Wanderer 33

Chapter 33: Trouble

It was a two-week journey on horseback to the Alchemists' Guild. At least, the dirt road only passed through grasslands and barren fields, saving Percy the trouble of trekking through more forests or mountains.

Not that the trip was without dangers. Baldy had given him a month's worth of elixirs, so that he wouldn't fall behind on his second core's purification. Unfortunately, the excessive amount of wealth was a double-edged sword, turning him into a juicy target for any aspiring robbers.

The young man knew bandits frequented places like this, so he found it difficult to sleep at night. His family didn't have any justification to send escorts this time, making him easy prey for the criminals. Sure, he was the owner of a promising bloodline but, as far as his relatives were concerned, he should have stayed locked up at home like a good little Red-born – not risk his life on needless adventures.

His only consolation was that he wasn't completely alone. Micky flew nearby, a couple miles away, ready to help if something happened. Of course, that came with its own set of challenges as Percy didn't want to be seen too close to the bird, to avoid drawing suspicions.

'Just five more days of this. Nothing bad will happen.'

The good news was that they had already travelled nearly two thirds of the trip without getting into trouble. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so quick to jinx it though…

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'Shit, I think they're following me.'

Four men rode just a couple hundred meters behind him. Normally, it wouldn't have necessarily meant much, as this was a popular road. Maybe they were regular travellers or merchants heading the same route. However, their movements were rather suspicious.

Thanks to Micky, Percy had noticed them before they saw him. At the time they had been riding much faster, but they slowed down as soon as he came into view, staying a fixed distance behind him ever since. They were still too far for him to examine their grades via Mana Sense, but it was easier for his familiar to pass over them and sneak a couple of glances before flying away.

'Three Orange cores, one Yellow.'

Percy frowned. The only thing in his arsenal capable of harming a Yellow was his Parting Gift. Even though his first core was at Orange, his soul affinity was disproportionately geared towards offense. It was invisible, making it difficult to spot without Mana Sense. Fast too, making it hard to dodge if it caught them by surprise. It also phased through objects, making it nearly impossible to block. And lethal. Very lethal. If the stars aligned, he could definitely kill a Yellow with it, as Mixcoatl had learned the hard way.

'But that's a big if…'

His soul magic downright sucked defensively, as he couldn't block incoming attacks either. It would be just as easy for his opponents to injure him, if not even more so. Plus, he couldn't gather soul mana right now, unless Micky ate something first.

Then, there was the rest of his magic. Circulation barely made up for his pure affinity, but his second core was still Red. If it wasn't for his higher physical strength, he wouldn't be confident holding his own even against an Orange core. As for Micky… he might be able to keep one of them busy… at most.

He shook his head.

'We can't confront them directly.'

His only option was to run, and hope his horse was both faster and less tired than theirs. He looked at the pouch strapped to his waist, hearing the gem bottles clinking with each bump. Archibald wasn't na?ve. He obviously understood the perils of the trip. Right before Percy set off, he told him to ditch the elixirs and bolt if he got into a situation like this. The bandits only wanted his money. They didn't give a damn about his life. Losing the bottles would sting, but they weren't worth dying over.

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Percy smiled bitterly. Leaving the pouch behind was the most logical course of action. He could always earn more elixirs later. But he was unwilling. This whole trip was a gamble. They didn't even know if he could make it in the Guild. It was all a desperate attempt to earn enough elixirs for both of his cores. Was he really supposed to give up twenty doses before he even got there?

'Screw that. I'm not going to run from a bunch of lowlifes.'

Having made up his mind, he slowed down his horse.

'Micky. Whatever happens, stay away unless I say otherwise.' he spoke through the connection.

When the bandits reached him, they seemed quite surprised. They quickly hid their confusion though, replacing it with amiable-looking smiles as their leader approached him. He was probably going to pretend he was just a harmless traveller or something, but Percy wasn't interested in the charade. Before the criminal even spoke, the young man tossed over the pouch, eliciting a strange look from the former. Still, the bandit opened it, his eyes widening as his expression morphed into one of greed.

"I've got something even more valuable than those, if you leave me alive." Percy said.

"Hahaha!" the bandit laughed. "Kid, you seem to really understand what's good for you. Most people waste our time running away just to get killed a couple hours later."

Percy shrugged.

"So, are you interested in hearing me out?"

The leader only chuckled, gesturing at him to speak. Receiving the affirmation, Percy slowly lifted his shirt, revealing a strange bandage wrapped tightly around his stomach. Multiple runes were engraved on the fabric.

“What’s that?”

“My family has developed a technique that lets us grow a second core. I keep it hidden for obvious reasons.”

The bandit gave him an odd look, probably thinking he was a lunatic, but didn’t stop him, watching him unwrap the bandage.

“Just use your Mana Sense, and you’ll know I’m telling the truth.”

A few seconds later, the criminal stared at him with his mouth agape. The others had also approached at some point, now flashing each other incredulous looks.

“And anybody can learn this?”

Percy nodded.

“There are a few steps, but as long as you have somebody guiding you, you’ll all have a second core in a couple of months.”

Internally, he smirked. The first part of the plan had gone smoothly. He could already see the bandits salivating with greed. He wouldn’t have to worry about them killing him anytime soon. Now, he just had to make sure none of them lived long enough to speak of his secrets…

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Three more days passed as Percy travelled with the group. At first, they’d been suspicious of him, thinking he was up to something. He didn’t exactly blame them either – because it was true. He seriously doubted they’d ever run into another target half as cooperative as he was. The leader had repeatedly questioned the validity of his words, warning him not-so-subtly things wouldn’t end well for him if he tried anything funny.

But they did appear to relax around him over time. He was sure part of it was because he made no attempt to escape. Not even when they pretended to give him an opening. Another part was due to his demonstration of Circulation. The bizarre technique was impressive enough on its own, as Percy showed them how it increased his strength sharply. Then he went into detail, explaining how it worked and how they could learn it, even guiding them into clearing their mana channels. In fact, he'd been truthful too, instructing them in earnest.

'Well… for the most part…'

The only lie he'd added was that Circulation would grant them a second core once mastered. Revealing two of his secrets like that had been a risk, but a necessary one. His second core was the bait he'd needed to entice them on the first day so they wouldn't kill him on the spot. As for Circulation, it was to convince them to keep him alive, as it was too complicated to learn without guidance.

But there were a couple more hidden objectives he'd achieved. By explaining how he used the bandage to hide his second core, he'd diverted their attention from anything else he might do with it. Furthermore, by showing them his pure affinity coupled with Circulation, he'd impressed them with its potential, while also making himself appear weaker than he was. Right now, they probably believed his first core lacked an affinity too.

And the time to act was swiftly approaching, as one of the bandits left the group to pee behind a hill. Knowing this was probably the best chance he was going to get, Percy subtly wrapped the bandage around his right hand a couple of times.

This was it!

He took a deep breath, before speaking through the connection.

'Now, Micky!'