Wanderer 331

Chapter 331: Twice the results

The following days reminded Percy of his time in the Thirsty Valley. Once again, he found himself in a group of three people: or three bodies, at least: surrounded by an endless expanse filled with horrific beasts.

Only, the situation was a little worse: in many ways. Doh, Sol and Latt were arguably weaker than Elaine, Nesha and his main body. They also had to keep moving, and were operating under a far stricter timeline.

But it wasn't all bad.

At least, the denizens of the silver forest seemed less prone to attack during daytime. The dark cloak of night provided the insidious creatures with a better cover for their vicious raids. That wasn't the case with Kronos's Decree, as day and night weren't all that different under the dome of bubbles.

Furthermore, the hunters' travelling speed indeed doubled once they no longer had Orange cores to escort. It hurt to admit it, but Rei and the others had made the right call. The three survivors were able to cover a lot more distance and avoid many more battles since the massacre. The fights were easier too, as they didn't have as many people to protect.

On top of that, their enemies thought twice before taking a gamble on them, clearly not sure it was worth the hassle for so little food. After all, a mage's power grew proportionally to a beast's as they advanced through the grades, but the same couldn't be said about their size. Starting at Green, sapients were already much smaller than beasts, possessing several times less meat for the starving creatures to feast on.

That said, there was still some downtime whenever the group needed to rest, so they had to split the shifts between them.

"So, you don't need any sleep at all?" Percy asked Latt one day, not completely sure how his trait worked.

“Nope,” the man grinned. “Insomnia is one of the most broadly applicable traits. It’s not as specialized as yours or the captain’s, but you’d be surprised at how much time it’s saved me since I got it.”

Percy sighed, feeling a little envious. Not that he was unhappy with Weaving, but he’d have preferred Composing or Insomnia. Doh’s Coordination trait also sounded pretty powerful. It gave the Green-born better control of his body. It was one of the reasons he’d learned Circulation so much faster than his subordinates.

At any rate, Latt’s condition was quite beneficial for them.

While Sol and Doh were the strongest in the group, they still had to sleep every now and then, so it was nice to have somebody who didn’t in the group. Of course, Sol had it a little better than Doh, as she and Percy could take turns controlling her body. That said, they still shared a single brain, so it wasn’t like they could keep going without pause. Sleeping while their body was moving and fighting wasn’t easy either.

Nearly two days after Rei’s sacrifice, Sol managed to activate her new core, allowing everyone to sigh in relief. It had taken a little longer than usual because she hadn’t been able to focus solely on that, but she’d made it there in the end.

Percy wasn’t too surprised with its affinity either. Pulling up his Status again, he checked the most relevant sections one more time.

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Sol (Percival's clone)

Mana cores:

[Mana core 1 – Yellow – Soul][Mana core 2 – Yellow – Soul]Spectral traits:

[Beacon] – Allows one to broadcast their location to their soulmate.[Weaving]: Boosts one’s proclivity in manipulating one-dimensional structures.___

‘Figures…’

He’d suspected she’d end up with another one of those. Unlike Elaine who had found herself in that situation purely out of bad luck, Sol had probably been doomed to get a second soul core from the start. Then again, that was just another type of bad luck…

‘Hey, at least it’s a rare affinity. And, if you’re gonna have two soul cores, I can’t think of a better place in the universe than Melodia to get them.’ he said to cheer her up.

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He wasn’t just trying to console her either. Without the means of advancement, she wouldn’t have to worry about catching up to her first core, or keeping the two in sync. They should be able to integrate the new core into her mana network by the end of the week. And they were currently heading towards the Mirror Lake, a paradise for soul users. Not to mention how thick the soul mana in the air was.

Figuring out the soul component of the Dance couldn’t possibly get any easier than this.

Another thing he’d noticed in his Status, was that both of their spectral traits were listed. Each person could only absorb a single fiend in their soul, but they had two souls, didn’t they? Apparently, they could even use each other’s traits.

Not that either of them was very useful at the moment, but it was nice to have the option…

In any case, Sol’s strength shot through the roof due to the passive benefits of her new core. And she received another minor boost a few days later, once she could use it in battle. The pattern of her boosting art had changed a lot, the silver lines now forming two maelstroms on her skin. One was centred around her sternum, while the second spun around her abdomen.

Percy was a little surprised by this. Elaine’s pattern hadn’t changed as much when she added the new core to the network. But they hadn’t had to put much effort into adjusting it either, as the soul mana seemed to settle into the new configuration by itself. This, coupled with Rei and Sol’s lessons about

souls gave him some ideas on how he could perfect the final step of the Dance, but nothing concrete yet.

'Hopefully the Mirror Lake will help everything click…'

Better still, Doh managed to activate Circulation not long after, allowing the trio to move even faster.

Latt was the only one who hadn't made much progress. If they were being honest with themselves, the guy was beginning to bog them as much as the Orange cores had done. And he seemed to understand that too, as he offered to stay behind multiple times.

But they wouldn't hear it.

They'd had to sacrifice the others out of necessity. They wouldn't do that a second time unless they ran out of options again. And things weren't that dire yet, as their new power-ups allowed them to make quick work of whatever beasts were dumb enough to attack.

Another week passed.

The trio hadn't reached the Elemental Source yet, but they were getting closer. They could tell, because the lake's influence was already noticeable. After all, it was a supreme treasure capable of affecting an entire planet, so it wasn't that strange its presence spread hundreds of miles away.

"There's so much soul mana!" Sol exclaimed.

She was sitting cross-legged at the base of a tree with her eyes closed. She was taking deep breaths, working alongside Percy on their boosting art. The silver whirlpools were constantly shifting along their skin, making it extremely difficult for him to maintain them.

At least, the ambient mana couldn't have been easier to absorb. By the time it entered their body, Percy had already converted most of it to soul mana. Sol didn't have to put much effort on her end.

‘Focus.’ he said. ‘It won’t be this easy once you return to your country.’

The incomplete Dance had already surpassed Circulation, but only because they were cheating. They wouldn’t always have each other, or the Mirror Lake to help them. They had to perfect it before he left Melodia.

“There’s a Green bird looking at us from above!” Latt suddenly said.

It was the middle of the day, yet they still needed somebody to keep watch. It didn’t happen as often, but sometimes the beasts attacked them when they least expected it.

According to Doh, things would continue to worsen over the next few years. The beast tide would escalate as the creatures exhausted what little food they had left. They would grow more desperate, cannibalizing their packmates, before turning to even the trees and bushes around them. Eventually, there would be nothing left.

But this wasn’t any of Percy’s business. Whether the expedition succeeded or not, he’d be back to Remior by then. Dealing with the problem would be up to Sol and her people…

Shifting his attention back to the present moment, he looked up, soon spotting the creature. It resembled an oversized eagle, but its body was translucent, reminding him of Gabe. It allowed the bright sunlight to pass right through it, causing him to squint.

He groaned.

Even after all this time, he despised fighting during the day. He had yet to get used to the extreme brightness of the forest like the natives. Taking down an airborne opponent would be even worse.

‘You should handle this one.’ Sol suggested.

Obviously, Latt couldn’t fight it by himself, and they didn’t want to wake Doh up just yet. It was his turn to rest, which was why they’d taken a break. The Green was currently sleeping a few metres away from them. So, it had to be either Sol or Percy taking down the intruder.

‘Feeling lazy?’ he asked.

She rolled her eyes.

‘No, I just think it’s good training for your homing spell.’

Percy nodded, tacitly agreeing with her. It was a fast, airborne opponent. That alone would make it challenging to hit. The fact he had a tough time looking at it directly also helped. It would prevent him from subconsciously trying to control his mana, allowing his constructs to do their thing.

‘Alright.’ he said, getting up. ‘Keep the Dance active. I can’t work on two new spells at the same time.’

Maintaining the boosting art wouldn’t be easy without his help, but she should manage. The Mirror Lake was still about a week away, but it had already started affecting them, allowing them to accomplish twice the results with half the effort. Its influence was still subtle, so he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it did exactly, but it should help him progress with his spells a little faster.

Drawing some mana to his hands, he manifested two sickles, yet he didn’t stop there. He expelled more from his pores, forming another four weapons spinning by his side.

Realizing it had been discovered, the eagle let out a shrill cry. It dove towards him, its pale eyes filled with hunger…

Chapter 332: Nostalgic

Objectively speaking, the fight wasn’t going well.

Percy’s spinning sickles just about managed to keep the bird at bay, preventing it from tearing him to shreds. But he didn’t have an easy time landing a hit either. In fact, he’d come closer to slicing Latt’s soul up by accident a couple times, forcing the man to retreat behind a large tree. Not that the wood would offer much protection from the soul mana, but it seemed to put the Yellow-born at ease.

If that wasn't enough, Percy had to fight with his eyes closed, unable to tolerate the burning rays of sunlight for too long. Sadly, it meant he had to forsake both Soul Vision and his regular sight, relying solely on Mana Sense to track the creature's movements. This only made everything even harder.

Still, a grin was plastered all over his face.

Against all odds, Percy was enjoying the battle!

Over the years, his arsenal had expanded with all sorts of new additions. Circulation, his pure affinity, Reinforcement, affinity fusion, runecrafting, his mutation and his spectral trait… He'd spent a lot of time mastering all those disparate components and integrating them into his spells, but he'd arguably neglected his original soul affinity in the process. That was the one thing he'd had for most of his life: for a decade longer than everything else, in fact, even if he hadn't known much about it during his childhood.

'Feels good to return to my roots!'

And how fitting was it, to work on his new attack using his sickles? It was the first spell he had ever registered: his Parting Gift!

He'd stopped using it with his main body after upgrading it to the Soul Harvester. The reinforced scythes were stronger and far more lethal than the flimsy weapons he'd hunted the wasps with. But his old spell still held a special place in his heart.

From the days he shot orb after orb of soul mana through that oak tree in the garden, to his experiments to shape it into knives by Baldy's side, to that fateful dagger he'd planted in Mixcoatl's soul… All the way to the curved blades he'd developed to fight the Starry Workers.

In fact, this whole trip to Melodia was quite nostalgic. If he ignored all the pressure and bloodshed: that is. It was an excellent opportunity to reconnect with one of his previous hosts, and to explore his primary affinity further. To discover things about it he'd never known. Just like he had elevated the pure affinity to something others would envy, he knew there was more to soul mana that he had yet to learn.

Alas, the new spell proved a bit tricky to master.

