Wanderer 31

Chapter 31: Leaving the nest

KRA! KRA!

Micky complained loudly, much to Percy's dismay. The bird's screeches were far more piercing than ever before, echoing through the dark forest.

"I'm sorry buddy. You're too big to sit on my shoulder now."

The actual advancement had taken less than an hour, but that was just the start. Saying the crow was starving afterwards would be the understatement of the century. Mere minutes after the promotion, Micky had devoured all seven goblins, not leaving a single bone behind. In fact, he ate their weapons too! Gone were the days when he only selectively sampled his victims' souls and cores, leaving most of their flesh untouched.

Evidently, the bird's advancement had placed its body in a state of rapid mutation, requiring a ton of nutrients in a short period of time. Percy had watched his friend grow visibly with each bite as they scoured the forest, looking for anything even remotely edible. The two had remained in the Whistling Woods all night, desperately fuelling Micky's insatiable appetite. It wasn't until the first rays of sunlight pierced through the dense thicket that the bird seemed to be done eating, its frame now twice as large as before.

'Oh well… I bet he's a lot stronger.'

Other than his size, Micky's appearance hadn't changed much. The only other notable differences were his beak and talons being even sharper than before. Their edges now glinted in a pale silver light, even outside Soul Vision. Percy sure pitied whoever ended up on the receiving end.

Overall, the most welcome surprise was the improvement to his familiar's soul, however. It had stabilized a lot even before the promotion, but this new step took everything to a whole new level. Micky's soul was still an assortment of multiple parts, but they'd grown closer together. The delineation separating the three souls was much fainter, resembling old scars more than fresh wounds.

‘Maybe they’ll fuse completely after another evolution or two.’

Either way, the bird would not only harvest more soul mana from its victims, but it would also need a lot less for itself, sending the lion’s share to Percy. Like this, he was optimistic he’d fully recover in a couple months.

Then he smiled wryly. Not everything was good news. He’d already felt the two had outgrown the Whistling Woods for a while now. To fully take advantage of Micky’s improvements, they’d need to leave the safety of the mansion and venture to more dangerous regions. And there was another, more immediate problem.

‘How do we explain you?’ he frowned, looking at his pal flying circles above him as he stepped out of the dense undergrowth.

Before, they’d used the excuse he’d found Micky abandoned and raised him as a pet. It wasn’t that strange as Red beasts were essentially regular animals. Reaching Orange, however, not only made them stronger, but far more aggressive. The thrill of advancement whetted their appetite, making them all but impossible to tame. Suffice to say, his relatives would be asking a lot of questions if they returned home like this.

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“Ok. Remember to stay away until I say otherwise.” Percy imparted the same instructions for the fifth time as they neared his family’s estate.

KRA! KRA!

Micky protested but didn’t disobey, taking off to look for a snack or something. The young man made his way to the mansion, heading straight to baldy’s office.

KNOCK, KNOCK

“Come in.”

Percy stepped inside, ready to deliver the news, when he noticed somebody else in there. He was a black-haired man who looked to be in his early twenties, dressed in an elegant buttoned-up shirt and silken trousers. His core was Blue. He was Galahad, Archibald's oldest living child currently in the family. A Yellow-born over 400 years old – House Avalon's second in-command, only below baldy himself. In fact, he was the one who had the highest chance of reaching Violet, on track to do so in about a century.

"Don't you think you've been wasting too much of father's time, boy?" Galahad asked, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

Percy grimaced but didn't reply. Instead, he turned to his grandpa.

"I was hoping to speak to you alone. It's urgent."

"Don't ignore me, you brat!" his uncle snapped. "You should be grateful we've wasted so many elixirs on you already! I still don't get what your grade has to do with passing your affinity!"

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He looked about to keep going, but baldy raised his hand.

"That's enough, Galahad. I don't need you to manage my schedule for me, or to tell me which of my grandkids to spend time with." Archibald's tone was calm but firm.

Galahad raised an eyebrow. He probably hadn't expected his father would reprimand him in front of the likes of Percy. He only spared the young man a cold glance as he walked out of the office, though Percy didn't miss his uncle's clenched fists, drained of colour.

'I'd almost forgotten what an asshole he was.'

Between his injuries, his training and his ventures into the forest, Percy hadn't run into his relatives as much over the past year. His amiable relationship with Elaine and Archibald had shifted his overall

perspective on his family, but the truth was most of them still looked down on Red-borns like him. That much hadn't changed.

