Wanderer 501

Chapter 501: Can’t make a familiar

The elemental body conveyed the human’s findings to the Queen, her giant frame sagging slightly with disappointment as a result.

‘Is there nothing you can do?’ the creature asked in a tired, shaky voice.

‘Not with these eggs,’ Micky shook his head. ‘How long has it been since you laid them?’

‘A while,’ the Queen admitted after thinking for a couple of seconds. ‘Do you think a fresh egg might stand a better chance?’

‘Maybe. There needs to be at least a trace of a soul there to accept my own, otherwise I have no way to possess them. I’ve no idea what state they were in the moment you created them, but souls tend to dissipate fast in a dying body.’

‘I can try again,’ the Violet beast offered.

‘Sure. But we can’t afford too many attempts. I don’t want you to exhaust yourself to death over nothing, and my friend is almost out of time. If the first few eggs come out like this, I’m going to place her soul in a different body.’

The Queen nodded, accepting his terms.

Over the next hour or so, countless smaller wasps swarmed into the chamber, hastily preparing the place for the upcoming operation. They drank the viscous goo from both pits, the sight of them gulping down the green liquid looking quite disturbing.

Even worse was the imagery of them crushing the inert royal eggs between their mandibles, consuming them. The objects appeared a lot softer and squishier than Percy had initially thought, their membranous shells bending and tearing with ease. Regardless, he tried not to let this scene bother him

too much, even though he was essentially planning to permanently shove his soul into one of these things.

'Well… if this is anything like the last time, my mind won't be present in the familiar anyway. If Nephthys is okay with the idea of being reborn as a bug, who am I to judge?' he thought with a shrug.

Beyond that, the creatures also carried the live Starry Breeder eggs out of the room, to make space for other things. As soon as the pits were both empty, they took turns vomiting nectar into one of them, filling it up for their grandmother to feast on. By her own admission, she'd been starving herself for a while, for the sake of her hive. Starry Queens had to only consume as much mana as they needed to survive and tend to their responsibilities.

They couldn't afford to go overboard, or they risked their beast cores progressing toward the next grade: which even the rich environment beneath the Fungal Spire was unable to support. Sadly, their voluntary fasting left them in a perpetual state of weakness.

The good news was that indulging every once in a while shouldn't be enough for the Queen to reach White, and she was going to need all the strength she could recover if she wanted to fight against her own body: to overcome the very limits of her species. The nectar her subjects fed her paled in comparison to the royal jelly, but it didn't seem like she had the time to generate her own meal.

'She does look a little better,' Percy noted at some point.

He hadn't realized this earlier because he wasn't that familiar with the bugs, but the Queen had been rather lethargic throughout their meeting. This was probably why she'd constantly sounded tired and hadn't moved around much.

Thankfully, her hearty meal had made her a lot more energetic already, the golden watermarks and the colourful dots on her carapace shining a little brighter, as even the silver silhouette beneath her exoskeleton surged with renewed vigour.

Evidently, the creature had been putting on a brave front the whole time. In hindsight, it didn't seem like Percy and Micky had been in any danger. The Queen wouldn't have been able to take them both on, even if they fought her without pushing the Symphony to its limits.

‘Good for her… We should focus on our own preparations though,’ Percy thought, returning to the task at hand.

Percy hadn’t twiddled his thumbs as he waited for the Queen to recover. Gathering some soul mana inside the human body’s head, he’d wrapped it carefully around Nephthys’s wisp, trying to slow down the leakage. Unfortunately, Soul Stitching wasn’t applicable in this situation, as there wasn’t much of the goddess’s soul left. Worse still, it didn’t have any open wounds for him to close, nor anything else to stitch it to.

However, he hoped that the soul mana’s natural tendency to flood wounds by itself might help a little. He didn’t know how much time this would buy him, but he needed every second he could get.

On top of that, he’d also resumed mending his own injuries, the stiff, frost-bitten sections on his soul having shrunk further. He still wasn’t in great shape, and he doubted he would recover completely anytime soon, yet he wanted to do everything in his power to avoid any unpleasant surprises during the familiar’s creation.

Finally, he’d taken out his Cauldron, working together with the second body to brew a few healing potions.

‘It would be so much faster if we could split up and brew separately,’ Percy thought with a heavy sigh.

Now that they shared their thoughts and memories: including their knowledge of alchemy: and since Micky’s body could theoretically shapeshift freely into a humanoid, they would have loved to split the tool into two identical copies, to brew twice as many potions.

Sadly, there were a few issues with that.

The elemental body didn’t have the Sovereign’s Eye, so it couldn’t use the scaling principle or the oversized cauldron by itself. It should still be able to brew with a regular cauldron, but its output would inevitably be reduced to a mere tenth of the human body’s, rendering the whole idea impractical.

And that was without taking into account the decreased yield: since the lack of the Atlantean mutation would cost more than just the ability to scale the quantity. If that wasn't bad enough, the human body was still missing an arm, so it needed help to manipulate the countless enchantments on the cauldron.

At least, the two bodies were able to coordinate flawlessly, one contributing its eyes as the other lent its limbs. This was completely different from their clunky attempts to cooperate in the past. Once again, it was clear that their recent fusion had turned them into something closer to a single entity than a pair of deeply connected individuals.

As for what they needed the healing potions for?

Well, even if they compressed them twice into Green, they wouldn't do much for the Queen. Not to mention that they didn't even have that many gravity herbs left. However, the Starry Princess would be born at Orange, so the standard potions would still be effective on her.

Of course, Percy's current goal was to get his hands on a serviceable egg, and it wasn't like the egg itself could drink potions. That said, life mana had the same natural tendency as soul mana to flow to open wounds: only, it applied to flesh injuries rather than spectral ones: so Percy hoped that placing the egg in a healing bath might preserve it a little better.

While he worked on alchemy, the Queen's subjects filled up the second pit too, though they only dumped dirt in this one. They left just a tiny crater open, barely wide enough to fit a watermelon. This was the spot where the Violet beast was going to lay the new eggs.

As soon as he was ready, Percy walked up to the hole, emptying enough of his recent brews to fill it up with another type of green liquid: this one shining brighter than the Queen's goo.

Having prepared herself too, the colossal bug stepped carefully over the hole, lowering her abdomen close to the opening. Percy had to duck, to avoid getting accidentally impaled by her enormous stinger. The base of the darn thing was as thick as a tree's trunk, though it led to a narrow tip sharp enough for a person to easily prick their finger on.

Admittedly, her control over her venom glands was commendable. Percy hadn't forgotten about the Starry Knight's stinger dripping with acid during his previous visit, yet not a single drop seemed to leak out of the Queen's stinger without her explicit wishes.

Either way, none of that mattered right now.

‘I’m ready if you are,’ the creature told Micky as soon as he reestablished their connection.

‘Give me a few seconds. I need to prepare my bloodline too,’ he replied.

Coating his fingertips in mana, Percy grabbed his soul with his one good hand, pulling out a portion of the grey silhouette sitting inside his head. With it, a broken pyramid emerged, the crimson structure having almost snapped into two pieces by now, its once-glossy faces now dim and riddled with cracks.

Ignoring the tapestry of colours hovering right above his eyes, Percy used his family’s technique, sending waves of soul mana rippling through his body. The grey substance bounced countless times along the fluctuating surfaces of his soul before flowing into his head. The mana accumulated flawlessly inside the blob, causing it to expand greatly with each forceful throb.

Suffice to say, Percy had grown quite proficient at this over the years. His efforts already resembled Baldy’s, though his version of the bloodline thankfully required less time to activate. That was only to be expected, since he only had to fill up a tiny piece of his soul with mana: rather than slowly generating an exact replica of his whole body.

Of course, the soul variant of the bloodline had its own share of drawbacks, but Percy’s limited clone capacity and the strain the ability put on him didn’t affect the current situation much.

He only stopped once the wisp in his palm had reached the size of a grapefruit, at which point he estimated that it couldn’t stretch much further without damaging the pyramid more than was acceptable.

‘Do it,’ he told the Queen, watching with bated breath as she began the process.

Chapter 502: Without laying a few eggs

The Violet wasp had obviously laid countless eggs in her life, since populating the hive was one of her most important responsibilities. Naturally, she had to be quite experienced at this: at the very least,

there was no doubt in Percy's mind that producing a Starry Breeder's egg was downright effortless for the Queen.

Giving birth to a new descendant, however, was clearly as far from effortless as anything could be…

Through their connection, he felt the strain on her soul, her entire body convulsing. The colourful dots on her exoskeleton shone brighter than ever before, as even her core went above and beyond, pumping so much beast mana into her circulatory system that Percy thought for a second that she was going to activate a boosting art by mistake. Flashes of golden light travelled across the watermarks and toward her abdomen, converging: along with the mana: at the hole right beneath her stinger.

Just when Percy was starting to question whether she'd lost the ability to even produce the eggs, the Queen pushed herself one final time, causing the markings and her channels to flare with unprecedented power. This lasted for just the briefest of instants, a tiny sphere soon popping out of the hole and into the crater on the ground with a wet squelch.

Percy's features couldn't help but twist into a grimace as he fought to suppress his disgust. Between him and Micky, they'd accumulated three lives' worth of memories, yet the universe apparently still held some rather nasty surprises for them.

Pushing the distracting thoughts aside, he focused his multifaceted vision onto the egg, desperately searching for signs of life.

"Nothing," he spat through gritted teeth upon failing to spot the slightest trace of silver inside the round object. He would have clenched his fist in frustration if he wasn't worried about crushing the fragile pyramid still floating inside his palm.

Either way, this didn't bode well.

If even a fresh egg was completely inert, Percy wouldn't be able to help the Queen. Still, he'd promised her to try a couple of times, so he wasn't going to quit after the first setback. Turning his attention back to the Violet creature, he noticed that her soul and markings had dimmed once more. Clearly, producing the tiny egg had taken a lot out of her.

‘I’m sorry… the first one is a failure,’ Micky told her, feeling a pit form in his crystalline stomach as he sensed her despair. She remained silent, however, commanding her subjects to refill the larger hole with nectar.

Knowing that she was going to need longer to recover a second time, Percy drained the humming orb of most of its mana. He had to reduce its internal pressure, as it was starting to accelerate the pyramid’s decay. The structure couldn’t possibly survive for several hours with the wisp filled to the brim with mana, and Percy didn’t want to risk moving it into and out of his body again.

Standing motionless over the pit, he waited patiently for the Queen to prepare herself. This time, she took about four hours, and Percy could tell that she hadn’t even recovered fully. Evidently, forcing her to lay multiple royal eggs in quick succession wasn’t the most optimal way to do this, but the pyramid’s deterioration didn’t afford them the luxury of delaying.

Unfortunately, a similar situation repeated itself shortly afterwards.

The sight of another dead egg popping out of the Queen’s body caused Percy’s heart to sink and his fleeting hope to evaporate. After two failures and paying such a hefty price for her efforts, the odds of the Violet beast succeeding the next time had to be even lower. She probably understood this too, but Percy was going to give her one last chance if she insisted.

Preparing for the third attempt took the Queen close to six hours. Leaving Percy’s wishes aside, it was clear by her appearance that this was going to be their final shot. Trying a fourth time wouldn’t just be ineffective: it might be dangerous. Her soul was flaring erratically as her core’s brightness fluctuated, and this was before she’d even started.

