## Wanderer 591

Chapter 591: Skin (1)

While the human body was studying the Mimicry trait in the Alchemists' Guild, Micky kept himself busy repairing his humble hut in Bogside town and reapplying the enchantments on the ceiling.

He could have obviously built a much bigger residence if he'd wanted, but his priority had been for the building to resemble his and Nesha's old place as much as possible: while being a little more functional than the decrepit wooden hut.

He wasn't planning to stay in the town much longer, so he'd embarked on this project purely for sentimental reasons: and to surprise his girlfriend in case they ever decided to move back here. Hopefully, Phoebe would help him separate his minds before that happened.

By the time he was ready to join the experiments, his counterpart had already granted him a preliminary understanding of their new ability. This was largely why he didn't even bother to get himself a mirror: Mimicry made him deeply aware of his appearance without him having to gaze at his reflection.

It even allowed him to tell the colour of body parts that he couldn't directly look at. He wasn't sure how exactly that was possible. Perhaps, he could infer certain details about himself by associating faint feelings about his posture that one wouldn't notice normally, subtle sensations on his skin, and his existing knowledge about his body and clothes.

Before trying to do anything new with his trait, he decided to study how it affected his previous capabilities. Taking a few deep breaths, he pushed his boosting art to its limit, absorbing enough ambient mana to cycle through his regular forms.

Skipping only the giant crow: it was too large for the small hut and too similar to its smaller variant anyway: he spent some time switching between human, Huehuan and bird, taking everything in.

'It's a little faster and more effortless but the improvement is barely noticeable,' he concluded.

He shrugged. He hadn't expected much, because his default forms had already felt as natural as breathing, trait or no trait. If anything, the fact that he had improved at all was testament to how well Mimicry would synergize with his mutation.

Next, he moved on to other shapes.

This wasn't his first attempt to transform into something different. Right after his fusion with Percy, he had hypothesized that he shouldn't be limited to just a handful of forms. Humans, Huehuans and crows were already as biologically different as they could be, so he didn't see any reason why he wouldn't be able to turn into, say, a dog or a sapient from a different race.

Over the past year, he'd even put some time aside to play around with his mutation, trying to expand his options. His efforts hadn't been entirely useless, though his success had been limited to just a subset of his previous hosts.

It wasn't like he couldn't recall the appearance of other creatures, but seeing was different from feeling, and his hosts' bodies were the only ones that he had personally inhabited.

To effectively change into a new shape, Micky required a deep understanding of its mechanical aspects: its body structure, the range of motion of its joints, the way the muscles were distributed, and so on. While his elemental body eliminated the need for many biological functions such as breathing or digesting food, he was still restricted by certain physical realities.

Even transforming to his previous hosts was far harder than his own shapes, and not all the creatures that he had possessed were equal, as certain groups felt much more alien than others.

For instance, Micky had a relatively easy time turning into animals native to Remior. After all, they shared certain physiological traits with humans and crows, so the beasts that he had possessed inside the Thirsty Valley had been among his first successes.

Starry Wasps were also rather easy, albeit for an entirely different reason. Despite being native to the same planet, they were admittedly way too different from mammals or birds, as they had exoskeletons rather than bones: among a myriad of other differences. However, Micky had possessed hundreds of thousands of magical wasps of various grades in the past.

Another group that he'd had some success transforming into were sapients. Those from other planets could easily have entirely different internal organs from humans or Huehuans, but Micky had learned a long time ago that sapient creatures often evolved in similar directions.

It wasn't difficult to figure out why.

Bipedals with a humanoid shape had spare limbs to handle tools and cast spells with. Opposable thumbs made it even easier to hold said tools, and front-facing eyes helped with reading and various other tasks. These traits weren't universal: Metatron was a sapient pentapus, after all: but Micky didn't think that it was a coincidence that most of his intelligent hosts had shared similar shapes.

Beasts from other worlds were by far the hardest to replicate, whether or not he had possessed them in the past. Their physiology was entirely different from the creatures of Remior, and they didn't even have the similarities that sapients tended to share to anchor Micky's efforts.

Suffice to say, he had never managed to transform into the floating cat or the frozen lizard: and not for a lack of trying.

That said, shapeshifting into any of his past hosts: even the easier ones: had still been a time consuming and imperfect process. Despite having spent several hours fine-tuning Enki's or Leo's appearance, Micky hadn't been confident that he could fool other Atlanteans or Felmarans.

The grey colour and crystalline texture of his icy body would obviously give him away immediately, but that wasn't the only problem. Even without that, he was certain that his transformations were riddled with other flaws. More importantly, they would collapse immediately if he tried to fight with them.

'Let's see if I can do any better now.'

Strictly speaking, Mimicry also focused on his appearance rather than the physiological aspects of his body, so he didn't expect its influence to immediately solve the problem.

However, there was clearly a strong correlation between how something was built and how it looked, so perfecting one should help with the other. Coupled with his memories of possessing his hosts, he would hopefully have two legs supporting his efforts rather than one.

Micky decided to start with Gabe's form. He should be one of the easiest candidates, because he had possessed him twice, and for extended periods of time. Even better, the second possession had been recent.

Sure enough, it only took him a minute or so to transform into his friend. His posture was still humanoid, but the number of digits on his hands and feet dropped to just three, and the arrangement of his internal organs changed drastically.

This was already several times faster than his previous attempts, and Micky wasn't even remotely done. Feeling his new trait scream in protest to his imperfect transformation, he gave into his supernatural instincts, allowing the Amorphos inside his soul to direct his efforts.

The first thing he did was retract the visual aspects of his blessing, robbing his flesh of its dull grey hue. However, that was merely the beginning.

Not satisfied with the teal colour either, he began replacing the soul-freezing ice mana inside his body with regular ice, rapidly getting rid of its faint silver colour too. Before long, Micky resembled a frozen statue of his friend.

He frowned. 'Still not good enough.'

His shape felt much closer to Gabe's than before, but the texture and colour of his skin looked nothing like the man's transparent flesh. A deep dissatisfaction permeated Micky's soul as he contemplated that fact, his new trait clearly not happy with the results either.

Trying something else, he fused more soul-freezing ice, replacing every cubic centimetre of his body once again. The silver glow of the material made it even worse, but that only lasted until he willed his skin, muscles and bones to turn invisible, revealing a set of silver organs pulsing beneath.

'Hmmm… It's certainly an improvement, but invisible isn't the same as transparent. Besides, the colour of my organs is all wrong.'

Another thing that made Gabe an excellent first humanoid to turn into was the fact that Micky had seen the man from the outside many times as well, during his other visits to the Vault. On top of that, his friend's biology had made it easier to observe his inner structure than pretty much anyone else.

Grabbing hold of the properties of his fused mana, he carefully adjusted the degree by which its colour had vanished, forcing a scarce layer to manifest once again. Only, he made sure that it was still possible to see his organs through it.

'It's a decent imitation, I suppose, but this only works in Gabe's case. Turning my mana partially invisible won't work for anyone else. I need to find a better way to replicate other colours,' he thought.

He didn't have many options when it came to his human body, but the elemental one was far more malleable. What he wanted to do had to be possible, somehow…

Pondering over the problem for a few minutes, he came up with a couple of ideas.

The simplest one would be to mix paint of various colours into his mana and let his trait handle the rest. It should work, but Micky would rather find a way that didn't involve storing a dozen buckets of paint inside his spatial seal and having to replenish them frequently.

He instead went with the second, more ambitious, option, reforging himself once again while paying closer attention to the internal structure of the ice. Getting rid of any microscopic impurities in the material, he ensured that his new body was far less cloudy than before, allowing light to pass through it freely like glass.

His lips parted into a grin. He knew that he wouldn't have been able to exert such fine control over his transformation if not for the trait's influence, and he gladly welcomed its assistance.

The end-result was an alternative way to construct a semi-transparent body. It looked a little better than the half-invisible version, though it hadn't solved the issue. Not yet, at least. Thankfully, this was just the precursor to something even more interesting.

Reforging his body for the umpteenth time, Micky forced the pristine ice crystals inside his flesh to grow in a certain manner. As soon as he was done, he lifted his glass-like arm, nodding with satisfaction as he

watched the subtle silver glow of his mana split into six other colours by the time it reached his crystalline skin.

Like a prism, he could force his body to disperse light as it flowed through it, meaning that he now had all the ingredients necessary to perfect his optical illusions. Of course, his understanding of the subject was rather limited, and carefully controlling the hue of every square centimetre of his body was a massive undertaking, but Micky now possessed the perfect trait to take care of the logistics.

'I guess Nesha can afford to wait a couple more weeks as I work on this. Hopefully, Phoebe will contact me by then too…' he thought, diving into his new project.

Chapter 592: Skin (2)

"Well? What do you think?" Micky asked Elaine.

His cousin circled him a few times, scrutinizing his appearance carefully before eventually nodding. "It's good. You look just like Grandpa! I wouldn't be able to tell if I hadn't seen you transform."

Micky's smile widened. Technically, the lower grade of his mana cores would give him away rather easily, but it was nothing that a few concealment runes wouldn't fix.

"How about now?" he asked again, shifting his appearance.

Unlike before, he didn't bother to reconstruct his entire body from scratch. Only a thin layer on the surface squirmed as shards of soul-freezing ice and droplets of soul-freezing water rearranged themselves, adjusting his shape and colours slightly.

Soon after commencing his latest project, he had realized that he didn't need to have light pass through his entire body. He only needed to create lots of tiny crystals of various shapes that would bend, reflect and disperse light into distinct colours, and have his trait dynamically arrange them as necessary. The resolution he could achieve was frightening, as modifying his appearance was the part of his transformation where his trait excelled.

Perfecting his new spell had ended up taking about a full month, meaning that he was cutting it close with the affinity-granting treasure that he had to deliver to Nesha. Micky had always found it difficult to

pause in the middle of a project that he found interesting. This was definitely a trait that he had inherited from Percy, as his Huehuan side wasn't like that.

"This is… quite unsettling," Elaine said as soon as he was done transforming. This time, she sounded less than pleased. "Is it me, or did you make me look a little fat around the waist?"

Micky chuckled, though he opted not to say anything. He was pretty sure that he hadn't made a mistake: his cousin had gained some weight in the last couple of years. She was still quite lean, but clearly not as much as she would have liked.

Unwilling to give her another reason to slap him, he quickly transformed into something else. This time, he picked Galahad: a person that he had never possessed. Technically, that made it harder to copy one's appearance, but morphing just his exterior wasn't much of an issue as long as it was a species that he was already used to.

"Yeap. This one's perfect too. You even got his clothes right," Elaine confirmed, before poking his cheek with her finger. "Your skin even feels and bends like a human's!" she added, before frowning. "Though it's still as cold as ice."

He shrugged. "Not much I can do about that. Or well… there's probably a way to fix that too if I want, but it sounds like too much effort for too little gain."

Next, he spent a few minutes cycling through a bunch of other forms. He had grown better at transforming into most of his sapient hosts: except for those that he hadn't spent much time possessing: and he could even freely adjust their appearance into a customized member of their species.

Sadly, his cousin hadn't seen any of those people before, so she wouldn't be able to tell if he made a mistake, though he was confident by now that his own enhanced instincts were good enough.

