Wanderer 36

Chapter 36: Fungal Spire

Technically, baldy HAD explained what they would find at their destination. Perhaps, Percy shouldn't have been so taken aback by the sight before him. Yet here he was, blinking repeatedly, struggling to believe his eyes. Maybe they were playing tricks on him, tired as they were from the long journey.

'CAW! CAW!'

'Yeah, I didn't realize it was going to be this big either.'

The Alchemists' Guild was situated next to an extraordinary structure resembling a conical tree. An impossibly tall one too, its tip lost above the clouds. It was adorned from top to bottom with bright lights of all colours, making it appear man-made, seemingly erected for some grand festival.

Yet, this assessment couldn't be further from the truth. To start with, this was no plant at all. Strictly speaking, it was a mountain. Its 'trunk' was really a narrow column of rock, several miles long, thrusting towards the sky like a giant's spear. There was nothing artificial about it either. Countless huge mushrooms grew all over the steep slope, their stems bending upwards. As a result, their caps faced the stars, forming platforms hundreds of meters wide. These titanic protrusions constantly released mana of all types, giving the place its varied glow.

'So, this is the Fungal Spire...'

According to his grandpa, it was among the greatest natural treasures on Remior. Also, one of the main reasons other races targeted them. Multiple underground rivers of mana converged beneath it, allowing the monstrous fungi to flourish. This, in turn, had given rise to a truly bizarre ecosystem where the main ingredient for the elixirs could be found. The Guild, where Percy would be living, was built at its base, while the hunting grounds, where he and Micky would spend most of their time, were the giant mushrooms themselves.

'CAW!'

Reminded by his familiar's cry, the young man gently tapped the horse's side with his heel, urging it to gallop faster. There would be plenty of time for sightseeing later. He shouldn't delay and risk getting attacked again.

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His relief was palpable as the Guild's entrance came into view. At last, he was safe!

'The lack of a queue is a welcome bonus too.'

Not that this wasn't a popular destination. Quite the opposite, in fact. Aspiring alchemists and merchants travelled to the Guild all year round. Still, it couldn't compare with the traffic to the Order's temples, where a third of Remior's children were brought to take the test. Certainly not this late at night.

'Everything ok on your end?'

Percy had bid his familiar farewell a few minutes ago. The bird couldn't follow him into the Guild proper, so the plan was for Micky to circle around and find a place to stay on the other side of the trunk. Apparently, the base of the Spire was designated as the bottom level of the hunting grounds, mostly populated by Red beasts.

There, the bird could fly around unobstructed, with nothing daring to approach. Of course, the Guild had numerous squads patrolling the perimeter of the structure, to prevent intruders from entering without authorization. That said, they wouldn't care much about a lone beast passing through the bottom level.

'CAW!'

After receiving confirmation from his friend that he was alright, Percy walked up to the guards. The two men wore green robes – the same colour as their cores. The clothes were neat, but not nearly as over-the-top as the funny-looking togas and sandals of the guards at the temple. They were half-asleep – one even startled by his appearance – probably not expecting any visitors past midnight.

Still, they were professionals. Without complaint, they requested his official documents backing his purpose at the Guild. Percy took out his grandpa's letter, which one of the guards skimmed through rather quickly, before handing him a wooden badge.

The tale has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

"This is only for guests. You'll have to register properly inside the third building to your left. But it's not open at this time. For now, keep going until you reach the building with the blue door and then head right until you get to the inn. You can stay the night there for free. The stables are next door."

Percy nodded, walking inside, his horse in tow. As soon as he entered the settlement, his eyes widened. Motes of light danced in the wind, like colourful snowflakes painting everything in joy and wonder. He'd seen some outside too, but they were much denser here. Probably thanks to some large-scale enchantment keeping them within the Guild's perimeter. The tiny orbs faded into nothingness every time they touched an object – a red one startling him as it landed on his nose.

'They must all be coming from the mushrooms.'

