Wanderer 108

Chapter 108: Starry Knight

With a violent snap of its mandibles, the knight tore nearly halfway through the clone's torso, before slamming him against the wall. Nesha stepped back, seemingly about to run away, when Percy stopped her.

"DON'T!" he yelled, not leaving room for debate.

Putting aside whether they could outrun the creature, they couldn't risk diving back into the sea of bugs behind them. The knight could easily set the whole colony off!

No, there was only one way out, and it was past the beast!

The monster lunged towards them, its pillar-like legs punching craters in their wake, the rocky protrusions sticking out of the tunnel's surfaces barely hindering its advance.

Out of time, Percy swung his right hand, launching the Parting Gift. A faint distortion passed through the air, spinning towards the bug. He'd poured everything in the attack, not leaving even a drop behind for Soul Vision. He'd have used Circulation too if he had a few more seconds.

KREEEEEE!!!

The bug let out an otherworldly screech – even louder than before – as the invisible sickle found its mark, landing between its eyes. Percy counted his lucky stars that the narrow tunnel had robbed the knight of its greatest strength – its agility. He assumed he'd have never managed to hit it outdoors. Not if it was any faster than the soldiers, just as they were quicker than the workers.

Missing a step, the monster stumbled on the ground, though its momentum continued to carry it forward at a dangerous speed. Thinking on his feet, Percy shoved Nesha against the wall, leaping towards the opposite one himself, hoping they'd fit in the gaps by the bug's sides.

'Micky!!! Use Circulation!!! NOW!!!'

The impact shook him, though he'd made sure to absorb all of it with his body, still cognisant of the crow in his arms. Though that was only the beginning of his struggle, as the knight's limp frame finally reached him, pushing him against the hard stone. Percy instinctively pressed both knees and elbows against the wall, desperate to leave enough space for Micky. He felt all his bones creak and crack as the rough carapace of the giant wasp peeled a layer of skin off his back.

"AAAAAAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGGHHHHH!!!!" he screamed, enduring the pain as he did everything in his power to keep both himself and his familiar alive.

Eventually, the wasp came to rest about halfway past him. Its body still pressed against his own, though the weight was more bearable now that it wasn't moving. Well, for a while at least…

Suddenly, the creature spasmed, sending a wave of force through him.

'It's still alive!' Percy realized in horror.

His Parting Gift had never failed before – at least not when he managed to land it. Then again, a two-grade gap was probably too much to bridge, especially without Circulation.

The creature cried and squirmed, each tiny movement slamming into Percy with the force of a charging ram. He had no idea if Nesha had survived, but he didn't have the luxury to worry about her now.

Taking advantage of the pauses between the bug's pained jolts, he crawled against the wall, ignoring his protesting limbs, trying to reach the rear of the creature before it recovered completely.

'Faster…' he thought as its spasms grew more frequent.

It was fortunate it lacked the awareness to attack him on purpose, as he doubted he'd survive any deliberate blows. Yet he understood it was just a matter of time until his luck ran out…

He inhaled as much air as he could with every chance the creature gave him. His efforts stung, as a broken rib seemed to have pierced his lung, slowing down the process. At least, the extreme density of mana in the air helped, letting him slowly refill his cores despite the obstacles.

A few seconds later, he found some space beneath the wasp's abdomen, finally letting him stretch his limbs a little. However, a new issue had arisen, giving him pause. Glinting by the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the bug's stinger. The lethal weapon was longer than a lance, thick droplets of purple dripping from its tip.

SSSSSS

A pool had already formed beneath it, and the acid seemed even more potent than that of the soldiers. Percy was standing a few steps away, yet the scarce vapor alone was enough to make his eyes burn and water, leaving an acrid aftertaste at the back of his throat.

Did you know this story is from Royal Road? Read the official version for free and support the author.

Just as he was contemplating how to best bypass it, the knight suddenly lashed out with a hindleg, sending him bouncing against the wall, before tumbling down a few metres behind it.

COUGH, COUGH

Percy's coughs were wet, and his body felt like it had been stomped on by a herd of buffalos.

'At least I'm alive…' he reasoned, before registering that the bug had kindly helped him around the pool of acid. 'Thanks for that!'

Even better, a quick glance revealed that Micky was ok. Rattled, yes, but otherwise unharmed. It was more than he could say about…

'Shit! Nesha!'

Only now did he remember his companion, scanning his surroundings for her. Luckily, he didn't have to look far, as he found her sitting by a wall nearby, having also managed to escape the bug's clutches somehow.

