Wanderer 49

Chapter 49: Frozen expanse

Snow covered the ground below like a white blanket. Percy was standing on a steeply inclined surface – a boulder or something.

‘This world must have harsh winters.’

Not used to looking at everything sideways, he climbed down from the rock. He noticed his host didn’t weigh much, their feet not sinking very deep, their steps barely leaving some shallow prints.

‘Good. Let’s not attract any predators so soon.’

Examining his surroundings, he realized his host wasn’t the only unlucky lizard. Countless more geckos stood motionless all around him, having met the same fate. Either some extinction level event had occurred in this region, or it was normal for his species to go through cycles of freezing and thawing with the seasons.

‘Oh well… You don’t mind me eating their cores, do you?’ he asked his new pal.

Percy had already experienced some of the lizard’s memories. He’d watched his host devour its own siblings, so he doubted it cared. That said, he figured it was polite to ask.

No reply.

Shrugging, he activated Mana Sense, noting most of the creatures were not only still alive, but also at Orange like him. Approaching the nearest one, he dug its core out with his claws, before swallowing it whole.

‘It didn’t even taste that bad.’

Normally, Percy wasn't a huge fan of raw meat, especially when frozen solid. That said, his new tastebuds appeared to have a thing for blood-flavoured snow. Another pleasant surprise soon followed. A burst of mana was released in their stomach, warming them up. This was finally enough to elicit a satisfied reaction from his host. Although, the timid lizard quickly faded to the background again, happy to let Percy do all the work.

'It's that passive attitude that screwed you up in the first place.' Percy reprimanded the gecko, before moving to the next statue.

He had no idea how close the lizard was to advancing, but it wouldn't take that long to eat all the cores. It was a bit of a gamble but – if he got lucky – he'd have a much easier time travelling at Yellow. As he continued slaughtering one gecko after the other, a strange thought crossed his mind. The lizards looked rather similar to what one could find on Remior, making him wonder whether he'd even left his world.

A quick glance at the sky gave him his answer.

'Never mind. Definitely a coincidence.'

There was only one sun – its colour unknown – but that was where the similarities ended. Percy counted as many as 17 moons of various sizes, and guessed there should be more that weren't visible right now. And those were just the semi-intact ones. Many more broken, irregular chunks of stone littered the sky, making it look like a cosmic cesspit.

'I wonder what the story is there. Did they just collide against each other, or did somebody do this?'

The mere thought sent shivers down Percy's reptilian spine. He had no idea if a god was even capable of such a feat, and he'd rather not find out. He wasn't keen on meeting a being capable of tossing moons around like pebbles. After all, what else would such an existence be capable of? Detecting souls, maybe?

Eager to get the hell out of this world, he picked up the pace, guzzling down one core after another, uncaring about the lizard genocide he was committing. Of course, he still had to take frequent breaks, to digest the mana every time his body reached saturation. While he couldn't devour the geckos' souls like Micky, the beast mana contained in their cores still accumulated rapidly after eating so many in quick succession.

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‘This is the most boring clone I’ve ever made.’ he thought as he sat on the snow waiting once more.

It had been several hours since he managed to thaw his host, and he’d already consumed hundreds of cores in that time. The sun had set too, but luckily his eyes turned out less useless than expected, as they appeared to possess some level of night vision. Percy’s core was still at Orange, although more than two thirds of the lizards remained. At his current rate, it would take him another day to finish the rest.

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‘Hopefully it won’t be a waste of time.’

His fear wasn’t the only thing rushing him. Given the relatively good condition of his body coupled with the ungodly amount of soul mana he had used to patch it up, he was confident he could easily survive for a week or two.

However, sending out clones was a zero-sum game. Every day he spent here meant delaying the next clone by just as much. Consequently, if there was nothing of value on this world, it was in his best interest to leave early.

‘Let’s not dilly dally then.’

Standing up, he walked to the next lizard, about to resume his feast. Not that he had much of an appetite left. While the first dozen or so had tasted alright, he’d grown sick after spending the whole afternoon stuffing his face full of them. Also, the statues looked much creepier at night. Either way, he never got the chance to take another bite, as he saw movement off the corner of his eye.

‘What the fuck is that?!’ he thought, as a wave of primal terror overcame his host.

A massive shape was slithering some distance away, its pale colour barely discernible against the frozen expanse. Much like the geckos, the serpent also vaguely reminded Percy of something he might encounter on Remior, but it was his first time seeing a snake covered in fur.

‘Shit. It’s at Green.’

He had no idea how large his host was compared to a human, but the abomination appeared colossal to his current eyes, its girth four times his own. As for its length, it was impossible to estimate as it zigged and zagged through the army of statues, swallowing them whole, one after the other.

‘What do I do?!’

Percy briefly considered playing dead.

A moment later he realized how idiotic the idea was. Even if the snake somehow missed the trail of footprints behind him, the thick stench of blood coming from him or his elevated body temperature, it certainly couldn’t miss the sea of mana coursing through his channels. But more importantly, the serpent clearly wouldn’t stop until it devoured every last one of his kin. Whether he stood still or not, his end would be the same.

‘Oh well. Worst case scenario it eats me.’

Out of options and without much to lose, Percy waited for the snake to look the other way before sprinting as if his life depended on it – which it did. He didn’t even dare to look back, only using Mana Sense half a minute later to check if the monster was in hot pursuit.

It wasn’t.

Only then did he stop, turning around. The snake was still busy eating the other geckos a few hundred meters away.

‘What, am I not tasty enough for you, you bastard?!’

Percy wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or offended. He was certain the creature had noticed him, but it hadn’t bothered giving chase. Then again, it wasn’t that surprising. Why waste time going after the lone survivor when it had a veritable feast laid out in front of it?

‘I doubt it would be willing to share though.’

Perhaps the serpent didn’t care much about a single gecko slipping away, but it was probably not going to take too kindly to him returning.

‘Great! All those hours wasted!’

Frustrated, Percy entertained the thought of going back to confront the snake. He knew he was no match for a Yellow beast, let alone a Green one, so he’d definitely die. That said, ending this farce a moment sooner might be his best course of action right now.

But he shook his head.

He realized he’d been spoiled by his past clones' successes. His current situation was likely more indicative of what he should expect going forward. The odds of stumbling upon a treasure trove every time weren't high, so giving up after the first setback would be unwise.

‘Let's wander around for another day or two. If I can't find anything interesting, I'll leave.’

As for what "something interesting" might be, he wasn't sure. He guessed he'd know when he found it. Perhaps a potent life source for his second core, another cluster of frozen lizards he could eat, a village of sentient lifeforms, or any other rare treasure might qualify.

SCREEEEEEEEEEEE

Just as Percy made up his mind, a loud screech caused him to tilt his head up. The only thing he managed to see was a shadow blotting out the sky.

SNAP

He didn’t even get the chance to examine it with Mana Sense, before an elongated maw snapped shut around his head. At least it didn’t hurt, the pain not yet registering, as his face rolled inside something slimy, before plunging into a pungent swamp. And with that, his vision faded to black, an irresistible force prying him out of the gecko’s flesh, bringing his third adventure to an abrupt end.

‘Worst. Clone. Ever.’