Wanderer 511

Chapter 511: Coughing

Everyone felt a lot less tired by sunset, though the sailors agreed that it was best to wait until morning before beginning their journey into the island's unwelcoming depths. Granted, time was precious, and it wasn't like they were completely safe on the beach, but delving into the jungle at night would have been even riskier.

A small campfire burned amidst the sleeping men, giving the fine sand a rich, golden hue. Many had argued against lighting the flame up, of course. The hardened seafarers didn't really need it for warmth, nor did they have any food to roast over it, so nearly half of the group had insisted not to risk attracting any nearby beasts. The rest had convinced them that it would be better not to fight the monsters in complete darkness, should any choose to attack anyway.

Marnok was among the few men still awake. Heeding Micky's advice, he'd volunteered to join the small team on guard duty. It was the best way to take advantage of their Insomnia trait without revealing its existence to anyone else, allowing them to continue working on their projects. They'd have to pretend to sleep tomorrow, of course, but that was neither here nor there.

Micky had also told his host not to activate the new core immediately, as it could draw unnecessary attention from friend and foe alike. Either way, Marnok was still about a day away before he was done clearing enough channels for it. Micky wasn't much closer to forming a stable rune inside their first core either.

"Eatin' that crap will give ya the runs," the sailor with the red bandana told another, drawing Marnok and Micky's attention. The man had kept his voice low so as to not wake up everyone, but his words couldn't escape a Yellow's ears from only a few metres away if they weren't sleeping already.

The second person was munching on a pile of seaweed that the waves had washed up. Micky found the notion of eating the slimy leaves disgusting. Not to mention that he personally wouldn't have dared to step any closer to the dark waters, afraid of the abominations that might still be lurking in their depths. The fact that the rising tide had brought the sea closer to the group over the past couple of hours certainly didn't help with his paranoia.

Marnok's crewmate didn't seem to care about the danger in the slightest. Nor did he appear to mind the texture of his meal. "Better this than starvin'. Unless 'ny of ya is hidin' more of 'em crackers, 'tis all I'm goin' to get tonight."

The sailor was referring to a funny scene that had unfolded on the beach earlier. One of the others had secretly tried to eat a small pouch of food that he'd managed to bring out of the sinking ship. The seawater had turned the crackers soggy, though that hadn't stopped him: nor had it deterred the naked guy from wrestling him for the food. In the end, they'd split the meal, but only after providing some much-needed entertainment to their crewmates. Marnok chuckled, as did the man with the bandana, though nobody said anything else.

Micky wasn't as worried about the food as the rest of the group, carrying some rations in his spatial seal. He didn't have too many: they would barely last Marnok a week or two, so sharing them with anybody was out of the question.

Either way, Micky's host was going to outlast his crewmates if they failed to find anything else. Then again, that wasn't a good outcome either. Marnok would find it exceedingly difficult to survive on the island by himself: relying on nothing but a pair of Yellow cores.

'Fingers crossed for a good affinity,' Micky thought.

A rare or composite mana type would be best: especially if it was one that he was familiar with. He'd even settle for water to fuse with air into ice, or anything solid that he could more easily draw runes with. Of course, the Moirais' Decree had never much cared about his wishes, so he was under no delusion that it would start listening now. At the end of the day, they'd have to make do with whatever they got.

He was about to resume working on his project, when somebody sat next to his host. It was Flammy: the life user that had tried to heal them as soon as they reached the island: and who Micky guessed was Marnok's close friend. As if to confirm Micky's assumption, his host leaned closer to the healer, whispering in his ear. "Thanks for the treatment earlier."

Flammy grinned, his golden teeth glinting as they reflected the playful flames of the campfire. "Don't sweat it, mate. I'm a wee bit surprised ya noticed though. Felt like me mana vanished the moment it entered yar body. Wasn't sure it did anythin'."

“Nah… I definitely feel better now,” Marnok replied vaguely, not bothering to explain the Decree’s shenanigans to his friend. “I ‘ave to admit, I didn’t expect to see ya alive and well on the beach. Thought the fish would ‘ave eaten yar face off: given yar affinity and everythin’.”

“Got worried about me, did ya?” Flammy asked, his grin widening.

“Worried? Nah… Would ‘ave been an improvement,” Marnok replied, cracking a smile of his own.

Both men burst into laughter, before Flammy moved to a more serious topic. “Say, did ya buy that crap about the Cap’n gettin’ drunk?”

Marnok shrugged. “He was always drunk: that much I ain’t doubtin’. Not so sure about ‘im getting the ship wrecked though. Ol’ Harrosh knew ‘is shit better than ‘nyone I know. He could ‘ave stirred that boat into a storm while sleepin’, and I’d ‘ave bet on him makin’ it to the other side in one piece.”

Flammy sighed. “So, ya also thinkin’ somethin’s fishy?”

Marnok shrugged. “‘Tis Robari, mate… There’s always somethin’ fishy goin’ on…”

Flammy nodded. Patting Marnok’s shoulder, he was about to stand when Micky’s host grabbed him. “What’s yar plan, Flammy? Ya still interested in the treasure?”

“What choice does ‘ny of us ‘ave? Commodore’s goin’ to skin us alive if we fail. Besides, me family in Ravisport’s gotta eat. Why? Ya thinkin’ of bailin’?”

“Bailin’, no,” Marnok said, shaking his head. “Where would I even go? We’re all stuck ‘ere ‘till they send ‘nother boat lookin’ for us. Just thinkin’ we should be focusin’ on survivin’ rather than treasure. We can worry about the Amber later.”

“Ya heard the others, Marnok. Two’s the same thing now. Can’t get food without goin’ in the jungle. And… if we go in the jungle ‘nyway, might as well head to the tomb.”

Marnok nodded, begrudgingly letting go of his friend.

‘Are you all in this to feed your families?’ Micky asked once his host was alone again.

‘Most of ‘em are,’ Marnok said.

‘Not you?’

‘Ain’t got a family no more. Not since the Lys-Clair fleet raided Narrisport ‘n butchered me wife ‘n kids. Now, I’m just hopin’ to help Commodore Vent-Noir get strong ‘nough to kill that Lys-Clair fucker. Still, I ain’t desperate ‘nough to throw me life aside on a random island for no reason neither.’

Micky nodded internally. He hadn’t realized how intense his host was. Evidently, offering him a ticket to the Vault to save his ass was probably off the table. Not that Micky wanted to spend his vacation dealing with Metatron. He’d have to go back to the artificial world sooner or later, but he wasn’t quite ready to clean up the mess he’d left there the previous time. Besides, he’d rather make some progress with his current project first, to get a better idea of what books he’d need to buy from the cube for the next step.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, though Micky doubted that they’d keep getting this lucky.

Once the sun was up: and all the sailors with it: the group started walking along the coast, circling the island. This was arguably going to take longer than heading to their destination directly, but they wanted to travel the shortest possible distance through the jungle, as that was easily going to be the most dangerous part of the journey.

Nobody spoke much: all the seafarers probably trying to preserve as much of their strength as they could. That suited Micky and his host just fine. It was mostly quiet, save for the sailors’ muted footsteps on the sand, or the soothing sound of the waves washing against the coast, allowing Micky and Marnok to focus on their tasks.

Micky managed to whip the concealment rune into shape multiple times, though the enchantment never survived more than a second or two, leading him to believe that he would have to come up with

some other trick to get this to work. As for Marnok, he'd already cleared over two-thirds of his new channels, bringing him that much closer to discovering his second affinity.

The relative quiet served them better as a group too, since it allowed them to keep their ears open to any potential threats. It also helped Micky notice something else, however. Something that he found more than a little odd.

Three of the sailors were coughing.

Not much: it was just a light cough every minute or two. Thinking back, Micky realized that two of them had started since the night before, though nobody seemed to have paid much attention to it. Micky probably wouldn't have noticed it either, under normal circumstances.

After all, it had only been the Orange-borns at first. Their bodies weren't that much stronger than a Red's, and they had just swum out of a shipwreck earlier that day. The water hadn't been very warm either, so it was entirely conceivable that they'd caught a cold.

'But why has the Yellow-born joined them?' Micky wondered.

It was the same person who had eaten the seaweed while on guard duty: which again, Micky would have chalked up to food poisoning, had it happened in isolation. Still, he didn't think this was a coincidence.

'Better keep my eyes open,' he decided. He couldn't put his finger on it just yet, but he couldn't shake a strange sense of unease from creeping through. Something about this place was off…

Chapter 512: Internal

Lacking enough information to determine with any certainty what exactly was making the sailors ill, Micky decided to let the situation unfold, and to deal with everything as it came.

Ignoring the coughing men, he took a moment to bask in the warm sunlight, and to take a few deep breaths of the cool, salty breeze, appreciating his leisurely stroll along the coast. His host didn't know where exactly their destination was, but according to the others there was still some ground left to cover.

For Marnok and his crewmates, this island might very well be a deathtrap, but for Micky, it was just the beautiful setting for another of his many adventures: one of the more relaxing ones too.

'I should still try to get the new spell down before we enter the jungle,' he reminded himself.

The concealment rune might save Marnok's life later. While Micky wasn't above enjoying his time here, he wasn't going to willingly sabotage his new buddy's survival prospects out of laziness or nonchalance.

He turned his attention back to the half-formed enchantment inside his host's core. As difficult as it was to control one's mana internally, Micky was more than a little skilled at doing precisely that. His elemental body on Remior had to do something similar every time he wanted to shift his ice mana between its three states, and that was without taking into account all the other permutations of pre-casting that he could apply in battle.

On top of that, drawing a single rune was pretty much the simplest expression of magiscript possible, even without his spectral trait helping him. With it, shaping the air mana into the circular symbol was more than manageable.

'Drawing the rune isn't the problem,' he noted. 'The biggest issue is the rest of the mana messing the enchantment up.'

Mana cores contained a mage's entire reserves, holding enough power to conjure up some pretty violent spells even as early as Yellow: let alone the higher grades. And all of that energy was normally stored inside a volume no larger than a strawberry. Consequently, even the slightest push could cause the mana to thrash wildly inside the organ.

This was why pre-casting was so difficult to master in the first place: manipulating the mana with any finesse required a gentle touch. Things were still simple when it came to more straightforward transformations like rotations or splitting the flow into multiple parts, but even the most basic runes had a relatively intricate shape.

Worse still, while Micky's trait helped him control the mana tied to the enchantment, it had nothing to say about the rest of his reserves. Then again, that was only to be expected, given its description.

