Wanderer 110

Chapter 110: Devourer

The crow remained silent, staring at the young man as if he had lost his mind.

“Please buddy… Can you do this for me?”

Micky looked back and forth between Percy and the carcass a few times, seemingly pondering the request. Eventually, he begrudgingly hopped towards the bug, resigned to his fate. Pushing a mandible open with his talon, he crouched inside the gaping maw, disappearing into the dead knight’s horrid throat.

Letting his familiar do his thing, the young man turned to Nesha again, watching her with bated breath. Luckily, he didn’t have to wait long. Soon, a flood of soul mana gushed through the connection, filling up his frame. It was a lot. Too much, even.

Without missing a beat, he poured everything into the girl, until she couldn’t handle another drop. Both his and her wounds greedily drank the tonic as fast as they could, though more kept rushing in, forcing him to spill it out of his pores. It was a waste, but he couldn’t help it. The two remained like that for several minutes, their frames saturated with mana, slowly but steadily patching them up.

“Please work…” he whispered, not knowing if anyone could hear him.

Well, Nesha seemed to. Her eyelids twitched, before she finally opened her eyes weakly. Regaining their lustre, her pupils darted around a little, before locking onto Percy. She blinked a few times, and then spoke.

“Have you seen my glasses?”

The young man was taken aback by the question. Instinctively, he shook his head. While the sturdy amulet had survived the violent fight, he doubted the glasses would be equally lucky. They hadn’t packed any spares either.

‘At least we have some extra clothes…’

That was when Percy jerked his head away, only now registering their bodies were barely covered. Nesha looked confused for a second, though her cheeks lit up with a rosy tint a moment later. Sifting through the cube, the young man handed her a fresh change, before wearing another pair of trousers himself. He was out of shirts, however, so he’d have to go around bare chested for the time being.

‘Another thing I would have bought if we had more time.’ he sighed.

Percy stood before helping Nesha up too.

“Let’s go. We barely have an hour to get the fuck out of here. If we’re lucky.”

“What about the knight? What happened?” Nesha asked, looking around.

Soon, she saw the giant wasp – it was kinda hard to miss – her body visibly tensing at the sight. A couple seconds passed before she found the courage to approach it, to examine it more closely, her poor eyesight not doing her any favours. Realizing it was dead, her expression twisted into an odd blend of shock and relief, as she turned to Percy, clearly ready to unleash a barrage of questions.

“Later.” he dismissed with a wave, before calling out to his familiar.

‘Come on Micky. You did great buddy, but we’ve got to go now.’

No response. Percy waited a moment before trying again.

‘Micky?’

‘…CAW…’ the bird finally replied, though it sounded odd. Lethargic perhaps or… bloated?

Considering a possibility, the colour drained from Percy’s face.

‘Don’t tell me…’

The familiar sent him a series of images, confirming his fears. It was eating a path through the wasp’s flesh, when it spotted something glowing in the darkness. It was an orb thrumming in an intense amber colour – Green through Mana Sense. Unable to resist, the bird pecked at it and… it wasn’t hard to guess what happened next…

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‘Here?! Now?!’ Percy panicked, though in hindsight, he should have seen this coming.

He’d already known the crow would overtake him sooner or later, and it HAD spent the last three years stuffing its face full of Orange and Yellow cores. Dozens of them per day, even. It would’ve been stranger if the knight’s core hadn’t pushed it over the edge. Still… □

“Nesha!” he shouted, startling the poor girl. “Change of plans. I have to stay here a while longer… But we can’t have you wait with me.”

“W-What? Why? What?!”

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking of the best way to explain it.

“Keep heading down the tunnel until you reach the end. Don’t worry about losing the way, it’s just a straight path towards the exit – there aren’t any more forks. Once you get there, you’ll find yourself at a dead end.”

“A dead end?!” Nesha asked in horror.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. It should only be around a dozen metres from the surface. We never finished digging the tunnel, because we hadn’t expected to escape from the Guild so soon. My plan was to have the wasp dig us out, though that isn’t an option anymore…”

Percy gestured at his broken clone, whose memories he was still suppressing.