Sol had taught him to let go of his mana. To trust it. Allow it to do its own thing. And that had been enough to breathe some life into his constructs. The spinning sickles could already adjust their trajectories by themselves, inching closer to his targets.

But there was a reason it was still a Crude spell: a far cry from his host's own ability.

Hurling two more sickles at the eagle, he watched it effortlessly dodge them with a casual flap of its enormous wings. At least, the intense gust of wind passed harmlessly through the ethereal weapons, unable to touch them.

Yet the damage was already done. The Parting Gifts flew away, missing their mark by several metres. They tried to adjust course, shifting upwards in a wide arc, but it was too late. In the end, they disappeared into the distance.

Percy clicked his tongue. Well… Sol's tongue.

'Okay, I can't just ignore the weapons entirely. I need to work alongside them.'

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The first step had been to weaken his hold on the constructs, letting them fly by themselves. The second step would be to strengthen his hold again. But instead of getting in their way: inhibiting them: like before, he would have to cooperate with them.

It was easier said than done though.

He would have loved to ask Sol for another tip, but she was currently busy keeping their boosting art active. And she was doing an admirable: if imperfect: job at it. Maintaining both the internal and the external conversion wasn't that hard given the abundance of soul mana, but keeping the whirlpools in place was.

Whenever he drew too much mana from their channels, he threw everything out of whack, causing her control to waver and the spell to weaken. It never took her more than a couple seconds to restore it, though it didn't look like she had the spare time to help him with his homing attacks.

He shrugged.

'Well, whatever. I'm the veteran mage here. I shouldn't be relying on a kid to spoon-feed me.'

Shifting his attention back to the beast, he noticed it was starting to grow irritated. It seemed to finally realize it wasn't going to get its meal today, looking at him cautiously from afar. Was it going to fly away?

"No, you don't!" Percy spat.

He hurled four more sickles at it, trying to cut its escape paths off. At the same time, he manifested four more, before launching them too. If he couldn't beat the creature with precision alone, he'd throw some quantity into the mix!

At first, the eight constructs were spaced apart by dozens of metres, but the gaps shrunk as they closed into the eagle, approaching it from every direction.

Sadly, there was still plenty of space for it to slip through.

Escaping the deathtrap, it appeared to hesitate for a moment. Truth be told, if it wanted to leave, Percy wouldn't be able to hold it.

But its eyes glinted with greed as its gaze landed on him once more. He'd used a lot of mana to form so many constructs at once, messing with Sol's work. The silver lines on their skin faded in and out, threatening to disappear entirely.

'What the hell are you doing?!' she chided him.

‘Baiting it.’ he replied.

It was risky, but it had worked, judging from its expression. It was already diving down for another attempt, thinking it stood a chance.

Forming two more sickles in his hands, Percy held his ground, threatening to hit back.

But the bird wasn’t that dumb, apparently. Turning away at the last second, it flew towards the sleeping Doh instead, thinking he was an easy target.

A big mistake.

The man rolled out of the way at the last second, the commotion having long woken him up. The eagle would have realized too, if it had Soul Vision.

The Green-born shot a chunk of soul mana into the beast, rattling the silver flame burning inside its frame. He took care not to injure it severely, however, probably realizing Percy still needed his practice dummy.

Hurt and disoriented, the bird crashed awkwardly into a tree, smashing the trunk into a rain of splinters. Percy could have easily finished it if he wanted, but that would defeat the purpose of this exercise.

Instead, he waited for it to take off, putting some distance between them.

The bird did try to escape again, but that ship had long sailed. It had a tougher time flying now, making it easier for Percy to box it in. On top of that, Doh and Latt finally decided to pitch in, preventing the creature from leaving.

‘Okay, I’m starting to feel a little bad for the poor thing…’ Percy thought, looking at the injustice painting the bird’s expression.

He sighed.

It’s not like he wanted to kill it. If it was alive by the time he finished training, he’d let it go. He doubted it would dare attack them again.

Between his two Yellow cores, the boosting art that Sol laboriously tended to, and an environment rich in soul mana, Percy had all the fuel he needed to test his spell to his heart’s content. Not to mention the perfect moving target: a most excellent whetstone to hone his aim.

Thus, he kept at it for hours, hurling sickle after sickle at the creature, improving his control ever so slightly with each attempt. His companions didn’t stop him either. Protecting themselves wasn’t as difficult after their recent upgrades, and they knew it would serve them well if he and Sol grew even stronger.

In the end, they were forced to let the beast go by nightfall, once a separate pack of Yellow beasts attacked them. The bird was more than happy to receive its pardon, though it didn’t miss the chance to snatch one of the carcasses on the way out, as payment for its trouble.

Unfortunately, Percy’s Status hadn’t registered the upgrade yet. But that was not to say he hadn’t improved. He was already able to manage multiple sickles at once, and his control was rapidly approaching Sol’s. He could tell their work with the Dance was also nearing a turning point.

‘I’ve no idea how potent the lake’s effect is from up close, but it should be enough. Just a few more days…’

Chapter 333: Swarm

The hunters had expected some changes in their surroundings as they neared the Mirror Lake. It was the most mana-rich location on the entire planet, and that led to a cascade of additional consequences. The plant life in the surrounding area flourished, growing to downright titanic sizes.

While they were still a couple days away, Percy noticed the trees were already twice as tall as before, their trunks as wide as small huts. Even their crowns were larger, their canopies almost blanketing the sky above their heads, offering some respite from the intense sunlight. The scorching rays still managed to pierce through the gaps between the branches, reflected countless times against the smooth surfaces before reaching the ground, but the sight wasn’t as insufferable as before.

The bushes were more frequent and intrusive too, their dense foliage beginning to obstruct the group's movement, slowing their travelling pace. It forced them to triple their caution, as it made it harder to protect themselves from an ambush predator.

Everyone understood the following days wouldn't be a picnic.

There would be beasts at their destination. Many of them. Yellows and Greens. Maybe even large packs, all fighting for territory. This was easily the most contested region on Melodia: especially nearing the peak of the beast tide. It was why their people couldn't establish a permanent presence in this place.

Suffice to say, they had prepared themselves for the brutal onslaught of monsters. They would have to fight every single day they remained there, struggling to carve out a sliver of space for themselves. To perfect their spells and grow strong enough to save their people.

But they hadn't expected they would run into a different obstacle entirely.

"What the hell is going on?!" Percy asked.

He helped Sol push the Dance to its limits, shielding their body from the silver blizzard trying to rip their soul apart. It was impossible to see more than a couple metres ahead. All their senses were clogged: both mundane and magical. Mana Sense and Soul Vision included.

"Spectral fiends!" Doh exclaimed.

The Green-born expelled some of his own mana too, protecting himself and Latt from the creatures.

"Fiends? Down here?! You mean, they actually descend to the surface?!"

Percy had thought the fiends only roamed the vicinity of the planet like scavengers, waiting for a dying soul to feast on. They were quite dangerous for a disembodied soul: as he had found out the hard way: but not to a healthy one still living inside the protection of its body. Even if they lowered their defences, it would take a while for the fiends to do any serious damage.

On the other hand, the creatures themselves were a lot more vulnerable. Showing themselves to a Melodian was risky, as even the simplest soul spell could rip them apart.

“Usually not, unless somebody baits them. But they can’t resist the attraction of the Mirror Lake.” Doh explained. “Our ancestors have always encountered some in their expeditions. Not this many though! I have no idea what’s going on…”

Listening to the Green’s words, Percy grimaced. Fighting against the beasts would have been bad enough. Shielding themselves from the fiends while doing so would only make things worse.

Reducing the flow of mana to his eyes, he weakened Soul Vision to a more bearable level, trying to better discern their shapes. Many of them had clung to their makeshift barrier, gnawing it down slowly. Others whizzed by them at ridiculous speeds, their blurry trails barely visible. Some slammed violently into the shield, sending ripples through it.

Fine-tuning his ethereal sense some more, he was able to make out more details. They looked like overgrown bugs, their sizes ranging from tiny like pebbles, to as big as Sol’s fist. There were all sorts of different kinds, but they all carried some otherworldly features, distinguishing them from corporeal lifeforms.

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There was one of those spider-like fiends he’d absorbed right above his head, trying to dig through the barrier. An Argalios. It had over a dozen legs, bent in all sorts of unnatural directions.

Next, Sol pointed at some kind of cricket crawling near her right shoulder. It was as big as the tip of her thumb. It had three wings, rubbing them together. But no sound came out. At least, none that Percy could hear.

‘That’s a Synthetis. The one Rei had…’ she said, some sorrow seeping into her voice.

At any rate, this wasn’t the time to marvel at the creatures. Protecting themselves wouldn’t be hard in the short-term, but keeping this up for a month?

“Stand close. We’ll take turns maintaining the barrier. It should get easier once we all upgrade our boosting arts.” Doh said, walking next to Sol, dragging Latt with him.

Percy sighed, not looking forward to this.

At least, the beasts wouldn’t have it easy either. Their lack of a soul affinity might make them less appetizing to the fiends, but they wouldn’t be able to defend themselves. Hopefully there would be fewer enemies at the lake than they had expected.

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“This… It’s not sustainable.” Latt groaned once the trio reached the lake.

Luckily, they hadn’t seen any beasts during the past couple of days, confirming Percy’s guess. However, the swarm of spectral fiends had only grown denser. By now, their shield was completely covered, forcing them to deactivate Soul Vision entirely to watch were they stepped. The mana combined with the buzzing creatures obscured their regular sight too, but at least they could see a couple feet past their noses.

If that wasn’t enough, the fiends were consuming their mana at a much scarier rate. Individually, they couldn’t do much, but a few hundred of them were certainly an issue. The only reason the trio hadn’t succumbed yet was because their boosting arts were easier to use than ever before, allowing them to barely keep up with the consumption.

But a single person was no longer enough to protect the group, so each had to pitch in for two thirds of the day. Suffice to say, they’d struggle to make it to the end of the week, let alone the month.

“Let me try something.” Percy said, sitting down.

Picking a smooth piece of bark from the dirt, he gathered some soul mana to his finger. Next, he poured the mana into the mirror-like surface, drawing an intricate rune. Of course, soul mana couldn’t normally interact with physical objects, but these trees had grown next to the Mirror Lake, soaking in its waters all year round, constantly breathing the air rich in soul mana. He was willing to bet their wood could absorb at least some of his mana.

And he was right.

It didn't take him long to carve the controlled heat enchantment into the bark. Percy had studied those mainly for his cauldron, so he'd selected a variant that would work with pure mana. He hadn't checked if this particular type would activate with soul mana alone, or what its effect might be.

