relied on the strength of her soul to activate. Her physique still held her back a little, as did the lack of a second core, but her Yellow grade more than made up for it.

He also showed her how to guess the monsters' thoughts. Sure, he didn't have his mutated eyes, but his years of using them had still taught him things the natives didn't know of.

Even more importantly, Percy's boosting art had never been easier to use. The air here brimmed with soul mana, barely requiring any effort to absorb. It would save him a lot of time when he began learning the rest of the Dance, though he wanted to get a little better at working with Sol before they got started on that.

Sol had plenty to teach him too.

"I don't get it. How can you guys control so many projectiles at once?" he asked one night.

They were fighting a flock of avian beasts. Some cross between bats and cats, rendering his close combat skills nearly useless. Luckily, the hunters didn't have much trouble shooting the creatures down, launching countless homing projectiles that seemed to always find their mark.

At first, he'd chalked it to specialized traits, but he knew Sol didn't have one. He considered it might have been due to the improved control afforded by a higher grade. But it was too much to be just that, plus the Orange hunters managed too.

Stolen story; please report.

“Not sure what you mean.” Sol shrugged. “Take over the reins. Let me see what you’re doing wrong. I can keep Circulation going in the meantime.”

Percy nodded, doing as she said. Leaving her in charge of their body, he tried to shape the soul mana into those bird constructs Sol liked to throw around.

It sort of worked: the Yellow mana responded to his will more easily than his own mana did. And he’d seen her use the spell plenty of times over the past few days. Still, the shape came out crude, and he felt the constructs would crumble before they reached their target.

Sighing, he started over, this time going for something simpler: just a bunch of throwing stars. He was already familiar with those, and it was his control he wanted to work on, not the flavour of the attack. Once he had a dozen of them floating beside him, he shot them at the creatures, trying to hit the two closest to him.

It was hard. The beasts were constantly moving. He steered the weapons halfway through, yet he still missed.

“I see…” Sol said, dodging a diving beast going for her throat. “I think I know what the problem is. You’re trying too hard to control the spell.”

Percy raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t interrupt her.

“Maybe you’re biased by how other people use their magic where you’re from. I wouldn’t know: since we only have soul affinities here. But it seems you’re not allowing the mana to do its thing.”

“Its thing?”

“It’s hard to explain. But the mana can help you, if you let it. Try telling it what you want it to do, instead of telling it how to do it.”

Percy frowned.

Her explanation did make some sense, admittedly. He thought back to the time he'd discovered the pattern for his soul affinity. He'd struggled a lot to get there, only succeeding once he gave in, losing himself in the spell. Perhaps soul mana was more responsive to its owner's will than other types.

'Well, only one way to find out…'

Following her instructions, he gave it another go. He shot another round of throwing stars at the creatures, but he allowed them to fly in a straight line this time. Instead of trying to change the trajectory of his attacks mid-flight, he merely concentrated on his opponents' souls, and on his desire to see them full of holes.

It didn't work.

The constructs missed again, flying even farther off from their target than before.

"Keep at it. It takes a lot of practice." Sol encouraged him.

Not one to give up easily, Percy tried again. Round after round, he did his best to pin down the creatures, though he only got one by accident every once in a while. The other hunters were forced to clean up after him, but nobody complained.

Even though Percy himself was disadvantaged against these opponents, this was honestly one of the easiest waves for the others to handle. The bat-creatures' souls weren't as sturdy as the others', so they didn't need as many hits to die. In fact, even a glancing hit was quite debilitating for them. It was enough to knock them out of the sky, sending them crashing down.

Come morning, Percy hadn't quite succeeded yet, though he had made some progress. At some point, the throwing stars had started moving by themselves, the mana beginning to respond to his will. It would be weeks until he could weave this ability into a proper spell, but he did have high hopes for it, thinking of his replicating scythes back home.

Luckily, there was no shortage of practice dummies in this place either.

Days went by, and then weeks.

Everyone was growing at a steady pace: some faster than others. Doh in particular had almost finished tempering his channels. As a Green, both his control over his mana and his endurance were higher than anybody else's, though Percy could tell the man's discipline and dedication had definitely played a role. He and Sol had already shown him the Circulation pattern again. As soon as he got a handle on the ability, the expedition's strength would shoot through the roof.