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[Scribing]: Boosts one's proclivity in expressing meaning onto any written medium.___

Thankfully, Scribing was rather lax when determining what counted as a "written medium", having allowed Micky to do all sorts of interesting things with it in the past. However, the definition didn't seem to extend to indirect help: it could force the mana into the correct shape, but it couldn't prevent a separate stream of mana from distorting it.

'It's ridiculous that I thought I wouldn't have to worry about the environment disturbing the enchantments…' he lamented, the corner of his host's lips curling into a bitter frown. 'There's no worse environment than the interior of a mana core!'

There was a silver lining, however. Micky had once again discovered how profound the Vault's runecrafting language was. The circular runes fit neatly inside the spherical core, making use of every square millimetre of its cross-section. Had he used any other language, he would have had to make the runes smaller to make them fit, weakening their effects and wasting space.

He was pretty sure that it was just a coincidence. He didn't think that Metatron knew about pre-casting, and he sure hoped that the titan hadn't even considered the possibility of elevating Circulation into an artificial promotion.

'As long as Tlaloc and Leo keep their mouths shut about the Dance, it would be too great a leap of logic.'

Then again, it was entirely possible that Micky's friends had already let the information slip. Perhaps, he shouldn't be underestimating Metatron's ingenuity either.

Whether the god had realized it or not, he already had access to many of the tools that Micky was planning to use in his project. The only ones that he might lack were the spectral traits and the alchemic principles, but Metatron could still potentially find workarounds.

'Well, there's nothing I can do about it now. Even if he gets there before I do, it won't affect me immediately. As long as I can become a god, I'll be able to deal with him one day.'

Either way, Micky already knew the titan's main reasons for building his entire runecrafting language on circular shapes, and they had nothing to do with mana cores. It made the enchantments simpler to draw and easier to stack together: both things that Micky had grown to greatly appreciate after years of experience in the field.

Regardless of Metatron's motivations, Micky had to admit that the runes were practically perfect for what he wanted to do. Even if he stopped holding the enchantments in place, they would be able to keep spinning inside the core with no obstruction.

'Wait… Spinning? That could work!' he thought, causing his host's heart to skip a beat.

Micky had been trying way too hard to keep the runes still, but that only made it more difficult for them to weather the violent flows of mana inside the organ. What if he stopped resisting and just allowed the symbols to rotate freely?

Deciding to give that a shot, he repaired the damaged enchantment once more, this time letting go of the circle's circumference. Like a flicked coin, the rune began revolving rapidly, falling apart within mere seconds. This was precisely what Micky had feared would happen, though he keenly noticed that the symbol had survived a little longer than his previous attempts.

Seeing that his latest idea had merit, he repeated his actions, adjusting his mindset slightly. He couldn't afford to let go of the rune entirely, or it would crumble on the spot. He still had to put some effort into keeping it intact, though he should probably avoid squeezing it as tightly.

'Its shape has to stay fixed, but its angular momentum and orientation don't really matter.'

The second attempt went a little better, the rune lasting for over five seconds before getting ripped apart. Thankfully, the wind crashing against it didn't apply as much pressure when Micky allowed the symbol to move freely, though a new problem soon presented itself.

Focusing on the enchantment was difficult. It revolved dozens: if not hundreds: of times per second, and it did so randomly, in all three dimensions.

Micky was only able to hold on to the rune for a while due to his trait. Unlike the conscious part of his mind that struggled to keep track of the construct, the instincts granted to him by Scribing didn't seem to care about whether the symbol was upside-down, flipped horizontally, or spinning.

Leaning into that feeling, Micky stopped trying to sense the rune directly. Ignoring the feeling in his host's chest entirely, he allowed a static picture of the concealment rune to form in his mind: a perfect representation of the enchantment inside his core, stripped of the movements.

He could still feel how the symbol was being affected by its surroundings, but he had essentially aligned his thoughts with the rune's frame of reference. He experienced the erratic air mana slamming into the construct as a series of violent gales, hitting it from every direction in an attempt to tear it down.

'They feel weaker than before though,' he realized, suppressing the urge to grin.

Ten seconds passed. The enchantment remained intact as Micky shattered his previous record. The gales didn't just crash onto the rune, however. They also collided with one another, brewing a chaotic storm inside the organ.

The enchantment wasn't spinning at a fixed speed, nor in a single direction. It constantly accelerated and decelerated, its rotation fluctuating wildly from one moment to the next. Every major shift threatened to throw Micky off, and to undo the symbol's structure, each sudden change impossible to predict or prepare for.

Micky was hanging on for dear life, like a boat trying to stay afloat atop a tumultuous ocean. He filtered all the detrimental information out, concentrating on nothing but the rune itself as he poured his mind into keeping every last stroke of the magical symbol in place. Whenever the shape felt like it was about to twist, he clamped down on it just a touch harder, letting go again as soon as the storm eased.

A minute passed, and then another: he guessed so at least, though he was too preoccupied with the difficult task to keep track. Micky's mind constantly alternated between tense and relaxed, almost as if he was wrestling with a tireless hurricane: struggling to block its violent blows with everything he had.

Thankfully, the situation improved markedly over time. It never got easy per se, but it did get a little easier after a while.

About an hour in, Micky wasn't as worried about the enchantment falling apart anymore. Maintaining its shape still required a lot of effort, but he was feeling increasingly confident that he could keep it up for a very long time if he didn't break focus, and his Status seemed to agree with that assessment.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Spectral Art: Internal Runecrafting: Refined!]

Chapter 513: Boulders

'Straight to Refined, huh? Not bad!' Micky thought, pressing his excitement down before it showed on his host's expression by mistake. The last thing Marnok needed was to have to explain to his crewmates why he was the only one thrilled to be starving on a deserted island.

Thinking back to the spell, Micky had to admit that he wasn't all that surprised by its classification. The new field of magiscript that he had just invented had an extremely high barrier of entry. In fact, he wasn't sure that his latest Spectral Art was easier to cast than his Instantaneous Formation, and his Status had listed that one as Masterful.

At the same time, he understood that Phoebe's Decree took several things into consideration when registering a new spell. Complexity was an important factor for sure, but so was potency. Viewed from that angle, the powerful formation that he had used to bring down one of Thess'kala's most talented disciples was worlds apart from his latest trick.

Internal Runecrafting demanded his undivided attention for a prolonged period of time and didn't even give him that much in return. Right now, the best he could manage was to replicate the effect of a cheap concealment bandage: something that even a novice enchanter could prepare with ease.

'Oh well… it's still proof of concept that my idea has merit. Every new field has to start somewhere,' he consoled himself.

All things considered, Micky did have a vague plan on how he was going to upgrade his boosting art. Ideally, it would serve as a direct improvement over the original Dance of the Savage Gods: not the Carnival, the Symbel, or the Symphony. Those were even more powerful, but they were tailored to Micky's unique combination of cores, affinities, and other abilities.

He didn't want to create the new spell merely for his own sake. His ancestors on Huehue had originally intended to elevate the technique further, though Rhaziel and his goons had prevented them from ever completing their project.

'I'll do it for them. And for Remior too.'

Micky wanted to pick up where the gods had left off, creating a spell that worked for every affinity, just like Circulation and the Dance. The latter already provided a person with enough mana capacity and regeneration to touch upon the next grade, but the boost was temporary and incomplete.

The next step would be to truly compress the mana to the next grade, which Micky guessed would bring about a much deeper physical enhancement, extending one's lifespan like a regular promotion.

His recent ventures in potionmaking had already given him a blueprint to follow. Conveniently, his spherical cauldron was shaped just like a mana core, so many of the key details would hopefully translate quite well from one application to the other.

'Mana cores are complex and delicate organs though,' he reminded himself. 'I'll need to be careful to avoid any injuries and make sure that the core still works properly afterwards.'

Normally, mana cores couldn't compress or support mana of the next grade. The whole point of drinking elixirs was to cleanse them until they could. Micky would have to use runes to pick up the slack. He'd also have to make the organs gather and compress mana automatically, otherwise his grade would drop the moment he stopped paying attention.

Finally, he doubted that he would be able to force more than a single artificial advancement. Much like his cauldron was currently limited to potions just two grades higher, Micky knew that he wouldn't be able to strengthen the organs endlessly with magiscript alone.

This meant that he'd have to continue cleansing his cores the good old way, drinking Aurora Dew multiple times per day: working towards his next natural promotion. And he didn't want to keep removing and reapplying the runes, so he'd have to design them in a way that didn't interfere with beast mana.

‘There are several major problems that I’ll have to solve,’ Micky thought.

He’d have to plan the enchantments out and buy whatever books he was missing from the Vault. He’d also have to get countless times better at drawing them, because struggling to keep a single rune active inside his core just wouldn’t cut it.

More importantly, he’d have to find a way of making the enchantments permanent, since he couldn’t afford to actively maintain them. One option would be to use solid mana types. Between Crystallization and ice mana, his bodies already technically had the means to craft permanent enchantments inside his own cores, but that went against his hopes of making the spell usable by every affinity.

‘I wonder whether a mortal can learn to craft solid seals like Metatron’s…’ he thought, creasing his host’s brow.

The spatial seal that the titan had sold him was made entirely out of space mana, and Micky was pretty sure that wasn’t normally a solid mana type. If he could copy the god’s methods, he’d have the means to turn every single affinity into a solid material to forge his enchantments out of.

Pondering over this some more, Micky felt that it was a viable approach, though it created a bunch of new issues. Leaving aside whether he was even capable of learning Metatron’s technique, he had no idea whether the titan would be willing to sell him the information.

‘I’ll have to look into this the next time I’m there. If I can’t buy it with credits, maybe I can claim it from the reward pools after clearing the sixth wave of the challenges.’

If it wasn’t in the Red or Orange pools, it might be in the Yellow or Green ones. Gabe had even managed to get a demigod’s soul mana that way, so Micky felt good about his odds. And even if the information wasn’t in the system, he could still try trading Metatron something for it.

Once he had everything he needed from the Vault, it would be time to essentially perform alchemy inside his cores. The thought of treating his own body like a cauldron was quite scary, but it should be safe as long as he approached it with sufficient caution. As soon as he had something that worked, he would need to solve the issue with the elixirs too.

‘I suppose that I can’t keep relying on the Scribing trait forever either, otherwise the spell won’t be useable by other people.’

That wasn’t a priority of course. It was already going to be extremely difficult to reach his goal with the trait’s help, let alone without it, so Micky wasn’t in a rush to get rid of his spectral crutches just yet.

Even so, he was happy with the plan. It would admittedly involve a lot of challenging steps, but Micky didn’t see any of them as insurmountable. He’d just have to tackle them one at a time: which wasn’t anything new to him.