His Status clearly agreed.

[Congratulations! You have mastered a new spell: Hybrid Art: Chameleon's Skin: Refined!]

‘Finally,’ he thought, exhaling in relief. ‘Straight to Refined too!’

It didn’t really matter whether he registered the spell or not, because this wasn’t one that synergized with his mutated eyes. Hell, he didn’t even have them in this body. Still, the notification was proof that he had grown proficient enough to potentially trick somebody if necessary.

It also felt good to have his efforts recognized.

As for why it was a Hybrid Art: that wasn’t much of a mystery. It made use of both a mutation and a spectral trait, so it was a mixture of a Wild Art and a Spectral Art. Apparently, Phoebe’s Decree was more than happy to lump it in the same category as his Core Bestowal, despite that one being a mixture of a Spectral Art and a Secret Art.

If he ever incorporated his bloodline into Chameleon’s Skin, it might even turn into an Ultimate Art like the Symphony, though he doubted he would create another Extreme spell anytime soon.

Then again, it could be argued that he had already sort of included his bloodline into the current version of the spell, because the knowledge of many of his current forms had been acquired by him possessing them. However, that wasn’t a strict requirement for it to work, which was reflected in the spell’s name.

“What are its limitations?” his cousin suddenly asked, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Anything that’s not human, Huehuan or crow takes a few seconds longer to turn into, though the difference is small. I think I’ve had enough practice with the spell to turn into most of my past hosts and other members of their species, though some of the more bizarre ones will probably still collapse the moment I start straining myself,” he explained.

Elaine nodded thoughtfully. “What about creatures you’ve never possessed before?”

“They should still be too hard at the moment, but every new appearance I master makes it easier to learn more,” he replied.

There were only so many ways to structure an arm or a skull. The more forms he added to his repertoire, the more reference points he would have in the future. Micky hoped that he could slowly

expand his capabilities to include any living creature: including not only those that he'd never possessed, but even some that he had never personally seen.

Perhaps, he might even grow capable of transforming into other structures eventually: bypassing the need for a consistent biology entirely. His new trait and spell were merely the starting point for a brand-new area of research.

Obviously, completing his artificial advancement and finding a way to strengthen Kassorith were more urgent: especially since the Amorphos wouldn't really help with either: but he still intended to make some time to practice his new ability on the side.

Micky chatted with Elaine for a few minutes longer, though his cousin eventually bade him farewell to return to her guard duties. He was about to pack up his things to finally head to Twilight City, when somebody knocked on his door.

'Hmmm? Did she forget something?' he wondered, willing the concealment runes on the door to deactivate so that he could scan his visitor with Mana Sense and Soul Vision.

To his great surprise, he found nobody standing outside his house. It was like the person had vanished instantly upon knocking.

Frowning, he took a couple of deep breaths to flood his channels with mana, preparing himself for a fight in case he was about to be attacked by an enemy. He obviously knew that an enemy wouldn't have bothered to announce themselves before ambushing him, so this was more likely somebody pranking him, but he wouldn't relax until he was sure.

Opening the door, his eyes widened in shock as he saw the last person he had expected to see: not just outside his hut in Bogside town, but anywhere on Remior. His Mana Sense and Soul Vision still showed nothing, yet the figure smirking at him in his regular sight looked as real as a heart attack.

He was a tall man with a head of dull grey hair, his gaze intense and intimidating. He was wearing expensive-looking robes, a series of roots emerging from the underside of a cloud on his insignia, indicating that he was a member of Remior's leading Great House.

More importantly, Micky recognized him, which only made it harder to accept that this person was standing before him, alive and well. After all, Micky had personally killed this man.

“Deimos!” he exclaimed, his frozen heart leaping into his equally frigid mouth. “How?!”

The fallen Violet’s smirk brightened, though he remained silent, the bastard clearly happy watching Micky squirm. He made no move to attack either, somehow entirely unconcerned as he faced the very person who had executed him.

Sure, Micky had only managed to defeat Hermes’s son after fusing with Percy, and his human body was dozens of kilometres away at the moment. However, he still had access to their powerful, shared domain with either of his bodies, so it might not be impossible to even the playing field and hold his own against the noble.

The man’s indifference to the danger he was in seemed almost as unreasonable as his unexpected survival.

Almost.

‘No, wait. I’m an idiot. There’s no way he’s alive,’ he quickly realized, forcing himself to calm down.

His mind raced with possibilities as he considered every other reasonable explanation. Did Deimos have a twin brother, or was this Hermes himself, sporting an unusual resemblance to his deceased son?

Even if the god cared about his dead progeny, Micky didn’t think that he would take direct action against him. The worst-case scenario would be that this was Machaon in disguise, as Micky wasn’t ready to fight against a White: certainly not with one of his bodies missing. However, Machaon’s memory-erasing bloodline was well known, and it shouldn’t have allowed him to transform into somebody else.

Silence stretched for several seconds, neither man making any further moves. Eventually, Micky settled on a guess that he felt fairly confident in, his shoulders finally relaxing as he realized that he wasn’t in any danger.

“Very funny,” he spat, his features twisting into a grimace. “I’ve been expecting you for weeks, and you decide to pull this stunt the moment you show up.”

‘Deimos’ chuckled, though his crisp laughter rang through the small hut like a gentle bell, sounding nothing like the deceased noble used to. At the same time, his body melted like wax, transforming into another.

“I arrived here a while ago, but I didn’t want to interrupt you as you were working on your new spell. After spending days watching you shapeshift, I couldn’t resist,” the prettiest woman that Micky had ever laid eyes upon said.

He sighed, not bothering to argue with the titaness.

The visitor was naturally Phoebe, and she was clearly here to honour her promise. It was finally time to segregate the Lone Wanderer’s memories and truly reclaim his separate identities as Percy and Micky.

Chapter 593: Constellations (1)

“Are you sure you don’t need me to bring my human body here first?” Micky asked.

He was sitting cross-legged inside the small hut. The concrete building only had two rooms, but that was by design. There was a bedroom, as well as what used to be his workshop in the old house, though he’d repurposed the latter into half a living room nowadays, since he didn’t see himself forging steel tools for the townsfolk again.

That was not to say that the technology wasn’t useful: Sengo’s teachings were quite revolutionary despite not using a single drop of mana. However, Micky’s blacksmithing skills and knowledge of concrete had already spread to the entire Camelot province and would permeate the rest of Remior eventually: without any further input from him.

Regardless, the small hut could probably use a bathroom: especially if any humans were going to live here in the future. It would cause the layout of the building to diverge from the old version even more, but sacrificing basic amenities for nostalgia’s sake wasn’t a great idea. However, this hadn’t been a priority because Micky didn’t need to relieve or wash himself due to his elemental body. Nesha and Percy could install a bathroom if they ever decided to settle here.

“No need,” the titaness said, breaking him out of his thoughts. “As far as I can tell, the two of you now share a mind and soul, so physical proximity isn’t important. I should be able to access your mindscape through either body. It’s not much different from how you absorbed the fiend recently, despite your bodies being separated by dozens of kilometres. That said, I do advise you to sit down until this is over, as the process will probably knock you out.”

Micky frowned. “Will it hurt?”

Normally, he didn’t mind a little pain, but recalling the agonizing experience of absorbing the Amorphos made him shudder. Evidently, getting over the mental trauma would take longer than a month or two. At the very least, he wasn’t looking forward to repeating the experience anytime soon.

Phoebe chuckled. “Not at all. Still, are you absolutely sure you want to do this?”

“Yes. I’ve thought about it long and hard. As convenient as my current state is, I want my aspects to recover and maintain a sense of individuality,” Micky replied, before raising an eyebrow. “Why do you ask? Is this going to be irreversible? Or are there any other side-effects I should know about?”

The goddess’s question was quite surprising. She’d previously made this sound like a simple operation: and not even a particularly intrusive one: giving Micky the impression that he could always get rid of the structures she was about to install inside his mindscape if he didn’t like them.

“Not really. You’ll be able to undo this whenever you want,” she confirmed with a shrug. “I just don’t like wasting my time.”

He suppressed the urge to swear, not wanting to piss the ancient deity off right as she was about to help him, though her teasing personality was starting to irritate him. Heaving out a heavy sigh, he heeded Phoebe’s instructions, sitting down with his other body as well and closing his eyes. The sooner they got this over with, the sooner he’d be free to return to Twilight City.

He heard the titaness step closer before sitting in front of him. Next, he felt a gentle touch on his temples. Her hands were small and soft, making it easy to mistake their owner for a helpless young woman. However, Micky knew better than that. Phoebe was the opposite of ‘helpless’ or ‘young’. Those tiny palms of hers were strong enough to shatter mountains and whip up terrifying storms.

Trying not to think too much about the fact that the titaness could crush his skull like a grape if she wanted, he concentrated on her actions. A trickle of something cool and soothing seeped into his brain, a familiar sensation rippling through his mind.

Mind mana.

Every single second, Phoebe was pouring more than Micky had ever experienced before: enough to drown him ten times over if left by itself: and it looked like she was only getting started. Thankfully, the potent resource was currently being guided by a firm, unshakeable will. The mana entered his head and melted seamlessly into his thoughts without so much as touching anything that it wasn't meant to interact with.

"Just relax and try to sink into your mindscape," the goddess suddenly said, her voice resonating within his very being. "I'll help you get there sooner."

Nodding slightly, he did as he was told. Before long, he felt the floor disappear from under him, finding himself falling through clouds. Floating shards of ice collided with his body as he shielded his eyes with his forearms. Frigid winds howled everywhere around him as a murder of crows cawed in the distance, joined by a chorus of shrieking spectres.

All things considered, the ever-present Symphony was far quieter today than it had been during his fight with Deimos and would likely remain so until he tapped into its full power again.

Ignoring the peculiarities of his Extreme spell, Micky peeked through the gaps between his arms to examine his surroundings. A vast, snowy plain unfolded beneath him like a wrinkled sheet, its slopes and crevices barely perceptible amidst the oppressive darkness.

The sight frightened him for a moment as he thought that he was going to splatter on impact with the ground if he didn't decelerate somehow, only to remember that this place was effectively just an illusion shaped by his own mind.

A blink later, he found himself standing on the snow, exhaling in relief as he felt solid ground beneath his feet. He was currently in his Huehuan form, finding it strangely fitting. After all, this place was a

replica of his home world: not to mention the fact that Phoebe had brought him here through his elemental body.

However, he was made of flesh and blood rather than living ice. It made the frigid environment somewhat unpleasant, though he ultimately welcomed the familiar numbness in his toes, as it reminded him of the family that he had lost.

His parents and sister might be gone, but he wasn't alone today.

Phoebe stood by his side, though her body wasn't made of flesh like his. She had manifested inside his mindscape as a monochrome construct of mana, her form poorly defined and constantly leaking crimson motes that danced around her like fireflies.

Clearly noticing his confusion, she smiled. "As I'm sure you know by now, it's not easy even for gods who have mastered multiple mind concepts to intrude in another's mindscape. Even with your permission, staying here and affecting this place is difficult: which is why I won't be the one granting you the new mindset. I'll merely provide the mana and some guidance."