‘Your Majesty… no matter what happens, I won’t allow you to try again,’ Percy said. The last thing he wanted to do was to discourage the creature, but he knew it was time to douse her with a dose of reality. Unless he adopted a hard stance early on, the wasp might insist on self-harm.

Nodding dejectedly, the Queen began the process once more. This time, Percy could sense her anguish as she squeezed every drop of mana out of her thorax and into her abdomen. The violent flow of energy caused her channels to swell and burst, ravaging several organs in its path. Her carapace cracked in many spots, green blood oozing out of the holes as the golden patterns on her exoskeleton nearly turned white.

This was it: the Queen was clearly determined to pour everything into this egg: no matter the cost.

Watching her, Percy was tempted to stop her, afraid that she was going to kill herself. Gritting his teeth, he allowed her to continue against his better judgement, however. Whatever gamble she was taking, this was ultimately a leader's responsibility: to do everything necessary to give their subjects a future.

In a way, the Queen's determination reminded Percy of Nephthys's sacrifices. Even now, her dormant wisp continued to protect the Amenthei, refusing to let go. This only reinforced Percy's view that the Starry Princess was the perfect match for the goddess's soul.

'Assuming this works…' he thought, swallowing hard. 'Otherwise… they both lose. And so do I, as well as all of Remior…'

Percy watched with bated breath as the third and final egg emerged out of the Queen's body. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the small object plunged into the pool of healing fluid with a soft 'plop', slowly sinking to the bottom. Percy's gaze remained glued to the sphere. Ignoring the layer of Orange mana inhibiting his Mana Sense, he focused entirely on his Soul Vision.

Just as he feared that this was going to be another dud, he spotted: to his unimaginable elation: the faintest spark of silver, rapidly dimming inside the egg. Traces of life mana were trying to seep into the object in an attempt to preserve the weak life housed within, though it was clearly a losing battle.

Unwilling to waste the precious chance that the Queen had so bravely created, Percy activated his bloodline, allowing the ghostly claw to enter the grey orb attached to his head. The claw twisted the wisp, causing the pyramid to shatter into half a dozen pieces. Percy's soul mixed violently with Nephthys's, as well as the countless silver dots glinting inside it.

Naturally, Percy had no idea whether any of them would survive the process. Even if the goddess did, he wasn't even sure what she had expected to happen to the dying mortals. Each of them was in a far worse state that Micky had been in, so the best-case scenario would be for them to merge with her, becoming a part of the emerging familiar. It was far from a promising fate, but Percy knew that this was the best Nephthys could have done for her people under the circumstances.

A loud snapping sound echoed through his soul as the claw tore the wisp off. Percy managed to lean over the pit just in time to aim his forehead toward the egg, watching the grey comet shoot into it in an instant.

The shock of his severed soul no longer affected him as much as it used to, so he was able to retain his senses to observe the process. The wisp entered the egg successfully, wrapping itself tightly around the fading spark.

'So far, so good…' Percy thought, exhaling in relief.

Obviously, this was just the start of Nephthys's battle, but they'd already overcome many of the most serious hurdles.

Unlike its siblings, this egg had definitely come out possessing a soul, and it had to still be alive in there, otherwise the others would have had nothing to latch on. On top of that, Percy knew how malleable newborn souls were, so the spark had likely already began fusing with the rest, gluing Nephthys's and Percy's souls together in the process.

Still, it was difficult to tell with certainty what was happening in there. The bundle of souls rolled violently inside the orb, its components twisting one another into the world's ugliest yarn ball. Whether it would stabilize in the end into something capable of hatching remained to be seen.

'What happened? Did this go any better?' the Queen's voice rang through the elemental body. It was soft like a whisper, betraying her pain and exhaustion, though an unmistakable hint of hope bled through her words for the first time in several hours. Not that Percy could blame her.

'Well, Your Majesty… the two of us have already done everything we could,' Percy replied, plopping down weakly. 'The rest is up to her...'

No matter what, Percy had no regrets. He'd already warned both the Starry Queen and Nephthys of the risks, and they'd agreed to go through with this regardless. On top of that, he'd managed to do everything he'd promised, bringing everyone to a single step before the very end.

Still, tossing another glance at the battle of silver, crimson and grey raging on inside the tiny egg, he couldn't help but pray silently to the Amenthei goddess for her success. The fate of not just one, but two worlds was counting on her…

Chapter 503: Percy's version of a vacation

Tired as he was, Percy couldn't help but keep his eyes glued to the egg during the first couple of hours. The bundle of souls rolling inside the obsidian orb calmed down after a while, showing no immediate signs of collapsing: which had to be a good thing. It was still a mess in there, of course, and the familiar's soul had no defined shape, making Percy question whether something had gone terribly wrong with the operation.

Then again, he didn't have anything to compare this to, since he had been unconscious during the early moments of Micky's "creation". Only now did he realize that passing out the previous time might have been a blessing in disguise. At least, it had spared him from all this worrying.

'Stop staring at the egg,' the Queen suggested at some point, her words coming out soft and strained.

Her body was still covered in injuries from head to stinger, though she had survived the ordeal. Her subjects had already refilled the hole in front of her with nectar twice, the sumptuous meal having improved her situation slightly. Percy had no idea how much of her lifespan remained after producing all those royal eggs that she had never been supposed to lay. Still, he very much hoped that the creature would be around for a few more years at least, to mentor her successor.

'I'm anxious to know the result too, but even a regular Starry Princess takes a while to hatch. Watching it the whole time will only drive you crazy…' she continued, oblivious to his thoughts.

Percy nodded, though he still pressed the Violet beast for a more concrete timeframe. Sadly, the mismatch between human and wasp timekeeping methods got in the way again. The Queen did have eyes and antennae in the outside world, so she wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the concepts of days and nights, but she apparently preferred to estimate durations by referencing various biological processes inherent to her species.

After some back and forth, Percy concluded that it would be at least a couple of weeks until the egg was done incubating. It wasn't that long, but he'd inevitably have to find other things to keep himself busy.

Nephthys didn't seem to be conscious yet, as she failed to respond to any of his transmissions. Even so, he kept feeding her morsels of soul mana through the cord, and regularly replenished the healing bath the egg was in, to hopefully improve her odds.

Other than that, there wasn't much else that begged for his immediate attention, which led him to another realization.

'I'm free! For the first time since forever ago!'

As long as he could remember, it had been one deadline after another. Years of hunting, studying and brewing in the Guild to meet his and Micky's needs… followed by even more years of planning to infiltrate House Tantalus… and things had only gone downhill from there: Acton, the race to the next grade, the bounty hunters, the wasp familiar…

It had been decades since Percy last had a moment to relax!

Granted, it wasn't like there was nothing left for him to do. Just off the top of his head, he still had to break Baldy and Orin out of their prisons, send out more clones, work on his artificial advancement, figure out the situation on Remior, help out House Avalon, and deliver the affinity-changing treasures to the girls.

That said, none of those things was terribly urgent. The treasure would last years, and none of his pursuers would consider searching for him in the depths of the hive. In theory, there was nothing wrong with him and Micky taking a short vacation as they waited for Nephthys to hatch!

'Well, okay… I can still spend this time productively, but that doesn't mean it can't be fun.'

The line between training and entertainment had always been blurry for Percy, as he didn't really dislike any of the things he normally spent his time on. He genuinely enjoyed alchemy and runecrafting, and was passionate about developing his spells or coming up with new ways to get stronger: even if some of those methods got a little unpleasant every now and then.

What he wasn't always a fan of was how much pressure he was in to do everything in the most optimal way, micromanaging every second of his life. Not that he regretted making a few sacrifices to move faster toward his goals, but the thought of setting himself loose for a few weeks sounded nice.

'Mending our soul is still a priority. Those stiff patches are rather uncomfortable. The rest is more negotiable though…'

Percy definitely wanted to do some alchemy during his break. He still had plenty of Aurora Dew left, and he didn't think that he'd have much trouble acquiring nectar or royal jelly in the future now that he'd forged new ties with the Starry Wasps, so he wasn't interested in doing anything elixir-related at the moment. Instead, he wanted to focus on something simpler and more relaxing.

'I'll just brew some regular healing potions.'

He didn't need that many of them, but the product itself wasn't the point of the task. Extracting potions from a single ingredient was about the easiest thing an alchemist could work on, and this was a recipe he was intimately familiar with. He could just turn his brain off, slowly digesting his gains from the past few weeks.

The experience was bound to be a hundred times more pleasant without a tight quota he had to meet, or limited ingredients he had to be mindful of. He still had a ton of green mushrooms, and the Queen would probably be fine with giving him a few dead wasps to plant more ingredients on if he asked.

'It's about time to master the Cascading Cracks technique too,' he remembered.

Reducing his elixir consumption hadn't been a priority lately, and it wasn't going to become one anytime soon, given his current circumstances. However, that only applied to him personally.

Assuming that everything went well with the new familiar, Percy was planning to start giving back to Remior, forging new alliances and mending broken bridges. A technique that could halve everyone's elixir consumption would make for a great peace offering.

Working on the painful technique didn't exactly fit with the spirit of his "vacation", but he didn't think much of it, because he couldn't spend more than a few minutes per day cleansing his cores anyway.

Between him and Micky, they had a total of three cores that had to be cleansed thrice a day, so it shouldn't take them too long to perfect the technique. Percy had already laid most of the groundwork for it on Thess'kala. Combining it with his Whirlpool of Four Streams would take a little longer: especially since he could only practice that using his human body, but his increased mental acuity should help with that too.

'I should also start sending clones again,' he thought, adding another item to the agenda.

He'd kept the cords available for the infiltration mission, but that was no longer necessary. Sadly, half of his slots had somehow ended up occupied by Micky and Nephthys: and that was without counting a potential fourth cord that he might need to tie up into the wasp familiar at some point.

Even so, there was no question that fusing with Micky had been worth losing a couple of cords. Percy was sure that the wasp familiar would pay for herself too. Leaving aside all the sentimental and political reasons he had for helping Nephthys and the Starry Queen, the royal jelly alone was precisely the sort of treasure he generally had his clones searching for.

As limited as the resource was, he was confident that he'd find a way to take advantage of it. In a way, the clone he had just placed inside the egg was one of the most successful yet, regarding his long-term goal of attaining divinity.

'That said, I should stop creating new familiars for another grade or two, or I'm going to run out of cords for regular clones…'

Three would have to do for the time being, and Percy was going to give them some time off too. Seeing as he was currently in the mood for a vacation, he decided to ease up on his orders a little, allowing the clones to do whatever they wanted. After all, there was close to a ninety percent chance that he'd end up as one of them by the time he severed the third of them off his soul.

Rather than embarking on high-stakes missions involving treacherous Blues and scheming titans, he'd much rather go on a few whimsical adventures for a while. That meant that he wasn't going to look for greater or lesser springs in the next few weeks. Finding them took too long anyway.

With everything settled, he had both of his bodies sit cross-legged across from one another, taking a few minutes to activate his bloodline a couple of times, producing the clones. As soon as he was done, he took out his cauldron and tossed a few green mushrooms in, commencing a new brewing session as he resumed mending his soul.