The others were a lot slower than that, but they'd at least learned to move as they cast their spells, improving their survivability a little. Percy didn't think any of them stood a chance of mastering the boosting art before they reached their destination though.

Sol had grown a lot too. She could now keep the spell active by herself, and she was currently working on her close combat skills. She wasn't nearly as good as Percy just yet, but she could at least hold her own for a while.

Meanwhile, Percy had made some progress with his new spell. It wasn't that impressive yet, but his Status had still been kind enough to acknowledge his efforts.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Living Weapons: Crude!]

It wasn't all good news though.

They were over a month away from their destination, and their numbers had dropped dangerously. Faster than their strength had grown, in fact.

There were only fifteen of them left: A Green, four Yellows and ten Oranges…

Chapter 328: Sickles

The Melodians weren't the only ones operating on a strict schedule. Percy was too. He'd already spent over six years inside the Valley before coming here, and his main body only had about seven more: give or take: until his confrontation with the Holy Child.

By then, he should have ideally mastered both versions of the Dance, and retrieved his clone, so that he could possess Micky and extricate him from the battle. He still hoped he'd open up a third cord upon reaching Yellow, but it wasn't a certainty.

Thus, he had to wrap up his business here quickly. Due to the time dilation, he only had around three months to do so, of which one had already passed. They were still another month away from the Mirror Lake, so the plan was to spend his third and final month there with Sol's people, before leaving.

But that would only matter if they survived long enough to get there. With just fifteen hunters left, things weren't looking great.

'Are you sure you don't have any ingredients rich in life mana?' he asked his host.

He wanted to slap himself. They'd sold millions of mushrooms before leaving the city, and he hadn't thought to save a few hundred thousand to bring with his clones, for cases like this. Sol was already the second strongest person in the expedition. Doubling her strength would have placed her above Doh, making their lives easier.

'I'm sorry, Percy… Plants of other affinities are really rare on Melodia. Even back home, we don't have nearly that many…'

He sighed.

He did have a few mushrooms and some potions in his seal, but not enough. Sol couldn't even use the potions without the Decree draining the mana. They'd considered growing more mushrooms, but it wasn't easy.

Going by the sheer number of beasts they'd slaughtered over the past month, they'd definitely had enough meat to get the number they needed.

Sadly, the mushrooms took a full day to grow on the Yellow beasts. It was much faster than the mundane meat Percy had used in the city, but still too slow. The hunters couldn't afford to stay at a single place that long. At least, not very often. And the carcasses were too heavy to carry with them.

Having only a quarter of his seal on him, Percy couldn't fit that many in it either, nor did the mushrooms grow while stored.

The good news was that the mushrooms grew a lot faster on the Greens. They only took a few hours. And Doh killed at least one every night. Like that, they'd steadily amassed tens of thousands of mushrooms, but it would be another couple of weeks before they reached the required amount.

'Alright, then our only option is to improve our spells and our teamwork. And we need to do that fast.'

Taking one deep breath after another, he activated Circulation. Next, he took some time to explain to Sol how the next part of the technique was supposed to work. Or at least, his best guess at it. He'd need her help to complete it.

Percy had several advantages going into this project of his. For one, his several years of experience with the pure part of the spell would definitely work in his favour. The abundance of soul mana on Melodia would help too, as would the fact that soul cores: or most type of cores, really: were better at converting ambient mana than pure cores. Finally, he had an assistant to work alongside him.

Still, it wouldn't all be smooth sailing.

Earlier, he'd copied Tlaloc, linking the whirlpools with the cyan lines on his skin to draw ambient mana into his channels. Unfortunately, the pattern for the soul version of the spell wasn't static. The maelstrom constantly shifted around his soul, the silver lines ever-changing.

'How am I even meant to establish a stable flow like that?'

Solving that riddle could easily take years. Hopefully, the Mirror Lake would accelerate the process several-fold, but he had to at least try and get a head start.

Besides, two minds were better than one, and all that. He wasn't used to having a host who shared his primary affinity. Sol wasn't as skilled with the boosting art as him, just like he wasn't as good with the homing attacks as her. That said, they'd spent enough time fighting together that they could meaningfully contribute, helping each other improve rapidly.

‘Ready?’ he asked, getting a nod back.

Next, he mirrored the pure version of the spell, trying to form a series of whirlpools linking to his channels, pushing the ambient mana in. It was hard, because he had to keep moving them around.

