

A beautiful woman stood in front of them, dressed in elegant red clothes, wearing a tiara adorned with rubies on her head. Percy's Mana Sense revealed her core thrumming with an intimidating Blue colour – a grade higher than the two attendants by her side. The High Priestess didn't seem to mind his previous lack of attentiveness, flashing him a bright smile, before gesturing at another golden door. It was half as tall as the other one.

“Please enter the pool inside and extract some mana out of your core. The enchantments will take care of the rest.”

Percy frowned.

“Alone? Don't you have to... I don't know, supervise people?”

Gawain shook his head as the High Priestess tilted hers.

“Why? Are you planning to damage the sacred pool?” she asked.

GULP

“Er, no? I mean, definitely not! I just thought... Isn't it too precious to leave unattended?”

She chuckled.

“I'm just messing with you. The evaluation is a private affair. Nobody can force you to disclose the results against your will. As for the integrity of the pool, you don't need to worry about it. Even I can't put a scratch on the materials and nobody below Violet could possibly snatch any of the concentrated mana in there.”

'I guess we'll see about that.'

Outwardly, he only nodded before limping towards the door.

“Do you need somebody to accompany you?” the High Priestess asked again as she saw his injuries.

But he shook his head, cupping his fists politely. He really didn't want anybody watching... whatever was about to go down in there.

He rushed forward, as quickly as he could manage, wincing with every step. Luckily, nobody seemed to notice anything was off. It was probably normal for those undertaking the test to be excited. It was a significant turning point in their lives after all. However, that wasn't what Percy was thinking. He was holding his breath, trying to mask the suspicious flow of mist.

As soon as the golden doors closed behind him, he looked at the only thing in the room. It was a circular basin, with a diameter of about 20 feet, filled to the brim with a dense red liquid that looked a bit like glowing blood.

DRIP

The liquid rippled as something fell in the middle of the pool. Looking up, Percy saw the mist swirl and gather at the ceiling. A decorated stalagmite-like structure appeared to collect and condense it. Its edge was shaped like the beak of a large bird, as a droplet enlarged, held in the tiny gap between its two points. Once it grew large enough, it fell.

DRIP

'Cool. I hope it still looks like this after I'm done with it.' he thought as he undressed.

Sadly, that was nothing but wishful thinking.

Not even a moment after he dipped his toes into the pool, all hell broke loose. The seed in his abdomen didn't bother waiting for him to inhale the mist anymore. A violent suction force emerged from his belly, directly causing the liquid to flow up his skin, making its way to it.

Percy panicked. The commotion could easily draw the attention of the High Priestess. He tried to step back, but his foot was stuck in the flowing liquid. He put more strength, trying to extricate his body, causing the red material to stretch like rubber, before snapping back, pulling him into the pool.

SPLASH

The sound was muted, as the fluid was already coiling around him.

'I can't breathe!'

Not only was it travelling up and through his skin, but also down his throat.

Percy used all his strength to stand up. It was hard and it took him several seconds to right himself. Even when he did, he couldn't bring his head out of the liquid, as he was covered from top to bottom like a crimson snowman. He tried to claw the material out of his face, but it didn't help. More kept flowing to replace it. Dizzy, he fell to his knees, his consciousness slipping. Percy thought he was a goner, when the flow suddenly eased up. It quickly lost its viscosity, falling back into the pool, trickling down his skin.

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But he wasn't out of the woods just yet. His second core was clearly a sloppy eater, having failed to clean up after its mess. The liquid outside his body had stopped hugging him, but that didn't help with the part still in his lungs. Percy desperately hit his chest, trying to cough the substance out, with limited success.

'No, I can't drown during the damn test.'

That would be such a dumb way to die.

Thinking of something, he climbed out of the pool, feeling an attractive force tugging at the liquid in his lungs. The High Priestess wasn't kidding when she said nobody could steal it from this place. He opened his mouth, letting it flow out. But it was still slow, and he was running out of time.

Suddenly, he had another bright idea. Reaching for the mana inside his *first* core, he followed the High Priestess's instructions, beginning the assessment in earnest. This was what he was actually here for after all. Soon, a few runes lit up on the walls and on the floor of the room, as the volume of the liquid still in his lungs began to decrease and the mana in his core to drain.

PANT, PANT, PANT

The taste of air was so sweet when he could finally breathe properly again.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK

“What’s taking so long?! Are you ok in there?!” a female voice asked.

Percy didn’t recognize it. He guessed she was one of the attendants.

