Wanderer 601

Chapter 601: Fuzzy

Despite his newly reclaimed optimism, Micky was still losing quite badly to Lord Parnassus.

It wasn't because he was weak. Micky was arguably more powerful than either he or Percy had ever been while fighting separately. Sadly, this was also the first time one of them battled against a Violet without help, and Micky's style was more straightforward than his friend's, thus predictable.

The patriarch merely had to take advantage of his superior speed and agility to remain firmly outside Micky's range, having only to dodge the occasional crescent of soul-freezing mist that managed to cleave through multiple burning tongues without collapsing. Maintaining a fixed distance, he harassed Micky relentlessly, constantly looking for openings to deal serious damage.

The advent of Micky's Turbulent Lotus had kept the Violet's spells at bay for a couple of minutes, but it hadn't taken Lord Parnassus long to figure out how to bait the technique out and target the gaps between the grey arcs or the intervals between Micky's slashes.

Eventually, Micky made a mistake. No, it couldn't even be called that. He was simply overwhelmed by his opponent's assault at some point, allowing one of the blazing tongues to land on his exposed wrist and sever his upper-left hand off, leaving him with one weapon fewer.

Regenerating the limb should be easy enough, but the patriarch didn't miss the chance to capitalize on Micky's momentary weakness. A barrage of spells descended on the airborne scythe from every direction, taking advantage of the reduced willpower to shatter the construct to pieces before it even touched the ground.

Micky gritted his beak in frustration.

Ironically, regrowing his icy body was easier than repairing or replicating his weapons. The former only required his own soul-freezing ice, while the latter depended on the relatively pitiful stream of phantom mana that Percy could send through their connection, or the even slower conversion of ambient mana that Micky could achieve thanks to his second-hand connection to his counterpart's cores.

If that wasn't bad enough, most of Micky's limited supply of phantom mana was already being consumed by his remaining equipment to preserve the structural integrity of the weapons and armour as he channelled soul-freezing ice through them, leaving him with very little for anything else.

Even so, Micky didn't waste a second, snapping a tiny piece off the bottom of one of the remaining shafts. Clutching it tightly with a newly grown hand, he began the arduous process of restoring the oversized weapon, hoping he would succeed before he suffered another setback.

It could easily take over half a minute: practically an eternity during such a high-level battle: but it wasn't like he had much of a choice.

Sure enough, the Violet had an even easier time harassing Micky through the gap in his defences. Fiery tongues landed on his body one after the other, slashing at the tattered robes that Micky had painstakingly expanded to cover his giant frame.

Thankfully, the Cloak was strong enough to resist a Blue's attacks by itself, as was Micky's crystalline flesh. Separately, they wouldn't quite cut it against a Violet but, together: and further aided by his domain: they prevented the attacks from digging in too deeply.

Several shallow wounds appeared on his shoulders, though the patriarch concentrated the blows on Micky's neck, clearly trying to decapitate him. The good news was that it was thicker than his wrist, so a single tongue wasn't enough, and his regeneration was just barely able to keep his head attached to his torso.

Probably realizing that slashing attacks wouldn't yield immediate results, Lord Parnassus changed his approach again. Instead of lashing at Micky, he gave his whips sharp tips, having them strike like snakes.

In mere seconds, Micky's head was riddled with narrow but extremely deep holes, several piercing all the way through his thick skull. Thankfully, it didn't hurt, though the feeling of his icy brain melting into a bubbling liquid and spilling out of the holes was anything but pleasant.

The Violet's attacks eased for the briefest of instants, giving Micky a chance to mend his injuries and make some progress on the half-formed scythe. He wasn't sure what exactly was going on in his opponent's mind, but he guessed that the Violet had thought that he had won the fight by stabbing through Micky's head.

The rest of Remior didn't know the full extent of his abilities just yet, so the concept of a creature that could survive and even keep fighting without a functioning brain was likely foreign to Lord Parnassus.

Alas, the seasoned mage appeared to have realized his blunder soon enough, resuming his assault. He aimed at Micky's torso this time, splitting the burning tongues between his sternum and abdomen, probably having figured out that Micky's mana cores were his only weak spots.

'Shit! I can't let either get hit, or it's going to be over for real this time!'

While he and Percy had thought the same about his brain before their fight against Deimos: only to be proven wrong: Micky was confident that he wouldn't be able to regenerate his cores.

Leaving aside their magical complexity: which he doubted that his mutation would be able to recreate: Micky wouldn't even have the means to regenerate anything without his cores. His ice mana was the very material that he fashioned his body out of, and his beast mana was what allowed him to breathe life into the otherwise-inanimate substance.

In a moment of desperation, Micky melted a chunk of his pectoral muscle, opening a narrow path to move his first core by a few centimetres to the left, barely dodging one of the patriarch's piercing blows. A couple of seconds later, he was forced to shift his second core higher to avoid a similar attack.

Realizing that he could capitalize on the flexibility of his internal organs to improve his survivability like this, Micky began deliberately moving the mana cores along his channels to avoid the Violet's projectiles.

Judging from the patriarch's actions, it didn't take him long to see through the charade, but Micky's entire frame was densely saturated with mana to begin with, so it was difficult to pinpoint his cores with any accuracy. The Violet had no choice but to attack randomly until he got lucky and struck one.

Of course, Micky's new trick wasn't without its drawbacks.

Constantly changing the location of his cores messed with his boosting art, forcing him to slow down the flow of mana in his channels. On top of that, the combined damage from the patriarch's spells and

Micky destabilizing his own muscles and bones to make space for the cores threatened to destroy him from within.

‘Wait… I don’t have to sacrifice my body parts… aren’t they made of soul-freezing ice?’

Realizing his mistake, Micky selectively turned sections of his flesh intangible, creating narrow tunnels for his cores to pass through before materializing them again.

Of course, phasing a piece of a bone out even temporarily could still cause his body to collapse. Thankfully, Micky’s cores hadn’t grown with the rest of his body, so they were now smaller than his fingernails and didn’t require much space to slip through.

Two tiny orbs: one pale as ice, the other glowing in a deep amber colour: swam like fish through a maze of mutilated organs and boiling water, methodically avoiding the patriarch’s attacks.

Falling into a trance, Micky focused all of his efforts into stabilizing his body and protecting his vitals and remaining weapons, knowing that he couldn’t afford to lose anything more than he already had.

‘Symbel of the Savage Gods, Third Toast, Dancing Stars.’

Micky’s new technique bought him time, but it was far from enough. He’d been forced to halt the replacement of his missing scythe entirely, giving him no way to turn the tables against the patriarch. Unless he figured out another way to break the stalemate, his opponent was bound to think of something first.

He would have loved to phase through the patriarch’s attacks in a similar way, but he knew that the Violet had enhanced his spells with his domain, so they would be able to hurt Micky even in his incorporeal state.

Another option would be to phase through the ground to escape the barrage and catch his breath. Sadly, he couldn’t turn his cores incorporeal: only the rest of his body: so it wouldn’t work.

‘Damn it…’ he cursed. ‘I wouldn’t have ended up in this situation if I could just predict his moves like Percy…’

In theory, Micky’s passive Soul Vision did allow him to read a person’s intentions through the fluctuations of their soul: this was essentially the origin of Percy’s Foresight spell that both he and Micky had used extensively throughout the years, even before Percy acquired the Sorcerer’s Eye. However, Soul Vision was far less effective without the mutation.

Besides, it required Micky to keep his eyes on his opponent, and he had lost track of Lord Parnassus a long time ago. Not to mention that much of his body was locked in a constant cycle of destruction and regeneration under the Violet’s barrage, so Micky didn’t even have intact eyeballs all the time.

Just as he lamented his predicament, a strange thought hit him. ‘Huh? Why do I even need eyes to use Soul Vision?’

Weren’t his eyes ultimately just chunks of mana given purpose by his mutation? Micky knew he could replace them fairly quickly if necessary, but that was just scratching the surface of what he was capable of. Technically, he could always shapeshift into a creature with more than two eyes, or even something that had eyes elsewhere on its body.

Perhaps, Micky’s experience as a former being of flesh and blood was needlessly restricting his potential as an elemental. Grasping onto that thought and not letting go, he allowed a part of his consciousness to recede deep into his body, examining himself for what he truly was.

‘Two cores and a piece of the Lone Wanderer’s soul.’

That was it: all that Micky was, beneath the illusion of a body. Everything else was just a tool that he could discard or replace at will. If he wanted, he should be able to cover his skin in eyeballs and give himself omnidirectional Soul Vision. In fact, even that step was unnecessary.

Along with the realization came clarity.

A dark world unfolded around him, illuminated only by faint silver flames: the souls of every living creature in his vicinity. The patriarch’s was the brightest by far, but not the only one.

Tiny wisps burned inside the bodies of insects and critters that had failed to escape the apocalyptic battlefield, scattered amidst still-intact patches of tall grass or buried underground. Even the plants themselves carried a faint silver sheen, though it was even dimmer than the bugs' souls.

Not stopping there, Micky allowed his Mana Sense and domain to expand as well, supplementing his vision with new colours.

This time, it was the plants that shone brighter than the insects, as even a mundane blade of grass typically contained more Brown mana than the tiny orbs barely visible inside the bugs' carapaces. Finally, Micky's willpower gave him a tactile feeling of his surroundings, placing everything else into context.

Sadly, his lack of the mutation held him back once more.

Without Percy's ability to seamlessly blend the three channels of information together, Micky was immediately disoriented by his own senses, his surroundings growing blurry. The resolution dropped steeply as colours swirled and blended like blobs of paint churning inside a bucket, making it difficult to focus on anything.

'It'll have to do,' Micky thought.

His new vision had severe shortcomings compared to his friend's, but it had some advantages too. Unlike Percy, Micky didn't have to keep his eyes locked onto his opponent anymore. All three of his magical senses extended in every direction, drawing a model of the entire battlefield in his mind.

No matter how fast or chaotically the patriarch flew, he couldn't escape Micky's vision. The Violet's soul revealed his intentions, while Micky's Mana Sense and domain allowed him to detect the burning whips coming at him.

'Symbel of the Savage Gods, Fourth Toast, Fuzzy World.'

Chapter 602: Brittle

Locating Lord Parnassus amidst the chaotic battlefield suddenly became trivial for Micky. No matter how fast the Violet moved or what obstacles separated the two combatants, his soul simply stood out too much from everything else.

Unfortunately, there was a limit to what Micky could learn through his blurry senses. Perfectly predicting his opponent's moves or generating accurate projections of the future were out of the question.

Still, the influx of information helped Micky adapt to the patriarch's rhythm.

Instead of slashing randomly at the burning tongues and hoping he dispelled some by accident, he had a much easier time targeting them deliberately. Micky was able to preserve his mana and stamina, only unleashing a barrage of grey crescents whenever he felt that it would eliminate enough projectiles.

His Mana Sense and domain had already helped him aim at the incoming whips even before his most recent breakthrough, but catching glimpses of his opponent's flaring soul further improved Micky's reaction speed, allowing his scythes to sever more of the patriarch's whips.