As soon as he was done, he poured some more mana into it.

Sure enough, it seemed to do something.

The object still felt cool to his touch, but the fiends around it dispersed, clearly finding whatever it did unpleasant. He didn't know if it was Sol's flesh protecting her own soul from the effect, or if it just wasn't potent enough to affect a sapient, but this might work.

"Help me gather more bark from the trees." he told his companions, lighting up a spark of hope in their tired eyes.

Over the next several hours, the trio assisted Percy as he equipped all of them with runes. He would have forged a suit of armour for each of them if he had enough fused mana for it, but that wasn't currently an option. They had to make do with a few pieces of bark embedded in their clothes.

"Much better!" Doh exclaimed after realizing how much easier it was to keep the fiends at bay.

It wasn't perfect, because they still had to fuel the enchantments with mana, and there were several gaps between the runes. That said, it was twice as efficient as before, meaning that even Latt should be able to protect the group by himself.

"It's just a proof of concept." Percy shrugged. "Take your tent out. I bet we can fit even more enchantments on it."

Sadly, the ambient mana wouldn't just flow into the runes by itself without a mage's will guiding it. And Percy didn't know any runes that drew ambient mana from the environment. If he did, he could have made the enchantments self-sustainable. Especially here.

This wasn't something he'd focused on in the past, because all his constructs required a lot more mana than they could get from the air around them. Many of them even required specific types, which weren't that abundant normally. Thus, he'd always relied on his own reserves to fuel his enchantments.

He sighed.

'Something to revisit in the future, I guess…'

A day later, the trio had finished fitting both their tent and their clothes with even more runes, cutting their consumption massively. Having protected themselves from the swarm, they could now focus on other matters.

The lack of visibility was still a problem, leaving them open to an attack. But the relative absence of beasts helped. They were sure there were plenty still around, but their senses should also be affected by the fiends, which worked in their favour.

Having dealt with the most pressing issues, the trio was finally free to explore the area some more, and to begin their training.

Chapter 334: Mirror Lake

According to Doh, the lake stretched for hundreds of miles, making it even larger than the Thirsty Valley.

'Should be called the Mirror Sea, really…'

It was impossible to see the other end of its tranquil waters even after climbing the colossal trees in its vicinity. Percy would have loved to try anyway, to get a better look at it. It wasn't every day a mortal got a chance to visit an Elemental Source: and of their own affinity, no less.

Sadly, that wasn't possible.

Fuelled by his mana, the heating enchantments formed an invisible bubble around his body. One that the swarm of fiends dared not trespass. This allowed him to relax a little at last, after the long and arduous journey. But it didn't do much to improve visibility.

Thus, he and his companions could only examine their immediate surroundings.

The lush forest stopped a dozen metres from the shore, giving way to tall grass reaching all the way to their knees. The blades were smooth and silver like all the other plants he'd seen on Melodia, resembling shards of glass more so than leaves. The soil was soft and wet, their boots sinking an inch deep with every step. It transitioned sharply into mud the closer one moved to the water.

As for the lake itself?

Well, it hadn't earned its name by accident.

The surface was truly still as a mirror, reflecting the countless fiends whizzing soundlessly above it. The creatures didn't seem to disturb the waters in the slightest as they dove in and out. They hungrily devoured any mote of silver they could get their mandibles on.

At first, Percy wasn't sure if it was due to their ethereal nature that they failed to interact with the fluid, but he received his answer soon enough. Even when the occasional leaf landed in the lake, it simply floated without the faintest ripple. Picking up a pebble, he tossed it in, watching it sink silently, without as much as a splash.

'What even is this? Is it divine mana?'

He'd long learned that a god's mana was dense like a liquid, allowing it to be stored even outside its owner's body for a prolonged period of time. This had been the case for the mind mana he'd absorbed to repair his second core, as well as the stored mana the Vault provided him as per his deal with Metatron.

Yet, that didn't seem to be it.

The lake did appear rich in soul mana in both his Soul Vision and Mana Sense, but not quite at the level of a deity. Various mortal colours ranging from Red to Yellow swirled chaotically in its waters, the lower ones more common. Sol appeared no less confused than him, clearly not as knowledgeable about this place as the others.

“It’s just normal water. Feel free to drink it.” Doh said.

As if to demonstrate, he cupped some, bringing it to his lips.

Once more, the action had failed to perturb the surface. Oddly enough, there was no mana left inside the water by the time he took a sip. Whatever cosmic miracle allowed the Mirror Lake to produce soul mana, it was tied to the place: not the substance.

“What a bummer…” Percy sighed.

He’d considered storing some in his seal to bring back home, but it didn’t seem there was a point.

Shrugging, he drank some too, feeling quite parched by now. The countless beasts they’d slain along the way had ensured their rations never came close to running out, but the trio had been more frugal with the water, since they couldn’t replenish it as easily. It hadn’t rained in weeks.

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After quenching their thirst and washing some of the grime off their exhausted bodies, Percy turned to the others.

“Alright, so how does this work? Are we supposed to train while swimming, or do we just drink lots of water?”

Latt chuckled.

“Neither. Merely being here is enough. Practice your spells as you normally do. You should see an improvement before long.”

Percy nodded. Pushing the Dance to its limits, he allowed his focus to sink into the ever-shifting whirlpools pumping mana into his soul. Granted, he and Sol had kept the technique active almost constantly over the past few days, but they’d devoted most of their attention to dealing with the spectral fiends. They hadn’t had the mental capacity to spare on uncovering the spell’s mysteries.

Sure enough, it took less than an hour to notice a difference.

‘This isn’t anything like the Wiseman’s Dust…’

Upon learning about this place, he’d thought it would function in a similar way. But that didn’t seem to be the case. Rather than opening his mind, providing him with endless inspiration, the Mirror Lake instead affected the behaviour of the soul mana itself. Everything still happened in response to his own actions: the more he concentrated on the silver motes, the more they appeared to resonate with him. They grew lively, exhibiting a will of their own, apparently bestowed to them by this magical place.

Initially, he felt it was counterproductive.

The mana rebelled against him. It refused to stay in line, slowing down their progress instead of accelerating it. Of course, he and Sol could always just break their focus to restore the mana to its original state, so they didn’t have to subject themselves to this. But wasn’t the lake supposed to make training easier? The erratic behaviour of his mana seemed to hinder them, more than anything.

It was only a couple hours later he understood this was actually a good thing.

‘The mana… I think it’s revealing its nature to us!’

Normally, a mage had to spent countless years slowly uncovering the unique properties of their affinity. In many cases, they never did. Most pure users in the universe seemed oblivious to the fact they could crystallize their mana, and most beasts had no idea they could supercharge their passive Circulation to strengthen themselves.

The only way to cheat was to ask somebody more experienced to share their insight. Percy had received a lot of help from the Melodians in that regard, but Sol and Mi's lessons were still limited to certain topics. It was another thing entirely for the mana itself to actively assist him in mastering a complex spell.

Now, they just had to figure out what it was trying to tell them.

'Is it me, or are the whirlpools fighting against us?' Sol suddenly asked.

Percy creased his brow. It was true. The ever-spinning maelstroms forced them to constantly move the silver ribbons along their skin, trying to keep the technique going. They'd improved at this over the past few weeks, but the lake further complicated things.

The more they focused on the mana, the more it resisted, struggling to drift away. Bending and twisting, the silver flows collided with one another, throwing their control off. No matter how hard Percy and Sol fought to separate them, they kept getting entangled, forming chaotic structures that resembled balls of yarn. The balls barely floated a couple seconds by their side before collapsing, depowering the spell to good old Circulation.

'You're right. Maybe we should just let it do whatever it wants.' he nodded.

She was the one who'd taught him to listen to his mana, after all. And there was no better place to do that than here.

Over the next several hours, the two kept at it, trying to understand what the mana was trying to do. Once they stopped holding it back, the yarn balls started to last a little longer before dissipating. They absorbed the ambient mana even faster, growing from the size of cherries to about as big as tangerines, swirling rapidly.

Yet, there was clearly something missing.

The yarn balls were no longer attached to Sol's body, so the mana had nowhere to go. The constructs weren't stable either. The bigger they got, the harder it was for Percy and Sol to maintain them.

‘Well… it feels more natural than the whirlpools, at least… but we still need to absorb the mana somehow…’

The technique wouldn’t be complete until the internal and external flows linked seamlessly with one another.

He and his host weren’t the only ones training. Latt was trying to get a grasp on Circulation. His channels were already tempered, and he knew the pattern for it, so it was just a question of putting everything together. Meanwhile, Doh had started working on the Dance too, though it would be a while until he even reached Percy’s level, let alone surpassed him. Still, they all intended to stay here as long as possible, unwilling to waste the precious chance their fallen comrades had bought for them with their lives.

Days passed. Before long, the first week was over.

The group continued to improve rapidly: several times faster than they had on the way here. The effects of the Mirror Lake had seemed subtle at first, but the Elemental Source proved worthy of its reputation. It appeared they weren’t destined to spend their time here in peace, however.

On the ninth day, the Melodians finally got discovered by a herd of ravenous beasts. And it was a nasty one, capable of threatening even them…

Chapter 335: Wisps

‘Seven Green beasts?! Together?!’ Percy spat, cursing inward at their bad luck.

Back on Remior, one would be hard-pressed to find even two or three Greens of the same species, let alone this many. At least if special locations like the Fungal Spire were excluded. But perhaps, it wasn’t that surprising.

On Melodia, the creatures had an entire continent mostly to themselves, with very few sapients to cull them. Furthermore, this was close to the height of the beast tide. Not to mention that the Mirror Lake was supposed to be the very epicentre of the disaster. If anything, Percy should probably be glad they’d lasted this long without a fight.

‘What even are these things?’ he asked his host.

The hulking abominations resembled sheep somewhat, though they didn’t have any horns. They were as big as elephants: a standard feature of their grade. Their wool: if it could even be called that: was rough, sporting a dull grey colour, making it closer to steel wires. Their cloven hooves sank several inches deep into the ground with each thunderous step, the squelching mud doing very little to slow them down, or to mitigate the tremors.

Sol smiled bitterly.

‘They’re called jigreets. They’re cute and cuddly at Red. No larger than my fist, and they only eat leaves. I’ve heard they make for great pets…’

Percy felt the urge to chuckle. Leaves, huh? Well, whatever the creatures had eaten at the lower grades, it didn’t matter. Virtually no herbivores remained so by the time they reached Green.