‘Most of those things can wait until later anyway. Right now, the best use of my time is to help Marnok while getting better with Internal Runecrafting.’

Micky was about to resume working on his spell, when he noticed that something had changed in the outside world. The sailors had stopped walking at some point, having probably reached the spot along the coastline closest to their destination. They’d gathered up, staring at the jungle ahead while discussing how to proceed.

Some wanted to do things more cautiously: to get in, find something edible, and immediately return to the beach. They weren’t necessarily against heading toward the Saint’s tomb eventually, but they wanted to take their sweet time preparing for it. They didn’t want to risk it until everyone was fully fed and rested, and they had slowly mapped out the area.

Others disagreed, insisting on going straight for the treasure. Apparently, their information already gave them a good idea of where it was located, and they reasoned that it was best to spend as little time inside the jungle as possible. Caution was good, but not if it meant giving the monsters dwelling in the depths of the island more chances to ambush them.

Micky didn’t much care what the sailors ended up choosing, his attention shifting to his host’s surroundings. The beach wasn’t as empty anymore: at some point, a few boulders of various sizes had appeared, jutting out of the sand. They were sleek and pitch black, most of them sporting irregular shapes that left no doubt that they had been formed naturally.

He keenly noticed a few with oddly canonical shapes, however, giving him a weird feeling. Micky wouldn't call them half-spherical exactly, and their texture didn't look any different from the regular boulders, but he thought that they appeared a little too similar to one another.

Scanning them with Mana Sense, he came up empty. No wonder the other sailors hadn't thought much of the objects. Was he really just imagining things?

Wanting to be sure, he searched inside his spatial seal, finding a tiny piece of his scythe that he'd managed to salvage earlier. It was barely as long as his index finger, and he didn't have a single drop of phantom mana left to repair it. Even if he tried to forcefully feed air mana into the adaptive runes, he guessed that they would distort the construct's shape into something unrecognizable long before he managed to regrow the weapon.

The scythe wasn't the point, however.

Quietly summoning the object to his host's hand, he clenched his fist, shattering the construct. Micky ignored the grey powder trickling through the gaps in his fingers. He couldn't un-crystallize his mana, but his reinforced weapons contained traces of soft mana as well.

There wasn't much, though he was able to send a tiny amount to his host's eyes, activating Soul Vision. The magical sense only flashed for a fraction of a second before fizzling out, yet it was just about long enough to give Micky a better glimpse into the strange rocks.

The sight that had unfolded before him sent a chill down his borrowed spine: a silver silhouette burned patiently inside each of the oddly-shaped boulders!

Chapter 514: Crabs

Micky had to stop his host from yelling.

'We need to warn 'em!' Marnok protested.

'We do, but you need to calm down first. Panicking will only make the situation worse,' Micky said.

He didn't think there was any chance that the creatures were planning to let them go: the endless hunger that came hand in hand with their affinity simply wouldn't allow them to ignore such a feast. If anything, it was surprising that they'd even held out this long, though Micky understood that was just a behaviour that they must have evolved after countless generations, to better their odds of getting a meal.

Judging from their sizes, most of them were at Yellow or Orange, and they appeared to outnumber the sailors three to one. Micky could see the fight going either way, but the outcome would largely depend on how they handled it.

The creatures likely understood that too. The only reason they hadn't attacked yet was probably because they wanted to lure the men even deeper into their ranks, to surround them from every direction. Their shells clearly concealed their mana signatures, the monsters having long learned the value of patience.

Micky was willing to bet good money that the creatures would drop the façade in a heartbeat the moment Marnok's people raised a big fuss or attempted to run away.

'What should we do?' Marnok asked upon listening to Micky's explanation.

'First things first. How close are you to activating the new core?'

''Tis ready,' his host replied. 'I've only kept the last channel half-closed like ya told me.'

Micky nodded internally. 'Good. Activate it. No matter what affinity we get, the physical boost should come in handy.'

While Marnok worked on awakening the organ, Micky paid attention to the sailors' conversation. They were still locked in a heated discussion, trying to decide whether to prioritize food or treasure, and how to better manage the risk.

The poor fools had yet to realize that food and risk had both already found them. Either way, the situation suited Micky just fine. The more his host's crewmates dragged on, the more time he and

Marnok had to prepare. Of course, there was always a chance that the monsters would get sick of waiting before they were ready, but there was nothing he could do about that.

About a minute later, their core contained enough mana for Micky to get a feel for its type. He'd experienced most affinities enough times to recognize them by now, though he wasn't necessarily as proficient with all of them. Thankfully, lady luck appeared to smile on him for once.

'Water… nice!'

It was merely a common affinity: which shouldn't come as a surprise, really: but also the best one he could have asked for. Not only was he extremely familiar with it, he was also skilled at manipulating its combination with air. Fusing the elements from two separate cores was bound to feel a little different from having a single core with the composite affinity, but he'd played with enough cores and bodies in the past that he should be able to figure it out quickly enough if necessary.

As an added bonus, he wouldn't have to worry about Marnok going thirsty if anything bad happened to the other water users in the group.

Along with the new organ came the familiar boost to Marnok's physique. Their muscles grew twice as strong, their mind clearer and their senses sharper. Micky didn't wait for his host to fill his core up, rushing to shape its contents into a concealment rune before the others noticed the oddity.

'What are ya doin'? Ain't we goin' to use the water mana?' the sailor asked.

'Only if we have to. No need to reveal all our trump cards before absolutely necessary,' Micky replied.

Keeping the enchantment from falling apart was a lot harder while Marnok was actively drawing mana to the organ, though that should stop being a problem as soon as it was full.

Either way, the added difficulty was offset by the fact that water mana was a lot calmer and slower. It didn't affect Micky's efforts nearly as much as air, and even though the currents inside the organ felt heavier, their movements weren't nearly as dizzying. In hindsight, there weren't many affinities more troublesome to pre-cast than air. Perhaps, Micky should have waited for a different host before attempting this.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

‘Oh well… what’s done is done. It was good practice anyway. Besides, I’ll need to learn how to do this with every affinity at some point,’ he thought with a mental shrug. Turning to his host, he said, ‘I won’t be able to focus on much else while I’m doing this, so make sure you survive.’

Marnok nodded, before interrupting his bickering crewmates.

“Oy! Shut yar traps for a moment!”

The sailors threw him curious glances, but he ignored them.

“No matter what I’m ‘bout to say, I need ya to remain calm. See ‘em black rocks around ya? Most of ‘em ain’t rocks. The smaller ones are beasts, bidin’ their time to bite ‘ar faces off.”

“‘ave ya lost it Marnok? Beasts can’t survive without ‘em mana cores. ‘n I don’t see any,” one of the men said with a smirk. “Did the lack of food get to ya?”

Many of the others snickered, only a couple looking like they were taking Marnok seriously.

“Just listen. If I’m wrong, ya can ‘ave a laugh at me expense later. But if I’m right, we’re in big trouble. Good news is that we ain’t got to go lookin’ for food. We can eat plenty ‘ere.”

“What do ya suggest?” the man with the red bandana asked, clearly belonging to the group more willing to entertain Marnok’s “madness”.

“Keep talkin’ so ‘em don’t realize we’re onto ‘em. Whatever happens, don’t try to run neither. Does ‘nyone think ‘em can get through ‘em shells?”

“I reckon only earth users can crack through ‘em big ones. Maybe fire can cook ‘em alive if we’re lucky. But we should all be able to handle ‘em small ones,” another sailor said.

Marnok nodded. “Ignore ‘em boulders shaped like actual rocks. We all attack on me signal, focusin’ on those to me left. We need to carve a path back the way we came, so that we don’t get surrounded. Everyone good?”

Some of the sailors seemed more willing to entertain Marnok’s proposition than others, though they all eventually nodded. Even the ones still thinking that this was a joke probably understood that they had nothing to lose if he was wrong and everything to lose if he was right.

“Now!” Marnok yelled, unleashing a green crescent blade at the nearest semi-spherical rock, the spell cleaving about halfway through the glossy shell before coming to a halt. Blue blood spilled out of the crack, providing ample evidence that he’d been telling the truth. Not that the others needed it, as they’d already attacked several other creatures.

A few earth users ganged up on one of the Yellow beasts. Its shell appeared even tougher than expected, the constructs unable to break through. The sailors settled for trapping the monster between a few stone pillars, its carapace barely cracking slightly where it collided with the spells. One of the fire users pitched in, finishing it off by pouring mana into the holes.

Things weren’t looking great, however. This was about to turn into a massacre if every creature required several people working together to take down. The other sailors either attacked the smaller beasts or tried to push the larger ones aside, focusing on opening a path instead of wasting their time and mana failing to deal any actual damage.

The beasts didn’t sit idly either. As soon as the men began attacking them, dozens of previously-still stones shifted at once, chitinous limbs unfolding one after the other. Sharp legs tapped rapidly against the sand, the crab-like creatures moving much faster than Micky had expected.

Each sported two pairs of giant pincers, the limbs stretching twice as long as the crabs’ bodies, the afternoon sun giving their serrated edges an ominous red sheen as they clicked loudly.

In mere moments, the army of creatures crashed into the group of marooned sailors like a tidal wave, the men doing everything they could to resist the onslaught while moving backwards.

Beasts fell one after the other: the Orange creatures doing so far more frequently than the Yellows. Unfortunately, Marnok's crewmates experienced plenty of casualties themselves.

The first to fall was one of the sick Orange-borns. Micky wasn't sure whether it had been the man's grade or illness that had caused him to miss a step. Either way, the poor sailor's leg ended up caught by an oversized pincer, causing him to lose both his foot and his footing, two massive crabs soon ripping him apart with savage glee. The second Orange-born performed a little better than his dead companion, even managing to outlive a couple of Yellow-born sailors before succumbing himself.

While the sailors lacked the numbers or the tough exteriors of their opponents, they had a few advantages of their own to fall back to. Unlike the bulky creatures that kept getting in each other's way, the men could stack their spells together a lot more easily. Retreating methodically, they bought themselves time to slowly whittle down the monsters.

Before long, all the Orange beasts were dead, the sailors managing to open up a path out of the encirclement. They should be able to outrun the crabs if they chose to escape, but nobody seemed willing to do that.

Whether it was out of a desire to avenge their fallen comrades, unwillingness to let all this food to go to waste, or pure spite toward the insidious creatures, the sailors decided to stay and fight, their coordinated spells gradually turning the battle in their favour.

The crabs found it increasingly difficult to approach, dying one after the other as the men took turns holding the line or recovering their mana.

