Wanderer 24

Chapter 24: Mixcoatl

‘What’s up with those people anyway? Aren’t they also natives? Why aren’t THEY locked up in a cage?’

Percy felt his features twist into a grimace.

‘They are… They’re just too dumb to see it…’

Once more, Micky reached for the kik’lit. With a trembling grip, he moved it to his beak, exhaling a soft breath into the instrument. The sound was off tune. He tried again but his fingers shook, unable to close the holes properly. His lungs hurt with every attempt too. After a few more failures, he let his arm fall, the intricate piece of bone rolling half a circle away.

‘When it became obvious we were going to lose the war, some of our ancestors switched sides. They volunteered the technique and our resources to the enemies, helping them accelerate their conquest.’

‘So, the spectators… the guards… the wardens…?’ Percy could already guess the answer.

‘Their descendants.’ Micky nodded.

The young man pondered over the implications. This certainly explained the bad blood between the two sides. Still…

‘Why would that guy agree to a fight? Can you challenge the wardens whenever you want?’

SIGH

‘There’s no official rule allowing or prohibiting it… but why wouldn’t he accept? The very reason our enemies even built these colosseums is to humiliate us… and to rub the bitter truth in our faces.’

‘What truth?’

‘That their ancestors chose right, and mine wrong.’

The two remained silent for a while. Eventually, Percy spoke again.

‘Can you beat him?’

Back in the arena, he’d caught a glimpse of Mixi-coco-whatever’s core. The guy was at Yellow – the same grade as them. Sure, Micky was injured badly… but maybe if he was more skilled…

‘Not a chance.’ Micky said. ‘He has the full technique. Even when I was healthy, he won easily. Let alone now.’

Percy was shocked.

‘Then why challenge him?! Not now, I mean. I get now. But why did you do it the first time?’

‘Same reason, really.’ Micky replied. ‘I was running out of time.’

‘What do you mean?’

Micky closed his eyes, softly tapping the back of his head against the wall.

‘I was born at Yellow. Some over 80 years ago.’

Percy raised one of their eyebrows. He didn’t know how long a year was on Huehue, but he figured that should be plenty of time for Micky to have advanced at least once, yet he hadn’t. Of course not. Who would waste precious resources on prisoners? The wardens on the other hand…

‘Mixcoatl is an Orange-born, but he’d already reached Yellow by the time he rounded us up, butchering my mother and sister right in front of me, dragging me into this shithole.’

‘…’

‘I’m so sorry Micky.’

Micky chuckled, but it sounded hollow.

‘I’m not an idiot. I knew I wasn’t his match. But I’ve heard he is close to Green now. Unless I went for it when I did, the gap would widen even further, and I’d lose my chance forever. Say what you will, but even throwing my life in the gutter was worth it if I could just land ONE good hit on that fucker’s face…’

‘Did you?’

Micky raised an eyebrow.

‘Land a hit I mean. Did you?’

‘Huh. Nope.’ Micky said, clenching his free fists. ‘He toyed with me… gave me a nasty stab and then… he had me sent here to bleed out… And you know the rest…’

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Percy was at a loss for words.

‘But hey, it’s not all bad!’ Micky said, the skin by the base of his beak curling a touch upwards. ‘Thanks to you, I get to try again!’

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They stood in the arena… for the final time. Whatever the outcome of the match, Percy knew his adventure on Huehue was about to end. The horrific wound now extended all the way to Micky's chest, his flesh barely held together by the lower pair of arms and as much mana as he could spare. His legs wobbled. Even making it out of the long corridor had been a challenge.

Percy thought the gate in front of them might have opened, but it was hard to say for sure through their blurry vision. It wasn't until Micky's opponent stood just a few yards away that they could make out his mocking expression. Their only consolation was that the ringing in their skull made it impossible to hear the crowd's jeers.

'Percival… Whatever happens, I want you to know it was nice having somebody to talk to.'

'Not "whatever happens"! You have to land a hit, remember?'

Micky nodded.

Both combatants took a deep breath, standing still for a couple moments. Percy felt power flood through their mana channels, though it hurt this time. Wherever it passed, muscles tore and bones creaked, as blood gushed out of their chest like a river.