It had been about ten minutes since the small herd stumbled upon the Melodians. The beasts had probably circled the lake in search of food. And, well… apparently, they found some. He had no idea why there wasn’t a single Yellow among them though. Perhaps, their weaker kin had already been devoured by other predators. Or maybe it was the Green sheep themselves that had cannibalized the rest.

Not that it made the situation much better.

Percy and Sol had taken it upon themselves to hold three of the creatures busy. Their boosting art was still incomplete, as they had yet to figure out how to properly re-absorb the yarn balls into their channels. At the moment, they clumsily tore them apart, trying to untangle the silver strands, pulling whatever remained into their pores. It sort of worked, but they lost over two thirds of the ambient mana in the process.

Inefficient as it was, the spell was relatively stable at least: providing them with a slightly greater boost than Circulation. The abundance of mana in the environment helped too, allowing them to unleash a storm of spinning sickles at their opponents.

Doh was facing just as many by himself. He hadn't made much progress with the Dance yet, but his Green core and Circulation were more than sufficient. His attacks resembled the homing birds Sol had used before switching to Percy's Parting Gifts. Pretty much all the Melodians fought in the same way: it was probably a staple of their culture.

On the other hand, Latt was having a tough time keeping the seventh creature at bay. He'd managed to complete Circulation over the past week, which certainly made his life a little easier. Sadly, that wasn't enough to fully bridge the gap.

The good news was that the beasts weren't that fast, so it wasn't difficult to hit them. However, their souls were even stronger than other creatures they'd encountered so far: probably a requirement to survive under the relentless onslaught of the spectral fiends. Thus, they didn't have much trouble shrugging off most of the damage they took. Painful as the soul injuries were, it would take many of them to bring the monsters down.

If it was just that, the hunters might have won already. But they all had to fight while fuelling the enchantments on their clothes, lest they got swarmed by the fiends. This ate away at both their mana and their focus, making the fight even harder than it had to be.

'We won't last much longer at this rate!' Sol warned.

Percy gritted his teeth, knowing she was right. She and Doh were doing okay, but Latt wasn't. His opponent had nearly trampled on him a couple of times already. And it was only a matter of time until he got unlucky.

But what other option did they have?

Running away? It wouldn't be easy. The beasts had them backed to the lake's shore, cutting off their escape routes. If they made a big push, they might be able to break through the encirclement, but that wouldn't guarantee their safety. Sol and Doh would probably manage to ditch the creatures in the end, though it could easily take hours. Latt would most likely fall behind. There was also a good chance they'd get attacked by more beasts if they travelled far.

No. There had to be a better way.

Tossing a fleeting glance behind him, Percy caught sight of the lake's still waters boxing them in. They stretched as far as his eyes could see: which wasn't that much right now, admittedly, as the swarming fiends still obscured their vision. Thinking of the strange way the water behaved, he came up with an idea.

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"Run on the lake!" he yelled, loud enough for everyone to hear.

As if to demonstrate what he meant, he leapt backwards, stepping on the surface of the water. Taken aback by his sudden move, Sol tensed, probably expecting herself to sink. But something else happened instead.

Percy kicked against the liquid, meeting a lot of resistance. It allowed him to take a second step, and then a third, practically dancing atop the smooth surface. Taking advantage of the quick footwork of his boosting art, he put some distance from the creatures, gesturing at his companions to join him.

'How…?' Sol started to ask, but she seemed to have put two and two together mid-sentence.

Technically, a Yellow mage was already more than strong and fast enough to run on water, but it should have been harder and more exhausting than this. Doing it for a prolonged period of time, and while fighting no less, was ill-advised. But this wasn't exactly regular water. Or maybe it was, but at least it didn't behave as such.

Percy was taking advantage of the lake's unique properties. The surface of the liquid appeared exceptionally resistant to deformation, so everything that fell inside it was affected in a binary way. If it was denser than the water, it would sink quickly and soundlessly, otherwise it would float. There was no middle ground. No slow sinking, or splashing, or floating near the surface. The barrier separating the two behaviours was steeper than normal. As long as one moved fast enough, the lake would act as a solid, not sapping their strength as much.

The others soon joined him, leaving their pursuers behind.

Of course, the beasts still followed them, clearly unwilling to let their food escape. But things weren't as easy for them. They were both slower, and countless times heavier, so they instantly sank to the bottom of the lake. It wasn't that deep: barely reaching their knees: but the resistance bogged them down massively. The Mirror Lake's properties had the exact opposite effect on the monsters, as the water simply refused to part before them.

The Melodians finally got a chance to catch their breath, though they continued to hurl a rain of spells at their opponents from afar.

"Whatever happens, don't stop moving!" Percy warned.

If any of them paused for even a moment, they'd sink, and it would be much harder for them to climb up again. Suffice to say, they could easily get surrounded by the beasts at that point.

The others nodded, unleashing their magic against the creatures. Percy could feel Sol's muscles burn and her bones creak as she hopped along the water. Their reserves dropped at a scary rate, their boosting art failing to keep up with their consumption. But they didn't let up. If anything, they intensified their offensive, throwing dozens of sickles at the jigreets, harassing them from every direction.

They knew they didn't have long, as their newfound advantage was fleeting. They didn't dare run deeper into the lake, as there might be aquatic horrors waiting for them there. Even this far in was a risk they would have rather not taken. Worse still, Latt was losing mana and stamina even faster than they were. The guy looked like he'd fall in the water any second now.

"Come on!" Sol exclaimed, clearly unwilling to let another of her comrades die.

Percy felt her fear as their racing heart skipped more than a couple beats. Her pain, as every inch of their body and soul burned. Her resolve too, as the weapons grew sharper under her command, their attacks more vicious. And honestly, he shared those feelings. They hadn't been strong enough to bring Rei and the others to the lake, but he'd be damned if he allowed one more teammate to fall.

"Go eat something else, you bastards!" he spat, landing a brutal strike on a beast's face.

It jerked its head back in agony, its eyes sporting a dazed look. The way things were going, it appeared the first casualty was only seconds away. Would it be one of the monsters though, or would Latt be the one to lose his footing, thrusting himself at their non-existent mercy?

Yet, something else happened instead: something that nobody could have expected.

Seemingly in response to Percy's and Sol's unyielding passion, the yarn balls ignited, a cold flame soon devouring them. Rotating even more violently than before, the silver wisps drew the ambient mana faster, growing at an alarming rate. Each barely took a second to escape Percy's control, forcing him and Sol to break them up. To salvage whatever mana they could from their remains.

Their efficiency was even lower, as they now failed to absorb over 80% of the mana. Yet, they still regenerated more than before: in absolute terms: allowing them to unleash more attacks on the beasts. There was clearly one final piece missing from the boosting art, but it was already powerful enough to save the day.

Even better, the fiends around them were drawn to the silver wisps, only to get incinerated by the fire. Whether it was the violent rotation that ground the creatures into nothing, or some other property of the constructs, Percy didn't know. Nor did he care.

They were finally free to deactivate the enchantments on their clothes, fully focusing their efforts on the beasts. He and Sol manifested more sickles, hurling them against the creatures. There were way too many weapons to control individually by now. Even for the two of them working together. Even with the Elemental Source breathing life into their mana. Even with Sol's greater mastery of the spell.

So, they didn't bother to control them all.

Instead, they focused on the collective behaviour of the attacks. Countless sharp edges spun like crescent moons, surrounding each of the bastards in a cyclone of death, shredding their souls one tiny incision at a time. The sickles were nothing more than parts of a greater whole now. It was the cyclones that he and Sol had to direct, not their numerous components.

The first of the beasts let out an agonizing roar, collapsing into the lake.

The impact caused the area to quake, sending a violent tremor through the surface. Still, the substance merely shook like a metallic sheet would, not a single ripple coursing through it.

Percy and Sol ignored that.

Retrieving a third of their constructs, they sent them against Latt's opponent, finally relieving some pressure off their companion. It didn't take long for the second beast to fall, and then the third.

But they didn't allow themselves to relax. Entering a trance, they revelled in the insights afforded to them by the Mirror Lake. They studied the silver wisps burning beside them, strengthening their boosting art. They played with their weapons as they flew faster than before, and with innate purpose, responding to their emotions and their will.

Once the last of the creatures drew its final breath, Percy's Status announced the first of the looming upgrades.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Living Weapons: Crude -> Vengeful Weapons: Refined!]

Chapter 336: Chaotic battle

Percy was more than happy with his new Refined spell. There was still some room for improvement, but he doubted it would register another upgrade during his stay on Melodia. It wouldn't be until he merged it with his Replicating Soul Harvester back home that he expected it to hit Masterful.

In any case, neither he nor his companions got much time to relax, their fight against the jigreets only marking the beginning of their trouble.

It wasn't an accident the trio had avoided fighting during their first week by the lake. They'd remained silent, trying not to draw much attention, taking advantage of the swarm of spectral fiends cloaking the whole area. Sadly, their peaceful days were already over.

The infuriated roars and the pained cries of the elephant-sized sheep had raised quite the commotion. It wasn't long until a second pack of beasts attacked, and another after that. Luckily, few packs truly posed a threat by themselves. Most of them barely contained a handful of Greens and a couple dozen Yellows. The Melodians had already grown powerful enough to fend them off without issue.

The problem was that the invading beasts never stopped coming. The hunters were forced to take turns to keep them at bay. When their numbers grew too much to resist, they had to leave.

Unfortunately, they didn't have many places to go. They still didn't want to delve deeper into the lake. It was supposedly shallow from end to end, but they all understood how disadvantaged they'd be against the aquatic denizens living closer to its centre. They couldn't exactly travel away from the Elemental Source either, otherwise they'd lose access to its beneficial effects: which Percy and Sol very much still needed, to perfect their boosting art.

Thus, their only options were to hold their ground, or to circle along the coast, much like the jigreets themselves had done.

Like that, a couple more weeks passed.

Percy had already been on Melodia for more than two-and-a-half months, while the hunters had been on their expedition for longer still.

The good news was that the trip had born fruit for everyone involved. Doh and Latt had yet to make much progress with the Dance, and even Sol and Percy were still stuck at the final step, having no clue how they were meant to efficiently absorb the silver flames into their soul.

However, they all had more spells to work on besides their boosting art. Percy and Sol had honed their Vengeful Weapons spell even further, slaughtering hordes upon hordes of beasts in the process. The others also practiced with their attacks, enhancing their accuracy and lethality in a similar manner.

