Wanderer 521

Chapter 521: Saint Ludwick

Landing on a flat surface, Micky scanned his surroundings, ready to protect his host against any potential threats. Not that he expected to find any beasts inside the sealed tomb, but one could never be too careful.

The room was mostly dark, though a few scant rays of sunlight slipped through the tunnel that he and Marnok had just crawled from, barely illuminating the place. The cube's faces were in relatively decent condition: smooth and engraved with numerous runes, written in a language that Marnok was only tangentially familiar with. The floor, walls and ceiling were made of some copper-based alloy like bronze or brass, though the enchantments had clearly elevated its structural integrity greatly.

Micky spotted a few cracks here and there, as well as some mold marring the corners of the chamber, though the place was clean for the most part: especially if he considered that it had supposedly remained unattended for thousands of years.

Alas, Micky and his host had much bigger concerns than the condition of the tomb.

"'Tis empty!" the sailor exclaimed, disappointment twisting his features.

The only "object" that they could see was a single skeleton sitting cross-legged in the centre of the room. It was quite aged, its drooped skull missing multiple chips, small mounds of pale dust gathered next to its feet. It wore a set of golden robes far fancier than anything Marnok's crewmates had owned, though the fabric had long lost its lustre. It was full of holes and tears, the once-intricate patterns now too faded to make out.

"Is this it?!" Marnok continued, his voice cracking as he questioned everything about his mission. "This is what all me friends lost their lives for? Just an ol' bag o' rotten bones?! What about the Fools' Amber?!"

Micky had no idea how to console his host. Truth be told, he was also shaken by this development, having hyped himself up for the treasure that they'd been supposed to find. He wasn't sure what exactly he had expected: he didn't have any use for the beast mana, nor had he intended to snatch the precious resource from Marnok. Still, this was a demigod's tomb: for fuck's sake!

‘How is this possible?’ he couldn’t help but ask himself.

The sailors’ information clearly hadn’t been entirely wrong, since the Saint’s resting place was exactly where they’d expected it to be. Had somebody beaten them to the chamber and claimed the coins?

‘No, that can’t be right either,’ Micky thought, mentally shaking his head.

Scanning the room more carefully, he quickly concluded that there was no other entry or exit point, besides the hole in the ceiling that they’d just drilled through. That could only mean that there had never been any Fools’ Amber to start with!

Was it just wishful thinking then? Had Marnok’s people muddied the truthful information about the tomb’s location, embellishing it with fake rumours of treasure?

Either way, this was bad. Finding something useful here had essentially been Marnok’s only hope of surviving the deadly island. Micky was going to be hard-pressed to find another way to help his host.

Controlling the distraught sailor’s body, he walked up to the sitting skeleton, kneeling by the late Saint’s chest. Leaning closer, he tried to make out the faded inscriptions on his robes: to see whether they had missed something important: his fingers brushing over the fabric.

Shockingly, even the slightest touch was enough to cause the demigod’s bones to crumble, raising a cloud of dust. Startled, Marnok stumbled backwards, falling clumsily on his butt as Micky shielded their mouth and nose from the airborne particles. Amidst their coughing fit, they felt a faint tremor permeate the chamber, some kind of mechanism clicking beneath the floor.

‘Now what?!’ Micky asked, leaping back to his host’s feet, examining the Saint’s remains in apprehension.

Uncaring about his concerns, grating sounds continued to emanate from behind the cube’s surfaces, like giant gears grinding against one another. At first, they appeared to spin rather slowly, impeded by rust or dust: or whatever else the endless march of time had lodged in the gaps between them. They accelerated with every revolution, slowly shedding their obstructions as a deep rumble filled the tomb.

The runes along the cube's surfaces began flickering one after the other, sparks and motes of various colours spilling out of the symbols after every short-lived flash.

Marnok's mouth dried with greed, his soul flaring with renewed anticipation as he realized that the situation might not be so hopeless after all. On the other hand, Micky was a little more worried than his host.

'Shit, I hope we didn't damage anything important,' he thought, staring at the hole in the ceiling.

For better or for worse, the gears kept picking up speed, the enchantments glowing for longer: a few of them never turning off after activating. Eventually, the entire room lit up with colour, the mechanical sounds in the background blending into a constant, muted hum that was thankfully rather easy to filter out.

That was when something even weirder happened.

Some of the runes shone brighter, forming a straight line that split the cube in half. It started where the Saint had been seated, travelling to his left across the floor, climbing up the wall, through the ceiling and down the opposite wall, before finally completing the loop from the demigod's right.

With no warning, the glow shifted along the cube, spinning counterclockwise, the deceased Saint's remains serving as its invisible axis. Micky keenly noted that the enchantments ignored the gap in the ceiling entirely, exhaling in relief upon confirming that they hadn't been affected by the missing patch at all.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the pile of dust and tattered clothes rose from the floor, reforming the demigod's skeleton as it had been before he touched it!

As if that wasn't shocking enough, Micky watched the broken pieces of alloy fly back to the ceiling to plug the hole that he and his host had entered from, restoring the room to its previous condition. The flashing runes showed no sign of stopping, the mold in the corners of the cube slowly receding, the cracks along the walls mending, as did the tears in the Saint's robes. The fabric grew smoother, the previously faded patterns more distinct.

They depicted a tangled web of fine threads that permeated various settings: from lush jungles to tall mountains, bustling cities, towering castles and crowded markets. Those places weren't empty, however. There were several creatures going about their daily lives, though both the people and the beasts remained oblivious to the existence of the strange threads, despite being surrounded by them. Micky had no idea what this meant: or even if it meant anything at all.

Moving on to more important matters, he focused on the writing across the demigod's clothes, trying to make out anything and everything that his host was capable of reading. It wasn't much, but he managed to gather some more information about the owner of this place.

'Saint Ludwick, Clear grade, Karma affinity'

Marnok creased his brow, Micky echoing the sentiment. They'd already known the demigod's name and grade, but it was nice to finally know his mana type too. Glancing back at the imagery on the Saint's clothes, Micky realized that he might have an answer as to what those threads represented.

Was it how karma users perceived the world around them? Some special sense analogous to his own Soul Vision perhaps?

'This must be what Jason was using to track us down,' he guessed, recalling how the Green mage had gathered mana to his eyes whenever he had attempted to manipulate one of the objects in their surroundings, sending them flying towards or away from something else.

'Micky? 'ave ya 'ny idea what's happenin'?' Marnok suddenly asked, clearly shaken to his core.

'I'm not sure. I'm not an expert on karma magic, but I don't think it's capable of this. Could it be time magic?' Micky responded with a question of his own.

That didn't sound right either. From what he knew, time magic was only capable of accelerating or decelerating the flow of time: and only locally. Reversing or travelling through time, on the other hand, was generally considered to be either completely impossible, or extremely difficult. Even if the strongest gods in the universe could do it, they shouldn't be able to return more than a few seconds in the past, otherwise they would have probably dominated the universe already.

‘If it’s not time magic and it’s not karma magic, then it has to be some kind of illusion,’ Micky concluded after eliminating all the alternatives.

Confident as he was in his guess, he still didn’t know how the dead demigod could have possibly set all of this up by himself. Unless of course, he’d had others helping him…

The changes in the room kept mounting at a scary rate, countless years flowing in reverse for seemingly everything but Marnok. The cube was gradually restored to pristine condition, even the demigod’s skeleton markedly improving. The holes in his skull got patched up, the rest of the powder by his legs gone.

Eventually, the spinning enchantment began to slow down, apparently approaching some special moment in the past. Just as Micky was scratching his host’s head, trying to figure out what the tomb was trying to tell them, one final change occurred: the most drastic one, in fact.

Flesh spilled out of the skull’s holes, a layer of skin rippling over the corpse in an instant. The figure swelled slightly, Marnok barely getting a chance to blink once before he and Micky found themselves staring at an old man, his chest heaving up and down, looking as alive as one could be.

“Well, would you look at that…?” Saint Ludwick: presumably: said with a tired sigh. His voice was soft like a whisper, but it permeated the whole cube like a gentle tune. “To think that this day would finally come…”

Chapter 522: Meeting through time

Scanning the suspected demigod from head to toe, Micky was surprised by how gaunt: arguably decrepit even: he looked. There was barely any muscle between his wrinkled skin and bones, his scalp covered in age spots rather than hair. He did have a long, white beard that reached all the way to his waist, giving him an air of refinement that one would normally struggle to find in a mortal.

Micky was sure that the Saint’s ears had once pointed outwards like the rest of Marnok’s people, though the years had caused them to droop. Even his skin tone was paler than the sailors’, indicating that he had spent vast stretches of time in closed meditation: as was typical of such figures.

‘Wow. There’s old… and then there’s positively ancient,’ Micky thought, struggling to remember the last person he had seen looking like this.

In fact, he couldn’t recall ever meeting a Yellow-born: let alone a Green-born who had presumably had access to cleansing resources their whole life: so close to the end of their lifespan. Back on Remior, demigods were capable of living for well over a hundred thousand years, and he didn’t think that Robari had been any different before its downfall.

‘And yet he still failed to forge his internal world in the end,’ Micky reminded himself.

Okay… perhaps it was time to reconsider how difficult it was to cross the final barrier separating gods from mortals. Between Micky’s work on the artificial advancement and his royal-jelly-producing familiar currently baking in the oven, there was a good chance that he’d finally solve the lifespan problem that had plagued him for so long. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to start thinking seriously about what came next.

‘I should have asked Zoris what the exact process of attaining divinity involves. I suppose I can bring it up when I get the ring back, or I can ask Nephthys if she still has her memories after she hatches.’

“Saint Ludwick, I presume?” Micky asked on the outside, partly to confirm his suspicions and partly to calm down the turmoil in his host’s soul. As for Marnok, he appeared more than happy to let Micky do all the talking.

“Yes and no,” the demigod replied, before elaborating. “There is no magic that can bring back the dead as far as I know: certainly not after so many years. However, this projection was designed to think and speak like the original Ludwick, so you may consider me an acceptable replacement for the purposes of this conversation.”

Micky nodded, this being pretty much in line with his guess. On a side note, it was quite refreshing to listen to one of Marnok’s people speak their language properly, though he still struggled to suppress a smile upon hearing the comment about reviving the dead.