If he got lucky, one of his throwaway clones might find something interesting in the next couple of weeks, or his main bodies might improve their brewing yield by the time the new familiar was ready.

Either way, he knew that this break was ultimately good for him.

Chapter 504: Stalker

A few days earlier

Unbeknownst to Percy, there was an ancient, wise, and arguably pretty pair of eyes watching his every move. In fact, learning how long these eyes had been observing him would likely send a chill down his spine.

Admittedly, spying on the boy wasn't Phoebe's classiest move, but it couldn't be helped. Percy was just too important to leave alone, and this was the only way to prevent any accidents from occurring: save perhaps for making her presence known and sheltering him directly, but that would inhibit his growth.

"He's improving faster than I expected. I really thought he would have slowed down by now…" she muttered as she watched Percy and the crow take down another group of bounty hunters.

It had only taken the boy a couple of years to go from barely beating Acton, to handling multiple Blues by himself: and even more with help from his familiar. Phoebe had initially thought that reaching Yellow and upgrading his boosting art would have marked the end of Percy's rapid growth, but he hadn't stopped surprising her over the past few months.

At this rate, he might actually get to where she wanted him by the time he reached Violet, or even Blue!

Of course, Phoebe hadn't always been invested in the boy's personal strength. At first, she'd been far more interested in other aspects of his bloodline.

She'd registered an anomaly as early as during his evaluation at the temple, though she hadn't thought much of it at the time. She could have never imagined that a mortal's bloodline or spell would be capable of bypassing the powerful enchantments in the assessment centres to steal her mana.

And, well… she had been right about that. Percy had caused the incident indirectly, by bringing one of the most powerful Decrees in existence back to Remior and letting it feast upon the crimson pool.

That said, Phoebe hadn't pieced together the details until years later. Sadly, omniscience was an ability that not even the most powerful gods in the universe could dream of possessing. Despite being the originator of the Status, she could only read another person's page while looking at them.

The most logical explanation at the time had been that too many children had arrived at the temple. She'd figured that the lazy priests and priestesses working there must've grown impatient with the long queue, having the children undergo their affinity tests in batches.

They weren't supposed to do that, of course. Phoebe had explicitly told them many times that the presence of multiple evaluees could interfere with the quality of the assessments, or make the children feel uneasy. Still, this wouldn't have been the first time the dumbest of her subordinates disobeyed her, thinking that she wouldn't notice.

Things like that were inevitable, since the personnel working at the temples weren't even official members of the Root: let alone the Order. They were simply volunteers from other noble Houses that had been sent by their families to carry favour with the gods. If the Root could be considered the Order's outer circle, the people at the temples were barely in the periphery of the organization.

Not that it had mattered much.

The mind mana had returned to its previous level within hours, and Phoebe had been more than happy to brush the short-lived hiccup aside, going back to her business. It wasn't until news of the revolutionary Aurora Dew reached her ears a few years later that she'd gotten involved with Percy again.

Learning about the culprits hiding in the Alchemists' Guild, she'd allowed the Root to apply pressure on them, mostly to observe how they would react: to gain a better grasp on their personalities and

motivations. However, she'd ordered the other gods to stay out of it, until she knew what they were dealing with.

Scanning the Fungal Spire, she'd searched for the ones responsible, spotting Percy and his friends as they emerged from the underground tunnels, all battered and covered in wasp blood.

As tempted as she had been to reveal herself and chastise them for their recklessness, she'd ultimately held back, opting to continue observing the mortals silently. A couple of young people with Orange and Yellow cores couldn't have damaged the hive much anyway. They'd likely just passed through the tunnels in their desperation, barely surviving the ordeal.

Over the following weeks, Phoebe had kept her eyes on them, trying to better understand the miraculous bloodline that had made everything possible, and to decide the best way to deal with the boy. Percy's strength hadn't been a factor worth considering just yet, though many other things about him had piqued her interest: outside of the elixirs.

The fact that he'd managed to develop a functional second core had been at the top of the list. The stolen Decree would have been little more than a curiosity had it been limited to Percy, but seeing how he had successfully transferred and germinated the seed in the crow's body had given Phoebe hope that the act could be extended to more people: something that she'd eventually confirmed.

Beyond that, the crow was a marvel of magic in and of itself. Every lesser spring in the universe dreamt of ways to control and foster powerful beasts, to use them as disposable pawns in their expeditions. The creatures could grow much faster than sapients, and they could do so without consuming a single drop of elixir. On top of that, their lives weren't particularly valuable, so they would make for the perfect foot soldiers to sacrifice in place of their precious Green-borns: provided that they found a way to suppress their hunger and rebellious nature.

Having White or Clear beasts wasn't as important for greater springs, since most were too powerful to care about a few additional demigods, and no world but Sixiang had ever produced divine beasts. Even so, Remior could still very much benefit from them.

This was why the Order had wasted so much time and resources to support House Parnassus, hoping that one of their descendants would mutate a usable version of their bloodline, though their millennia-long efforts had yet to bear any fruit. Perhaps, Percy and his crow could open another avenue for them, assuming that the bloodline could be passed on, and that his familiars showed no flaws down the line.

Other than the Moirais' Decree, the bird and the Aurora Dew, the only things that had stood out the first time Phoebe had laid eyes upon Percy's Status had been Circulation and Metatron's Decree. The former was another precious gift that she had hoped to eventually spread across Remior, while the latter had given her pause, making her realize that letting Percy roam the universe was inherently dangerous.

Not wasting time, she'd planted a mental obstruction in his mind that would prevent him or his future clones from ever activating the Decree on Remior. To this day, the boy had yet to notice its presence: because he'd never even considered doing anything that foolish.

It only spoke volumes to how intelligent and responsible he was. Clearly, he also understood how risky it would be to place his life in Metatron's hands, or to give the titan access to his world. Even so, Phoebe had never regretted taking measures to stop him. Desperation could drive anyone into making all sorts of reckless decisions, and this was the one thing that she could never allow Percy to do.

Leaving that aside, Phoebe had been more than satisfied with the boy's conduct. Being born with a unique bloodline hadn't been under his control, but not many people in his shoes would have used it as well. Most young nobles might have stopped after the first couple of successful clones, leveraging their gains to elevate their status in their families, indulging in a life of luxury and worthless pleasures.

Not Percy though.

Phoebe couldn't have asked for a better owner for the bloodline, in fact. His ambitions compelled him to constantly aim higher, his morals tempering his decisions with kindness, patience and caution. His work ethic prevented him from wasting a single moment of his life, and his cunning allowed his clones to return with valuable gains more often than Phoebe had thought possible.

'I don't even need to step in,' she'd realized.

Evidently, Percy didn't require her help or her guidance. He was doing everything she would have wanted him to do, all by himself. She merely had to sit back and document his discoveries, keeping track of those that could be useful for their world, while looking out for any hidden dangers.

Studying Ea's Decree: and years later, Obatala's: had been especially useful due to their overlap with her own. Phoebe didn't think that she'd be able to replicate the extraneous elements: the mutated eyes or

the ability to lock one's domain in its strongest state: unless Percy found a way to dig the buried potential out of his soul and grant the missing features to his clones: like he did with the second cores.

However, the way in which the Decrees had restructured Percy's Status was something Phoebe could learn from. The adaptability of her creation was one of its most important qualities, but also a prelude to a much more useful feature that she'd always planned to eventually incorporate into it.

Sadly, her research in that area had hit a wall thousands of years ago. Thankfully, Percy's bountiful harvest had already given her a lot of much-needed inspiration to resume working on her grand project: something that not just Percy, but everyone on Remior would soon benefit from.

'Well… my "soon", that is,' she thought, scratching her head. 'From their perspective, it'll be quite a while before it's ready.'

Other than the Decrees, Percy had brought plenty of other valuables back: Phoebe had never even heard of spectral traits. Admittedly, it appeared that they could only be absorbed by soul affinity users, but they did have a couple of those in the Order: including a demigod: so the knowledge should prove useful.

Reinforcement would also help everyone with a pure affinity: and they had a lot more of those. Or… they used to, at least: before giving most of them a petal. Either way, they would certainly receive several affinity-less Holy Children in the future.

Many of the alchemic principles Percy had mastered would also prove handy, as would the advanced runecrafting knowledge. Phoebe had chosen not to butt in Percy's dealings with the sentient Ring of Sacrilege or the goddess slumbering in his soul, having grown to trust the boy's judgement after watching him for so long.

More importantly, however, Phoebe had slowly started to appreciate how well Percy had integrated all of the disparate pieces of magical knowledge that he'd acquired into his arsenal.

During his time in the Valley, she had fully expected him to get his ass handed to him by Acton, forcing her to jump in to save him. Revealing herself wouldn't have been ideal, but it would have been better than letting him die.

Yet, Percy had shocked her once again, upgrading his boosting art and reestablishing his previously demonstrated ability of fighting two grades above his own: despite the lack of a domain that should have made bridging the gap exceedingly difficult.

Before that fight, Phoebe hadn't expected Percy to jump grades like that until Blue. Even once he did, it wouldn't have made that much of a difference, as his bloodline was best applied to the betterment of Remior as a whole than powering up a single Red-born.

Or so she had thought.

The revelation had finally made her realize that the boy held even more potential than she'd initially given him credit for. All of a sudden, Percy's strength had become one of his most valuable assets: a talent worth cultivating. If only he could stay on this trajectory for a few more grades, he might grow strong enough to fight against gods one day, while still being a mortal, thus opening countless new doors for their world!

Even better, Phoebe's recent observations had only confirmed that Percy was still steadily traversing this impossible road. This was precisely why she found Deimos's sudden intrusion so annoying.

'That petty little shit!' she cursed, seeing through the man's true grade at a glance.

It wasn't a huge secret that Hermes's youngest son had serious insecurities, but she hadn't expected him to stoop so low as to hide his promotion from everyone for years, just to punish Percy for all the attention he was getting.

But here they were.

Unfortunately, Phoebe couldn't see a way out of this mess for the boy. As strong as he was, the gap was too wide for him to escape or win: and she'd already sealed his final trump card away.

Unless she stepped in, her golden goose was going to die today!

Chapter 505: Mistake

As expected, Phoebe watched Deimos toy with Percy and the crow, effortlessly ripping them apart. Seeing the Violet preparing to finish the boy off, she knew that her time to interfere was quickly running out. Yet, just as she was about to step in to save him, the broken familiar leapt in the way of the blast, clearly intending to sacrifice everything to protect its master.

The sight made Phoebe hesitate, thinking that letting Deimos destroy the crow first might not be a terrible idea.

She didn't want to do that, of course: she wasn't heartless. She'd grown rather fond of Percy and Micky after observing them for so long. The bird's willingness to give up its life to save the boy was especially moving and the thought of letting either of them suffer didn't sit well with her.

Even so, she felt that it was better this way. She wasn't their mother: she was the Order's leader and Remior's primary protector. Her duty was to their world before any of its people and the upsides of letting the crow perish greatly outweighed the downsides.

This was quite a strange dilemma, but one that she'd been contemplating for a while. In anybody else's hands, the powerful familiar would have made for a priceless asset: the realization of the Order's ambitions for Acton's family over the last several thousand years.

Had someone told Phoebe that she was going to willingly allow a creature like Micky to die before her eyes one day, she would have burst out laughing. However, Percy's unprecedented growth had greatly shifted her perspective over the years, making her value his development more than many of his other achievements: the creation of a controllable beast included.

