Wanderer 21

Chapter 21: Dance

As Micky followed the guard through a long corridor, Percy was reevaluating his life choices. How had he found himself hitching a ride on a walking corpse, escorted to a fight through a dungeon? Not to mention, this place had somehow turned out even crueller than Remior. Micky might be their prisoner, but these people didn't seem to know nor care he'd just died.

'Surely, they could give him a day off!'

Oblivious to his thoughts, the guard soon brought them to a large barred gate, an ominous red light seeping through the gaps. Stopping, the man made some kind of whistling sound. And a few moments later, Percy heard a loud metallic noise. It was grating, like a rusty chain grinding against something hard. At the same time, the gate was slowly lifted by the mechanism.

Micky stepped through as the guard stayed behind. He walked into an open space, to the cacophony of jeers and boos, which only intensified upon their arrival. Percy's host scanned their surroundings slowly, which he figured was done for his sake.

The stands surrounded them in all directions, stretching up for over a hundred meters. And they were filled to the brim with eager spectators, clearly itching to enjoy the barbaric event. Most of the crowd was too far to make out, but many of those closest appeared to be the same species as Micky, albeit lacking the tattoos again, like the guard.

'Why do this to one of your own?'

His host had a visceral reaction to that thought. Percy felt phlegm accumulate in their throat, before Micky spat out the half-chewed head of the rodent, covered in thick bile.

'Please… never do this again…'

'Your fault! For calling this trash "my own"!' Micky snapped back.

Then he looked up at a sky painted red, reminiscent of a sunset back on Remior. Yet here, it was the middle of the day. The local sun was at its apex, bathing Huehue in a dim crimson light. The sand blanketing the arena was red too, but a different, brownish shade. Mixed with the blood of countless combatants, it was coarse and sticky, with the occasional bony shard jutting out. Micky ignored those, as they failed to pierce his calloused feet, making his way to the centre of the arena.

'Can you even fight like this?'

His host shrugged. Then, Percy felt the muscles in their abdomen tense, forcefully closing the injury. It hurt like a bitch, causing them to wince, though it was practical.

Next, the core in their sternum stirred, flooding their body with potent mana. Having recently acquired a pure affinity himself, the substance felt somewhat familiar to Percy. Still, it was weird coming out of his chest rather than his abdomen and at a higher grade than he was used to. Soon, it gathered on the wound, further sealing it in a film of pale cyan. It wasn't perfect, but it would do.

ROAR

A thunderous bellow came from the other end of the arena, as faint tremors reached their feet. And they grew more fierce over the next few seconds as another gate opened, revealing their opponent. It was a large bear-like creature, taller than Micky even on all six. Its green fur was long and curly, which might have made the creature look cute, if it hadn't been for its curved claws and twisting horns. Its snout was wide, with sharp fangs protruding out of its mouth, making it resemble a crocodile's maw.

Micky activated Mana Sense, letting the two examine its grade.

'Yellow.'

Percy wasn't happy. Beasts were generally dumber than sentient beings, but they possessed a special affinity that made up for it. Greatly strengthening their bodies with each promotion, it turned them into fierce opponents even for somebody at their grade. And that was assuming that person had a proper affinity themselves.

Micky pulled mana from his core again, this time to his hands, forging it into four short staves.

CLINK, CLINK

He hit them together a couple of times, nodding in satisfaction as he verified their hardness. Still, that did little to assuage Percy's worry.

It wasn't like pure mana was completely useless. It could still form proper spells and there were people who ascended all the way to godhood with it. But it hadn't earned its reputation as the weakest affinity by accident either. It was far less flexible than water or air, and not nearly as sturdy as earth, or as lethal as fire and lightning. Even calling it a jack-of-all-trades was an overstatement. Perhaps a jack-of-no-trades was more apt. Adding Micky's suboptimal condition and Percy wasn't optimistic about their odds. Not wanting to negatively affect his host, he tried to steer away from those thoughts, but they must've seeped through.

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Micky chuckled.

'I know what you're thinking. And you're not exactly wrong. Lacking any affinities, Huehue used to be one of the weakest worlds, constantly losing ground to others.'

Then, their calves tensed like steel coils, as Micky jolted towards the monster with shocking speed. He was quicker than a Yellow had any right to be, clearly having honed his body to its very limits. His technique was nothing to scoff at either, perfectly timing the swings of his upper arms to close into the beast's head from both sides.

However, the croco-bear was no slouch either, raising a paw faster than its bulk should have allowed, slashing down violently.