‘My main bodies would like a word with you, sir.’

Examining the man more carefully, Micky failed to spot any trace of mana in his body. He wasn't sure whether that was due to the illusion failing to trick his host's Mana Sense like it did his sight and hearing, or due to Clear mana being notoriously difficult to perceive for people at lower grades. It didn't really matter though.

"I came here searching for Fools' Amber," Micky said, before scratching the back of Marnok's head. "Uhm… I don't know if it was called something else in your time. I'm talking about cultivation resources. Please tell me you didn't go through all this trouble just to have a chat with me."

"I do have what you seek," the projection replied, causing Marnok's heart to skip a beat. "Despite my arduous efforts, I ultimately let Robari down by failing to ascend. This is why I worked with others like me to preserve enough coins for a future generation to try their luck. That said, I'm afraid that this stash was never intended for someone like you."

Micky wasn't surprised by that. "You've been waiting for a Green-born, I take it?"

"Indeed." The demigod sighed. "I hope you can forgive me. Unlike many of my colleagues, I've never held any contempt for those of lower birthright: this is purely a matter of practicality. Yellow-borns cannot ascend to godhood, thus we cannot afford to squander our limited supply of coins on them."

"Why didn't you pick a bunch of Green-borns to support before your deaths?" Micky asked.

"We did," Ludwick replied. "We still had enough beast mana for all the Green-borns alive at the time, and we even left them enough to pass to the generation after them. Unfortunately, the fact that we are having this conversation probably means that they, too, have failed to attain divinity, and that something has broken the chain of inheritance. This place is our last resort: a final attempt to grant advancement resources to a generation of Green-borns in the far future, who are otherwise incapable of procuring them."

Micky nodded, the Saint's words once again corroborating his prior information. Clearly, the demigods had hidden some of their stashes so well that they hadn't been found for a very long time, probably setting up some vague clues that would eventually reveal themselves: all so that they could lead people like the four Commodores here one day.

“I see. I’m not aiming for the Clear grade personally, but I’m here on behalf of one of those Green-borns,” Micky explained, sticking to his host’s story. “The problem is that I’m stranded on the island. I only ask that you help me protect myself for a few years, until my superior sends people after me. I’ll give him the Amber then.”

“That won’t work.” Ludwick shook his head. “I’m only allowed to personally hand the resources to a verified Inheritor: not their representative. Any unauthorized person who steps into this tomb is to be eliminated.”

Marnok’s eyes widened, clearly neither him nor Micky having expected the conversation to take such a drastic turn. The Saint continued, however.

“Once again, I must ask for your forgiveness, young man. This isn’t personal, but the coins are too precious to fall in the wrong hands. I only hope that the next person who reaches this place will be a Green-born, as this projection will not be operational a second time.”

With little warning, the background hum grew louder, a high-pitched sound stabbing into Marnok’s skull, blurring his vision and bringing him to his knees. Micky scrambled to think of a way to convince the demigod to let them go, only to realize that he couldn’t even open his mouth.

Horror gripped their heart as the enchantments across the room shifted colour at once, an ominous crimson light permeating the tomb. Micky tried to recall where the hole in the ceiling was. The illusion had masked it, but he knew it had to be there somewhere.

The problem was that even lifting his host’s head was a struggle, let alone jumping that high. Left with no other option, he reached into the deepest recesses of his mind, hoping that he could activate Metatron’s Decree again, now that he wasn’t on Remior.

‘I’m sorry Marnok. I know this isn’t what you wanted, but anything is better than certain death.’

Right as Micky was about to summon a portal beneath the sailor’s feet, something changed.

The painful ringing in their head died down, the runes turning purple and then blue, before reverting to their previous colours. Micky and Marnok soon discovered that they could move their body again, even

the lingering weakness fading within a few seconds, making them wonder whether they had merely imagined the unpleasant experience.

'What the hell?! Did he change his mind or something?!' Micky asked himself, his gaze returning to the demigod's projection.

The Saint appeared just as confused as them, the wrinkles on his forehead deepening as he rubbed his beard in contemplation.

"Curious. Also, concerning…" Ludwick muttered, giving his descendant a weird look. "The enchantments were designed to gauge the Inheritor's remaining lifespan and time to their next advancement: to estimate their potential lifespan. You're clearly a Yellow-born, but the data suggests that you can live long enough to reach the Clear grade…" The Saint paused, seemingly struggling to make sense of the information. It was only a few seconds later that his eyes widened with shock. "You! You have a second core! How is this possible?!"

Micky ignored the demigod's question entirely, not in the mood to explain anything to him: the fucker had just tried to kill them!

Tempted as he was to walk up to the old man and punch his teeth out, he knew that he couldn't even touch Ludwick's body. Besides, the real Saint was long dead, and this projection was nothing more than a message that he had left behind. Getting mad at him was as pointless as it was stupid.

"Why did you set the system up in such a contrived way?" Micky asked, finding this a more productive use of his time. "Wouldn't it be easier to just read my grade than to perform all those complicated calculations?"

"Your current grade can't give me a complete picture. A Yellow-born could have found enough beast mana to advance elsewhere, coming here posing as a Green-born. Even a real Green-born could be a bad candidate to inherit the stash if they've consumed too much of their lifespan."

Micky shrugged. "Great! So, are you saying that I've passed your little test then? Are you done trying to murder me?"

Ludwick looked like he'd just swallowed a fly. Still, he begrudgingly answered the question. "I couldn't put a scratch on you even if I wanted to. Now that you've been determined to be a suitable Inheritor, I am compelled by my design to lead you to the coins."

Micky cracked a wry smile as he sensed how unhappy the Saint was about this, though he couldn't exactly blame him for it. Leaving his and Marnok's interests aside, this was indeed an unfortunate development for the demigod's plans.

Sure, his host's second core had barely tipped his potential lifespan beyond the threshold of reaching the Clear grade, but it would still take him something like fifty-five thousand years. He wouldn't necessarily need to advance all the way with both cores, but he would need to get the second one to at least Violet or White to buy himself enough time.

Micky had no idea how much Fools' Amber Ludwick had preserved, yet being forced to give so much to a single person wasn't ideal. After all, that much mana would be enough for around ten Green-borns to become demigods.

Even worse, Green-borns technically had more than enough time to advance to the Clear grade even if they diluted the coins. That way, the stash could theoretically support up to fifty times as many people: or a total of five hundred god candidates!

Meanwhile, Marnok would have to consume the resource in its concentrated state to stand a chance, thus robbing half a thousand Green-borns of their opportunity. Finally, the sailor wouldn't even have as much time left to attack the Concept realm afterwards, making this a complete waste of resources.

'Well, he's going to have to suck it up. Besides, Marnok doesn't even want to use the coins.'

The sailor had never expressed any interest in advancing or attaining divinity. He'd only ever wished to bring the Amber back to his superior, to help him defeat the White-core behind his family's deaths.

Granted, Marnok might need to consume some of the coins to reach Green, to better his odds of escaping the island. Even so, a few years' worth of Amber would barely put a dent on the stash. Regardless, Micky didn't speak a word about this to the demigod, happy to let him squirm. It was the least that the bastard deserved after that stunt he'd just tried to pull.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the projection walked through Marnok, stopping at a certain spot behind the sailor. Several runes lit up on the floor, illuminating a square a couple of metres across. The mechanisms around the room shifted loudly again, tiny streams of compressed air spilling out of the edges of the glowing tile as it sank slightly, sliding away to reveal a staircase.

"Follow me," Ludwick said, descending into the tunnel. More enchantments lit up to illuminate the path behind him. "Loophole or not, I suppose I have no choice but to hand you the coins… and a few other things."

Chapter 523: Unintentional benefit

Micky and Ludwick had barely walked twenty steps down the staircase when the latter suddenly paused. The runes on the walls flashed brightly for an instant as a loud noise emanated from above, accompanied by a deep rumble that shook Marnok's very bones.

"What is going on?" Micky asked upon realizing that this was coming from the tomb that they'd just left behind.

At first, it sounded like stone and metal were being ground to dust, though the sound of rushing water soon joined it.

"Come on. We need to hurry up. This corridor will also get destroyed soon," the Saint said, gesturing for Micky to follow as he resumed walking. "To prevent anyone from disturbing the Inheritor while he consumes the beast mana, we designed the tomb to collapse after our meeting. Anyone who relies on the same clues as you to search the lake will think that their information was false."

Micky frowned, not very happy about this. It was great that the beasts on the surface or any hostile sapients wouldn't be able to chase them down here, but this created more problems than it solved.

"How am I meant to survive without food? And how do you expect me to leave afterwards?" he asked again.

Ludwick remained silent, appearing wholly uninterested in alleviating Micky's worries.

They reached the base of the staircase, only for their path to be blocked by a bronze wall, every square centimetre enchanted like the tomb's surfaces. More runes lit up, forming a rectangular door slightly taller than a person. It sank by about a finger's length before sliding to the right to reveal a cavern several times larger than the previous room.

As soon as Marnok stepped through, the door closed behind him. The entire underground complex shook again as the staircase shattered and got flooded. Only, it appeared to be dirt and rock filling the corridor up this time instead of water from the lake.

"So, what is this place?" Micky asked, scanning the cavern.

It looked more natural than the previous room, its surfaces uneven and made of limestone rather than polished metal. It was illuminated too: though not by magic this time: allowing him to examine everything.

A carpet of glowing moss covered the ground, Marnok's boots sinking several centimetres into the spongy material even while standing still. The greenish-blue substance climbed halfway through the walls, a few thicker columns reaching all the way to the ceiling.

On closer inspection, Micky did spot a few runes carved into the stone: at least on the bare patches not hidden behind the plant. However, these enchantments looked much simpler and scarcer than those in the tomb, indicating that their functionality wasn't nearly as extensive.

'These must be Robari's version of preservation runes. I suppose Ludwick drew them to slow down the cave's erosion.'

The enchantments had to be running on ambient mana. Runes like that were quite common on most developed worlds: not just the Vault of Magic. The buildings in the Alchemists' Guild on Remior used them too.

Micky hadn't bothered to learn any such enchantments in the past, focusing on more potent variants that required a mage's mana, because those were more useful in combat.

