Wanderer 22

Chapter 22: Kik'lit

The two were back in the cell, the foul smell of blood now dominating the earthy scents of the cave.

Micky didn't seem bothered, however, as he pecked chunks off the croco-bear's severed leg. Being allowed to eat their kills was apparently one of the few joys afforded to the prisoners of the colosseum. Not that Percy particularly enjoyed the taste of the still-bleeding meal – he preferred his food cooked. At least this one was fresh. Surprisingly tender too. A Yellow beast's flesh was supposed to be tougher, but his host had softened it quite a bit after that massacre of a bout.

'So, I take it your people were attacked out of greed?'

Micky nodded.

'Originally, our enemies only wanted our resources. Upon perfecting the Dance, my ancestors managed to turn the situation around for a few millennia, regaining some of the lost territories. But the only thing we achieved was to give our foes an even greater reason for coveting our world. Eventually, they joined forces with a few other races to conquer Huehue.'

'But why? Does it even work with other affinities?'

Fighting above one's grade was certainly valuable, but if it only worked with pure mana then the advantage would be offset by its weakness. In that case, it would be priceless for the people of Huehue, yet not quite as much for others.

'Sadly, yes.'

Hearing that, Percy's feelings were mixed. Part of him did want it to work solely with his second core, to finally make it worth it. Stumbling upon a powerful technique that only worked because of his affinity sure sounded better than one that did so despite it. But he shook those thoughts away, knowing they were silly.

‘It’s better this way. I can use it with both cores.’

The only question now was whether Micky would be willing to pass his people’s heritage to an outsider...

‘Might as well.’

Percy thought he’d heard wrong.

‘Just an hour ago you were willing to destroy your own soul to keep me out of your body.’

Micky shrugged.

‘Well, by now it’s obvious you aren’t related to our enemies. I don’t mind helping you out. It’s not like I have anything better to do either.’

‘But what’s in it for you?’

‘You’ve already given me everything I could ask for. Which isn’t much really. It’s not like I have some grand ambition. I figured it would be nice to have a couple more fights. And if I’m lucky, maybe another shot at the bastard who killed me.’

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The young man was at a loss for words.

‘You’re already getting those things for free. Why put in the effort?’

Micky chuckled.

‘This is the part where you thank me and quit while you’re ahead. Are you trying to get me NOT to teach you?’

‘Well, no. Of course I’m happy to take the freebie. I just thought it’s a little too easy.’

SIGH

‘Percival… Had you visited Huehue 10000 years ago asking for our technique, I’m sure my ancestors would have skinned you alive… But right now, all the people I hate the most already have it. As I see it, passing it to somebody else before I die is my best chance at preserving my legacy and spiting my enemies.’

COUGH, COUGH

Percy felt the taste of iron in their mouth, as Micky wiped something sticky off the bottom of his beak. This blood wasn’t from the food.

‘How long do you think we even have?’

‘Beats me.’

Micky shifted in his seat, the movement sending another jolt of pain through their body. Unlike before, he had to use one of his lower hands to keep the wound closed. Despite the measures he’d taken during the fight to protect it, it had still widened by about an inch. While powerful, the Dance of the Savage Gods clearly took a toll on its user.

Carelessly tossing the naked bone away, Micky pushed himself up, walking to a different corner of the cell. The dim light of the torch didn’t reach that spot, so Percy hadn’t noticed there was something here earlier. Reaching down, his host picked up a strange piece of bone, crafted into some sort of intricate tool. No, not a tool. An instrument. It looked a little like an ivory flute, but it had two shafts, way too many holes and was wide like a trumpet on one end…

‘That’s the thing you mentioned earlier! A kriki-tick!’

‘A kik’lit, but yes.’ Micky rolled his eyes. ‘My mother played one for me as a child. A few years ago, I convinced the wardens to let me craft one after winning a lot of matches in a row.’

Next, he sat down again, moving the object to his face. That’s when Percy understood that, unlike a trumpet, one was supposed to blow at the kik’lit from the wide end – the beak going inside the hole. Which frankly made sense, given the locals’ physiology.

The young man figured his host would have a tough time playing with one hand occupied, yet Micky seemed to manage just fine. If anything, he appeared quite skilled with it too, his fingers moving swiftly but gently, tapping some of the holes while brushing over others. Then, he blew a strained breath into the kik’lit, causing it to emit a soft tune. The melody was crisp and strangely uplifting, like something a mother would play for her child to cheer them up. For a second, Percy almost forgot he was still inside a corpse, trapped in a cell atop a broken world.

Yet, a second tune subtly underscored the first. A kid would have missed this one, and perhaps Percy might have too, if not for Micky’s emotions seeping through their connection. This hidden layer spoke of struggles against adversity, and of the fight for one’s place in the world. Like a people cursed without an affinity, trying to protect their home. Or a boy born with a Red core, looked down upon by all…

Micky played for hours, the mellow notes bouncing off the cold walls. Every few minutes a cough interrupted the music, each time sounding worse. Still, it always resumed soon after, as if it would be a crime to rob Huehue of even this minor consolation.

So absorbed was Percy in the melody, he nearly failed to register the warm trickle down his cheek. It slowly flowed down his face, before dripping off his chin.

PIT, PIT

The tears sputtered on his chest, curving around the wound, almost caressing it. But Micky wasn’t the one crying.

Without meaning to, and for the first time since their meeting, Percy had broken his promise…