Everyone got more accustomed to fighting in the area too, getting used to peering through the mist of fiends surrounding them. The creatures still obscured most of their senses, but there were cues they could pick up on that allowed them to keep track of their opponents' movements from a greater distance. Even Percy learned a thing or two that he could bring back home, despite already having access to his mutated eyes and Greater Foresight with his main body.

Would this be enough? Any of it? Would he be able to defeat Acton and rescue his familiar? Would Sol and the others make it home without him?

He didn’t know. None of them did. But their chances had never been better. Besides, they didn’t have a choice but to do their best and hope they succeeded, as the time of his departure was swiftly approaching.

By now, several years must have passed inside the Thirsty Valley, and it was possible his estimates were a little off, so he didn’t want to cut it too close. He’d have to leave around a week from now at the latest, Dance or no Dance. The Melodians might be able to stay at the lake a little longer than that, but they’d have to go at some point too, before the area got even more crowded.

It sucked that he might fail to perfect his boosting art in the end, but maybe he’d figure the final step out once he rejoined his main body. After all, the guy was also working on precisely that: most likely. He might not have an Elemental Source to help him, but he’d been at it for even longer, and he should be close to his advancement too, which should make things easier.

That said, Percy didn’t have the time today to ruminate about his future plans.

The group got attacked again, and it was a rather nasty pack once more: the first to pressure them this much since the jigreets. The creatures resembled jackals, though their saliva sizzled whenever a droplet landed on the ground. Curiously, there wasn’t a single Green leading them, but that didn’t make them any less dangerous. There were hundreds of them in the pack: more than even the group that had killed Rei and the others.

Sol and her two remaining teammates had grown a lot stronger since then, but also more tired. And the environment didn’t exactly work in their favour either. Thus, for the first time in two weeks, the group was forced to escape to the lake once more, hoping its treacherous waters would bog their pursuers down.

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No such luck.

Unlike the jigreets, the jackals appeared both light and nimble enough to skid along the surface, not slowing down in the slightest.

Gritting their teeth, the Melodians ran deeper into the lake: against their better judgement: while flinging spell after spell at the creatures, doing everything they could to thin their numbers. Dozens fell, but more kept coming. If there was an end to the horde, it was too far for Percy and the others to make out with their limited vision.

They kept delving deeper and deeper, soon losing track of where the shore was, even. Well, okay. It was a lake, so the shore was technically in every direction. But still several hours away in most of them. Yet, their priority right now was to not get surrounded by the beasts. If they did, holding them at bay would only grow harder.

“I think… there aren’t… many left.” Latt spat amidst pants at some point, taking another two jackals out with a couple of well-placed shots.

The man had lasted a lot longer than against the jigreets, partly because he’d grown more accustomed to keeping Circulation active, and partly because the merciless crucible of the lake had tempered everyone’s endurance above all else. But he was still obviously close to his limits.

Percy scanned the attackers, confirming his companion was right. The herd still stretched as far as the eye could see, but their ranks were a little scarcer than before. The creatures had clearly also grown tired. They might have an easier time skidding above the water than the elephant-sized sheep, but they were still heavier than the Melodians. Hungrier too.

Perhaps Latt shouldn’t have been so quick to jinx things though.

Sol was about to bisect a jackal’s soul. The foolish creature had been dumb: or impatient: enough to lunge at her, falling squarely in range of the sickles held tightly in her hands.

That was when Percy intervened, having caught a shadow leaping at them by the corner of their eyes. He barely moved his host’s torso an inch back, narrowly avoiding the eel-like creature darting just in front of their sternum like an arrow. Its long fangs still carved a shallow wound on Sol’s right shoulder, before sinking into the jackal’s throat. Clasping around the unsuspecting creature’s neck, it dragged it beneath the surface in an instant.

Percy couldn't tell if the two beasts were fighting beneath his feet, or if their battle had already ended. The mirror-like surface remained eerily still, undisturbed by the chaos, and unmarred by the jackal's blood.

"Watch out! Belo–" he tried to warn the others, but he was a moment too late.

Doh faced a similar situation. Right as he was about to finish two beasts, a second eel exploded in motion from right under him, shooting up like a treacherous spear. Luckily, the Green-born's reflexes didn't betray him, allowing him to take out all three of the creatures with some expertly placed bolts of silver.

Latt, however, wouldn't easily survive an ambush. He was already close to falling in the water, at which point there would be no saving him. And that was assuming he even managed to protect himself that long from the invaders.

'Take care of things here!' Percy told his host, giving her full control of their body.

At the same time, he allowed his senses to sink beneath the surface, trying to track the eels down. His regular sight couldn't penetrate even an inch into the water, but his Soul Vision and Mana Sense were a little better. The area was still painted in the intense colours of mana and souls, but some shades shone just a touch brighter. A mixture of Yellow and silver traced the creatures' serpentine frames as they snaked all around them, looking for an opening.

'There!'

Hurling one of the flying sickles, he barely managed to intercept an eel that was about to attack Latt, buying his teammate a few more breaths. Sadly, that was just the start, as more eels soon gathered around them.

The good news was that they were all at Yellow, much like the jackals. If there were any Green variants, they had yet to appear. The even better news, was that the Melodians weren't their only targets. Most of them seemed happy to devour the sunken carcasses of the jackals the hunters had already slain. Even the few that appeared to prefer their food fresh, were more willing to attack the surviving beasts running above the surface, probably finding them easier prey.

Suffice to say, the battle devolved into complete chaos.

Coming to terms with the new threat lurking below, the jackals panicked, some of them abandoning their hunt in a desperate attempt to escape. Meanwhile, the hunters fought against everything daring enough to attack, trying to survive the relentless onslaught of the monsters.

At some point, Latt stopped fighting entirely, clearly focusing his efforts on merely staying afloat. Each breath looked like a laborious task, as the man's feet wobbled. Even Sol and Doh weren't exactly doing great.

That said, not many beasts remained. Most of the jackals were either dead or had run off. The eels hadn't suffered nearly as many casualties, but the survivors seemed to have had their fill, many of them opting to quit while they were ahead rather than continue risking their lives.

"Let's try making our way to shore. Latt won't last much longer." Doh said.

Sol nodded. She looked around, presumably trying to recall which way they'd come from. But Percy wasn't paying them much attention, something else bothering him.

'Is it me, or is the swarm a little thinner than before?' he wondered, causing his host to raise an eyebrow.

'You're right…' Sol replied, noticing the same thing.

The density of the creatures did fluctuate every now and then, but not this much. Percy and Sol could see dozens of metres away now. Even stranger was the timing. If anything, more fiends should have swarmed their location, considering how many dying souls they could feast on.

Lifting his head up, Percy's eyes widened at the sight before him.

Countless fiends had gathered above, forming an even denser cloud of wriggling limbs and otherworldly features, spreading like a blanket, covering up every inch of the sky. And the creatures seemed to flow in

an orderly manner, like hundreds of silver rivers, forming a colossal bulge in the blanket. There, they condensed into a massive ball, larger than a house.

“Shit! Dodge!” Percy shouted, right as dozens of torrents shot down at the battlefield like meteors, aimed at every living thing in the area.

Chapter 337: Symbiotic

Having been the first to spot the attack, Percy had an easier time dodging. With two swift strides, he sidestepped the torrent of fiends, watching as it soundlessly phased through the smooth surface of the water. Probably even the ground beneath, judging from its momentum.

Doh had a slightly tougher time avoiding it. He rolled out of the way, barely managing to push himself back to his feet using his hands, just before the surface tension gave way under him.

The Yellow’s luck had finally run dry, however. He still evaded the attack, thanks to Percy’s timely warning, but his weakened knees collapsed, causing him to sink in the water. Standing on the wet soil, the surface only reached his chest. Sadly, it didn’t seem like he could pull himself up without help, leaving him exposed to the eels around him.

Fortunately, the creatures didn’t have any time to spare on Latt.

The silver torrents had struck many of them, leaving them disoriented. Both the jackals and the eels were injured, as even the mirror-like surface failed to hide the lake-dwellers from the attack. Everything in the area was used to being assaulted by the fiends all day long, of course, but this was very different.

There were so many of the ethereal pests, and they had attacked from a single direction with unparalleled coordination. Percy still struggled to understand how this had happened, but the damage the attack had dealt was undeniable. It had peeled the outer layer off the beasts’ souls, leaving them vulnerable to whatever fiends had survived the impact.

It was strange, because the fiends weren’t supposed to be smart nor selfless enough to pull off such a stunt by themselves. But was there anything capable of controlling them on this planet?

Alas, there wasn't much time to think about it, as the swarm was flying upward again, joining the rest, preparing another attack.

Percy's gaze scanned the battlefield. The remaining eels were swiftly recuperating. Some of them snatched up the carcasses of both the jackals and their own fallen comrades, looking for an easy meal. Based on how quickly the cores and the souls were dispersing, it wouldn't be long until one of them turned its attention to Latt.

But Percy ignored all that for now, his attention focused on locating the attacker. Whatever means they used to control the fiends, they had to be nearby.

'There!'

His eyes landed on a faint silhouette, darting along the surface a few hundred metres away. The creature had foolishly betrayed its own position by lifting the fog of fiends obscuring it.

'It's so fast!' Sol exclaimed in shock, the assailant barely registering as a Green blur in their Mana Sense.

'It doesn't matter… Green or White, we need to stop it from attacking again, or Latt is dead.'

Percy didn't care about the other beasts: none of them seemed in the mood to attack him anyway. With his host's help, he sent the spinning sickles towards the creature, trying to surround it. That was when something strange happened.

The blanket of fiends above their heads shifted again. This time, a thick sheet descended, falling vertically like a curtain, blocking the attacks. The sharp crescents sank violently into the wall of creatures, some of them even piercing through. Still, the defence had robbed them of their momentum, causing them to shatter into harmless motes just metres later.

'How is it doing this?!' Sol asked.

It was clear the beast was directing the fiends somehow. Percy hadn't heard of anyone or anything on Melodia capable of controlling the fiends. Judging from his companions' shaken expressions, they hadn't

either. But there was no question that it was doing precisely that. Even if the past two moves could be considered coincidental, the fact that no fiends seemed to approach it sealed the deal.

“Doh! Grab Latt and return to shore!” Percy shouted. “We’ll hold it off!”

At the same time, he manifested a new round of sickles, hurling them against the beast, forcing it to defend once more. The half-assed spell didn’t achieve much, other than delaying the creature’s next attack by a few more seconds.