Micky never felt the need to pitch in, focusing solely on his Internal Runecrafting throughout the battle. It was valuable experience, and it wasn't like an extra water mage would have made a huge difference. Exposing his host's second core would only bring them trouble down the line.

Marnok never attempted to use his new mana type either. Leaving aside the fact that Micky had explicitly instructed him not to, he probably didn't even know how to wield the affinity properly: certainly not at the same time as his air mana. However, his newly strengthened body definitely made a difference, allowing him to position himself better, preventing him from falling behind his companions and getting devoured by the monsters.

By the time the sun was about to set, the earth users joined forces one final time to pin the last crab between a bunch of constructs, the beast letting out a screeching cry as the fire users emptied their cores inside its carapace.

The sailors had won the gruesome battle and even found themselves some dinner!

Or at least, the eight of them still breathing had…

Chapter 515: Cleaning up

The irony of getting ambushed by a group of beasts that hid their mana cores while he himself was working on a similar ability wasn't lost on Micky.

As soon as the battle was over, the survivors looted a few shards from the crabs' shells to fix into their clothes, to hopefully mask their mana signatures in the coming days. In a way, this rendered Micky's previous efforts moot, though he hadn't been practicing Internal Runecrafting just for Marnok's sake.

The group was rightfully distraught after losing nearly half of their members again, yet nobody complained much. Today's casualties were barely a drop in the bucket compared to the hundreds of people who had died the day before.

Each survivor contributed in whatever way he could, to clean up the mess and get some much-needed rest as soon as possible. Marnok and another air user worked together to funnel the stench of death and decay toward the ocean, to avoid drawing unwanted attention from the land-dwelling creatures.

The only remaining water user: or well… the only one that the other sailors knew about: washed away the bloodstains on the sand, while two earth users were in charge of burying the bodies and building a makeshift camp for the group. It might have been more prudent to move away from the battlefield before more monsters arrived in search of food, but the sailors were too tired to travel or carry the heavy carcasses.

Two fire mages took it upon themselves to roast the Orange crabs. The larger specimens were too tough to eat, but the sailors didn't rush to get rid of them. They hoped to offer them as tribute to any invading beasts, to hopefully avoid further bloodshed tonight.

There weren't any pure or lightning mages left. There had been some, but none had made it through the battle. All the sick men had died too: Micky didn't think it was a coincidence that the sailors with the lower grades, weaker affinities, or impaired physical conditions had been among the first to perish.

'Just the indifference of nature doing its cruel job…' He sighed.

Much to his host's relief, Flammy was the eighth survivor. The life mage hadn't been able to do much against the crabs directly, but his crewmates had gone out of their way to protect their only healer, and he'd returned the favour by keeping everyone in decent condition throughout the battle. He was currently walking toward Marnok to do more of that, his hand ablaze with the green glow of life mana.

"I'm good mate," Micky hurriedly said after seizing control of his host's mouth. "The others need yar help more," he added, making sure to emulate Marnok's speech pattern to the best of his ability. He pointed to another sailor that sported a couple of nasty gashes on his left leg, just below his knee.

Flammy nodded, quietly moving to heal the injured man as a mental frown bubbled up through Marnok's soul. 'Who says no to free healin'? I know we're doin' better than most, but I wouldn't mind gettin' some of me fatigue washed away, ya know?'

Micky felt the urge to roll his eyes. 'I've still got plenty of healing potions left,' he said, emptying a few doses into his host's stomach. The Orange liquid had grown even less effective on Marnok after he awakened his second core, but relieving some tension from his muscles wasn't an issue.

'Aye, if ya'd rather waste yar potions than to get patched up for free, who am I to judge?' Marnok replied with a shrug.

As soon as everyone was done with their respective tasks, the sailors feasted in relative silence around the campfire, only speaking briefly to discuss their plans for tomorrow.

The thought of venturing into the jungle with nearly half the men they'd started out with filled everyone with unconcealed dread, yet reaching the Saint's tomb might be their only shot at surviving the island. Not that the demigod's treasure was guaranteed to save them, but the alternatives were far less promising.

Nobody knew how long it would be before their Commodore sent more ships after them, and they didn't think that they'd be able to survive on the coast for weeks or months: maybe even years.

"At least we no longer need food. We'll save a lot o' time if we 'ead straight there," one of them concluded, getting a round of nods back.

Half the sailors went to sleep, Marnok and Flammy included. Or at least, the former pretended to do so, to avoid having to explain his willingness to keep watch for a second night in a row. Closing their eyes, Micky and his host rested on the soft sand, listening to the soothing sound of the waves and the hushed whispers of the sailors on guard duty.

'A couple of them are coughing again,' Micky noticed, suppressing a frown.

They weren't the same people as yesterday: those men had already died. Worse still, the newly afflicted sailors were all Yellow-borns, which was a terrible omen if Micky had seen one.

Granted, he already had some guesses as to what was causing this, but he lacked enough evidence to be certain. Deciding to sit on the information a little longer, he ignored everyone else, turning his attention inwards again.

The fact that Marnok no longer needed the concealment runes lifted some pressure off Micky's non-existent shoulders, but that didn't deter him from resuming work on his project. He still had a long way to go before his new skill was at a satisfactory level for his goals.

'A single rune isn't challenging enough anymore. I need to push myself further,' he realized.

Maintaining the enchantment still took a lot of effort, but his improvements had slowed down noticeably after having kept the rune active for the past few hours. Clearly, he'd have to keep raising the bar if he didn't want to stagnate.

Adding more runes was a no-brainer, but Micky had no idea how he was meant to draw multiple enchantments side-by-side inside the spherical core. Instead, he opted for enchantments that involved multiple runes stacked over one another.

The most obvious next step was a controlled concealment rune. He started by forming one in his host's water core, to ease the transition, only switching to the air core about an hour later. The process hadn't changed much, but the shape in his mind was a little more complex, forcing him to expend more effort to hold it together.

Over the next couple of hours, Micky moved on to other types of controlled enchantments, drawing each one inside Marnok's water core first, before scrapping it and switching to the more challenging air core, getting faster and better with every attempt.

About halfway through the night, he realized that trying different runes wasn't helping as much anymore. Deciding to increase the difficulty again, he drew one of his favourite enchantments: and one that involved two intricate runes rather than one and a half:

A self-repair.

Micky had considered the possibility of using internal self-repairs to somehow accelerate his advancements in the past, though he'd long concluded that it wouldn't work.

Mana cores couldn't be repaired with just mana. Even if he could somehow get the memory runes to store the organ's blueprint before a cleansing session and the growth runes to restore it afterwards, the enchantment would most likely bring back all the purged impurities, essentially reversing the effect of the elixir.

If he did that, Micky would only be wasting time and beast mana. He just couldn't imagine a way to mend the cracks in the core the right way: other than feeding them crystallized pure mana, which his Aurora Dew already did.

'Come to think of it, none of my current enchantments are particularly useful when paired with the new spell,' he realized.

Other than the concealment runes that could be used in niche situations, the only others that might come close were heat runes, pressure runes or structural integrity enchantments.

Heat runes could potentially be used to warm up his body if he ended up stuck in a cold environment with a low grade and an affinity incapable of generating heat by itself.

The pressure runes might allow him to expel mana more forcefully from his body, to perhaps strengthen his spells slightly. Of course, he could achieve something similar with regular pre-casting, and he wasn't even sure that the organ would be able to endure the strain.

As for the structural integrity enchantments, they could potentially shield his cores from harm, though he struggled to think of many situations where that would be handy.

'I guess that they can be combined with pressure runes to offset the damage.'

It would arguably be too much effort for too little gain. That said, both the structural integrity enchantments and the pressure runes would be part of his eventual artificial promotion, so testing this out sounded like a nice milestone to aim towards.

'I'll worry about that later. Right now, even the self-repair is difficult to draw,' he decided, shaking the pointless thoughts off.

It took Micky two hours just to get the enchantment to work inside Marnok's second core, and another to resist the violent air mana in his first. Micky was debating internally whether to try a controlled self-repair next, or to go back to the simpler concealment runes but keep them active in both cores at the same time, when he got interrupted.

The first rays of the morning sun licked his host's face gently, the other sailors calling out to him: slightly less gently.

"Oy, Marnok! We're about to head out!"

Micky took a short break from his runecrafting, he and his host stretching their limbs, taking a few deep breaths of the salty breeze, and eating a couple slices of dried crab meat. It was finally time to trek to the Saint's tomb!

Chapter 516: Skull Island

The sailors moved cautiously through the jungle, heading straight toward the nearest lake. Apparently, there were three of them on the island, the largest one sporting a crescent shape like a person's grin, the other two perfectly circular.

From the sky, the island looked like a skull, which was precisely how it had received the name that it was labelled by on most maps: at least according to the sailors who had actually seen said maps, though Marnok and, by proxy, Micky, had only heard about this from the others. The tomb was supposedly buried beneath the lake that made up the skull's right eye.

'No wonder it hasn't been discovered in so long,' Micky had thought upon hearing about it.

He didn't doubt that the people of Robari had turned their whole planet upside down in search of the hidden stashes of Fools' Amber, but few would think to dig beneath a random body of water on some remote island without a hint.

Technically, the lake was only a couple dozen kilometres away from the spot where the sailors had fought the crabs. After all, the marooned crew had spent the better part of the previous day circling the island precisely to shorten the distance as much as possible.

The trek still took a while as the eight men travelled cautiously, masking their cores and dulling their steps as best as they could. They'd even covered their bodies with mud to get rid of their scent, and kept their mouths shut: for the most part: to avoid drawing any attention.

If there was one thing that wasn't going in their favour, it was the sailors' intermittent coughs that kept echoing through the dense undergrowth. The afflicted men had wrapped strips of fabric around their mouths to stifle the sound, though there was a limit to how much cloth they could stuff in their faces without suffocating. As for where they'd found the excess fabric?

Well… let's just say that their deceased crewmates wouldn't be needing their shirts moving forward. They wouldn't be needing their boots either, which was why Marnok had "borrowed" a pair.

'Is it me, or are there more people coughing again?' Micky wondered, letting his host's lips curl into a frown.

Last night, it had only been two, but another three had since joined their ranks. Flammy was among them, which Marnok wasn't particularly happy about, clearly worried about his friend's health. Luckily, Micky and his host hadn't felt anything odd yet.

'Start coughing,' Micky told Marnok at some point.

'What?' the sailor asked, his soul flaring with surprise at the strange request.

'You heard me,' Micky replied. 'And once you begin, make sure you keep it up, or the others will know you're faking it.'

