Wanderer 100

Chapter 100: Into the Spire

Percy's adventure hit a roadblock sooner than expected.

Upon stepping inside the massive stem, the buzz in his head grew a dozen times louder, eliciting a visceral response from his host. Jolted awake from its stupor, the bug fought for control over its body. Driven purely by instinct, it quickly turned and stumbled back out, only calming once the headache subsided to a bearable level.

'What's going on?!'

Unwilling to retreat so easily, Percy steeled himself before entering the Spire again, more prepared this time. The bug really didn't want to be there, but the clone resisted as much as he could, determined to press onward.

Venturing further, he noticed the tunnel expanded after a few more steps, making it a little less cramped. Contrary to his expectations, it was quite bright in there, the flesh of the fungus glowing more vividly than the cap outside, giving the walls of the living cavern an otherworldly appearance. The air was thick with shimmering motes too – three or four times denser than on the surface.

'I suppose that makes sense. What we get is just whatever leaks out of the mushrooms.'

Sadly, his host soon rebelled again, pulling him towards the exit. Reluctantly, Percy let it have its way this time. He couldn't afford to push too hard, lest he got evicted.

'How are the others able to remain there?'

Though his stay had been brief, Percy had glimpsed a couple more Starry Workers – the same class as his host – grazing comfortably inside the mushroom, basking in the mana-rich environment. The rumours that the hive's interior was teeming with wasps appeared true. More importantly, the rest of the creatures showed no sign of suffering from his host's ailment.

‘Do they not hear this incessant buzzing?’

Perhaps it wasn’t a natural phenomenon. There might be some intelligence behind the scenes, imposing its will on only some of the bugs – for some reason. And it didn’t take a genius to figure out its source…

‘The queen must be real too!’

Though he couldn’t tell for certain, he felt it was a reasonable guess. Even regular wasp colonies were highly hierarchical, let alone one as large and powerful as this. And there was no telling what a Violet cored beast might be capable of. Much like he used his ethereal cords to communicate with his clones and familiars from afar, it was possible the queen had her own means to relay her orders from a distance.

As for what those orders might involve? Well, most of her subjects were apparently meant to stay inside, taking advantage of the abundant resources. Percy’s host, on the other hand, presumably belonged in the minority tasked with venturing outside, to gather what little mana strayed there.

‘Isn’t there a way to get this idiot to disobey her?!’

Percy would be damned if he lost to a couple of insects. He spent the next couple of hours ‘negotiating’ with the creature, trying to get through to it. That was easier said than done, as it was arguably the dumbest host he’d ever had the misfortune of possessing.

‘Well, what did I expect? It’s a bug...’

Yet, as simple-minded as it was, the wasp seemed hell-bent on following its mother’s will above all else. Approaching the problem from various angles, Percy started by trying to filter the buzz out of their head, hoping to eliminate it entirely. Unfortunately, there was a limit to how much he could tamper with his host’s senses. Next, he attempted to convince the bug its hive was under attack, its mother in danger. Perhaps it might be more open to breaking a rule or two in the face of an emergency.

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‘Or not…’

Initially, his efforts bore no fruit. Eventually, he thought of a way to take advantage of his mental connection to the creature, which seemed to yield some results. Essentially, Percy fed the bug memories of the buzzing sound whenever it did something he disagreed with, to dissuade it. It was the equivalent of impersonating the queen, establishing a second line of command.

‘Yes. Go back inside, or I’ll be very, very angry!’

The wasp was really confused. While Percy’s fake signal appeared to work as well as the real thing, it wasn’t like the queen had stopped transmitting her own. Torn between two ruthless rulers, the bug kept walking back and forth, entering and leaving the cave repeatedly, unable to comprehend why its mother was so hard to please today. Some more manipulation later, Percy convinced the creature to remain inside, though he knew they wouldn’t get very far before he lost control again.

‘Let’s move fast then.’

Finally delving a little deeper, Percy couldn’t help but stare at his surroundings in awe. The tunnel they were in kept getting wider and wider, as the population of wasps didn’t stop increasing. Most of them were workers like his host. Percy guessed the fungi on the upper levels contained more mana, making them more suitable for the higher grades.

Though he did spot the occasional drone or soldier. Admittedly, the first Yellow cored insect he saw frightened him. While he could easily handle them with his own body, he couldn’t do much in his current state. The fact they looked larger than horses right now wasn’t helping.

‘Calm down. These are my siblings now…’

Sure enough, the creatures just ignored him, continuing whatever it was they were doing. Still, the cavern was already so full of bugs they now had to crawl over one another. Suffice to say, the sight was more than a little unsettling for a human.

However, Percy gritted his… mandibles… and pressed on, knowing he didn’t have much longer. The queen’s signal was already beginning to overpower his own. Even worse, these other bugs released all

sorts of pheromones, probably to let each other know which tunnels contained the most mana or something. Affected by all the external stimuli, his host stirred in rebellion once again.

‘No, you don’t! Just keep walking buddy!’ he demanded, tuning the buzz up to eleven.

Moving a little further, he noticed the walls of the hive were starting to change. At first, it wasn’t easy to tell. His poor eyesight, combined with the turbulent river of bugs only allowed him a few sporadic glimpses here and there.

Still, he eventually pieced together what was happening. The mushroom’s flesh had given way to rocks and minerals. Everything was filled with mana like before, though it manifested differently. Unlike the softly pulsating organic matter of the fungus, the tunnel’s surfaces were now decorated with crisscrossing veins of enchanted ores.

‘This must be the Spire proper…’

Percy would be lying if he said he wasn’t tempted to bring some of the colourful metals back. Granted, he had no idea what they could be used for, and it wasn’t like magical craftmanship was particularly advanced on Remior either. Yet, there was no question everything here was valuable.

But he held himself back. There was a reason the Guild didn’t let people enter the Spire and, honestly, Percy agreed with them. This was their world’s most precious asset and the only source of the elixirs they needed to survive. Nobody – Percy included – was willing to damage this place.

‘I’m only here to look for an egg. Nothing else.’ he reminded himself, suppressing his greed.

Suddenly, he ran into a fork in the tunnel, breaking him out of his thoughts. It appeared he had to make a choice. Neither of the paths particularly stood out – both were about equally wide, with the same number of wasps of all sizes crawling throughout. However, the buzz in his head spiked at the mere thought of going right. Naturally, his host wanted nothing more than to go left – or better yet, back – but Percy wasn’t having it.

‘I bet the reason she doesn’t want us in there is because it leads closer to her nest.’

At the risk of frying the poor worker's tiny brain, he overloaded it with the strongest signal he could muster, essentially challenging the queen to a battle over his host's body. He did manage to force the bug a few metres into the new tunnel, though he quickly realized the creature was finally approaching its limits. Its legs wobbled and he got a little dizzy.

Begrudgingly, he turned around, deciding to call it a night, much to his host's relief. In any case, even if he could somehow reach the eggs, he didn't exactly have a plan for snatching one under the watchful gaze of a Violet cored beast. Nor did he think it would be easy to escape from the thousands upon thousands of wasps that would presumably try to stop him.

'In fact, it isn't safe for my main body either…'

For all he knew, taking an egg outside might cause the entire colony to rush out of the Spire, unleashing their wrath on not only himself, but the rest of the Guild too. Percy would have to take his time carefully mapping out the interior of the hive and coming up with a plan.

'Oh well… I didn't expect to get this done on my first attempt…'