The vastly reduced number of attacks that landed on Micky also meant that he no longer had to randomly move his cores around his body and hope that his luck didn't run out, giving him some breathing room. In turn, it sharply slowed down his accumulation of damage and minimized his mana consumption, while also allowing him to push his boosting art to the limit again.

Micky was still very much in a pinch, as sensing and parrying the patriarch's blows stretched his already tired mind thinner, but he was finally able to redirect much of his mana and attention into repairing his fourth scythe.

Lord Parnassus must have realized that he was about to lose his advantage, because he promptly intensified his assault to put pressure on Micky, clearly not caring about his own consumption.

Thankfully, Micky managed to hold on just long enough to replace his missing weapon, immediately putting it to good use. Unleashing his Turbulent Lotus over and over again, he increased the number of soul-cleaving crescents by a meaningful thirty-three percent while eliminating his previous blind spot.

Overall, his mana expenditure didn't necessarily decrease, but Micky certainly preferred channelling the excess into his counterattacks rather than into regenerating his body. His newfound senses only improved the situation further, allowing him to put Lord Parnassus on the backfoot for the first time since the start of the battle.

'Hmmm… it's nice that I'm finally able to resist properly, but I'll never win like this,' Micky realized.

He doubted that the Violet would be able to breach his defences again anytime soon, but he also didn't see any of his own grey crescents landing on the nimble patriarch.

This wouldn't do.

With neither side having a way to break the stalemate, the battle could easily last for hours: maybe even days. In theory, Lord Parnassus would eventually need to sleep or eat due to the limitations of his human body, but Micky was pretty sure that they would be interrupted long before it got to that point.

Sooner or later, the Violet-level battle was bound to catch the attention of the local nobles. Should that happen, the owners of this province would respond in one of three possible ways: they would stay out of the fight entirely, help Micky in the hopes of ingratiating themselves to Percy, or assist Lord Parnassus: mostly to avoid getting on Machaon's bad side.

Admittedly, the final scenario was the least likely, but Micky didn't want to leave his survival up to the whims of a third party. Besides, there was also a small chance that the disgraced White or his associates were nearby and would notice the commotion by themselves: which would be catastrophic.

'I need to end this, disguise myself and reach Twilight City as soon as possible,' Micky reminded himself.

Objectively speaking, Micky was growing faster than his opponent, since this was his first time exploring the limits of his malleable body and improved boosting art after his fusion and subsequent separation from Percy.

He'd already developed a whopping four new techniques in the last few minutes, and he was confident that he would come up with even more given enough time. While he'd admittedly been at a complete disadvantage at the start of the battle, it was fair to say that he was slightly ahead by now.

Sadly, small, incremental improvements weren't enough in this case: especially because Lord Parnassus had also improved noticeably over the course of their fight. Perhaps not as much as Micky, but the patriarch's gains were undeniable.

As old and experienced as he was, it was clear that the shrewd Violet hadn't had many opportunities to face off against worthy opponents over the centuries: and certainly not in a long time.

That might have to do with the fact that his House used to be sponsored by the Divine Order: by his own admission: thus deterring their rivals from attacking. Or it might simply be due to how rare and ill-advised it was for a Violet to leave their territory and fight against another Violet.

Whatever the reason was, it would take Micky a while to widen the gap enough to win, leaving the door open for outside interference. Even if nobody showed up, Lord Parnassus wasn't a fool. He was bound to realize that the tides had turned against him long before Micky backed him into a corner, at which point the patriarch would simply escape. Should that happen, Micky would be stuck having to guard his mind against the Violet's insidious bloodline until their next meeting: or Micky's advancement.

'I can't afford to let him get away. The last thing we need right now are more enemies,' Micky realized, the corner of his beak shifting into the closest thing to a frown.

The problem was that Micky wouldn't be able to keep up with the Violet if he tried to fly away, unless he shrank or transformed into a crow: both of which would expose him to his opponent's counterattack once again, thus bringing him back to square one.

By turning his body incorporeal, Micky could vastly increase his speed enough to catch up without shapeshifting, but that wasn't a great idea either. The patriarch would only need to launch a few attacks to force Micky to materialize again and protect his cores, which would slow him down. No matter what, it looked like the Violet was going to get away.

'Not on my watch,' Micky thought, scrambling to come up with a way to win.

If Micky wanted to get rid of Lord Parnassus once and for all, he would have to prepare a trap. Admittedly, that style of fighting was more up Percy's alley, but Micky still had access to many of his friend's memories, as well as all the other tools necessary to make it work.

Happy with his plan, Micky carefully restricted his counterattack to give Lord Parnassus the impression that he was a little weaker than he actually was. That way, Micky would be less likely to scare his opponent off: not to mention that his trap required him to receive some controlled damage anyway.

Methodically conceding ground, Micky gradually let the burning tongues closer, eventually allowing some to breach his defences again. However, he made sure to guard his vitals and limbs this time, unwilling to lose another weapon.

The Violet's attacks shaved chunks of ice and strips of grey cloth off of Micky's body, littering the ground as he retreated. The ice melted and evaporated before it even landed, leaving nothing behind. Unbeknownst to Lord Parnassus, Micky carefully phased a few pieces of magical silk through the dirt, hiding them underground.

He still had to leave most of them on the surface to prevent his opponent from noticing anything, but the number of hidden constructs slowly accumulated as Micky led his opponent in circles and used his phantom mana to regenerate his Cloak as fast as he could.

Enchanted with concealment runes and separated from the patriarch's domain by several metres of dirt and rock, the pieces of grey fabric that Micky had planted underground remained firmly outside the old man's notice as he continued to chase Micky around.

It was a pity that Micky couldn't replicate the constructs nearly as fast as Percy, otherwise he would have produced enough within a couple of minutes. As things stood, he would probably need over half an hour to prepare everything. Even so, he persisted, patiently saturating the ravaged battlefield with mana as his opponent unknowingly accelerated his own demise.

Eventually, Micky felt that he had scattered enough pieces.

Giving Lord Parnassus a false opening, he waited for him to unleash a storm of blazing tongues, the poor fool probably hoping to sever another limb or two. Obviously, Micky had no intention of letting that happen.

Concentrating on the projectiles, he used the Turbulent Lotus to shoot dozens of grey crescents in every direction, shredding the patriarch's constructs to harmless motes of orange.

Lord Parnassus took a step back in shock, probably realizing that Micky had been suppressing his skill for a while. Sadly for him, it was way too late to do anything about it.

Countless discarded pieces of silk sprung up, the soul mana embedded inside the fabric helping Micky control so many of them remotely. He made sure to keep them invisible for as long as possible too, though it clearly didn't take Lord Parnassus long to discover them with his domain. The man leapt upwards and backwards, trying to fly away with his willpower.

Undeterred by his opponent's attempt to flee, Micky had the constructs cannibalize themselves, feeding the ice mana of the other runes into the heating enchantments and unleashing a wave of chilling air that specifically targeted a person's soul.

At the same time, he unfolded his own domain, forcing the fraying strands to interlock with one another even faster than they already were, forming a second layer of heating runes. Finally, he arranged those into an even larger version of the enchantment that spanned over a hundred metres across.

Worse still: for Lord Parnassus, that was: the components of the enormous formation turned incorporeal, flying alongside the patriarch at a ridiculous speed and preventing him from escaping its boundary.

Not that he didn't try.

The poor man emptied his core, releasing his remaining mana through his palms and soles. Seemingly not even caring about his incinerated shoes, Lord Parnassus shot four narrow columns of condensed flames from his extremities to accelerate beyond what was possible with just his domain.

Assuming that the patriarch's reserves could last for a couple of seconds, there was a small chance of him outrunning the giant enchantment. A hundred metres wasn't that much to a Violet and, despite how fast Micky's ethereal mana could travel, his control would decline steeply if it moved too far from his body.

Luckily, Lord Parnassus didn't have a couple of seconds.

A grey, translucent sphere appeared at the centre of the formation. It started off no larger than a watermelon, but it expanded to cover the entire enchantment in an instant.

The orange jets propelling the patriarch away fizzled out like candle flames on contact with the grey region, the enormous bubble filtering every strand of light passing through it.

From where Micky stood, it looked like a circular patch of sky with Lord Parnassus at its centre lost all colour, appearing like a dull, charcoal painting. Time itself seemed to crawl to a halt as everything inside the grey bubble stop moving entirely.

That only lasted for a fraction of a second before a series of loud cracks formed on the enormous sphere. Then, it shattered into countless pieces larger than houses, which continued to disintegrate into smaller and smaller fragments, eventually turning into powder that faded away.

Micky ignored all of that, his gaze locked onto his opponent's body that was already falling. On the outside, Lord Parnassus appeared entirely unharmed. Other than the bottom of his shoes that he had destroyed by himself, the patriarch hadn't suffered even a single physical injury throughout the battle.

However, Micky finally relaxed upon failing to spot even the faintest hint of silver inside the man's frame. The Violet's soul was gone. Destroyed without a trace.

'Symbel of the Savage Gods, Fifth Toast, Brittle Globe.'

Chapter 603: Aspect

Initially, Micky had considered using a technique similar to Percy's Fifth Parade: Dead Man's Shroud: to suffocate Lord Parnassus inside the scattered pieces of the Cloak, much like what his friend had done to that assassin years ago.

The problem was that a Violet would have a much easier time breaking out of the reinforced cocoon: something that Deimos had already proven. Even worse, Micky wasn't able to regenerate the fabric fast enough to keep a powerful opponent trapped.

This was why he'd opted for a different approach, using his domain, advanced magiscript knowledge, Instantaneous Formation spell, and potent soul-freezing ice mana to create a different trap for the patriarch.

'Thankfully, it worked out in the end…'

Micky sighed. After feeling the ethereal chains wrapped around his mind crumble unceremoniously, he took a moment to appreciate his reclaimed freedom. Since he no longer had to worry about the patriarch's annoying bloodline, he shapeshifted into a giant crow and flew to intercept the plummeting corpse.

Micky didn't expect to find valuable loot inside the man's spatial amulet: though he was certainly going to check anyway. More importantly, he wasn't going to waste the rare and nourishing meal.

His beak clamped shut around the patriarch's torso, bisecting him. Swallowing the fragmented core along with a mouthful of mangled flesh that got caught with it, Micky allowed the rest to fall to the ground.

He briefly considered eating everything, but he ultimately decided against it, not seeing any reason to bother. The Violet's flesh barely contained any mana, and devouring the mass of an adult human would force Micky to remain in a larger form until he fully digested the meal.

He didn't care about hiding the evidence either.

If anyone came this way, they'd instantly know that a couple of Violets: or at least multiple Blues: had fought seriously and for an extended period of time. The ravaged battlefield was proof enough of that.

Patches of scorched, molten, or frozen ground stretched for a couple of kilometres in every direction. Even the last few spots of grass had been destroyed at some point, leaving nothing but a wasteland behind.

While Micky could get rid of the body if he wanted, it wouldn't be long before the rest of Remior registered the patriarch's absence and connected him to the ruined area. After all, Violets didn't go

missing every day, and nobody would think that this level of devastation happening around the same time was coincidental.