Simply put, Micky had always been more of a liability for the boy than an asset!

Just thinking about it was crazy, but there was no denying it. On the surface, the crow had done an excellent job keeping up with Percy's strength and aiding him in his ventures. Any outside observer could be excused for thinking that Micky's contribution to their team was equal to Percy's, as the bird essentially doubled the boy's fighting strength.

Phoebe was wise enough to peer a layer deeper than most, scrutinizing the long road that had led them to the present moment.

‘The crow has been holding him back from the very start,’ she’d concluded.

Percy was probably smart enough to see it too, though his loyalty to his friend had blinded him all this time. Not only had the bird consumed enormous amounts of resources and attention to reach its current level, but its existence had also forced Percy to make numerous reckless decisions.

He’d travelled to suboptimal places to train, taken unnecessary risks for the sake of his familiar, and even picked a fight with a Holy Child. If it hadn’t been for Micky, Percy might have stayed in the Alchemists’ Guild the whole time, hidden from everyone: including Phoebe. The only reason he’d put himself out there had been the urgency to earn enough resources to support the crow.

On top of that, there was an even greater disadvantage to owning a familiar: Percy’s limited clone capacity.

For the longest time, he’d only been capable of maintaining two connections, one of which had been permanently occupied by the crow. Even after increasing his limit to six, the boy had foolishly chosen to tie up a second clone to the bird, thus leaving a third of his total capacity unavailable to this day.

That was without even considering the second familiar that he was clearly planning to create. Phoebe couldn’t help but wonder how much stronger Percy would have grown, had he focused his efforts on bettering himself over the past couple of decades.

Looking back, she had to admit that Percy hadn’t made that many outrageous mistakes in the time that she’d observed him, but the biggest ones could all be traced back to that first mistake: Micky’s creation!

That was not to say that she was opposed to the idea of familiars in general. They were certainly an important feature of Percy’s bloodline, as well as valuable assets to Remior as a whole: especially if they could be mass-produced. They could revisit the topic in the future.

Perhaps, the best time to do that would be after a few thousand years, once Percy was done picking all the low-hanging fruit waiting for him out there in the cosmos. As soon as his progress slowed down, they could have him tie up a clone or two to forge a couple of powerful companions. The creatures grew rather fast, so it wouldn’t be too late to start over.

Now was too early, however.

Stinting his growth so early in his journey was inefficient. Phoebe was willing to bet that Percy would have been far stronger if he hadn't missed out on hundreds of potential clones due to Micky.

'Also, I'm sure that he can do a lot better than the bird…'

Phoebe hadn't witnessed the familiar's creation, but it was quite clear that Percy had simply shoved a random mortal's soul into the first available body, without even understanding the implications. Sure, he'd taught the crow a few useful spells since then and even invested a petal to grant it a composite affinity, but none of its abilities was particularly impressive.

In many ways, what Percy was obviously planning to do with the goddess's soul and the Starry Wasp was a hundred times more promising: now, that, was an experiment that Phoebe was interested in watching, excusing, and even wholeheartedly supporting.

Even if Percy decided that he needed more familiars in the future, she could help him pick unique souls and useful bodies to pair together. In fact, she was more than happy to let him try several times, until they stumbled upon a familiar lucky enough to awaken a rare affinity.

As for Micky…

It was painful to admit, but Percy was better off getting rid of him. Since he wasn't going to do that by himself, Phoebe could just let Deimos do it for him.

Watching the crow's head burst open left a bad taste in her mouth. It was cruel of her to allow this but making the tough decisions that nobody else was willing to entertain was ultimately her job.

Seeing the anguish in Percy's expression gave her no pleasure, nor did his sheer agony as the bundle of souls slammed into his own, twisting it into an unrecognizable shape.

Watching pain distort his features only solidified Phoebe's opinion that this had been necessary, however. It was clearly much harder for Percy to assimilate a semi-foreign soul that had remained

separated from him for decades than a regular clone. Allowing Micky to survive for centuries or millennia before perishing would have only made things worse.

'Weird… why are Micky's cores still drawing ambient mana though?' she wondered after seeing the crow's mutilated body circulate the violent snowstorm with even greater vigour than when he was alive.

Truth be told, she had considered the possibility that the bird's mutation could regrow a missing head, his weird soul and even stranger body having left that door wide open. Had that happened, she would have just forgotten about it, allowing Percy to keep the crow.

However, that ship had already sailed. The extended section of Percy's Status had vanished and there wasn't the slightest trace of life left in the frozen carcass.

Charging another blast, Deimos gloated about his sick accomplishment. Slowing down the sadistic Violet's perception of time to buy Percy a few more precious seconds, Phoebe ignored Hermes's son entirely, watching with bated breath as the seemingly ownerless cores broke out of the headless sculpture, sinking into the boy's Cloak!

'What the hell is happening to him?!' Phoebe asked herself in horror, having never seen anything of the sort.

Deimos unleashed his attack at last, but she no longer cared about him. She could tell that his pathetic spell wasn't powerful enough to pierce the raging cyclone of ethereal silk and grey mana spinning around Percy. She was far more concerned with the damage that the boy was inflicting on himself than any external threats.

Yet, it soon became clear that the chain of surprises had only just begun.

Phoebe's eyes widened as she witnessed the unbelievable scene of a Yellow's domain tearing a Violet's to shreds, and the brutal beatdown that ensued. The power that Percy wielded was far higher than anything he and Micky had been capable off before their unexpected transformation.

Thankfully, the boy's situation appeared to have stabilized, though Phoebe could tell that something major had happened. Time after time, she tried to peer into Percy's Status: to hopefully shed some light onto his new state: only for her own Decree to ignore her!

It wasn't until after the fight that it managed to recalibrate itself, finally responding to its creators will. Even then, the information that manifested before Phoebe's eyes was difficult to accept.

Whether Micky: or even Percy, for that matter: had survived, she still couldn't say with certainty. The name of the new entity didn't match either of theirs. Either way, one thing was immediately clear: her assessment that the crow had been holding Percy back couldn't have been more wrong.

Nobody could have predicted this: not even Percy and Micky themselves: but it seemed that they'd started walking on a path to greater heights a long time ago…

'Perhaps I was the one who made a mistake then: not him…' she begrudgingly admitted.

More importantly, she couldn't help but linger on a single detail: the very piece of information that she had hoped to see in Percy's Status one day. She hadn't expected it to appear nearly this soon though.

'An Extreme spell!'

This was the hallmark of a paragon: a mortal capable of slaying gods!

Of course, a true paragon needed a Clear grade too, which Percy paradoxically still lacked, even though it was generally considered to be the simplest of the two requirements to meet.

Regardless, even Phoebe's ancient heart that had weathered countless seasons without wavering couldn't help but skip a beat as she pondered over the implications of the boy's achievement.

Chapter 506: Gamble

Countless thoughts passed through Phoebe's mind in an instant, as even somebody as experienced as her struggled to digest the shocking events she'd just witnessed.

Strictly speaking, the strength of the cloaked figure wasn't worth mentioning to a demigod: let alone a titaness. Even if Percy managed to reach the Clear grade himself, the power of a paragon was more of a threat to weaker gods: not those who had mastered several concepts and climbed even further up the cosmic ladder, as she had.

That said, that was more of a testament to the boy's lower grade, not an indictment of the spell's quality. Phoebe couldn't help but imagine the Ultimate Art wielded by a fellow deity one day, the notion giving her goosebumps.

'I should probably avoid telling him that I was willing to let Micky die…' she decided.

Turning her attention back to the collapsing figure, her eyes carefully scanned the information in the Lone Wanderer's Status, taking a moment to absorb the changes. Sometimes, her Decree chose the most bizarre names to give to new spells: though it was its first time renaming a person.

Phoebe didn't question that too much, since she understood better than anyone how the Status worked. It was deeply rooted in the minds of its owners, taking several things into consideration when registering a new entry: from its broad database of similar spells across Remior, to the person's preferences and magical knowledge.

The new mutation and upgraded domain didn't surprise her too much either. As impressive as they were, they were just the logical evolutions of abilities that Percy and Micky had already demonstrated. What she found more concerning was what had happened to the two mortals, though she would likely have to wait until they regained consciousness to learn more.

She was about to swoop in to rescue them from the swarming bugs, when she realized that the creatures showed no sign of aggression.

'I wonder what that's all about…'

It was no secret that the Starry Queen was as intelligent as a person: more so than most people, in fact: though that didn't explain what the creature wanted from the boy. Phoebe decided to let the scene play out, curious to see what the wasps were going to do.

That was when she realized that there was a small problem.

Too many layers of dirt, colourful minerals, and dense ambient mana would interfere with her senses, preventing her from observing the mortals. Consequently, she was forced to descend to the surface of the planet, shrouding herself in a veil of mind mana to conceal her presence from everyone's senses as she followed the army of bugs into the hive, ready to intervene if they tried anything funny.

Waiting for Percy and Micky to wake up was pure agony of course.

Even a few centuries were normally nothing to Phoebe: let alone a couple of hours: but not when so much was at stake. Depending on what had happened to the boy, he might become even more important for Remior's future, or this might mark the end of his promising journey.

As soon as they regained consciousness, Phoebe watched with bated breath while they explored their new condition inside the crystal-lit chamber. They certainly appeared healthy enough at first glance, causing her to finally exhale in relief.

The crow's shapeshifting ability wasn't anything to scoff at either. It looked about as convenient as she'd imagined it would be, turning Micky: or half of the Lone Wanderer's existence, at any rate: into a creature made almost entirely out of living mana!

Sadly, she couldn't peer directly into their mind to know what they were thinking, but she could still infer the gist of what had happened to them.

'Their souls and minds seem to have merged completely,' she concluded, creasing her brow.

This was a good thing for the most part, as it would make them stronger and grant them a wide assortment of new abilities. However, she could see how weird this would feel on a personal level. They'd essentially lost their individuality and muddled their personalities, turning into a jumbled mess of memories.

'Well, that's not a huge problem. It should be easy enough to fix: assuming that they want it fixed.'

She shrugged.

Phoebe was more than happy to help them separate and segregate their thoughts again later. For a titaness who had mastered several mind concepts, adding a few mental gates in their head that could be opened or closed at will would be a piece of cake.

The fact that they already bore her Decree would only make this simpler. With their permission and cooperation, integrating a robust feature into their Status to allow them to freely shift between their merged and separated states would only take a couple of days.

Not that she was planning to reveal herself to them anytime soon, of course. Acquiring an Extreme spell at Yellow: or Green, depending on how she looked at it: was far earlier than she had expected, but they still had plenty of room to grow before she brought them into the fold. For now, they'd have to get used to their merged mind by themselves.

Before long, Percy and Micky were done playing around with their new bodies, causing Phoebe to perk up. It was finally time to see what the Violet beast had brought them here for.

"Seriously?" she asked, clicking her tongue in annoyance as Percy established a spectral connection with the creature, though she should have probably seen this coming. Had their link been forged with mind mana, she might have been able to intrude in their transmission, but soul mana fell squarely outside her expertise.

Regardless, most of her questions got answered as soon as the oversized bug led Percy and Micky to the next chamber, showing them the inert eggs.