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The Green-born tossed Percy an uncertain look. It only lasted a moment before he nodded, his expression grim. Making his way to his sunken teammate, he grabbed his hand amidst hops, helping him up. The poor guy was too tired to resume dancing, so Doh just flung him over his shoulder, about to bolt away.

“Just leave me here… Escape with Sol... My life is less valuable than either of yours…” Latt muttered, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Everyone knew there was some truth in his words. Not that Latt hadn’t pulled his own weight over the past month: quite the opposite, in fact. There had been plenty of times when his contribution had been undeniable. For example, whenever Doh or Sol had to sleep while the other fought against the beasts, Latt was there to lift some of the pressure off them.

Regardless, there was no denying that he was less important to the expedition’s success. If either of them died, it would all be over. Meanwhile, if Latt perished, there would still be hope. They all understood it, but nobody was willing to compromise any more than they already had. To sacrifice another teammate. Even if it meant putting their mission at risk.

“Sol… Percy… You have to make it back at all costs. You know that, right?” Doh asked.

Sol replied by clenching her weapons tightly, her eyes glinting with resolve. Percy was on the same page: more or less: though he did have one last card to play if things went south.

If it looked like his host was about to get killed, he'd open a portal to the Vault, saving her life against her wishes. It would suck for her and her people to essentially sell their entire planet to Metatron. And Percy might also lose access to the Mirror Lake forever. But the Melodians would be screwed anyway without her, and this was better than letting her die, so he wouldn't rule it out pre-emptively.

'Let's hope it doesn't come to that.'

Doh ran away, gathering some mana in his free hand, presumably to defend himself in case another eel tried to attack him. Meanwhile, Percy kept his eyes open for the inevitable retaliation of the mysterious beast, while trying to make out its features.

It was hard because it was quite far and moved extremely fast. Its attacks didn't help either. Now that most of the other creatures had died or otherwise evacuated the battlefield, it was free to focus exclusively on Percy and Sol. The torrents of fiends were thicker and more frequent, shooting at them from all sorts of insidious angles, forcing them to evade them by the skin of their teeth.

'It seems to have a symbiotic relationship with the fiends.'

Coordinating with the swarm, it was able to take down pretty much anyone and anything it stumbled upon. The fiends ate the souls, while the monster consumed the cores. Or at least, this was Percy's guess. He had no idea how the creature had evolved such a treacherous ability, but it made it extremely powerful in this place. Anywhere else, it would probably be weaker than the average Green. It didn't appear to be that strong physically.

It resembled a praying mantis, but without the claws. Percy caught glimpses of it momentarily squatting on all four of its long legs, but it had to keep hopping to remain afloat. It was only slightly taller than a Melodian, making it the smallest Green beast Percy had ever seen. Its lighter frame coupled with its exceptionally powerful limbs was what allowed it to stay above water.

Whenever it jumped, it sent a single ripple through the water, accompanied by a crisp ting. Ever since Percy arrived at the Mirror Lake, this was the first time he saw anything capable of disturbing its still surface even slightly, demonstrating how much force the creature's muscles unleashed on the liquid.

Its carapace was a milky white, making it that much harder to spot against the pale backdrop of the Elemental Source. Finally, two large antlers extended above its head. They were jagged and chitinous, and they seemed to click together whenever it gave the spectral fiends a new command.

'Let's do this then…'

Pushing the Dance to their current limit, he felt the silver wisps collide against their soul, a fraction of the mana seeping through their pores. At the same time, they expelled some of the mana they had already refined, manifesting several more sickles by their side.

The blanket of fiends above their heads rolled and tumbled, as if brewing a violent storm. The mantis leapt towards them a few times, cutting the distance separating them by half. It was probably easier for it to command its minions from up close.

Was facing the monster alone truly the right move?

Percy didn't know. He could have tried escaping with Doh, but the beast would have caught up. It was clearly faster than them. The only other option would have been to leave Latt at its mercy, joining forces with the Green-born to fight it together. He and Sol had surpassed their leader, but not by much. With Doh's help, they would have certainly won, at the cost of their teammate's life.

But he didn't regret choosing to stand his ground: or well… his water.

Unlike the time with Rei, there was a way for all three of them to survive this time. And Percy would be damned if he didn't at least try to grasp it.

He dashed toward the creature, as it hopped back, trying to maintain a fixed distance. At the same time, it ordered the fiends to attack. They descended in all sorts of intricate formations: from dense orbs to thin streams: not unlike a mage's spells, actually. The sickles, too, spun in every direction, forming numerous silver cyclones.

A beast and a woman were about to clash: to determine the fate of their world, whether they knew it or not. The former wielded a million spectral fiends… As for the latter?

Just one.

Chapter 338: Faces

Rivers of fiends shot at Percy and Sol from every direction, the swarm flying soundlessly above the still water. The only sounds breaking the eerie silence of the lake were the crisp notes released by the beast's powerful hops in the distance, as well as the girl's rhythmic breaths.

'We're at a disadvantage!' she said.

Percy nodded, having noticed the same. The mantis wielded the swarm like a mage would their mana. The only difference was that the beast wasn't limited by the capacity of its core: it instead had an endless supply of fiends to order around. Many died blocking the spinning sickles, but more flew in to replace them.

The good news was that Percy and Sol weren't as limited by their cores either. The Dance: incomplete as it was: worked by drawing ambient mana. And the air here was rich with soul mana, making their job easier. Even when their constructs shattered, or when they failed to fully absorb the silver flames floating beside them, the motes still dispersed in their immediate surroundings, raising the concentration of soul mana even more. One side possessed a single Green core, the other two Yellow ones boosted by a spell. But it looked closer to a battle between Blues: ignoring the absence of any domains, of course.

That said, the mantis was fast enough to maintain its distance, and the malleable curtain of fiends made it nigh impossible to breach its defences. On the other hand, it had an easier time reaching Sol with its own attacks, each powerful blow threatening her life.

With Percy's help, she danced atop the lake: jumping, and pivoting, and weaving: to dodge the hungry fiends, whatever insidious formation their master forced them in. But they knew this wasn't sustainable. Sooner or later, they'd make a mistake, and they might not live long enough to make a second one.

'Hold on. There's another card we've yet to play.' Percy said.

Reaching into his storage, he summoned his solitary scythe, gripping it tightly with both hands. He'd already wasted nearly all of his fused mana to maintain it over the past couple of months, in case he needed it. And well… here it was.

It wasn't like he needed his stash for any other purpose either. He would obviously have to replenish his reserves with soul mana before leaving Melodia, but he could use his host's now that he had access to her cores. It was a higher grade too, so it should be plenty to break through the blockade of fiends on the way out.

In any case, he wouldn't be able to repair the scythe again without teal mana, much less duplicate it, meaning that he would likely lose it after this battle. But that was fine. It should do a better job piercing through the wall of fiends than the flimsy sickles.

Three more rivers of otherworldly bugs flew at him, trying to box him in. He sidestepped one, ducking beneath the second. The mantis tried to steer them toward him of course, but there was a delay between its commands and the fiends' response. This was the price the beast had to pay to harass them from afar.

The two streams collided violently against one another, the creatures spilling all over the place. Luckily, they lacked the density to harm Sol like this, the silver flames incinerating whatever lone stragglers approached her body. She and Percy were under no delusion that their boosting art or their heating enchantments would be able to block a direct attack, but they were more than enough to protect them from the aftermath.

Sadly, the third river was impossible to dodge completely. Caught in an awkward position between the first two attacks, and having to constantly keep their feet in motion to avoid sinking, Percy and Sol were about to get hit.

Calling over whatever sickles still lingered around them, Percy flung them against the incoming fiends, shredding a portion of the blast: just enough to buy his host a second or two. The swarm overwhelmed the weapons soon, but Sol was able to leap to safety by then.

Unfortunately, their manoeuvre just now had cost them over half of the sickles they'd accumulated since the start of the battle. And they needed as many as they could get to open a path for the Soul Harvester.

'Help me replace them. We might only get one shot at this.' he said, getting a nod back.

Pressing on its advantage, the beast continued to harass them. Percy and Sol dodged what they could, trying not to waste any more of their constructs. It wasn't always possible, but they did manage to craft a few more over several minutes.

'Good enough?' Sol asked, clearly getting impatient.

Percy didn't blame her for it either. The mantis had attacked them right after they'd spent hours fighting the jackals and the eels. Even the days leading up to this hadn't exactly been a vacation. By now, their muscles burned, their stamina dwindling.

'It'll have to do.'

Switching tactics, they sprinted towards the creature. It probably hadn't expected that, but it overcame its surprise soon enough, leaping backwards to maintain its distance. At the same time, it sent more fiends after them, trying to slow them down.

Dodging the attacks clumsily, the two shot their sickles at the beast, hurling the Soul Harvester right behind them. Another curtain fell from above to block their spells, stopping the smaller constructs in their tracks. Still, they'd weakened the barrier enough for the scythe to cleave right through it without issue.

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

Powered by Percy's willpower: Sol couldn't pitch in, as this one had been crafted by his main body: the weapon picked up speed, flying right towards its target. The beast hopped several times in quick succession, trying to avoid the construct. It dodged the first blow, and even the second, but Percy's latest attack wasn't as easy to shake off.

Aided by his new spell, the scythe changed course repeatedly, almost as if it had a will of its own, carving a vengeful path towards the mantis.

Realizing it wouldn't be dodging this one, the beast summoned more fiends to impede the weapon. It sort of worked: the hastily forged defences sapping much of the scythe's momentum, but it still hit its mark.

A silver arc cleaved through the mantis, inflicting a serious wound on its soul. Unfortunately, it had just about managed to twist its body at the last second, ensuring the blow only severed one of its four legs.

Which was still great news: between the amputated limb and the agonizing soul pain, the beast nearly sank in the lake. In the end, that didn't happen, as the creature managed to hop away in time. However, it was clearly weaker and slower than before. It didn't even have enough strength to send a ripple through the surface anymore.

'Its soul is more fragile than the other beasts!' Sol noted, some hope finding its way into her eyes. She clearly hadn't expected their attack to deal so much damage.

Then again, it wasn't that strange. The beast had probably spent its life living by the lake. It collaborated with the fiends, and it had never encountered any Melodians, so it didn't really need a stronger soul.

'If only we could take advantage of that.' Percy smiled bitterly.