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He barely lasted five seconds before it all fell apart.

‘Are you sure this is how it’s supposed to go?’ Sol frowned.

‘Of course not.’ he rolled his eyes. ‘If I was, I wouldn’t have asked for your help, would I?’

She fell silent, as did he. The two spent a few minutes brainstorming, trying to come up with a solution. They both understood that everything they cared about hinged on their success. Circulation alone might not be enough for the hunters to return home or push back the beast tide. The Melodians’ survival could very well depend on their ability to perfect the spell.

Percy, on the other hand, wasn’t looking forward to challenging a Blue with an incomplete boosting art. But cracking the riddle wasn’t easy: it was definitely a Masterful spell, and he didn’t have anyone to hand him all the answers this time.

‘What if we split the task?’ Sol suggested. ‘I’ll take care of the internal flow, and you focus solely on keeping the whirlpools spinning. Each of us will be responsible for converting the ambient mana on our end.’

He shrugged, agreeing to give it a shot.

Not that he thought it would work in the long run: there was clearly some other trick they were missing. But it might work here, on Melodia, since they could collaborate, and because the ambient mana was so much easier to digest.

By the time the sun set, they'd barely made any progress. At least they'd managed to keep the prototype Dance active for a prolonged period of time, but the flow wasn't nearly powerful enough to provide them with a noticeable boost just yet.

In the end, they had to call it a day. The next wave of beasts would be upon them soon.

Sure enough, it was barely half an hour later when they got attacked. Though it wasn't a large pack this time. Nor was it homogeneous. In fact, the Melodians got caught in the crossfire between some Green beasts fighting each other. There was a massive bear-like creature covered in bony plates. It was under attack by three wyverns, harassing it from above.

The hunters had no idea how long the four creatures had been at it, but the battle had rolled all the way to their camp. Even worse, the beasts seemed to reach a tentative understanding upon seeing them. Probably thinking that the Melodians would make for easier prey, they stopped fighting each other, attacking Sol's people instead.

Doh took it upon himself to keep two of the wyverns at bay, leaving the third one to Sol and Percy. Meanwhile, the remaining hunters ganged up on the bear, trying to take it down.

'Shit. It's too fast. I'm not skilled enough with ranged attacks to hit it.' Percy groaned.

His go to move when dealing with such opponents was to spam projectiles from his shroud. He could fire dozens of them that way, but he couldn't vary their trajectories much, and he could only control them in bulk. Most of them would miss, so he usually relied on the extreme lethality of his mana to take his enemies out.

This wouldn't cut it on Melodia. Not against the sturdier souls that the beasts here possessed. Certainly not against a Green. His new spell helped a little, but it was still Crude.

That said, he did have a Soul Harvester in his spatial seal. It was far more lethal, and he could control a couple of those better than a rain of throwing stars. The problem was that the self-repair enchantments had to be fuelled by his fused mana, and he didn't want to waste his dwindling stash unless absolutely necessary.

‘Okay. Take care of defence. I’ll handle offense.’ Sol said.

Hurling her sickles at the creature, she forged two more, before throwing them too. They’d already agreed to use the same weapons for both melee and ranged attacks, so that they could cycle between them more easily.

The blades spun towards the wyvern, but it flew out of the way with a powerful flap of its membranous wings.

Luckily, that wasn’t the end of Sol’s attack. The second pair was about to hit, as the first pair was already on the way back, chasing the creature from behind. And she was already preparing a third one in her hands.

This time, the beast dove downwards, barely avoiding the constructs by the skin of its fangs. But it seemed to realize that this wasn’t sustainable, so it flew towards them, aiming to take them out before they fired more spells at it.

Percy took over their body, sidestepping the lunge as he sank his blades into the beast’s soul. This time he was met with a lot more resistance, the wyvern’s soul being among the sturdiest he’d ever tried to cut.

In fact, the weapons snapped, lacking the integrity afforded to them by Reinforcement. Still, he’d dealt some damage, the wyvern letting out an agonized cry as it put some distance.

Meanwhile, Sol hadn’t paused for a second, sending the other four sickles after it. Of course, Percy could still control that many by himself, but not with as much finesse. And the girl was already forging another pair in their hands, and one more floating beside her.

