Wanderer 81

Chapter 81: Gabe's second affinity

Percy figured he'd been in the Vault for about a week, though keeping track of time was always difficult outside Remior.

It had only taken him a few days to clear enough mana channels to fill up his host's second core. Piling onto the good news, the event had also gone down surprisingly smoothly. Sure, an elemental affinity wasn't the flashiest one to have, but it was definitely more useful than pure mana. Also, activating the core did strengthen Gabe's soul, causing the broken shards to swell, filling up more of their vessel.

Sadly, the shift did cause their bond to loosen, forcing Percy to expend the last of his stashed mana to repair the connection. Though it wasn't that great a loss, since the golems were immune to his Parting Gift anyway.

And today, Percy felt he'd cleared enough pathways to use the new core in a fight. Not that he was anywhere close to using it with finesse, but they should still be ready to tackle the fourth wave. As much as they'd love to prepare a little longer, their time was finite, and they needed to assess their situation.

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The white-hot axe slashed against the octagonal shield, the impact sending a shockwave reverberating through the room. However, the empowered flames barely carved an inch into the black metal before dimming, as the green inscriptions on its surface flashed brighter.

Worse still, the construct easily brushed its left arm aside, tearing one of Gabe's wings to shreds, throwing him off balance in the process. And taking advantage of the opening, it lunged forward with its sword.

Percy's host barely managed to leap to the side at the last second, escaping with a shallow cut on his upper arm. Not ideal, but definitely preferrable to getting cleanly ran through by a blade wider than his thigh.

Gabe clumsily walked backwards, putting some distance from the giant golem, each step awkwardly splashing through the viscous liquid covering the cube's floor all the way up to his knees.

The construct simply stood in place, watching him disengage. It clearly wasn't in a rush to give chase. Some of the tar-like substance flowed to the golem, mending the small cut on its shield within mere seconds.

'How the hell are we supposed to beat this thing?!' Gabe asked.

But Percy didn't have a good response either. Unlike the "swarm" challenge which involved lots of weaker enemies, the "gauntlet" instead focused on singular, elite opponents. Their current foe was technically "just" another Green golem, not unlike the four constructs they had defeated during Percy's first day in the Vault. Still, its strength was nothing like those.

It stood at twice Gabe's height – much like the previous golems – though this one was a fair amount leaner. Its shield was neigh-impregnable – even harder than the bodies of the last ones – while its speed was nothing to scoff at either. Percy estimated it was faster than the Starry Soldiers back on Remior. Plus, this was still only the fourth wave. He wasn't looking forward to whatever monstrosity the challenge would throw at them during the sixth one.

To make matters worse, Gabe's kit wasn't as well suited to this challenge. Sure, his bloodline and blessing did augment both his offense and defence to a degree – making him much stronger than the average Green core. That said, these advantages couldn't compare with the boost to his endurance, which was what had ultimately carried him through the other one. And these challenges had clearly been designed taking into account that most of the Vault's surviving mortals were bred elites.

'I guess we expected as much. At least this one doesn't seem to have any ranged attacks.' Percy said. 'Should we pull out our secret weapon?'

Gabe wrinkled his nose.

'Normally, I wouldn't be keen on letting somebody experiment with my body, playing around with new spells in the middle of a fight. Certainly not against such a monster. But I suppose I'm dead anyway – unless we can get this to work. Are you sure you won't make things worse though?'

While Gabe would have to figure out how to use his second core by himself after his guest was gone, they had agreed to leave Percy in charge of the new affinity for now.

‘Well, I’ll do my best to not get in your way at least. I’ll focus on supporting you.’ Percy said.

Nodding, his host prepared the wings again, taking to the air. Reinforcing them with mana from his first core, he dove down towards their opponent. The golem raised its shield to block with practiced ease, though it was in for a small surprise this time.

Right when they had covered about half the distance, Percy drew some mana from their second core, expelling it from their feet. The manoeuvre was a little rough around the edges, but it did work as intended. Picking up speed, they arrived a moment sooner than the construct was expecting, as Gabe delivered another brutal blow.

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Like before, he failed to deal much damage, but he did land the attack at an angle, deflecting the shield to the side as he spun, opening the way for a second slash right at the golem’s neck.

Taken off-guard, the construct still managed a last-second parry with its sword, though not before Gabe carved about an inch into its neck. The golem was even forced to take a step back.

Sadly, the wound wasn’t nearly deep enough to cause any lasting damage. The construct didn’t miss a beat, slamming its shield right where they stood the very next second. It nearly crushed them into paste too – as Gabe still hadn’t recovered his footing, having gone all out in that last exchange. It certainly didn’t help they were essentially fighting in a swamp.

