

Percy and his relatives barely managed to escape with their lives, leaping out of the wolves' den by the skin of their teeth. Ok, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. The High Priestess let them go. *Relatively easily.*

Not that Percy's hastily constructed lie was particularly believable, but at the end of the day there wasn't any evidence incriminating him. After all, she had said it herself. Nobody below Violet could steal the dense mind mana, let alone an Orange cored teenager.

While she had certainly seemed somewhat colder during their subsequent interactions, in the end she did give him some tips on how to train with his affinity like she had promised.

That was why he was squinting really hard right now, trying to peer into Elaine's soul.

“Cut it out, will you?!” she grunted in annoyance. “What did you even do in there?”

“I tested for my affinity.” he shrugged.

His cousin rolled her eyes.

“Fine, keep your secrets. Just try not to get us all killed next time.”

Percy was about to comment on the irony of her statement, but in the end, he chose to let it slide. He was too busy to walk into another argument.

The High Priestess had explained that the soul affinity *could* be used for offense. Even though it wasn't good at affecting physical objects, there were ways to shape it into a potent weapon against living things. What he had done to that goblin was proof enough it was possible, but it still didn't explain why Percy was so bad at it. After all, even a Red core could easily injure somebody with a fireball or a stone shard. Why had he needed to advance to Orange before he could stun a single goblin temporarily?

Hearing his worries, she had advised him to start by developing something called a Soul Vision. Simply put, it was just a specialised version of the basic Mana Sense that everyone had upon awakening their core. Soul Vision made

use of his affinity to observe another's soul directly. Once he managed to pull that off, he could more easily understand what he had been doing wrong with his magic.

The trio finally made it to their horses, much to Percy's relief. As painful as riding was, it was several times better than walking. Only after they headed off did he resume training, willing the soul mana to build up in his eyes. This time, he focused on his uncle, to avoid his cousin's complaints.

Getting *some* rudimentary version of Soul Vision to work wasn't too difficult. Even the slightest trickle of mana allowed him to see things he couldn't previously. The main challenge was fine-tuning the process, to make this new sense of his as effective as possible.

If he used too little mana, Gawain's soul was barely visible, appearing as a few faint wisps of silver swirling around his chest. Using more than necessary on the other hand was like pulling wool in front of his eyes, as the excess soul mana itself obscured his sight. The trick was to get used to exactly the right amount, so that he could discern his uncle's soul without obstructing it.

He knew it was just a matter of practice until he nailed it, but he did hope he could get it done by the time they returned to the Whistling Woods. He would need it for the next part of his training after all.

*'Better make the next 3 days count then.'*

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*'Just a little more.'*

Percy sent another clump of mana to his right eye.

As that happened, Gawain's soul came into focus, letting his nephew spy on it more clearly. To Percy, human souls appeared like semi-amorphous flames contained inside one's body, spreading to roughly cover its entire volume. They did flicker a bit, so their shape constantly diverged from that of the person's flesh. Also, he had no idea what happened to somebody's soul after they died.

Still, this was good progress in his book. And the best part was that he only needed a few seconds to fine-tune his Soul Vision by now. Not to say there wasn't any room for improvement though.

PANT, PANT, PANT

Percy breathed hard as the mana dispersed from his eyes, returning his sight to normal. Sadly, he couldn't keep his new trick up for too long before having to stop. It took quite a mental toll, plus it did cost a fair amount of mana to maintain. That said, he figured both would improve over time. Perhaps, one day he would even be able to keep Soul Vision up indefinitely, although that was more of a long-term project.

*'It'll do for now.'*

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He looked up, at the rows of pine trees appearing in the distance. He had trained relentlessly over the last three days, and luckily, it had paid off. He had managed to get his Soul Vision to an acceptable level by the time they returned to the forest.

It took some begging, but he had convinced Gawain to help him find some more goblins to practice on, now that he finally had the tool to figure out what was going on. His uncle had initially been resistant to the idea, but he'd eventually relented. Percy wasn't sure if the man had warmed up to him, or if he was doing this because his daughter had asked him to. The young man appreciated it all the same.

"Just remember, we won't spend more than a week here." Gawain reminded him.

"Have I mentioned you're my favourite uncle?" Percy asked.

"We both know that's a low bar." Gawain rolled his eyes.

"And you've passed it with flying colours!" Percy didn't let up.

SIGH

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So, it turned out wood goblins were a lot tougher to find when one was actively looking for them. Well, either that or the trio had just been unlucky last week. In any case, it took them six full days to find one this time around. And that's only because they stumbled across an injured loner abandoned by its pack.