During his previous trips to the Vault, he'd lacked the credits or the time to master multiple variants of each rune, so he'd been forced to study the ones most suitable to him. Since then, his boosting art had also given him a way to cheat, allowing him to convert ambient into phantom mana from afar to feed his constructs.

Sadly, his clones couldn't do that without the correct affinity or the Carnival. Even when it came to his main bodies, having to manually activate every enchantment he used wasn't always convenient.

Fortunately, Micky was going to have a lot more time and credits during his next visit, so he should be able to broaden: not just deepen: his magiscript knowledge.

"This is where you'll live for the foreseeable future," Ludwick said, breaking him out of his thoughts. "After you use up the beast mana, you can exit through the tunnel over there," he added, pointing to a section of the moss-covered wall to their left.

Micky wouldn't have noticed it by himself, but there was a narrow opening cutting through the plant, resembling a pair of living curtains that had failed to fully seal the exit.

"Where does it lead?"

"To the eastern coast of the island. You'll have to dig through a couple dozen metres of sand and rock to reach the surface though," the Saint replied. "I trust that won't be a problem given your current grade: let alone your grade after a few advancements."

The demigod's projection stepped forward again, walking through the moss and toward the back of the room. There, the floor was elevated by a few metres, forming a stone platform untouched by the glowing plant.

On it, Micky spotted several objects that he'd have to examine from up close, though his attention was instantly drawn to something in the corner. It was a pile of coins, tall enough to bury his host. Rather than gold or silver, the coins shimmered in a deep amber colour, leaving no question as to their purpose.

"That's a lot of Fools' Amber…" Micky said, creasing Marnok's brow. "But less than I was expecting."

Every coin looked about as large as a single dose of elixir. Assuming that it was equally potent, and comparing it to his own stash on Remior, he estimated that the pile would last for a couple decades of daily cleansing. If he was right, that could be enough for Marnok to reach Green with both cores even in its concentrated state, and Blue: or even Violet with one of them: after diluting it.

It wasn't bad, yet Ludwick's earlier words had made it sound like he and his colleagues had stashed away enough Amber for at least one Green-born to reach the Clear grade: if not several. This much would only get one to White, however.

"It's not all here," the demigod said as they reached the platform. Hopping onto the raised stone, he waited for Micky to climb up too. "We split the beast mana into a thousand portions and hid each at a different location. All of it is enough for a hundred new demigods."

"Wait, you expect each 'Inheritor' to look for ten different tombs?!" Micky asked, finding that horribly impractical.

Ludwick sighed. "It's not ideal, but it was the only way to ensure that it wouldn't all be lost if the wrong person stumbled upon one of the burial sites. Also, it forces the Green-borns to dilute their stash, so that it'll last for more people."

Micky tilted his head, instantly seeing a problem with the Saints' plan. "Don't you risk many of the tombs being lost forever, or the Green-borns never finding enough?"

"Indeed." The demigod nodded. "However, our Inheritors don't have to hunt for more tombs blindly. We picked a hundred special locations and sealed the means to find nineteen others in each of them. If an unqualified person finds one of the other nine hundred tombs, we only lose a single portion. Meanwhile, if they reach one of the special locations, our projections will try to eliminate them and seal the stash and the map away, to protect the other nineteen piles. That way, if only half of the special tombs end up in the right hands and the Inheritors use the excess mana sensibly, we could end up salvaging most of the beast mana to create over ninety new Saints."

Marnok's eyes widened. The sailor was clearly as shocked as Micky to learn of the great lengths Ludwick and his colleagues had gone to, to give their world its best chance of rising up again.

“So, does the fact that I found your projection here mean that this is one of the special tombs?” Micky asked.

The question caused the demigod’s features to twist into a grimace. “I’m afraid so. What are the odds, that a Yellow-born with a second core would stumble upon this place? Now I’m forced to give you the map to nineteen other stashes, which will be entirely wasted on you.”

Micky suppressed the urge to chuckle upon hearing the disappointment in Ludwick’s voice. Once again, he was tempted to remind him that Marnok had no interest in consuming so much beast mana. Even if that hadn’t been the case, he could teach his host the Cascading Cracks technique to make the pile last twice as long.

However, he didn’t know whether the Saint would believe him and, frankly, he didn’t care that much about placating a mental projection that would fade away in a few minutes.

“Where exactly is this map then?” Micky asked instead, scanning the stone platform for anything that might look the part.

“It’s not a physical object,” Ludwick said, stopping him. “It would have been too risky to store such important information in a medium that could end up in the wrong hands. I’m only allowed to brand the locations of the other tombs directly into the mind of a verified Inheritor.”

Micky cautiously stepped back from the Saint upon hearing that, not sure that he wanted anyone messing with his or Marnok’s minds. However, the demigod’s next words caused him to reconsider.

“Oh, I should also point out that imparting the information comes with a small, unintentional benefit. It’ll grant you a modest new ability: one which you might be able to apply in other situations.”

Chapter 524: Mindset

‘Are you okay with Ludwick doing this to you?’ Micky asked his host.

No matter what the Saint’s plan involved, Micky wasn’t very worried about himself. He didn’t think that the demigod could do anything to his mind that he couldn’t fix by merging back with his main bodies. His

host, on the other hand, only had one life, so Micky wasn't going to agree to something this intrusive without hearing his opinion.

'I… trust in the Saint's judgement,' Marnok said, his voice carrying a hint of reverence toward the aged figure.

Only now did Micky realize that the sailor hadn't remained silent all this time merely out of fear. For Micky, meeting a demigod's projection wasn't a huge deal: after all, he'd bargained and even picked fights with titans and gods before. Hell, he was currently trying to turn a goddess's soul into a familiar!

For someone with Marnok's background, however, Saint Ludwick was probably the subject of songs and legends: a mythical figure from Robari's glorious past. The sailor was clearly still shaken by the unlikely meeting with the demigod's projection.

"How is this going to work? Does it have anything to do with your karma affinity?" Micky asked.

"That was my original plan," Ludwick replied with a sigh. "My affinity is great for locating objects that I have touched in the past. It is also notoriously difficult for somebody without it to spy into those connections. I spent many years racking my brain to think of a way to pass the map to the Inheritors. Sadly, I couldn't find one."

"Why not?" Micky asked.

"There are several reasons. The threads tend to fade away with time. They do so slowly, but it's been many, many years since the beast mana was hidden. Also, I couldn't come up with a method to pass my abilities to another. That's why I came up with an alternative approach, commissioning one of my colleagues to lend me their strength."

The projection walked next to one of the other objects on the raised platform that Micky had glossed over earlier. It was a short, cylindrical artifact that sported a deep red colour.

'No, wait… the exterior is just a transparent crystal,' Micky corrected himself upon examining it further. 'Is that mind mana inside it?'

He doubted that he was wrong about that, having come across the affinity many times in his life. The liquid was barely perceptible inside his Mana Sense, suggesting that it was at the Clear grade. That would also explain how it could be contained for such a long time without dissipating.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the Saint pointed at a small formation carved into the ground next to the cylinder, gesturing for Marnok to sit.

“I’ve modelled this ability on my own means, but I had to get several elements reworked with Saint Qilian’s help. Of course, whether the enchantments are still functional after all this time remains to be seen…”

Shrugging, Micky plopped down on the formation. He said nothing else, merely nodding at Ludwick to proceed. The demigod didn’t move a centimetre either, but the runes below Marnok’s body lit up a second later, causing the liquid inside the cylinder to bubble up.

Closing his host’s eyes, Micky waited patiently for the enchantment to come into effect. He was curious to see what this “ability” was that the projection had promised him, though he didn’t get his hopes up. For one, he had no idea whether there would be enough mana for both him and Marnok. For another, he knew that Ludwick and his colleagues were mere demigods: not gods, and certainly not titans. Micky didn’t expect to obtain anything even remotely on par with a Decree.

Soon, a warm feeling seeped into the sailor’s legs, slowly spreading to the rest of his body. As soon as it reached his head, it started flowing faster, his brain greedily drinking the mind mana. Marnok shifted slightly, clearly feeling a bit uneasy as the foreign sensation wormed its way into his thoughts.

‘Don’t worry. Your mind is a lot more resilient than you think,’ Micky consoled him as he experienced the same thing.

It felt like a stranger’s hand stirring their skull and shoving stuff aside to make space for something new. Micky could see how unsettling that could be to the uninitiated, but he had personally suffered much more agonizing changes to be bothered by it.

Compared to the multiple mental Decrees that he had assimilated in the past, the painful process of repairing Leo’s mind, the spectral fiends that he had absorbed, or Percy and Micky’s recent fusion, this barely qualified as a headache.

As soon as the hand was done rearranging their minds, the flow of Clear mana spiked, a tiny seed seemingly coalescing near the back of their skull. It kept drawing mana for a while longer, a series of roots spreading outwards. Just as the pain started bothering even Micky slightly, the flow halted abruptly, the newly formed structure seemingly fading away into the background.

Opening their eyes, Micky scanned the cylinder, only to realize that over three quarters of the mana was gone. Had the presence of a second mind caused the operation to fail?

Shifting his gaze toward the similarly perplexed projection, he was about to ask him about it, when his Status alleviated his concerns.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new mindset: Ludwick's Compass!]

'Mindset? That's a new one…' he thought, raising an eyebrow.

His Status was already quite bloated, and yet it appeared that there were still categories of abilities that he had never heard of before. Not wasting time, he pulled up the page, focusing on the new section that had appeared between his spectral traits and spells.

___

Mindsets:

[Ludwick's Compass]: Set mental checkpoints anywhere in the world. Instinctively track their location as you move away.___

'How odd…' he thought, before turning to the demigod again. "Care to explain how this works?"

"Just focus on anything in the room and try to memorize where it is," the projection said.

Nodding, Micky looked at the pile of Fools' Amber by the corner of the stone platform, doing as the Saint had instructed. Almost instantly, the newly formed structure in his mind stirred again, igniting a large, amber-colour pyre around the stacked coins.

The sight startled both Micky and his host, though they calmed down upon realizing that the precious resources weren't truly on fire. This was just a visual representation of their new ability. Closing his eyes, Micky noted that he could still see the flame. Even when he turned around or strolled on the platform, he could tell where exactly the pile was.

Conducting a few more tests, he confirmed that he could lower the pyre's intensity or even hide it from his perception entirely. He could also restore or amplify it whenever he felt like it, erase the mark completely, and create as many checkpoints as he wanted.