Micky nodded, feeling glad about this. While he was convinced that Phoebe didn't mean him any harm, he still didn't know her well enough to fully trust her. As much as he wanted to segregate his memories, he certainly preferred being the one in control of the process.

"So… how is this supposed to work?" he asked.

Phoebe glanced around. "First things first. This place is a mess."

Micky tilted his head, not sure what to say to that.

The goddess chuckled. "Everyone's mindscape looks different, since it's built by their mind subconsciously the first time they enter. Fortunately, it doesn't have to stay that way: it shouldn't take much effort to reconstruct it into something easier to work with."

He raised an eyebrow. "What about it needs fixing?"

“Lots of things,” Phoebe replied, before elaborating. “There’s no reason for it to be so dark that you have to squint to see past your nose. There’s also too much empty space between notable locations. Why don’t you try bringing everything closer?”

Micky nodded, scanning the area carefully.

There was no sun directly above him, though he did see a dim, crimson star shining over a different spot in the distance, illuminating the coliseum. Elsewhere, Remior’s yellow sun shone over the Whistling Woods, while many other stars hovered over various other locations from his memories. Just like the land itself was a patchwork of countless worlds, so was the sky.

His mindscape had always looked like this, though light from those distant regions struggled to reach the snowy plain: at least as long as he wasn’t focusing on them: as if his mind was trying hard to preserve the mental image of Huehue’s dark side.

He sighed. ‘I suppose that it is needlessly inconvenient,’ he acknowledged.

Fixing the place proved just as easy as Phoebe had said. It only took a thought for him to turn the brightness up, ushering in a constant stream of daylight over the snowy plain. Golden rays of sunshine emerged from seemingly nowhere, yet arrived pretty much everywhere, banishing even the tiniest shadow from the pale ground.

Finding it a little too unnatural, Micky played with the environment for a few seconds. Eventually, he decided to brush away the clouds and create a proper sun that wasn’t supposed to exist here, forcing the light to radiate from a specific direction.

Next, he willed all the structures in the distance to move closer, shrinking the once-desolate wasteland into something closer to a cheerful hub that would allow him to access the rest of his memories more easily.

At the same time, he noted that everything in his mindscape looked a lot better than it had shortly after the fiend’s absorption. The coliseum had almost finished repairing itself, new trees adorned with even newer leaves having sprouted in the Whistling Woods. The giant mushrooms growing on the steep

slopes of the Fungal Spire had largely regenerated, the holes on their caps having patched themselves up with new, glowing tissue.

There were still signs of damage here and there, but this was certainly a promising development.

'Well… whatever… we're not here just to assess the condition of my mindscape,' he thought, turning back to Phoebe. "How about now? Is it any better?"

The titaness nodded. "It's an improvement, though you're still restricting yourself to the logic of the physical world. Why don't you try utilizing all three dimensions? It'll make navigation easier."

Micky raised an eyebrow. That was a good idea: one that he was sure he would have eventually thought of, had he spent longer in this place. Examining his mindscape for a couple of minutes, he pondered over various possibilities, eventually settling on one that he liked.

Then, the whole world shattered like cheap glass.

Chapter 594: Constellations (2)

Land and sky crumbled into colourful shards that rapidly faded away, leaving behind a void scarcely dotted with tiny stars.

Unlike earlier, Micky didn't fall this time, floating in the same spot with Phoebe by his side. As the master of this realm, he could freely control everything: including gravity: at least so long as he understood the power he wielded. Besides, there wasn't anything left to fall towards.

Bringing the glowing particles closer, he focused on one that shone in a deep blue colour. Micky didn't move a centimetre, nor did the star change in any way, yet the mere act of concentrating on it caused a scene to play out in his mind.

He was in Enki's body, swimming inside the cold depths of Atlantis. The intense pressure of the alien ocean was a little disorienting as it had been decades since the last time he'd experienced it, though the boy's flesh had luckily evolved to handle it without issue.

The eruption of the nearby volcano cast an ominous red glow interspaced with twisting shadows across the pale corals that decorated the seabed. Tiny crustaceans and strange fish scurried about to hide or escape from larger predators.

More importantly, Micky felt that he could easily force the flow of time to slow down or accelerate if he wanted. He could also skip ahead, rewind or even pause the memory entirely. Of course, he did nothing of the sort, opting to withdraw his attention from the blue star and move on to another.

The second dot shone in a crimson light, leading Micky back into Nephthys's Sanctuary. However, he didn't stay there long either, seeing no reason to waste time now that he had a better grasp on the changes in his mindscape.

"Excellent thinking," Phoebe praised. "This will make everything easier. Most mind affinity users structure their mindscapes in a similar manner."

He nodded. His memories were certainly more compact and accessible than before. Admittedly, the place had lost some of its previous charm, though the starry sky he was currently inhabiting wasn't necessarily less beautiful than the frozen wasteland.

"Now what?" he asked, eager to take the next step.

"Start by separating the stars into three groups," the titaness instructed, before elaborating. "Gather the ones that you only want Percy or Micky to have access to, as well as those you don't mind sharing."

Micky raised an eyebrow. He wasn't surprised by the task that the goddess had given him, since he understood how it was relevant to their goal, but he quickly found an issue with her instructions.

"How? Do you expect me to sift through my entire life, one memory at a time? There are thousands of them!"

Phoebe shook her head. "Always remember that you're in complete control of this place. Just focus on the reasons for which you want Percy or Micky to have exclusive access to certain memories."

Heeding her advice, Micky started by focusing on his intimate memories with Nesha. Those were naturally the first ones on the chopping block, as he really had no business remembering them. The sooner he forgot them, the sooner Percy would be able to regain some semblance of privacy and resume his relationship with his girlfriend.

Several stars grew brighter in response, separating them from the rest. With a wave of his hands, Micky gathered them all to one place, pushing the others aside.

That said, his work was still incomplete. Nesha was Micky's friend: not just Percy's girlfriend. He didn't want to completely forget her or the time they had spent training together and discussing magic.

Filtering out the innocent parts required a lot of additional queries: it mainly involved Micky associating certain emotions, sounds, or images and figuring out which stars reacted or didn't: but he eventually felt happy with the results.

"Honestly, there aren't even that many memories…" he muttered as he realized that the stars he had cherry picked were only a tiny fraction of the total.

Then again, it wasn't that strange. Percy hadn't had much alone time with Nesha. Most of it had happened in Bogside town, where they had only lived for a couple of years, and they hadn't even gotten together until several months in. Afterwards, they'd been too preoccupied with other matters to spend quality time together.

"Is this going to be enough to split us up?" he asked, turning to Phoebe.

She chuckled. "Not even close. You'll need to locate a few other categories of stars. The first are your formative memories: those from your childhood or other important events. Ideally, you don't want to share them."

Micky raised an eyebrow. "But I don't mind Percy remembering my mother and sister's death, nor do I care if Micky recalls my childhood in the mansion."

“That’s fine,” the goddess replied with a shrug. “Just duplicate the stars, and we’ll tweak the copies later. The memories will be intact, but the emotions associated with them will be muted and feel less important. That way, you’ll remember those events like an outsider rather than a participant.”

Micky nodded begrudgingly. He’d suspected that separating his memories wouldn’t be entirely without cost, but this was something he could stomach.

Locating the right memories was both easier and harder than expected. Micky and Percy hadn’t even met each other during their original childhoods, so the corresponding stars were relatively easy to spot. However, there were several times more of these memories than the ones that Percy had shared with Nesha.

To make matters worse, Micky had essentially lived through a second childhood, having spent years growing up again as an amnesiac crow. There were also certain other memories that he felt were at the core of his identity: such as his decades-long captivity in the coliseum or under Acton’s thumb. Traumatic as they were, he knew that they had shaped him into who he was.

By comparison, Percy hadn’t experienced that many tragedies: other than the loss of his parents perhaps, though he’d been too young to remember it well. In hindsight, Archibald had done a great job sheltering him from Remior’s horrors before he awakened his bloodline.

However, many of his early off-world adventures had sparked awe and wonder in his youthful mind, so he figured that it would be a good idea to keep at least some of those to himself.

Obviously, Micky would still have to share any of his fights in the blood-stained arena that had let to important insights, much like Percy would need to share the adventures that had yielded valuable magical knowledge. He didn’t want Micky to end up without his magiscript skills, or Percy to lose years of honing his fighting style.

For better or worse, memories like that were generally few and far between, as Micky had faced thousands of weak opponents in the coliseum that hadn’t taught him much, and Percy had sent out hundreds of clones that had returned to Remior empty-handed.

Sorting everything out took several hours. Eventually, Micky heaved out a tired breath, feeling happy with the results. He'd even made sure to duplicate all the stars he had gathered and modify the emotional intensity of the memories, just like the titaness had suggested.

"Please tell me that we're done," he begged the ancient deity.

"Almost," Phoebe replied, patting his shoulder consolingly. "The final set of stars is the smallest one by far, but arguably the most important."

Micky tilted his head, having no idea what other memories could possibly be more important than those at the core of his personalities, or the ones that he explicitly wanted to keep private.

"There's more than just memories here," the goddess explained, probably guessing what he was thinking. "Haven't you noticed that a few stars never responded to your stimuli?"

Micky creased his brow, realizing that Phoebe was right. His eyes landed on a nearby grey dot that had remained practically untouched through his endeavours. Focusing on it, he was greeted by a different: yet extremely familiar: sensation.

This time, there was no vision from his past. In fact, the senses that reached him were incomplete, though they felt more real than anything he had experienced in this place. He found himself suspended in darkness, registering nothing but the rhythmic sound of his own heartbeat. He tried to open his eyes or move, yet he quickly discovered that he couldn't so much as twitch a muscle, nor control the flow of time.

Lifting his attention from the grey star, he returned to his mindscape.

"Was that…?"

"Percy's sense of hearing," Phoebe said. "If you want each of your aspects to be constrained to a single body, you'll have to separate their senses and erect a barrier between them."

"What if we need to share or swap bodies at some point?" Micky asked.

He wasn't trying to be difficult. The titaness was only giving him what he'd explicitly asked for. However, he really didn't want to completely lose the flexibility afforded to him by the Symphony. At the very least, they'd need to fully blend their minds whenever they pushed the Extreme spell to its limits.

"Don't worry. We'll bind your memories loosely so that it doesn't become an issue. Just trust me for now."

Micky nodded, withdrawing his protests once more. Gathering the stars corresponding to his senses was far easier than his memories, so it only took a couple of minutes.

Once everything was ready, the titaness lifted both hands, her palms swiftly swelling into giant red blobs that kept expanding until they were over a dozen times as tall as she was. It was only now that Micky realized where all the mind mana the titaness had poured into his head had been.

Separating the giant spheres from her body, Phoebe regenerated her missing limbs before speaking. "Use these to connect the memories. The exact manner doesn't matter as much as your intention does, so concentrate on the way you want the new mindset to work."

Following her instructions, Micky seized control of the crimson orbs, sending each into a different group of colourful stars. The blobs exploded, tiny droplets of mind mana bound together with thin strings scattering and seeping into the glowing dots.

The stars shuffled chaotically, whipping up two massive storms inside Micky's mindscape. The weak-looking bands holding the stars together tensed and stretched, making him fear that they were about to start snapping, though that luckily didn't happen.