'But why?'

'Because, if I'm right about this, your friends will soon be asking why you're the only one who's okay.'

Marnok didn't seem entirely convinced, but he heeded Micky's instructions regardless.

The group continued to advance slowly through the jungle, prioritizing caution over speed. Had they sprinted toward the lake, the trip wouldn't have taken them longer than an hour. However, they opted to travel without raising a stir, and while carefully scanning every patch of dirt they stepped over. Despite the delay, they should be reaching their destination by noon.

Micky only paid attention to them intermittently, spending most of his time working on the new spell. He had already managed to form and sustain a controlled self-repair enchantment in his host's water core, though getting it to work inside the air core was proving rather difficult.

That was why he'd taken a break from pushing for more complex runes, instead switching his efforts to multitasking. Right now, he was trying to form concealment runes in both organs. The one in Marnok's second core was already complete, yet forcing the other one into shape wasn't easy.

'Maybe I should try doing it the other way around? It might be easier to draw the rune in the water core while holding one steady in the air core…'

Strictly speaking, this particular exercise wasn't very relevant to his project. His artificial advancement would certainly involve enchantments far more complex than his controlled self-repairs: so that part of his training was necessary: but he wouldn't need to draw them in multiple cores at once. As soon as he learned how to give his runes substance, he should have the means to upgrade his organs one at a time.

However, Micky felt that any practice was good. Even if an exercise didn't have an obvious application, it would help him spot and fix flaws in his technique that he hadn't even noticed.

He was about to test out his new idea, when a sudden scream pierced the jungle, drawing everyone's attention.

Several heads: including Marnok's: snapped toward the noise, Micky soon realizing that one of their crewmembers was missing. Of course, Mana Sense was often more reliable than regular vision. Marnok's soon revealed the location of the unfortunate sailor, the crab shells hiding his core having shifted from his sternum.

Guided by his sixth sense, Micky's gaze followed their crewmate's mana signature up a tall tree, his host's eyes widening upon landing on the man's mutilated body. A giant shape was slowly coiling around his torso, squeezing the life out of him. The sailor's bones audibly cracked with every centimetre the foreign mass travelled, his swollen flesh twitching in pain as blood oozed out of countless wounds.

However, the poor sailor couldn't let out another sound, a massive maw having already swallowed the upper third of his body, two yellow orbs shining on its head with unconcealed malice.

'Some kind of snake? It's huge!' Micky thought as he tried to fathom the creature's entire length.

Its body stretched and twisted through the crowns of nearly every tree in the area, its girth thicker than the numerous trunks supporting its weight. It was so long in fact, that Micky wasn't sure whether it was a single beast or a whole pack of them. If it was just one specimen, it had to be at Green, though he struggled to read its grade.

Gasps and horrified shrieks broke the oppressive silence of the jungle once again as the surviving sailors stepped closer to one another, nearly pressing their backs together and facing outwards.

“H-How in the reefs did we miss it?!” one of them asked, his voice shaking.

That… was a great question. The abomination was practically everywhere – and yet it had somehow eluded all eight of their Mana Senses for such a long time. Scanning it more carefully, Micky noticed that its pitch-black body wasn’t covered in scales exactly, but rather something else.

Shards of a material that appeared oddly familiar. Come to think of it, didn’t it look exactly like the fragmented shells that Marnok and his crewmates were using to hide their own cores?

The pieces were rough and irregular, seemingly attached to the monster’s body rather than naturally grown. Micky saw traces of a pale liquid spilling slowly through the gaps: thick, viscous and sticky: like molten wax, holding the stolen carapaces in place.

Swallowing hard, Micky was about to instruct Marnok and the other sailors to attack the creature while it was still busy with its meal, when he saw something else that caused the blood to freeze in his host’s veins.

Micky had instinctively thought of the beast as some kind of snake: but this wasn’t Remior. His preconceived notions clearly couldn’t be trusted. The monster’s elongated body didn’t run across a single straight line: it forked at a certain spot, splitting into three ways!

One segment clearly led to the head currently devouring the unlucky sailor. Another likely ended up as the creature’s tail, somewhere far in the distance. As for the last one…

Micky’s borrowed eyes darted across the canopies as he frantically followed the abomination’s body to its third extremity. The colossal beast stretched too far, winding through countless gaps in the dense foliage, almost forming a second layer of jungle overlaying the first one.

To Micky’s great horror, his search eventually led him right above his host!

Rivers of transparent saliva gushed out of a jaw hung so wide it might as well have been a cave, rows of curved fangs glinting with hunger as a second pair of yellow orbs shone upon Marnok!

“Fuck!” Micky spat, shoving the others aside as he rolled along the dried dirt, barely dodging the monster’s strike.

The enormous mass crashed into the ground where Marnok had just stood with enough force to shake the entire area, the surrounding trees still vibrating a couple of seconds later. Micky felt his host’s eardrums nearly split, watching the earth crack as the violent impact raised a cloud of dust.

The creature’s fangs remained lodged deep in the dirt, getting ripped out of their owner’s maw as it pulled its head up, blue blood spilling out of its torn gums. Micky didn’t get a chance to celebrate his opponent’s defanging, countless new fangs soon sprouting to replace them: the beast was clearly built for precisely this sort of thing.

The other sailors finally decided to make themselves useful, a barrage of spells of four separate affinities flying toward the creature. Little good it did them, however, the projectiles splashing harmlessly against the stolen fragments, never so much as touching the monster’s actual body.

“Focus yar attacks at the same spot!” Micky yelled. “We’ll never kill it if we shoot randomly!”

He wasn’t sure whether the others had heard him through the cacophony of the battle. Trees snapped in two every time the snake moved, colourful flashes blinding everyone as boulders, fireballs, green crescents and streams of water pelted the beast’s armoured hide, plunging the jungle into complete chaos.

Thankfully, their attacks soon converged where the monster’s necks split. Whether they had heard Micky or not, Marnok’s crewmates clearly had the same idea as him. Nobody knew whether the monster could survive with a single head, so their best bet was to make sure that they severed both at once.

Micky actively assisted his host this time, making full use of his water mana. He no longer cared whether anyone noticed. They were probably too busy to pay attention to him anyway, and he guessed that they would be more than happy to swallow whatever explanation Marnok gave them later as long as they survived.

Perhaps he'd pack more firepower if he seized Marnok's other core too and fused the mana types into ice, but he decided that he'd rather have a second mind helping him than a composite affinity.

Everyone's priority was to keep track of the creature's head, as it posed the greatest threat to the group by far. At least, it had yet to demonstrate the ability to attack with any other body part. However, avoiding its blows grew twice as hard as soon as the monster was done devouring its meal, freeing up its second head.

The second sailor fell almost immediately: it was one of the earth users: increasing the pressure on the others once again.

The good news was that their attacks eventually yielded some results, peeling off the layer of chitin shielding the intersection of the beast's necks. The opening exposed a much softer body hiding beneath: translucent and slimy like a slug's. The sticky fluid was already flowing along the creature's length, dragging more of the glossy fragments with it, the monster clearly trying to repair its broken armour.

"Like hell I'll let ya!" the last of the earth users shouted, emptying his core to fire a massive stone spear into the creature's hide, stabbing into its vulnerable exterior.

Only, the sailor had left himself wide open in his eagerness. Worse still, he didn't have a drop of mana left to protect himself with. Others tried to save him, but the snake's fangs tore through their hastily crafted constructs as if they were paper, snapping around the man's body and leaving his torso riddled with holes.

To his credit, the sailor retained enough clarity of mind to will the spear to shatter with his dying breath, giving his crewmates an opening to pour their attacks directly into the creature's body.

"Come on! Just die already!" another yelled, hurling a fireball into the hole.

The abomination writhed in agony, apparently realizing that it was about to lose its life. It pulled both of its heads back, going as far as to let go of the mangled corpse still in its maw. Its serpentine frame moved along the trees' crowns as it attempted to untangle itself from the jungle and slither away.

Marnok's companions showed no interest in letting it go, however. They ran behind it, continuing to shower its body with spells, trying to aim for the opening that their fallen comrade had sacrificed his life to create. Most of their attacks missed, but a few didn't, the snake screeching in agony each time.

"Let it go!" Micky yelled, taking control of his host's mouth. "It's not worth chasin'!"

Before anyone even had the chance to register his words, a colossal shadow flew through the jungle, slicing every tree in its path like a giant's machete, heading straight toward the group.

Micky barely got Marnok to duck, scarcely registering that two others had done the same. Their three companions weren't so lucky, the snake's tail slamming into them more violently than its heads ever had, causing their upper bodies to burst into minced meat. Fountains of blood sprayed out of their severed torsos, as a rain of dirt, splintered wood, fragmented shells and gore showered what was left of the jungle.

By the time Marnok, Flammy, and the sailor with the red bandana raised their heads, the Green snake was long gone, the midday sun shining brightly over the uprooted section of the jungle that stretched for dozens of metres around them.

Not wasting a moment, Micky took control of his host's body, darting toward a certain direction while yelling at the others.

"Run toward the lake!"

Chapter 517: Flammy

Abandoning all caution, Micky sprinted toward the lake at full speed, the other survivors right behind his host. It was too late for stealth anyway: given the commotion that their battle against the two-headed snake had raised.

On top of that, they most certainly lacked the numbers to protect themselves against any other horrors that the jungle might throw at them, so their best bet was to avoid them entirely. Hopefully the monstrous serpent had scared the other beasts off. The group had already covered most of the distance to the tomb, so it shouldn't take them very long to arrive at this pace.

‘Can’t believe we lost two hundred men in three days,’ Marnok said, his heart still racing. ‘Just how unlucky can one get?’

‘I don’t think it was all luck,’ Micky mentally shook his head, though he didn’t bother to elaborate.

Nobody said anything else, the three men rushing through the jungle, this time keeping an eye up at the trees’ crowns in case there were more snakes lying in wait. Fortunately, they managed to reach the circular lake where the Saint’s treasure was supposedly buried without encountering any other creatures.

Technically, there was a chance that they’d lost their way in their hurry and ended up at the wrong lake, though Micky doubted that was the case. The other bodies of water were much farther away, so he and his companions wouldn’t have reached a different lake this soon.

As for whether the demigod’s tomb was truly hidden here… he had no idea. None of the deceased sailors had been certain either. Micky didn’t even know how deep the lake was, or whether any aquatic creatures lurked inside its seemingly tranquil waters, as their intel hadn’t included that information.

The only thing he could tell was how wide it was: a couple kilometres across. Even if the treasure was here, finding it wasn’t going to be easy. Things would have been simpler if they had arrived with hundreds of men as originally planned.