"Convenient," he muttered, before turning to the Saint's projection again. "What are the limitations? How far does it work and how many checkpoints can I track at once? Also, how exactly is this possible?"

"You can track the marks from anywhere on Robari. Technically there isn't any hard limit, but each mark does put a tiny, almost negligible load on your mind. If you go overboard, you might start feeling the strain. I suggest you stick to the most important places that you want to memorize," the demigod patiently explained. "As for how it's possible… Your mind passively registers every time your body moves or turns around: even while asleep or unconscious. Just think of this as a form of heightened spatial awareness that only works for specific locations."

"I see…" Micky replied, already trying to come up with potential applications.

Honestly, Ludwick hadn't lied when he called this a "modest" benefit. Off the top of his head, Micky couldn't think of any use for the new mindset.

Back on Remior, he had already acquired enough strength and status to reach most places that he might want to travel to with relative ease. Not that there was anywhere other than the Fungal Spire, the Camelot province, or Twilight City that he was planning to visit anytime soon.

As for his clones…

Thinking of a possibility, Micky couldn't help but crease his host's brow.

'Surely not…' he thought, almost dismissing his idea entirely out of hand, guessing that it was a long shot.

The more he considered it, however, the more he realized that there might be a slim possibility of this working. On the off chance that he was right, it would absolutely revolutionize the way he used his bloodline!

'I'll test it later,' he decided, shoving the idea to the back of his mind for now.

"How do I find the other nineteen tombs?" he asked the Saint.

"The stored checkpoints should have been passed to you along with the mindset. Try searching for marks outside this room. It might take some digging due to how long it's been since the map was created."

Doing as the deceased demigod said, Micky was indeed able to manifest several other amber flames after a few minutes, each pertaining to some faraway location on Robari.

'Can you see them too?' Micky asked his host. He didn't really care about the Fools' Amber personally, so this would all be pointless if the sailor couldn't track the treasure by himself.

'Yes,' Marnok replied with a mental nod. 'Works just like he says.'

Happy about that, Micky was about to bring up the topic of their living arrangements again. Ludwick had yet to explain how Marnok was supposed to survive in this cave for years on end. The Saint spoke first, however, shifting his attention to a different matter.

"Fools' Amber… this is the term your generation is using to refer to the stashed beast mana nowadays, isn't it?" he asked, a melancholic smile forming on his wrinkled face.

Micky frowned, only now realizing how offensive the phrase might sound to one of those “Fools” in question.

‘Hey, don’t blame me for the nickname your own descendants have given you! I only got here last week!’ he thought, though he kept that to himself.

Ludwick sighed. “You’re not wrong. Me and the other Saints were just a bunch of useless old fools. We’ve let our world down by failing to ascend before our bodies rotted away,” the demigod said, his voice cracking with raw emotion. “I sincerely hope that you don’t blame our mentors though: the gods of Robari: for this situation. They are the only ones who aren’t at fault.”

Micky gave the man a weird look. Weren’t the gods precisely the people who deserved most of the blame? The demigods had at least tried to fix everything, while their superiors were the ones who had destroyed the original source of beast mana in the first place, before abandoning Robari or killing one another.

Then again, he couldn’t help but recall Flammy’s twisted appearance, and the swarm of black scarabs that had spilled out of the treacherous healer’s mouth, realizing what the Saint was trying to tell him.

Sure enough, Ludwick’s next words confirmed his suspicions. “I can only imagine how distorted their image is in your heads, but I want you to know that our gods were all noble, wise and selfless people. Our planet’s well-being was always at the forefront of their minds. At least… that was the case until they succumbed to its sickness.”

Chapter 525: Cardinal Devil

“Is it a demonic infestation?” Micky asked, causing the projection to raise an eyebrow.

“How could you know about that? Has it started affecting mortals already?” Ludwick answered Micky’s question with a couple of his own.

Micky shrugged. “Well, it’s affected at least one Yellow-born to my knowledge. I wasn’t alone on this expedition, originally. A friend of mine betrayed the whole crew, wrecking our ship and stranding us on the island. He then proceeded to pick us off a few at a time, for seemingly no coherent reason other than pure, ill-considered greed. When I interrogated him about his actions, he lost what was left of his

mind entirely, turning into a rabid animal. I was forced to put him down. If that wasn't bad enough, a bunch of black things spilled out of his mouth afterwards, trying to infect me too."

The demigod clenched his fists upon listening to him, the skin on his old face somehow turning even paler than it already was.

"Then this is even worse than we feared. We were hoping to produce new gods in time to deal with the infestation, but… if it's started turning you against one another already, today's Green-borns might not live long enough to reach the Clear grade."

"I don't understand," Micky replied. "Shouldn't gods be more resistant to an infestation's influence than mortals? How is it possible that they were the first to succumb?"

Micky wasn't exactly an expert on the topic, but he had learned a couple of things about it during his travels. According to the hieroglyphs in Nephthys's Sanctuary, the weakest among the Amenthei had been the first to fall asleep, with their goddess being the last one to be corrupted. Yet, here on Robari, the infestation was seemingly working in reverse.

Ludwick smiled bitterly. "What you've just described matches our initial understanding of demonic infestations. Sadly, it seems that our case is as far from the norm as one can be: in several ways…"

"What do you mean?"

"It's powerful. So powerful, that it corrupted several gods even in its infancy. It's also intelligent. Most infestations are mindless and self-destructive. They blindly infect and kill all the creatures that they rely on to survive, only to eventually share their fate. But not this one. This one deliberately got rid of the only people with the power to potentially threaten it, before going dormant again. It's also extremely patient. It has been biding its time, slowly gathering strength without making any big moves that would have accelerated our world's destruction. Not until now, at least."

The Saint's words sent a chill down Micky's borrowed spine. He'd already known that infestations came in many shapes and sizes: some even capable of threatening deities.

Even so, he'd written Amenthes off as a special case. It had been a relatively young lesser spring with only a single, inexperienced goddess, lacking any knowledge about the broader cosmos. The fact that Nephthys and her people had fallen wasn't so surprising.

Meanwhile, Robari had clearly been a far more developed place, yet this infestation had methodically dismantled it from the very start, sealing its fate.

Oblivious to Micky's thoughts, Ludwick continued. "Something dark is brewing in the depths of our world. And once it hatches, I fear that what's left of our cursed planet won't be enough to even whet its appetite."

"Wait, what? Do you think it'll leave Robari to destroy more worlds?" Micky asked, getting a nod back.

The demigod had kept talking about the source of the infestation as if it was a living, thinking entity, causing Micky to recall something that he had heard about in his youth. Well… in Percy's youth. It was largely a story that adults told to scare children into behaving, but it was common knowledge that the underlying information was rooted in reality.

"Is it a Cardinal Devil?" he asked again, the blood freezing in his veins as he uttered the words.

Cardinal Devils were supposed to be extremely rare, and far nastier than regular infestations. Each was a creature no weaker than the strongest gods.

Of course, Micky knew a lot more about the cosmos now than he had as a child, so he couldn't help but wonder just how many Cardinal Devils existed in the universe in total, or how they would fare against the most powerful greater springs like the Moirai or the Void Hand.

Either way, unlike mindless infestations that only threatened their world of origin, Cardinal Devils could supposedly travel through the universe as they pleased, infecting more worlds and turning them into Great Hells.

"You… how do you even know so much about this topic?" Ludwick suddenly asked, clearly noticing that Micky's experience didn't match that of his assumed identity.

Micky sighed, deciding to finally come clean to the projection.

“The truth is, I’m not the owner of this body: just an passenger. I saved Marnok from drowning when his ship sank, and I’ve been trying to help him out since. I’m… not from Robari. This is also how he got his second core,” he explained, flashing the demigod an apologetic expression.

Contrary to his expectations, the Saint didn’t seem angry upon learning of his deception. If anything, Ludwick’s surprise gave way to excitement, a glint of hope finding its way into his old eyes.

“Is this true, or are you pulling my leg?” he asked cautiously.

“Why would I make this up? And shouldn’t you be more concerned about Robari having essentially been invaded by another lesser spring?”

The Saint chuckled. “Concerned? What is there to be concerned about? We’ve nothing left for you to steal. Most developed worlds wouldn’t want anything to do with an infected planet like ours anyway. The way I see it, getting some attention from the outside could only be a good thing.”

“Fair point. I’m sorry to burst your bubble though, but I don’t have the means or the time to do anything about a demonic infestation: let alone a Cardinal Devil. I’m working alone, and my real body is only at Yellow… er… Green I mean.”

“Then, what exactly are your intentions?” the Saint asked.

“Normally, I go around looking for new ways to grow stronger, but I’m currently on a bit of a break,” Micky replied, scratching his head. “Or I was, though I suppose it ended up being a little more exciting than I expected. Either way, I just wanted to help my host, yet one thing led to another, and here we are. I’ll be leaving soon.”

The old man’s head drooped in a manner not befitting of a demigod. Micky wasn’t done though.

“Look, I won’t make any promises, but I’ll keep your situation in mind. Maybe one day I’ll find someone or something that can help you.”

Ludwick sighed. “Thank you. I suppose it would be unreasonable to ask for any more than that.” The demigod fell silent for a few seconds, seemingly thinking about something else before speaking again. “The energy keeping me operational will not last much longer, so if you or the owner of your body have any other questions, this is your final chance to voice them.”

“You never told us what Marnok is supposed to eat!” Micky exclaimed.

The demigod pointed at the carpet of glowing moss covering the rest of the cavern. “We selected this plant to seal with the stashes of beast mana due to its broad utility. It’s edible: highly nutritious, in fact: while also recycling the air in the room and illuminating the place. It grows much faster than a single person can consume it, and the cavern is designed to not let it expand too much, so you won’t have to worry about running out or getting trapped. Its flavour is a bit bland and its texture slimy though, so it’ll take some getting used to.”

Next, he gestured at another object on the raised platform. It was some kind of massive stone bowl, filled to the brim with water. Droplets of condensation rhythmically pitter-pattered inside it after falling from a giant stalactite on the ceiling, sending ripples that caused the liquid to overflow. The excess water poured down from the edges of the container, guided towards the carpet of moss through a couple of narrow grooves on the floor.

