Wanderer 69

Chapter 69: Starry Soldiers

As soon as Percy overcame the shock of seeing a wasp as large as he was, he thought he'd have an easy time slaying the overgrown bug. Its slick black carapace still glittered with colours like its smaller cousins, but the soldier was large enough that its camouflage was essentially useless.

After all, the motes of light slowly falling from the mushrooms above couldn't possibly conceal the man-sized creature, nor could they obscure the dense Yellow shape thrumming within Percy's Mana Sense. So, with nowhere to hide and with such a bulky frame, how hard could it be to hit it with his sickle?

Well…

Near impossible it turned out.

'I really need to stop jinxing everything.'

The soldier's stinger was about the shape and length of a rapier, delivering a barrage of lunges, trying to turn his head into a kebab. Strictly speaking, Percy didn't have much difficulty dodging the blows – they were more forgiving than the mage's stone javelins. Especially with the bug's soul betraying its intentions ahead of time.

Still, it was landing his own attacks that proved challenging. Unlike his human opponent who had stood in place like a sitting duck, Percy couldn't pin the wasp down. Despite its larger frame, the soldier was even more agile than the Orange variants. Hitting it from a distance was a tall order.

Then, there was the strategy Percy had used against the workers at the beginning. Back when he was weaker, he'd resorted to well-timed counterattacks to dispatch the bugs. Sadly, that wasn't applicable right now. His only means of defending himself had grown obsolete once more. And there wasn't much he could do about that.

'There's no way to block a Yellow beast's attacks with pure mana from a Red core.'

Until it advanced to Orange, he'd have to retire his second core entirely. Its only use at the moment was the passive boost to his physique. Although he did have another advantage.

Side-stepping a stab, Percy tried to bisect the wasp's soul with his left. It moved horizontally to dodge, but that gave him a chance to throw the second Parting Gift held by his right.

Thanks to Circulation, he could summon and maintain two of the weapons now!

That said, the wasp flew up to avoid the second attack. Next, it only stared at him for a moment before diving back to unleash another rain of lunges, trying to take advantage of his missing weapon. Not that he had much trouble evading them, but a similar scene repeated once he finished replacing his second sickle.

Half an hour later, the two were still at an impasse. The bug attacked whenever Percy was one weapon down, putting him on the backfoot until he recovered. Whenever he did, it was his turn to go on the offense, but the soldier was just as good at evading. If necessary, Percy could keep Circulation up with both cores for a couple more hours. Still…

'How do I create an opening?'

Having Micky distract the creature was out of the question. Percy had already asked his familiar to remain at a safe distance and he had no intention of letting him anywhere close to the monster.

As Percy was evaluating his options, the soldier suddenly did something different. It flew a few meters above his head, before pointing its stinger down.

'Oh, fuck me!'

A purple blob emerged from the stinger's point, soon expanding to a blanket shrouding his view. Leaping to the side, Percy barely managed to roll out of the way as the sludge rained on the mushroom.

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The surface of the giant fungus sizzled as a wall of brown gas rose to the sky. The small amount that reached Percy's nose burned his nostrils, even coating the back of his throat with an acrid aftertaste.

However, that was just the start, as the wasp fired two more liquid projectiles. This time, it was harder evading them, some of the acid landing on his leg.

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"AAAAAAGH!!"

Percy hadn't expected to experience this again so soon. Luckily, it didn't corrode much deeper than his skin. The substance had spread rather thin during its flight, otherwise he wouldn't be surprised seeing his entire limb melted into a puddle – bones and everything. Not that it made his situation much less precarious.

He barely got the chance to roll out of the way of the stinger, as it stabbed just inches from his face. Lodged into the mushroom, the wasp appeared stuck, but it still tried to crush his throat with its limbs, forcing him to keep crawling away. Only when he was a couple meters from the bug did he get the chance to stand up, before dashing towards the soldier, taking advantage of its immobility to finally kill it.

'That was a close one.'

Percy had thought his latest improvements would make this a walk in the park, but he couldn't have been more wrong. The acid rain attack was something he'd never seen the Orange variants do. It could have easily spelled his doom if the bug wasn't limited to three consecutive shots. In fact, if the soldier hadn't stupidly trapped itself, the fight might have not even ended.

'You live, you learn.' he shrugged.

At least, this did give him an idea as to how he could use his pure mana against these creatures. Although it wasn't strong enough to block their blows or pierce their carapace, maybe he could protect himself from the acid rain with it.

'Micky! Come eat the core!'

The familiar didn't need to be told twice. Tearing into the hard exoskeleton took the bird a bit longer than usual, but it still managed to claw a hole soon enough. It first dug the gland out of the torso, throwing it to Percy with its talon. Then, it dove back into the bug's sternum, looking for the tasty snack. Percy grabbed the gland. Ignoring his feasting friend, he took a vial out of his pouch. Next, he sliced it open with a knife before squeezing the nectar into the gemstone.

'45!' he counted with glee.

He'd already known how much nectar the soldiers had on them of course. Still, actually seeing half the vial filled with amber fluid after a single kill was truly satisfying.

'And to think the commanders on the top level have over 400 drops on them. That's enough for a dose of the elixir!'

Not that anybody hunted there of course. Most Guild members were already alchemists by the time they reached Green, let alone Blue. By then, they could earn a lot more points brewing than hunting.

'Oh well. I'll get there too. Soon.'

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'Here it comes again.'

The wasp fired a blob of acid like the last one. This time, Percy was prepared. Through the passive Soul Vision granted by his Circulation, he dodged the spray before it was even unleashed.

He could have easily evaded the next two shots too, but he intentionally remained within the splash zone to test something out. Pure mana gushed out of his pores as he swiped his arm, brushing the droplets aside with a wave of cyan. The purple liquid rapidly dissolved the flimsy defence, some of it making it to Percy's skin. Still, most of it had been blocked.

'Success… kinda.' he made a weird expression halfway between a grin and a wince.

He'd rather dodge the attacks entirely than rely on this, but it was nice knowing he had one last layer of protection.

Next, the soldier dove down in an attempt to poke his eye out. Apparently, this one wasn't dumb enough to get itself trapped like the last bug. Dodging, Percy tried to land a melee blow, hitting nothing but empty air.

Not getting discouraged, he quickly threw a handful of silver knives towards the creature. While he'd kept one of the Parting Gifts in the shape of a sickle, he'd decided to branch out by reverting the second one to a bunch of projectiles. Two of them missed, but the last one grazed its side. The silver silhouette shook, the wasp's movements growing erratic.

Finishing the injured creature only took a couple more minutes.

'Ok. Progress.'

At least, Percy didn't come close to dying this time. Also, incorporating some level of variation in his arsenal looked promising. Still, he estimated he wouldn't kill more than six soldiers today. Surpassing his previous spoils would take a few more weeks.

But he wasn't too disappointed.

'It's going to be worth it in the long-term.'

His gains had been modest when he began hunting the workers too, yet they'd quickly eclipsed what was possible on the first level. Percy couldn't help but rub his hands in anticipation. After a year in the Guild, his original goal was finally within reach.

'I'm going to have enough elixir for both of my cores soon.'