He was about to call out to her, when he noticed her condition. She had a hand pressed against her right temple, a stream of red seeping through her fingers. One of her eyes was closed, the other sporting a vacant gaze. There were several more cuts and bruises throughout her body, though her blood was mixed with a different liquid. A green one.

'Wasp blood?'

Percy recognized it, having encountered it countless times while hunting. There was no mistaking it, as it gleamed in a brighter shade than his clone's vomit.

A piercing screech reminded him they weren't out of the woods quite yet, as the knight had stood up again, and it was trying to turn around.

Breathing faster, Percy hoped to activate Circulation in time. The boosting art put a strain on one's body – which wasn't an issue for him normally – but his current state made everything a challenge.

'Synchronization is definitely out of the question…' he noted, as he watched the wasp claw some extra space out of the walls so it could turn.

That was when Percy spotted some nasty gashes by its side, a bright green liquid oozing out of its exoskeleton.

'It's injured!'

Checking Nesha's core with Mana Sense, he saw it was empty. She'd probably used everything she had to extricate herself from the creature, wounding it in the process.

The bug finally managed to orient itself, its compound eyes locking onto Percy, sending a shiver down his spine.

‘I suppose it’ll have to do.’ he thought as a silver maelstrom came to life underneath his skin.

He hadn’t bothered to use his second core, as he knew the pure mana wouldn’t even put a dent on the knight’s carapace. Plus, Percy’s body couldn’t handle another round of boosting right now.

Placing Micky on the ground, he briefly considered asking him to help. Though he quickly shot the idea down. While the crow was in a better state than him, it didn’t have anything in its arsenal that would make a difference here. It wouldn’t even be able to fly properly inside the narrow tunnel. Realising it was all up to him, he manifested two silver sickles, each larger than the one before.

The bug was about to charge towards him, but Percy wouldn’t give it the chance to pick up speed a second time. Unleashing both of his weapons, he watched as they stabbed his opponent’s soul. It had clearly learned its lesson, however, jerking its head at the last second to ensure only one of the constructs landed on it, letting the other hit its torso. The projectiles definitely hurt.

Still, the monstrosity simply refused to collapse. It lashed erratically against the tunnel with everything it had – limbs, stinger and mandibles – causing chunks of stone larger than Percy’s head to fall all over the place.

The young man had no choice but to jump around, while keeping an eye out for Nesha and Micky both, ready to intercept a rock with a blast of cyan if he had to. At the same time, he rushed to replenish his soul mana, preparing to hit the wasp again.

But it wasn’t going down that easily, it seemed. Snapping out of its frenzy sooner than last time, it crawled towards Percy, hell-bent on chomping down the annoying pests that dared to injure it.

Percy wanted to run. Unlike before, the exit was behind him. Still, he was in a worse shape than the creature. It would definitely catch up. Besides, he couldn’t leave the others at its mercy.

“Then… Just DIE already!!!” he yelled, launching another sickle with what mana he’d managed to recover.

It hit, but the wasp kept coming.

“DIE!!” he threw one more, draining his channels out too, bringing him right out of Circulation.

This one halted the knight’s movements, causing it to fall to its side, the impact sending a shockwave through the cavern. Yet, the horror wasn’t quite over, as the bug’s limbs twitched just moments later, letting it resume its march.

“JUST…!! FUCKING…!!DIE…!!!”

The young man screamed between strained breaths, resorting to random blobs of pure mana that splattered harmlessly against the creature. Naturally, they did nothing.

Looming over him, the wasp looked like it was about to pounce, when someone interfered…

‘My clone!’

Percy had written the soldier off, as he was in the worst condition out of everyone in the tunnel. By far. His upper body was barely held together by a few scant shards of chitin. Though that hadn’t been enough to put the clone out of commission, apparently.

Having waited for the knight to walk right over him, he bit at one of its legs, hugging it tightly. Then, he plunged his stinger right into the wound Nesha had inflicted, pumping the monster’s carapace full of acid.

Screeching in agony once more, the Green bug stomped on the clone’s head with a different leg, this time crushing it directly. It only took a moment for the soul fragment to slam into Percy, flooding his mind with memories. The young man forcefully brushed them aside, however. This wasn’t the time to sort them out.

Having exhausted all his trump cards, Percy stared at the beast, his expression grim. He knew he couldn’t retreat another step. Nesha was right behind him. Tightening his grip around a half-formed sickle, he prepared for his final stand against the bug.

Satisfied with its handiwork, the knight tossed the broken clone aside, turning back toward Percy. It opened its jaw wide, sending a rain of spittle at him. Man and insect looked each other in the eyes, both keenly aware that only one of them would survive.

‘At best…’