“In any case, you’re a Yellow. I’m sure you can dig us out with a few spells.” he explained.

“What about you?”

“I’ll meet you as soon as I can. But you need to get a move on. We won’t have enough time to expand the tunnel later, so I’m counting on you to get it done by then.”

The girl stared at him in silence for a couple seconds, letting his words sink in. Percy could practically see the questions bubbling up but, understanding the urgency of the situation, she didn’t voice them. In the end, she simply nodded, before placing her hand by the wall to orient herself, heading off. Only then did Percy turn back towards the carcass.

‘Well, Micky… Whatever you’re doing, just hurry up…’

Activating Mana Sense, he examined the dead knight, observing his familiar’s advancement. The wasp’s body itself was now void of mana – whatever had remained in its channels was already gone, its core consumed. The crow was the only thing still visible within Percy’s sixth sense. The carapace did obscure it slightly, but a core’s advancement was a difficult thing to hide.

Micky’s entire silhouette shone in a vibrant Orange colour. His core burned a shade brighter, filled with strands of Yellow twisting and rolling within. More of them appeared each second, as they joined and banded together in a familiar manner.

‘Not fast enough…’

Thinking of something, Percy walked to his clone’s remains, picking a broken chunk off the ground. The gruesome piece of flesh was tough to identify, but he was almost sure it contained the creature’s core. Scanning it, he confirmed it was indeed there, though more than half had already crumbled, the rest of it dim.

‘Oh well. Every little helps.’ he shrugged, tossing it into the knight’s mouth.

The bird complained of course – it didn’t exactly have room for dessert – though it ultimately acquiesced, probably recognizing through Percy’s tone he wasn’t in the mood for nonsense. As expected, the extra push increased the pressure in Micky’s sternum, forcing the strands to fuse faster. The young man estimated it would be done in a couple minutes.

Sadly, their time had already run out.

Everything shook, from the shimmering crystals filled with mana, to the colourful ores lodged in the cavern’s walls, to the corpses of the two bugs, all the way to Percy’s very bones. Feeling the vibrations coursing through him, he could tell the army of insects was already upon them, his body oozing cold sweat. Then, he heard their wings. There were countless of them, their incessant buzzing echoing through the vast cavern, growing louder by the second.

Looking at the carcass again, Percy saw it shrivel and sink, as Micky had already moved to the second phase of his advancement, his core shining in a bright Yellow. Honestly, the young man was tempted to grab the bird right then and there, getting the hell out while he still could.

‘No, I don’t know what happens if a beast doesn’t get the food it needs after evolving…’

He had no idea if they’d find enough outside. They might even run into other problems there. Unwilling to place his familiar at risk, he allowed him to continue devouring the Starry Knight, turning its flesh into his own. Percy’s heart did ache a little at the sight, as he couldn’t help but imagine the Green clone he could have crafted out of the corpse. But that was just a pipe dream – he hadn’t had the luxury of taking it easy on the creature to leave its body intact, nor to spend hours using his bloodline inside the hive.

‘Feeding it to Micky was the best use for it…’

Shaking the distracting thoughts out of his mind, he took a deep breath and then another, drawing the shimmering motes into both cores, preparing to fight.

The first bugs to appear were the workers. While the wasps grew faster with each grade, that was provided they were free to fly. Within the tight walls of the hive, a different dynamic manifested.

Nothing above Orange had enough space to stretch its wings, so this wave of insects was the quickest to reach him.

Gritting his teeth, Percy formed a sickle in each hand, as two sets of glowing lines lit up underneath his skin. But he didn't stop there. Now that he'd managed to heal his flesh and soul both, he pushed the boosting arts to their very limits, as his muscles bulged and his skin reddened, a twin halo of cyan and silver shrouding his frame. Next, he poured even more mana into his weapons, sharpening them and growing them another touch, as he stared intently at the depths of the tunnel ahead.

And finally, the dense river of fox-sized wasps appeared, rushing him in all their maddened fury, as Percy pounced into the swarm, determined to survive…