Furthermore, there was no way that Percy and Micky could wash their hands of the man's death. Even on the off chance that Lord Parnassus hadn't told anyone that he was planning to come after him, people would likely connect the dots due to his bloodline and relationship to the deceased Holy Child.

Besides, Micky had nothing to hide, nor be ashamed of. The Violet had attacked him first, and even had the gall to use his disgusting bloodline on him: much like his son had done, years ago. Thankfully, Percy was no longer the lowly fugitive he'd once been, so nobody would argue if they explained the situation.

'It'll probably be fine even if we don't say anything, actually. Still, I need to get the hell away from here before Machaon hears word of this battle and decides to come looking for me…' Micky thought.

Flying to the nearest intact part of the road leading towards his destination and landing on the paved dirt, he shifted back into his Huehuan form for a second. The normal-sized version: not a giant. He would have to disguise himself into a random human and leave soon, but he wanted a moment to examine himself now that he had finally regained some clarity of mind.

Before doing that, he lifted his upper-right hand up, vomiting a bloody object into his palm. It was a black, cube-shaped artifact, strung on a thin, broken chain. Pouring mana into one of the spatial amulet's faces, Micky caused it to enlarge and open, scanning its contents.

Sure enough, the only things of value were a bunch of elixirs and some money.

Strictly speaking, there was a lot of both: more than he or Percy had ever looted from a single corpse. However, their pockets weren't as tight as they had been in the past, so it wouldn't really affect their finances. That said, Micky saw no reason to let the resources go to waste. Storing anything even remotely useful inside his seal, he ditched the rest.

Then, he finally moved on to what he actually wanted to do.

Scanning himself from head to toe, he clenched and unclenched his fists a few times. He understood that his original body was gone forever, and that he no longer had Huehuan blood: or any type of blood,

really: flowing through his veins. His tattooed exterior was little more than an icy shell, appearing like flesh due to his Chameleon's Skin.

'It doesn't matter,' he thought, shaking his head. 'This is good enough. Better than anything I could have asked for, even.'

Micky could feel and do everything he used to be able to do in the past: in addition to a million new things. His mind was back too. Micky remembered everything, and he had even rediscovered what was most important to him during this latest battle.

Hell, he had even reclaimed his independence. If he decided to bid Percy farewell and go on his merry way, he knew that his friend wouldn't force him to keep fighting by his side. Of course, Micky had no intention of abandoning his soulmate like that.

Not now. Not ever. But that was beside the point.

"I'm back…" he muttered, almost struggling to believe it. "Percy… that crazy bastard has actually done it!"

Micky shuddered as the weight of those words hit him. This wasn't anything new per se. Micky had slowly regained pieces of his existence and identity over the past few decades, yet it was only now that the process was truly complete.

His friend had been nothing but a clueless teenager during their first meeting. Percy hadn't known the first thing about his bloodline or affinity at the time, and Micky had been little more than a stranger to him.

A dying stranger that Percy had barely spent a couple of days with.

Even so, Percy had resolved to doing the impossible: to bring Micky back from the dead. Since then, he'd never given up for a moment. It had taken so many years, and they'd had to overcome so many obstacles, but Percy had pulled through every single time.

He'd healed Micky's soul, rebuilt his body, and restored his mind: one piece at a time: until there was nothing truly valuable missing.

"I'm back," he said again, some excitement spilling into his voice.

Micky opened his beak wide and burst into boisterous laughter, cold tears forming by the corners of his eyes. If anybody saw him, they would think that he had lost his mind, but he didn't care.

He was actually back. Alive, against all odds.

He was Mictlantecuhtli, a proud warrior of Huehue.

And he was Micky… an aspect of the Lone Wanderer.

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Percy, who had observed his friend's entire battle, as well as everything that had transpired inside the man's mind, finally exhaled in relief. He wanted to lean back and rest, but his consciousness was still floating inside the void of their shared mindscape, so there was nothing to rest on.

'That was a few too many close calls for my liking,' he thought, feeling the urge to slap Micky for putting him through this.

This wasn't their first brush with death, but it was best to avoid fights this dangerous if they could help it. It would have been wiser for Micky to fly away in his crow form before Lord Parnassus got close enough to activate his bloodline, buying time for Percy to help him.

At the same time, Percy understood why his friend had insisted on undertaking this crazy risk by himself, and the results spoke for themselves.

He glanced up at the constellation of the crow looming over him. Its shape and size hadn't changed, though its colour had. The cyan and amber hues that had previously fought for dominance over the formation were both gone, replaced by a new, uniform colour.

The stars pulsed in unison, the pale light glowing as intensely as the grey stars of Percy's own constellation. It was through the changes in the shimmering structure, as well as those in Micky's mental and emotional state, that Percy knew that his friend had finally overcome the last obstacle barring him from his new life.

On top of that, their gains from the battle had vastly exceeded Percy's wildest dreams.

'Five new techniques…!'

He gasped. It was a lot, though it sort of made sense in a weird way. The first three: Challenge of the Colossus, Turbulent Lotus, and Dancing Stars: were essentially just new versions of attacks that they had used against Deimos. Micky had merely comprehended and repurposed them into techniques that he could use on his own.

The fourth: Fuzzy World: was ultimately just Soul Vision taken to its logical conclusion, after taking Micky's status as an elemental into account. That said, the technique had given Percy some inspiration on how he could attempt to upgrade his ocular mutation without having to get his hands on another Decree.

'Something to try in the future, though it's not a priority right now.'

He and Micky had already delayed their artificial advancement for way too long. As soon as his friend reached Twilight City and passed the affinity-changing treasure to Nesha, they should both settle down and focus on sending out clones and practicing Internal Magiscript for the next few years.

It was imperative that they raised their strength before Machaon felt ready to attack them.

Other than that, Percy also planned to get more involved with Nephthys's development at some point. So far, he had intentionally avoided intruding on the former deity's affairs too much, for several reasons.

He trusted her to know what was best for her, he'd had other things to worry about, and he'd also been afraid of merging with another familiar accidentally. Now that he had finally resolved the situation with Micky and crossed several tasks off his schedule, he could potentially reconsider his relationship with the reincarnated goddess.

He also had to prepare to compete in the void tournament with Kassorith sooner rather than later. Metatron hadn't given him a strict time limit, but Percy wanted to return to the Vault while he was still Yellow. Besides, if he actually managed to get his hands on a third mana core, it was better to start cleansing and promoting it as soon as possible.

'Let's take it one step at a time. The artificial advancement is more urgent than anything else right now.'

Shifting his attention back to the topic at hand, Percy noted that Micky's fifth technique: Brittle Globe: was essentially a version of their Instantaneous Formation spell: the same one that Percy and his Thess'kalan host had used in the final round of the regional tournament. Micky had simply discovered a way to use it with his own affinities and equipment.

'This confirms that we can win against regular Violets as individuals,' Percy thought with a grin.

It hadn't been an easy fight for his friend, but it was good to know that they had reached this level even without fully tapping into their Ultimate Art or joining forces. And there was another major benefit of Micky's recent accomplishments.

Focusing on his surroundings, Percy keenly noticed that the Symphony of a Dead Winter had grown louder and clearer once again. Despite the lack of air in his mindscape, he heard a series of howling winds, cawing crows and laughing spectres. The otherwise disparate sounds were tied together by a gentle melody that reminded Percy of the trees in the Whistling Woods.

The echoes of the Lone Wanderer's Extreme spell were especially intense today: almost as much as they had been during their fight against Deimos. Only, Percy and Micky's bodies were currently separated by dozens of kilometres in the real world, and even their minds and identities had been partially segregated by a newly erected barrier.

Percy's grin widened as he pondered over the implications. There was no doubt about it: everything that they had done was precisely what their Ultimate Art had required from them all along.

The next time they joined their forces in earnest, the Symphony of a Dead Winter would be less strenuous and far, far stronger.

[END OF BOOK 5: LORD OF THE FUNGAL SPIRE]

Chapter 604: Companions

Seven years had passed since Phoebe helped Percy and Micky segregate their minds.

Remior had remained relatively calm, though everyone understood that peace was temporary. Percy was slowly building his strength up, and he was sure that Machaon was doing the same as they both quietly prepared for their eventual clash.

Several interesting things had happened during the past decade, but those were for Percy's main body to worry about. The clone's job was to focus on his own adventures, much like so many of his predecessors had done before him.

'Are you sure you don't want to make an exception just this once? We could settle for a lesser spring or something,' Micky suggested, his irritated voice echoing through their shared consciousness.

As a side-effect of the mindset that the titaness had helped them create, all of Percy's clones now carried their own personal copy of Micky's mind by default. That was only to be expected, since Percy and his fellow aspect still shared a single soul.

Even though it was only Percy's body that possessed the bloodline, his clones were equipped with an exact replica of his mindscape and, by extension, its other occupant.

That said, Percy had still been surprised the first time one of his clones had heard his friend's voice while navigating through the plane of souls. However, he'd ultimately been more excited than annoyed to finally have company in his adventures.

Sadly, the presence of a second mind hadn't proven very useful. At the very least, it hadn't increased his cognitive abilities, as the sum of Percy's and Micky's mental capacity was still exactly the same as the

Lone Wanderer's had been after their fusion and before their separation. The clones could merge their minds whenever they wanted: just like the originals: though they generally preferred remaining separate and having each other to talk to.

Well… that was the case on most days, though Micky could admittedly get a little annoying every now and then.

'We've gone over this a million times,' Percy said, having the urge to roll his eyes. 'You know that it's our job to look for a greater spring since we have an empowered cord.'

After years of practice, he and Micky had grown better at maintaining a second instance of Soul Resonance effortlessly, which meant that two of their clones were now always connected to the main bodies.

That had led Percy to separate the clones into two groups. The one without access to the original was tasked with visiting less promising worlds, such as barren planets and lesser springs. As long as he spotted anything even remotely interesting, he stopped to check it out.

Those trips hadn't yielded anything particularly valuable so far, but they had allowed Percy and Micky to grow more accustomed to various rare and composite affinities, experience all sorts of strange bodies to provide Micky with inspiration for shapeshifting, practice many of their soul-related abilities such as Soul Stitching and Parasitic Connection, study the ins and outs of Ludwick's Compass, and simply learn more about the types of alien worlds that populated the wider universe.

Most of those throwaway adventures tended to only last for a couple of days at most, meaning that Percy never had to wait too long if he suddenly needed one of his cords to pass the Moirais' Decree to somebody or check up on Sol's signals.

Meanwhile, the clones with the empowered connections were supposed to stay away for several months at a time, ignoring most low-level destinations until they spotted a greater spring: or at least something else that was truly unusual.

There were two reasons why Percy had made this decision.

Firstly, he could communicate with the clones that had empowered connections at a moment's notice if there was an emergency on Remior, so he felt at ease having them stay away on longer missions.

Secondly, Soul Resonance gave the clones more options, since they could always borrow mana from the main body or request reinforcements if they found something valuable that they needed help extracting. Thus, it simply made more sense for them to focus on greater springs.

Sadly, Percy and Micky hadn't found any of those either.

While they hadn't lazed around for even a moment, Percy had to admit that the past seven years had been among the least productive for his clones. Perhaps that was only to be expected, since he was a lot stronger than he used to be, which had only raised his standards for what he considered valuable.