BOOOOM

Percy felt their bones creak, as the shockwave sent ripples through their skin. Bent under the tremendous weight of the claws, one of the rods was already cracked. They'd all shatter the next instant!

But Micky never gave them the chance. Having expected the parry, he stabbed forward with his lower arms, hitting the creature's chin. The impact sent its head up by a few inches, a few bloody fangs spluttering out.

Yet, it was far from enough.

GROWL

Enraged, the beast swiped with a second paw, this time slashing directly at Micky's chest. Percy felt all four elbows bend, the mana flowing to reinforce the damaged weapon, as the rods moved to block the incoming blow.

BOOOOM

It was even heavier than the one before, but Micky loosened his footing at the last second, letting himself slide back a dozen metres to lessen the impact. Two of the staves had still snapped in half. As the young man had thought, his host was at a severe disadvantage. He just couldn't see a way out of this.

Micky pulled some more mana to repair the weapons but didn't stop there. He pushed it into his channels, keeping it in his body. Then, he took a deep breath as Percy felt the strands of ambient mana enter their lungs, swirling like water down a drain. Their core had previously been at half its capacity, Micky having already exhausted much of his reserves, though it began refilling rapidly as he continued to pump mana into his pathways. At this rate, it would take less than a minute to max out!

'My ancestors laboured over countless generations to develop a technique that made us famous in the cosmos.'

Percy's eyes would've widened had he been the one in control. The beast was already charging at them, but Micky didn't appear concerned. He continued to absorb mana as his channels swelled. Countless thin threads like veins began glowing under his skin.

As soon as the monster was upon them, Micky pivoted on his heel, narrowly avoiding being impaled by its horns. Then, he stomped hard with his other foot, all the muscles in his body bulging – somehow even more than before. The mana burned its way through their lower arms, making the weapons glow brighter as they lunged upwards.

CRACK

Percy felt the beast's ribs give way under the fierce strike, the force even lifting its giant visage an inch off the ground.

GRRRRRR

Its maw snapped shut, droplets of boiling spittle falling in all directions as the creature seethed. This time it swiped sideways with two of its paws. Or tried to, at least.

Micky's movements were too fast for Percy to fully track, though he seemed to have struck one of its knees with a staff, stopping it before it picked up momentum. As for the second paw, he'd failed to see how his host had dodged it, as Micky tiptoed around the monster, his footwork elegant like a dance. Then, he leapt backwards, putting some distance from the disoriented beast.

'At its highest level, the technique allows one to fight a full grade above their own.'

Only then did Percy realize their core was about to reach full capacity. With one last breath, it hit its limits. But still, Micky didn't stop inhaling mana. The pressure was intense, making Percy fear both the core and the channels were about to burst, when the glowing lines on their skin shone even more brightly. Percy had only managed a fleeting glance, but the mana seemed to flow in certain patterns, tracing along the tribal tattoos, hinting at the order in which they were meant to be read. A few scarce motes of cyan leaked out of their body, as the rods felt hotter to the touch.

'It made up for our shortcomings, finally letting our gods stand tall against others, giving the technique its name.'

The beast regained its bearing, glaring at them with unconcealed fury. Though it wasn't as quick to attack this time. Instead, it was Micky who dashed forward. Before he even reached the creature, he

took a few strange steps, twisting his path. The monster's attack hit empty air as Micky delivered three swift strikes from various angles.

CRACK, CRACK, CRACK

Every time a rod landed, a bone shattered.

Saying that Percy had a front row seat to the spectacle would be an understatement. Inside Micky's body, he could feel every muscle flexing, every wisp of mana moving, every pivot of their feet, every sharp swing of the weapons. But even then, he could barely track a tenth of Micky's actions.

His host wasn't only manipulating the staves with his hands. They bounced off his elbows and even his knees, as they swished through the air erratically, stabbing and crushing and slashing at the creature from seemingly random angles. At one point, Micky even kicked the bottom of a rod with his heel, slamming the other end right onto the monster's horn, smashing it into splinters.

Five minutes later, the beast was lying on the ground, its pained cries having softened, its breaths slowing down. It was battered, its limbs bent in all the wrong directions, countless craters tearing into its flesh.

Percy stared at the monster in horror. A short while earlier he'd been wondering how they could possibly escape its clutches, only to watch it slaughtered in such a brutal manner.

Then, Micky spoke again.

'It's called the Dance of the Savage Gods.'