Listening to the persistent coughs of their companions, Micky remembered that his host was supposed to be faking his illness too. Then again, it didn’t really matter at this point.

The sailor with the red bandana was breathing and coughing a lot harder than Flammy. It hadn’t been that long since he fell sick, but straining himself during the previous battle must have greatly worsened his condition. The island’s humidity probably wasn’t making things easy for him either.

“Need some ‘elp, Nodarr?” Flammy asked.

The healer hadn’t done as much as the others during the battle. Most of the snake’s blows had been lethal anyway: by the time they connected there was nothing left to heal. That said, he seemed more than happy to contribute his life mana after the fact, as always.

Nodarr gestured for the man to proceed, prompting Micky to do something that none of the sailors could have expected. Taking control of his host's cores, he allowed a huge amount of air and water mana to spill out of his body, and to mix into a layer of frost that spread toward the healer.

"Don't touch him!" Micky yelled as a pale sheet of ice covered Flammy's feet, freezing him in place.

He didn't stop there, however, crystalline tendrils coiling around the healer's legs and torso, making crackling sounds as they restrained him further. Flammy tried to resist, of course, but the tendrils only grew thicker as they wrapped around his body, soon binding his arms and even covering his mouth.

"Marnok?! What in the reefs are ya doin'?!" *cough* "And how the–" Nodarr began to say before gasping mid-sentence, his eyes widening with realization. "Ya've a second mana core!"

"Stay away from him," Micky insisted, making no effort to imitate his host's accent anymore.

Meanwhile, Marnok didn't seem particularly happy about this turn of events either. 'Micky?! Mind explainin' why ya're attackin' me mate all of a sudden?!' he asked, trying to take back control of his body.

Micky sighed. Stirring the spectral fiends slumbering inside his wisp, he used their help to strengthen his hold on his vessel against the man's wishes.

"It's him," he said out loud for everyone's sake, his voice calm and confident. "Flammy's the one who's infected the whole crew. I'm willing to bet good money that he was behind the shipwreck too."

Marnok's resistance eased slightly, his soul flaring with disbelief, though Micky could tell via their connection that his host was still more inclined to side with his friend than him.

Nodarr didn't appear very convinced either. "That's a serious accusation, Marnok! 'ave ya 'nythin' to back this up?"

“I… know more about the life affinity than most people,” Micky replied, scrambling to decide how to best phrase what he was about to say. “I’ve come across a family with multiple life users in the past. They could use it for more than just healing.”

“That ain’t proof,” Nodarr said.

“No, it isn’t,” Micky agreed. “Which is why I didn’t say anything sooner, even though I’ve had my suspicions for a while. But I’ve been paying attention to Flammy over the past couple of days, and everyone he ‘healed’ coincidentally started coughing shortly afterwards. Just think about it for a moment: aren’t you the same?”

Nodarr creased his brow, clearly taking Micky’s words seriously for the first time in this conversation. Even Marnok stopped trying to forcefully reclaim his body, finally willing to at least hear Micky out.

cough “What about ya, then?” Nodarr asked. “Couldn’t ‘elp but notice ya stopped coughin’ the moment that thing attacked us. Were ya pretendin’ all along?”

“I was protecting myself,” Micky said, not a hint of apology in his voice. “He tried to infect me the moment I made it to shore, but I accidentally got rid of his mana due to reasons that aren’t relevant. It took me a while to piece together what had happened, but I realized that he’d try to infect me again, so I’ve been rejecting all his subsequent offers to heal me.”

“So what?” Nodarr pressed. “Ya didn’t ‘ave to lie to us.”

“What choice did I have?” Micky shrugged. “When he started faking his own cough, I realized that he was planning to single me out. I would have been the one who looked suspicious if I’d been the last healthy person in the group. I still didn’t have any evidence to prove that he had infected everyone or that he was faking his own cough, but he couldn’t prove that I was faking mine either.”

“What’s changed? Ya still don’t have ‘ny concrete proof, so why did ya stop doin’ it?”

“Well… believe it or not, playing Flammy’s little game was the last thing on my mind while we were getting butchered by a Green beast. And, frankly, I no longer give a shit now that it’s just the three of us.

I can handle him just fine, so I could have waited for him to kill you, but I thought I'd do you the courtesy of letting you know."

"What about the second core?" *cough* "Or ya speakin' differently all of a sudden?"

"I don't mind giving you a detailed explanation about all of that, but I promise you that it has nothing to do with any of this. I'm not sure you even have the time to hear me out."

Nodarr fell silent, seemingly contemplating everything Micky had said.

However, Marnok clearly had a few more questions for him. 'This still doesn't make sense. I've known Flammy for decades! I've met 'is family! 'is boy calls me "Uncle"! Why in the reefs would he do this to us?'

'That much is obvious,' Micky replied with a mental shrug. 'I don't know if he's been lying to you the whole time or just recently decided to stab you in the back, but he clearly wants all the Fools' Amber to himself.'

'That's stupid! We ain't even sure it exists! And he couldn't 'ave known he'd survive this long: he could 'ave died a dozen times over!'

Micky scratched the back of his host's head. 'This… I admit it's the one thing I haven't been able to figure out. It's one of the reasons I've waited so long to tell even you. But I'm pretty sure about the rest.'

He didn't think that it was a coincidence that nearly every person Flammy had touched had ended up falling sick and getting killed in the very next battle, but the man's motivations indeed didn't add up.

Flammy could have drowned in the shipwreck or gotten picked off by the aquatic monsters while swimming to the island, and he could have just as easily gotten killed by the crabs or the Green snake. They didn't even know whether the demigod's tomb was here, nor did Flammy have the means to survive on the island by himself after getting rid of everyone else.

It would have been safer for him to betray his crewmates during the return trip, after they'd confirmed the Amber's existence and helped him claim it. And even if: by some miracle: he managed to get off the island with all the treasure, how was he going to escape from the Green-borns ruling the oceans long enough to use it?

It almost felt like the man's greed had robbed him of every trace of common sense, leading him to make all sorts of idiotic choices, gambling his life at every turn.

"Let 'im speak." *cough* "I want to hear what he has to say," Nodarr said after a while.

Micky complied, since he was just as curious as the others. He unsealed Flammy's mouth, only to reveal the world's creepiest grin. Much like Micky had warned Marnok and Nodarr, their "healer" no longer bothered to cough.

More importantly, he made no effort to deny the accusations or defend his actions, nor did he look very concerned that his treachery had been unveiled. He merely stared at his former companions, his eyes as still as the lake they reflected, with just the faintest glint of mirth simmering in their depths.

"Nothin'?" *cough* "Is everythin' Marnok" *cough, cough* "said about ya true?" Nodarr asked, his coughs growing more frequent by the second.

"Flammy! Tell 'em they're wrong!" Marnok suddenly yelled, Micky allowing him to use his body again.

Silence.

Nodarr raised an eyebrow upon registering Marnok's sudden change in tone, but Flammy didn't show the slightest reaction to his friend's outburst, nor to anything else that had been spoken earlier.

Not until a couple of seconds later at least, when he turned to face Nodarr directly. Ignoring the tight restraints, he shifted within the ice, his bones audibly cracking in the process. The grating noise made every hair on Marnok's body stand on end, though the healer didn't seem to even feel the pain. Flammy's core flared with mana, making Micky realize that something was wrong.

Countless veins squirmed beneath Nodarr's skin, the poor sailor clenching his chest in agony as he fell to his knees. His throat and chin turned purple and swollen, blood pouring out of every orifice in his body!

"Fuck! Stop this or I swear I'll kill you!" Micky yelled, but the life mage didn't so much as flinch.

Chapter 518: Scarabs

Micky used the icy vines to constrict the healer tighter, but Flammy didn't seem to care about his misshapen body or the countless wounds tearing open across his skin.

Nodarr was having a much harder time enduring the violent symptoms of his infection, however. Bloody foam spilled out of his lips as he struggled to speak: or breathe: Micky wasn't sure which: but only choked gargles escaped his mouth. Before long, he was convulsing on the ground, clawing desperately at the dirt and his own neck, trying to dig a hole to inhale through, yet his flesh only swelled further to seal his self-inflicted wounds.

Realizing that Flammy wasn't going to let the poor man go, Micky formed an icy javelin in his hands, pointing it at his host's friend. He didn't know whether the healer's death would release Nodarr, but he had no idea what else to try.

Marnok didn't even try to stop him this time. Perhaps he'd fully accepted that Flammy was no longer the person he once knew, or maybe he was simply too shaken by the pointless cruelty transpiring before his very eyes.

Just as Micky fired the construct, veins squirmed beneath Flammy's mutilated skin too, his body turning red like a ripe tomato, in a manner that reminded Micky of his trollsfury potions. The healer's muscles flexed with new power, shattering his restraints as he smashed the projectile with his backhand. At the same time, life mana flooded his body to mend his wounds.

Of course, Flammy's injuries were way too serious to be fixed in an instant, even after emptying his core. His half-repaired bones broke again with every step he took, cutting through his own flesh as he charged at Micky on all fours like a wild beast, leaving bloody footprints and palmprints on the frozen ground.

Whether his goal was to rip Marnok apart with his bare hands, bite his throat out like a rabid dog, or just infect and watch him suffer the same fate as Nodarr, Micky didn't know nor care. Either way, he didn't panic, knowing that he was stronger and far more collected than the injured healer.

Flammy had only possessed half of Marnok's mana reserves to start with, and he'd already wasted a lot to worsen Nodarr's injuries, to free himself from the ice, and to fight against his self-inflicted wounds.

More ice spilled out of Marnok's body, a new layer of frost reaching Flammy, this one even thicker than before. Tendrils sprouted to stop the healer in his tracks once again, the man's face coming to a halt mere centimetres from his former friend's.

Flammy's eyes had remained perfectly placid throughout, no matter what he'd done or what had happened to him: almost as if his mind was no longer even present, his body acting entirely on its own. Micky had to admit that he was more than a little disturbed by the sight, even though he knew that the healer didn't pose much of a threat to him.

Not giving up, the life mage spat out a mouthful of infected blood into Marnok's eyes: or tried to, anyway: though Micky had seen that coming from a kilometre away, having already coated his host's face with a film of water.

Shifting his attention back to Nodarr, he realized that the man was already dead.

Sighing, he was about to finish the incapacitated healer off, when another change occurred in the man's body. His throbbing veins suddenly expanded once again, this time turning pitch black. The dark colour snaked toward Flammy's face before spilling into his eyes, a black cloud soon covering his scleras.