However, their subpar results had inevitably generated some friction between him and his friend.

'I know…' Micky groaned. 'Yet, it's been what? Eight? Nine months since the last time we returned home? I'm bored out of my mind here!'

Percy sighed internally. 'I get that, but we knew that it was going to be like this from the start. Greater springs are rare. If you don't think you can take this anymore, we can always fuse our minds again.'

'That's not going to make me any less bored, is it?' Micky complained. 'Forget it. I'll shut up for another week or two, but I want to go back to Remior if we don't find anything by then. Catching up with the main bodies' memories will probably refresh us enough to make the experience more tolerable for the next clone.'

'Alright,' Percy begrudgingly agreed as he resumed scanning the sea of souls for a suitable host. 'But help me look, will you? We still haven't found anything to strengthen Kassorith for the tournament.'

Their Mimicry trait and Micky's shapeshifting skills weren't very useful for the Thess'kalan, and their main bodies had prioritized Internal Magiscript over everything else during the past few years. Attaining their artificial advancement was the single most important thing if they wanted to beat Machaon and increase their remaining lifespan.

The good news was that they'd made a ton of progress on that front, to the point that their goal was practically within reach already. In fact, the originals had informed the clone that they were about to upgrade the spell pretty soon.

Sadly, that also meant that they were running out of time to prepare for the interstellar competition. Percy did have an idea that he wanted to try before returning to the Vault, so it wasn't like he was entirely out of options, but it wouldn't hurt if one of the clones stumbled upon something useful.

Micky mentally nodded, joining Percy in his endeavour.

To his credit, the Huehuan didn't speak a word of complaint during the next month: over twice as long as he had previously requested. Unfortunately, they had still not found anything, so Percy fully expected his friend to start pestering him again any time now.

However, when Micky did speak again, he sounded a lot more enthusiastic than before. 'Percy! Do you see that cluster of souls over there?!'

'Hmm? What about them?' Percy asked, sharing his friend's senses. 'This looks like a barren world.'

Barren worlds: at least as defined by Mrs. Lia on Felmara: weren't necessarily planets without life. Just those without a means of advancement. That said, the one that Micky had just spotted was a step below even that, as it didn't seem to have any sapient souls. Only beasts.

'I know… but look carefully,' Micky insisted. 'Isn't that a demigod?'

Percy couldn't help but crease his non-existent forehead. That was honestly a good catch. Souls at the Clear grade didn't stand out nearly as much as actual gods, so they were fairly easy to miss when scanning a planet.

This was why Percy had failed to spot the four Whites on Robari, though a demigod's soul was admittedly a little brighter than that. Even so, he was sure that his friend would have missed the creature if not for the planet's relatively smaller size. Joining Micky, he scanned the place more carefully, eventually finding another two demigods located a fair distance away from one another.

‘Strange,’ he muttered as he contemplated the implications of their discovery.

These were beasts at the Clear grade. Percy had never seen any of those before. Well, technically, he hadn’t met any sapient demigods besides Ludwick’s projection either: and the deceased Saint hadn’t even been a real person: so this was quite a novelty no matter how he thought about it.

Still, Percy had met many White and Violet mages, but he had only ever seen a single Violet beast: the Starry Queen: which spoke volumes as to how rare these creatures were.

His familiar’s mother had only managed to grow to that level by leveraging the unique environment of the Fungal Spire which gathered several massive channels of ambient mana from across Remior. Even then, the hive only had enough mana to support a single Violet creature at a time: or at least it used to, before Percy’s interference.

Admittedly, the Fungal Spire also contained over a million Blue wasps and several times more Greens and Yellows. If all of that mana had been redirected towards a single creature, it could potentially survive at White or even Clear. However, a single Starry Empress would probably have a tough time collecting all the ambient mana scattered across the enormous hive, so the eusocial structure of her species was likely a necessity.

Percy knew that it was theoretically possible for quasi-divine beasts to emerge naturally. While only the denizens of Sixiang had ever overcome the final step of mastering a concept of their affinity and forging their internal worlds, reaching the peak of the Colour realm was probably more common than that.

Even so, he could hardly fathom how much mana such creatures would need to survive.

‘They probably have to eat… like… a continent’s worth of food every month or so,’ Micky: the resident expert on the topic: guessed.

‘Indeed,’ Percy agreed. ‘And to think that there are three of them on a planet this small. I’m surprised that they haven’t driven everything to extinction yet.’

Tossing the strange world another look, Percy failed to spot any other creatures above Green. It appeared that the three overlords had basically monopolized all the mana on their world, preventing anything else from even approaching their grade.

Percy still had no idea what had allowed the planet to develop in this manner, but he assumed that the quasi-divine beasts survived by somehow herding and devouring scores of the smaller ones. Regardless of how they managed that, one thing was certain.

He wanted to see this place for himself.

'I suppose that you got your wish in the end. This is interesting enough to forget about greater springs for now,' he told his friend, a spectral chuckle ringing inside their soul. 'Shall we?'

'It's your turn to pick a host,' Micky replied.

Scanning their options for a couple of minutes, Percy eventually spotted a Green beast in a relatively salvageable condition. It was far enough from the three overlords that he didn't think they would end up devoured immediately, but close enough to one of them that it shouldn't take too long to travel there.

Happy with his choice, he checked with Micky one final time before diving right in.

Chapter 605: Mysterious material

Sinking into his new body, Percy found himself cramped inside the cracks in the beast's soul. He was hit by a wave of rejection, his latest host clearly not big on sharing, nor interested in getting healed.

Percy didn't know whether this was due to the personality of this particular beast or an excessive amount of aggression brought about by its higher grade, but he had no interest in trying to placate the creature.

With practiced ease, he stirred the slumbering fiends inside his soul, causing a series of thin, spider-like limbs and long hairs to sprout across the surface of his wisp. The spectral appendages dug into the creature's soul, gripping the fragments tightly, but Percy was only getting started.

His wisp melted and wriggled, assuming more specialized shapes like clawed hands, hooks, tweezers and even suction cups, expanding to fill up all the available space and get a better hold on his host's soul.

One thing that he hadn't expected upon absorbing the Amorphos was how well it would synergize with his Parasitic Connection spell. This clearly wasn't what the Mimicry trait was for – but then again it wasn't what any of his traits were for: just a fortunate side-effect of having so many fiends scattered inside his soul.

Adding Micky's assistance and the experience that they had accumulated after possessing thousands of hosts over the past few years, their Spectral Art had grown a lot more powerful.

Percy still generally avoided taking his hosts over by force when possible: especially when it came to sapients: but he wasn't going to lose sleep over a random alien beast that wouldn't have even been alive if not for him. And not just because he didn't sleep.

Due to his connection to his main body, he wasn't overly concerned about the creature's injuries either, as he had access to all the phantom mana he might need to stitch its soul up.

'I suppose this is good practice for the next time I meet an asshole host like Kassorith,' he reminded himself as he slowly took over the creature and wove preservation runes inside its wounds.

Opening his eyes, he found himself submerged. After countless adventures, he knew that water was relatively abundant across the universe, as well as a necessary component in the biology of every living thing he had ever possessed, so ending up underwater was sadly a relatively common occurrence: even if he hadn't found any aquatic civilizations since Atlantis.

'At least we can breathe,' Micky pointed out. 'It doesn't look like our host died by drowning.'

Percy nodded. A cursory examination of their body failed to reveal any physical injuries. He didn't think that the beast had starved either. Judging by the age of its soul, he felt like it had simply reached the end of its lifespan: much like the three-eye cat that he had possessed decades ago. A rather rare phenomenon when it came to beasts.

The good news was that death by old age made the creature's spectral injuries easier to fix. On the flipside, there was probably a limit to how much extra time they had bought, so they would have to move quickly. Overall, the beast appeared like some sort of aquatic reptile, its body long and lithe.

Scanning his surroundings, Percy noticed that the seawater was a little strange. 'Hmmm? Why is it red? Is this blood or something?'

It didn't taste like blood, but that might just be an issue with his host's sense of taste. Then again, the unique colour of his environment could also be caused by the creature's eyes, so it was hard to tell what was happening with any certainty.

'I still think it's water,' Micky: who had also grown into a veteran in otherworldly adventures by now: argued. 'It has the right viscosity and resistance. Maybe there's something mixed in it?'

Percy's new host quickly proved physically incapable of creasing its forehead, though that didn't stop Percy from trying to do just that. Micky was right. The water had a faint grainy texture, almost as if millions of tiny needles were solved in it, constantly prickling their skin.

Luckily, the lizard's exterior was fairly tough, preventing any injuries, though the same couldn't be said about its interior. Every breath was unpleasant, the creature's gills and whatever organ was responsible for filtering oxygen out of the water clearly not being nearly as impervious to the mysterious substance. They hadn't suffered any notable damage just yet, but they might not be able to stay in this part of the ocean indefinitely.

It made the area brighter too. Percy guessed that they were located quite deep, as he couldn't see any sunlight reaching them from above. However, the whole place was illuminated by a strange, ambient glow, making him feel like they were suspended inside a giant, liquid ruby rather than an ocean.

'Where to now?' Micky asked.

Percy shrugged. Shrugging was apparently well within his host's capabilities. 'The glow is more intense that way. I wouldn't be surprised if that's where the demigods are, so we'll definitely want to check it out at some point. Maybe we should leave that for later though, after getting a better feel for the local ecosystem.'

Not hearing any objections from his companion, he began swimming in the opposite direction, while keeping an eye out for any lifeforms. Fortunately, it didn't take long to find some. And there were lots.

Much like he and Micky had previously surmised, their host was at Green, placing them solidly at the top of the local food chain: at least if they ignored the existence of the three quasi-divine beasts hiding somewhere on the planet.

That was not to say that it was impossible to get attacked by other Green creatures, but it seemed like food was abundant enough in this area that beasts of their level didn't need to risk attacking each other. As a result, Percy found it easy to relax and observe his surroundings in peace.

The fauna of this planet shared some similarities with marine life on Remior. Reptile-like beasts were admittedly more abundant than he was used to, but he did find plenty of things that resembled fish or mollusks.

Pulling a scythe out of his spatial seal, he turned it invisible and incorporeal, using the insidious weapon to hunt some of the faster creatures without having to exert his old body more than necessary. Just because other beasts were less inclined to attack his host, it didn't mean that he wasn't going to attack them.

Biting a chunk out of pretty much everything unlucky enough to cross his path, he seized the opportunity to learn more about the biology of the native creatures, and to fill his host's belly so that he and Micky wouldn't have to worry about starving anytime soon.

Interestingly, none of the creatures possessed anything resembling an internal skeleton. Instead, everything: including his host and even the mollusks: was covered in an extremely hard shell that he had some difficulty biting through even when separated by a full grade.

He wouldn't exactly describe it as an exoskeleton like what the Starry Wasps on Remior possessed, as it consisted of a series of tiny scales that individually felt harder than any mundane gemstone. They shone in a faint crimson colour, greatly resembling the mysterious powder scattered in the water, making Percy wonder whether it was the same thing.

