Wanderer 83

Chapter 83: Moment of truth

“Cube. Start the ‘gauntlet’ challenge. Green level. User ID: 004527945512.”

“Authorization granted. Starting ‘gauntlet’ challenge, Green level. The user has already cleared wave 5. Do you wish to resume at wave 6? WARNING: Wave 6 contains a far more powerful opponent.”

‘Are you ready for this?’ Gabe asked his guest.

Another month had passed since they first cleared the last wave, breaking Percy’s record for the longest-lived clone, and by a huge margin at that. By now, they’d already grown rather skilled at seamlessly weaving their two types of mana and both sets of wings into their fighting style.

Though their strength was beginning to plateau. The only avenue that still left them a lot of room for improvement was mastering the Moirais’ trick, fusing their affinities into one. Gabe and Percy had actually made some progress in that department, but the result wasn’t quite ready to be relied upon during the fight.

‘Go for it.’ Percy replied.

“Yes.” Gabe spoke out loud.

“Choice confirmed. Wave begins in 18 rits.”

While it would have certainly been more prudent to wait longer, the two were already running out of time. Despite their relatively healthy body, Gabe’s recent promotion, and the crazy amount of soul mana Percy had invested, the patches holding their souls together were finally beginning to come undone. Their most optimistic estimates gave them a few more days together – though they figured it was best not to cut it too close.

“Wave begins in 12 rits.”

All in all, they weren't particularly happy with their odds, but it wasn't like they'd miraculously get stronger if they held on for another day or two.

Naturally, the thought of turning Gabe into a familiar had crossed Percy's mind. While his stingy host wasn't always the most pleasant to be around, Percy had still grown fond of the jellyfish-person after spending so much time fighting alongside him. That said, he'd rather not resort to that before exhausting all the alternatives. While Percy had never regretted creating his crow familiar, the jury was still out on whether he'd done right by the original Micky, as his pal had yet to recover any of his old memories.

"Wave begins in 6 rits."

Not to mention the personal cost involved with his secret art. Perhaps, he could get Orin to take care of him for a few weeks if he ended up in a coma again, though he wasn't looking forward to explaining everything to the alchemist afterwards. Then there was the question of whether he'd even find a suitable body for Gabe in the middle of the Guild…

'I'll only do it if we're out of options.'

"Wave begins. May your challenge be successful!"

Black metal poured down the cube's walls once more, the level of the liquid rising to Gabe's knees soon enough. Only then did a blob of sludge swell on the floor about a dozen meters in front of them, as their latest opponent started forming.

Of course, Gabe and Percy had tried attacking the golems in this vulnerable state in the past, but they'd only wasted their time. Despite the cube's words, the challenge wouldn't officially begin until the construct was done taking shape.

Not that it took very long, as the new golem stood tall before them mere moments later. This one had two pairs of arms, reminding Percy of the natives on Huehue. Each of its four hands held a curved sabre, their edges fanning out in a ferocious stance, tilted slightly towards Gabe. Even more unsettling was the construct's gaze, which seemed no less piercing than its weapons' tips, flooding the room with a palpable sense of oppression.

‘I have a bad feeling about this…’ Percy didn’t wait for the golem’s inscriptions to finish lighting up, hurriedly pulling the ambient mana towards their back.

Following his lead, Gabe did the same, as the stream split off, coalescing into two pairs of nascent wings. The upper ones were the widest and most majestic, made of scorching blue flames. The others were more modest, elegantly crafted out of swirling gusts of wind, carrying a faint green tint. In any case, it was a good thing they hadn’t waited…

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This time, the golem didn’t give them the chance to attack first, seizing the initiative instead. It pounced towards them like a tiger, a short-lived crater forming in the swamp where it had stood just a moment ago.

Its visage rapidly enlarged in their vision as it flew mere inches above the black substance, two of the sabres carving waves into the formerly-serene surface of the liquid metal.

As for the remaining pair, they were crossed in front of the golem’s face, clearly impatient to taste Gabe’s blood.

Flapping all four of the half-formed wings, they barely managed to escape diagonally to their right, though not before losing both left wings and getting a nasty cut below their ribs.

‘What the hell?!’