Micky instinctively took a few steps back, no longer sure what he was dealing with. Everything the healer had done up to that point could be explained by a life mage that had lost his mind due to greed, but they were quickly delving into stranger territory.

It was a good thing that he'd put some distance from the man too, because Flammy vomited another mouthful of blood the very next instant, once again trying to infect his friend. Only, this time, the liquid was viscous and black like tar, a series of disturbing shapes writhing inside the blob.

Micky intercepted the attack with a blast of pressurized air, only for the scattered droplets to move again by themselves the moment they landed on the ground. They formed a swarm of tiny insects: beetles? Or scarabs, perhaps? The nasty creatures: if they could even be called that: flew at Micky, trying to worm their way into his host's body.

Gritting his borrowed teeth, Micky blocked them again with a screen of water, trapping them in the clear liquid. The scarabs didn't give up, however, turning back into droplets that tried to swim right through the azure barrier!

"Not gonna happen," Micky spat, gathering and rolling the mana into a globule as big as a watermelon, making sure that he pulled every last drop of filth to its centre. Scanning it with his Mana Sense, he soon confirmed that this thing didn't have a mana core of any sort: something that every living being in the universe was supposed to need.

Then again, he wasn't sure whether spectral fiends had any either: he'd never thought to check: nor did he know whether they counted as living creatures. Whatever the case, the tar-like material trapped before him looked nothing like them either.

'Another demonic infestation?' he wondered. 'They're much more common than I thought…'

How many clones had he even sent out in total? Four? Five hundred? And this was already his third time running into a world like this. Of course, every infestation he'd encountered had manifested in an entirely different way, but the similarities were uncanny.

'Could this have something to do with Robari's gods killing each other and ruining their only source of stable beast mana?' he asked both himself and his host.

Marnok remained silent, clearly still too shocked to utter a word. Even Micky was too tired to solve the mystery right now, and way too freaked out by the weird substance to keep watching it wriggling inside the azure bubble.

Pouring some air mana into the construct, he froze it completely before shattering it into powder: as fine as he could make it. Just to be sure, he stomped on both the pale and black dust indiscriminately, before freezing everything into an even larger block of ice that would hopefully last for several hours before melting. If that wasn't enough, he used more ice mana to drill a deep pit into the ground, burying the construct and sealing it with mud.

Turning to Flammy, he realized that the crazed sailor was somehow still alive. Whether it was his life affinity or his ailment keeping him breathing wasn't clear, though the man had reduced himself to a

shrivelled mummy, too weak to fight against his new prison. Even so, he was clearly trying: and thankfully failing: to gather more of the dark blood to vomit out.

Not interested in finding out whether the healer would eventually succeed, Micky froze him completely into a statue, before giving his corpse the same treatment as the bugs.

Was it a little over the top?

Probably. Especially given the fact that he was borrowing Marnok's body to pulverize his friend's. Still, Micky knew that these demonic infestations could bring even gods to their knees. Robari had been even more developed than Amenthes, and had still suffered greatly, so he wasn't going to leave anything up to chance.

Only after separating and burying the minced and twice-frozen remains of the treacherous life mage in five different pits did he finally exhale in relief, plopping down weakly.

'Marnok… I'm really sorry about your crew and your friend. And for making you watch that,' he said as he tried to catch his breath.

'Just… what was that?' the last surviving sailor asked, his inner voice soft and defeated.

'If I'm right… something really, really nasty,' Micky replied vaguely. 'Have you ever heard of anything like this happening elsewhere on your planet?'

Marnok shook his head. 'Do ya think I could 'ave 'elped him? Had I realized sooner?' he asked, clearly caring more about the people he had lost than the fate of his world.

'Don't even go there,' Micky said, his voice growing firmer. 'I'm pretty sure that whatever happened to him has been going on for a while. Since before the shipwreck for sure. Probably long before that. You couldn't have known, and I doubt you could have done anything about it.'

Marnok didn't reply immediately, though he did eventually nod a couple of minutes later. 'Now what? Everyone is gone. I'm the last person on the damn island.'

Micky pushed his host's body back to his feet, scanning their surroundings once more. His gaze lingered on Nodarr's gnarly corpse for a second, the man's expression still twisted by horror, disease and sheer agony.

They should bury him. Micky didn't know whether the infection that had killed him had merely been the product of Flammy's life affinity or the infestation too, and he'd rather not wait long enough to find out. Besides, the poor guy deserved to be treated with some dignity in death. Either way, dealing with that shouldn't take more than a few minutes.

Peering past the dead sailor, Micky scanned the vast lake stretching before him as he answered his host's question.

'Unless you've reconsidered how important it is for you to stick around on this shitty planet for revenge: no offense: we're going to have to start searching the lake. Just pray that we find your Saint's tomb before we get eaten, and that the demigod has something useful buried with him.'

Chapter 519: Lake

Micky and Marnok were still shaken by the things that they had seen over the past couple of days. Sadly, they didn't have the time to rest or mourn the others. A vast jungle teeming with monsters stretched behind them, a slightly less vast lake full of unknown horrors lying before them. While the sailor was busy burying Nodarr's body by the shore, Micky seized the opportunity to refill his host's cores, contemplating the best way to proceed.

Once Marnok was done paying his respects to his fallen crewmate, Micky began crafting a new ice construct. It looked a bit like a spear, though its blade had a spiral shape, leading to an extremely pointy tip. Not satisfied with the tool's hardness, Micky engraved a few unit cells on the ice. He kept the enchantments relatively simple, knowing that making something on par with his scythes or Cloak would take too long.

Even the half-assed runes he drew on the tool were bound to be quite useful, however. The structural integrity enchantments would help the construct endure the strain as it drilled into the lakebed, while the sharpness runes would allow it to pierce deeper and through tougher materials. The controlled self-repairs would not only help with the spear's maintenance but also give Micky the ability to easily replicate it. Finally, he included rotation runes to make the construct more mana-efficient for what he intended.

‘Mind tellin’ me what all this is for?’ Marnok asked upon seeing Micky snap the spear in two, fuelling its pieces with mana to regrow them into a couple of brand-new copies.

‘It’s to locate the tomb,’ Micky replied, before elaborating. ‘It would take forever for us to shovel the whole lake out by ourselves, but we don’t need to. We just need to find the right spot to dig.’

Burying a corpse didn’t require that much space. However, this wasn’t just some random person’s burial site: it was the final resting place of a demigod, so Micky figured that it had to be somewhat spacious. More importantly, it had been designed either by the Saint himself or his associates to weather the endless march of time and, if Marnok’s information was to be believed, to hide a sizeable stash of Fools’ Amber.

All things considered, Micky felt confident that the tomb had to be several metres across at the very least: probably much larger. That meant that he wouldn’t have to drill the holes too close to one another. If he spaced them out in fixed intervals, he could slowly poke around the lakebed until he found what he was looking for.

To demonstrate, he grabbed one of the constructs, pouring some mana into its runes. Stabbing the ground, he allowed the tool to start spinning. Within mere seconds, the sharpened drill had pierced dozens of metres through the dirt and even the thick layer of stone beneath it.

More importantly, Micky had designed the construct to consume as little mana as possible, so that he could have a bunch of them working at once without draining his host’s reserves too quickly. Like that, he should be able to search most of the lake within a couple of days: especially since he and Marnok didn’t need sleep. If they got lucky, it might not even take that long.

‘That’s good ‘n everythin’, but how are we goin’ to know that we found it?’ Marnok asked, clearly not entirely convinced.

‘Well… I bet it’s been enchanted to the high heavens to survive for so many years. Its ceiling should be much tougher to drill through than the surrounding stone, so we can compare how much resistance the tools encounter from one hole to the next. As soon as we run into something odd, we can keep pushing to see if there’s a hollowed-out section even deeper.’

Marnok nodded in understanding, though he still didn't appear particularly thrilled. What Micky had just described was merely the method to locate the tomb. They'd yet to discuss how to protect themselves from the aquatic monsters most certainly living inside the lake.

Luckily, Micky had come up with a few ideas about that too.

Leaning over the edge, he dipped his host's hand into the water, channelling mana from both cores and allowing it to mix into ice. The liquid began freezing immediately, icy roots spreading out from Marnok's palm.

Micky carefully controlled the shape of the emerging constructs, having something very specific in mind. He also kept his consumption to a minimum, not in a hurry to empty his host's reserves.

Taking deep breaths one after another, he made sure to refill the organs as fast as he was depleting them, to always keep them above eighty percent of their capacity. It was imperative to have enough mana to defend oneself while working in a potentially hostile environment like this.

'Now what are ya doin'?' Marnok asked again, sounding genuinely curious rather than critical. 'Ya'll never freeze the whole lake like this.'

'Of course not,' Micky replied. 'But lowering the temperature enough to make it unpleasant for its inhabitants should be manageable.'

The sailor creased his brow, probably finding even that to be overly ambitious. The lake was a couple of kilometres across, and they didn't even know how deep it was. Even if Micky kept pouring mana into the water for weeks, he'd never be able to cool the whole lake down fast enough to matter.

However, Marnok still had no idea what Micky was capable of.

Shaping the ice into a thick, square slab thrice as large as his host, Micky allowed it to float to the surface. Hopping on it, he confirmed that it was big enough to support a person's weight without sinking, and wide enough for him to balance on it with relative ease.

Getting off again, he began drawing enchantments on the slab, the runes mostly resembling the one's he'd adorned the drills with. Only, he swapped the sharpness and rotation runes with adaptive, controlled heating enchantments.

He didn't stop after the first layer either. With the help of his Scribing trait, he carefully arranged the unit cells into an even larger controlled heating enchantment that spanned the entire surface of the slab. Satisfied with his handiwork, he then broke the construct in half, using mana and water to grow more floating platforms.

Scattering the blocks of ice in a circular area with a diameter of a couple dozen metres, he spread them out into an intricate formation, once again using his spectral trait as his guide. As soon as the fiend inside his wisp was happy with his efforts, he finally began pouring mana into the slabs, fuelling the numerous enchantments he'd just drawn.

The smallest heating runes were the first to activate, a pale glow emanating from the constructs. The water appeared unchanged at first, but Micky didn't doubt that it had already started cooling rapidly.

It wasn't until the second layer of runes came into effect that numerous frozen tendrils emerged from the slabs, snaking beneath the surface of the water. They looked just like the ones from earlier, though they were spreading from several points at once!

Micky was still carefully rationing his host's mana, not consuming the resource any faster than he was recovering it, yet his enchantments allowed him to get much more value out of every single drop.