'Its toughness isn't a joke,' Micky pointed out as they nearly broke their fangs trying to eat some kind of Yellow pufferfish, and not even for the first time.

While Percy couldn't see the inside of his host's mouth, he was convinced that the only reason they succeeded in the end was because their curved fangs were also made of the same material as their scales.

'Yeah… if there's anything valuable on this planet, I bet it's going to be this red substance,' he agreed.

Percy was tempted to store a few litres of polluted seawater in his seal already, though he decided to study this place a little longer first, in case they found something of a higher quality.

Swimming in what he hoped was the same direction, he wanted to see whether they would come across anything different. Nothing seemed to change for several hours, though he eventually noticed that the red glow in his surroundings had grown dimmer, the concentration of the mysterious substance having clearly plummeted.

This only served to reinforce his guess that both the source of the material and the location of the quasi-divine beast were in the opposite direction, but he wasn't in a rush to turn back just yet.

The water around him had darkened and shifted to a deep purple colour. Presumably, it would turn into something closer to the familiar blue of mundane seas if he kept going this way: at least if he could see anything through the darkness: and if there was anywhere on this planet that had none of the crimson powder.

Luckily, the local fauna illuminated the place somewhat. The creatures were still covered in the same luminescent scales as before, which stood out even more against the dark backdrop of the ocean and helped Percy examine the abyss.

'Their shells are also a little darker than before,' Micky pointed out. 'Just… not as much as the water.'

Evidently, the wildlife in this ocean had the ability to gather the strange material by eating or breathing, using it to reinforce their scales.

Unexpectedly, this place was more popular than the depths of the red region. After a cursory scan, Percy counted roughly twice or thrice as many creatures as before in his immediate vicinity. Their average

grade had dropped significantly, however, with more Oranges than Yellows, and even the occasional Red.

If Percy's hypothesis about the mysterious substance was correct, this didn't really make sense. Shouldn't these beasts have flooded the area where the material was concentrated so that they could collect more of it?

'Maybe they can't stay there for too long for some reason…' he guessed.

Breathing the material in had been rather painful even for his host which was a Green, so Percy could only imagine how much prolonged exposure might hurt weaker creatures. Then again, it was just as likely that he was missing other important information.

He was broken out of his thoughts by a Green mollusk lunging at him.

Chapter 606: Chaotic battlefield

The creature lunging at Percy's host looked a bit like a cuttlefish that had pincers at the end of its many tentacles, and it was the first beast that had actually taken the initiative to attack them since coming here.

Having missed its first strike, the Green mollusk was already circling back for round two. Fortunately, Percy didn't have much trouble bisecting the creature's soul with his invisible Harvester, putting the poor thing out of everyone's misery.

Scanning the area, he realized that this type of scene was much more common here. Creatures of all shapes and sizes were attacking each other, plunging the sea in carnage. Beasts looked more willing to go after those of their own grade too, despite the abundance of weaker food. Was it an attempt to eliminate competition, perhaps?

'Hey, doesn't it look like those with dimmer scales are on the losing side?' Micky asked.

It was true. Some creatures clearly had an easier time overcoming the defences of their prey or shielding themselves from their predators, and that appeared to be strongly correlated with how much of the strange substance they had absorbed.

Perhaps delving into the red region was a necessity here for any beast that hoped to strengthen itself enough to survive the carnage, though that still didn't explain why anything would bother coming back out into the mundane water, or why the creatures were less inclined to attack each other inside the magical zone.

'Let's keep going,' Percy suggested, curious to see if there was anything interesting this way.

'Do you want me to awaken our host's second core while you're busy swimming?' Micky offered.

Percy considered his friend's suggestion for a while before nodding. The reptile was already living on borrowed time, and it was possible that they would run into trouble when they attempted to explore the red region later, so strengthening their body and extending what was left of their lifespan wasn't a bad idea. Then again, he doubted that their second core would start higher than Red: or maybe Orange if they got lucky: so its impact would be negligible.

At the same time, it wouldn't cost much. Green mushrooms were practically dirt cheap across Remior by now, so investing a few into this trip wasn't a big deal. Besides, Percy fully expected to fill up his spatial seal with as much of the strange substance as it could fit by the time he was done, so freeing up more space wouldn't hurt.

Not saying anything else, Micky began summoning mushrooms inside their host's stomach, mouth, or clenched inside the creature's webbed digits, carelessly discarding the shrivelled fungi as soon as the Moirais' Decree was done draining them of their life mana.

Meanwhile, Percy resumed swimming through the aquatic battlefield, eliminating anything dumb enough to attack them. For most opponents: their fellow Greens included: he didn't even have to use his scythe.

It quickly became clear that his host's shell was harder than most, making other creatures less inclined to try their luck against him. It probably wasn't that strange, considering that he and Micky had found the lizard inside the red region where the miraculous substance was more abundant.

It did, however, make him wonder why some beasts still stubbornly chose to attack, despite clearly not standing a ghost of a chance against the superior Green. The only explanation that Percy was able to

come up with was that consuming a beast with a stronger shell was a shortcut to absorbing a lot of the material quickly.

'Shall I try to eat a few of the bigger ones too?' he asked.

'Go ahead. I'll stop absorbing mushrooms for a few minutes,' Micky replied.

Percy focused on other Green creatures with the most vibrant scales that he could find. Comparing them with his own host's limbs, he knew that they had absorbed less of the material than him, but that was fine. He wasn't looking for a meaningful upgrade: he just wanted to understand the process.

Butchering the beasts wasn't difficult, as no amount of physical reinforcement would offer any protection against the curved edge of Percy's spectral weapon. Borrowing phantom mana from his main body also made the scythe's maintenance laughably easy, allowing him to go all out.

Consuming his victims was more challenging, however. Even though Percy's host had absorbed more powder, its thin fangs threatened to shatter against the thick hide of his prey. Not particularly concerned with the lizard's dental health, Percy still bit off as many scales as he could, swallowing them whole and flooding his stomach with beast mana to dissolve them faster.

Almost immediately, his host's body started burning and itching all over, though the feeling was more concentrated along the creature's scales, claws and fangs. Some of the cracks that he had just suffered began mending in real time, the lizard's whole exterior feeling a little harder by the time the strange sensation faded.

The difference was admittedly small, so Percy guessed that they would have to consume thousands of creatures at this level if they wanted to experience any tangible improvements, and this was already after having picked the juiciest targets he could find in the area.

'I suppose that's because of our host's higher starting point. Hopefully there's a more efficient way for us to keep growing,' Percy reasoned.

Either way, he was definitely a fan of how easy it was to absorb the powder. He just had to make sure that it was compatible with life on other planets: or just humans, really: and that there weren't any adverse effects.

Pausing the experiment for now and allowing his friend to resume consuming life mana, Percy continued travelling in what he hoped was the same direction as before. The water kept growing darker and closer to blue for several days, the battlefield getting more chaotic by the hour as the concentration of the magical powder plummeted.

Percy doubted that his host would survive for more than a month in total, which meant that they would probably have to turn back pretty soon if they didn't find anything interesting this way.

Thankfully, the concentration of the red substance began climbing again at some point, causing all the recent changes to start occurring in reverse: their surroundings grew brighter, the number of beasts fighting around them dropped, and the water gradually reddened once more. This continued for a few more days as he and Micky approached what Percy guessed were the outskirts of another red region.

'Are we sure that it's a different one?' Micky suddenly asked. 'Maybe we just lost our way and headed back by mistake.'

'Beats me…' Percy admitted. 'But there's a way to make sure that doesn't happen again.'

Tapping into the deepest recesses of his mind, he activated Ludwick's Compass, planting a huge, crimson pyre in the middle of the ocean. Hopefully, the mark would allow him and Micky to retain their bearing as they kept travelling.

Sadly, there was no landmark to place the illusionary flame on, so it was debatable whether it would stay in place or slowly drift away as they distanced themselves from this spot. After all, the mindset relied exclusively on their own senses to memorize the path away from the marks.

'Well, it should be fine,' Percy reassured himself as much as he did his friend. 'Ludwick's Compass has even allowed us to find our way back to distant planets while travelling through the soul plane. There's no way it's going to get tricked by a few hundred kilometres of swimming inside a physical ocean.'

‘Agreed. So, what do you want to investigate next?’ Micky asked.

‘Hmmm… our body should still have a few weeks left,’ Percy replied.

His companion had already repaired the Moirais’ Decree and cleared the first few channels leading to their host’s abdomen, revealing a Red mana core with a water affinity.

As expected, it wasn’t anything crazy, but it had probably added an extra day or two to their time here. More importantly, if they released all of their water mana at once, it should give them a small burst of speed in case they needed to flee from something.

‘Do you want to take some time to check out the surface too before diving into the red region? I doubt we’ll find anything interesting there, but it’s probably best to leave the most dangerous part of the journey for last,’ Percy reasoned.

After confirming that his friend was on the same page, he began swimming upwards.

It took far less time for their environment to grow brighter again, though the change was caused by rays of mundane sunlight piercing through the water from above, instead of the ominous glow of the omnipresent substance. If anything, the concentration of the alien resource plummeted even more rapidly, causing their surroundings to shift into brighter shades of violet as they approached the surface.

Percy fully expected to swim into another chaotic battlefield, but that didn’t happen. Life grew scarcer rather than more abundant: almost as if there was something at the end of their path scaring all the other creatures away.

It didn’t take him and Micky long to figure out what.

Just as Percy was racking his brain to make sense of the changes, he caught sight of something ahead that made him freeze in his tracks, while also conveniently answering a few of his questions.

The sunlit surface was finally right before his reptilian eyes, separated from him by only a couple hundred metres of seawater. Even so, neither he nor Micky were in a rush to cross the last stretch, unwilling to offer themselves as a snack to the giant shadows leisurely swimming over their head.

There were dozens: no… hundreds – of them, and each was larger than a small house. These beasts clearly weren't the three demigods that Percy and Micky had seen while entering the planet, but their grade was still markedly higher than anything else that was supposed to exist in this world.

'Hey, didn't we make sure that there was nothing above Green besides the quasi-divine beasts?' Micky suddenly asked, echoing Percy's feelings.

Percy nodded while swallowing hard, though reality clearly didn't agree with him or his friend. The school of giant reptiles barring their path were Blue. Every last one of them.

'What the hell is up with this place?!'

Chapter 607: Intimidation

'Something's off,' Percy said.

'Well... they aren't covered in red scales like everything else,' Micky pointed out. 'Maybe they don't bother to dive into the crimson regions because they're strong enough without ingesting the substance.'

The creatures lurking close to the surface were lizards like the majority of fauna that Percy and Micky had encountered over the past week, though they were definitely of a different species than their host: so they wouldn't be able to rely on kinship to keep them safe.

Their massive frames were round and bloated like whales, which was admittedly not a shape that one tended to associate with an apex predator. More importantly, their scales sported a dull grey colour. They looked sleek and mostly undamaged, but they lacked the characteristic glow: and probably the hardness: of everything else that Percy had seen.

'That doesn't make sense,' he argued with a shake of his head. 'These things are obviously born at a lower grade. Don't they need tougher shells to protect them until they reach maturity? They don't look like they have ever left the surface.'