“You can drink from that bowl, though my data indicates that you possess the air and water affinities, so I doubt that will be necessary,” Ludwick said, before pointing at a hole on the other side of the platform. “That one is for your waste.”

There was also a stone bed and some additional space for meditation, but those didn’t need any further explanation.

“I know we got off on the wrong foot, but me and my colleagues have only ever done what we thought was best for Robari. Either way, this is the end of the line for us fossils. Starting now, that responsibility will lie entirely on your shoulders. Both of you: since you’re both my Inheritors, along with anyone else who might stumble upon the special tombs.”

Micky nodded. He didn’t know Ludwick that well: one could argue that he didn’t know him at all, since he hadn’t actually met the real demigod: but he understood how much the man had loved his world.

This wasn't Micky's home, yet he already considered Marnok his friend, and that was enough for him to carve out a spot in his heart for Robari.

Would he ever have the means to help these people?

He didn't know, but he was surely going to try. Bowing respectfully toward the Saint's projection, he watched the old man scatter into a cloud of colourful motes, dispersing around the cavern.

Micky wasn't planning to stay here much longer, but he had to deal with a couple of other matters before bidding his host farewell.

Chapter 526: Seclusion

'Marnok… you were awfully quiet during the meeting with the Saint. What are your thoughts on all of this?' Micky asked once they were alone.

The sailor sighed. Before replying, he walked to the edge of the platform, scooping up a handful of glowing moss. It felt cold and slimy, but he would have to eat it sooner or later.

Tossing some in his mouth, he clearly struggled to swallow it without throwing up. Micky didn't appreciate the flavour either, though he was used to eating random stuff in his adventures. Not to mention all the rotten meat he'd been forced to eat for decades back on Huehue.

'It all sounds so strange. All this time, we thought that runnin' out of Fools': no, Saints': Amber was 'ar biggest issue. We were worried 'bout what would happen to 'ar descendants after the last White died… to think that there's such an abomination incubatin' on Robari… Poor Flammy never stood a chance,' the sailor replied.

'My offer to take you out of this planet is still on the table,' Micky said. 'If you want my honest opinion, I don't think you, your leader, or anyone else here will have a good end. Is it worth throwing everything away for revenge? Besides, that guy who got your family killed will also get screwed by the infestation sooner or later.'

‘Ya ain’t wrong,’ Marnok admitted. ‘But this goes beyond just petty politics between Green-borns now. Ya saw how hard ‘ar Saints worked to give Robari every fightin’ chance they could. Who am I to just run away? I want to stay and do me best too,’ the sailor replied, his soul alight with determination.

‘Okay. As long as you understand what you are signing up for,’ Micky said.

Pulling some mana from his host’s cores, he slowly forged a block of ice as large as his spatial seal, placing it in an empty corner of the raised platform. He then started engraving various enchantments on it. Mostly, he included preservation and heating runes, as well as self-repairs and structural integrity enchantments. Once he was done, he hollowed it out to create a large, frozen box.

‘What’s this for?’ Marnok asked.

Micky answered the sailor’s question by emptying all the beast meat that they’d salvaged from the lake into the construct. Then, he began pouring more mana into the self-repairs, slowly refilling its internal space with ice, encasing all the food.

‘Teaching you runecrafting would take a long time, but I don’t have to do that. Just use the self-repairs every few days to maintain the box, and you’ll be able to preserve the meat for several months. You’ll still have to mostly live off the moss, but at least you’ll be able to break it up with something tastier every once in a while,’ Micky explained, before scratching the back of his host’s head. ‘Well, as tasty as raw frog meat can be, at any rate.’

He would have loved to make an oven for Marnok too, but his self-repair enchantments could only restore constructs made of his mana, and creating an ice oven was obviously impractical.

Perhaps he could have drawn a few regular heat runes on limestone and fuelled them out of air mana, but they were unlikely to remain functional for long without proper maintenance.

Micky also created a few enchanted weapons for his host to use after exiting the cave. Of course, Marnok would advance by then, which was why Micky included adaptive self-repairs this time, to allow the constructs to essentially upgrade themselves with the more potent mana later.

Finally, he passed the sailor all the spare healing potions that he had left. They would inevitably grow even less effective after his host reached Green, but it wouldn't hurt the sailor to have them just in case.

'How much Saints' Amber are you planning to consume before you go? Still planning to hand most of it to your boss?' Micky asked.

'I'm not sure,' Marnok admitted. 'I need to reach at least Green with both cores to stand a chance out there. Even then, it might not be enough. Especially if I have to escape from the island on me own. But I don't want to spend decades eatin' moss inside a tiny cave. Also, I'd rather not waste too much Amber, so I'll be dilutin' it...'

Micky nodded. 'Green is plenty. You'll be even stronger after I teach you a couple of other things, though mastering them will take a while.'

Over the next few days, Micky showed Marnok the Cascading Cracks technique, which would eventually allow him to get twice the value out of the coins. The sailor had a difficult time wrapping his mind around it, because he wasn't even used to cleansing his cores the normal way: let alone via some highly advanced technique from a greater spring.

According to the sailor, some people on Robari knew how to cleanse their cores without beast mana, but the method wasn't very popular. It took around a century to see any results, and most people didn't even survive that long, causing them to view it as a waste of time.

The sailor's inexperience wasn't the only problem with Micky passing him the technique. He wasn't the best teacher either, since he had yet to master it himself. Well, his main bodies might have done that already, but he wouldn't have the memories until he returned to Remior.

That said, Marnok didn't need to learn it immediately. Micky prioritized showing his host how to work on it safely: to avoid permanently damaging his cores. As soon as the sailor knew what he was doing, Micky would let him practice by himself.

Perfecting it would inevitably take the man a few years due to his lower starting point, so he was bound to waste some time and Amber at first, but his efforts were bound to pay dividends down the line. Especially after he passed the technique to his superior.

Hopefully that Commodore Vent-Noir guy would be happy enough about the Cascading Cracks technique and the map to nineteen other tombs to overlook Marnok consuming some of the Amber for his survival.

Maybe the White cores would even reconsider their petty dispute after Marnok told everyone about the Cardinal Devil. After all, this issue had to do with the very survival of their species, and the protection of everything they held dear.

'Of course, it's entirely possible that the Commodores will put themselves first…' Micky thought but kept that to himself. If Marnok insisted on trusting his leader, then it wasn't his place to butt in.

Outside of Marnok's promotions, Micky instructed his host to train his body and temper his channels. He crafted an ice statue of the sailor, carefully carving pathways corresponding to his three affinities inside the construct, to serve as a three-dimensional model for Circulation. He even engraved lots of self-repairs on it, so that the man could freely break the statue, study its interior and restore it to its previous shape whenever he wanted.

Unfortunately, the model wasn't perfect. Micky had based it off his own physiology. Marnok's networks were bound to differ at least slightly: especially due to his ice affinity being split across two separate cores. Consequently, he would have to figure out any necessary adjustments by himself after he was done clearing his channels.

Even so, Micky explained in great detail how the boosting art was supposed to work, giving his host everything he would need to complete the spell by the time he advanced.

Finally, Micky taught him the basics of pre-casting and even explained how the liquid and gaseous variants of ice mana worked, though he wasn't sure how Marnok would replicate that with two cores.

As for the Dance… he didn't bring it up. It was way too complicated to explain when Marnok didn't even know the Refined version of the spell yet.

Marnok's training aside, Micky took advantage of their downtime to work on his own project. By the time his host was ready to commence his seclusion, Micky was able to draw controlled self-repair enchantments in either core, regular self-repairs in both at once, and structural integrity enchantments

in just the water core. He was still a long way from achieving his artificial promotion, but he would have to continue working on this on Remior.

'I suppose this is goodbye then?' Marnok asked.

Micky nodded. 'Take care of yourself. I know that the past couple of weeks have been rough, but at least you'll be safe for the next few years,' Micky replied.

'Well, unless you end up infected by the Devil…' he thought to himself, though he didn't bring that up, not wanting to sour their final moments together.

The truth was, they still had no idea how Flammy had fallen prey to its insidious influence. Considering how powerful it was, it might be able to infect anyone on Robari whenever it wanted. Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do about that: Marnok was already as isolated and concealed as anyone could be.

'Will ya ever come back?' the sailor asked again.

'I don't know if I can even find this place.' Micky shrugged. Thinking of the new mindset that Saint Ludwick had granted him, however, he added, 'but I suppose I'm about to find out.'

Chapter 527: Ludwick's Compass

Micky's goal was simple, if somewhat ambitious.

He wanted to use Ludwick's Compass to keep track of Robari's location as he returned to Remior, so that he could revisit the place at will. Not that he had any intention of stepping foot on the infected world anytime soon, but his success would affect a lot more than his ability to help Marnok.

It would forever change the way he approached his future trips!

Up until now, he had been rather limited in where he was able to go. He had some control over what host he possessed and what type of worlds he targeted, but he couldn't aim at specific places or revisit old destinations.

The only exceptions were worlds that he had special means to find again: the Vault using Metatron's Decree, Melodia through Sol's trait, and Huehue or Felmara due to his connection. Perhaps, he'd be able to find Amenthes too with Nephthys's help, but that was about it.

Yet, if this worked, every single planet he visited from now on would be on the table!

'The problem is that the mindset was never intended to be used this way,' he reminded himself, tempering his expectations.

Ludwick's Compass was just the most convenient method to pass down the tombs' locations. It relied on one's physical senses to keep track of the marks, and it had only been designed with the scope of a single planet in mind.

The distance between worlds was countless times vaster. On top of that, the soul plane had its own rules, and the clones' senses were entirely different from those of a physical entity.

The good news was that space and time, while distorted, still operated under some logic inside the soul plane. Proximity in the real world didn't map to objects there exactly, but it certainly played a role. This was how he had been able to reach Felmara while aiming for Huehue, after all.

In many ways, this place was analogous to his soul channels. While they constantly shifted inside his body, they were still connected to one another and to his core in a consistent manner.

'Hopefully it makes enough sense for the Compass to work...' he thought.

Even if this was the case, whether his wisp would be able to collect and feed the mindset with enough subconscious information to keep track of the marks remained to be seen.

Shrugging, Micky finally left the sailor's body, allowing the cord to yank him away from Robari. At the same time, he willed the twenty amber pyres in his mind to intensify and his senses to expand outwards as far as he could reach.