'Royal eggs? Did something happen to the Queen's successor?'

Suffice to say, the hive's innerworkings were well understood by the Divine Order. They knew about the limitations in the royal line's procreation, and about the jelly they excreted, though Phoebe hadn't realized what a precarious situation the bugs had been in lately.

‘Just who…?’ Frowning, she turned to her daughter, reaching out to her using the mental link that they kept available for convenience. ‘Athena!’

‘Mother?’ the fellow goddess responded, clearly startled by the intensity and suddenness in Phoebe’s voice.

‘Did any mortal above Violet step anywhere close to the Fungal Spire in the last century or so?’ Phoebe asked, knowing that her daughter tended to pay more attention to such matters.

Athena appeared to ponder the question for a moment before replying. ‘Hmmm… if I’m not mistaken, Machaon: the current leader of House Asclepius: briefly studied alchemy in the Guild a few decades ago. Why? Did anything happen?’

After bringing her daughter up to speed, Phoebe worked with her to recall anything suspicious that the White-cored man might have done in recent history. Sure enough, it didn’t take them long to remember that the cunning mortal had made several strange: if seemingly unrelated: moves in the past few centuries.

About two hundred years ago, he had caused quite a stir by suddenly deciding to build a grandiose garden for himself, in some remote forest, leading many people to wonder whether the unforgiving march of time had eroded the man’s sanity.

Even the gods had found it a little unusual, though everyone had eventually forgotten about it after seeing that the White’s hobby hadn’t really affected how he handled his responsibilities as the head of the Great House.

Going even further back, hadn’t Machaon asked the leader of House Etna to let him enrol in their runecrafting academy about six hundred years ago?

All of that could be: and had been: chalked up to the man’s eccentricity: an innate curiosity to study various aspects of magic, perhaps, or a desire to fend off the boredom that came with his long life. In hindsight, his intentions appeared a lot more sinister.

‘That sneaky bastard!’ Athena cursed. ‘He’s played us for fools all along! Just how long has he been planning this?!’

The realization sent a chill down Phoebe’s spine. As much as she wanted to blame Machaon’s greed, she had to acknowledge that this was ultimately her own fault. After all, no mortal would have managed anything of the sort if not for her own negligence.

‘First Percy, and now him…’ she thought.

At first glance, the two mortals couldn’t differ more: one was a treasure for Remior, the other a silent catastrophe waiting to happen. However, they both served as living proof that she hadn’t paid as much attention to the low-borns as she should have.

Their grades and shorter lifespans might limit their power and potential, but clearly not their ambitions or their cunning. Left unattended, anyone could apparently alter their world’s fate irreversibly. Two of them had done precisely that, coincidentally in the span of a single generation.

‘Do we know where the garden is?’ Phoebe asked, vowing internally to pay more attention to everyone from now on. Athena sent a nod back, prompting Phoebe to continue. ‘Go. I need you to check up on the Starry Princess. But don’t say a word to anyone just yet.’

It only took her daughter a few minutes to contact her again with some results. ‘It’s just as we feared. The creature is trapped inside a massive enchantment, and it’s not looking good. It’s still at Green!’

Phoebe swallowed hard. Only two advancements in twenty years? That was unheard of for a Starry Princess. It spoke to how difficult it was, even for the leader of a Great House, to keep the bug sufficiently fed without drawing too much attention.

‘What is he even thinking? The wasp will never live long enough for him to reach the Clear grade!’

Even if Machaon managed to incorporate the royal jelly into the Aurora Dew to further accelerate his advancement, and even if he could keep the bug healthy and well-fed the whole time, its lifespan was far too short. To make matters worse, the Princess definitely wasn’t healthy at the moment, and the Aurora Dew hadn’t even existed while Machaon had formulated his insidious plan.

Was he planning to have the Princess reproduce, continuing to bleed the creatures dry over multiple generations, ignoring both the hive and the rest of the planet as everyone got starved of elixirs?

The odds of that working were laughably low! Even if the first wasp made it to Violet, would it be in any condition to reproduce? Granted, the creatures did so asexually, but the process required a lot of energy that the wasp would surely lack! He'd have to repeat the process more than just once or twice too, without any of the royal wasps dying under his watch or failing to reach maturity!

Machaon wasn't just selfish: he was a complete lunatic!

Not only was he going to destroy everything, he was going to do that without any guarantee of success. That bastard was willing to sacrifice all of Remior on a desperate gamble, for merely the slimmest chance of becoming a god!

'What should I do?' Athena asked again, breaking Phoebe out of her thoughts. 'I can have the wasp back in the hive and Machaon's head on a spike in an hour if you want,' she snarled, failing to conceal her fury.

'Wait…' Phoebe said as Percy and the previous Queen prepared the chamber for their looming operation.

It wouldn't be entirely risk-free, but something good could come out of this mess if they played their hand right.

'For now, keep everything we've learned to yourself. I want you to closely monitor the Princess's condition, and to secretly feed her as much food as she needs. I don't care if you have to snatch every Green beast that House Ypnos owns: just make sure the creature gets its fill from now on.'

Returning the kidnapped beast to its habitat would have been better, but having a goddess personally attend to its every need was the next best thing. By focusing entirely on the creature, and without worrying about anyone's opinion, Athena should be able to stabilize its condition.

If Percy failed or the current Queen died, they'd have no choice but to bring the Princess back immediately. And even if he succeeded but something went wrong with the familiar later, it wouldn't be too late to do so in a couple of decades.

Most importantly, Phoebe struggled to contain her curiosity. Seeing what Percy had done for a common crow, she couldn't help but wonder what he might do for one of Remior's most important creatures.

A wave of confusion naturally flowed through the connection, as Athena wasn't privy to Phoebe's thoughts. That said, the goddess ultimately chose to keep her doubts to herself, instead asking about something else.

'What about Machaon? Are we just going to let him get away with this?'

The notion caused a mirthful pang of laughter to escape Phoebe's lips. 'Get away? After nearly bringing our entire world to ruin? That piece of shit will get his due, one way or the other. I'll see to that personally,' she spat, but she wasn't done.

Her eyes landed back on Percy, who was getting ready to shove his soul into the egg. Only then did she add, 'but not right now. Don't let Machaon know that we're onto him just yet. He might still be of use to us for a while longer…'

Chapter 507: Micky's clone

It wasn't a greater or even a lower spring that the clone had found himself approaching this time: just a barren world. At least, he hadn't sensed the presence of any gods or powerful mortals, yet he still felt more excited about this trip than he had in a long time.

The fact that he'd given himself permission to relax for once, focusing more on the experience itself than the potential benefits, certainly played a huge role, but there was more to it than that. He hadn't even picked a host yet, but the journey through the soul plane had already felt rather fresh for some reason, despite Percy having done this hundreds of times in the past.

It wasn't a huge secret where this feeling of novelty was coming from, of course. This was Micky's first clone!

‘Well, okay… technically it’s the third one, but I still don’t have the others’ memories back,’ he corrected himself.

After merging with Percy, Micky remembered all the past clones, but he’d never actually lived through those moments himself, which apparently made quite a difference.

Flying through the infinite darkness without the ability to see or hear anything was oddly unsettling for the first time in a while. It also stirred a sense of awe and wonder deep within him, as did the constellation of souls softly shimmering in the distance as soon as he tried to reach out to them.

Scanning the sea of potential hosts, he couldn’t help but ponder over another fascinating benefit of their recent fusion that he’d discovered soon after he began preparing the latest batch of clones: right before finding himself among their ranks.

Evidently, the spike in his mental capabilities had done more than merely allowing the original to coordinate his two bodies. It had also made it several times easier to maintain Soul Resonance for a prolonged period of time, letting him establish a permanent connection with one of the clones.

In the past, that hadn’t been an option. Empowering even a single cord used to require a lot of focus, which Percy had rarely been able to spare, given how busy he’d always been with other things. Consequently, he’d only ever done this when he’d had a good reason to. Sadly, by the time the clones realized that they needed help, it was typically too late to reach out to the original.

Things were different now.

Keeping a single connection open was almost effortless, and even a second instance of Soul Resonance should be easy to maintain for at least a few days: until the original knew whether it was worth investing more effort into a certain clone: without affecting himself too much.

That said, the main body had already widened his connection to one of this clone’s older siblings, and pushing himself to keep in touch with all three of them at once didn’t exactly fit with the spirit of their “vacation”, thus the current clone had been left to embark on this trip by himself.

‘Oh well… it’ll only make everything more interesting,’ he thought with a mental shrug. ‘I should still introduce myself as Micky to my new host, though. To commemorate the experience.’

Having made his mind up, Micky chose a relatively healthy-looking Yellow soul, diving into its body. His wisp quickly flowed into the gaps and cracks of his new vessel as he tried to communicate with its owner.

‘Hello? Do you need help with not dying by any chance?’

Something akin to a pained groan echoed through the person’s soul. Their mind was clearly there, though it appeared too foggy for them to form coherent thoughts.

Unable to get full consent right away, Micky found it difficult to strengthen his connection to his host. Left with no other choice, he tapped into the fiends slumbering within his wisp, causing them to wake up. Spectral tendrils shapeshifted into clawed hands, digging into the fragmented soul. Spider-like limbs and long, flailing hairs sprouted along the surfaces of his own wisp, helping him find purchase to pull the fragments together.

Obviously, Micky was much gentler than he’d been while trying to forcefully possess Kassorith. He only wanted to heal his new host: not subjugate him or worsen his injuries.

Was it a bit pushy of him to default to his Parasitic Connection spell? Sure. It was inevitably more painful for his host than a consensual connection, but every second counted when dealing with an injured soul on the verge of death. Micky would rather violate a couple of personal boundaries than wait for permission.

‘If they don’t want to be saved, they can always kill themselves later,’ he reasoned.

Ramming his mind into his host’s, Micky forced their connection to widen, in an attempt to limit the damage his actions caused. Pulling the shards as close to one another as he could manage without breaking them further, he poured phantom mana from his stash into their surface, slowly knitting the emerging tendrils together into a series of preservation runes.

Before long, his host appeared to regain some mental clarity. Micky felt an odd cocktail of gratitude and annoyance seep through their connection, but the person didn't get the chance to thank or berate him for his reckless assistance.

A lot of information flooded Micky's mind as he finally managed to tap into the body's senses, the cold but familiar embrace of the sea pressing down on his skin from every direction.

'I can't breathe! Are we underwater again?!'

For a moment there, he thought he was back on Atlantis, though the pressure was negligible by comparison, meaning that they had to be much closer to the surface. The water was warmer than it had been at the bottom of the alien ocean, and his host clearly wasn't meant to survive in this environment.

'They must've drowned then… we need to swim up.'

'Get out of the cabin before the ship sinks any deeper,' a male voice suddenly said, Micky's new host finally making himself useful.

Micky nodded, trying to follow the man's instructions, when another problem presented itself. The saltwater stung their eyes, and the room: or cabin: they were in was clearly too dark for them to see a thing. The fact that there weren't any souls or mana signatures to latch on didn't help. Unable to locate the exit, Micky swam directly upwards, only to slam face first into a flat, wooden surface.