Soon, eight crescents spun towards the monster, flying towards it from every direction. Percy took the chance to launch a fifth pair at it too, controlling this one himself.

The wyvern avoided as many as it could, but it still got struck by several. Unfortunately, it suffered even less damage this time, the attacks not having as much force behind them. It ignored the pain again, trying to pin the pesky Melodian down.

Percy feinted to his left, leaping to his right instead. At the same time, he hacked at the beast's wing, guessing its soul was weaker there.

Sure enough, the sickle lasted longer before crumbling, leaving a nasty tear in the silver flame. Partially losing control of its limb, the beast hit the ground, carving a deep trail as it slid for dozens of metres, raising a cloud of dirt and leaves in its wake.

But it wasn't over yet.

The creature was more than capable of fighting on the ground too, apparently. It only took a second to brush off its disorientation. It even ignored the pain from the next round of sickles Sol had hurled into its soul, already charging at them on its three good limbs.

The good news was that it wasn't much faster than them without its wings. Certainly not as nimble. So it wasn't hard for them to keep it at bay, pelting its soul with more attacks, slowly gnawing it down.

By the time the beast's eyes glazed over, the other battles had also reached their end. Doh had won too, killing another wyvern while scaring the second away. The other hunters had also slain their opponent, but not without paying a steep price.

Another Yellow had fallen, along with three Oranges…

Chapter 329: Rei

"I survived… again." Rei muttered, her heart clenching at the sight of her fallen comrades.

She was one of the few remaining Orange cores in the group. Unlike the others, she hadn't made it this far through sheer luck, however. The other hunters had done everything in their power to protect her. Even the Yellows threw their bodies between her and the monsters, giving their lives for hers.

Because she was a medic.

The last surviving medic in the camp, in fact. She was arguably the third most important person left in the expedition, after Doh and Sol. And she hated it. So damn much.

She sighed.

Pushing herself to her feet, she walked up to the others. The blisters hurt like hell. Not that strange, after so many months of gruelling work. Just days of non-stop travelling, alternating with nights of harrowing battles…

And she knew she had it a little better than the others. Percy had given her a few healing potions, to help her patch up her injuries. She felt a bit guilty about it too. She was the medic here: this was the reason so many people had died to keep her alive: yet she had to rely on Sol's friend to keep going. Of course, he'd handed the others some potions too, but not as many. He'd favoured her to thank her for earlier, and because they weren't as effective on the high-borns.

Reaching the group, she looked at the other Orange cores, her gaze brushing over their tired features. If there was a silver lining, it was that there weren't any injured people for her to tend to. Anyone the monster had touched was already dead.

"Are you guys sure you all want to go through with this?" she asked. "You understand there's no going back."

"We're screwed anyway. What use is living for another day or two, before the survival of our people?" Fal replied.

The others nodded, though they didn't say anything. They'd already made their minds up. And so had she.

She approached Doh. He was helping Sol and Percy to plant those green mushrooms of theirs on the last wyvern. The man paused upon seeing her, flashing her a questioning look.

"Boss, I've discussed this with the others. We think we should camp here for a day or two…"

Doh raised an eyebrow.

“Rei, I know you’re all tired: everyone is. But we can’t do that. The blood will attract more beasts, and we no longer have enough men to defend the camp. We need to keep moving.”

She shook her head. Sol had also stopped tending to the mushrooms at some point, her attention now glued to her.

“That’s what we’re counting on. If Sol relies solely on the Green carcasses, it’ll be a couple of weeks before she gets her new core. We’ll all get wiped out by then. What if we take a stand today, and plant the mushrooms on whatever Yellow beasts we attract?”

Doh’s eyes widened, but it was Sol who protested.

“We’ll get slaughtered! How is that better than waiting two weeks?!”

Rei chuckled.

“Prioritize your safety. You and the captain need to survive at any cost. If Latt and Sik make it too, that’s a bonus. The rest of us are disposable. Throw us at the monsters if you must. Plant mushrooms on our corpses too, if you think it’ll make a difference. Do whatever it takes to bring the technique back to our people.”

Having scouts and medics made sense at the beginning of the expedition: when there were still hundreds of them. Right now, the Orange cores were just holding Sol and Doh back. The high-borns would travel much faster without them. They’d make for less appetizing targets if they didn’t have to escort a bunch of weaklings through the forest. And they’d have an easier time escaping from a losing battle.