The Soul Harvester hadn't survived the attack. By the time it even reached the creature, the fiends had mostly gnawed it down. As soon as the monster regained its bearing, it made sure to finish the job, leaving Percy and Sol without a proper weapon.

Just seconds later, the mantis resumed its onslaught, its composite eyes burning with hatred. It hopped closer to them, directing the swarm with maddened fury, trying to exact its revenge on the insolent Melodian who dared to injure it.

Realizing they had lost their only chance, Percy hesitated. He was tempted to activate Metatron's Decree, to save his host's life. He must've done a bad job controlling his emotions though, since she seemed to notice what he was thinking.

'Don't. I know you want to protect me, but I can't just let the others die. You don't have to risk your life though. Grab some of my mana to refill your wisp and leave this place.'

He could tell through their connection she'd already made her mind up, her soul burning with resolve.

‘Like hell I’ll leave you here!’ he spat back.

Fighting the mantis to protect Latt was something they’d decided together. They’d promised Doh to survive too. Not to mention how Rei and the others had given their lives to get them this far. Or the countless people back home waiting anxiously for their success. If the girl had decided to stay and fight, there was no way he’d run away on his own.

Having come to a consensus, the two threw everything they had into the fight. And something strange happened, once more.

Burning brightly beside them, the silver wisps absorbed the mana even faster. Within mere fractions of a second, they grew to the size of grapefruit, before shooting into their body on their own. The cold flames slammed violently against their soul, every last drop spilling into their channels without fail. The immense pressure tore their pathways apart, but the flood of mana rushed to repair them just as quickly.

The wisps pierced through their cores, as images flashed in front of their eyes. Visions of the harrowing battles they had fought. Of Mi’s last stand to protect his daughter. Of Rei’s decision to give her life for the girl’s second core. Of each and every hunter that had fallen since the start of the expedition. Next, the silver flames escaped from the opposite side of their body, having shrunk to the size of peas. They then began sucking the mana once more, soon returning to their previous glory, starting the cycle anew.

Percy and Sol felt their body swell with strength.

They sped through the battlefield like a comet, dozens of silver wisps of varying sizes following them closely like shooting stars. There were even more of them now than before. They grew faster too, entering their body one after the other, filling their cores with mana.

Catching a glimpse of the flames, Percy noticed something else. Vague shapes had appeared inside them. Mouths, noses and eyes. Faces of people he recognized. Of Sol’s father, and her teammates. They cried shrilly as they sucked in the mana around them.

Mourning their unjust deaths, perhaps? Or were they laughing? Celebrating their reunion with Sol? Their chance to fight by her side once more?

He didn’t know.

He couldn’t even tell if these people had truly returned from the underworld to help them, or if it was just their memories lingering on his host’s soul. Either way, he vowed to honour their wishes.

The mantis shot more rivers at them. Percy and Sol danced around them with unprecedented ease. They sank the Parting Gifts against the torrents, the silver flames igniting the curved edges, incinerating hordes of fiends in their wake.

They forged more sickles. Dozens of them, swirling around them like an endless hurricane. Flinging them at the beast, they watched the silver crescents slice and burn holes into its defences, soon shredding the wall into nothing. Several made it through, spinning towards the mantis in a rain of death.

It jumped out of the way, before bolting off. It must’ve realized there was no surviving this time. Giving up on its meal, it tried to escape. Unfortunately for it, it was much slower on three legs. Percy and Sol were much faster too.

Shooting behind the creature, they noticed their footfalls now sent ripples through the lake’s surface, each step leaving a crisp sound. The notes blended with the shrill cries of the burning faces, as well as Sol’s rhythmic breaths and her racing heartbeat, filling the previously silent lake with a strange melody.

It was raw.

And it was final, promising a swift end to whomever heard it.

The mantis commanded its minions to attack again. To stop them. The swarm certainly tried to do just that, but it was useless.

Percy and Sol easily circled the violent torrents, their burning weapons cutting the fiends’ numbers down sharply. And they kept closing the distance to their mark, their elegant steps growing more frequent as the savage tune neared its crescendo.

Before long, they were upon the mantis.

Turning around, it suddenly leapt at them, going for one last attack in its desperation. But its telegraphed move was easy to predict, now that the fiends no longer obscured its soul. And its body was laughably slow, to Percy's current perception.

Pivoting at the last stretch, he evaded the bug's mandibles, right as his sickle hooked around its neck. Drawing one final arc on the beast's soul: a silver line thinner than a sheet of paper, really: he skidded behind the creature, letting its lifeless body sink into the water behind him.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Dance of the Savage Gods: Masterful!]

Chapter 339: Grey blot

With his boosting art now at Masterful, Percy was confident he could defeat any solitary opponent on the planet. Well, unless they ran into a Blue beast, but he wasn't sure there were any on Melodia.

That was not to say that they were out of trouble though.

They could still get swarmed by lots of weaker beasts, and his host needed someone to guard her while she rested. Right now, she was exhausted, and they had no idea if their companions had even survived. Splitting up had been a gamble, as Doh was tired too, and protecting Latt on his own would be a challenge. Not to mention that Sol and Percy didn't know which way the others had fled.

'Pick a random direction, reach shore, kill our way around the lake until we find them?' he asked.

Sol sighed. Obviously, neither of them was looking forward to another fight. Certainly not several hours of battles. Alas, this was their only option, and they had to rush too, as the others might be running out of time.

At least, the trip out of the lake went smoothly. Maybe they'd just been lucky not to cross paths with the eels again, or perhaps the aura of power they now radiated was enough of a deterrent. Some of the land-dwellers also allowed them to pass peacefully, though not every pack was that smart. A few daring beasts still got in their way, only to get their souls shredded to pieces by the storm of sickles.

In the end, they had to trudge through the mud for about three hours until they met the others. Whether it was their faster travelling speed, or the lower number of enemies they had been forced to slaughter, the Dance allowed them to cover vast distances relatively quickly. They'd only had to walk around a quarter of the lake's perimeter to find Doh and Latt.

The two were alive, thankfully. Though they hadn't escaped trouble completely. They were fighting a small pack consisting of two Greens and a bunch of Yellows. It wouldn't have been that difficult a battle normally, but without Sol and given their previous state, the Melodians had a tough time holding their ground.

At least until Sol and Percy reached them.

Making quick work of the creatures, the trio was finally free to catch their breath, having somehow survived what had arguably been the most dangerous day since the beginning of their expedition.

It took another two days until they all recuperated, each of them taking turns to rest while the others guarded them. Fewer beasts attacked, partly because the group had already slaughtered many of their neighbours, and partly because the swarm of spectral fiends still cloaked the area now that the mantis was no longer around to command them.

Regardless, Percy felt a lot better about leaving the planet.

He'd accomplished everything he'd set out to do. He'd not only mastered the soul component of the Dance, but even wrapped his mind around Sol's homing attacks, getting two new spells in the process. Of course, he still wanted to practice with both of them some more, as he and his host had to get used to fighting on their own, and without the Mirror Lake helping them.

But things were looking good.

The Melodians would have an easier time returning home too. Sol should be able to keep the group safe for a while longer, buying time for the others to master the Dance under her guidance. Even if they failed to complete the spell in time, there was a good chance they'd make it to their homeland alive. That was enough. They could take their sweet time spreading the boosting art to their people.

Percy was planning to head off a couple days from now, though it appeared that Melodia still held one final surprise for him.

“Latt, do you see that too?” he asked at some point, noticing something strange on the lake’s surface.

It was hard to make out through the cloud of fiends, but the water appeared a little darker than usual. That wouldn’t have been too strange had this been a regular lake, yet nothing had affected the smooth surface before. It had always reflected everything above it like a perfect mirror, unblemished by any shadows or other substances. Even when large amounts of blood had spilled in the water, they had simply failed to change its colour in the slightest.

Latt raised an eyebrow.

“If I’m right, this could be a very good thing. But let’s wait for Doh to wake up, just to be sure. He knows more about this place.”

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Fortunately, they didn’t have to wait long, as the man was up just an hour later.

“A blot…” he muttered, some excitement finding its way into his eyes.

“Care to explain?” Sol asked, Percy echoing the sentiment.

The Green-born scratched his chin, apparently searching for the best way to describe what was going on.

“Generally, the Mirror Lake provides insight, helping people perfect the spells they were already working on. But it can’t exactly teach them completely new techniques out of its own volition. It just doesn’t work like that. Except for when the blot appears, that is.”

Percy creased his brow, prompting the man to elaborate.

“Our ancestors have recorded encountering a disturbance like this once before. They were able to learn something new from the lake at that time. And I’m not just talking about some vague form of inspiration: the dark substance actively shifted around, forming actual diagrams and letters, explaining in detail how the spell was supposed to work. We have no idea how this was possible, but the results are undeniable. This is how we got the method to absorb the spectral fiends.”

“Seriously?” Sol asked, her voice incredulous. It was clearly her first time hearing this story.

Percy hadn’t expected anything of the sort either. What he’d experienced so far pretty much aligned with his previous understanding of Elemental Sources. They breathed life into the mana, helping a mage develop their spells indirectly.

But what Doh was talking about sounded quite farfetched. Elemental Sources were just natural phenomena, weren’t they? They weren’t supposed to be intelligent, much less have the ability to directly communicate with sapients, or to hand them specific spells.

‘Maybe it works differently because of the soul affinity?’

Soul mana had a will of its own: as he’d found out at every turn: so maybe this wasn’t that strange…

“Should we investigate?” Latt suddenly spoke, asking the obvious question in everyone’s mind. “Not to sound too greedy: since we already got what we came here for, but it sounds like a waste to ignore the blot now that it’s appeared.”

Doh and Sol looked at each other before nodding. Percy, too, didn’t want to let go of the opportunity. Maybe he could learn another nifty trick before leaving.

Thus, the trio embarked on another journey atop the lake. This time, they continuously scanned the water beneath their feet, to ensure they weren’t ambushed by the eels again. They followed the dark gradient for a few hundred metres, watching it grow more intense with each step. Before long, it was a dull grey colour, no longer reflecting anything.

And that wasn't the only thing that changed.

The swarm of fiends was denser too, surrounding the epicentre of the blot. The creatures flew closer to the water, clearly trying to devour the source of the disturbance. The sight was more than a little unsettling, making Percy fear that they had stumbled upon some powerful beast. Was his luck truly that bad, that he'd have to face a Blue as well before leaving Melodia?

'No, that can't be it. Why would a Blue beast teach these people how to grow stronger?'