Realizing that the momentary burst of energy that their resurrection had granted them wouldn't last forever and knowing that he didn't have time to familiarize himself with this body's affinity or other abilities, Micky resorted to his own means. Reaching into his spatial seal, he pulled out his trusty scythe, turning it incorporeal to ignore the water's resistance as he swung it against what he assumed was the cabin's ceiling.

The moment the enchanted blade was about to phase through the wood, he willed it to materialize again, feeling the mundane solid part like paper beneath the weapon's sharpened edge. A single slash wasn't going to get them out, so Micky repeated his actions with practiced ease, carving out a triangular path through the sinking vessel.

Pushing the severed blocks aside was harder than cutting through the wood. Either way, his host's body was at Yellow, so Micky knew that he was strong enough to make it with enough effort.

Finally crawling through the hole in the ceiling, he found himself stopped by a second wall, forcing him to keep going. It wasn't until a few seconds later that he finally kicked the last wooden triangle out of his path, escaping from the sinking deathtrap.

Only then did he realize that some parts of the ship weren't fully submerged yet. Grabbing against the deck, he dragged his host out of what would have surely been his watery grave, coughing out one mouthful of saltwater after another as he gasped for air, sprawled on a solid: if wet: floor, under the scorching sunlight.

'Thanks for savin' me,' the man whose name Micky hadn't even bothered to ask said at last. He didn't seem to be in a rush to reclaim control of his body, probably trusting Micky to do a better job with it. He clearly wasn't above voicing a couple of suggestions, however. 'We ain't safe yet. We ain't got long before the ship sinks completely, and these are dangerous waters.'

Sighing, Micky rolled over, storing his scythe away as he pushed himself up. While his "vacation" wasn't supposed to involve any self-motivated pressure to find something useful and rush back to Remior, it didn't mean that his time here was going to be peaceful.

Not bothering to examine his current body, he prioritized his surroundings. The ship was among the largest he'd ever seen, making him realize that his host was part of some seafaring civilization. They weren't underwater creatures like Enki's people: just folks that apparently regularly sailed across the ocean.

They had fishing boats on Remior too, though they were much smaller and never wandered very far from the coast. There was typically no need, as it was usually easier to reach any place on the continent by land or air. Percy and Micky hadn't come across any of the fishing villages they knew existed along the shoreline either, as those were rather scarce, and the two of them had only ever entered or exited the ocean through a couple of remote locations.

Either way, the oversized ship wasn't in great shape. Micky was standing on the bow, the floor beneath his feet tilted backwards, facing the stern that sloped the opposite way, with the middle of the vessel submerged between them.

If he had to take a guess, the captain must've tried to steer away from some underwater obstacle at the last minute: a reef perhaps: only to still crash into it sideways, splitting the hull in two.

The broken foremast was floating a few dozen metres away from the rest of the ship, though the main mast was clearly still intact, a thick wooden pillar jutting out of the water and hovering just above Micky's borrowed head. Its sails were torn, loose strips hanging over the figurehead, yellowed strains that seemed to predate the accident dirtying the once-beige fabric.

'The good news is that we're not that far from land,' Micky realized upon spotting an island on the horizon.

Coughing out a few lingering dregs of seawater, he wrung the bottom of his shirt as he climbed higher up the sinking boat to buy a few more seconds. The wood was slippery, and not just because it was currently wet. It was covered in rot and moss, the vessel's passengers having clearly not been big on cleaning.

Micky sure didn't appreciate the slimy feeling beneath his feet: especially since it reminded him of his decrepit cell on Huehue: but he let that slide, turning his attention back to his host.

'When you say dangerous waters…?' he asked as his eyes landed on the other sailors desperately trying to swim toward the island. Dangerous or not, swimming to shore was obviously the only way for any of them to survive, and the other men clearly had a head-start on Micky's host: who must've been asleep when the ship crashed.

'Very dangerous,' the man replied, swallowing hard. 'The sea is teemin' with Yellow and Green beasts. To be honest with ya, drownin' might 'ave been a mercy… I'd pick that over gettin' eaten alive.'

Micky scoffed, thinking that the guy was just being difficult. 'At least there's a chance to survive now!' he protested. 'With your grade, swimming to shore won't take us too long. Maybe there aren't any predators nearb–'

He didn't even get to the end of that sentence, when one of his host's crewmates suddenly got dragged underwater, without even getting the chance to let out a scream. The sea bubbled and foamed around him for the briefest of instants, causing the other sailors to swim even faster in their panic as the spot around their unfortunate comrade turned crimson.

‘Well, shit…’

Chapter 508: Marnok

Micky watched the sailors swim toward the island with all their strength. The poor souls didn’t even dare to toss a glance back as their crewmates got dragged to the dark depths one after the other.

Some tried to resist the monsters. Colours of every common affinity flashed beneath the surface as the distraught men fired their spells at their hunters. Micky guessed that a couple of blasts might have even landed, though he failed to spot any carcasses. The dead creatures were probably devoured by their kin almost immediately.

The water foamed and roiled as pools of blood blossomed like flowers all over the aquatic battlefield, the thick scent of iron mixing with the salty breeze. It was strangely quiet, however, as nobody dared to so much as let a whisper out, probably afraid to attract the beasts’ attention.

The sailors were at too much of a disadvantage against the monsters. There were too many beasts, and they were fighting in their element. If there was one thing that worked in the sapients’ favour, it was the fact that each of their dead companions bought the survivors a couple of extra seconds.

Micky had counted over a hundred men originally, though their numbers had already been cut down to the low dozens by the time they approached land, and they weren’t even there yet. Meanwhile, Micky and his host were still stuck watching the horror show atop the sinking ship.

‘Damn it… we’ve fallen too far behind. Swimming by ourselves would be suicide at this point,’ Micky said.

Not only did they have nobody to split the monsters’ focus with, the commotion must’ve drawn even more creatures to the area. Getting through the blockade without help wouldn’t be easy.

Then again, they couldn’t afford to stay on the shipwreck much longer. Looking back, Micky realized that the vessel had sunk a couple of metres deeper, the surface of the water having already swallowed the hole they’d just climbed through.

Swiftly running out of options, he pulled up his Status, skimming through the information quickly in search of anything he could work with.

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Marnok Du Vent-Noir (The Lone Wanderer’s clone)

Mana cores:

[Mana core 1: Yellow: Air][Mana core 2: Seed: ???]Domain:

[Pulse: Dormant]Spectral traits:

[Weaving]: Boosts one’s proclivity in manipulating one-dimensional structures.[Insomnia] – Eliminates the need for sleep.[Scribing]: Boosts one’s proclivity in expressing meaning onto any written medium.Spells:

[Spectral Art: Parasitic Connection: Refined] [Spectral Art: Cauldron of a Thousand Whispers: Masterful] [Spectral Art: Instantaneous Formation: Masterful] Alchemic principles:

[Extraction]: Separate and condense an ingredient’s essence.[Pacification] – Delay an ingredient’s activation rate.[Redirection] – Adjust an ingredient’s effect.[Deattunement] – Prevent multiple conflicting ingredients from reacting with one another.[Bonding] – Enrich an ingredient with crystallized pure mana.[Restructuring]: Alter an ingredient's phase.[Scaling]: Brew a greater volume of ingredients at once.[Compression]: Elevate an ingredient to the next grade.Decrees:

[Phoebe’s Decree]: Grants access to your Status.[Moirais’ Decree (Incomplete)] – Grants the seed of a second mana core. Requires potent life mana to germinate.[Metatron’s Decree]: Open a one-way portal to the Vault of Magic at will.[Ea’s Decree (Modified)] – Augments and enhances your Status.[Obatala’s Decree (Modified)]: Augments and enhances your Status. Allows you to effortlessly deploy your domain in its strongest state.___

This wasn't the time to memorize his host's full name, nor to dwell on the fact that Marnok was apparently considered the Lone Wanderer's clone. Focusing on the details that mattered, Micky realized: to his great dismay: that the man didn't have much going for him.

'An air affinity. Not the best, but at least it's one I'm skilled with…'

Sadly, even if he poured enough life mana into the sailor's second core, he wouldn't be able to clear enough channels to fully activate it in the next few minutes. Preparing his body for Circulation would be even harder, and the domain was back to being dormant again: an inevitable consequence of changing bodies. Awakening it with a single Yellow core would be extremely difficult, and the weak pulses wouldn't help that much even if he somehow succeeded.

Even worse, he'd already consumed some of his stashed phantom mana to stitch up Marnok's injuries. Micky still had plenty left, but its best use would be to fuel the Harvester's enchantments, allowing him to wield the deadly weapon for as long as possible.

The sharpened scythe could be used to slaughter dozens of Yellow beasts and even a bunch of Greens with ease: assuming that the creatures took turns attacking them. Sadly, the hungry monsters were far more likely to swarm them from every direction. Micky didn't have enough mana to replicate the scythe, and there was only so much that he'd be able to do with a single weapon.

'Any brilliant ideas?' Marnok pressed, his heart beating wildly. The poor guy was clearly frightened, and Micky couldn't exactly blame him. Getting eaten alive was a terrible way to go and, unlike him, the Yellow didn't have another body to return to.

Scanning the area in front of him carefully, Micky measured the distance to shore, estimating roughly how long their reserves would last if they used them sparingly.

'About three kilometres to go. Using air mana to attack the beasts would be a waste. We're better off propelling ourselves forward whenever they're about to catch us. But it still won't be enough to get us even halfway there.'

If he used a couple more tricks, they might make it a bit farther, though whether it would be enough remained to be seen. Either way, the water had almost reached the ship's figurehead where Marnok was standing, indicating that they were almost out of time.

The resurrected sailor was about to speak again, when Micky made a move. Drawing some air mana to his hand, he played with it for a second or two, trying to fashion it into a rune to test an idea.

The concept behind it was similar to his Instantaneous Imprint spell, though air mana was much harder to force into a fixed shape than metal mana, and Micky didn't have Kassorith's Blue core right now, nor a domain to help him.

"Come on, just stay put already," he spat through gritted teeth, stirring the Scribing trait slumbering inside his soul.

Almost immediately, the green motes snapped into place, forming a small, circular symbol in Marnok's palm. It was a concealment rune, blocking everything behind it from Micky's Mana Sense. Sadly, the rune didn't last long, the unruly resource simply refusing to remain still. The very next second, the shape fell apart, robbing the enchantment of its effect.

Sighing, Micky realized that this wasn't going to work.

He'd wanted to try and mask his host's core, to reduce the number of attacking monsters. He wouldn't be able to hide from the rest of their senses, but if he could just lessen the pressure slightly, he'd have an easier time killing the rest or escaping.

Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be. Even if he managed to keep the rune from crumbling for a prolonged period of time: and while swimming: he'd need multiple enchantments to conceal their core from every direction.

'Damn it!' he swore. 'I should start equipping my clones with concealment bandages!'

Then again, hindsight was twenty-twenty. The reality was that his spatial seals had a limited capacity, and he couldn't possibly carry every single tool that he might need in his adventures.

Suddenly, a tall wave rose a little higher than the rest of the sea, licking Marnok's heels. Under other circumstances, the water's cold touch would have felt refreshing: a welcome break from the burning

sunlight drying the sweat on their forehead, caking their scalp in a salty crown. Right now, it only served as a grim reminder that their time was up.

Gathering all the strength that he could muster, Micky leapt off the tip of the figurehead, trying to cover as much distance as he could before splashing into the ocean.

