Wanderer 44

Chapter 44: Opportunity

The thing about quarterstaffs was they were two-handed weapons. Suffice to say, dual wielding one with a sickle was more than a little awkward. Detrimental even – as it got in Percy's way more often than not, preventing him from landing sure blows with his deadlier tool.

Of course, he couldn't help it either. He had considered simply not using it, but the Parting Gift couldn't block incoming attacks, so the flimsy rod was essentially his only defence against the venomous stingers of the Starry Workers. Although he was currently working on changing that.

'I'm not going to bother with a different weapon.'

The reason he'd even created it to begin with, was Micky's influence still fresh on his mind after Huehue, coupled with his first core being unavailable for a long time. The staff had been his only means of attack back then, and it had served him well against the wood goblins.

However, his fighting style was still rough around the edges, pieced together out of whatever scraps he could recall from his friend's demonstration. His lacking pair of limbs didn't help much either. Not to mention his grade being much lower than Micky's too, so the poor excuse of a weapon just wouldn't cut it against the wasps. He reasoned it might be worth revisiting the Quarterstaff in the future, after his second core advanced to Orange, but for now he'd rather retire it.

'This time, let's go with something purely defensive.'

Strictly speaking, his requirements for the replacement were rather modest. He only needed something to block a blow or two, to give him a chance to counterattack. Something that wouldn't get in the way as much. The thought of forming some kind of armour with his pure mana was appealing, though he understood he lacked the capacity to cover his whole body. Instead, he settled for something smaller.

'Will this even hold?' he frowned, looking at his right fist coated in a film of cyan.

The construct was poorly made. It was more akin to a cast than a glove right now as he couldn't twitch a single finger in it, but he'd rather confirm it worked as protection before trying to improve its design. He lifted his eyes, gazing at the bug locked in an aerial confrontation with his familiar, before shrugging.

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

Activating Circulation, he dashed in, telling the crow to disengage. The wasp didn't seem to mind either, more than happy to switch targets. Percy could have dodged the incoming lunge but didn't. Instead, he swung his hand to brush the stinger aside, bracing himself for the worst.

Had this been his first day on the second level, he would have missed, as it was much harder to time the parry with such a small surface area than it was with the rod. However, he'd grown used to the bugs' movements by now, so the blows connected without issue.

CRACK

He felt the material crumble under the pressure, but it held better than the staff. That was promising, considering his new construct still had plenty of room for improvement.

Pushing the wasp away, he tossed a fleeting glance at his hand. The impact had left a deep and wide groove into the construct. Percy directed more mana to repair the cast before taunting the bug to attack again.

The two exchanged blows for about ten minutes, as the young man tested the limits of his new spell, before his stamina began to decline. Only then did he finally seize the next opening, finishing the bug with his sickle. He gestured Micky to enjoy his meal, before plopping down on the mushroom's cap, analysing what he'd learned.

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'I don't think it's safe to block a direct stab with it, but brushing the stingers from the side is more than doable.'

The cast lasted a couple of blows before it came close to shattering. It was only when Percy had pushed for a third in a row without fixing it that he'd risked getting injured. It cost less mana to form and repair, plus it let him use the sickle better too.

'It's definitely worth working on it, but it's going to take a while to perfect.'

He'd never made anything this intricate with mana before. The finalized glove would involve lots of interconnected pieces, to protect all the joints in his hand without impairing their movement.

'Still, if I can use both constructs with the same hand it's going to make everything a lot easier.'

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By nightfall, the duo had taken 20 wasps down, surpassing their previous limit once more.

Just over a week after joining the Guild, Percy had already reached the higher end of what was viewed as possible for an Orange core. He was still far from his goal, but at least his new constructs were much better suited for hunting the bugs. Moreover, he was getting more accustomed to both their fighting style and to keeping Circulation active for longer.

And his personal kit wasn't the only thing he was working on. Micky had yet to kill a single wasp by himself, but he was getting closer. His agile opponents were a terrible match for the crow, which was why Percy was still reluctant to let him fight unsupervised. That said, the familiar had not gotten himself in trouble over the last couple of days, having grown better at dodging the last-minute lunges of the bugs. In fact, he'd almost managed to clip their wings a few times. Percy estimated the crow would achieve his first solo kill before long, at which point they could split up and adjust their strategy.

Entering the settlement, his attention was drawn to a crowd that had gathered around somebody. He counted a couple dozen people, most of them in yellow robes – not very surprising as they made up the majority of the Guild members. Still, he spotted a handful of Green and Orange cores too.

'What's this about?' Percy raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued.

Approaching them, he noticed everyone held a leaflet, chatting loudly.

‘Must be a good thing to get them so excited.’

In fact, they seemed to be in such a good mood they didn’t even frown upon seeing him, instead letting him pass unobstructed.

‘Ok, now it’s getting weird.’

The person at the centre of the crowd – a Blue core holding the stack of leaflets – handed him one with a smile.

“Free introductory lesson to alchemy?” Percy’s eyes widened as he read the heading aloud. “Seriously?”

The guy nodded.

“Normally, each lesson costs about 1000 contribution points, but the Guild likes to sponsor them every now and then to encourage people to get into it. After all, alchemists are precious, and we need as many as we can get.”

Percy smirked.

“Then why even charge people in the first place?”

“Because this isn’t a charity. Those giving the lessons are just regular members of the Guild and they expect proper compensation for their time.”

SIGH

“That said, I do think my fellow alchemists should strive to be a little more selfless for everyone’s sake. Teaching is even more lucrative than brewing. You can make tens of thousands per day doing it, but you

need to be an experienced alchemist already to qualify. I guess some of them are either a tad too greedy or they just don't want to build up the competition."

The young man nodded, albeit reluctantly. It's not like he didn't understand the concept, but it really made it difficult for people like him to get into the field.

"Aren't there any books on the topic?" he asked.

"Yes, there are plenty in the library, free to read. They cover the basics but, without guidance, it'll take you ten times longer to learn. Plus, the priciest part of alchemy is the ingredients, not the lessons."

That made sense. All these Yellows wouldn't have trouble saving up a thousand points, but if they had to waste months' worth of nectar before they got any good at it, it would indeed be a huge barrier of entry.

"Anyway, are you interested in signing up?" the Blue core asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Yes, when is it?" Percy didn't hesitate.

Perhaps he couldn't afford to become a proper alchemist just yet, but it wouldn't hurt to learn more now that the opportunity presented itself. The knowledge might influence his future plans, after all.

"Tomorrow morning. Just show up at this building at ten." the guy indicated a certain spot on the leaflet, on a hand-drawn map of the Guild.

Percy thanked him, before leaving.

'Besides, I could use a break from hunting.'