After confirming that the constructs were strong enough to withstand the process, Micky paid closer attention to what exactly his memories where doing. At first glance, they looked like they were dancing around randomly but, on closer inspection, he realized that there was an underlying pattern to their behaviour.

Some stars: specifically those that harboured his senses or his most private memories: were trying to sink deeper into the swarm, while the rest were slowly getting pushed to the exterior.

Many of the crimson strings twisted together into thicker bands, creating smaller groups of associated memories that were connected to other large groups in the distance. Every now and then, a pair of memories briefly collided, causing a brand-new string to connect them like a freshly-spat piece of chewing gum after they parted.

At the same time, their colours began to change. Their varied hues flowed outward through the strings, trying to pollute the neighbouring stars. Groups where a certain colour was already dominant settled into some adjacent shade of that colour fairly quickly, before attempting to take over other groups.

Overall, the two swarms were changing rapidly in both shape and colour, though Micky still wasn't sure what exactly they were trying to turn into. He hadn't noticed any changes to himself yet, either.

The process was long and tedious, but Phoebe reassured him that it was going well, so he patiently waited for the dust to settle.

Eventually, the stars slowed down, forming a pair of well-defined constellations that sported familiar shapes. Each group had a single uniform colour: for the most part: the stars pulsing in unison as the previous conflicts appeared to have been resolved.

The first constellation was shaped like Percy, but he was made of countless grey dots linked together by even thinner strands of the same colour. The formation was downright colossal: easily a kilometre from head to toe. Across him, an equally massive crow floated in the void, though its stars shone with a blueish-green light.

The appearance of the giant structures caused something to stir inside the real Micky: or at least the projection that currently housed his consciousness. However, his Status spoke before he had the chance to examine himself.

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new mindset: Shimmering Constellations!]

Chapter 595: Constellations (3)

Percy's flesh squirmed and his organs shifted inside his torso. They expanded, shrank, split apart and merged again like nobody's business. Thankfully, there was no pain, but it was still quite a disorienting experience.

A few seconds later, the left side of his body separated from the right, the two halves transforming into different shapes as they regenerated their missing parts. At the same time, Percy lost awareness of his counterpart, his half swiftly adopting his human form, complete with clothes and mutated eyes.

Meanwhile, the figure across from him remained a Huehuan: bare-chested, four-armed, beak-faced and covered in tribal tattoos from head to toe. The changes extended beyond the avatars in the mindscape, however.

Percy suddenly identified several gaps in his memories: or rather, those he had previously inherited from Micky. Most of his friend's memories were still there, but some felt blurrier than the rest, certain details difficult to recall.

He obviously couldn't say much about the memories that had been removed entirely: that was the whole point: but he naturally recognized the fuzzier ones. They were the same memories that he had just spent the past several hours modifying under Phoebe's patient guidance.

Finally, he identified a few deeper changes after the acquisition of the mindset. Most notably, he felt less connected to Micky's family, and somewhat numb to the hardships his friend had endured during his captivity.

It wasn't like he'd stopped caring about Micky's suffering entirely, but he only felt sympathy towards his buddy, rather than having a personal stake in those matters. While he couldn't easily access the Huehuan's mind anymore, he imagined that he had experienced similar changes with regards to Percy's own goals and relationships.

Overall, the separation had left Percy extremely dizzy, but he guessed that he would feel better after resting for a few hours. All things considered, he was quite pleased with the result.

"Success!" he exclaimed, punching the air, though his excitement dimmed once he paid closer attention to his friend.

Micky was staring back at him blankly, his eyes glassy and his expression sour. Percy had no idea why, but the Huehuan clearly hadn't taken their abrupt separation nearly as well.

"What's wrong?" he asked, a tinge of worry creeping into his heart.

Fortunately, his friend wasn't entirely gone. Percy's words seemed to snap the four-armed man out of his daze. "Uh… sorry Percy… this is a little weird…"

Percy frowned. "Weird? How so?"

Micky blinked tiredly before replying. "I'm not sure how to explain it. I guess I'm feeling somewhat lost. Empty, maybe? Like I've just lost my purpose in life."

"Your purpose? Didn't you want to free your people from Rhaziel? To find out what happened to your dad?" Percy asked. "Don't tell me you lost your memories again…"

Micky creased his brow. "Well… not really. I still remember everything: from both lives. And my brain is telling me that I should care about all the things you've just listed. I'm just struggling to connect with all of that… emotionally… for some reason. As if there's no point bothering."

Percy raised an eyebrow. This sounded like good old depression: not something magical: but he didn't think it was a coincidence that it was happening now. Hoping for some answers, he turned to Phoebe's projection who had been observing them silently.

"Any idea what's wrong with him? Did we make a mistake while modifying his copies of the memories or something?"

The titaness shook her head. "You did everything correctly, though his situation isn't exactly unexpected," she replied, before elaborating. "You have to remember that Micky's starting point was very different from yours."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. “You’ve lived a relatively continuous life: like most people. Sure, your clones occasionally brought you random bundles of extra memories, and you did just spend the past couple of years sharing a mind with Micky. Still, for the most part, Percival Avalon’s life could be likened to a single block of stone spanning several decades without interruption. Meanwhile…”

Phoebe didn’t complete her sentence, but Percy understood what she was trying to tell him. Micky’s past was fragmented. It had been so, long before their fusion, and the last two years had only made things worse.

The poor guy had died a total of three times, and practically lived just as many different lives: first as a native of Huehue, then as an amnesiac crow on Remior, and finally as a part of the Lone Wanderer.

Scanning the giant constellation of the bird looming over them, Percy paid closer attention to a detail that he had glossed over earlier. Unlike the grey constellation resembling himself, the crow’s colour wasn’t completely uniform.

Rather than a single bluish-green hue, it was more of a mixture of two different colours: a cyan glow that reminded Percy of the original Micky’s pure affinity, and the deep amber hue of beast mana. The two colours were still warring over the colossal figure, refusing to yield like all the other hues that had been eliminated before.

“But why is this happening? His memories should all be there, and we never noticed any issues before the separation,” Percy protested.

“Previously, the pieces of his mind stabilized themselves by latching onto yours, effectively using your personality as a crutch,” Phoebe explained. “Obviously, that is no longer an option.”

Percy frowned, thinking back to the past couple of years. Now that the titaness had mentioned it, it did seem like Micky’s ambitions and quirks had taken a backseat to his own. At the very least, his friend’s more playful nature had been muted, and they hadn’t focused as much on their mission to overthrow Rhaziel.

At the time, it had made sense, because returning to Huehue was more of a long-term goal. They would have to grow a lot stronger before they even considered challenging a god, and they still had several

more pressing issues to deal with on Remior, so concentrating on Percy's dreams had seemed more prudent. However, it appeared that this wasn't the only reason for the discrepancy.

Percy took a deep breath to calm down before speaking again. "How do we fix it?"

"There's nothing we can do," Phoebe said. Before Percy had a chance to argue again, she added, "or rather, we don't need to do anything. Your friend will be fine on his own. He just needs some time to rediscover himself, but I don't think that this is going to be a major issue."

Percy relaxed slightly upon hearing that the problem would resolve itself, though the goddess's reassurances hadn't shaken his worries off entirely. "How long will it take?"

"Hard to say. It could be anywhere from a few days to several decades. It's mostly up to him."

Percy clenched his fists, but he knew that there wasn't much he could do to help his friend. It was already a miracle that he'd managed to save him from beyond the grave so many times, and even given him a new, healthy body in the process. If the mind titaness didn't have a way to expedite Micky's recovery, he doubted that there was anyone on Remior who did.

"Don't worry about me," Micky suddenly said, placing a hand on Percy's shoulder as he jumped into the conversation. "It's like she said. You've already done more for me than I could have ever asked for. The rest is my burden to bear."

Percy sighed, deciding to trust his friend. At least, this did seem like a relatively minor hurdle compared to all the obstacles he and Micky had overcome since their original meeting: his nearly destroyed soul, the missing memories, his insatiable hunger and his inconvenient body. The man was practically a single step away from being able to live a life of his own again, all thanks to Percy.

"Thank you for the help," Percy told the goddess, trying not to feel too bad about the Huehuan's situation.

"A promise is a promise," Phoebe replied, her avatar dispersing into a swarm of crimson motes that faded away one after the other. Before the last one vanished from the mindscape entirely, her melodious voice echoed in Percy's ears one final time. "It'll be a while before we meet again. Try not to

get killed by Machaon. Oh, and you should probably play around with your new mindset before you leave this place. You can wait until after you return to the real world but doing it here will give you a better feel for how the changes in the constellations affect your mental state."

Listening to the deity's suggestion, Percy flashed his friend a questioning look. They both already had an instinctive understanding of their new ability: after all, they were the ones who'd just connected the glowing stars in a certain manner, infusing the thin threads with their intentions. However, the goddess was right. It wouldn't hurt to practice a little to get a better grasp on their new capabilities.

Micky nodded in silent agreement as they tried to merge their minds again.

The stars in both constellations vibrated violently, attempting to break free from their constraints. Their bonds held them in place for several seconds, though the stars eventually overpowered them, the colossal figures exploding as their components shot toward one another. A single, chaotic swarm formed: one that looked like it would take longer to settle than the previous shapes.

Micky's projection shot toward Percy's too, the two fusing into a single person once more. He didn't even bother to examine which shape he'd assumed this time, as it didn't really matter.

He was more interested in the changes to his memories. The gaps closed rapidly as the blurry parts grew clearer, soon restoring the Lone Wanderer to his previous state. However, he understood that this was temporary: it would only last for as long as he wanted.

Scanning the hurricane of stars, he realized that they had retained their colours this time. Half still shone in a grey light, the rest constantly shifting between cyan and amber. The strings that had previously linked them together were still there, though they had been stretched so thin that they were barely visible.

With a single thought, he willed the constellations to separate again.

Part of him didn't like that. He now understood that Micky wanted to stay fused: almost like an addict that couldn't bear to part with his vice. However, that was all the more reason to remain separate until the Huehuan resolved his dependency.

The glowing threads snapped back, pulling the constructs apart and back into defined shapes in an instant. Some of Percy's memories faded away like before as Micky's projection split off from his own.

"Nice. It's easy enough to switch between the two states. I suspect that we should also be able to partially merge if we want," Percy mused.

If necessary, they could bypass any feature of their new mindset. That included forcefully accessing each other's memories: even the private ones: tapping into the other body's senses, and possibly even swapping bodies entirely.

At the end of the day, the constellations were mere suggestions, not prisons. They were meant to softly guide their mind into a new default configuration: as long as it was convenient.

Another thing that Percy had noticed was that the Symphony had grown a little louder and clearer in the background after they registered the mindset. The spectres cried in celebration as the crows cawed gleefully, the winds howling fiercely, somehow, despite the complete lack of air inside the starlit void.

Percy had no idea why their boosting art appeared to have grown stronger. Shouldn't the opposite have happened?

Their Extreme spell was the culprit behind their fusion, and they had just taken a step back from that by splitting up. Why did their Ultimate Art feel more powerful than ever before, even in its dormant state?

'Maybe this is closer to how it was always meant to be,' Percy guessed.

