Wanderer 42

Chapter 42: Adjusting tactics

‘I’m jumping in!’

Hearing the warning, the crow changed direction at the last second, briefly confusing the wasp. Percy dashed towards it, swinging down his staff.

Still, the agile bug caught on quickly enough, dodging the telegraphed blow, before lunging forward to deliver a hit of its own. The young man flicked his hand, parrying the stinger.

SHING

Bending dangerously, the cyan weapon appeared about to snap. Percy understood by now that a quarterstaff wasn’t great against the creatures. Coming up with a better use for his pure mana was definitely something on his to-do list. That said, this wasn’t his focus right now. He stabbed forward with his other hand, the silver point just barely missing the wasp.

“Fuck! I almost got it!” he groaned.

The insect was about to counterattack, but Micky dove towards it, nearly clipping its membranous wings with his talons, engaging it into a new round.

SIGH

Activating Soul Vision, the young man looked at his new weapon again. Its shape hadn’t changed much, but it was twice as long as before. Perhaps it resembled a rapier more than it did a dagger by now.

Over the last couple of days, Percy had thought about the greatest shortcomings in his offensive capabilities. While the Parting Gift packed quite a punch, it was frankly overkill in most situations. The difficulty in landing it coupled with the long preparation time meant he left himself defenceless for much of the fight.

If he didn't have a second core to rely on, he would have probably died already. Even if he had found another way to escape from Rick's group, the Starry Workers would have stabbed him full of holes by now.

Consequently, he had come up with two possible solutions. The first was to continue increasing the number of projectiles he could shoot at once. If he gave his spell a wider spread, he'd be able to hit the wasps more frequently. However, it would still leave him powerless between shots.

That's why he'd gone with the second solution instead. His current plan was to devise a close-combat variant of the Parting Gift. It wouldn't dissipate after each strike, so his opponents would think twice before approaching – or pay the price.

'Although, it's not perfect either.' he frowned.

While it would keep the bugs at bay – making him safer – it wouldn't help him land the hits. If anything, it would make it even harder. That said, he reasoned he could amend that with more practice. The soul constructs were weightless, so he could swing them faster than any corporeal weapon. As long as he worked on his timing, he'd be able to slay the Starry Workers with some well-executed counterattacks.

'Perhaps a rapier isn't the best shape though.'

Due to the extreme lethality of his soul mana, he only needed to nick a corner of the bugs' souls to defeat them. Even if the first strike didn't kill them, it would stop them in their tracks long enough for him to finish the job. Consequently, a slashing weapon might be more useful than a stabbing one. It wasn't piercing power he lacked.

'Should I go for a hatchet or cutlass?'

He didn't like the idea of the former as he'd have to waste a lot of mana on the handle. The latter sounded better, but he'd still prefer something with a wider blade. Something the wasps couldn't evade so easily.

'Hmmm… what if I bend the edge a little too…'

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‘CAW!’

Micky complained, snapping him out of his thoughts.

‘Right. I’m going back in.’

He quickly summoned his weapons, but one looked different. As before, the scuffle ended without success, the wasp dodging the modified spell effortlessly. However, he didn’t let it get to him, as he knew realizing his new idea would take a couple more days.

Percy grinned, beginning to reform the blade once more, adjusting the shape again.

‘You bastards are in for a nasty surprise.’

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He took a deep breath, as the cyan lines shone underneath his skin. Over the past week, Percy had focused on adapting his Parting Gift rather than killing as many wasps as possible. Logically, this should have caused their daily gains to drop even more, yet it hadn’t. Without realizing, the young man had grown better at maintaining Circulation. This had allowed him to fight in his top form for a couple hours longer per day.

‘Today our kill count is going up too.’

Soul mana gathered in his hand once more, coalescing into a solid. The blade extended and curved and… kept extending and curving still. By the time it finished taking shape, Percy had exhausted every last drop of mana in his sternum, his weapon spanning an arc three times the radius of his fist. The new version of the Parting Gift required the full capacity of his core to cast, taking the form of a sickle!

‘Stay out of this one, buddy.’

CAW!

Stomping hard, he bolted towards the wasp. The worker noticed him before he reached it, diving for the counter. Percy sidestepped the stab, feinting with his staff. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, the wasp bought the fake out, flying to one side, as Percy swung the rod for real this time, nearly glancing the bug too.

BZZZZZZZZZZZZ

That seemed to have pissed it off, as it launched a barrage of lunges towards him, trying to turn him into a pin cushion. It wasn’t hard to evade most of them with his footwork, parrying the rest with the Quarterstaff. The construct protested, but it held – for now.

Another narrow dodge later, the bug seemed to have run out of steam, as it tried to put some distance. Percy didn’t let it, instead stepping forward, putting some pressure on the creature with his rod.

Realizing it couldn’t keep this up, the bug went for another desperate counterattack, forcing Percy to sacrifice the Quarterstaff for one last parry.

SHING

This was it! The attack left the bug staggered!

Having anticipated it, Percy’s left hand was already on its way to the wasp’s side. It tried to pull back diagonally, but he only had to let the weapon travel a few inches horizontally before releasing his grip, letting the sickle spin as it flew towards the creature.

The slash didn’t make a sound, but the young man didn’t miss the bug’s silvery soul being cleanly bisected through his Soul Vision. Percy allowed what remained of his staff to crumble away, but he didn’t move.

THUD

The lifeless carcass of the Starry Worker crashed on the cap of the giant mushroom, one of its wings nearly snapping as it bent in a weird angle.

‘It’s done.’ he stared at it in disbelief.

He wasn’t even out of breath yet! The fight had only lasted a few minutes!

Of course, he’d already spent a week working towards this, but pinning down the slippery creature by himself – without relying on luck or distractions – had seemed like such a distant goal. But he’d done it! He’d held his own, anticipating the bug’s moves, dodging its blows and seizing the right opportunity to strike back!

CAW! CAW!

Micky flew over him, sharing in his excitement.

“Hahahaha!” the young man burst into laughter.

“Help yourself buddy!” he gestured to the corpse.

There was still plenty he could do to make their trips more efficient, but this was the first massive step forward. He smiled.

‘Let’s see how many we can get today.’

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‘19!’ he counted, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

Percy had just finished squeezing the last of today's glands into a vial. This was their best record so far!

This time, he had filled nearly three tubes with the precious nectar, indicating he was getting closer and closer to his goal. Naturally, he was still 8 kills short, but that didn't seem so unattainable after what he had achieved over a single week.

The new form of the Parting Gift was extremely effective against the creatures. He had already killed a few with it in both melee range and from a distance, proving it was about as versatile as he'd intended.

It was still a pain whenever he threw it and missed, as it left his first core completely empty for a time. Luckily, Micky could always jump in and keep the bugs occupied until he recovered.

'It sucks the Status hasn't bothered to recognize it though.'

That said, he had expected that. The new variant wasn't sufficiently different from the original to be listed as a new spell, and neither was it profound enough to be elevated to a Refined classification.

'Although, I suppose it doesn't matter what it's called.'

Percy shrugged.

'Tomorrow I'll work on a replacement for the Quarterstaff.'