Bright cyan lines lit up on their opponent's skin as well, as the two sides summoned their weapons. Micky clenched the ill-shapen rods tightly in his free hands, one threatening to crumble already. Mixcoatl had an easier time, leisurely assuming a loose battle stance, only bothering to lift one of his four javelins to point at their throat.

Micky dashed forward.

Not that he could afford to move much, but waiting would only make things worse. The twin rods closed into Mixcoatl's face from either side like a pincer. But the attack was too slow. Too telegraphed. Too weak. With a swirl of his javelin, the warden sliced both staves in half, kicking Micky squarely in the chest.

CRACK

Multiple bones broke as his ribcage caved in. Percy felt a wet cough escape their beak as they were sent flying back, skidding and rolling, before sliding on the dirty sand over a long distance. Luckily, their core hadn't shattered under Mixcoatl's foot, but mana still leaked out of their pores as Micky struggled to keep the technique going.

Seeing this, the warden also allowed the glowing lines to fade away. Apparently, he deemed it unnecessary to exert the effort. Just like that, Micky had been defeated again, this time without Mixcoatl even having to resort to the full Dance!

Percy felt his soul untangle from his host's. The makeshift patches he'd hastily fashioned out of soul mana were rapidly coming undone as his connection to Micky grew more distant. Over the last couple of days, he'd almost forgotten how precarious the condition of their soul was. Like two broken vases, joined together with spit and wishes, it was even more fragile than their physical form. The tether to his main body was already pulling him, trying to pry him out of Huehue.

'No. Not like this.'

Micky had lived a shitty life… and he'd died an even shittier death… Percy would be damned if he let him die another!

He prodded his mana again, tightening the patches, trying to restore his connection to Micky – their connection to the battered body. It seemed to work. His buddy's bitter thoughts seeped through him once more, as he barely managed to open their eyes in time to see Mixcoatl looming over them.

The warden's beak moved, but Percy couldn't register the words. Then the man lifted his foot and stomped their knee. Hard. Just like that, one of the patches Percy had fixed with so much effort instantly fizzled out, a part of Micky's soul shattering with it.

It was pointless. Even if he clutched onto their fading life for a moment longer, the end would be the same. There was no way Micky could fight back. So, Percy stopped trying to hold on to their life. Instead, he did something crazier. He didn't have his soul core with him, but this was still his mana. His main body had bestowed it to him to use it as he pleased. It was filled with his will.

The young man allowed many of the patches to disperse, ordering the mana to fall in line. There wasn't much of it left. His main body had charged him up with a few refills before sending him off, but most was already gone. Some had been absorbed, trying to mend their broken souls. A lot had just leaked out or drifted away.

'It'll have to do.'

Mixcoatl was a full grade higher than him, but he wouldn't see this coming. The fool had even disabled the Dance.

Commanding the mana with all his might, Percy gathered it into one of his lower hands, one of the two still keeping their organs from spilling out of the wound. The young man had spent countless hours practicing this spell, but he wasn't happy with it. It had to be sharper. Much sharper. Tougher too. He'd only get one shot, and he REFUSED to waste it!

The warden lifted his foot again, crushing the other knee. It didn't matter – it was already limp. Percy had already drained all the mana from their lower body, allowing half of Micky's remaining soul to crumble away. Then, Mixcoatl switched to the arms. Luckily, he only bothered with the upper ones – the ones sprawled out on the sand by his sides – not the one Percy needed. Two seconds later, they were also shattered. With a savage glint in his eyes, the warden raised his javelin, finally done torturing his prey. He pointed the tip at their neck, ready to end this.

It was now or never.

Percy summoned as much strength as he could and flicked his hand towards the warden's chest. His movement was slow… so slow… Mixcoatl had reacted before the young man even let go of the mana. The warden stabbed Micky's throat with a javelin, the other three crossed in the projectile's path. Percy wasn't sure if the warden could see it. He should be able to – if he was using Mana Sense. Either way, his hand's motion had betrayed the dagger's trajectory.

But it didn't matter.

The bastard should have dodged instead! The last thing Percy saw as his vision faded to black were Mixcoatl's eyes glazed over, as he plopped down, deader than dead.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Parting Gift – Crude!]