The marks shrank and merged into a single, tiny dot almost immediately. The planet's dimensions were negligible when compared to the speed by which Micky was currently travelling.

The flame waned and twisted, Ludwick's Compass clearly struggling to retain its location. Even so, Micky refused to let it go out. Filtering out every unrelated thought, he focused exclusively on the mark and anything else that might help him create a permanent map to his friend's world.

He also tried to get a better feel for the path that he was traversing.

The cord appeared to pull him in a straight line as always, though he could tell due to the way the amber dot was jumping around that that wasn't entirely accurate. Space itself seemed to twist as he plummeted through it, exhibiting the same noodle-like behaviour as his mana channels.

Gritting his non-existent teeth, Micky scrambled to make sense of his surroundings, to hopefully aid the Compass in its task. He had no idea if his efforts could make a difference: the Saint had said that this was subconscious: but surely understanding this place better could only be a good thing, right?

The trip felt longer than usual, probably due to how much he was straining himself, though he at least had something to keep him occupied.

Eventually, he slammed into his main body, commencing the familiar process of assimilation. As his memories blended with the original's, and those of the other clones that had already returned, it became clear that this clone had been the only one who had completely butchered the spirit of their "vacation".

His main bodies had spent the past couple of weeks leisurely brewing healing potions. Even the other clones had taken things easy, picking a couple of weaker hosts and enjoying their mundane lives while savouring the local cuisine at their destinations.

'Hey, it's not my fault that everything went to shit from the very first moment!' he protested as his mind melded rapidly with the others. 'At least I've brought a couple of cool things back, unlike the rest of you slackers!'

Opening his eyes, Percy found himself sitting across from… well, himself, a still warm cauldron standing between him and Micky. His head didn't hurt at all: the clones had been a lot easier to absorb since the fusion.

'Internal Runecrafting… good,' he thought as he went over the newcomer's gains, a subtle smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

He'd been planning to start working on that exact project soon. Evidently, one of his clones had already beaten him to the punch, even making some respectable progress on the spell. Once he developed it a little more, it would be time to return to the Vault and purchase whatever else he might need for the artificial advancement.

Opening his Status, he made sure that both the spell and the mindset were listed properly, before shifting his attention outwards. Searching for the mark, he soon found a tiny amber dot glinting somewhere on the cave's ceiling, clearly pointing toward some faraway location.

'Hmmm… it's still there,' he thought, creasing his brow.

That could only be a good thing, but it wasn't the end of the story. Just because the mindset had managed to retain the mark, it didn't mean that the information was correct. He could easily check by sending another clone to Robari, of course, but he'd rather not take that risk.

Even returning to Remior had technically been a gamble. Unlike a regular infestation, the Cardinal Devil might have the means to infect and follow him back here without him knowing.

The safest options would have been to either self-destruct and lose all of his memories of Marnok and Robari, the progress he had made with the new spell and the mindset: and even a quarter of his spatial seal: or forcibly take his host to the Vault against his will and ask Metatron to check them.

In the end, he'd chosen not to do anything too drastic. He hadn't been on the planet that long anyway, and he didn't think that the Devil was constantly monitoring every single mortal.

'Oh well… let's hope I haven't just doomed Remior.'

He sighed. As for figuring out whether the mark was valid… he could test that in the Vault later. It would be a lot easier to play with the mindset if he had an alternative means of getting there. Also, he'd need to send multiple clones to the artificial world anyway, since he was planning to complete challenges across different grades to collect credits and bonus rewards.

Sadly, even if Ludwick's Compass did what he wanted, it would only allow him to return to his future destinations. There was no mark on Atlantis or Gallimus, so visiting some of his old friends was still out of the question.

'One step at a time. Yesterday, even this was impossible. A few years ago, I only had one clone and no way to communicate with him or bring physical objects back. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?'

Leaving his bloodline aside for now, his gaze returned to the cauldron. The clone's arrival had caused him to ruin the latest batch, but it didn't really matter. He'd already brewed an enormous quantity of Orange healing potions over the past few weeks, the Queen having helped him grow as many green mushrooms as he wanted.

While he hadn't expended nearly as much effort as his most recent clone, he did have some positive results of his own to boast of. After taking the time to properly consolidate his gains from the past year, his brewing yield had finally had the chance to climb to its new limit:

Seventy-five percent!

Of course, one's yield was highly dependent on the number of alchemic steps involved. Percy estimated that his current performance would translate to an eighty-two percent yield when brewing simple potions inside a standard cauldron, though some losses were only to be expected when mass producing them like this.

Performing some mental calculations, he wanted to estimate what this would mean when brewing regular elixirs. That was the most important metric to consider, since it was the benchmark that the Alchemists' Guild used to evaluate one's skill.

'Fifty-seven!' he thought, raising an eyebrow. He had to do a double-take to ensure that he hadn't made a mistake. 'Isn't this better than the elders?'

If his memory served him: which it most certainly did, after the fusion: Orin had once told him that the highest yield in the Guild was just fifty-six percent. That was a point shy of Percy's!

Granted, he had cheated extensively to reach this level, only doing so due to a mutation, a Wild Art, four alchemic principles that nobody on Remior but him was even aware of, and a special cauldron. Meanwhile, the elders had achieved their own brewing yields through centuries of persistent practice.

'Well, it's not a competition.' He shook his head. 'Boosting our yield just means fewer wasted ingredients.'

Ideally, he should strive to help everyone improve as much as possible, as that would only benefit their world. Others would likely get better if he taught them whatever principles were applicable to them, and he would also inevitably keep improving with time, albeit slowly.

'I wonder how high my yield will be when I'm their age…'

Was it even possible to reach a one hundred percent yield? Probably not.

Shaking the pointless thoughts out of his head, Percy stood up, storing the cauldron away. Although he could resume brewing if he wanted, he'd been meaning to take a break for a while now. Nephthys had shown signs that she was approaching some major turning point.

It was finally time to see what all their efforts amounted to.

Chapter 528: Starry Princess (1)

Technically, the egg had already hatched: a little over a week ago.

Percy had been thrilled at the time, watching with bated breath as his new familiar broke out of her shell, only to be disappointed by the outcome. The creature crawling on the uneven floor of the magical hive had looked nothing like any of the three types of wasps that the Queen had told him about.

It had just been a wingless, limbless worm, its glossy exterior sporting a milky white colour. The Princess's body had still been dotted by the stars giving her species their name, as well as the golden

patterns unique to the royal lineage, but those features had been difficult to make out against the pale backdrop of her squishy skin.

More importantly, Nephthys had been in a state of delirium, still not responding to Percy's repeated messages. Even his Status had failed to acknowledge her existence, preventing him from pulling up her information.

The only part of the reborn goddess that had appeared slightly better had been her soul. It had resembled a yarn ball of three different wisps struggling to fuse: much like Micky's had done at the start: though she was clearly improving much faster than the crow, likely thanks to all the phantom mana that Percy was supplying her with.

Fortunately, the Queen had been quick to alleviate his worries, explaining that all of the Starry Wasps began their lives in a larval stage like this: one which was supposed to last a couple of weeks. The Violet bug had been downright ecstatic that her royal egg had finally hatched into what she'd claimed was a healthy daughter: especially after decades of failed attempts.

After consuming a lot of nectar delivered to her by her subjects, the Queen had produced some royal jelly to feed the larva. It would have been too little to sustain a Blue or a Green beast: let alone a Violet: but even a trickle was more than enough for a newborn Orange creature barely larger than Percy's fist.

Obviously, Percy had been somewhat depressed to hear that he had to wait even longer for the result, but he'd ultimately swatted those thoughts aside after realizing that this was probably a good thing.

In his experience, the beast affinity was great at causing mutations and other necessary adaptations to better serve its owners, but such developments only tended to happen when a creature evolved to the next grade or otherwise experienced some major transformation.

Case and point, Micky had developed all of his mutations right after his first core's advancements. He'd later merged them together after getting his body destroyed and rebuilt during his fusion with Percy.

Going through multiple developmental stages could only benefit the Princess. Her egg was one that had never been supposed to hatch: or even exist. Percy might have rekindled the creature's waning soul, but nobody knew what other defects the wasp might have been born with. Now, she had the opportunity to deal with them!

After growing to twice her initial size, Nephthys had encased herself in a silken cocoon, beginning her pupal stage. That had happened about four days ago.

Percy was particularly excited today, feeling that the creature was extremely close to emerging in its mature form. The Queen insisted that it would probably take a couple more days at the very least, but he was confident that his familiar would be done earlier than expected.

It wasn't just blind optimism speaking. He'd already heard some faint ramblings back through the cord, confirming that the Amenthei goddess was well on her way to regaining consciousness!

Granted, her words were sporadic and not very coherent. Most notably, she appeared to speak a language that he didn't understand, indicating that communication with his new familiar might be a little troublesome at first.

On the other hand, this could only mean that Nephthys had retained at least some of her memories and intellect, unlike Micky who had begun his new life as a blank slate, having to slowly develop his mind and learn Remior's language as his first.

A tear appeared on the cocoon less than a day later, Percy's hearts skipping a couple of beats as he watched a black foreleg pierce the silk. Micky instantly placed his hand on one of the Queen's limbs to reestablish their mental link, just in case they needed to act urgently for some reason.

The Violet insect had her gaze glued on the creature much like he did, though Percy didn't pay her much attention. Before the Princess was even done escaping from her self-imposed confines, his Status rushed to notify him of their success.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new familiar: Nephthys!]

This message was another new one that he was certain he hadn't received during Micky's creation: though he'd been too unconscious at the time to tell. It only made sense though. If Phoebe's twice-upgraded Decree would inform him when a familiar got destroyed, then why wouldn't it do so when a new one came into existence?

Regardless, he didn't pull up the goddess's page yet, wanting to examine her with his own two eyes first.

Her soul was still a patchwork of two colours. The bulk of it sported a dull grey shade, indicative of Percy's blessing. It probably meant that she had inherited his spectral traits too, which could be a bit of a problem if she didn't develop a soul affinity of her own.

The blessing's influence was bound to fade over time, rendering her unable to endure the strain of multiple fiends. It was precisely to avoid such a scenario that Zoris had advised Percy to wait until after he internalized the concept to begin absorbing his additional traits.