'Holy Saints' above!' Marnok exclaimed. 'I never knew ya could accomplish so much with runecraftin'.'

Micky grinned. 'You haven't seen anything yet.'

As if on cue, the pale roots interlocked under both his conscious and subconscious control, completing the final rune in the formation. Three layers of enchantments complimented one another, working in unison to accelerate the freezing process.

The air around Marnok instantly chilled, sending a shiver down the poor sailor's spine. A downside of fusing two common mana types from separate cores into their composite affinity was that it didn't grant

their owner as much resistance to the resulting element. Thankfully, Marnok's two Yellow cores had strengthened his body enough to endure the leakage of the formation without much trouble.

'Brrrr… Yeah. I can see where yar confidence stems from,' he admitted. 'I'm still not sure this'll be enough though.'

'It will be,' Micky insisted. 'We don't need to freeze the whole lake. Just chill one section at a time, to drive the beasts away.'

Obviously, Marnok was far weaker than Kassorith, making it impossible for Micky to unleash a formation on par with the one that he had used in the tournament. His current host only possessed about a fifth of the Thess'kalan's reserves, and the lake was much larger than the stadium: not to mention filled with water rather than air.

Even so, if he were to split the place into, say, ten smaller regions, and take his sweet time channelling mana into each one, he should be able to lower the water's temperature by several degrees, giving him and Marnok space to start digging.

The lack of a domain also prevented him from preparing the formation in an instant, but that wasn't a problem in a drawn-out operation like this. Finally, he'd made sure that both the slabs and the spears he had crafted were highly mobile, so it wouldn't be difficult to move from one spot to the next.

Marnok whistled in appreciation once Micky was done explaining his plan in detail, though he still had some questions. 'How do ya know the beasts will swim away instead of attackin' us?'

'Well… I don't,' Micky admitted. 'But imagine that you're a dumb animal and your environment suddenly gets freezing cold. Would your first instinct be to go around looking for a mage that might be causing it, or just to leave for somewhere more comfortable? And remember that these beasts might have never even come across sapients before.'

Marnok nodded, yet Micky wasn't done.

‘Some of the creatures might still attack us, so help me keep an eye out. However, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Our drills can be used as weapons, and I’m confident that we can handle a few isolated creatures here and there. They’ll help us restock on food too.’

They still had most of Micky’s rations, as well as a lot of leftover crab meat from the day before that they had frozen and stored inside the spatial seal. It should be more than enough to last Marnok for weeks. On top of that, all three of Marnok’s affinities were excellent for surviving in an inhospitable environment for a long time.

He could conjure drinking water and breathable air, in addition to preserving food for months. That said, they had no idea what awaited them inside the tomb, so having some extra food wouldn’t hurt.

Happy with their plan, the two said nothing else, commencing their operation. Whether the Saint’s tomb was truly here or not, they were going to turn the lake upside down searching for it.

Chapter 520: Spear fishing for dead demigods

Channelling his host’s mana through the constructs, Micky rapidly filled the gaps between the enchanted slabs with more ice. A frozen island formed beneath Marnok’s feet, encasing the entire formation in mere moments before continuing to expand outwards.

Blooming like a pale lotus, it disturbed the lake’s still waters, growing to thrice its original width in less than half an hour. Only then did its expansion begin to slow down, the complex flow of mana reaching a delicate equilibrium.

Marnok’s cores absorbed water and air mana as fast as they were expelling it, essentially leaving his reserves untouched. At the same time, the frozen island was large enough that chunks kept tearing off its perimeter as quickly as new liquid was solidifying to join it, preventing the island from growing any larger.

This created the illusion that Micky’s efforts had stopped yielding results, but he knew that couldn’t be further from the truth. Examining the area around the island, he saw countless discarded pieces of ice floating away, like a river of peeled petals. He was willing to bet that the water was still growing colder by the second too.

‘If stackin’ so many runes together is workin’ so well, why don’t ya add more layers to the formation?’ Marnok suddenly asked.

‘It’s not that simple,’ Micky said, mentally shaking his head. ‘The enchantments make the cooling process more efficient, but I still need to keep fuelling all the small runes. You don’t have enough mana for a fourth layer, and I can’t control too many separate streams at once either, nor can I send your mana too far from us.’

The configuration that Micky was currently using was already several times simpler than the one he had unleashed on Thess’kala, yet fully activating it while being mindful of his host’s expenditure was still difficult and time-consuming.

Even so, Micky was more than satisfied with its output. By nightfall, he was confident that he had driven away all the living creatures in their immediate surroundings. The absence of sunlight would hopefully help the lake stay cool for longer too, giving him ample time to begin his search in earnest.

He wasn’t exactly thrilled to do so in the dark, but he understood that the operation was never going to be perfectly safe, no matter what he did. Sighing, he ripped the enchanted slabs out of the island’s surface, stacking them on a tall pile by its edge for later.

Next, he grabbed the magical spears from the other pile, setting them vertically in various spots across the island, their tips pointing downwards. Pouring mana into the rotation runes, he allowed the tools to drill through ice, water, mud and stone alike, leaving one narrow hole after the other on the lakebed.

Moving around the island methodically, he scanned the area beneath it for any signs of unexpected resistance. Another twenty minutes later, he was done with the frozen region entirely, coming up empty-handed. Still, he knew that his little island only constituted a tiny fraction of the first section of the lake that he intended to explore.

Returning to the stack of slabs, he tossed them out into the water, freezing their edges together into a makeshift raft. Hopping on, he willed the constructs to move, sailing through the lake while continuing to poke at its depths with his magical drills.

He was mindful not to move too far from the formation, lest he ventured into warmer waters by mistake. Searching everything in a wide circle around the island took him the better part of the night, though he sadly had nothing to show for it by morning.

'Oh well… we were never going to find it on the first try,' he thought with a shrug, consoling both himself and his host.

Stopping at a different location, he allowed the raft to split into its components again, repeating his earlier actions to form a second island. The rising sun didn't make his life easy, slowing down the expansion.

However, his efforts from the previous day most certainly did. Looking back, Micky saw that the first island was still there. It had shrunk slightly, but it looked like it would be a few days before it melted completely.

'That's good,' he thought. 'Every region will go a little faster than the previous one.'

He wasn't sure whether he would manage to freeze the entire lake at some point, or whether he would hit diminishing returns and never exceed a certain volume of ice. Either way, it didn't really matter. At his current pace, he'd be done exploring the lake in a week anyway.

Micky and his host continued to search one region after another, averaging two new islands per day. Of course, Micky was doing most of the work, but Marnok still found various ways to contribute. He helped pour mana into the enchantments, took care of their bodily needs, and kept an eye out for any attacking beasts.

A few aquatic creatures did try sneaking up on them every now and then, but the only thing they accomplished was to add to Micky's stash of frozen food. Having learned his lesson a long time ago, he'd rather not break his host's teeth on Yellow meat, but they'd thankfully slaughtered plenty of Orange beasts too.

'The frogs are still going to the very back of the queue,' he told his host on the fourth day, preferring to feast on just about anything else before he resorted to the raw amphibians.

While Micky and Marnok had settled into a productive routine, they still remained tense throughout the operation, the threat of a Green beast constantly looming over their head. Micky didn't know whether he could handle one by himself with his current means, and he didn't want to find out either.

If there were any such monsters in the water: and that was looking increasingly unlikely: then Micky's plan of forcing them away from their habitat had clearly worked like a charm. However, it was entirely possible that the beasts would lose their patience at some point if he kept chasing them around, so he was really hoping that they would find the tomb before it came to that.

The good news was that no land-dwelling creatures had bothered them. Even if they'd tracked them down to the lake, they clearly had no interest in swimming toward Micky's raft.

By the sixth day, Micky and Marnok were beginning to lose all hope. They'd already explored over eighty percent of the lake, finding no sign of the demigod's resting place. There was a chance that it was located in the tiny area that they had yet to search, but there was also a much greater chance that they had missed it, or worse, that it wasn't here at all.

'Now what?' the sailor asked, his voice gloomy.

'I don't know,' Micky said. 'If we fail to find it in the last two areas, our only option is to start over.'

Maybe they'd get lucky if they drilled even deeper, shrunk the intervals between the holes, or just paid more attention. As long as they didn't provoke some Green monster in the process, their supplies would last.

However, searching the lake more thoroughly would inevitably take a lot more time. If that didn't work either, they'd have to try a different lake, hoping that Marnok's information hadn't been entirely baseless. The problem was that they'd need to trek through the jungle by themselves to get there, which was practically suicide.

As for escaping the island or surviving here indefinitely: those were even more unrealistic options. Micky may have originally come here looking for a quick vacation, but he wasn't going to leave Marnok alone in such a hellish place, so he'd have to find an acceptable solution for his friend before returning to Remior.

‘Maybe he’ll reconsider moving to the Vault if we run out of alternatives…’ he hoped.

Just as Micky was trying to think of the best way to breach the topic again, one of his drills hit something hard, halting its descent. He didn’t immediately think much of it, guessing that he had probably just poured too little mana into the construct, weakening its momentum: it wouldn’t be his first blunder this week.

Yet, his borrowed heart skipped a beat as soon as he recharged the tool and still struggled to pierce deeper, and then a second time once his host came to the same realization as him.

‘Do ya think…?’ Marnok asked, clearly too afraid to jump to conclusions. Technically, it could just be a naturally occurring vein of some harder mineral inhibiting the tool, though they hadn’t found anything of the sort over the past few days.

‘Only one way to find out,’ Micky said.

Using several more drills, he tried to narrow down the dimensions of the suspected tomb. It soon became clear that Micky had greatly underestimated how large the structure was: though that had admittedly been on purpose, to make sure that they didn’t let it slip through their fingers by mistake. Either way, it was a square over thirty metres across, its clear-cut shape further evidence that it was artificial.

Micky’s constructs could still penetrate the ceiling with enough effort, but he didn’t rush to break in just yet. Flooding the tomb would only make their subsequent exploration harder. Instead, he arranged the enchanted slabs above the structure, spending the next thirty minutes activating the formation again and freezing every drop of water separating them from their destination.

This was one of the deepest spots they’d searched so far, the lakebed about twelve metres from the surface, the ceiling of the suspected tomb another five metres of stone below that.

Once everything was ready, Micky dug a tunnel wide enough for Marnok to crawl through, reaching the enchanted layer in less than a minute. Their heart thrummed wildly the more certain they grew that this was indeed the place that hundreds of Marnok’s crewmates had lost their lives searching for.

‘And it’s all ours for the taking!’ Micky thought, rubbing his host’s hands with anticipation.