Wanderer 23

Chapter 23: Circulation

A zigzagging trail of shallow prints formed on the sticky sand. They were erratic and barely visible. Nearly soundless too. Had Percy relied on his eyes, he would have failed to track the creature. Still, the Orange orbs shimmering inside his Mana Sense made this easy. With a horizontal movement of his upper-right arm, he slammed the rod into the critter's side, feeling little resistance as he catapulted its body a dozen meters away.

THUD

A small crater formed on the ground, as the skin of the fox-like animal regained its colour.

'Careful, there's another behind you.' Micky warned.

The young man had already noticed, swinging his left to intercept it. But his movements were clumsy. The only thing he managed to hit was his own back, fumbling with the weapon as the Orange blur streaked toward his throat. His bottom-left elbow jerked upwards at the last second, the staff's lunge sending the beast flying.

THUD

It didn't land until a couple seconds later, the impact sending a splash of bloody sand in every direction.

GRRRRR, GRRRRR

The rest of the pack growled at him, but didn't rush to attack, learning from their companions' mistakes as they circled him cautiously.

'It's harder than you made it look.' Percy said.

'You'll get there.' Micky replied before chuckling. 'Just don't start crying again.'

Percy felt his cheeks heat up.

‘Shut up about it already! For all we know it was you!’

Then, he resumed his stance, his focus returning to his opponents. A sliver of cyan leaked out of his sternum, tracing along an arm to repair one of the rods. Micky was in charge of their core, as Percy wasn’t proficient enough with pure mana to form stable constructs. The second pair of arms too, as the young man didn’t need to learn how to use those.

‘Your technique is downright atrocious, but I suppose it would be unreasonable to expect otherwise. If you’re used to my body, we can turn things up a notch.’

Percy nodded. The Dance of the Savage Gods was a complex technique with many moving parts. Mastering each would be a time-consuming process, but a lot of them he could work on by himself. For example, training his body to withstand it was relatively straightforward. Forming the weapons too.

That said, there were some aspects he couldn’t learn without guidance. Micky pushed more mana out of their core, flooding their channels. Unlike the last time, he deliberately slowed down the process, making it easier for Percy to follow. The young man paid close attention to the specific pathways the mana was flowing in.

Normally, over 95% of a mage’s mana was contained in their core. Their channels weren’t meant for storage, but for efficiently transmitting it outside as quickly as possible. Consequently, most people only bothered to clear out the channels that began at their sternum and spread out to their extremities.

Micky’s technique was very different. It used every channel in one’s body – even the seemingly useless ones looping around pointlessly. Percy would have to clear a lot of new pathways later. Not just that, but he’d have to temper all of them, including the ones he normally used, until they could stretch more than normal. This would let him contain twice as much mana as before. The flow was also necessary, to keep the mana evenly spread out, so that he could draw on it quickly where it was required. The deep breaths too, which would constantly refill his pool, maintaining his strength.

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‘Sadly, I can only teach you the first half of the art, as I never learned the rest.’

‘What?! This is only half?!?!’

This was news to Percy. Once more, he felt his muscles brimming with strength, as glowing cyan lines became visible on his skin. This much had already allowed Micky to utterly dominate a previously insurmountable opponent. Just how powerful was the full technique?!

‘From what I understand, the last step involves some direct manipulation of ambient mana outside your body. Unfortunately, you’ll have to figure it out by yourself. Still, once you master Circulation, your strength should shoot up by half a grade.’

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COUGH, COUGH

Percy didn’t even bother wiping the blood off their beak. There was no point – they were covered all over already.

‘That’s enough. I think I’ve got the basics down.’

Micky nodded. With a sudden spin, he delivered a powerful blow on one of the remaining critters, crushing its skull. Then, gathering strength in his calves, he sprung forth like an arrow, swiftly dispatching the last one too.

Only after they were alone in the arena did he finally let go of the excess mana, falling with his back on the sand, his chest heaving up and down as the cyan lines faded from his skin. He was using both of his lower hands to keep the wound from opening more than it had to. By now, it had doubled in size and his body was much paler, having lost a ton of blood.

‘How are you holding up?’ Percy asked.

He could feel the agonizing pain of course, but he figured his host had a better understanding of his own body.

‘I think the next fight will be our last.’

Perhaps they could have made it a couple days longer if they took things slower, but they’d overexerted themselves against the invisible foxes. Normally, Micky wouldn’t have needed more than a minute to slaughter them all. The only reason he’d persisted for over an hour had been to show Percy the ropes. It wasn’t nearly enough time for him to learn the technique, but he’d at least begun to grasp the underlying concepts.

As their breath evened out, the young man noticed the crimson sun was still at its apex, having never moved from that very spot.

‘Are days really long on Huehue?’

Micky raised an eyebrow.

‘What’s a “day”?’

Percy thought he was being pranked. Still, he showed his host images of the sun setting and rising on Remior.

‘Fascinating…’ Micky said after a while. ‘Huehue always faces Tonatiuh with the same side. The warmth is barely enough for us to survive, but the back of our world is stuck in eternal darkness.’

Then he chuckled bitterly.

‘Though I suppose this side isn’t much better now.’

A few moments later, they pushed against the sand, struggling to stand up. Only then did Percy register the crowd's boos, startled by their intensity. Evidently, their bloodthirsty audience wasn't pleased he and Micky had dragged the fight out for so long.

'Not entertaining enough for you, you pigs?!' he glared.

Micky shook his head.

'You learn to filter it out after a while in here.'

The rusty gate made a groaning sound somewhere behind them. They looked back, seeing the guards gesturing impatiently.

SIGH

'Percival… Do you mind if I do something dumb?'

For some reason, the young man felt his heart clench, but didn't say anything. This was Micky's life. The tiny sliver he had left. And he'd already used up much of it for his sake. Whatever he wanted to do, Percy wouldn't stop him. Receiving a tacit agreement, Micky ignored the guards' shouts, slowly trudging to the other side of the arena. The boos only grew louder as the injured gladiator stumbled his way to one of the walls.

Next, he looked up.

Percy examined the crowd as his host's eyes brushed over them. There were people of all ages – men, women and children – dressed in all kinds of clothes he'd never seen before. From sleeveless shirts with silken ties, to colourful dresses that left little to the imagination, to flamboyant hats and intricate accessories… Under other circumstances, he might have appreciated the exotic fashion of Huehue's locals. Right now, however, it wasn't nearly enough to suppress the sheer disgust he felt towards them.

Eventually, Micky's gaze lingered on a man somewhere in the first row. He lacked the tribal tattoos and scars – much like everyone else – but, unlike the rest, his build was muscular.

‘A fighter.’ Percy realized.

He was surrounded by a few more men like him, but Micky didn’t pay them any heed. Raising his hand, he manifested a new cyan rod before pointing it at that person. Only after getting a nod back did he let the construct crumble, his arm falling weakly by his side. Finally, he turned back towards the gate, ignoring the even louder boos buzzing in his ears.

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CLUNK

The cell’s door slammed shut as the guard left with what Percy thought was the equivalent of a sneer.

‘Mind telling me what that was all about?’

Cusping a handful of water from the puddle, Micky gulped it sloppily before plopping down on the cold stone.

‘That guy in the stands… He’s Mixcoatl. The one who killed me.’

Percy’s eyes widened, but Micky wasn’t done.

‘And I’ve just challenged him to a rematch.’