After creating the spell, their Status had renamed them into the "Lone Wanderer", but it had also introduced a brand-new section in the page to list "Percival" and "Mictlantecuhtli" as his aspects. If its intention had been for them to lose their individual identities completely, then why had it bothered to differentiate them like that?

Percy knew that Phoebe's Decree only reflected his own subconscious thoughts: it would never force him onto a path that he fundamentally disagreed with. Viewed from that angle, perhaps the Symphony of a Dead Winter had always been meant to be complimented with something like the mindset that they had just created.

Admittedly, most of this was speculation, but he felt confident in his assessment.

Scanning the constellations one final time, he marvelled at their majestic forms as they floated in the void. The stars comprising them shone in specific colours and were arranged in orderly shapes, painting a stark contrast against the rest.

Around the colossal figures, an ocean of stars stretched as far as Percy's vision: farther, probably. Those didn't have a uniform colour. They were the shared memories that Percy and Micky hadn't seen fit to claim exclusive ownership of.

"Are you still fine with delivering the affinity-changing treasure to Nesha?" he asked his friend.

Okay. He had to agree that it was a little strange to talk to what had been a part of himself until a few minutes ago, though he understood that this was how things were supposed to be.

Micky hesitated for a second, but he nodded eventually. "I'll do it. Getting some fresh air will probably help. As will practicing my shapeshifting."

With that, Percy and his counterpart willed themselves out of their mindscape, each returning to his own physical body.

Chapter 596: Ruined garden

Machaon stood by the pond in his garden, lost in silent contemplation while staring at his reflection. The waters of the tiny lake were turbid: disturbed by the wind: though he didn't care enough to calm them down with his willpower today. It wasn't like he had any interest in preserving his refined appearance anymore.

From what little he could see amidst the roiling waves, the bags under his eyes betrayed the fact that he hadn't slept in days. It had been even longer since he'd last washed himself, his hair oily and unkempt as his robes were wrinkled and covered in stains.

Had somebody told him a few years ago that he would have allowed himself to devolve to this pathetic state, he would have been appalled. This hadn't been how Machaon had wanted people to see him. He was a patriarch of a Great House: one of Remior's leading figures!

The garden was in even worse shape than its owner.

The overgrown grass reached all the way to his knees, the bushes and trees having not been trimmed in years. Most of the flowers had withered or otherwise been replaced by invasive weeds. The fragrant air that had once permeated Machaon's little paradise now reeked of the bird droppings that littered the marble benches and cobblestone paths.

'How the fuck did it come to this…?' he asked himself for what he felt was the millionth time, his lips curling into a bitter smile.

Machaon had known that Percy and Nesha had posed a theoretical threat to his plans: especially if they'd kept digging into the matter of the girl's destroyed family. However, he'd thought that the possibility of them connecting the dots or stumbling upon something incriminating had been rather remote.

He'd still wanted to eliminate the danger before it blew up in his face, of course. Machaon had never been fond of loose ends. He'd even taken steps to get rid of the low-borns over the years.

Still. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that his operation would have come crumbling down so quickly… and so completely. The Violets in his House had been pressuring him to step down from his position for months, and his fellow Whites had made every attempt to sever ties with him and his family, clearly unwilling to be implicated by association.

Centuries of meticulous planning and excessive caution had been rendered moot by a couple of young upstarts that hadn't even lived as long as the plants in Machaon's garden.

'I should have headed to the Guild personally and squashed the little bastards on day one,' he thought, grinding his teeth.

At the time, it had seemed like an unnecessary risk. People would have questioned his involvement in the destruction of House Veritas and his obsession with the girl. Putting their concerns to rest without arousing suspicion about the Starry Princess would have been difficult.

That said, if he could go back in time, Machaon would choose that path a hundred times over.

'This… it's even worse than the worst-case scenario…'

It would have been bad enough if Percy and Nesha had simply speculated about his crimes and tattled to the Divine Order and the other Houses. At least, the low-borns had been fugitives for years, so there was a small chance that nobody would have taken their accusations seriously.

To think that Deimos: that stupid asshole: would lure Percy and his bird back to the Fungal Spire, practically inviting them to one of the only two spots on the entire planet where they could have found concrete evidence of Machaon's crimes.

'No. There's no point regretting the past.' He sighed. He'd already gone over this a thousand times, but he understood that the choices he had made had been reasonable at the time. 'Besides, Percy is clearly as ambitious as I am. The little freak would have still tried to turn a Starry Wasp into one of his minions sooner or later.'

Either way, it was better to focus on the future: assuming that Machaon still had one of those. While he'd given up on his appearance, his garden, and even his reputation, Machaon had yet to give up on himself.

Much like everyone else, he'd waited with bated breath to see how the gods intended to deal with him. At the same time, he'd spent his days and nights trying to come up with a way out of this mess.

As far as he could tell, there was precisely one path to salvation, and he didn't like it one bit. Whether it even had a chance of succeeding practically depended entirely on Phoebe's whims, and Machaon wasn't one who enjoyed leaving his fate in another's hands.

Alas, there was nothing he could do about it.

The good news was that the Order had remained silent so far: an indication that his plan had merit. There were several additional things that Machaon had to take care of if he wanted to live though, the hardest of which he had been postponing for the last few months.

'No sense in delaying the inevitable,' he thought, finally deciding to commit to his gamble. 'If they kill me, so be it.'

There was a good chance that Machaon wouldn't see the sun rise again, but dying was starting to sound preferable to agonizing over his fate for years. Besides, if the deities decided to spare him, he would have to start preparing for the next phase of his plan sooner rather than later.

Nodding with grim determination, he flew over his dilapidated garden, reaching the entrance of the underground chamber in mere seconds. The leaders of the other Great Houses had demanded access to his not-so-hidden lair countless times in recent months, insisting that they couldn't allow anybody to threaten the survival of their world.

Obviously, Machaon had denied both their requests and the Red-born's explosive accusations. He knew that he hadn't convinced his colleagues, but they had luckily proven too cowardly to take action against him before the gods broke their silence.

'I'll still have to get Theseus and Morpheus on my side for this to work,' he reminded himself.

The other four boot lickers were more likely to stick with Percy and the smaller families if it came to a conflict, but Machaon felt that the Divine Root and House Ypnos could be convinced to join House Asclepius due to their own history with the Red-born. Regardless, it was too early to worry about his potential allies before knowing whether Phoebe would even hear him out.

Using his willpower, Machaon ripped out a massive chunk of dirt and dead plants out of the dried hedge formation, revealing the entrance of the underground complex. This time, he carelessly tossed the carpet of weeds and bushes aside, not bothering to preserve it for later.

There was no going back. Everyone who mattered already knew of Machaon's crimes, so he might as well start operating in the open.

Flying into the dungeon, he made his way to the captive as the runes around him activated one after the other to illuminate the narrow corridors. Machaon had deliberately designed the pathways to barely fit humans and beasts up to Green, to make it harder for the wasp to escape once she grew past a certain size.

Of course, the creature would probably be strong enough to break out regardless if her restraints failed after she reached Blue, but a few obstructions might delay her long enough for Machaon to notice. At least, that used to be the plan.

As things stood, the Starry Princess's possible resistance was the last thing on Machaon's mind.

Soon, he reached a wider chamber at the heart of the underground prison. This was the only room large enough to fit a fully grown Violet beast. Originally, Machaon had expected both its current occupant and a bunch of her eventual descendants to reach that grade by the time he became a demigod himself.

In the middle of the room, a single Starry Wasp lay motionless atop a large formation that glowed softly in various cycling colours. The bug was larger than an elephant, though she didn't look great at the moment.

All six of her limbs and both of her wings were missing. Machaon had ripped them out himself, to ensure that she never so much as tried to leave. Her black carapace was cracked and worn, the colourful dots adorning her exoskeleton were dim, and the golden watermark patterns coating her exterior had lost their royal lustre. One of her eyes had been crushed to a pulp, dried insect blood marring her mandibles as her second eye appeared entirely listless.

More importantly, the bug was thinner than she was supposed to be, as procuring enough beasts to feed her had grown even harder following Percy's revelations. The only reason the other Whites had humoured Machaon's requests for more food was because nobody on Remior had wanted the Starry Princess to starve to death.

The Red-born had replaced her with a healthier sister: hence the lack of urgency from everyone to retrieve Machaon's prisoner: but keeping the second royal wasp alive could only be a good thing.

Finally, the creature was bound in countless enchanted chains that suppressed her mana without draining it and prevented her from moving. It was important to weaken the creature enough that she

couldn’t attempt to escape, yet without increasing her mana consumption more than necessary. If anything, Machaon’s enchantments had only helped in that regard.

“Let’s drop this farce, shall we, Lady Athena?” Machaon requested, his voice echoing through the vast hall.

Nobody replied, but Machaon wasn’t a fool. He knew that the gods would have never left the creature unattended in this state, and he’d caught signs of the illusion months ago: even though he’d been more than happy to play along as he considered his options.

“Fine. If you insist on pretending, I hope that you can forgive my rudeness.”

Compressing his domain into a cube as big as the Starry Princess, he willed it to slam down on the creature with enough force to pulverize it like a common wasp. On the off chance that he had guessed incorrectly, he genuinely didn’t care if the royal bug ended up dying.

As things stood, Machaon knew that he wasn’t going to survive the next thousand years or so, meaning that the beast had lost its value in his eyes. The only reason he’d even kept feeding it to this point was because he hadn’t felt ready to pull the curtain on the gods’ charade.

Much like he had expected, his willpower never so much as touched the Princess. It struck an invisible wall a few centimetres above the wasp’s exoskeleton, the impact causing the entire room: No. The whole garden: to shake. As for the creature, it remained entirely unharmed.

Just as Machaon was about to strike again, a single ripple disturbed the air between him and the Starry Princess, the scene in front of him shifting rapidly.

The starving creature was instantly replaced by a healthy one that stood on all six of her legs, the chains that had previously bound her now gone without a trace. A pair of membranous wings unfolded and folded lazily on her back, her carapace glossy and adorned with all the right colours.

The original heir of the Fungal spire wasn’t nearly as thin as she had previously appeared either, though her compound eyes still glared at Machaon with undisguised hatred, despite her complete recovery. However, the patriarch of House Asclepius had lost all interest in the oversized bug.

He was too busy looking at the beautiful young woman sitting on the creature's head with one leg over the other, staring back at him with as much scorn and disdain as her magical mount.

"You have some nerve to attack and make demands of me, you selfish little prick."

Chapter 597: Divine pardon

Machaon opened his mouth to speak, but the goddess never gave him a chance.

A wave of force crashed into him from seemingly nowhere, slamming him against the nearest wall with enough power to shatter his arm and several ribs. The invisible attack knocked the air out of his lungs, causing him to vomit it out along with a mouthful of blood.

Athena wasn't done, however.

Before Machaon even managed to fall out of the human-shaped impression on the cracked wall, another blow struck from above with the weight of a carriage, peeling him right out of the hole. It sent him face-first onto the ground, crushing his nose and knocking out several teeth.

Suffice to say, finding himself at the deity's mercy was quite a humiliating experience for Machaon. At the very least, he couldn't recall the last time he'd been treated like this. Perhaps, one of his seniors might have tried to discipline him in his youth, thousands of years ago, but never this brutally. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do but shield his body with his domain and try to minimize the damage to his internal organs.

