Wanderer 107

Chapter 107: Hell

Countless legs poked Percy from all sides, pushing him around like a boat amidst a sea of insects. They came in all sizes, from the rod-like limbs of the soldiers pinning him to the ground, bruising his body with each heavy step, to the stick-like legs of the drones crawling all over his skin. Their soft, frequent taps were as intrusive as they were unnerving.

The young man had to lean on both knees and one elbow, desperately trying to resist the weight of the wasps above, doing his best to keep Micky from getting squashed in his embrace.

“Ugghhh!” Percy couldn’t help but groan in pain, as the frightened crow clenched its talons, digging into his flesh and soul both.

As for his right hand, it didn’t fare much better, creaking as Nesha clasped it tightly, short-lived but frequent tremors coursing through his bones every few moments. It was nearly impossible to make out what was happening around them, as the flurry of insect shadows bled into the dizzying glow of the cavern, plunging Percy’s surroundings into chaos. Still, he vaguely spotted his partner trying to shield her head with her free hand, her face a nauseated green.

“Hold on!” he shouted, though his voice barely pierced through the buzzing cacophony of the hive.

At first, he wasn’t sure Nesha heard him, but a prompt squeeze of her palm soon revealed she indeed had. Percy gathered all his strength to crawl forward, forcing himself against the current.

‘Should I use Circulation?’

Even with two Orange cores and a trained body, enduring the current of bugs without his boosting art was a struggle. The thought of resorting to it was tempting, especially since the dense accumulation of mana inside the tunnel promised to make the act easier than ever.

But he shook his head.

Inducing such a conspicuous flow of ambient mana risked drawing the wrong type of attention from the insects. Gritting his teeth, he pushed through the river of wasps with brute strength alone, still protecting his familiar with one hand, guiding the girl forward with the other. Inch by inch, they made some progress, though it would take them days to reach the exit at this pace. Not to mention, the constant scratches caused by the bugs' limbs threatened to tear what little remained of their clothes off, and the soldier's goo with it.

'Shit! If we lose the scent, we're fucked!' he realized, before calling out to his clone. 'Do something, will you?!'

The latter had to deal with the rushing bugs too, but his hard exoskeleton ensured he had an easier time doing so. His body was built for precisely this environment after all. Heeding Percy's call, he dove forward, alleviating some of the pressure with his frame, finally allowing the trio to move a little faster.

With the immediate danger warded off for the time-being, the group – two humans, one bird and one wasp – crawled closer to one another, doing their best to not fall into the same predicament again. Of course, some of the insects still climbed over them, but there were fewer now, as the clone focused on clearing the path ahead.

Yet…

Percy swallowed hard as a soldier's stinger brushed right by his cheek, narrowly missing his eye. Had it landed a couple inches to the right, it would have skewered his brain, pumping his skull full of acid.

'At least it wasn't on purpose…' he realised in relief.

Not that he particularly cared about souring his relationship with a random bug, but had the creature intentionally attacked, it would have meant the rest of its kin were about to follow suit.

The party continued like this for several hours, each of them visibly fighting both the exhaustion, and to keep the contents of their stomachs from spilling. Percy handled the situation slightly better than his companions, but only because he'd already experienced this many times before, through his clone's memories. Even so, there was a stark difference between merely recalling his clone's second-hand experience – in its native environment no less – and actually enduring it with his real body.

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‘Less room for mistakes too…’

Eventually, the slope beneath their feet tilted upward, the density of bugs in the winding tunnel dropping about half an hour later. They were still some distance from their destination, but they appeared to have crossed the half-way mark.

Suddenly, Percy stopped. Nesha flashed him a questioning look, but he ignored her, busy communicating with his clone instead. Soon, the bug turned around, spitting a new round of vomit on him. Understanding his intentions, the girl then closed her eyes, silently inviting the clone to renew her own cover too. She appeared to have finally overcome her disgust for the sludge.

‘I suppose it would be strange if she still cared about that…’ he chuckled.