‘Maybe their body loses the enhancement provided by the material if they stop ingesting it for a long time. Or maybe the parents just take care of their young so that nothing dares to attack them before they reach Blue,’ Micky offered, though Percy still wasn’t convinced.

‘Their scales aren’t the only thing that doesn’t add up. How can they survive here by themselves? Blue beasts need a ridiculous amount of food per day, but there’s nothing to eat here. They should have starved a long time ago: especially with so many gathered at the same place.’

‘Well… they clearly manage, somehow,’ Micky said.

‘No. I don’t think these things are Blue,’ Percy insisted.

‘What do you mean? Just look at them with your Mana Sense! I agree that it’s strange, but the proof is right in front of us. Besides, their size is also on par with the Starry Commanders on Remior.’

Percy examined the creatures for a little longer without daring to swim closer, verifying once more that everything was exactly as Micky said. Even so, he had a hunch that things weren’t as they seemed, and he trusted his instincts. ‘Do you mind if I approach?’

‘Be my guest.’ Micky shrugged. ‘We’ve already left a mark on this planet, so we should be able to return if we get eaten.’

‘I doubt it’ll come to that,’ Percy reiterated, already swimming towards the nearest creature.

Not just his target, but also a couple of others in its vicinity instantly registered Percy’s approach, regarding him cautiously. Perhaps, the sight of multiple ‘Blue’ beasts staring at him should have given him pause, but Percy only grew bolder the closer he got without the giant beasts attacking.

Based on what he knew about magical beasts, there was no universe where a Blue creature would think twice before pouncing on a Green that was only a few dozen metres away. The gap in their grades and the presence of a domain were more than enough for the colossal animals to eliminate him with ease, yet his host’s Green core should be just about nourishing enough to be worth consuming.

Growing more confident in his guess, Percy sent a trickle of phantom mana into his eyes to activate Soul Vision, instantly noticing that the Blues' souls were flaring erratically with unease. It was almost like they were more scared of him than the other way around.

More importantly, their souls looked nothing like the souls of true Blues. In fact, they were so pathetically weak that Percy didn't believe the creatures to be Greens, Yellows, or even Oranges.

'Wow. These bastards really got me there for a moment,' Micky admitted, trying and failing to mask his embarrassment.

Oblivious to the Huehuan's thoughts, the beasts shifted nervously as Percy closed the distance separating them. They looked like they wanted to swim away, but ultimately chose to hold their ground: or rather… their water: to avoid giving away the game. Sadly for them, it was a little too late for that.

Percy saw no reason to harm the fake Blues despite their ruse, though he did find their little trick quite interesting, so he stopped as close as he could to observe them without giving the poor things a heart attack.

'How do you think they pull this off?' Micky wondered.

'Their size is real at least,' Percy said.

It was common knowledge that animals could potentially grow as large as Blues even without a high grade. Percy knew that there were whales on Remior that could accomplish that even at Red, though the aquatic mammals typically had no choice but to actively hunt and consume small Orange beasts early on in their life to evolve. If they didn't, their increased bulk would only turn them into juicier targets as they matured.

Clearly, the giant lizards didn't bother to do that, however. After observing them carefully for several minutes, Percy concluded that these things survived mostly by filtering lots of tiny crustaceans out of the water. It explained how the reptiles accumulated their mass, though their meals clearly didn't contain enough mana for them to evolve.

‘I guess this is a good thing for them. If they advanced, they would have no choice but to dive deeper and participate in the fight for mana and the red substance. This way, they can survive near the surface where food is relatively scarce,’ Percy concluded.

Faking their grade was obviously a biological adaptation to prevent other creatures from realizing how easily they could overpower the giant reptiles.

‘But how is that even possible?’ Micky asked.

‘Maybe the principle behind it isn’t that different from our concealment runes,’ Percy suggested. ‘They don’t change their actual grade: only how an outsider perceives it. I suppose that this is done passively by their bodies.’

A regular concealment enchantment could hide one’s mana signature entirely, but it was possible to only partially filter it through a concealment rune with multiple controls. That was similar to the bandage that Deimos had used to appear as a Blue while being a Violet, or the enchantments that Percy had carved onto his cauldron to obscure the walls of the construct without completely hiding the ingredients inside it from his Mana Sense.

‘Makes sense, I guess,’ Micky said. ‘But how do you go the opposite way?’

‘Hmmm… I don’t think I ever saw a single rune that did that in the Vault, but we’ve never tried combining concealment and reversal runes before,’ Percy said.

‘That’s a good shout, actually,’ Micky conceded.

Not wasting any time, the Huehuan seized control of the beast mana inside their host’s core, using Internal Magiscript to form a small unit cell that consisted of a handful of runes: a reversal rune, a concealment rune and a bunch of controls on both of them.

It barely took a second, since Percy and Micky had poured countless hours into this particular spell over the past half-decade or so. By now, they could easily draw enchantments with over sixty runes inside their cores. It was still less than half than the maximum complexity they were capable of on the outside, yet it was getting pretty close to what they would need for their artificial advancement.

In fact, their main bodies had shifted their attention to seal-crafting, learning how to make the enchantments permanent and much smaller, and designing the enchantment that they were planning to introduce inside their cores.

Either way, none of that mattered right now.

Micky activated just the concealment rune at first as Percy scanned the gentle giants with Soul Vision. Their souls flared with surprise and curiosity as Micky lowered their host's grade to Yellow, Orange and then Red, before hiding it entirely.

Giving his friend a mental nod, Percy watched the Blue-sized reptiles with bated breath as Micky finally activated the reversal rune as well. The moment the second part of the enchantment went live, the creatures' souls exploded with terror as: from their perspective: a real Blue beast suddenly appeared amidst their ranks.

Unable to remain calm any longer, the poor beasts started swimming away in panic, the colossal pod scattering in less than a minute. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on Percy. The creatures had managed to resist the urge to flee before, despite the fact that Percy could have butchered them just as easily at Green, only to finally lose their minds the moment he used their own trick against them.

'I guess it worked,' Percy said, suppressing the urge to chuckle as his Status surprised him with a notification.

[Congratulations! Your spell has evolved: Spectral Art: Internal Magiscript: Masterful -> Spectral Art: Intimidation: Masterful!]

'Wow. We finally found an application for Internal Magiscript!' Micky exclaimed.

The spell had reached Masterful through nothing but sheer complexity. Percy and Micky had kept working on it without getting much for their efforts, only because they knew that it was going to eventually form the foundation of their artificial advancement. They saw everything up to that point as a necessary, intermediate step. Even so, being able to actually do something interesting with it for a change certainly felt good.

‘Guess who managed to upgrade Internal Magiscript first!’ Percy gleefully sent through the ethereal cord, making fun of his main body who was most certainly working on combining the spell with seal-crafting this very moment.

‘You’re kidding, right?’ the original asked back, sounding more curious than annoyed.

‘Nope. It’s not the most impressive thing, but it might be good to include in the eventual unit cell,’ the clone said before bringing the main body up to speed.

While the main goal of their artificial advancement was obviously to truly raise their actual grade, Percy and Micky were already planning to add several utility features to their cores: including concealment runes.

Adding Intimidation into the mix would only require a couple of extra runes, and Percy could definitely see this ability saving their skin one day. Admittedly, everyone on Remior already knew their real grade, but it was possible that they might eventually travel to distant places while still in the Colour realm, so being able to inflate their grade to avoid a fight wouldn’t be a bad option to have.

‘At least we won’t leave this place entirely empty-handed, even if the red substance proves useless,’ Micky said as soon as Percy was done briefing the main body on their discoveries so far.

‘Agreed, but I see this more like an appetizer,’ Percy replied, his host’s lips parting into a toothy grin.

After so many years of wasting their time without finding any interesting planets, he had every intention of making the most out of this place, and he was sure that his friend felt the same way. With one more mystery settled, Percy finally crossed the remaining distance to the surface, peeking his head out of the water for the first time since their arrival.

Chapter 608: Journey to the depths

Peeking his host’s head out of the water, Percy was greeted by a scene that wouldn’t have been out of place on Remior. The sky was blue and mostly clear, with only a few white clouds scattered here and there. A single yellow sun appeared to illuminate this world: at least at this time of the day: though it was possible that other stars were hiding behind the planet at the moment.

It wasn't very windy either, the waves short and moving slowly as the ocean was caressed by a gentle breeze. A faint purplish hue differentiated this sea from the one that Percy and Micky had once spent months flying over, but everything else was about the same.

Not in a rush to dive back into the abyss, Percy decided to spend a couple of days swimming across the surface, travelling in the same direction as the waves to cover more water.

His friend kept himself busy too, splitting his time between playing around with the new spell and attaching reversal runes to other enchantments that they hadn't thought to augment like that in the past.

Most of Micky's experiments proved useless, with only the mana-gathering runes producing a somewhat interesting mana-repelling effect. Percy couldn't think of an application for it right off the top of his head: the enchantment was too weak to be used in a fight: but he was sure that they'd come up with something sooner or later.

'I think we've seen enough,' Micky said about half a week later, clearly having grown just as sick of runecrafting as he had of the bland scenery.

Percy nodded. He hadn't spotted any birds or signs of land since reaching the surface. That didn't necessarily mean that there weren't any, as he and Micky had barely explored a tiny part of the planet, but he was starting to grow increasingly convinced that the red regions in the depths of the ocean were the only interesting places on an otherwise generic world.

He and Micky had encountered several pods of the same fake Blue beasts that had inspired their latest spell, however. Apparently, the creatures were fairly common here, and quite possibly one of the main reasons why other animals avoided swimming this high.

While it was entirely possible that the smarter beasts could see through the ruse of the gentle giants, they didn't have much incentive to attack them. Given their size and numbers, the fake Blues should be strong enough to overpower anything below Yellow with ease, despite not possessing a shred of magic.

Stronger predators wouldn't be interested in meat that contained so little mana, no matter how abundant it was. If Percy also considered the scarcity of other types of prey and the red material near the surface of the ocean, it wasn't hard to see why it was so peaceful.

'It's funny how a bunch of creatures this weak could have such a profound impact on the entire ecosystem,' he mused. 'But yeah… I think you're right. It's time to search for the even larger beasts at the other end of the spectrum.'

Unless the local fauna had developed a way to fake the fluctuations of their souls as well, the quasi-divine beasts were bound to be as real and dangerous as advertised.

Not wasting any time: their host didn't have much left anyway: Percy dove back into the water, heading straight towards the illusionary pyre at the edge of his consciousness that he had placed a few days prior using Ludwick's Compass.

He wasn't overly attached to that particular mark. He simply knew that it was guaranteed to lead him to the outskirts of a red region, but he was more than happy to enter a different one if he found any on the way.

'Do you think our new spell will work on the creatures below?' Micky asked.

The Huehuan had yet to dissolve the enchantment inside their host's sternum. Maintaining such a simple unit cell was practically effortless for them by now, so they were still projecting the aura of a Blue beast outwards.

'No harm in trying,' Percy replied with a shrug. 'Keep in mind that our host is too small to pass as a genuine Blue, but beasts at Green or lower aren't exactly known for their intelligence. No offense.'