Percy would have liked to put the poor thing out of its misery, but truth be told, the creature's misery was only about to begin. He did feel a little bad doing this, but he had to test his soul magic on *something*. Inanimate objects obviously wouldn't work, which left humans, innocent animals, or ugly goblins. And sadly, Percy's green pal was the most disposable of those targets.

"Don't look at me like that. I'll start easy." he told the creature tied to a tree.

Activating Soul Vision, he spent a few moments calibrating it, as the goblin's soul came into focus. It looked disturbingly similar to his uncle's, only slightly shorter. Percy didn't know if goblin souls were fundamentally different to those of humans, or if they only looked smaller due to having less space to expand to.

*'Judging from how I managed to possess an alien body, I suppose souls of different species are somewhat interchangeable.'*

Or maybe not. His clone *had* fallen apart rather quickly. But he shook the philosophical thoughts out of his head. He couldn't keep his Soul Vision up for too long, so he had to make it count.

Pulling some more soul mana out of his core, this time he gathered it in his palm. Normally, it appeared colourless, to the point he could barely see it with the naked eye. *Not now.* Through Soul Vision, it appeared like a bright silver orb, about the size of a cherry.

Soon, he fired the bolt towards the goblin, carefully paying attention to the changes. As the projectile slammed into the similarly coloured silhouette of the creature, he saw it bend backwards and distort, its shape clearly rattled.

Dispersing the mana in his eyes, he watched the goblin's physical form, curious to see what would happen to it. Percy's prisoner looked disoriented for a while, but its eyes regained their focus after a few seconds.

He nodded.

He'd held back with the last attack, partly to conserve his mana and partly to avoid dealing permanent damage to the creature too early. The last blast had only been at the level of what a Red core would be capable of.

Next, he repeated the process, this time charging the orb as long as possible, letting it reach the size of a tangerine before shooting it at the creature. The impact was a lot more violent than before, causing the goblin's soul to stretch, almost leaving its body. Then, it snapped back, shaking intensely for a few seconds, like a boat trapped in a storm.

Still, it settled down eventually, without any permanent damage visible on the surface. Percy switched to his regular vision and observed the changes to the goblin. This time it remained out of it for longer than an hour, before eventually regaining its senses. It still appeared somewhat dizzy afterwards, but it didn't look like something a few hours of sleep couldn't fix.

*'As I thought. My attacks barely do anything. Any other affinity I know of would be deadly at Orange...'*

He frowned, trying to work a way around the issue.

The problem was that the goblin's soul was surprisingly resilient. And judging from his experiences growing up, human souls were even more so. Anyone he'd ever tossed his mana against had shrugged it off without feeling more than a simple chill.

Thinking back to his attacks, it was a bit like trying to punch a sandbag. No matter how much strength he put behind the blast, it would just deform to absorb it.

*'Hmmm... A sandbag, huh?'*

Percy willed his mana to gather in his hand again. This time, rather than shaping it into a ball, he focused it on his index and middle fingers, trying to make it as pointy as possible. This was his first attempt at something like that, so it took a while. The construct crumbled a few times, and he couldn't make it too sharp without it falling apart, but eventually he managed to get something about as pointy as a spoon's handle.

He activated his Soul Vision once more as he walked up to the goblin. As much as he would have liked to throw the new projectile, he knew it wouldn't survive the flight. He pointed his augmented fingers towards the goblin's chest

and stabbed forward. His actual fingers stopped on the creature's skin, but the surrounding mana dug an inch deeper.

“EEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHHHHHHHH!!!” the goblin shrieked loudly, the sheer agony contained in its voice making Percy's hair stand on end.

Covering his ears, he took a few steps back, but kept his Soul Vision active, trying to figure out what was going on.

There was a small scar on the creature's soul. It was tiny, as if it had been nicked by a fingernail, but unlike the blunt damage from before, it wasn't recovering. Percy didn't know if it would, given enough time, but he could tell the goblin would be in a world of pain until then.

The creature's cries instantly reminded him of his experience possessing the alien body. What the goblin was feeling right now appeared to be similar to what he'd felt back when his clone fell apart. Maybe not quite as intense, but of a similar sort.

BLURG

He turned around just in time to catch Elaine heaving out her lunch, her father looking at her with concern. The two had been observing him during his experiments, also curious about his soul affinity.

Percy walked back to the goblin. Even though the little buggers had shot him full of holes just days ago, watching the creature squirm churned up his own stomach. Besides, he'd learned more than enough to plan out the next phase of his training. Pulling a knife out, he plunged it into the goblin's neck, putting an end to its suffering.

*'A soul affinity, huh? Clearly not meant for the faint of heart.'*