Luckily, Percy intervened once more, pushing their body out of the impact zone with another burst of mana. The shield caused the tar to part for a moment, sending a tall wave of liquid metal slamming against the room’s walls. It also pushed Gabe a few meters back, but that worked in their favour, helping them disengage sooner.

‘Ok… Not a terrible first try.’ Percy said.

Gabe hesitated briefly before nodding, reluctantly agreeing with that assessment.

‘Try to weave the bursts of speed into all my moves.’ he suggested.

‘Alright. I’ll let you know which way I’m pushing you a moment before I do it.’ Percy said.

Repeating the same sequence, Gabe dove against the golem once more, with Percy accelerating his descent behind the scenes. Better prepared than before, the construct firmed its stance while waiting for the attack to arrive.

But it never did.

‘Right.’ Percy said, diverting their flight to the side at the last second.

The unexpected turn allowed them to circle around the golem’s massive shield, as it awkwardly moved it, trying to trace their trajectory. Still, it was a little slower than them, allowing Gabe to roll in the air before landing a vertical slash on its scalp. Before he had the chance to split its head open, the shield was finally in the way to resist the attack, but Percy wasn’t going to let their opponent have its way.

‘Down!’ he said, adding momentum to his host’s cleave.

Swinging the shield up, the golem managed to throw them off by the time they’d cut about a third into its face – right around where the bridge of its nose would have begun if it had one. A wave of disappointment overcame the duo, though it faded once they noticed their opponent’s inability to follow-up with a counterattack. It was still on its feet, but the last blow had obviously done something.

Not wasting the opportunity, Gabe tried to land another blow with his second wing.

‘Forward!’ Percy released more mana from their back, clearly on the same page.

The burst of wind was more modest than the ones before. Their second core’s lower grade, coupled with Percy’s inexperience with the air affinity had already dried out their reserves. In fact, Gabe wasn’t

doing much better with his first core, having already exhausted most of his fire mana during the previous attack.

That said, the golem wasn't in top shape either, its grip shaking after that desperate block and the nasty wound on its noggin. Expecting another attack to its neck, the construct tried to intercept with its sword, but Gabe had seen through its moves by now. Taking advantage of their shorter stature, he crouched below the swing, before cleaving at the golem's wrists.

The hand holding the weapon was cleanly separated, though the wing fizzled out before it got through the other one too. As the heavy chunks of metal landed in the liquid, they sent a tall wave towards Gabe. A second one also rose when the construct lifted its foot to stomp them.

Luckily the viscous sludge impaired the golem's movements as much as it did Gabe's – if not even more so due to its increased bulk. Out of mana and wings both, the duo barely rolled out of the way. At least, the powerful current helped.

However, the golem didn't stop after the first step. It stomped its way towards them, trying to pulverize them before they recovered, its previous nonchalance nowhere to be seen.

The scene might have looked a little comical to an outsider, but neither Gabe nor Percy were in the mood to laugh, as they frantically dodged the golem's furious footfalls, trying to sneak in a few breaths in between. Some mana barely trickled into their cores, as a little more made its way to Gabe's back, reigniting the wings.

Though they weren't the only ones recovering. The sludge kept flowing to repair the construct, the wound on its head already halfway mended. In fact, Percy didn't miss how the discarded sword had already melted down, as the severed hand and weapon were already reforming on the golem's arm. It was currently little more than a broken shard attached to a hilt, but it wouldn't be long before it was back to its former glory.

Suffice to say, Gabe had no intention of letting his opponent complete its recovery.

'It's all or nothing!' he said, getting a mental nod back from Percy.

Leaping back to avoid another stomp, Gabe tensed both calves, before springing forward like a coiled cobra, bolting through the space between the golem's knees. And, using whatever air mana he'd managed to recover, Percy added to his host's momentum, as the latter reinforced his wings once more. The duo knew they wouldn't get through their foe's defences had they aimed for its torso or head, so they hadn't bothered trying. Their current goal was to sever another limb or two.

The golem's shield was already on its way down, in a last-ditch effort to crush the pesky vermin by its feet before they completed their stunt. But it was too late.

It wasn't just the shield, but the construct's entire upper body that landed in the black tar. It raised the tallest wave yet, submerging Gabe who was still in the process of climbing back to his feet.

The golem squirmed, trying and failing to right itself. The liquid rushed to repair it, dirtying its previously polished surface with sludge.

Gabe and Percy were out of mana again, though time was on their side for once. They estimated they would recover long before the construct did. And sure enough, they were able to finish the golem a couple minutes later without any surprises.

'And you said we need to beat two more of these things?' Percy asked grimly.

Gabe grimaced too, before nodding.

'Two stronger ones…'