'Hey!' Micky exclaimed in a faux-offended tone, causing Percy to chuckle.

Either way, it would be nice to get a feel for how effective Intimidation was. It might even let them reach their destination sooner if it spared them from a fight or two. However, Percy made a mental note to stop his friend when they entered the red region.

A quasi-divine beast was absolutely smart enough to see through their façade. Even if it didn't, presenting themselves as a Blue would accomplish nothing but stir the creature's appetite, so it was in their best interest to avoid appearing too conspicuous. In fact, it would be prudent to draw some concealment runes inside their abdomen to hide their second core entirely when they got closer.

The journey lasted about a day, proving mostly uneventful.

The concentration of the strange material steadily rose along the way, illuminating the chaotic battlefield as the number of beasts devouring one another rose with it. Most of the creatures steered clear of Percy and Micky, suggesting that their new trick was quite effective against the dim-witted animals.

Eventually, they reached the outskirts of a red region. Percy wasn't sure whether it was the same one that he had marked, since the illusionary pyre was still quite far from his location, but it didn't really matter. He dropped another mark for good measure before entering.

This time, he headed in the direction where the mysterious substance was thickest. The itchiness in his host's gills returned with a vengeance, growing more unpleasant by the minute. It wasn't long until every breath was genuinely painful, suggesting that even the relatively powerful reptile that Percy and Micky had possessed wouldn't last here indefinitely. At some point, even their scales, claws and fangs started to itch, much like they had done whenever they'd consumed an animal with a tough enough exterior.

'I guess we're deep enough for our host to start benefitting,' Micky pointed out.

They weren't the only ones in the area. While this place was admittedly more peaceful and far less populated than the dark expanse separating the red regions, the beasts they did see were all at Green like them. Furthermore, their scales shone brightly: some even more so than Percy's host: indicating that the creatures had absorbed more of the mysterious substance.

Just as Percy was beginning to wonder why nothing dared to stir trouble, he spotted a strange shadow speeding towards his host from the left, looking like it was about to attack.

It was some kind of squid, though its tentacles were covered in the same crimson scales as everything else. Some were long, curved and pointy: sticking outwards like barbs or hooks meant for ripping its

prey apart. It moved by squeezing its body and letting its many limbs expand, before whipping them back forcefully to propel itself forward. Its gaping maw looked especially unsettling, covered with several rows of thin fangs spiralling inwards.

Thinking on his webbed hindpaws, Percy pulled out an invisible Harvester, gripping it tightly in his clawed forepaws, ready to slice the invading creature in half. For better or worse, the monstrous squid simply swam around his host, continuing its path unimpeded.

'Phew…' Percy tried to exhale, only to remember that the reptile didn't even have lungs. 'That bastard scared me for a second there.'

'Why are you so jumpy? It's just a Green beast,' Micky chastised him, rolling their eyes.

The Huehuan wasn't wrong about that. Either of them could have effortlessly squashed the creature into mincemeat with their domain back on Remior: not to mention that their current host wasn't any smaller than the squid, on top of being infinitely more disposable than their real bodies.

In Percy's defence, anyone in their right mind would have found a misshapen alien squid popping out of nowhere frightening. That thing was the stuff of nightmares, and the ominous glow of this ocean hadn't made it any better.

'Why aren't the beasts here attacking each other?' Percy asked his friend, eager to jump to a less embarrassing topic.

'How should I know? I suppose this place is some kind of training ground,' the Huehuan speculated.

Percy nodded. Micky's guess was more or less the same as his. As far as he could tell, the stronger beasts delved as far into the red region as they could handle, absorbing the substance and reinforcing their scales so that they could survive the chaotic battlefield in the outskirts more easily.

There seemed to be some unspoken understanding between them that this wasn't a good place to hunt each other. Or maybe they just didn't want to break their teeth trying to bite through the shell of a beast that had absorbed as much of the weird material as them.

Either way, they appeared to be safe for now, so Percy decided to keep going. He had to grit his fangs as the itchiness across his borrowed body and the pain in his gills climbed to a new high, but he didn't let that stop him.

From the moment he and Micky had set out on this mission to the depths, they'd known that their host wouldn't survive the trip. Even if it somehow managed to endure the agonizing tempering of the strange substance, the demigod that probably awaited at the end of this journey was unlikely to spare them.

Of course, that would only matter once they reached that point: something that was questionable given what happened next. It felt as if the sea itself started tugging at their host's side, trying to steer the reptile off-course.

Chapter 609: Sinister trap

Resisting the ocean's pull seemed easy at first, but the force of the underwater current rose sharply as Percy kept swimming towards the source of the red substance. Mere seconds later, it was powerful enough that controlling his host's body had turned into a struggle.

Shocked by the sudden change, he drew strength from both cores, pumping more beast mana into the reptile's veins to activate Circulation, while also expelling the water mana from its hindlegs for propulsion. Turning against the current and towards the surface, Percy swam as fast as his aged body could handle to escape the aquatic prison.

For several seconds, it was unclear whether he had even moved. Thankfully, the current seemed to weaken slightly after that, loosening its hold on the lizard and letting Percy and Micky pick up speed. Even so, neither dared to relax until several hundred metres later.

'What the hell was that?!' Micky asked, clearly as shaken as Percy. 'The current went from a gentle nudge to almost impossible to swim against in… like… two seconds!'

Their heart thumped wildly in their chest, threatening to give out. Their gills hurt even more than before as their hurried breaths had drawn in an unhealthy amount of the needle-like particles, though their host's condition was the last thing on Percy's mind.

'I guess we've just discovered the method that the Clear beasts use to trap and devour their prey,' he said, finally having enough pieces of the puzzle to understand how the alien ocean worked.

It was as ingenious as it was sinister. The giant creatures with the fake Blue cores also played a role: perhaps unwittingly: by scaring everything else away from the surface and driving the other species deeper into the ocean.

The mysterious substance made the red regions impossible to endure for weaker animals, leaving them no choice but to gather in the darker, more mundane waters. Unsurprisingly, the higher concentration of beasts led to them rapidly devouring one another, eliminating those with less potential and forcing the rest to evolve into Yellows and Greens.

At the same time, the competition motivated the winners to delve into the red regions to reinforce their scales. After all, even a Green would eventually lose its life under the constant assault of thousands of other creatures if it lacked the necessary defences to protect itself. It might resist their attacks for a few months or even years, but could it survive the tempered fangs of Yellow and even other Green beasts for decades or centuries?

The weaker beasts could barely handle the outskirts of the red regions, but the Greens could push themselves deeper and deeper with each trip as they slowly accumulated strength.

By moving back and forth between the hunting and training waters, they were essentially fattening themselves like pigs for slaughter, until they finally grew strong enough to cross the invisible threshold separating them from the deepest part of the red region.

After that, there was no turning back, and it was pretty easy to guess whose jaws the juicy, elephant-sized snacks tended to find themselves in.

‘The demigods have basically hijacked the entire ecosystem of their planet, making everything work for them,’ Percy summarized.

He had yet to actually see the quasi-divine beasts with his own eyes, so this was admittedly all speculation. However, it would explain everything they had experienced since coming here. The only question left to answer was whether the mysterious substance and the powerful underwater currents were produced directly by the demigods, or if they were simply natural phenomena that the Clear beasts were taking advantage of.

‘Do we want to keep going?’ Micky asked.

Percy shrugged. ‘Why wouldn’t we? This body won’t last much longer anyway, and the concentration of the substance keeps increasing the deeper we go. If we want to bring a sample back, we might as well push as far as we can.’

‘I don’t want to get too close to the demigod though,’ Micky protested.

‘Me neither,’ Percy agreed with a nod.

It would be incredibly unwise to treat the creature as another dumb animal. At that grade, it was definitely as intelligent as a person. On top of that, a domain that powerful could easily interact with a disembodied soul, potentially preventing Percy and Micky from escaping the planet.

Blues and Violets would struggle to trap them with just their willpower: which was why Syrreneth had been forced to employ a soul-affinity mage to prevent Percy from escaping from his cave on Thess’kala: but a demigod was two grades higher than Kassorith’s master.

The good news was that the quasi-divine beast’s domain would be much weaker from afar, especially if it wasn’t intentionally trying to stop Percy and Micky from leaving. However, they understood that they could easily lose a clone if they made a mistake.

Hopefully, Percy’s main body would eventually regenerate the damage in his soul and the missing cord even in that case, but this was something that he wouldn’t be certain of until it happened: and he had no interest in testing his luck.

Besides, even if the original did recover the clone, he’d still lose a piece of his spatial seal and a fully charged Zelesian bead: both of which had cost an arm and a leg: along with the marks leading back to this planet. Not to mention how unpleasant the experience was bound to be for the clone.

‘Let’s set the limit to about a kilometre,’ Percy suggested. ‘I’m sure that a creature this massive will be visible from afar. The moment it looks like we’re about to get dragged closer than that, we bolt.’

‘Alright. I’ll focus on drawing concealment runes in our second core, and you make sure to collect as much of the material as you can on the way,’ Micky replied.

Happy with their plan, Percy dove into the depths again, this time reluctantly allowing the powerful current to pull him in, robbing him of the ability to control his body. Before long, it became clear that he wouldn’t be able to turn back anymore: not with his borrowed flesh, at least: even if he went all out.

The source of the red material had appeared blurry up to that point. Percy had hoped that approaching it would have given him and Micky a better look, but the violent current wasn’t helping, making it difficult to see ahead.

Interestingly, the reptile was getting dragged to the side more than it was moving forward, almost as if it had been caught in some enormous whirlpool spanning several kilometres.

Percy spotted countless other creatures trapped in the distance, their silhouettes barely larger than ants from his point of view, their Green cores shining like magical specks of dust in his Mana Sense. The poor animals appeared just as powerless as he was. The only difference was that, unlike him and Micky, they hadn’t ended up in this situation by choice.

‘About three hundred Green beasts… and that’s just what’s visible from here,’ he noted, swallowing hard.

By his estimates, there should be over two thousand Green creatures trapped at this distance from the base of the whirlpool, with many times as many beasts located even deeper. At the rate they were moving, Percy wouldn’t be surprised if they all reached the bottom within the next ten minutes, which meant that the suspected demigod would consume over ten thousand Greens in a single sitting!

The realization caused his host’s blood to freeze in its veins. However, he understood that he didn’t have any time to waste. Especially since he and Micky might end up ejected from the reptile’s mangled body long before it entered the monster’s mouth.

The concentration of the red substance had already been high enough to damage their scales before they reached the whirlpool, and things had only grown even worse since. Carried by the violent currents, the needle-like particles slammed against his host’s exterior, peeling one bloody layer after the

other. Inhaling was pure torture, causing Percy to debate whether he should try and hold his breath for the next few minutes.

That said, his current predicament also presented him with a rather unique opportunity.

Thin streams that looked like they contained more of the strange material than seawater flowed around the dying beasts like glowing ribbons, their spiralling paths effectively tracing the overall shape of the whirlpool itself. Trying to absorb the substance from them directly would be suicide for any Green: or even Blue: creature, but that was fine by Percy.

