Wanderer 84

Chapter 84: Persistence

The sickening sound of their skull cracking never came. Gabe thought it might have already happened – too fast for them to register – but Percy had experienced enough deaths to be confident this wasn't it.

Still, they held their breath, remaining motionless under the surface of the dark swamp, unsure whether the challenge had stopped in time, or whether the golem had simply lost track of them. It was most likely the former, but neither of the two was feeling brave enough to check.

Sure enough, the liquid's level dropped soon, draining into the floor, exposing their body once more. Only then did they reluctantly open their eyes, before bursting into laboured breaths a moment later, their chest heaving up and down.

'Well… That sure sucked…' Gabe said.

'Next time we fail – and there will definitely be a next time – PLEASE say the words faster.' Percy berated him.

Gabe didn't respond, focusing on refilling his cores for a while. Only after they'd fully recovered did he speak again.

'How are we going to get through this?'

Sadly, Percy had no good answer for his host, feeling just as lost. Of course, they'd encountered many difficulties during the previous waves too, but they'd had plenty of options at the time. They'd adjusted their tactics, honed their cooperation and magic, or grown more used to their opponents' moves.

This time, things weren't as simple. They had no idea how to improve enough in the next couple of days, plus the golem's response had been too fast to read. They'd basically attacked it blindly, at a speed they could hardly even grasp, yet that hadn't been enough. It had parried their offense rather easily. Despite going all out, they'd barely broken through its defences, and even then, it had deflected the trajectory of their slashes enough that they'd no longer posed a threat to its integrity.

‘You’re not going to like this, but I suggest we keep doing the exact same thing and hope we get lucky.’ Percy said.

Gabe’s jaw slackened.

‘That’s the shittiest plan ever!’ he complained.

But Percy shook his head.

‘It’s all I’ve got. Feel free to suggest something better.’

Gabe groaned as he pushed himself up, his body hurting all over. While they’d healed perfectly after the “swarm” challenge, they’d accumulated a lot of new injuries over the past few weeks. The peculiar thing was most of them had been self-inflicted. While he and Percy had done a commendable job dodging most of the golems’ attacks, the intense heat of their own spells had caused plenty of nasty burns all over their skin.

Naturally, mages possessed high innate resistance to their own magic. That said, Gabe’s blessing and bloodline already pushed his spells close to his limits. Adding the extra air mana into the mix, and the flames had grown a little too hot for comfort.

Unfortunately, beggars couldn’t be choosers. They’d needed every bit of firepower to even get this far. Plus, although Gabe had been forced to splurge a few credits on ointments and other remedies – to his great dismay – none of these injuries were life-threatening, so they’d chosen to endure them.

‘Let’s do it then. I haven’t gone through all this crap just to fail at the last juncture.’ he said resolutely.

Soon, they began the challenge anew. Knowing what to expect, they’d already prepared beforehand, waiting for the golem to toss a couple of sabres their way, before diving in for an attack. Again, the clash had been too quick and far too hectic to fathom, though it had gone slightly better than the previous one. While the construct was still alive, this time it had lost two of its arms. Perhaps, this would have been the perfect opportunity for Gabe and Percy to finish it… if they had any mana left – which they didn’t.

“Cube. Abort challenge.” the former spoke with a heavy heart once more, not giving their opponent the chance to retaliate.

And about half an hour later, they went for their third attempt, managing to land a good blow on the golem’s head, slicing a corner off. In fact, the injury had even left it disoriented for nearly half a minute, making them think this was their lucky break. Unfortunately, just when they repaired their wings enough to go for the finisher, the golem attacked, nearly beheading them before they hurriedly ended the challenge.

‘Again.’ Percy said.

This time, they tried to sneak up on the golem from behind. To their great horror, they discovered it possessed eyes at the back of its head too! Not only that, but it could easily spin its arms around, causing the clash to go no better than the previous ones!

Fifth attempt.

Abort.

Sixth. Seventh… Tenth!

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Abort. Abort… Abort!

Gabe was sitting by the side of the cube, resting against the wall. They’d recovered a few minutes ago, but they weren’t in a rush to try again. Verbally terminating the challenge and restarting whenever it suited them might seem like a great loophole – and it was, to an extent – yet it wasn’t without cost. Recovering their mana between rounds wasn’t difficult, but they had no way to heal their wounds.

By now, Gabe was a complete mess, his skin peeling and bleeding, his flesh battered and sore. Not to mention the risk of incurring much more serious injuries with each attempt. Two tries ago, they came

this close to losing an arm, narrowly getting away with a nasty gouge on their shoulder. And Gabe couldn't just ask for more life mana if they succeeded. He needed the soul mana, and he seriously doubted the cube would be generous enough to give him both.

Also, they were running out of time. Fast. Percy could feel the patches falling apart one after the other. By now, he had to get creative, shifting around the mana, trying to keep their soul from crumbling before its time.