Especially since they were about to get stronger.

If things worked out, Sol could get her second core tomorrow. That would make her more powerful than a normal Green. And Doh would master Circulation in a few days. Protecting each other, they stood a

real chance of reaching the lake. The return trip would be even harder, since they'd have to travel the whole way by themselves, but Percy and Sol would hopefully upgrade their spell by then.

It was a huge gamble, but it was their best shot at completing their mission.

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Strictly speaking, they should have done this weeks ago. They would have lost more people at the time, but they would have saved more later. It would have raised their odds of success significantly. Doh had probably thought of it, but he'd clearly chosen not to sacrifice them like that. This was why Rei and the other Orange cores had taken it upon themselves to volunteer.

"We won't just abandon you! We can hold on for a couple more weeks!" Sol yelled, some tears rolling down her cheeks.

Rei smiled at her. Sol wasn't the naïve girl she'd been when she joined the group. She'd matured a lot over the years. Rei knew Sol understood it was the only way: she just refused to admit it.

"Percy, can you do me a favour?" she asked.

"What is it?" Sol replied, though her tone was calmer.

"Nobody will blame you if it all fails in the end. You've already done plenty for us… But if it comes to that, make sure you get out of here. As long as you exist, our memory will live on, inside your soul. Never forget that."

He nodded. Doh didn't say anything either, tacitly agreeing with her plan. Even Sol remained silent, finally accepting this was the only way.

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The beasts attacked earlier than usual.

Normally, they waited to do so under the cloak of darkness. But they seemed to have lost their patience today. Was it the smell of blood stirring their appetite? Or did they see them as easy prey: given how much the group had shrunk?

Either way, it didn't matter.

It was a horde of lizards this time. Their smooth scales reflected the sunlight much like the trees did. It made it harder to stare directly at them, or to make them out from the background. At least, that would've been the case if the Melodians didn't all have Soul Vision.

Luckily, there weren't any Greens this time. Perhaps there weren't any left in the area. Or maybe they were content to sit back and wait. But it lifted some pressure off the hunters for now. Only some.

Fal was the first to fall, a couple hours later.

It was a miracle he'd lasted this long, flinging spells with a single arm. Everyone fought tooth and nail, fully aware this would be the final battle for most of them. And that it could very well determine their world's future. Sol and Doh slaughtered dozens of creatures, unleashing their terrifying spells all over the battlefield like a pair of grim reapers. The other Yellows picked up the slack whenever their leaders needed to rest. The other Orange cores simply tried to survive as long as possible, to keep some pressure off the high-borns.

But not Rei.

Technically, she could fight: it would have been strange if she couldn't, after all this time. But she was probably the weakest in the group. Instead, she'd taken it upon herself to drag the carcasses behind the front line, to prevent the other lizards from snatching them up. She planted spores on them, hoping the mushrooms would grow on time.

Two more Orange cores died in the evening.

Everyone kept guzzling down healing potions to keep going: except Sol who couldn't. At least, Circulation helped her ration her mana better. A few mushrooms were already beginning to sprout from the beasts' orifices, and from the incisions Rei had carved into their bodies. But they were still tiny. They'd need several more hours to mature.

'Will we even last that long?'

Counting the carcasses, Rei figured they'd killed around sixty or seventy Yellow lizards already. Unfortunately, Yellow beasts were much smaller than the Greens. The mushrooms didn't just grow more slowly on their bodies: each carcass produced much fewer of them too.

They'd killed hundreds of Orange beasts too, but those were useless. It would be several days until any mushrooms bloomed on them, so Rei didn't even bother planting any. According to their earlier estimates, they'd need at least a hundred Yellow carcasses to hit their quota. Only then would the one-day timer truly start ticking.

By midnight, all the other Orange hunters were dead, leaving only five people in the group: Doh, Sol, the two Yellows and Rei.

Doh and Sol couldn't fight side by side anymore. They took turns, covering for each other as they rested for a few minutes. Meanwhile, the Yellows protected Rei, helping her tend to the carcasses. There was a veritable mountain of them behind her, which the surviving lizards were now eyeing with unconcealed hunger. It would have been impossible for her to guard it by herself.

The good news was that the lizards' numbers had dropped greatly. They'd already amassed enough carcasses, so it was just a question of buying time now. There were only a few dozen beasts still besieging the group, with just ten Yellows among them.