While he wasn't strong enough to extricate himself from the current entirely, it wasn't impossible for him to navigate the treacherous waters slightly. Consuming some of his host's waning stamina, he swam to the nearest crimson stream, barely allowing his left foreleg to sink into the substance.

The pain caused him to wince as the particles shredded his scales and bit into his muscles, but he knew that he had at least half a minute before his paw was devoured entirely. Even after that happened, he could just push what was left of his amputated limp into the stream, maintaining contact with the material for as long as necessary.

'Better make every second count then,' he thought, reaching into his spatial seal with gritted fangs.

Percy didn't think twice about dumping most of his supplies into the alien ocean. His Harvesters and Cloaks could be replaced in seconds by his main body, and almost everything else was practically worthless when compared to the exotic resource. The only object he couldn't afford to part with was the Zelesian bead, so he made sure to keep his attention on it as he tucked it away in a corner of the warehouse-sized space.

A thick, ruby-like substance quickly appeared inside his spatial seal, filling up the vacuum in mere seconds. This was already the densest, highest-quality version of the material that Percy had encountered on this planet, but he wasn't satisfied with just that.

Using the same trick that allowed him to compress his potions into the next grade: and which he had practiced extensively over the past few years in the hopes that it would eventually help with his artificial advancement: he stirred the contents of his spatial storage into a second, smaller whirlpool.

Fortunately, the needle-like particles appeared to be slightly denser than water, so they were instantly pushed to the walls of the spectral storage: where the Zelesian bead was also kept: increasing the concentration of the material even further.

That came at the cost of lowering its density near the centre of the seal, prompting Percy to pour the water there back into the ocean. At the same time, he drew even more from the deadly stream, slipping it between the centre and the boundaries of his storage device to supplement the whirlpool.

Over the next several minutes, Percy's left foreleg was rapidly reduced to nothing as he ignored the pain to separate as much of the precious material as he could from the water.

By the time he felt that the contents of his seal couldn't get any more concentrated, his host's body was a mangled mess. Even the parts that he hadn't deliberately dipped into the stream had slowly been ravaged by the rest of the giant whirlpool.

Shifting his attention back to the outside world, he noticed that they had moved much closer to the source of the substance. If they had been about five kilometres away before, they were now only three, and they were also moving much faster.

The beasts around them were much closer to one another too. A cursory scan revealed over seven hundred within view, and Percy even caught a glimpse of another batch even deeper, probably having a head-start of a full revolution over his host.

More importantly, however, the previously blurry source of the ruby-like substance had grown more defined.

It looked like what Percy could only describe as a vast mountain range, coiled atop the seabed. Rather than stone or coral, it seemed to be made entirely of the same magical material that had lured everything all the way here, though it shone even more brightly than the ribbon-like streams that had just destroyed his arm.

Reinforcing the small bubbles of water mana that he was using to protect his host's eyes, Percy scanned the strange mountain from end to end, trying to find where the Clear beast was hiding. That continued for a couple of seconds, until a shocking realization hit him:

The whole structure was moving. The colossal mountain range wasn't just the habitat of the quasi-divine beast… it was its body!

Chapter 610: Quasi-divine beast

'Holy fuck, it's huge!' Percy gasped.

He'd expected the creature to be massive, but it appeared that he had still failed to properly imagine its size. The ruby mountain easily stretched for over a kilometre from end to end, though it was admittedly difficult to tell its head apart from its tail.

That remained the case until one side shifted more than the other, a vast cavern appearing seemingly out of nowhere as the monstrous beast opened its maw. Rows of long, curved fangs lined up its colossal jaws, each made of the same material as the creature's exterior.

What Percy could only assume to be a river of mangled Green beasts flooded the giant mouth, disappearing inside the demigod's horrid throat. Three kilometres wasn't that far, but the turbulent current still heavily interfered with Percy's vision, making it difficult to say what was happening with any certainty.

Even so, he could tell that each of the elephant-sized beasts were barely large enough to fill the gaps between the creature's pillar-like fangs. Had Percy been here with his real body, the quasi-divine beast was unlikely to even notice his existence as he got pulverized in its jaws.

'Scary,' Micky said. 'But also good for us. Unless we do something to stand out, it won't spare us a glance. We wouldn't even qualify as a grain of rice, and I bet that this thing is used to eating more than three bowls per day.'

Percy nodded, yet calming down his host's racing heart was still a struggle. That was especially the case a few seconds later, when the creature's bright yellow eyes leisurely brushed over its incoming food: Percy and Micky included. Thankfully, the oppressive gaze didn't linger on them at all.

Trying to gauge the demigod's size, Percy estimated that it should be able to swallow a couple of fully grown Starry Queens standing side-by-side: maybe as many as three or four if it opened its mouth wide and stacked them vertically as well as horizontally: and that was only because most of the beast's bulk was taken by its length rather than its girth.

If the monster had to be described in terms of animals native to Remior, the closest match would be an eel, though the demigod's body wasn't nearly as smooth. It was jagged and bumpy, its colossal scales looking more like mineral deposits than chitinous protrusions.

Long fissures stretched across its serpentine exterior, seemingly functioning as giant vents: or pores, perhaps: that spewed massive plumes of the same ruby-like substance that Percy and Micky had come here to collect.

As they had suspected, the quasi-divine beasts were the source of the substance, though it looked like their connection to the massive whirlpools they used to trap and collect their prey wasn't as straightforward.

Percy could feel the presence of the monster's willpower inside the current, but it was still quite thin, and he doubted that even a demigod could perpetually control such a vast region with its domain alone. It was more likely that the whirlpools already existed, and the eels merely empowered and steered them into fulfilling their own sinister purpose.

'How can they even afford this expenditure?' Micky asked, what remained of their host's eyes jumping across the eel's long body as the Huehuan clearly tried to count how many streams of red were being poured into the water.

That was honestly a great question. The quasi-divine beast required a ridiculous amount of high-quality food to survive, yet didn't appear to mind constantly secreting an equally-absurd volume of the red substance. Percy thought about it for a few seconds before offering his opinion.

'There's no doubt that the material is magical, but if you pay closer attention, it doesn't actually contain that much mana.'

To demonstrate, he pulled a pinch of the concentrated substance that he had filtered and accumulated in his spatial seal, summoning it inside their host's mouth. Then, he scanned it with Mana Sense, sharing the results with Micky. The needle-like particles shimmered in a faint Red colour that would barely qualify as a secondary ingredient when used in alchemy: a far cry from the grade of its source.

It was just speculation, but the substance looked like it was merely a byproduct of the eel devouring and digesting so many powerful beasts. Most of their mana was used to sustain the demigod's colossal body, with the remaining nutrients processed and released into the ocean.

Besides, the quasi-divine beast was clearly able to recycle much of the material: hordes of smaller creatures slowly filtered it out of the water, the larger ones accumulated it by eating their way to Green, and finally, they helpfully delivered it back to their overlords at the moment of their death.

At least, that further explained why the material was concentrated in the red regions instead of being scattered evenly across the planet. In all likelihood, the eels didn't even have to generate much to supplement their losses.

'Fascinating… so this is the true power of the Clear grade,' Percy couldn't help but think.

Admittedly, he'd met gods and even titans before, but neither Nephthys, Phoebe, nor Metatron had had a reason to show him much of their strength. Even the Whites that he had met on Felmara and Thess'kala hadn't openly exerted themselves.

This was different. It was his first time seeing such a powerful creature openly demonstrating its might. Part of that had to do with the fact that the eel couldn't just shrink itself or hide its enormous strength even if it wanted to, but it also clearly had no qualms about throwing its weight around, since it had nothing to fear in this ocean.

At this moment, Percy was certain that even Machaon: the frightening opponent that his main body had spent the past decade tirelessly working to overcome: would easily lose his life if he found himself inside the eel's jaws.

'I wonder if I'll also grow this huge once I reach the Clear grade,' Micky said, clearly just as impressed as Percy.

Percy smiled wryly, suddenly glad that his friend now had the ability to shapeshift into a smaller body. Micky's true size could already get a little inconvenient at times, and he was merely a Green. The thought of flying around Remior while sitting atop the head of a town-sized bird sounded ridiculous.

Then again, they would probably have to deal with that issue when his current familiar grew to that level, as it didn't look like Nephthys's mutations would grant her a similar shapeshifting ability. Fortunately, it would be a while before that became a problem.

'And to think that the weakest god can probably crush dozens of these things without breaking a sweat,' Percy said. 'Do you think true divine beasts are even larger?'

He knew that even a newly promoted deity was supposedly three grades stronger than a demigod. If that translated to a similar size increase, the dragons and phoenixes of Sixiang were bound to be enormous.

'Maybe the power of the Concept realm doesn't manifest in the same manner,' Micky suggested, though he didn't sound very certain of his guess. 'Either way, I wouldn't be surprised if they have a method of compressing their size like I do.'

Percy nodded, suddenly wishing to visit the peak faction one day, and not just because his familiars and fellow aspects might need access to the Elemental Source of the beast affinity that the divine beasts were suspected to possess. Alas, it would probably be a while before that day arrived: if it ever did.

For now, they should leave this place while they still could.

Their host, much like all the other Green beasts in their surroundings, had been reduced to a catatonic state. Its scales had mostly been peeled off, and its body had nearly been flattened by the crushing pressure. Percy struggled to so much as twitch, but the reptile's mutilated muscles weren't the only issue.

The willpower inside the water had grown dangerously thick, holding them in place. The current appeared to flow faster as they spiralled towards the eel. Percy and Micky were still a couple of kilometres away, so they did have some leeway before they reached the previously agreed one-kilometre mark, but there was no reason to risk drawing the leviathan's attention now that they had already saturated the storage seal with the material.

'Send me more phantom mana,' Percy told his main body as he prepared to leave this planet.

It probably wouldn't be necessary, but it wouldn't hurt to have some of his own mana at hand, in case he had to drill his way out of the demigod's domain. His spectral stash was the only tool he would be able to wield after letting go of his host.

As soon as he was ready, he extracted his wisp from the lizard's spectral injuries, not even bothering to leave the stitches intact. Either way, the creature wasn't going to survive this.

Percy apologized to his host for the rough handling, not sure whether the reptile was still capable of hearing or understanding him. In his defence, most of their time on the planet had been peaceful. It was only the last few hours that had been rather unpleasant.

'It's impressive that this guy lived his whole life without ever falling into the eel's trap,' Micky noted as they fled the colossal whirlpool. The potent willpower did offer some resistance, but it was nothing they couldn't handle. 'Pity we had to ruin its streak.'

'It's a pity, but not an accident,' Percy argued.

It looked like most beasts on this planet tended to die in one of two ways: old age or getting eaten: whether by the demigods or the smaller creatures. At the very least, it didn't seem like starvation or freezing to death were serious problems here.

Getting eaten was admittedly countless times more common than surviving the eels' machinations for centuries to reach the end of one's lifespan, but Percy and Micky would have inevitably selected one of those rare outliers to possess, since they had needed an intact body.

'Indeed,' Micky conceded with a mental sigh as they finally escaped the planet, disappearing into the infinite darkness.