By the time he found himself submerged, he had summoned his scythe again and hurled it downwards. The spectral weapon phased soundlessly through the water, flying in a wide circle beneath his host's body: spinning and invisible. Micky might not be able to hide his host's core under these circumstances, but at least the greedy beasts wouldn't be able to sense the deadly construct.

'Swim as fast as you can,' he said, giving Marnok control of his body back. He figured that his host would be able to handle his limbs better than him anyway.

At the same time, Micky allowed his senses to unfold outwards, locking onto several mana signatures closing in rapidly. He couldn't make their shapes out, but their grades were obvious enough. Over thirty Orange creatures and a dozen Yellows were about to reach them. No Greens had appeared yet, but this was still a lot of beasts to fend off at once.

The weapon worked overtime, flying rapidly through the cold abyss, splitting a creature's soul in half with each violent revolution. The poor fuckers never stood a chance: this was a weapon that had claimed the lives of multiple Blues and even a Violet, after all.

Still, more beasts took notice of the swimming sailor soon enough. At least, Micky had made sure not to inflict any physical wounds on his victims, unwilling to spill even more blood into the water. Even so, he doubted that it would take long for the surviving monsters to realize what a sumptuous feast he had laid before them.

Marnok's limbs burned from the effort as he swam as fast as he could, the water failing to cool his muscles down. Micky, too, poured everything he had into his weapon, slaughtering the aquatic horrors by the dozens as their numbers kept increasing.

The first Greens arrived, the scythe still managing to carve through their souls like a hot knife through butter. However, Micky knew that this wasn't without cost. The more he used the construct, the more it would degrade, forcing him to sacrifice some of his phantom mana to fuel the self-repairs. This wasn't a

problem back on Remior, as he could always rely on an endless supply of ambient mana thanks to the Dance. Here, every single drop was priceless.

Sure enough, the weapon began to slow down about a minute later, indicating that its edge had dulled. Gritting his borrowed teeth, Micky extracted a hefty chunk of phantom mana from his stash, letting the scythe fly through the grey blob to repair itself.

The school of monstrous fish seized the opportunity to draw closer, faster than he could kill them. Micky was forced to consume some air mana too, the momentary burst propelling him several metres ahead: just enough to break out of the encirclement.

He wasn't in the mood to celebrate, however, fully aware that both of his mana pools had shrunk noticeably in the past few minutes. And they'd covered less than half of the distance to their destination.

A similar situation played out a few seconds later. The other sailors must've reached the island already: or perished entirely: Micky didn't know which. Either way, they had freed up more of the monsters, putting pressure on Marnok.

The sailor tried to refill his core with every strained breath, though he was clearly approaching his limits. Noticing this, Micky emptied a few healing potions in the man's stomach to relieve his fatigue. The life mana barely lingered for a fraction of a second in the Yellow's muscles before the seed in his abdomen gobbled it up.

More beasts attacked, and more died, as Micky and Marnok used everything at their disposal to survive for as long as possible. They drained their reserves at a scary rate, their expenditure vastly exceeding their pitiful intake as the situation grew more dire by the second.

Even so, they persisted, covering about two-thirds of the journey by the time Micky's phantom mana ran out completely. Marnok's air mana lasted a little longer because he'd kept trying to replenish it, though he eventually emptied his core too: another five hundred metres later. Losing the ability to repair the scythe, Micky watched it dull again, giving the monsters a chance to draw nearer once more.

Left with no other choice, he discarded the scythe's shaft entirely, breaking the blade into three fragments, and using them to kill the creatures thrice as fast. It worked for a while, buying him and his

host a few more precious breaths, though the pieces only degraded faster when wielded separately like this.

Thankfully, they'd already drawn close enough to the island that the sea had grown shallower. Micky estimated that the seabed was only four or five metres below the swimming sailor, greatly limiting the number and sizes of creatures that could encircle them at once.

By the time Micky felt the sweet feeling of sand beneath his feet, what remained of his weapon was entirely useless, and his host was making wheezing noises with every exhausted heave.

The creatures chasing them hadn't given up yet, however.

Some kind of giant crocodile lunged at the tired sailor, its colossal maw about to snap shut around his body, its curved fangs glinting beneath the bright sunlight. The monster's enormous head disappeared, falling inside a circular portal, metallic surfaces covered in pulsing runes visible on the other side.

Micky promptly deactivated the Decree, giving the Green creature the Syrreneth treatment, and the rest of the monsters a nice little distraction. The smaller beasts were more than happy to fight each other over the bloody feast, devouring the elephant-sized reptile in seconds as they dug through its flesh in search for its nutritious core.

By the time they were done, Marnok had already walked out of the water. Even so, the man clearly didn't dare to stop moving until he was over thirty metres from the edge of the sea. Only then did he allow himself to plop down weakly, hugging the scorching sand as if it was his long-lost lover.

Micky shared the sentiment, though his attention was inevitably drawn to the other survivors slowly surrounding him and his host, their mouths agape.

Chapter 509: Survivors

The sound of the tall waves washing over the coast was strangely soothing: almost like the sea had forgotten the horrific massacre that had taken place in its depths just then. The sailors didn't seem to care about the ocean's cruel irony in the slightest, too busy whispering to one another while gawking at Micky's host.

“Marnok?! How in the reefs did ya pull that off?!” one of the survivors barked, holding out a hand to haul him up.

Micky found it odd that he could register the sailors’ weird speech patterns, having never experienced anything of the sort in the past. His hosts all spoke languages entirely alien to him, which he could only understand thanks to their connection. Any weird quirks that they exhibited tended to get absorbed by the translation entirely, sounding like regular sentences in his mind.

The fact that he could notice the discrepancy probably meant that Marnok had been exposed to the correct version of his language, yet both him and his crewmates clearly insisted on butchering it by clinging to their uncouth sailor-speak like a bunch of barbarians.

‘Oh well… I suppose I can forgive them for being a little difficult to understand, considering all the shit they’ve been through today.’

Oblivious to his thoughts, Marnok groaned, clearly wishing that the others would let him rest on the soft sand a few seconds longer. He ultimately kept those thoughts to himself, however: and to the nosy foreigner sharing his body, of course: before grabbing his friend’s hand.

The man helping him up released a burst of mana from his palm, sending it into Marnok’s body. Micky was a little surprised by the familiar rush of life mana, having not expected to meet someone with a rare affinity here. That said, the sailor’s generous attempt to heal his friend didn’t amount to much, the mana getting sucked into the seed in Marnok’s abdomen the very next instant: much like the potions from earlier.

‘I hope he didn’t realize what happened,’ Micky thought, though he mentally shook his head the very next second.

It didn’t really matter, did it? This wasn’t a developed world, and the sailors were all at Yellow or Orange, stranded on an island with questionable odds of making it out alive. Besides, even if he told them everything about the Moirais’ Decree or his bloodline, there was a good chance that they wouldn’t believe him.

That was why he didn't bother coaching his host, letting him make up whatever excuse he wanted. Marnok opted to go for the good old strategy of playing dumb, pretending that he'd escaped from the aquatic horrors through sheer luck.

Well… that wasn't entirely false, though Micky's host conveniently left out a few crucial details: such as the hundreds of powerful creatures that the parasitic ghost hiding in his body had slaughtered using his now-broken scythe, or the portal to a different world that said spectre had employed to rip a Green reptile apart.

Tuning the pointless part of the conversation out, Micky focused on something more interesting. He scanned the sailors up and down, finally getting a chance to learn more about them, and this place.

'They look surprisingly similar to humans,' he noted.

He might have even struggled to tell them apart, if not for the overly square jaws barely concealed beneath their bushy beards, or the way the top of their ears pointed outwards. Their bodies were admittedly a little too muscular to pass as humans, however, their skins sporting a deep bronze colour. Then again, those features could have just as well been caused by their rough lives sailing across the ocean.

Their attire varied slightly from person to person, though it was generally centred around a certain theme. Most wore loose, cropped trousers that Micky guessed had been fashioned out of repurposed sailcloth. They were paired with V-collared or buttoned linen shirts, their sleeves rolled up to their elbows. Many had a thick sash tied around their waists: Marnok's was red, though Micky saw some green, yellow, orange and blue ones.

A few of the more uncommon features included piercings that a couple of sailors wore on one or both ears, and a crimson bandana that one of them had wrapped around his forehead. Marnok was in the minority that didn't have boots on: only three out of fifteen had made it to shore barefoot like him. And only two had Orange cores, the rest being at Yellow.

'I suppose the survivors are heavily skewed toward the higher grades who had been awake when the ship crashed,' he reasoned.

One unlucky sailor had reached the island buck naked, making Micky thank his lucky stars that Marnok had slept with clothes on. Spending the whole trip in his host's birthday suit would have been way too embarrassing.

'Still better than getting killed within the first hour though,' he reminded himself, thinking back to the unfortunate swimmers.

Micky wasn't sure how many had died in total: he'd personally witnessed close to a hundred getting eaten alive, though many more had likely drowned inside the sinking vessel before he'd even arrived here.

Alas, there was nothing he could do about those poor souls, other than maybe praying that their final moments had been swift and not too painful. Turning his attention back to the sailors' conversation, he perked up upon realizing that they'd already moved past the topic of Marnok's unexpected survival and onto other, more important things.

"What are we even goin' to do now?" a man asked, his voice cracking with worry. "We ain't got a scrap of food nor a drop of ale left!"

"I'd be more worried about endin' up as food 'arselves," another growled. "Edric, ya sure those things won't chase us here?"

"The ones in the ocean won't," a sailor: Edric presumably: said. "They're smarter than ya give 'em credit for. Wouldn't risk fightin' so many of us on land. Most can't even survive outside the waves. But I won't rule out some Green beast crawlin' outta the jungle," he added, gesturing toward the dense foliage some distance away from where the group was standing.

"Great… so how are we supposed to survive?" the first man muttered again.

"Edric's got a water affinity. He can conjure drinks for us: ya don't need ale to survive. I say 'tis best we take a breather before doin' anythin' reckless," the life affinity user said.

On closer inspection, Micky realized that he knew the man's name. His host had to be familiar with all of his crewmates: not just the healer: but Micky had known for a while that people his hosts interacted

more often with tended to leave a deeper impression in their minds, allowing him to access some of that information himself. This was largely how he'd managed to get by during his brief stay in the Proudheart Academy on Felmara, and also how he could understand and speak his hosts' languages while sharing their body.

Either way, Flammy's most distinguishing features were two golden teeth in the upper-right side of his mouth, along with a vertical scar over his left eye. The man had clearly used his life affinity to seal his wound a long time ago, though he didn't seem skilled enough to get rid of the lingering traces that his injury had left behind.

Oblivious to Micky's thoughts, the other sailors nodded in agreement with the healer, many of them plopping down on the spot.

"How the bloody depths did ol' Harrosh even manage to sink the ship?!" the naked man asked, drawing everyone's attention. "Cap'n was a stubborn bastard alright, but he sure knew 'is stuff when it came to sailin'! Never seen 'im screw everythin' up this badly!"

"The old sod downed a barrel o' rum last night, that's how!" one of the Orange-cores snarled, spitting on the sand. "Told 'im it was a bad idea too, but he wouldn't listen!"