It wasn't until several minutes later that Athena decided to stop.

Machaon's whole body hurt. Even an expert healer would need days to fix everything. Weeks, maybe, due to his higher grade, though his stronger physique hadn't helped much during the beatdown.

Unable to stand on his broken legs, Machaon propped himself up with his willpower, staring back at the goddess defiantly. As much as he despised being in a position of weakness, in a strange way,

experiencing first-hand the power of the Concept realm had only reinforced his opinion that everything he'd done had been worth it.

Machaon wanted this: more than anything. Even though his previous plan to reach godhood had failed spectacularly, he'd rather get reduced to a pile of mincemeat than resign himself to a mortal's fate.

"I… want t-to… speak to… your… mother," he said with difficulty, his voice coming out broken and weak as his body trembled under the effort.

Athena clicked her tongue. "Again with the demands? Do you think that you're in any position to get your way? You're lucky you'd die if I pushed you further."

Machaon chuckled: or tried to: though only a choked gurgle came out. "That's right… you… need me alive… don't you? …That's exactly why… Phoebe's going to… want to… hear me out."

The goddess sighed, saying nothing else. She lifted her hand to the side, a river of thick, crimson mana gushing out of her palm. It landed on a spot a few metres away from the Starry Princess, spinning into a small cyclone about as tall and twice as wide as a person. The mana rotated faster and faster as Athena added more, eventually turning into the figure of a woman.

Machaon had never met the titaness in person, though he'd seen statues and illustrations of her more times than he could count, so he recognized her immediately. Her temporary form was ultimately just a blob of mind mana supplied by her daughter: whom Phoebe resembled greatly: yet that did very little to detract from her otherworldly beauty. He had to remind himself that the young-looking women: both of them: were hundreds of times older than even he was.

"I see that Athena has failed to control her temper," Phoebe said upon regarding his injuries. "I suppose that it's understandable, given the fact that she's had to bottle her anger up for months… as have I. I would apologize on her behalf but, frankly, I fully condone her actions. If anything, you got off easy."

"I… don't care… what you think," Machaon grunted before breaking into a coughing fit.

Hearing him struggle to form a coherent sentence, Phoebe gave her daughter a slight nod, prompting her to toss him a few gemstone vials. Machaon examined the green fluid swirling inside the expensive containers with his Mana Sense, noting that the potions were of the Green grade.

The irony of being offered the resources that had only been made possible by his greatest enemy wasn't lost on Machaon, but he didn't hesitate. Uncorking all six of the small bottles, he gulped down the healing potions one after the other. A wave of vitality rushed out of his stomach to flood the rest of his body.

Separated by a whopping three grades, there was only so much that a handful of doses could do, but he guessed that it would be enough to mend some of the damage to his throat and let him speak more easily. Clearly, this was also Phoebe's intention.

"For the record, I don't regret anything," Machaon said as soon as he was able to. "It's easy for you to judge me. You're both Green-borns: you don't know what it's like to be cursed without a path to divinity."

"Cry me a river," Athena said, jumping back into the conversation. "I might feel bad for any other mortal saying that, but I don't have a shred of empathy towards you. Do you honestly think that the ambitions of a single person could ever justify the level of destruction you were about to unleash onto our world?"

Machaon shrugged. "Had there been a way for me to help every Yellow-born on Remior reach the Clear grade, I would have chosen that. But there wasn't. There was only enough royal jelly for me, so I took it. That's all there is to it. I just wish I had delayed stealing the egg by a few more decades, since the emergence of the Aurora Dew would have changed everything."

"You're beyond fixing, Machaon," Phoebe said with a shake of her head. "What do you want? I hadn't expected my daughter's illusion to fool you forever, but you should have just played along and enjoyed the few years you have left."

Machaon spat another mouthful of blood and phlegm next to his foot. "Fuck that."

His response caused Phoebe to raise an eyebrow. Athena looked like she was about to start torturing him again, but the titaness lifted her hand to stop her. Ignoring the divine duo, Machaon continued.

“Let’s skip the nonsense, shall we? We all know why you’ve kept me alive. You just want to turn me into your boy’s latest punching bag: a step-up after Deimos.”

“So what?” Phoebe asked. “Do you think you get a vote?”

He smirked. “Don’t I? I doubt that I’ll make for much of a challenge if I just sit back and let Percy kill me.”

The titaness creased her brow. “Are you seriously threatening to commit suicide… to blackmail me into sparing your life?”

A pang of laughter escaped Machaon’s lips. It was just as ridiculous as it sounded, but this was the only path to salvation that he’d managed to come up with after pondering over the issue for the past couple of years. Everyone on Remior wanted him dead, but he was still valuable as a suitable opponent for Phoebe’s prodigy to fight against.

“All I want is a chance,” he clarified. “Pardon my crimes and promise not to send anyone from the Order or take direct action against me. We both know that Percy will come after me anyway, and I’m sure that you’re confident in his victory, so it shouldn’t make a difference to you. Either way, I’ll die.”

“You clearly think otherwise,” Phoebe pointed out.

“That’s my business. More importantly, I’ll make for a better challenge if I’m fighting towards something: otherwise, why would I even bother to resist? Just to get executed by you on the off chance I win?”

Phoebe remained silent for a few seconds, seemingly considering his request.

“Have it your way. I won’t stop you from attacking Percy or even his House, but you’re not allowed to get anyone with the Clone bloodline killed,” the titaness eventually replied. “I’m not planning to pressure Percy into having children anytime soon, but his relatives with the bloodline are now priceless assets.”

Machaon raised an eyebrow.

“His grandfather is a two-cored Violet with a rare affinity, a powerful bloodline and: if rumours are to be believed: the same boosting spell that allows the boy to fight above his grade. That makes him almost as strong as me. How am I supposed to even get to Percy if I’m not allowed to kill Archibald?”

“That’s your problem. Find a way around it,” Phoebe replied, not leaving any room for debate. “I’ve already given you infinitely more than you deserve. If it hadn’t been for Percy, I would have killed you years ago.”

‘If it wasn’t for him, you would have never learned about the Starry Princess,’ Machaon thought, but kept that to himself.

Phoebe left without saying anything else, her avatar scattering into a swarm of fading motes. Athena didn’t seem to have any interest in talking to him either, though she stayed in the room. Her instructions were clearly to remain with the oversized bug, to ensure its wellbeing: and maybe to give Percy’s latest minion a chance to grow by having the hive to herself.

Machaon found the deity’s blind obedience to Phoebe amusing. As a goddess, Athena was powerful enough to do whatever she wanted, yet she was willing to spend years babysitting a beast inside a dark cave, just because her mother wished to pit a couple of mortals against one another.

‘Pathetic,’ he thought, limping out of the room. Every step hurt, but a bright grin still spread over his face: or well… a rather patchy one, due to all the missing teeth.

This hadn’t been a pleasant encounter in the slightest, but Machaon had succeeded!

Sure, the titaness might have lied about her willingness to spare him, but his only option was to trust her. It wasn’t like he was new to gambling. His original plan to reach the Clear grade via royal jelly hadn’t exactly been guaranteed to work either.

Even if Phoebe intended to honour her word, there was one final obstacle threatening Machaon’s survival: Percival Avalon.

As strong as the Red-born was, Machaon knew that he held the advantage for now. In theory, he could go after Percy whenever he wanted, crushing him like a bug before he had the chance to grow more powerful.

The problem was that the boy was protected. Machaon might have managed to steal a royal egg from the hive, but sneaking past the wasps had been much easier than it would be to fight his way through the army of Blue beasts to get to their ruler. Not to mention that every mage in the Alchemists' Guild would also jump to Percy's aid.

Another option was to try to get to the crow while it was still separated from its master. At least that way, Machaon would greatly weaken his opponent. For now, Machaon was still probably stronger than Archibald: strong enough to win without killing him: and House Asclepius would easily crush House Avalon.

Unfortunately, there was a good chance that several smaller families would get involved, and Machaon couldn't fight the whole planet by himself. Especially if House Etna also stood against him.

'I need to prepare,' he reminded himself, having already given this part of the plan a lot of thought.

Machaon needed power and allies. Ideally, it would be nice if he could also find a way to disentangle the hive's future from Percy's survival, so that the other nobles wouldn't be as eager to help the boy. Fortunately, Machaon had a pretty good idea how to get his hands on each of those things.

However, he also needed to hurry the hell up. At the rate his opponent was growing, Machaon's window to act was shrinking by the day.

'Ten years,' he decided. 'I'll have everything ready by then. It'll probably be several times longer than that before he's strong enough to be beyond reach, but it's best not to cut it too close.'

## Chapter 598: Never again

Micky maintained a precise and deliberate pace as he travelled towards Twilight City. On one hand, he didn't want to spend too long on the road, so he strove to move faster than a galloping horse. It also

helped him project a certain level of strength outwards to prevent nearby bandits from getting any funny ideas.

All things considered, he was walking about as fast as a Green.

Well… technically, Micky himself was a Green, though he was far from a typical mage of that grade. Between his beast affinity, his second core, and however much of his boosting art he could use while hiding his mana signature within the concealment enchantments of his invisible Cloak, he could run several times faster if he wanted. Hell, he could have just flown to his destination in his crow form or by simply using his domain.

On the other hand, he understood that he had to be cautious now that he didn't have Percy or Archibald by his side, which was why he'd greatly limited his speed to that of the average noble. This had unfortunately extended the trip by a couple of weeks, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Besides, he was almost there now, so it didn't really matter. If anything, his casual journey had given him a chance to practice his shapeshifting. He'd assumed a different human appearance each time he'd passed through a new town, partly to expand his repertoire of shapes and get used to the Mimicry trait, and partly to reduce the odds of somebody recognizing him.

Other than training, he'd also spent his days contemplating what he wanted out of his life, trying to fix whatever was wrong with him.

Sadly, it appeared that somebody had managed to pick up his scent, despite his abundant caution. Micky wasn't sure how: he'd felt quite confident in his disguise: but he'd caught fleeting glances of a person that had maintained a fixed distance from him for a couple of days now.

The mysterious man was walking several kilometres behind Micky, visible only whenever the curvature of the road allowed him to see that far. Micky hadn't managed to learn much about the person's soul from that distance, as his version of Soul Vision was inferior to Percy's due to the missing mutation. Mana Sense hadn't revealed much either, probably because his pursuer was using concealment runes too.

To add insult to injury, Micky couldn't stare at the man for too long at a time, otherwise his pursuer would realize that he was onto him. Suffice to say, he hadn't figured out the man's grade either, though he had some guesses.

'He clearly knows who I am, and he's still gambling his life to follow me. He must be confident in his strength,' Micky deduced.

This probably meant that the man was at least a Blue: though there was a good chance he was a Violet. His senses were sharp enough to keep track of Micky from quite far, and his endurance sufficient to follow him for days without resting.

Micky's icy heart leapt to his throat as he realized how much danger he was in. Could it be Machaon or one of his people?!

'No… that doesn't sound right,' Micky thought, forcing himself to calm down.

He should be able to hold his own against a Violet without help, but he didn't stand a chance against a White even with Percy by his side. Had the disgraced patriarch found him, he would have seized the opportunity to eliminate him while he had the chance: there was no reason to hesitate.