Well, whatever this was, the fiends were eager to grab a bite of it. Though they didn't have an easy time doing so. The substance affected the soul mana around it… Or maybe it was the mana?

It was hard to tell.

Either way, the mana was thicker. Heavier. The fiends still nibbled at it frantically, but they failed to put a dent. The blot was growing about as fast as it was shrinking, forming a balance that looked like it could last for years.

'What if there were a few more fiends though?' Percy suddenly wondered.

According to Doh, there hadn't been this many willing to invade the planet's surface the last time his people had visited the lake. Was the number of fiends surrounding Melodia constantly increasing?

Perhaps, it would overwhelm the blot at some point, destroying its source. Was that why it had taught the natives how to absorb the fiends? To slow down its own demise?

"Hey… honourable… entity…?" Latt suddenly asked, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "You may not remember, but you have graced our people with your kindness some time ago. Would you consider assisting us once more? Our cities are in dire peril, and we could use any help we can get!"

No response.

If the source of the blot was intelligent, it was too busy protecting itself right now to care about the man's desperate pleas. Perhaps they should just give up and return home…

'As if.'

Thinking of something, Percy pushed his newly upgraded boosting art to its limits. Using the silver flames dancing playfully around Sol's body, he began setting the fiends on fire, incinerating dozens of them in an instant. The others joined him. They might not share his spell yet, but they could still use the heating runes on their clothes to drive some of the fiends off.

Their collective efforts barely made a dent of course: the swarm covered a vast area, stretching both above and inside the lake. Probably below it too. There was a limit to what they could accomplish with their clumsy methods.

But Latt didn't miss his chance to placate the entity resting inside the blot once more.

"How is it? I know the three of us can't do much to help you right now, but our people might be able to work with you if you give us a chance. Help us survive the beast tide, and we'll attempt to claim the lake. This time, I'm confident we'll succeed. We'll help you fend off the fiends too."

Percy sighed, not expecting the blot to respond.

Against his expectations, the water's colour shifted, however!

The Melodians drew sharp breaths, their eyes glued on the disturbance. The blot allowed some of the silver water to snake through it unimpeded, using it to write actual letters, shimmering brightly against the backdrop of grey.

Soon, they formed a couple sentences that everyone here could read.

'Not interested. Just leave me alone.'

Chapter 340: Chasing the entity

Percy didn't even get a moment to ponder over the how or why the entity had responded in the way it had, when he spotted something moving beneath their feet.

"It's trying to escape!" he exclaimed, already running behind it.

The change was barely perceptible – just a slight shift in the flow of soul mana inside the water. Anyone would have missed it if they weren't paying close attention. The entity shot away at a dizzying speed, clearly trying to shake them off.

"No, you don't!" Percy yelled, pushing his boosting art to its limit.

Sol's muscles swelled with strength as their strides grew longer and their steps more frequent, each footfall sending a new ripple through the still surface of the lake. The silver wisps danced once more, their trajectories seemingly in sync with the twin maelstroms spinning around their cores. Every now and then, the flames grew large enough to sink into their channels, emerging much smaller from the opposite side of their body. That said, the faces of the fallen Melodians sang a more relaxed tune this time, echoing Sol and Percy's calmer emotions.

The swarm of fiends was dense, but Sol blasted right through it, the Masterful spell incinerating any creature unwise enough to block their path.

'What the hell is that thing?' Percy wondered again.

They had already put some distance from the area they had found the entity in, so the water had returned to its normal colour – for the most part. The source of the disturbance was still polluting the area, but the grey colour didn't have enough time to spread and accumulate. The entity was extremely small, leaving a tiny trail no thicker than a person's finger behind it.

It moved underwater for most of the time, so Percy and Sol had to rely mainly on their magical senses to keep track of it. Only once every few seconds did the trail brush against the surface briefly, leaving faint dark marks that faded away as quickly as they appeared.

Clearly, it was way too small to be a beast – even a Red one. Most curiously, it didn't seem to possess a mana core either. It was weird, because even the tiniest bugs needed one to survive. But there was no

mistake – the entity didn't seem to possess a single drop of mana of its own. It merely converted the soul mana around it, giving it the dark grey tint the Melodians had seen before. It was obviously harder for the spectral fiends to pierce through that, protecting the entity from them.

Was it really part of the Mirror Lake though? The will of the Elemental Source, perhaps – having awakened due to the peculiarity of its affinity? Or was it a spectral fiend too? A special one? That didn't explain why the other fiends seemed hell-bent on cannibalizing it though.

Whatever the case, it was obviously intelligent. It had already demonstrated it could communicate with the natives, and in their own language, no less.

"Give it up!" Percy shouted again. "You'll get eaten by the fiends if you keep doing this!"

He wasn't just saying that because he wanted to capture the entity. There was much less of the grey mana shielding it right now, offering no protection against the fiends. That only emboldened the swarm to descend upon it even more eagerly, trying to gobble it up. If it hadn't been for its nimble movements, it would have been devoured already.

Sooner or later, it was bound to make a mistake, sealing its fate. Its safest option would be to stop swimming away, taking some time for the grey mana around it to accumulate, until it rebuilt the dark blot that had protected it earlier. Why was it being so stubborn, even? Would it be such a bad thing to collaborate with the Melodians, sharing a new technique with them? It had already done that at least once in the past, hadn't it?

Regardless, Percy couldn't help but grit his teeth.

He knew he couldn't continue like this either. Doh and Latt had already fallen behind, unable to keep up with him and Sol. Things weren't that bad yet, as they weren't that far apart, and they hadn't lost track of each other either. But it was only a matter of time until that happened, and they couldn't afford to split up again.

'Should we let it go?' Sol asked. 'As much as I'd love to learn another spell, it's not worth risking everyone's lives.'

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He nodded, agreeing with her. Their mission was already on the cusp of success. They would be fools to throw that away out of greed.

‘Let me have one go at it. If I fail to grab it, we’ll turn back and regroup with the others.’

Closing the gap with the entity had never been the problem. It was fast, but not necessarily faster than them. Not if they went all out. The issue was actually capturing it. The same speed that allowed them to run atop the Mirror Lake without sinking prevented them from piercing through the water to snatch something hiding within. The only option would be to slow down until the surface tension stopped holding them up, but the entity would be long gone by then.

‘I hope this works…’

Fully exerting himself, Percy caught up with their target, running right above it. The entity tried to throw him off, taking advantage of its higher agility to shoot toward random directions – even doing a complete U-turn at times.

Percy had seen that coming from a mile away, however. His sharp senses coupled with the elegant footwork of his boosting art allowed him to remain glued to his mark throughout its tantrum.

Nearly emptying his channels, he gathered as much soul mana as he could in his hands, shrouding them in thick blobs of silver. Then, he tossed all of it in a certain direction, allowing it to spread like a thick blanket as it sank towards the bottom of the lake.

It was a bit of a gamble, admittedly, as he was merely guessing which way the entity would go next. But it was an educated guess, as he’d observed its patterns for several minutes already – and he was a bit of a specialist in analysing an opponent’s movements.

Sure enough, the entity headed straight towards the silver sheet, about to slam into the construct.

Percy watched it with bated breath, hoping the soul mana would obstruct it. This was the second uncertainty in his plan, since his mana didn't normally interact with physical objects. That said, this thing seemed to be afraid of the spectral fiends, so Percy was happy with his odds. ŘαиÖ₿Ę ş

At the same time, he skidded to a stop, using both hands and feet to slow down his momentum.

The silver sheet stretched, the entity about to pierce through it. Percy grinned at the sight, knowing he had already won. The flimsy construct wouldn't last more than a second, but that was plenty.

Suddenly, the force holding Sol's body up vanished without a trace, as Percy felt the gentle caress of the lake's cool water hugging their skin. Yet, he didn't allow himself to as much as blink, all of his senses still locked onto his target.

Before his host's body was even fully submerged, he reached out with one swift movement, trying to grab the mysterious creature.

The powerful resistance slowed his hand down. And it looked like his target wasn't going to give up easily either. No longer trying to pierce the blanket, it moved along the construct instead, nearly evading Percy's grasp.

"As if!" he spat, unwilling to fail at the final stretch.

Stomping forcefully against the muddy lakebed, he twisted Sol's body as much as he could manage, rotating his arm by a few degrees. It wasn't much…

But it was enough.

His fingers closed around the creature – if it could even be called that. It was a hard, round object – one that he was dying to examine carefully, but that would have to wait a few more minutes. The entity still fought, trying to escape his palm. Unfortunately for it, it was way too weak to do so. All it had going for it was its speed, and that was apparently only a consequence of its trivial weight – not true strength.

This wasn't the time for Percy and Sol to worry about their prize, however. Their stunt had almost knocked them out of the Dance, and they were currently sitting ducks. Well, kinda.

Truth be told, Percy had scanned their surroundings for any traces of the eels or other aquatic creatures before doing this, so he was confident there weren't any around. That said, he could have missed something, so he wouldn't relax until everyone was safely outside the lake.

Sticking his head out, he took a few breaths to refill his channels. Luckily, the silver flames seemed to work underwater, still swirling rapidly as they absorbed ambient mana from their surroundings. Before long, their spell was back at full power.

Slapping the surface violently with his free hand, Percy summoned every drop of strength he could muster to push himself up in an impromptu handstand, before rolling swiftly to his feet. By the time he was hopping atop the lake again, Doh and Latt had caught up.

"Did you…?" the Green-born asked, as the Yellow also held his breath.

Percy responded with a toothy grin.

Gesturing at them to follow, he shot toward where he thought was the nearest edge of the lake. It wasn't until the trio was back on solid land, that his attention returned to the mysterious entity still struggling inside his hand. Having held onto it for a while, he already harboured a few guesses as to its shape and, more importantly, its origins. But he wouldn't dare believe it until he examined it with his own eyes. The Melodians, too, burned holes in his hand with their gazes – the owner of said hand included, causing him to chuckle.

"Time to see what all the fuss was about…"

Percy carefully pried his fingers off the object one by one, shifting it around his hand so that it couldn't escape. The entity didn't miss its opportunity to struggle some more, realizing this was its final chance to get away. But Percy wasn't an idiot.

Pinching it firmly between his thumb and index finger, he was finally able to confirm his guess.

It was a small round object, made of a smooth material. Its dull grey colour gave the impression that it had been cast out of the cheapest piece of iron, but Percy knew that couldn't be further from the truth. Examining it more closely, he noticed it was slightly translucent, allowing him to just barely see through it. And it had a hole in the middle…

It was a ring.