Normally, either Sol or Doh would have been more than enough to take care of them by themselves. However, everyone was exhausted by now, and the creatures weren't alone. At some point, their Green leaders had deigned to show up. Two of them. They didn't look much different from their lesser kin. Just bigger. Faster. And far stronger.

Holding all the creatures back was a struggle for the survivors.

Doh was forced to spread his mana thin, deterring the horde of weaklings with lots of painful spells. He bought time for Percy and Sol to fight against the Greens, but it was still a tough battle for them, considering the numerical disadvantage. The others did everything in their power to guard the carcasses. If they got stolen, it would have all been for nothing.

It took an hour for the first of the Green lizards to fall under their sickles. By then, six more of the Yellow creatures had joined it too, along with most of the Oranges. Unfortunately, one of them managed to rip Sik's throat out with its dying breath.

None of the survivors shed a tear though. Not because they didn't care about their dead comrade: any of their dead comrades: but because they'd long run out of tears. They were too tired to mourn, and loss had become a constant in their lives for a while now.

The sun rose.

Finally, the second Green fell, the rest of the monsters soon following it.

No more creatures attacked either: at least, not immediately. This part of the forest must've been the lizards' territory, so it should be a while until the neighbouring packs noticed their absence.

Plopping down weakly, Rei breathed heavily, her hand pressed against the deep gash on her abdomen.

She was experienced enough to tell this was it for her.

Chapter 330: Offer

Percy watched Rei as she sifted through the empty vials in her pockets, her trembling hand probably searching for a healing potion.

It didn't seem like she had any left.

"Here you go," he said, startling her. She clearly hadn't noticed him approach.

Summoning two from his storage, he extended his hand. But she seemed hesitant to take them.

“They won’t be enough anyway. My liver is severely damaged.”

“They will be, if you drink more of them.” he replied, bringing out another two. “I still have a few left.”

Rei bit her lip. She was clearly tempted to accept them. If her pained expression was anything to go by, her wound hurt a lot. Still, she shook her head in the end.

“Keep them. Sol will be able to use them after her new core is ready. You might need them later.”

Rei rested her head on the pile of carcasses behind her. The scaly hides of the Yellow lizards had to be rough, and the stench of blood and excrement was nauseating. But Percy didn’t fault her for not caring about any of that: the muddy ground didn’t look like a better place for her to die.

“Why are you giving up?!” Sol suddenly asked, taking back control of her body. “You’ve made it this far! We can bring you along!”

“Like I said… There’s nothing more I can do to help. I’d just slow you down…” Rei replied weakly.

Picking a tiny mushroom from the ground: one that had been uprooted amidst the chaos: she fiddled with it for a few seconds, probably considering whether to sprinkle some spores in her wounds.

“Don’t…” Percy said, grabbing her wrist. “No point in putting yourself through that. It’ll take longer to grow on you, and I doubt it’ll make a difference. If the Yellow beasts aren’t enough, we’re fucked anyway…”

She nodded.

The others had approached them too at some point. Not that there were many left: just Doh and Latt. They were looking at Rei, their gazes full of sorrow and compassion.

Sighing, Percy spoke, offering them another solution: against his better judgement.

“There is another way to save you… All four of you.” he said, surprising everyone. “But it’s not my call.”

Over the next few minutes, he told them about the Vault. He really didn’t want to make a habit of resorting to that whenever things went south, but what else was he supposed to do? Just let them all die?

Percy wasn’t the most social person. Even when he spent a long time living somewhere, he didn’t easily connect with the people there. After years in the Guild, he’d barely grown close to Freddy, Orin and Nesha. He hadn’t really befriended anyone in Bogside town or Twilight City either. It was mostly his hosts that he tended to grow close to: an inevitable consequence of his bloodline. The only other people he’d befriended with his clones had been Tlaloc, Lyn and Klatz. Even then, he’d spent much less time with them.

But the Melodians were different.

He’d only been here for a month, but he’d spent every waking moment by their side, either trekking through the forest together or fighting against the beasts, sweating and bleeding with these people. And they were good people. They’d sacrificed everything for their country. He knew their names and their faces. Even their traits and their spells. Suffice to say, he felt bad watching them die.

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“What’s the catch?” Doh asked as he finished his explanation.