Micky had only dared to set out for Twilight City on his own because he hadn't expected anyone to detect him: including Machaon.

There weren't that many Violets on Remior that didn't belong to the Divine Order: only about a thousand or so. Most would never consider leaving their House unprotected to chase after Micky, nor provoke Percy given his current status.

'This narrows the list down massively,' Micky realized.

His pursuer was presumably a male Violet who wasn't necessarily connected to the Great Houses. He hated Percy or Micky enough to risk the destruction of his entire family to go after them. He also possessed the means to see through Micky's disguise: a rather peculiar requirement.

Luckily, Percy had left his knowledge of Remior's noble Houses accessible to Micky. Not that Percy knew of every bloodline in existence like Nesha or Archibald might, but Micky possibly had enough information at his fingertips to make an educated guess.

Going over the shared memories, however, he quickly realized that he might not even need Percy's help to identify his pursuer. He already knew somebody who fit the culprit's description to a tee.

Feeling somewhat confident in his assessment, he sighed, halting his steps. This wasn't as bad as he had initially feared, though it was still dangerous. That said, it was better to eliminate the hidden threat here and now, before it became a problem.

"Is this place remote enough, Lord Parnassus?" he asked as he turned around, making sure that he spoke loudly enough for the Violet to hear.

Examining the tiny silver flame flickering inside a slightly larger human-shaped dot a few kilometres away, Micky still struggled to estimate the man's grade. That said, the way his pursuer's soul shuddered in surprise made Micky more confident in his guess.

Micky waited patiently for the suspected patriarch to approach, scanning him carefully from head to toe. By the time the figure crossed the halfway point, Micky had seen enough to be certain.

The Violet looked like he was in his early thirties, his unassuming features appearing eerily similar to those of another person who had haunted Micky's nightmares for several years: at least back when he still slept.

The old mage's unkempt brown hair fluttered erratically in the wind, his expensive robes wrinkled and dishevelled. Dark circles were visible around his eyes as Lord Parnassus clearly hadn't slept in days. He also stopped once he was a couple hundred metres away.

'Do you need help?' Percy suddenly asked through their connection, their shared soul rippling with worry. 'I can probably reach you in a day or two if I rush. You just need to keep your distance from him and fly toward me to buy time.'

Micky wasn't surprised that his friend had kept an eye on him: especially after what Phoebe had told them right after their separation. Still, he mentally shook his head. 'It's fine. I appreciate the offer, but I think that this is something that I need to overcome by myself. I should be able to hold my own against a Violet… even him.'

'Are you sure?' Percy asked, not sounding very convinced. 'The fact that he tracked you down means that he possesses the same bloodline as his son.'

Micky sent a nod back. 'I know, yet that's another reason for me to do this. I'll need to borrow our domain for the next few minutes though.'

'It's all yours,' Percy replied without hesitation. 'Just remember that I'm always here if you need me.'

Grateful as Micky was for the support, he didn't say anything. He and Percy were closer than brothers, and there was no need for such words between soulmates.

He turned his attention back toward the Violet. "Out of respect for your loss, I'll give you exactly one chance to leave and never bother me again."

The patriarch's eyes flickered with hatred at the mention of Acton, though the emotion died down as quickly as it appeared. As much as Lord Parnassus despised Micky and Percy, it was clear that targeting them wasn't just an impulsive decision. It was calculated.

"My son's… murder… flushed our family's reputation down the toilet. Percy's ability to control powerful beasts was the final nail in our coffin," the Violet explained in a hoarse voice. "I doubt the gods will ever bother supporting us again, now that a much better bloodline than ours has emerged."

"So what?" Micky asked, still struggling to place his finger on the patriarch's motivations. "Have you given up on your family's survival? Gambling your life away for a final shot at vengeance before everything comes crumbling down?"

Lord Parnassus shook his head. "Finding hope where there is none is a leader's duty. Today, that hope lies in your connection to Percy and, by extension, the Starry Wasps."

Micky felt an ominous presence radiate from the Violet, worming its way into his very being, trying to bind him in chains. He'd obviously expected the patriarch to use his bloodline against him at some point: simply due to how well it countered him: but it was only after listening to the man that Micky understood what he was after.

'He wants to capture and use me to blackmail Percy!' he thought with a gasp, as shocked as he was impressed by the old mage's boldness.

The whole planet was practically at a loss when dealing with his fellow aspect, with almost nobody willing to get involved in the conflict between Percy and House Asclepius. Meanwhile, Acton's father had sought out a way to benefit himself and his family amidst the chaos.

He'd probably travelled to the outskirts of the Camelot province upon hearing that Micky and Archibald were heading home. Then, he'd waited patiently for Micky to leave by himself, using his bloodline to locate and follow him despite his disguise. Finally, he'd waited until Micky had travelled far enough from anybody who might try and help him: all to create this opportunity.

The patriarch's gambit might even succeed if he forced Micky under his control, and the odds of that happening weren't bad on paper. Micky had advanced with both cores since his captivity under Acton, but the Green-born's father was a grade higher too, so the same gap existed.

Countless ethereal chains tightened around Micky's heart, in some ways reminding him of his connection to Percy. However, unlike the bond of equals that he enjoyed with his friend, the patriarch's encroachment on his mind felt suffocating.

In the past, Micky had been powerless to resist the insidious influence of the bloodline, but there was a lot more to a person than their grade, and Micky was no longer the naïve crow that the Holy Child had subjugated.

A deep sense of revulsion rose in his chest as the chains reminded him of the decades of imprisonment in the coliseum and those under Acton's thumb. Micky wasn't sure what he wanted out of his life anymore, but he was absolutely certain of a few things that he wouldn't tolerate.

"Never again!" he yelled, his mind slamming violently against the chains.

Chapter 599: Colossus

Micky's efforts caused the cold chains wrapped around his mind to loosen slightly, giving him some breathing room. Probably noticing his resistance, Lord Parnassus doubled down on his bloodline, tightening the ethereal bonds and trying to force Micky to submit.

'Unlike Acton, he doesn't have to speak out his commands,' Micky noted.

He didn't know whether this was the result of centuries of experience or just a different strain of the bloodline, but it didn't really matter. His body started to move against him. His flesh turned softer, his crystalline bones and muscles partially turning liquid and squirming, seemingly in an attempt to transform him against his wishes.

Whether he was doing it consciously or not, the Violet was trying to turn Micky into a crow, perhaps thinking that his bloodline would work better if Micky took on the shape of a beast instead of a sapient.

Micky had no idea whether that was the case, but he had no intention of letting the patriarch do as he pleased. He resisted the transformation with every fibre of his being, his body cracking as pressurized rivulets of frigid water shot out of the fissures. Chunks of ice of various shapes fell off one after the other, most of them small like grains of sand: though they were occasionally joined by larger pieces: including one as big as a man's fist.

Unleashing his domain, Micky shattered the ground around him, forming a crater over a dozen metres across. It kept widening as his willpower peeled off layers of mud and uprooted grass.

Of course, Micky couldn't care less about destroying a random patch of land in the wilderness. He focused on the ethereal chains restricting his freedom, trying to shatter them with his domain: a potent tool that he hadn't possessed the last time he was captured.

He partially succeeded, breaking several links and weakening the rest, though his efforts felt inefficient. The patriarch's bloodline appeared to operate in a layer of reality largely divorced from the physical, the spectral, or wherever willpower tended to manifest.

Annoyingly, less than five percent of Micky's power seemed to interact with the chains, giving him the impression that he was trying to grasp a gale of wind with his bare hands. Even so, he used everything at his disposal to resist the Violet's oppression.

Lord Parnassus showed no intention of letting him off, however. He released his own domain: albeit a far weaker one: pushing back against Micky's.

Gritting the beak that had formed on his face at some point, Micky desperately pried the chains off his mind as fast as he could manage, feeling a spectral slap of encouragement on his back. Percy joined his efforts, taking advantage of their connection to reinforce his mind.

Micky's body tore itself apart as the Violet wanted to forcefully transform him into a crow and Micky fought to preserve his bipedal form. However, Micky wasn't interested in retaining the appearance of a random human. Instead, a second pair of arms sprouted beneath the first as he shifted into something more familiar.

Taking one deep breath after the other, he whipped up a terrifying blizzard of ambient mana, shards of grey ice spiralling wildly with him at the centre as his boosting art resonated with his domain to strengthen both.

Soul-freezing motes gushed through his channels and saturated his frame, rapidly mending his bones and stitching the tears in his muscles shut, though he didn't stop there. He kept absorbing more ambient mana than his Huehuan body could possibly contain, forcing it to start growing.

The abundance of soul-freezing ice caused his mutation to stir, nearly transforming him into an elephant-sized crow automatically. After all, that was his largest natural form, as well as the one that he defaulted to whenever he consumed so much mana.

Knowing that turning into a beast would only play into the Violet's hands, Micky desperately fought against his own mutation with the Mimicry trait's help, holding onto his bipedal shape. As a result, he grew without allowing his figure to deviate in the slightest, turning into a giant Huehuan.

The stronger he became and the longer he persisted against the chains, the weaker they seemed to get. Eventually, Micky reached an equilibrium where the influx of ambient mana barely managed to support his size and reverse his continuous injuries.

He was about three times as tall as a regular person. Lord Parnassus was standing too far away for Micky to compare himself to, but he felt that the man's scalp barely passed his knees.

The chains were still there, trying to force Micky into submission as always, and his body was still locked in a vicious cycle of destruction and regeneration. Even so, the crystalline skin at the base of his beak curled up as he realized something important.

'I can move again… I can fight like this!'

He'd overcome the same bloodline that had cursed him for decades in the past. Its insidious influence still weakened him and threatened to annex his agency as soon as he made the slightest mistake, but this was enough: he had enough control of his body to resist.

Now, he only needed to purge the source of the disgusting ability: to kill Lord Parnassus: and free himself once and for all!

Looking into the Violet's eyes, Micky spotted traces of resignation and even fear. The patriarch probably understood by now that his plan of capturing Micky alive and using him against Percy had been doomed from the start. Today, only one of them would walk away alive. Micky wasn't sure that he was going to win, but he would rather die than become someone's prisoner again.

He took a step forward as he borrowed the spatial seal from the other side of his soul and summoned a bunch of scythes in his hands. The weapons were too short and thin to properly wield in his giant form, so he broke their shafts and blades, using a lot of ice mana to fuse them into larger versions of themselves.

Unfortunately, Micky's affinities prevented him from producing as much phantom mana as Percy, so he couldn't easily create many copies of his equipment and surround his opponent with an army of spectres.

That said, he had his own advantages: like his bestial strength, his ridiculous regeneration, and his lethal mana type. On top of that, his friend provided him with as much phantom mana as he could through their shared soul, helping him repair and maintain his oversized constructs.

Micky approached Lord Parnassus, his feet leaving deep impressions in the ground with each thunderous step. He brandished a total of four colossal scythes, soul-freezing ice accumulating on their

jagged edges to give them a savage glint as grey mist hissed and crackled around the malformed crescents.