“Yeah, everything is fine! Sorry! It took me a while to figure it out!”

The voice remained silent for a couple of seconds. Percy wasn’t sure if she had bought his lousy excuse or if she was still trying to process it. *Well, it was the latter.*

“What’s there to figure out?!?! Please tell me you haven’t pissed inside the sacred pool!!” she yelled again, this time a hint of anger seeping through.

He scratched his head, unsure what to say.

“What?! Of course not! Who do you take me for?!” was what he ended up going with.

Next, he took another look at the pool. Its surface was a couple feet deeper than before. Evidently, he’d already drained about a third of the volume.

'I'm afraid you'll wish I'd only pissed in it...' he chuckled awkwardly.

Then he raised an eyebrow.

'I mean... It WOULD raise the water level again...'

But he shook his head. He had desecrated the holy goo enough for a day.

Next, he picked up his clothes, pulling up his Status as he dressed. Maybe he should have waited until he was safely out of this place before worrying about it, but he figured he might as well check it now in case they murdered him and he never got the chance.

Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

- **[Mana core 1 – Orange – Soul]**
- **[Mana core 2 – Seed – ???]**

Bloodline:

- **[Clone]** – Create a copy of yourself. Effect varies by affinity.

???:

- **[???** – Grants access to your Status.
- **[???** – Grants a bloodline.
- **[??? (Incomplete)]** – Grants the seed of a second mana core. Requires potent life mana to germinate.

‘Success!’

The changes were small but important. Not only had he finally learned he possessed the soul affinity, but the trait granting him the second mana core had graduated from “Fractured” to “Incomplete”. It now only needed life mana, which meant Percy was merely a step away! Now he just had to make it out of the temple in one piece.

Exiting the room, he found all five people giving him strange looks.

“What?! I’m injured, it took me ages to undress.” he shrugged.

The attendants eyed him suspiciously, but luckily the person who had the final word – the High Priestess – didn't dwell on it.

“Alright. I trust everything went well then?” she asked.

Percy nodded.

“Great! As I said before, you don't have to disclose your affinity if you don't want to. Still, if you are willing to share it, we can give you some basic guidance.”

Hearing that, he raised an eyebrow. It was indeed a tempting offer. A soul affinity was even rarer than others and he doubted he could learn much from the library. He opened his mouth to speak, when one of the attendants beat him to it.

“Mother! He's already wasted more than enough time!”

Percy recognized the voice as the one that had spoken to him earlier.

“Erythea.” the High Priestess said in a stern tone. “Basic guidance is a part of the service.”

The attendant gritted her teeth.

“But he’s just a Red-born! There are hundreds of kids waiting outside!” she protested.

The second attendant didn’t say anything, but Percy guessed he agreed with his colleague based on his expression. Luckily for Percy, the High Priestess didn’t.

“And that’s why he had to pay a hefty sum to be tested. Now that he has, he deserves the same treatment as everyone else.”

Her daughter, or subordinate, or whatever Erythea was, clearly didn’t like the response, storming off to the room he’d just exited.

‘Fuck! I hope she can’t tell the difference...’

Though the High Priestess didn't seem to pay her any heed. She turned to him, evidently still waiting for his answer. Percy looked at his uncle, wondering if it would be ok to reveal this information. After all, depending on how things went, it could easily become a secret of House Avalon.

"Go on. The High Priestess can be trusted." Gawain said.

He nodded at his uncle before speaking.

"Eh, yes. Some guidance sounds peachy. I have a soul affinity."

Everyone seemed surprised to hear that.

"Interesting." the High Priestess said, before turning to Gawain. "And I take it Archibald wouldn't have sent him here if he hadn't inherited the bloodline too... Is House Avalon about to develop a new branch?"

"That is very much our patriarch's hope." Gawain said.

Percy was surprised his uncle hadn't hesitated for even a moment before replying. He couldn't tell if he knew her personally, or if all the Order's clergy deserved such trust. She seemed ready to offer a few words of advice, when a shriek came out of the room.

THUD

The gates slammed open, Erythea storming out, her face red like a ripe tomato.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!?" she grabbed Percy by the collar, shaking him like a doll.

The High Priestess grabbed her wrist to calm her down, but didn't speak, only flashing her a questioning gaze.

"Half the condensed mana is gone!!!" Erythea yelled, causing everyone's faces to fall. They all looked at Percy, demanding an explanation.

GULP

Knowing he didn't exactly have that many options, he fell back to the most ancient art invented by mankind.

"I found it like that."