“Where do I even begin?” Percy smiled bitterly.

He should be able to bring everyone to the Vault, since Metatron would be interested in Sol and Doh, while Rei and Latt fell well within his quota. This was why he hadn’t mentioned anything earlier: because there had been more of them.

But the titan would definitely learn about the Mirror Lake. No way they'd pass four soul affinity users off as a coincidence. And he'd want it. The idea of giving Metatron something this precious again sickened Percy to no end.

"We'll have to make a deal with him. He gets the Mirror Lake in exchange for your people's safety. The good news is that he's honoured every deal we've ever made so far, so you can at least trust his word."

Other than the Elemental Source, Melodia didn't really have anything else of value: they didn't even have any advancement resources. Metatron would be more than happy to leave them alone. Even sending a demigod to protect their country from the beasts would be trivial for him.

"But the Mirror Lake won't belong to you anymore. Your world won't belong to you either, really. You'll always be at his whim. The likelihood of somebody else finding out about it will also go up. Metatron might decide to sell it at some point, or one of his enemies might learn about it. And your people are just part of the bundle."

Percy didn't press them, giving them some time to consider it. He knew it was a big decision.

Eventually, Rei spoke again. She wasn't the leader of the expedition, but she was the one whose life was currently hanging by a thread, so everyone was more than keen to listen to what she had to say.

"I joined the expedition for our people… everyone did… I'd rather die than abandon our mission and spit on everyone's sacrifices."

"But there's no guarantee we'll reach the lake. Even if we do, we might fail to upgrade the spell. Or Sol and Doh might get killed on the way back. I won't even be able to stay with them for the return trip." Percy said. "This may be the only way to save your people."

She shrugged, though the movement made her wince.

"Let me ask you something… How confident are you that this Dance thing is enough to turn the situation around?"

“I’m not sure how powerful the complete technique is, since my main body has yet to perfect it. Supposedly, it boosts one’s strength by a full grade, and I’m inclined to believe that. You’ve all seen Circulation. Even that might be enough, so the upgraded version should be plenty, assuming Sol can bring it back to your country.”

“Then… try to reach the lake. If you can’t, you can always escape to the Vault later… But I don’t want you to give up ahead of time for my sake…”

“Are you sure?” Percy asked.

“If we end up making a deal with that god, you’ll have died for nothing!” Sol added, not happy about this.

Percy could feel how shaken the poor girl was, seeing her friend at death’s door. And Rei was far from the first person she’d lost over the past few years.

“I’m not dying for nothing.” Rei smiled. “None of us has. We’re dying to give Melodia a chance to stand on its own two feet. I’d rather die for our people to protect themselves, than to rely on the kindness of some alien titan who only cares about the Mirror Lake.”

The others nodded along, sharing her decision. The only one who seemed bothered by it was Sol, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Well… herself and her prying fiend.

Doh and Latt kept the dying woman company, but Percy didn’t. As much as he would have loved to stay by her side until the very end, he knew his priority was to repair Sol’s new core, else they’d just be wasting her sacrifice.

Digging into the pile of carcasses, he pulled some of the older ones resting at the bottom. These had been around for nearly a full day, so the mushrooms on them had already matured. Brushing his hands along the shrivelled bodies, he allowed the seed in Sol’s abdomen to drain every drop of life mana from the fungi. Then, he tossed them aside, moving to the next ones.

Going through all of them would take hours. Especially since he’d probably have to wait a bit longer for the more recent ones. And they could get attacked again at any point.

It was about half an hour later when Rei exhaled her last breath, evident by Doh and Latt's sobs. Percy's heart clenched at that moment, tears streaming down Sol's cheeks.

'This was her choice… We just have to make sure we honour it…' he said, more to himself than his host.

As Percy and Sol harvested the mushrooms, Latt took some time to bury their fallen comrades. They did get attacked again in the afternoon, but it was only a lone Green beast this time. Doh took care of it by himself. Tired as he was, he seemed to have appreciated the chance to vent.

He planted a few more mushrooms on it too, just in case. But it proved unnecessary, since the Decree stopped absorbing mana by nightfall, with plenty of carcasses left.

Only then did the trio run away from this place, before the next wave of scavengers showed up. Despite their exhaustion, they moved much faster than they had over the past month.

Yet, the weight on their shoulders had only grown heavier…