Wanderer 30

Chapter 30: One year

Micky sent an image of a shadow sneaking through the bushes. He was perched atop a branch, gazing at their surroundings from the high vantage point, scouting the area. The crow was already fully grown by now. Percy felt it practically salivating through their bond as it eyed their misguided ambushers.

‘Thanks. I see them now.’

Percy pulled most of his mana to his channels, nearly emptying his core before taking a deep breath to refill it. The motes spiralled into his lungs like a vortex, as an even denser river gushed through his body. But he wasn’t done yet. He pumped even more mana through his pathways, feeling them swell and burn, his muscles brimming with strength, his frame threatening to pop like a pufferfish.

SWOOSH

An arrow shot out from behind him. The young man only tilted his head slightly, dodging the projectile as the wind brushed harmlessly by his ear.

Another mouthful of mana later, he saw faint cyan lines glow under his skin. The pattern wasn’t exactly the same as Micky’s. Even though they shared their affinity, their cores were located at different points, forcing Percy to modify the technique slightly. They shone less brightly too. There was definitely some room for improvement, but the Status had still been kind enough to register the technique a couple months back.

‘You chose the wrong guy to attack.’ Percy smirked.

Then, he stomped hard, his foot making a loud sound as it cracked the dried dirt, catapulting him towards the goblins.

SWOOSH, SWOOSH

More arrows flew his way, but he easily weaved out of their path, causing the goblins' eyes to widen. They switched to their melee weapons in a hurry. Their knives and hatchets had all been crafted out of bone. Rather poorly too.

Percy's core had nearly refilled already, but he drained it again, this time gathering the mana into his right hand, squishing the blob of cyan into something solid. By the time he reached his opponents, his weapon had fully formed. It was a staff, about as tall as he was, its thickness the same as his thumb's.

He spun it through the air as his momentum carried him between two of the creatures, where he hit each with a different end of the staff, slamming one to the ground while sending the other flying. Of the remaining five goblins, only three were brave enough to gang up on him, as the other two fled in terror.

Still, their lunges felt slow in his Mana Sense. He easily tiptoed around their attacks with some well-placed footwork. He swung his weapon again. It had cracked after the previous attack – his Red core not doing him any favours – but he'd already finished repairing it as the mana continued to accumulate inside his body.

Two swings later, three more goblins were rolling on the ground, as Percy finally allowed the staff to crumble.

Another image flashed through the connection. Micky had already intercepted one of the escapees, having torn out its throat with his talons. The bird was currently feasting on the goblin's soul, as Percy felt the mana flowing through the link.

Activating Soul Vision, he spotted the last of the creatures. It had stopped moving, crouching quietly behind a tree some thirty yards away. Perhaps it thought it was safer to hide than run.

'Big mistake.'

Percy took another breath, this time focusing on his first core instead. The two sources of soul mana soon gave him just enough for the spell as a silver dagger formed in his hand. With a flick of his wrist, the Parting Gift pierced soundlessly through the air, doing so even more rapidly than the arrows had, before phasing through the tree's trunk.

THUD

A moment later, the goblin's stiff body landed on the ground.

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"Start with the dead one before its soul dissipates."

Percy tossed the corpse in front of his familiar, who'd just finished consuming the previous goblin. The other five were merely knocked out, as the young man had taken extra care to keep them alive.

Feeling the mana in his eyes dissipating, he hurriedly tossed one last glance down at his soul before Soul Vision deactivated. Micky had supplied him more than enough to keep it active for longer if he wanted, but he'd rather invest the limited resource towards their recovery.

His soul didn't look that great, still resembling a pile of minced meat held together by thin threads. That said, the chunks were fewer and larger than before, and they were attached to one another more firmly too. The crater in his chest had also shrunk a lot since last year.

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That's right.

A little over a year had passed since Micky's first flight. Percy had even had two birthdays in that time. He was seventeen now.

He still couldn't gather much soul mana without the bird's assistance, but he healed faster and faster as Micky grew up and their hunts became more rewarding. As early as a few months ago, the two had graduated from rats and rabbits, turning their sights towards the goblins in the nearby Whistling Woods.

It wasn't ideal, as the forest was a few miles away from his House's mansion. It meant they had to spend several hours per day just travelling back and forth. But it couldn't be helped, as it was too dangerous to

camp the night there by themselves, and they harboured a few too many secrets to be working with strangers. Neither baldy nor Elaine had the time to babysit them for weeks on end.