Micky hadn't run into this problem, because Percy hadn't possessed any traits during his creation. Later, he had only acquired them indirectly: through the clone. Of course, things were different now that he had fully fused with Percy. They shared a single soul anyway, so even the part resting inside the elemental body was constantly washed by the blessed phantom mana, maintaining its elevated durability.

'Oh well… it should be fine as long as I send her mana often.' He shrugged.

His clones were in the same boat as the goddess, yet none of them had shown any sign of losing the concept even after staying away for months. It would probably take years for that to happen, giving him ample time to keep refreshing the blessing.

Turning his attention back to Nephthys's soul, Percy noticed that it was less of a jumbled mess than before. The part pertaining to the goddess's soul shone in a bright silver colour: more so than a regular mortal soul, at least: suggesting that it still carried traces of its former radiance.

More importantly, this brighter shade was scattered over the surface of the familiar's soul, forming watermark patterns no different from the golden markings on her physical body!

'Interesting…' Percy thought, wondering what that was about.

Other than that, the Princess was shaped more or less like a regular wasp, appearing like a miniature version of her mother. The colourful dots and golden ripples now contrasted properly against her black exoskeleton, giving the young creature's chitinous exterior a majestic: almost regal: lustre.

The only exceptions were her eyes, stinger and the insides of her mandibles which sported a dull grey colour, a couple of shades lighter than the rest of her black carapace even in Percy's regular vision. He guessed that this had been caused by the same Soul Predator mutation that Micky had been born with, allowing Nephthys to observe, interact with, and even consume foreign souls.

There was another detail that he hadn't expected.

Both the golden marks on Nephthys's body and the silver marks on her soul grew denser closer to her head, twisting together into a three-pronged spiral that converged into a single point on her forehead. There, a tiny, crimson gem was embedded firmly into her exoskeleton, shaped like a triangular pyramid. Inside it, Percy saw numerous golden dots shimmering faintly in his regular vision, and just as many pale dots doing so in his Soul Vision.

'I suppose that answers what happened to her people. I wonder what it'll take to grant them a proper life of their own though…'

Satisfied with his cursory examination, he finally opened his Status, seeing no mention of the Starry Wasp in there. Evidently, the Decree was still intent on treating his clones and familiars as extensions of his own page, rather than parts of it.

Shrugging, he followed the ethereal cord connecting his forehead to the Princess's, shedding more light on her abilities.

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Nephthys (The Lone Wanderer's familiar)

Mana cores:

[Mana core 1: Orange: Beast][Mana core 2: Seed: ???]Mutations:

[Soul Predator] – Allows one to more easily interact with the souls of others.[Royal Lineage] – Grants a royal wasp additional abilities befitting of their role.[Divine Spark] – Grants endless inspiration when developing one's magic.[Spectral Ark] – Allows one to carry and preserve the souls of others.Spectral traits:

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

[Structured Amnesia]: Selectively suppress or curate memories to minimize their mental load.Decrees:

[Moirais' Decree (Fractured)] – Grants the seed of a second mana core. Requires potent life and mind mana to germinate.___

Chapter 529: Starry Princess (2)

'Four mutations?!' Percy gasped.

This was the most Micky had ever had, and three had been caused by his second affinity! Nephthys now possessed just as many: and this was before she even got her new core repaired!

Calming his racing hearts down, Percy studied the entries more carefully. He wasn't very surprised to see Soul Predator among them: it appeared that all of his familiars would be born with it by default.

Royal Lineage wasn't unexpected either, but he hadn't realized that it would manifest as a mutation. Its description was somewhat vague though. The "additional abilities" it spoke of probably referred to the production of royal jelly, the authority that Nephthys should be able to exert over the other Starry Wasps, and her ability to make more Starry Breeders and Princesses.

As for the last two mutations… Shocked as he was, Percy wouldn't say that they'd emerged entirely out of the blue. He'd long hypothesized that a familiar fashioned out of a divine soul would exhibit some unusual qualities. Even so, he hadn't dared to imagine what exactly that would look like. Focusing on the first one, he couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

'Endless inspiration?'

Divine Spark's description sounded an awful lot like what the Wiseman's Murmurs did. Percy had felt guilty over wasting Nephthys's entire stash. Even if some of the exotic resource had survived his fight with Deimos, it had most likely spilled out of the broken pyramid later, leaving the goddess with nothing to fall back to as she began her new life.

Evidently, that wasn't as big of a problem as he'd expected.

'I suppose it makes sense. Wiseman's Dust and its variations are just impurities that a demigod expels from their body during their ascension. It only stands to reason that whatever's left should be of an even higher quality…'

If he was right, Nephthys's new mutation should be far more potent than the Murmurs, and hopefully last forever. For a mortal like him, having access to such a powerful effect his whole life would be a dream come true.

Then again, it was still poor consolation to a goddess who had just lost everything. Once a lofty existence who had ascended to the Concept realm and lived for countless millennia, she had been forced to flee her home after failing to protect the vast majority of her people. She'd even given up her power and body to start over from near the bottom of the Colour realm, reborn as an Orange creature too short to reach Percy's knees.

He sighed.

At least this was better than falling prey to the demonic infestation and drowning inside the black ocean on her home world. Besides, between the mutation, the beast affinity, and the Queen's help, she'd recover her previous strength at record pace.

Moving to the last entry on the list, Percy read the details of the Spectral Ark mutation that presumably housed the slumbering souls of the Amenthei. He had no idea what conditions the reincarnated goddess would need to meet in order to grant her subjects lives of their own, but their situation had seemingly stabilized.

Thinking about the information some more, he wondered about something else. 'It says that it can carry and preserve the souls of "others". Does that apply to anyone besides those already inside?'

That could prove useful one day. If it worked, Percy might obtain the means to house the souls of other potential familiars, allowing him to take his sweet time finding the right body for them. While he had barely succeeded this time, he was fully aware of how close Nephthys had come to dying.

Had he been a few days: or even hours: late, or had the Queen failed to produce a salvageable royal egg in the nick of time, things could have gone down very differently. Percy would rather not be in a rush when dealing with such delicate matters.

Leaving the mutations aside, there was more in Nephthys's Status that he was curious about, but he should probably make sure that she was okay before considering anything else. Besides, he'd have to talk to her about some of it.

'Nephthys? Are you in there?' he asked through the connection.

The response came a few seconds later in the form of a soft, feminine voice. It sounded lucid enough, if somewhat sluggish. 'Percy…? Amut ha… kathar mahad?'

'Right… the language barrier.' He frowned.

Evidently, the part of him residing inside Nephthys's soul was too dormant to contribute any of his instinctual understanding of Remior's language. Fortunately, he had several methods to deal with that.

In theory, the ethereal cords should allow him to convey meaning directly: this was how he and Micky used to communicate before the crow reached Yellow and began learning the language. However, Nephthys clearly defaulted to her native tongue. Moving to wordless communication or a different language would take some getting used to.

Another solution would be to double down on their connection by shoving a clone in her body or using his Soul-to-soul spell. Both approaches would involve him messing with her soul that had only barely stabilized, so he'd rather avoid them for the time being.

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Left with no better choice, he went with the simplest and least intrusive solution. Taking his translation device out of his spatial seal, he pressed it to the side of his head, hooking it above and around his ear before speaking again. ‘Sorry, can you repeat that?’

‘I said… “Percy? Is that you?”’ the same voice replied, her words making sense this time.

He smiled. ‘Sort of. I’ll explain later. How are you feeling?’

The former goddess appeared to ponder over his question for a few moments. ‘Weak. I suppose that’s only to be expected. This body is so different from my old one…’

Crawling around the mana-lit cavern, the Starry Princess stretched her limbs, clicked her mandibles and repeatedly unfolded and folded her wings, clearly trying to adjust to the changes.

‘It’s gone…!’ she muttered, a wave of relief spilling through their connection. ‘The Slumber… I feel truly sober for the first time in ages!’

Percy nodded. This wasn’t surprising. The infestation should have stopped affecting Nephthys the moment they left her planet, though her mutilated soul had been too weak for her to enjoy her newfound freedom sooner. The Insomnia trait that she’d just acquired, coupled with her healthy new body had only sealed the deal.

Happy as he was for her, Percy’s smile grew a little colder. ‘Your people… I’m not sur–’

‘I can feel them,’ Nephthys said, cutting him off. ‘I don’t know how to wake them up yet, but they are better off than they’ve been in a very long time. At least there’s hope now.’

Percy turned back to the Queen who had observed them patiently the whole time.

‘Your Majesty… it appears that we have succeeded,’ he said through the other connection: the one that Micky had kept open with her.

‘So it would seem,’ she replied. ‘I’d like to speak to my new daughter in private later, but I’ll let you bring her up to speed first.’

Percy bowed his head in gratitude, gesturing at the Starry Princess to follow him to the nearest wall of the cavern. Plopping down, he leaned back on a flat-ish chunk of a deep blue mineral, allowing himself to truly relax for the first time in a while. There was a lot that he and Nephthys had to go over, and even more for them to do in the foreseeable future, but the worst was hopefully behind them.

Nephthys climbed atop a rocky protrusion next to him, her thin limbs making crisp sounds as they tapped against the uneven floor of the hive, until her compound eyes reached about as high as his shoulders.

Over the next few minutes, Percy went over the most important matters, explaining what he understood about the goddess’s new body and its importance to Remior. Even if she had no intention of producing lots of Starry Breeders or ruling the hive, it would help their world massively if she was willing to give birth to at least a Starry Princess at some point.

‘I’ve no problem with that,’ Nephthys replied with a mental shrug. ‘You said that Starry Queens reproduce asexually? That’ll only make this less weird.’

Percy nodded. ‘Are you sure about it? I won’t force you to do anything. It’s not your fault that we ended up in this mess.’

The Starry Princess shook her head. ‘Percy, you were kind enough to invite me and my subjects here. We Amenthei are proud people: we refuse to live as parasites that only take and never give back. If Remior is to become our new home, then the least we can do is help at a critical time like this, when the survival of the whole planet is on the line.’

‘Alright. If you’re onboard, it’ll simplify everything,’ Percy replied, failing to suppress a smile. ‘We’ll have to talk to the Queen later about your role in the hive. I still don’t fully understand how everything works.’

