Wanderer 106

Chapter 106: Unsettling

Percy removed his robes, carefully folding them before placing them on the ground.

‘Man, I’m so going to miss the self-cleaning enchantment…’

Unfortunately, he couldn’t risk being seen wearing his Guild attire outside. Doing so would only needlessly increase the risk of people connecting him to the elixirs. The same went for his old clothes. He was better off masquerading as a commoner, to avoid bringing his House trouble. That was why he’d brought two sets of plain, linen outfits – one for himself and one for Nesha.

“How do you even control these beasts? The wasp is a higher grade than you!” her voice rang out from the other side of the tree, where she was also changing.

“I’ll explain if we survive… No point wasting my breath before then.” he replied as he pulled up the boot on his right foot.

“Fair enough…” she said, though she caught herself a moment later. “Wait. What do you mean ‘if we survive’?! How confident are you in this plan?!”

Percy shrugged, though she couldn’t see him. But neither party spoke much over the next few minutes, as he waited for her to finish. At some point, he remembered the Honey Roll he’d bought in a hurry before rushing out of the settlement. Digging through his folded robes, he found the snack in one of the pockets, gleefully biting a chunk off. It had grown cold, but he wasn’t deterred.

It was debatable whether stopping by Freddy’s had been wise given the circumstances, though Percy had wanted to chat with his pal one last time before leaving the Guild for good. While he hadn’t dared to bid the man farewell, afraid to get the poor guy involved in his mess, he knew that might have very well been his last chance to see him.

‘And this could be my last Honey Roll ever…’

Slowing down to savour it, he looked up at the mushrooms above. They still showered the ground level with their wondrous particles. Percy would never forget the first time he saw them, on that fateful night some three years ago…

'No. I'll definitely come back one day.'

A couple minutes later, he and Nesha stood by the mouth of the tunnel his clone had dug up, gazing at the colourful glow emanating from within. Swirling motes of light danced in the air, reflecting off the tunnel's slick walls, casting a mesmerizing, almost dreamlike atmosphere around them. Despite its beauty, Percy keenly felt the weight of the danger lurking beneath them.

'Let's get this over with…' he silently conveyed to his clone.

That was when the Starry Soldier approached, opening its jaws wide before suddenly spitting something at him. Percy barely closed his eyes in time to avoid the green goo splattering all over his face. This serving of sludge had nothing to do with the nectar in the bug's gland. Rather, it had come from its stomach. It was thick like mucus, sliding slowly down his neck. Its stench, a disorienting blend of musk and rot, hit him instantly.

"Ugh…" he grunted, resisting the urge to gag as he used his hands to smear the creature's vomit all over his clothes. The insect continued to throw up more of the disgusting substance.

Nesha retched, recoiling back in horror at the sight. Percy would have grinned if not for the fear of accidentally swallowing some of the foul goo. After another mouthful of vomit splashed onto him, he nodded in satisfaction, before waving a hand toward the bug, sending it after his partner.

"Eeeek!!! Keep that thing away from me!!!" she shrieked, stepping back as the creature advanced. Though the clone ignored her, closing in against her protests.

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"Let it do it if you want to survive." Percy said, wiping his mouth on the last clean patch of his shirt before explaining. "The interior of the Spire is filled with wasps. This is the only way to keep them from attacking us…"

‘Hopefully.’ he kept that last part to himself.

Nesha groaned, wrinkling her nose in disgust as she reluctantly began slathering the vomit on her clothes. Eventually, she broke the long silence as soon as she was done. “Isn’t it forbidden to enter these tunnels?”

“Sure.” Percy admitted. “But we’re already criminals. Or we will be, if people find out what we’ve done. Also, nobody is going to know about this. They can’t monitor all these openings – there are too many. Not that they need to, as entering is a death sentence in and of itself.”

“Lovely.” she spat sarcastically.

Then, Percy turned to his familiar. Over the next few minutes, he had his clone cover the crow with the sludge too, taking the opportunity to strap their old clothes on the wasp’s back. The idea was for it to dispose of them somewhere in the tunnels below, as soon as they escaped the Guild. Before long, he was done – as was the bug.

“KRAAAA!” Micky cawed in annoyance, trying to peck some of the goo out of his feathers.

Percy had considered letting him fly away on his own, but they didn’t know how tight the security was around the perimeter.

‘Oh well… For all we know he won’t survive if I die anyway…’

“Are you ready?” he asked Nesha.

Getting a nod back, he embraced the bird with his left elbow, before offering his right hand to his partner. She stared at it for a moment before reluctantly grabbing hold.

“Whatever happens inside, don’t let go.”

The two then walked into the vibrant cave, the Starry Soldier right behind them. As soon as they were all inside, the bug turned around and lunged at the walls of the tunnel, clawing at them with its thin forelegs, biting at them with its mandibles.

“Now what?” Nesha asked as the cave’s opening collapsed, sealing the way back.

“The tunnels on the first level aren’t supposed to be large enough for people.” Percy explained.

As they delved deeper into the hive, the bug kept digging at the walls, collapsing everything in their wake. If anyone saw what Percy was doing to the interior of the Spire, they’d have rushed to skin him alive.

‘I prefer to think of it as restoring the environment to its original state.’

Which was technically correct. The tunnels his clone was currently destroying were the very ones he’d personally widened over the past few weeks. Naturally, he couldn’t have possibly built the entire tunnel leading outside – it would be too long for a single bug to pull off in such a short time. Even for one at Yellow. Percy’s clone had merely expanded some sections, linking the ground level of the Spire to the network a few dozen metres underground. Most of the tunnels the group would be using had already existed beforehand.

‘It’s a pity I couldn’t get to the queen’s nest though…’

Even though his latest clone had delved much deeper than the worker, he still hadn’t managed to reach the eggs. It was one of the reasons Percy wanted to return to the Guild in the future, to try again after possessing one of the Green bugs. After all, the prospect of a Starry Wasp familiar was too tempting to give up on.

BZZZZZZZZ

Percy was taken out of his thoughts as the trio encountered the first few bugs. There were only five drones in front of them, but a quick scan via Soul Vision revealed twice as many lurking around the corner. Nesha’s grip tightened, the girl appearing a little shaken. A few Red beasts were nothing to a

Yellow core, but she didn't have much experience hunting, and the current circumstances were more than a little claustrophobic.

"Listen. The further we go, the more of them there will be. Higher grades too. Don't try fighting them or running away. If the goo fails us we'll be overwhelmed anyway."

At first, his words seemed counter-productive, only causing the colour in her face to drain further. Still, Nesha bit her lip to calm down, before forcing a strained smile.

"Great. Let's hinge all our lives on bug vomit."

Percy grinned too, mostly to suppress his own bubbling unease, as he pressed onward, bringing the others along. The drones paused upon noticing them, eyeing them curiously. From his clone's experience, Percy understood they were trying to discern whether they posed a threat to the colony. No wasp below Yellow would attack him unprovoked outside, but things here were different.

Still…

After approaching and giving them a cursory feel with its antennae, the bug turned away, seemingly satisfied with their credentials. Its pals returned to their jobs too, back to grazing the concentrated mana off the tunnel's walls.

"So far so good." he muttered, keeping his voice down.

The others seemed to have grown a touch more confident too, as Nesha picked up the pace, probably eager to get the hell out of here before the scent wore off.

Sadly, no amount of confidence could have prepared them for what followed…