That said, it wasn't all bad.

Percy's free time had increased sharply ever since his training sessions with his relatives stopped, so he could afford to do this. Plus, hunting was good for honing both his magic and his teamwork with Micky. Finally, even though the goblins were notoriously difficult to find, their larger cores and much more developed souls made the endeavour worthwhile.

'At least Micky is doing better.'

While Percy's soul was still some distance from a full recovery, preventing him from cleansing his first core or sending another clone, his familiar's had grown a lot more stable. The bird could even go a few days without a meal before it began to get affected.

Shrugging, the young man's attention turned to his Status, as he had no interest in watching his friend stuff his face with goblins.

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Percival Avalon

Mana cores:

Bloodline:

Spells:

???:

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Not much had changed, besides the two new spells he'd registered.

The first – Quarterstaff – was perhaps the most unassuming entry in his entire Status. Being nothing more than a Crude spell cast from a Red core with a pure affinity, it wasn't nearly as eye-catching as all the other stuff in there. Still, Percy was proud of it, as it had taken him a lot of hard work to hone it to its current state. Plus, it was his very first registered spell with his second core, so that had to count for something.

At first the young man had tried to go for a couple of shorter rods, one in each hand, to more closely mirror Micky's style. Eventually, he realized dual wielding felt a bit unnatural to him. He appeared to have a personal proclivity towards a single, longer weapon. The construct wasn't very sturdy, but it was good enough for the goblins.

The other new entry was a lot more impressive, however.

Although still a step short of the full Dance, Circulation was Percy's first Refined spell. As a mage's grade increased, so did their mana capacity and regeneration, as well as their control and reflexes, allowing them to master more intricate spells. Generally, people between Red and Yellow mostly focused on Crude spells, whereas Refined spells were seen as the hallmark of Greens and Blues. There were exceptions of course. Sometimes, a talented Yellow would master a Refined spell ahead of time, or a lazy Green would fail to do so before advancing.

Still, Percy was only at Orange. Not just that, but he was technically using Circulation with his Red core. Suffice to say, his circumstances were essentially unprecedented. News of his achievement would probably cause some waves if they leaked. He wasn't exactly surprised Circulation was ranked that highly either, as it involved many difficult and demanding steps to master. Frankly, he knew he couldn't have done this without cheating. Extensively.

His grandpa's help had allowed him to get the equivalent of half a decade of physical training in only half a year. That, coupled with his dedication in clearing his channels meant he had started tempering his pathways faster than the others. In addition, the final step – circulating the mana and overcharging both his core and his channels – was by far the most difficult. However, he'd already experienced the art under Micky's guidance, severely lowering the barrier of entry for him.

Even baldy hadn't mastered the spell until a month after Percy. As for Elaine, she was still struggling with the last part.

'Let's not get complacent though. They can still wipe the floor with me with their hands tied behind their back...'

SIGH

At least, Percy had grown strong enough to survive by himself at a semi-dangerous place like the Whistling Woods. That said, the road ahead was long and uphill…

Suddenly, some unexpected thoughts seeped through the link, drawing his attention. The young man lifted his eyes, looking at his familiar with concern. For some reason, the bird had stopped eating after the third goblin. It was sitting on the ground, occasionally twitching, as if in pain.

'Micky! What's wrong?!'

No reply.

Percy activated Mana Sense, anxious to figure out what was happening to his bond. The bird's frame was glowing more brightly than ever before, its entire silhouette shimmering in a vibrant Red colour. More and more mana was released from its stomach, as its flesh shook and squirmed. The core in Micky's sternum thrummed more frequently and violently than he'd ever seen it do before, glowing a shade brighter than the rest of his body.

Logically, his friend should have already started sending him the excess mana to relieve himself. However, he was instead holding everything in for some reason, letting it accumulate to a dangerous level.

The young man panicked, unsure how to help his familiar. He was about to call to him again, to ask him to let go of the mana, when he caught something odd through his sixth sense, giving him pause. As the core pulsed more and more intensely, its colour shifted. It was subtle at first, but Percy became more and more sure of what was going on as he kept watching. His previous fear was now replaced by excitement and even anticipation.

Micky was advancing to Orange.