Percy moved their bottom-right wing opposite the upper-right one, to balance it out. It was a nifty trick they’d come up with in the past few weeks, taking advantage of the fact their wings weren’t actual body parts, allowing them to be shifted around somewhat freely. Their flight was a little lopsided, but hovering for a while longer wouldn’t be an issue.

‘I suppose this one won’t let us recover between rounds.’ Percy said as they rose higher, putting more distance from the ground.

‘Geez… Real dick move to change up the golems’ tactics with no warning!’ Gabe groaned.

Had the gods in charge made the previous constructs passive out of kindness? Or had it all been a ruse to lure challengers into a false sense of security?

Either way, their trouble had only just begun. Before the severed wings were done recovering, the golem tilted its head up, its eyes flashing a shade brighter, sending a chill down their spine. Then, it moved again!

It tossed its sabres in well-spaced intervals, the colossal blades spinning as they sliced through the air towards them. Even in his current state, Gabe didn’t have much difficulty manoeuvring around the projectiles, but that was beside the point.

The shockwaves Percy had expected to hear never came, the weapons spluttering into blobs of liquid the moment they made contact with the cube’s sides, rolling down the smooth walls. And the sludge constantly flowed to the golem’s feet, its sabres reforming one after another, ensuring the construct would never run out of blades to throw.

‘Shit! It’s going to tire us out eventually!’ Percy noted.

The barrage was a lot more forgiving than the rain of needles in the ‘swarm’ challenge, but it seemed like it could go on forever. While the wings didn’t use up any of Gabe’s mana, keeping them active and flying around was still mentally taxing.

‘I guess we have to go on the offense.’ Gabe shrugged.

‘Yeah. I suppose that was the plan all along.’ Percy nodded. ‘It’s not like we can get the reward you need by dodging.’

Their wings had recovered by now. They took a moment to rearrange them into their original configuration, before circling the golem cautiously. The good news was that the moment it threw each of its weapons, it was left with just two-and-a-half sabres, giving them a slight opening to attack. Though it wouldn’t be long before the construct was back to its top shape.

‘Let’s use all our mana at once.’ Percy suddenly suggested. ‘There’s no sense in rationing it, as it won’t give us a chance to disengage anyway.’

Gabe raised an eyebrow.

‘But what if we fail? We’ll be completely defenceless.’ he protested.

‘You can still verbally terminate the challenge, can’t you?’ Percy reminded him.

That was how Gabe had tried to escape from the ‘swarm’ challenge when things had gone downhill, though he’d been a moment too late, leaving him riddled with fatal wounds by the time Percy found him.

‘Right… ok. I’m going in.’ the former replied.

As soon as they dodged the next incoming sabre, Gabe reinforced the upper pair of wings with fire mana, turning them white before flapping them. Percy mirrored the motion with the lower pair, while also skilfully distributing the air mana throughout their body.

Their vision blurred for a moment, but they’d done this so many times in the past month they didn’t need to see where they were going. Reaching the golem, the first of their blazing axes cleaved at its neck, leaving a distorted afterglow in its wake.

The concentrated mana burst into a wave of force and heat upon impact, spreading outwards from the point of collision. Gabe had to actually close his eyes to shield them from the flash, rendering the duo unable to gauge the extent of the damage they’d dealt.

Still, they felt their opponent’s sabres bend and crack, though the attack ultimately failed to pierce through. But that was ok – the second wing was just behind the first.

This one finished the job, as shards of metal flew in all directions, the white blade slicing through the damaged weapons before delivering a diagonal slash on the golem's torso. The construct staggered, its inscriptions even dimming for a moment…

But it didn't collapse. Soon, the runes on its polished surface shone brightly again, as it swung the broken sabres towards Gabe.

Percy slammed the second pair of wings against one another, right in front of their chest. The burst of wind pushed them backwards, letting them narrowly dodge the fragmented edges of metal thirsting for their flesh.

"C-cube… Abort wave… End challenge!" Gabe barely got the words out as the golem was already airborne, falling rapidly towards them.

The two stumbled backwards in their desperate attempt to buy an extra fraction of a second, the shadow of the golem's visage shrouding their vision, as the viscous sludge enveloped their back, hugging their sinking body.

Their pupils widened as they stared in horror at the colossal fist just inches from their face, about to smash their head open like a watermelon!