"What is it?" baldy asked, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Right!" Percy exclaimed before approaching the desk. He covered his mouth before whispering, "Micky has advanced."

Archibald's eyes widened.

"Already? This is even faster than I expected…"

"What do we do? I can't exactly bring him here."

His grandpa sank back into his chair, remaining silent for a few minutes.

Eventually, he spoke.

"We're heading back to the forest. It's a temporary solution but I'll stay there with you for a week until we come up with something more permanent."

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A grimace marred Percy's face.

By the time he met baldy he'd already been up for nearly thirty hours, having spent all night hunting with Micky. Staying awake as his grandpa arranged for his impromptu absence had been pure torture, and the young man wasn't happy travelling to the woods again. Still, this had to be done if he was to keep his secrets.

He doubted anybody in his family was a spy or traitor, but there were hundreds of people in the Avalon House. If a few more learned of his second core or Micky, it wouldn't be long before that number doubled, and then quadrupled, until the entire mansion knew. And then, it would only take a mistake for the rest of Remior to find out too.

In fact, those two secrets were still relatively benign. Anything pertaining to the Dance, on the other hand, was far more dangerous. Even in its incomplete state, it could instantly raise the strength of an entire House by half a step, placing them right behind the Great Houses. As much as it would benefit his family if they all learned it, a single mishap could easily invite disaster.

'Just like what happened to Micky's people…'

Consequently, baldy had strongly emphasized to him and Elaine the importance of keeping everything under wraps. As much as it sucked to be looked down on by people like Galahad, knowing he could change everyone's view of him with a few words, Percy understood what a thin line he was treading.

"Percy… I'm sorry you have to take all this shit from everyone." baldy said as he walked alongside him, a dozen of his clones marching silently right behind them. "Truth be told, you've already done more for our family than almost anyone else…"

The young man waved the apology away.

"We knew it would be like this since the beginning."

Archibald nodded.

"So, what do you plan to do now?"

Percy pondered over his grandpa's words carefully before replying.

"I'll head out. I need to find a good place for Micky to hunt, to avoid stunting his growth. I also need to get my soul repaired as soon as possible to resume sending clones. Though, I suppose those go hand in hand."

Baldy didn't seem surprised, having probably expected that answer.

"Any idea where specifically?"

The young man didn't reply for a while. This was the part he hadn't figured out yet.

"I'm not sure. Maybe I should take lots of missions like Elaine and only come back once every few weeks to restock on elixirs."

Baldy's face fell.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about the elixirs, actually. As you know, our family is fully transparent with who gets them and who doesn't. This policy has served us well for centuries, as it bolsters trust."

Percy nodded, but he didn't like where baldy was going with this.

"Normally, it doesn't really matter, as the rules are fairly simple: Orange-borns and Yellow-borns get them. Red-borns don't." Archibald continued.

"Until me." Percy realized.

"Yes. So far, I've used the excuse of your soul clones being a promising thing for the family to justify giving you elixirs, but nobody knows the details. They have no idea how useful your clones are. Neither do they have a clue why I've been spending so much time with you. Galahad's outburst from earlier is actually a common sentiment among the family's management."

The young man frowned. Indeed, between the weeks baldy had spent filling his second core up, the several months of training together for the Circulation spell, and all their other interactions, they had really spent a lot of time together. Even now, his grandpa was going to be with him the whole week. This should all seem suspicious to the rest of their family.

“Surely, they understand there must be a reason for it, right? Even if they don’t know what.”

Baldy shook his head.

“What reason could there be? Nobody could possibly imagine what your ability does. Sending your soul to other worlds?! Most of them believe I’ve grown too attached to you for purely sentimental reasons. They think I’m just finding excuses to spoil you rotten.”

Percy’s jaw slackened upon listening to his grandpa. He was glad his relationship with baldy had improved, but he didn’t know their actions had given rise to such a wave of discontent among his relatives.

“So, what does this mean?”

SIGH

“I can continue supplying you with a single set of elixirs. They won’t like it, but it’s within the limits of what I can justify based on your bloodline’s importance. However, a second one is currently out of the question.”

“What?! But I’ll need it when my soul is repaired!”

He hadn’t started cleansing both cores yet, as he’d created that clone soon after repairing his second core. Since then, his injuries had prevented him from maintaining the necessary mana, despite Micky’s help. But he was very much looking forward to changing this soon.

“Is there no other way?”

Baldy’s next words gave him hope, however.

“I can only think of two possible solutions.”