'Let's try fusing the affinities again.' Gabe suggested. 'I know it's a long shot, but it's the only thing we haven't tried.'

Percy considered it for a few seconds.

'It's more than a long shot. The best we've managed was weaker than your air mana alone. And we need something more destructive than your all-out attack…'

Gabe grinned.

'As a wise man once said, "feel free to suggest something better."'

'Fine… but let's practice for a couple hours without starting the challenge. No sense in testing a new spell while having an angry golem trying to slice us into strips…'

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Whether it was Remior or the Vault of Magic, less than 1% of the population was born with a composite core. That said, these affinities were well understood, as they represented elements abundant in nature, such as mud, steam, or magma. So, while neither Gabe nor Percy had personally seen someone use the light affinity before, they had a pretty good idea what to expect.

Sadly, that didn't seem to help them much in mastering it.

‘Steady… keep going.’ Percy said, focused on the rotation and integrity of the small tornado between their palms.

Gabe, on the other hand, was doing his best to lower the intensity and temperature of his own fire mana, trying to match his guest’s output.

‘I think we’re nearly there.’ he said, watching the flames spin.

The air mana provided fuel for the fire, turning it hotter, while the heat allowed the air to move even faster. The two components were rapidly consumed, generating an effect more potent than the sum of its parts. The blue vortex grew brighter, though this wasn’t due to Gabe’s blessing. He was still doing his best to hold it back for now. Perhaps, they’d need to add it to the finished product later, but for now their focus was on blending the affinities together. And as the scorching winds shrunk into a ball, their shape and colour shifted, turning the tornado into something different.

A white sphere.

It was so bright, it caused Gabe to look away. In fact, it seemed even hotter than his strongest flames, though it had lost much of its substance, turning matter into pure energy.

‘So far so good.’ Percy nodded.

He couldn’t help but salivate over the prospect of fusing his own mana back home. He knew it would be harder as neither of his affinities was elemental, which meant their fusion was inherently unstable. Still, the Moirais’ books suggested it was possible.

‘Stop daydreaming and focus on the sphere!’ Gabe snapped him out of his thoughts.

‘Right.’ Percy replied as his attention returned to their project.

This wasn’t their first time getting to this point, but they needed to pour a lot more mana into the spell, and to control it much better before it could be used against the golem.

The two coordinated to increase their input at the same rate, slowly expanding the radius of the sphere, as its blinding rays grew more intense. Gabe's eyes watered even through his closed eyelids, though they didn't stop. They needed this to work. Running out of ideas, they tried to divert the beam away from their body.

Partial success.

About 70% of the light was directed to the front, though the remainder still hurt them. Even worse, the higher output combined with their rough attempts at manipulating the spell affected its stability, causing it to blink rapidly, putting it on the verge of fizzling out.

'I can't keep this up.' Gabe winced, before allowing it to come apart.

Smoke was coming out of their palms, which had received the full brunt of the fused mana.

'Man, I don't think we've improved in the last few hours at all…' Percy noted.

'Me neither… how are our souls doing?' Gabe asked.

'Not great. I've had to actively expend my willpower to keep the patches stable for a while now. If we start fighting the golem again, we'll only last a few more tries…'

Gabe plopped on the ground weakly, as Percy felt despair seeping through their connection.

'It's over. It was all for nothing.' the former said.

'It wasn't… there's still one more thing I can try doing for you if we fail to beat the golem. Though you won't like it.'

Gabe raised an eyebrow, prompting Percy to explain how his familiars worked.

‘So, you’re telling me I’ll lose all my memories and potentially end up reincarnated as some vermin, small enough to fit in my palm? And that’s the best-case scenario, assuming all the stars align? What’s even the point?!’ he asked.

‘I know it sucks. It’s why I didn’t mention it earlier. Still, it’s on the table if you want to try it.’ Percy said.

His host didn’t respond immediately, taking some time to consider his options. Eventually, he spoke.

‘Alright. If all else fails, I’m willing to give it a shot. However, I’d like to test one last thing before we resort to that.’ he said.

‘I’m listening.’ Percy replied.

‘Well, it’s nothing too revolutionary. Just a final gamble. So far, we’ve split our efforts between making the spell powerful enough to damage the golem while also controlling it to keep ourselves safe.’

Percy understood what his host was getting at.

‘You want to ditch the second part.’

Gabe nodded.

‘I don’t know if we’ll succeed, or what state my body will end up in, but it might be better than becoming an amnesiac critter.’

‘Alright. Start the challenge then.’

Naturally, they’d only get one chance, as they didn’t have the luxury of injuring themselves repeatedly to hone their suicidal attack to perfection.

Gabe went through the motions, restarting the wave, as the two summoned their wings and took to the air. The duo looked ahead as the black metal began pouring down the walls of the cube, watching their opponent form once more. And this time, there would be no giving up. In a few short minutes, Percy would finally return to Remior.

The only question was whether he'd do so alone, or with company…