Strips of tattered silk hung loosely over his shoulders and around his privates, greedily drinking as much mana as he could spare and slowly expanding to cover his now-massive frame. His body was made of living ice as always, but the illusion of pink skin adorned with tribal tattoos coated his crystalline flesh, reminding him of the life he had once lived.

He was going to fight like a gladiator of Huehue again!

Remior's bright, yellow sun looked nothing like the dim crimson star illuminating the coliseum, but it would have to do. Micky let out a deep, guttural bellow that shook the area for hundreds of metres, the tall blades of grass that now barely reached his shins swaying outwards as something that he had been missing finally stirred inside his soul.

'Symbel of the Savage Gods, First Toast, Challenge of the Colossus!'

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Percy grinned as he followed the changes on his soulmate's side. He was currently in meditation, floating inside the starlit void of their shared mindscape: a place that he had recently taught himself to visit at will after having entered it accidentally so many times.

The cyan and amber stars that formed the constellation of the giant crow were strangely agitated today, shining as brightly as the grey stars in Percy's own constellation.

He hadn't missed the emotional turmoil on the other side of his soul either, so he knew that his friend was on the cusp of something important. As worried as he was that Micky was locked in combat against a Violet by himself: and one that countered him so heavily no less: Percy was hopeful that Micky was going to emerge out of the fight stronger than ever before.

'First Toast, huh?'

Percy's grin widened. In hindsight, his lopsided fusion with Micky might have been caused by something more than just his friend's fragmented past: namely, the imbalance in their boosting arts.

In theory, the Symbel of the Savage Gods was a spell on par with the Carnival, but Percy had registered his own version of the boosting art years earlier than his friend and had seized the opportunity to fully explore and tailor it to his fighting style after countless battles.

Meanwhile, Micky had acquired his own spell mere days before the fight against Deimos that had led to their fusion, so he hadn't had a chance to tap into its potential.

Of the building blocks of the Symphony, their boosting arts were arguably among the most important: it might not be a stretch to describe them as the foundational pillars of their Extreme spell. Moreover, Percy distinctly remembered that they had incorporated most: if not all: of the Carnival's Parades into their attacks against Hermes's son.

If Micky wanted to solve the instability in his constellation and mental state, developing his boosting art in a similar manner might prove as important as rediscovering his purpose in life: in fact, there was a decent chance the two were synonymous.

Viewed from that angle, Lord Parnassus's unexpected ambush might turn out to be a priceless opportunity for the reincarnated crow.

Of course, Percy had spent years and relied on a huge pile of Wiseman's Murmurs to fully explore the limits of his own boosting art, so it was dubious whether Micky could accomplish anything remotely similar in the span of a single fight.

Fortunately, their fight against Deimos had provided them with several clues as to how Micky's affinities and version of the spell could be leveraged, so he wouldn't be starting from scratch: he merely had to digest his gains and make them his own.

'Come on, buddy…' Percy thought, anxiously clenching his fists. 'I know you can do this!'

Chapter 600: Gladiator

Micky covered several metres with each stride as he charged toward his opponent, his oversized scythes thirsting for the taste of the Violet's soul.

Lord Parnassus was no slouch, however. Having clearly realized that subjugating Micky with his bloodline was no longer an option, he had decisively switched to using lethal force in an attempt to take him down.

Expelling a tremendous amount of fire mana from his hands, the patriarch had formed countless tongues of condensed flames, hot enough to scorch the ground and melt stone on contact.

The spell reminded Micky of Elaine's aquatic whips somewhat, though the Violet made full use of his centuries of experience to wield his mana far more proficiently than Percy's cousin. He controlled many times as many constructs, reached much farther with each one, and struck from all sorts of unexpected angles with shocking precision.

If that wasn't bad enough, Lord Parnassus had withdrawn his domain from the battlefield at some point, probably realizing that his willpower would only be wasted in a direct contest against Micky's. It was unclear where he had invested it, though Micky suspected that it was concentrated on his body and the blazing tongues, maximizing his manoeuvrability and the lethality of his spells.

Micky followed suit, toughening his flesh and scythes as he chased after the patriarch, slicing through the approaching attacks.

'This isn't sustainable,' he thought, clicking his beak in frustration.

Thick as a tree's trunk, Micky's legs were extremely strong: especially while saturated with beast mana, boosted by the Symbel and further empowered by his domain. Sadly, his limbs also had to carry the bulk of an elephant-sized creature across the battlefield. His enemy was far nimbler by comparison, so Micky had trouble breaking through the storm of spells to catch the pesky Violet.

He could probably increase his speed if he shapeshifted into a crow and flew instead of running, but that might weaken his resistance to the patriarch's bloodline and cost him the battle. Even if it didn't, Micky wouldn't be able to wield his weapons without hands, and he knew that he was going to need every advantage against such a powerful opponent.

Alternatively, he could shrink back to the size of a regular person to reduce his weight and make himself a smaller target, yet that was tantamount to underutilizing his Green beast core: one of the most important pillars of his strength. Without it, his attacks and defence would also grow significantly weaker.

'I have to find a way to hit him from afar without compromising my size,' Micky realized. 'And I need to act fast.'

After accounting for the grade disparity and Micky's boosting art, the relative mana expenditure of both combatants was similar, so it was unlikely that either would outlast the other. That said, there was a different timer looming over Micky's head.

The patriarch's attacks were getting closer to Micky's body with every passing minute. It appeared that the old fox was constantly gauging his movements and reaction speed, slowly adjusting the number, velocity and pattern of his constructs accordingly.

Taking advantage of the apparent stalemate, the experienced mage was trying to crack through Micky's defences as if they were nothing more than an intricate puzzle.

'How am I supposed to reach him? It's not like I can just hurl my weapons and hope I don't miss…'

Micky's affinities still prevented him from regenerating and replicating his scythes as well as Percy. If he lost even one, he would have fewer tools to protect himself with. He wasn't as good at dodging either, which meant that he would inevitably have to endure a lot of devastating blows, with no guarantee of getting anything worthwhile in return.

Technically, Micky had incorporated his Frozen Shards into the Winter's Fang: and later, the Symbel of the Savage Gods: so it should be possible to wield the violent blizzard around his body as a ranged spell. The problem was that he'd never attempted that in a humanoid form.

'Well… it's not like I have a choice. I need to try something before it's too late.'

Having made his mind up, Micky directed the snowstorm towards his weapons, channelling the rapidly-converted ambient mana into their shafts. The adaptive self-repair enchantments greedily drank the potent substance, causing the scythes to glow brighter as grey mists roiled and hissed along their blades.

The tools felt colder in his hands. Despite the resistance afforded by his affinity and frozen body, his very soul shivered as he clenched the weapons tightly. Still, he didn't hesitate.

Swinging the scythes with all his might, he felt their shafts vibrate with power as their jagged edges sliced through the air. The mana coating the blades propelled them forward, forming deadly arcs that promptly detached from the weapons and kept flying on their own.

Be it Micky's muscles or scythes, they felt nothing like the body given to him by his parents on Huehue or the cyan rods that he had wielded for decades inside the bloodstained arena. Fortunately, he still had access to many of Percy's memories, so he found his current equipment familiar enough.

Taking advantage of the dual nature of his mana, Micky allowed the constructs to switch between ethereal and corporeal whenever necessary, phasing them through one another so that he wouldn't impede himself.

Each arm swung several times per second, each slash releasing multiple glowing crescents. Mana exploded with chilling grace, unfolding outwards like the petals of a giant flower. They tore into the cascade of fiery tongues that Lord Parnassus had surrounded Micky with, ripping them apart.

'Symbel of the Savage Gods, Second Toast, Turbulent Lotus!' Micky screamed internally, his soul singing with vicious glee.

Between his long arms, even longer scythes, and the magical slashes that he unleashed, Micky's reach extended all the way to the patriarch, earning him some respite from the Violet's attacks.

Unfortunately, Micky wasn't much closer to landing a hit of his own. Lord Parnassus dodged the crescents with relative ease, promptly adjusting his assault to account for Micky's new technique. All things considered, the situation was still dire.

Even so, a smile couldn't help but tug at the corners of Micky's beak. After completing his latest attack, he had been hit by an important realization.

'This is fun!'

As dangerous as his opponent was, this was the first time Micky had enjoyed himself this much since his separation from Percy. For the past month, he'd been stuck in a fatalistic daze, unable to extricate himself, yet something about this battle appeared to have changed that.

Resuming his chase of Lord Parnassus, Micky continued to fend off the blazing constructs to the best of his ability as he contemplated his emotional state, trying to understand the source of the strange feeling.

Fortunately, it didn't take him long.

'At the end of the day, I've always been a gladiator, haven't I?'

There were many things that Micky wanted to accomplish in the future: such as finding his father, freeing his people, and training by Percy's side. However, it wasn't that strange that these goals had failed to motivate him by themselves. As important as they were, they were all external. They had to do with others: not himself.

Micky hadn't had many passions in life. Other than playing the kik'lit to soothe himself to sleep and remember his mother by, he'd never had the chance to master a craft or pick up a hobby. He'd lived most of his life in the arena, constantly trying to better himself to avoid getting killed.

Obviously, he hadn't chosen that life: it had been forced on him against his will: but it didn't really matter. Fighting was all that Micky knew. What he was good at. After clashing with countless opponents, he had grown to love the thrill of battle, and to find pride in the skill that he had painstakingly honed at the edge of life and death. Nothing matched the feeling of identifying an opponent's weakness and clutching an unlikely victory by the skin of one's beak.

This was something that Micky shared with Percy to an extent, but his love of battle was arguably even purer than his friend's. After all, Percy's goal was to become a god: to reach the pinnacle of magic and

attain eternal life. Fighting was a part of that, as was runecrafting and alchemy, but Percy's personal strength was ultimately just a means to an end.

For Micky: the original Micky: combat had been its own reward.

Of course, he had still died a weakling despite his love of battle. The Orange or Yellow beasts and fellow gladiators that he had been forced to kill in the coliseum weren't worth mentioning when compared to the Blues that he had fought against after his reincarnation.

He had spent his entire first life held back by his poor affinity, lack of cleansing resources and the fragile body of a sapient. While he had done his best to utilize everything at his disposal, his strength had plateaued years before his fateful defeat at Mixcoatl's hands.

'It's different now,' he thought, his smile widening.

Percy hadn't just brought him back from the dead. He had generously granted Micky several new gifts, brutally shattering the barrier that had previously limited his potential. With new affinities, a versatile body that combined the best traits of beasts and sapients, and a myriad of other things, Micky was free to grow to his heart's content.

Realizing that, he couldn't help but chuckle. 'How did I manage to lose track of something so important for so long?'

Perhaps it had to do with how limited his crow body had been before the fusion, or his missing memories. Fortunately, neither of those things was a problem anymore.

Glancing at Lord Parnassus again, he suddenly felt a strange sense of contentment. The man's insidious bloodline still fought to violate Micky's will, and his spells kept burning closer and closer, threatening to melt his icy body into a puddle of water at the slightest mistake.

Even so, Micky found himself looking past the immediate danger, a surge of anticipation rising in his chest at the thought of overcoming his opponent.

This was good. He could keep fighting. Improving. Growing stronger. There were several things that he and Percy needed to accomplish in the future, and just as much hinging on their success, but there was no reason not to enjoy the journey as much as the destination.