Wanderer 109

Chapter 109: Regal intent

The knight's mandibles opened wide, preparing to chomp the pesky human in half. Reading his adversary's intentions via Soul Vision, the young man was ready to crouch beneath the monster at a moment's notice, clenching the half-formed sickle tightly in his fist.

Yet just as they were about to clash, something strange happened. The beast's body suddenly relaxed, its expression easing.

'Now what?!'

At first, Percy thought it was an act. A ruse to get him to drop his guard. But he doubted the creature was that smart. Besides, it didn't really need to trick him to end this. Honestly, his odds of surviving the frontal assault of the elephant-sized beast were abysmal. More importantly, he could see the wasp's bloodlust had all but evaporated, not finding any trace of hostility in its soul.

'Who cares?!'

Whatever the reason was, he wouldn't waste his chance. Swinging his weapon at the knight's face, he gouged another deep wound into its soul. What was it, the sixth now?

An advantage of fighting in close range was that he could more easily maintain his constructs. A chunk of it still crumbled away, but he needed less mana to repair it than to form a new one, soon delivering another strike after the first.

No reaction.

For some reason, the towering monster that had savagely fought to slaughter them all just minutes ago was now standing motionless, eating Percy's attacks with no intention of fighting back.

'Has it lost consciousness or something?' he wondered, as the silver maelstrom finally formed within his torso once more.

Yet, just when he was about to redouble his efforts to slay the knight, another change occurred. A spark of intelligence suddenly flashed inside its compound eyes, gazing at the young man not with hatred or hunger, but curiosity.

Percy shivered, leaping backwards by instinct.

He knew his best course of action was to continue hacking at the monster, but his body refused to listen, a primal wave of terror now coursing through it. Somehow, the bug's pensive look was even more frightening than its previous demeanour.

But the wasp didn't stop there. Tilting its head, it unleashed a suffocating aura inside the narrow corridor. Physically, nothing happened – Percy didn't need to use Mana Sense to see the colourful motes dancing through the air like before, many of them flowing towards him. The bug hadn't moved an inch from its spot either…

Still, he couldn't help but feel like he was stuck in amber, as a palpable presence flooded the cavern, holding him in place. No Green beast should be able to exert this kind of tangible authority!

This… it felt almost regal!

'Shit.'

It appeared the Starry Queen had taken notice of their actions! Percy had no clue why she had stopped the knight from killing him, or why she seemed intent on capturing them alive… and honestly, he wasn't interested in finding out.

Summoning every shred of willpower, he fought to twitch his thumb, eventually managing to point it towards his palm. Then, he pushed some soul mana through it, extending a sharp point off its tip.

"AAAAARRRRGGGHHHH!!!"

The pain was immense. But it worked. Gritting his teeth, he intensified his breaths as he formed another sickle in his right hand, still stabbing himself with his left.

“GO TO HELL ALREADY!!!” he yelled, dashing towards the creature.

It raised two forelimbs to stop him, though Percy saw its reaction coming from a mile away. He didn’t know if the previous damage had slowed the wasp’s movements, or if it was the queen’s control over her subject that was clumsy, but it worked in his favour either way.

Crouching beneath the knight’s legs, he slid underneath its carapace, as he relied on his momentum to slice a long line through its soul. If a dozen small attacks weren’t enough to take it down, Percy would have to go big!

The rough floor of the tunnel further shredded his already injured back, but he didn’t let the pain dull his offensive.

The sickle’s edge met a lot of resistance – it was like trying to chop a tree with a rusty axe – but Percy wasn’t deterred. He kept flooding his weapon with mana, as his core and channels emptied again, bringing him out of Circulation a second time.

In the end, the construct shattered right around the wasp’s sternum, Percy’s body coming to a halt not much further. He wasn’t sure if that had been enough, but he knew he shouldn’t remain in that spot either way. Kicking against a rocky protrusion, he rolled to the side, colliding violently against the wall.

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And just in time too…

BOOOOOOOOOOOM

With a deafening sound, the heavy carapace of the colossal bug fell limp on the floor, countless cracks spreading out from the impact.

Instinctively, Percy wanted to hold his breath until the results came in, though he knew the fastest way to check if the beast was alive was to gather enough mana for Soul Vision. And a few seconds later, he had his answer…

He finally exhaled in relief, plopping back onto a hard crystal. It hurt a bit, but not as much as everything else. Still, Percy ignored his protesting body, pushing himself up. There was no time to waste. Limping towards Nesha, he placed two fingers on her neck, checking for a pulse. It was faint, but she was alive.

'Not for much longer though.'

Luckily, he had the means to save her. Reaching for the spatial amulet around his neck…

'No. No-no-no-no-no!' his heart skipped a beat upon realizing it wasn't there. 'Shit! Where is it?!?!'

The artifact contained everything! From the two years' worth of ingredients he'd painstakingly accumulated, to the healing potions he needed to save his partner's life. Hell, without them, he wasn't sure he'd be in any condition to escape the tunnel himself, before the queen sent her troops after him.