"Always knew the ol' sack of bones would drink 'imself to death on' day!" another swore. "Never thought he'd nearly take the lot of us down with 'im, though!"

"Well, that's just perfect, ain't it?!" the sailor with the red bandana said. "This was supposed to be an easy voyage: four months 'ere and back, safe as houses in the Commodore's waters, not a soul from the Brumes-Indigo fleet to trouble us. Not to mention nearly two hundred men to storm this place… and now look at us! Can't even protect 'arselves! Are we still chasin' that treasure?"

Micky couldn't help but raise one of his host's eyebrows upon hearing the word "treasure". Sure, he probably shouldn't expect much from a barren world like this, but he still struggled to suppress his curiosity.

"What choice do we 'ave?" another sailor asked. "We 'ave to trek into the jungle if we don't want to starve, so might as well head for the tomb. If it's truly where 'ar intel says, we might find somethin' buried with the ol' Saint that can 'elp us."

Soft murmurs rippled through the group, most of the men nodding in agreement. A few didn't seem to like the idea much, but everyone understood that they couldn't just stay on the beach waiting for their deaths.

Meanwhile, Micky couldn't help but shift his attention to his host. 'Hey, who's this "Saint" whose tomb you guys are after? Someone important, I take it?'

Micky tried to temper his expectations, knowing that, at the end of the day, he'd only come here to have some fun. Obviously, he wouldn't shy away from helping someone in need: which was why he'd done his best to save Marnok earlier: but he didn't think that he'd be walking away with anything particularly valuable.

At most, he was hoping to spend some time practicing a certain trick that he hadn't had a chance to work on with his main body in the past few years: one that would factor heavily into his future plans. That said, his host's next couple of sentences flipped those expectations on their head, making Micky realize that there might be more to this world than he'd initially thought.

'Of course he's someone important! Saint Ludwick was one of Robari's last demigods!'

Chapter 510: Robari

Micky had several questions, not the least of which being "how did a barren world without elixirs ever produce demigods?" He wasn't in a rush to voice them, however. First, he and his host had to take a few precautions to raise their odds of surviving the upcoming trek.

After giving Marnok a brief explanation about himself and the second core, Micky began emptying ridiculous amounts of healing potions and mushrooms into their stomach, allowing the gluttonous vortex in their abdomen to absorb the mana.

'Man, repairing the Decree has never been easier,' he thought.

In the past, his clones had mostly relied on unprocessed mushrooms rather than finished potions. The problem with the former was that they contained more than just raw life mana, which meant that they left traces behind after getting drained.

Micky couldn't just dump a hundred thousand mushrooms inside a person's stomach at once and expect them to digest the fungi in a reasonable timeframe. The best alternative would be to summon a pile outside the body, draining them a few at a time. That came with its own issues, however: namely the fact that the other sailors would inevitably question where the mountain of mushrooms had come from.

Thankfully, things had recently changed a little.

Micky's main bodies were currently brewing hundreds of doses of healing potion per hour back on Remior, leisurely honing their alchemic skills. Thanks to his larger cauldron, improved yield and the endless supply of dead wasps that the Starry Queen was more than happy to give him, he could convert enormous volumes of fungi into potions in a relatively short amount of time.

It wasn't like he had a better use for them either. Repairing a person's second core through potions alone would still amount to a couple of weeks of nonstop brewing, so Micky was hesitant to rely solely on them, which was why he was using a mixture of mushrooms and potions. The moment the fungi got drained, he stored the empty husks back into his seal, to hide them from the others and make room in Marnok's stomach for more.

Even better, he had more space than ever before, since his main bodies were down to just three cords. That meant that he would only ever need a maximum of four spatial seals, so he'd never have to divide the artifact more than twice. By skipping the bottom denomination entirely, he could ensure that every clone had eight times the capacity.

'Hmmm… in hindsight, maybe I should start equipping the clones with more stuff than just food, mushrooms, potions and a scythe…' he thought, challenging his earlier assumption. Alas, that was more of a suggestion to his future self: it wouldn't help him much right now.

A few minutes later, the second core was finally done accepting mana. Micky instructed his host to start clearing channels for it. The sooner they got it into working condition, the sooner it would start helping them. If there was one thing that Micky loved about barren worlds, it was the fact that his hosts had never advanced before meeting him, making their second cores just as powerful as their first ones, giving him the most value for his efforts.

Micky didn't slack while his host was busy with the new organ, focusing on a different task. He turned his attention to their first core, resuming the project that he had failed to complete atop the ship.

This time, he didn't bother drawing any air mana to his hands, trying to shape it into a concealment rune while still inside his host's sternum. Maintaining the enchantment like this would inevitably be much harder, but they would only need a single, much smaller rune to mask their mana signature, and they wouldn't have to worry about the ocean's currents: or anything else in their environment: disturbing the enchantment.

'Come on… just stay still for a second!' he groaned internally, though he struggled to force the unruly resource into shape even with the Scribing trait's help.

The idea of drawing the rune inside his core hadn't come out of thin air. Micky: or rather, Percy: had envisioned the potential of combining pre-casting with magiscript since he first learned about it on Felmara. Of course, he'd always known that it would be extremely difficult. In fact, he doubted that even the most skilled Felmarans had ever succeeded.

Then again, Micky had several unique advantages that Leo's people had lacked, giving him hope. Even so, this was a project that he had put aside for the longest time, until he met the prerequisites to properly attempt it. Over the years, he had grown increasingly proficient with both arts, and his Scribing trait was the final nail in the coffin that should allow him to embark on this difficult journey.

'It's going to be a while before I'm any good at it, but I need to give it a shot if I ever want to turn my boosting art into a permanent promotion…'

At the very least, Micky didn't see any way of upgrading his spell that didn't involve drawing lots of runes inside his body. Whether he could make enough progress with this ambitious project in time to benefit Marnok remained to be seen, but they would certainly get attacked by several more beasts in the coming days, so having a way to hide their presence wouldn't hurt.

As the two men worked hard on their respective tasks, Micky spared some attention to resume their previous conversation, still curious about this world.

'So, Marnok? You said that this place was called Robari? Is that the name of your country or the whole planet? Also, would you mind explaining what you meant by "demigods" earlier? I didn't spot any souls above Yellow while looking for a body.'

The sailor shrugged before replying. ‘Robari is ‘ar world. We used to ‘ave not just demigods, but even full-fledged gods too, a long, long time ago. Of course, none of us folks alive today was around to see that, but the evidence is pretty darn clear.’

Micky couldn’t help but frown. So, this place was actually a former lesser spring. In many ways, that sounded like an even crueller fate than being born on a barren world without any knowledge of the wider cosmos or the possibilities that lay beyond the bottom grades. After all, it always hurt more to lose something precious than to have never possessed it.

‘What caused this?’ he asked.

‘Nobody knows exactly,’ Marnok replied with a sigh. ‘The details were lost to time, but ‘ar gods were killin’ one ‘nother for some reason. A bunch of ‘em fell as others escaped Robari with their tails tucked between their legs. The worst was that they ruined ‘ar only source of beast mana, leavin’ us stuck at ‘ar birth grades. Though it ain’t all gloom ‘n doom.’

‘How so?’ Micky asked, struggling to see a silver lining.

‘Well, there is some beast mana left. Rather than lettin’ it hang out in the open for ‘nyone to grab, ‘ar Saints decided to brew it into a solid shape to make it last longer. They buried piles upon piles of priceless coins with ‘em: Fools’ Amber we call ‘em: hidin’ it for future Green-borns to find.’

Micky let out a soft whistle, thinking that the demigods’ plan was rather smart. After failing to attain divinity themselves, they chose to do everything they could to raise Robari’s odds of producing new gods later. Had they not hidden the coins, the Yellow-borns and Orange-borns would have split them among themselves, maybe advancing once or twice and living a couple of centuries longer, at the cost of wasting their world’s last traces of beast mana.

By gathering the coins up and stashing them away in hidden locations, they made it more likely for the Holy Children to find and collect enough of them to reach the Clear grade.

‘How can they ensure that a Green-born finds the buried treasure and not anybody else though?’ Micky asked.

Assuming that the coins were as effective as Remior's elixirs, even the Green-borns would need several thousand years' worth to advance four times, and there had to be lots of Yellow-borns around hunting for the lost treasure.

'Well, there ain't 'ny way to be sure. But they probably knew that the new Green-borns would hold all the power after the higher grades died out. They'd also live longer than 'nyone else, thus 'aving more time to amass 'nough Amber and expand their advantage. And that's exactly what ended up happenin'.'

'So, your world is currently ruled by a bunch of powerful Green-borns?'

'Pretty much. Only four of 'em are currently at White, splittin' the seas among 'emselves. Each lets a couple subordinates reach Blue, but not Violet: it would cost too much Amber and threaten their rule. The four navies are constantly fightin' over the few tombs that 'aven't been found yet, racing toward the Clear grade.'

'I see…' Micky muttered.

He didn't recall spotting any Whites or Blues while scanning the planet. Hell, he hadn't seen any Greens either, even though he knew there had to have been some Green-borns around. Unlike gods, powerful mortal souls didn't stand out as much, so it was easier to miss a bunch of them scattered in a population of hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

'Do you think any of them will make it?' he asked.

'Hard to say. Two are supposedly close, including 'ar own Commodore Vent-Noir. Of course, there 'ave been other Whites in the past, but none of 'em made it to the end. Not even when the Fools' Amber was more abundant than it is now.'

Micky nodded internally. What his host had left unsaid was that even if one of the Whites somehow made it to the Clear grade, there wasn't any guarantee that they'd be able to attain divinity. Only a tiny fraction of demigods ever did, so this world was probably screwed regardless.

But he didn't see any point in talking about that. Instead, he homed into something else that Marnok had mentioned. 'Commodore Vent-Noir? Isn't that the same surname as you? Are you two related by any chance?'

Marnok guffawed, garnering weird looks from the other sailors sitting nearby. He didn't seem very bothered by it, merely waving their curious gazes away apologetically before responding. 'Don't I wish? Ya think I'd be puttin' me hide on the line for some ol' Saint's treasure if I'd been the boss's nephew? 'Tis just how we do things on Robari. We all carry the name of one of the four fleets, to signal who owns us.'

'Why does he send you to collect the Amber in his stead? Isn't he worried that you'll keep it to yourselves?' Micky asked, finding that difficult to believe. A Yellow-born like Marnok was never going to make it very far, but even reaching Green would make a huge difference in his life.

'They trust that most people ain't dumb enough to double-cross 'em. Where would we even hide if we stole from 'em Commodores? All the oceans belong to 'em anyway. We wouldn't even get a chance to use 'em coins before they found us.'

'Is Robari all ocean and islands? No large landmass?' Micky asked.

'Pretty much. Well, the islands the Commodores live on are bigger than the rest, but not by much. 'nyway, the Saints did a good job hiding their burial places, so we're still findin' more to this day. But it's slowin' down. I doubt there's many left.'

Micky nodded once more, satisfied with his host's explanation. Part of him was starting to get a little excited about the Saint's tomb. He didn't personally need any Fools' Amber, of course, since he doubted that it was any better than the nectar he now had a near-infinite amount of, but he had no idea what else the demigod might have buried with him.

'Even if there's nothing, I can still make some progress with pre-casting, so the trip won't be a complete waste,' he reminded himself.