Percy hoped to accomplish a lot more than merely saving the Starry Wasps from extinction. As vile as Machaon’s crime was, it might have granted them a unique opportunity to revolutionize their world.

If they properly leveraged all the tools at their disposal: the Moirais' Decree and his boosting art included: it might be possible to optimize the hive's internal operations, improving the wasps' efficiency and output so that they could produce enough nectar for everyone on the planet.

Obviously, that alone wouldn't be enough to change the status quo. He doubted that the alchemists were equipped to handle the increased volume of nectar, so he would have to work with the Guild to change that too.

Setting everything up would take time and effort from everyone: humans, Starry Wasps and the Amenthei goddess included: but Percy believed that they already possessed everything necessary to make this work.

In any case, that was a project for later.

'I think that it's safer to wait until after you reach Yellow to repair your second core,' he said, moving to a different topic.

The Moirais' Decree was the only one Nephthys had inherited. Due to Percy's mind being dormant inside the familiar, she didn't have access to Metatron's or Phoebe's, and even her second core required both life and mind mana again. The former was easy to accumulate thanks to the mushrooms, but gathering enough of the latter was bound to be trickier.

While there were many ways to obtain mind mana, it would be simpler not to. Percy guessed that they could skip the requirement entirely if he temporarily placed another clone in Nephthys's body. However, doing that would risk destabilizing her soul.

'It shouldn't be an issue after your evolution, though it means that you won't manifest the new mutations until Green,' he explained.

Either way, the goddess's first few advancements shouldn't take that long. Micky had reached his first promotion after about a year of munching on Red goblins. Given how rich the environment here was, Nephthys should be done in a few months at the latest: especially if her mother managed to spare some royal jelly to feed her.

The affinity-changing treasure in Percy's seal would easily last for nearly three more years, giving him ample time to use it on the familiar and still get it delivered to Nesha and Elaine later. As for Nephthys's second promotion, it should be done after another couple of years.

The Starry Princess sent him something akin to a mental shrug back. 'Do whatever you think is best. You understand your bloodline and abilities better than me.'

With that settled, there was only one major item left on the agenda. Percy wanted to hear her opinion on his fusion with Micky. Not only did she have a direct stake in the matter: since the fate of Percy's previous familiar could potentially become her own one day: he was also curious whether she could help him fix himself.

After all, Nephthys was not only a former goddess, but also one that used to possess the mind affinity. If they got lucky, she might regain it later. Even if she didn't, she might be able to offer some valuable insight on the matter.

'The Lone Wanderer… what a peculiar name,' Nephthys said after listening to his explanation.

'What do you think? Is it possible to split us up again?' Percy asked, some cautious optimism spilling into his voice.

Chapter 530: Structured Amnesia

'Hmmm… you don't want it entirely gone, do you?' Nephthys asked back.

'Not really.' He shook his head. 'Our current state comes with too many advantages. It would be a waste to reject them and go back to how we were before.'

He merely wanted to carve out spots in his mind for "Percy" and "Micky" to exist as individuals again. That way, they would be able to control their respective bodies most of the time, and even keep their most private thoughts and memories to themselves, so that their relationships with their friends and family wouldn't be affected.

At the same time, he wanted to keep the ability for his bodies to communicate and cooperate seamlessly, as well as fuse completely at a moment's notice when he used his Ultimate Art or embarked on some joint operation. Finally, his current condition allowed him to share a single, extremely powerful domain across both bodies, and he had no interest in giving it up.

Was he being a little too greedy? Perhaps, but this was nothing new. His ambitions had already brought him quite far, hadn't they?

'I see… well, here's the deal. What you want is certainly possible,' the goddess replied, rekindling his hope. 'Regardless of whether we are talking about a complete separation or just a partial one, it's just a question of combing through your mind to segregate your memories and certain mental processes, as well as forming certain structures like gates or links to set everything up the way you want.'

Percy drew a sharp breath, though he didn't let himself get too excited. 'I sense a "but" coming.'

The former goddess sighed mentally. 'This would have been simple enough with my old affinity. Sadly, I don't think I can help you without it.'

Percy nodded, not letting this get to him too much. Splitting his personalities up wasn't that urgent. To somebody who was planning to eventually attain divinity, waiting a few years for Nephthys to acquire her second core was a small matter. Even if she didn't awaken the correct affinity, he could always look for another powerful mind healer later or find another solution entirely.

The biggest issue in the short-term was that his current condition would make his relationship with Nesha needlessly weird. Then again, they were already on a long-distance relationship anyway. Waiting a few years wouldn't be the end of the world.

Other than that, the rest of his plans shouldn't be affected negatively.

'This procedure that you've just described… Would it produce something like a new mindset?' he asked, switching to a different topic.

Nephthys tilted her head in confusion, prompting him to elaborate. 'Like that "Structured Amnesia" that you've given yourself.'

‘Ah! How do you know about that?’

‘It’s listed in your Status.’

‘I see.’ Nephthys nodded. ‘I hope to meet this titaness of yours one day. Before meeting you, the concepts of Decrees and titans were foreign to me. She must be quite a talented woman to have achieved so much: and with the same affinity as me. I’m sure I’d have a lot to learn from her,’ she said before pivoting to his earlier question. ‘Indeed, “mindset” sounds like an apt term for it.’

‘How do they work? Can anyone with the mind affinity just create one at will?’ he asked again, still finding the notion odd.

In some ways, mindsets could be considered analogous to spectral traits: in the sense that they represented a special category of abilities tied to a certain mana type. However, the way they worked appeared entirely different.

‘More or less,’ the former goddess replied before elaborating. ‘Mind mana can be used offensively by tampering with an opponent’s senses, but that’s barely scraping the surface. In my experience, the affinity’s greatest application lies in augmenting one’s own mind. You’d be shocked by how much hidden potential is lying inside your head, waiting to be dug out.’

‘Can you give me an example?’ he asked.

She shrugged. ‘You can accelerate your thoughts, prune unpleasant emotions, recall forgotten memories, reduce the time you need to sleep every night, augment your senses… lots of things, really.’

Percy nodded. Some of that, he’d found ways to replicate with the soul affinity or his spectral traits, but the mind affinity clearly had its own advantages. Most importantly, one didn’t have to hope that they happened to be compatible with the right fiend, and there didn’t seem to be a strict limit to the number of mindsets an individual could possess.

‘Wait, no… that’s not quite right either,’ he corrected himself, recalling what Saint Ludwick had told him.

According to the deceased demigod, the mindset he had gifted him would put a small mental load on his head whenever he used it. It wasn't a big deal: certainly not when compared to the hard limit of absorbing spectral fiends: but other, more ambitious mindsets might be pricier to wield. It would probably be quite difficult for one to handle too many at once: especially if they didn't possess the mind affinity themselves.

'So… that mindset of yours. What's its purpose exactly? Don't you remember your past life?' he asked.

'Not all of it,' Nephthys said. 'I remember the most important things: who I am, where I came from, and what happened to my world. However, I was forced to let go of many memories to make the trip.'

'Such as?'

'Well, I've lived for a very long time, Percy. I'd memorized most of the information on our planet's heritage that you'd found carved onto the walls of my internal world. I'd also memorized a lot of things about my subjects' lives, to help them remember who they were, should they ever wake up from their slumber. Much of that is gone now.'

Percy couldn't help but clench his only remaining fist upon hearing that. He'd already watched first-hand how much damage the pyramid had endured as it shrunk to a size that would allow even a mortal's severed wisp to carry it across the soul plane.

He didn't think that any of the information in the library had survived the trip: let alone the months of degradation it had suffered since, or its transformation into the crimson gemstone currently embedded in the familiar's forehead.

Evidently, the pyramid had just been Nephthys's backup plan, but she'd clearly lost the memories stored in her mind too.

'So, is it all gone then? Your people's history and culture?' he asked, his voice shaky.

A mental chuckle rang through their connection. 'It's nice of you to be worried about us, but that isn't necessary. I took great care while severing my memories to preserve the most important details in the

form of numerous mental seeds. I only got rid of things that can easily be inferred later. Some of it I've already recovered. The rest should slowly come back to me as I advance through the grades again.'

Percy exhaled in relief, glad that he wouldn't have to go through the arduous process of helping another familiar remember their past. Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised that a literal mind goddess had had the foresight to plan ahead though.

At the same time, he couldn't help but reevaluate how useful the mind affinity was. For the longest time, he'd considered it weaker than many other rare affinities that he had run into. Evidently, that only spoke to his ignorance about its potential.

Other than the gods and demigods whose Decrees and mindsets he had obtained, his only other brush with a mortal user had been Kassorith's opponent from the Ancestral Lineage Sect.

The woman's magic had been largely suppressed by her bloodline during their fight, so Percy had only experienced glimpses of what she was capable of. He'd mostly worried about her short-lived illusions, having not had the slightest clue what had been going on inside her head.

'I really hope Nephthys awakens it again…' he thought.

It wasn't just about fixing his fusion with Micky or getting more mindsets. More importantly, the former goddess had already mastered a mind concept to ascend to godhood. Regaining the correct affinity would essentially guarantee that she would do it again!

If Percy was to fuse with her too one day, this would basically amount to a free ticket to divinity!

'A man can only dream…' He shook his head.

He still didn't know how the Moirai ascended, let alone an entity with multiple bodies like him. Even if he found a way to cheat his way to divinity with a single core of one aspect, it didn't mean that it would be easy to do so with the rest.

Putting that aside for now, he allowed Nephthys to talk to the Queen. Evidently, it was as simple for her as joining the mental network that all the Starry Wasps had access to. In fact, it soon became clear that this was even easier for her than communicating with him, as her instincts helped her bypass the need for a translation device. Not that Percy would have refused to lend her his, had she asked.

Letting the royal wasps discuss the affairs of their underground kingdom, Percy took a moment to consider his next moves. Nephthys's growth, boosting the hive's output and improving his Internal Runecrafting were all things that would likely require several months.

Before he focused on any of them, there were a few other things he wanted to do: a couple of prisoners that he needed to rescue, a bunch of Violet-cored elders that he had to talk to, and a certain White-cored traitor that he had to deal with.

He grinned, a wave of nostalgia rippling through his soul.

'Time to return to the Alchemists' Guild.'