

Elaine helped Percy walk as they passed through the corridor leading to baldy's office. She hadn't spoken to him much during the last stretch of their journey, still shaken after watching him torture the goblin.

He didn't think she held it against him or anything. Hell, he'd watched her butcher plenty of goblins herself just days ago. Still, she'd kept her distance from him every time he practiced since then, clearly having some newfound appreciation for the danger his affinity posed. And he didn't exactly blame her for it.

*'Who would have thought such a small cut on one's soul would cause such suffering?'*

Truth be told, his mood hadn't been much better, but that didn't mean he could take a day off training. Those at the bottom of the ladder didn't have the luxury to stop climbing. Whenever they did, the rising tide drowned them.

Consequently, he'd spent the last few hours of their trip honing his projectiles into knives. They already looked much better than what he had stabbed the goblin with, and he could even throw them a short distance before they crumbled. Though they weren't ready for combat. *Not yet at least...*

KNOCK, KNOCK

"Come in."

The two entered, finding their grandpa much like they had left him.

*'Does he even sleep, or has he spent the past 2 weeks in that seat?'*

"Thanks Elaine. You may go."

Percy wasn't sure why his grandpa wanted to speak with him alone. Even stranger was how Elaine did as she was told, leaving the room without any protest.

*'What's up with her today? Surely she's not just scared of my affinity?'*

He shook his head. He would talk to her later, but for now he had to figure out how to snatch baldy's magic tree.

"Come closer." his grandpa spoke.

He frowned, but ultimately obliged, curious to see what the man wanted.

Archibald placed a hand on Percy's shoulder, as the latter felt a suffocating pressure emerge from the former's sternum. Activating his Mana Sense, he saw a bright Violet star thrum with activity in his grandpa's chest, as a film of vibrant green covered the man's arm in his regular vision. Percy instinctively tried to step back as he saw the life mana flow towards him, still not completely over the trauma from the temple, but Archibald's firm grip kept him in place.

As the mana trickled down his body, the seed of his second core awakened once more, trying to pull it, making Percy fear the worst. He didn't think his grandpa had enough mana to suffocate him, nor was it nearly dense enough to do so, but the man could still notice something was off.

Luckily, that didn't happen. Unlike the red liquid that had been kept in the pool for Phoebe-knew how long, baldy's mana was filled with his intent, rendering Percy's second core powerless to affect it. Ignoring the weak pull, the green river continued past his abdomen, reaching his legs, as Percy felt his wounds itch.

And just a moment later, it was over. Archibald let go of him, as Percy tried moving his feet, finding not only the pain but even the soreness from the trip gone. He almost thanked his grandpa. He wasn't used to receiving much from him, but this was the second time in a few days. First, the hefty sum baldy had spent for his affinity test. Now this. Not that it seemed to take much effort to heal him, but it would save Percy weeks of annoyance all the same.

Still, he bit his tongue. Archibald had only begun to give him stuff upon learning there was value in him. It was all a transaction.

"It's a handy trick." is what he said in the end.

Baldy nodded, looking at him silently for a few seconds.

“My son told me you have the soul affinity. Is there anything more I can help you with?”

Percy suppressed a chuckle.

*‘Sure. I’ll take all the mana from your magic tree, killing it in the process. Then I want twice as many elixirs as you give any of the others, to feed both of my mana cores. I’ll let you know if there’s anything else.’*

Naturally, he kept those thoughts to himself.

“No.” he said. “I’ll practice with my soul mana on my own for a few days and then I’ll test Clone again.”

Maybe his grandpa could offer a few words of advice, but it wouldn’t amount to much. Percy was pretty much in uncharted territory. He would have to figure out how his bloodline interacted with his affinity by himself. Hopefully his new Soul Vision would help with that.

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“Very well. Let me know once you learn more.”

Percy nodded as well, walking out of the office.

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The young man looked at the tall oak tree, which honestly resembled a jade statue more than a plant. It exuded a thick green mist, reminding him of the mana around the temple. But it *smelled* nice. The mind mana had been odourless, while this gave each breath a fresh minty undertone.

It had taken him about a week of planning to figure out how to make it here. Baldy clearly went above and beyond to keep it safe. It obviously hadn't been planted in the garden outside, as anybody could steal or damage it there. Instead, he had carved out a special location inside the mansion, for an inner garden. It was designed to only have a single entrance.

Luckily, it had been several decades since the last time anybody tried anything funny, so some chinks had appeared in the tight security. From there, Percy only had to wait for his uncles Gareth and Balin to be paired on the same shift, which took a few days longer than he had hoped, but did happen eventually. The two idiots were among the laziest in the family, so they often left their post a few minutes earlier than they were meant to.