Percy scanned his surroundings, looking for the pendant. He had to find it. And he had to do it fast! He still wasn't sure what the queen wanted from him. Perhaps she had seen how useful Circulation was, or maybe she just wanted to kill him personally.

Either way, the sea of bugs they had left behind was only a few hours away, and that was assuming there weren't any other nearby tunnels filled with the darn things. It didn't take a genius to guess they were probably all heading their way already.

'It all depends on when I dropped it…'

Had it happened back when the wasps were crawling all over them, there would be no retrieving it. His only hope was to have lost it during the fight with the knight. But the odds of that being the case were swiftly fading as he failed to spot it anywhere around him.

'Maybe it's under the corpse…'

The only thing more difficult than walking back to the knight was lifting its oversized carcass. Percy's limbs were already purple and swollen. Even the slightest exertion resulted in a series of popping sounds all over his body. Still, he persisted, knowing he wasn't getting out of here without that amulet.

Reactivating Circulation was torture. To make matters worse, a single application didn't seem to be enough. Gritting his teeth, he pushed as much mana into his channels as his body could handle, eventually managing to budge the knight slightly.

'This thing must weigh half a dozen tons…'

It took everything he had and then some, only to roll the body a couple inches to the side. Percy was starting to lose all hope when he finally caught a glimpse of a dark object about a metre to his left.

"HAHAHAHA!!!" he laughed like a madman, his sheer joy giving him the strength to lift the carapace just a little more.

"Micky!! Grab it! FAST!"

The bird didn't need to be told twice, eagerly fluttering towards the artifact, happy to finally be useful. Percy hadn't had the time to think about it earlier, but he knew the crow had felt guilty letting him fight on his own, unable to help.

Only after the familiar retrieved the pendant did Percy lower the corpse again, falling back weakly. Micky then brought him the object, as he wasn't in any condition to move.

Confirming that it wasn't damaged, the young man stuck his thumb on one of the cube's faces, releasing three brief pulses of pure mana. He didn't know if these enchantments worked with every affinity, but they certainly did with his.

The cube emitted a satisfying sound, before expanding severalfold, reaching the size of a crate. The same side he had just tapped then opened, revealing a stash of tools and vials within. Most of them contained a turquoise liquid, but those weren't the ones he needed.

“There!” he exclaimed, clumsily pulling a handful of green potions out.

Sadly, he hadn’t bought too many of them – only a couple dozen. Given the state of their injuries, he wasn’t sure they’d suffice. Nesha was at Yellow and the potions had grown less effective on him too, ever since his second core advanced.

‘If only I had known…’ he smiled bitterly.

But he couldn’t have. Not about the Divine Root forcing them to leave two years in advance, and not about the Starry Knight beating them within an inch of their life. He shook his head. There was no point regretting things he couldn’t change, nor any time for it.

Uncorking three of the vials in quick succession, he quickly guzzled their contents down, hoping they’d fix him up enough to move.

‘I’ll only drink more if Nesha doesn’t need them.’

His wounds itched as the potions took effect, though it was modest as expected. Still, he did feel a little better about a minute later, able to move his limbs again. Making his way to his companion, he soon panicked upon seeing how pale she was, her skin cold as ice. Lifting her chin, he helped her swallow potion after potion, only pausing after the sixth one.

“Come on…” he muttered, biting his lip.

Scanning her intently, he saw many of her wounds begin to close, though that didn’t seem to be enough. She didn’t regain consciousness either. He fed her another four potions, drinking a few more himself. Finally, her injuries faded away, as did his own.

‘She’s still not waking up!’

Turning Soul Vision on, he examined her again. She was right on the verge – bad enough that he could probably possess her if he wanted, though not completely beyond the pale. He did have a few more potions, though this wasn't something life mana could fix.

'But I can!'

Pouring all his soul mana into her, he did mend the injuries slightly. Given enough time, he should be able to heal her completely. Yet time was the one commodity they were swiftly running out of. He could speed things up with Circulation, but his own soul wasn't exactly healthy either…

'The knight!' he remembered.

With Micky's help, the colossal carcass could provide them all the soul mana they needed, and then some. The only problem was getting through its hard exoskeleton. Neither his pure constructs nor Micky's talons could pierce it. Examining the corpse, Percy's gaze briefly lingered on the wound Nesha had inflicted. However, his clone had filled it with acid, rendering it too dangerous for the crow.

Then there was the soldier's body too, but it was a lower grade. It had also died even earlier, and more thoroughly. There wouldn't be anything left…

"Micky!" Percy called to his familiar, thinking of something.

"CAW?" the bird gave him a questioning look.

"I need your help, but you aren't going to like it."

"CAW! CAW!" Micky replied resolutely, eager to contribute however he could.

"Go into the knight's mouth and eat its soul from inside."