Instinctively, he tilted his head up, gawking at the blinding sea of colours slowly descending from the sky. Even more numerous than stars, they shifted and mixed, forming ever-changing patterns of raw magic. A question suddenly popped up in his head.

'Can I absorb them?'

He took a deep breath, letting the motes spiral into his lungs as he directed the mana to his two cores. His regeneration was slightly faster than outside – maybe by 20% or so – but that was about it. It would make fighting atop the giant fungi slightly more convenient. That said, the difference wouldn't be great.

Micky might be able to get some mind mana for his second core too, although it would be negligible. It couldn't even compare with the red mist outside the Order's temple, so it would take the familiar years to amass enough at this rate. Percy would still have to find a different source, which was one of his goals for the near future.

Then, he shook his head.

‘That’s tomorrow’s problem. Let’s get some sleep now.’

Following the guard’s instructions, he slowly made his way towards the inn, all-the-while appreciating the sights around him. The architecture was very different to what he was used to. Unlike his family’s mansion which was mostly made of wood, all the buildings here were made of stone. Not just that, but they all appeared to be in pristine condition, as if they had only been built days ago. Of course, this wasn’t the case. The Alchemists’ Guild was even older than the Avalon House. Many times so, in fact. Percy wouldn’t be surprised if these houses and shops had been here for tens of millennia already.

‘They must be enchanted with preservation runes.’

The young man didn’t miss the numerous glyphs dimly shimmering along the polished surfaces. The symbols shone a touch more brightly every time one of the colourful motes landed on them, before fading a moment later.

Soon, he found the inn. He skipped it for now, entering the stables instead. Luckily, they were open, manned by a clerk in a uniform like that of the guards, although his was yellow. There weren’t many horses inside. Not many people used them on Remior, as travelling on foot was easier once you reached Yellow.

With nine times the speed and endurance of a regular human, the only reason for a Yellow or higher to ride a horse would be if they were escorting somebody at a lower grade. Even then, they technically had the option of carrying that person themselves, although it would look awkward and downright silly. Percy chuckled, imagining Gawain giving him a piggyback ride. Or Rick stacking his three lackies on his back like sacks of rice.

“How long do you want us to keep it for you?” the clerk asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Percy felt some heat gather in his cheeks upon realizing he’d looked like a maniac, laughing to himself. Then, he shrugged.

“Can I sell it instead? I’m not going to be leaving anytime soon.”

It would be cheaper to buy another horse when it was time to go – if he even needed one by then. Strictly speaking, Percy had no idea how long he was going to stay. It would depend on many factors he couldn't account for at the moment, such as his success or failure in the Guild, or whatever treasures his future clones managed to bring back to Remior. Still, he estimated he'd be here for at least a year or two.

The man nodded, slamming a red coin on the counter, prompting Percy to raise an eyebrow.

"Ha, I guess you're new here. This coin is worth 1 contribution point. The colours follow the same pattern as grades, with orange coins worth 10, yellow 100 and so on. You'll need them for everything you buy or sell in the Guild."

The young man picked the coin up, examining it for a couple of moments in intrigue before tossing it in his pocket. He was about to flood the clerk with a ton of questions, but the guy beat him to it, raising a hand.

"Look, kid, I know you want to ask me more stuff, but they'll explain everything at the orientation when you register tomorrow. For now, go get some sleep. You look like crap. No offense."

Percy wasn't bothered, realising the clerk was most likely right. He thanked him before leaving. Entering the inn, he showed his wooden badge to the guy there, before being led to his room for the night. It wasn't the most luxurious place, but it was clean at least, probably enchanted for that. It sure beat Micky's cell on Huehue. His own room back at home too – though not by a huge margin.

'I guess this is my home now.'

Percy would be lying if he said he wasn't worried. He knew he'd be safe inside the Guild, and he'd already checked up on his familiar six times since entering the settlement.

Still, he had no idea what tomorrow would bring. Would he thrive in this place, or sink to the bottom and be forgotten?

'Only one way to find out, I suppose.'