*'No time to waste then.'*

Percy approached the tree, already feeling the seed in his abdomen beginning to draw in the mana. Standing next to the trunk, he stretched his hand, but paused just an inch from it.

Once he started, there was no going back. If this was anything like what had happened during the affinity test, he wouldn't be able to stop until his second core was satisfied. And Percy wasn't sure the tree even contained enough for that. It had a lot, but could it compare to the condensed mana of a titaness?

One thing was certain though. Whether it was enough or not, the tree wouldn't survive. Based on what he'd heard, this tree was actually a treasure gifted to

his family by the Divine Order! It was a great help for life users honing their spells. Even his grandpa regularly used it.

They were actually lucky none of the White cores leading the Great Houses had a life affinity, otherwise they would have long destroyed House Avalon to seize the tree by force. If Percy ruined it here, he'd be dealing a severe blow to his own family. Even if he managed to escape their wrath, all his relatives might end up dying a few years from now, crushed by a rival House. All because of *him*

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*'Why the hell should I care?'*

*They* certainly didn't care about *him*. Percy needed to awaken his second core if he was to ever be more than cannon fodder. It's not like he had a choice. Did he?

He gritted his teeth. He had to do this. *He HAD to!*

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Percy entered his grandpa's office, not bothering to knock. His fists were clenched tightly, drained of all colour. He had been so close last night. Just a tap away from completing his new core. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. Even now, he wasn't sure why.

Archibald raised an eyebrow at his grandson's intrusion. Though he didn't say anything, waiting for him to speak first.

"I want the jade tree. It won't survive." Percy said, fully expecting baldy to laugh him out of the room. *At best.*

He didn't really think there was a chance baldy would agree. Still, he didn't dare to steal it, so asking for it was the only path left. Contrary to his expectations however, his grandpa wasn't outraged. He didn't laugh at him either. Instead, his response shocked Percy even more.

"I figured out that much."

Taken aback, the young man stared at him in confusion, before baldy gestured at a chair across him.

“How?” Percy asked upon sitting.

“Gawain told me what happened at the temple. You think he didn’t notice how the mind mana was swirling around you? My daughter did too. You’re lucky her attendants didn’t, otherwise she wouldn’t have managed to cover your ass.”

“Your *daughter*? The High Priestess?!” Percy asked.

Archibald nodded.

“She’s your aunt, Guinevere. She’s only a few years older than Gawain, but she’s a Yellow-born.”

“I thought you needed as many Yellow-borns as possible, to increase the chances of getting more Violet cores for the family. Why would you send her away?”

SIGH

“We *do* need every Yellow-born we can get. Even then, there’s no guarantee one will be ready to succeed me if I die. But having strong ties to the Divine Order is just as important.”

Well... this was all fascinating, but Percy had more pressing concerns at the moment.

“That still doesn’t explain how you knew I needed life mana.”

Baldy chuckled.

“Please. I’m 50 times your age. You think I wouldn’t notice you trying to snatch my own mana right in front of me?”

Percy smiled awkwardly. He really was out of his depth here.

“I still have no clue what you needed all the mind mana for, but as soon as I healed you, I knew you weren’t done. I paid closer attention to you since, and you didn’t disappoint.”

The young man fell back weakly, letting his neck sink into the silky headrest as he stared up at the ceiling. He had been so foolish to think he could outsmart the old fox.

“Why are we even having this conversation then? Just execute me, or banish me, or whatever.”

Baldy fell back as well, his own expression morphing into something Percy didn’t quite recognize. His grandpa almost looked sad, but he’d never seen him like that, so he wasn’t sure.

“Percy. Do you hate our family?”

The young man frowned. Where was *this* coming from all of a sudden? His first thought was to reply “obviously”, but he figured he could take his time answering.

Most of the people in his House were, frankly, *assholes*. Present company included. But then there was Elaine who he got along with. And his parents who he didn't really remember. Was it fair to hate his parents, just because of their surname, without even knowing them? Hell, *he* was part of the family too. Did he hate *himself*?

Perhaps, it was its management he hated. *His grandpa*. But the man was pragmatic, and honestly, not a bad leader. His decisions were always calculated.

*'Even though I always get the short end of the math.'*

Still, it wasn't like he never got anything from them. At least, he had food and a roof over his head. He even had his own room. *But so what?* Was he supposed to just forget everything else? To forgive them? To *love* them?

“I don't know.” he said after a long time.

Archibald nodded again.

“Here’s an easier one then. Do you resent *me*?”