Only after the whole group had undergone the process did they resume their journey. Honestly, Percy wasn’t sure the substance was necessary anymore, as the entire hive reeked with the foul stench this far in. From what he understood, this was how the bugs communicated to one another who was a friend.

‘It doesn’t hurt to be careful.’ he shrugged.

In any case, the party of four continued their trek through the colourful tunnel, finally able to appreciate the scenery now that the flood of bugs had grown less chaotic. Percy had seen the lustrous deposits decorating the walls before, though they looked twice as beautiful now that he sported a better pair of eyes. Nesha gawked at the sight too, seemingly having set her fears aside. Percy didn’t blame her for it either. The view was truly mesmerizing, especially for someone stumbling upon it for the first time. ***R*******

A couple hours later, the traffic of bugs nearly disappeared entirely, as the group approached the artificial part of the hive the clone had personally dug up. At last, the most dangerous part of the trip was already behind them…

…or so they thought.

Suddenly, a massive insect head smashed through the ceiling a few metres ahead, the crumbling debris raising a cloud of dust as it hit the floor.

‘The fuck?!’ Percy nearly stumbled backwards, dragging Nesha with him.

He coughed, wanting to cover his mouth, but neither of his hands were free, forcing him to awkwardly use his shoulder instead. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the intruder. Luckily, it didn’t seem to have noticed them yet, still struggling to dig itself out of the hole. Yet, what little Percy could see was frightening enough. The bug’s head was as large as his clone’s thorax, meaning the creature’s entire body was probably as big as an elephant.

‘A Starry Knight!’

It was his first time seeing one in person, though his clones had run into a few in the past. Not many, as they seemed much scarcer than their weaker relatives – at least in the sections of the hive he’d managed to access. Only a few seconds later did Nesha spot the oversized bug, Percy feeling her shudder. Part of him wanted to comfort her, but the priority right now was to figure out how to get past the monster in one piece.

‘Will the disguise even hold?’ he openly wondered through the cord, letting his clone listen in.

‘I don’t know… All the wasps rely on the goo, but the higher grades are smarter too.’

Percy gritted his teeth. Bug or not, he didn’t dare underestimate a Green core’s intelligence.

‘Can you get us past it?’ he asked again.

He’d considered turning back, but there was nowhere to go. His clone had only dug one exit to the surface, and this was the only tunnel leading to it.

‘I can try.’

Then, realizing they were almost out of time – the knight having nearly extricated itself from the hole – the clone spat another mouthful of sludge on each of them for good measure. Next, it turned around to negotiate with its giant cousin.

The creature had to scrunch up to fit inside the tunnel – it clearly wasn't meant for the Green variants. Each of its movements scraped ores and crystals off the walls. Glancing at the group, it perked up, noticing something out of place.

Not missing a beat, the clone stood before it, trying to block its view, as he opened his mandibles. The stench of rot and musk intensified further, as Percy's clone released more of it, this time in a gaseous form.

Releasing a high-pitched screech that made Percy's ears hurt, the knight tried to brush the clone aside with its head, though the latter fought to stand his ground. Confused, the Green wasp felt the clone with its antennae, probably trying to discern whether he was truly its kin.

Though the knight seemed convinced, it still stubbornly tried to look past the clone, sensing something wrong. Percy held his breath throughout the whole ordeal, a quick glance revealing that Nesha was doing the same. Unable to hold on much longer, however, he ended up gasping for air a few seconds later, a whiff of the putrid stench nearly making him gag.

Thinking of something, he let go of his partner's hand – much to her surprise – discreetly placing it behind his back, hidden behind the bandage. Luckily, the enchanted fabric was still in one piece, unlike many of the tattered rags they wore.

Then, he began gathering some soul mana, just in case. The standoff continued for several minutes, as cold sweat trickled down his back. At some point, the knight seemed to back down a little, making Percy think it had finally agreed to let them go.

Relaxing, he noticed the noxious odour had, at some point, given way to a different, less unpleasant scent. It was sweet, faintly reminding him of bananas…

'Shit. RUN!' the clone suddenly screamed through the connection.