

Sometimes, figuring out the solution was the hard step. Like solving a puzzle where, once you have the answer, all you need is to move around the pieces and get everything perfectly aligned. Liam had known going in that this was not one of those cases, that implementation was going to prove tougher than tying everything into place.

Standing in front of the golem, there was a sense of dread and apprehension in the pit of his stomach. Or maybe that was from having barely consumed anything other than coffee and sleep-deprivation for several days in a row. Whatever the case, Liam should've probably thought things through after having gotten some proper rest, but he knew all too well where that would lead.

If he took the chance to just reconsider his options, then there was a high likelihood that his nerves would get the better of him. Sure, in the heat of the moment he could push himself, but given the opportunity to step back and think things through? He'd try to mediate, try to find middle-grounds. He would convince himself that Khalid and Maridah's partnership could be worked around, even after he "lost" the challenge. Or maybe he'd tell the Goddess all was lost and to better go look for someone else in the list.

After all, wasn't it true what Khalid had said? That he was weak? It'd been perfectly fine to be weak back in his world, back where he DID spend every waking hour locked up in his own flat, where anything and everything he did was through a screen.

Liam wouldn't have survived the fight with the priestess on his own.

He hadn't even been capable of convincing her to lay down her arms.

It was exactly for this reason that he didn't want to take the chance to overthink this. The dice had been cast, and he'd either do the impossible or see how far his determination would take him.

Thus, Liam prepared to do what would likely be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

Reaching out to the golem, sparks danced between his fingers and the metal as he pressed his palm against the sun-baked creation. Immediately he wondered whether this was a good idea, as heat and electricity never worked well together, but grit his teeth and focused.

First, figure out exactly where the core was.

Roughly, he knew it to be within the golem's stomach. It was the safest place to put it. The "gut" provided thicker protection, while also being close enough to the legs to give its walking better power and control.

Without any proper mana-sensing abilities, all Liam could rely on was on the wrigglers within his arm. He started off by suckling on the golem at a "mild" exertion for sixty Mississippi's, stopped, and then moved to a different position to try again. Much as he'd suspected, the amount of mana he got out of each attempt varied.

To make sure his test was reliable, Liam would expend that mana right afterwards, and painted a number from 1 to 10 on the spot he'd used. This way, he'd graph out how "easy" it felt to drain the construct on each spot.

Bit by bit, he worked his way around the golem, patiently suckling then expending mana in the form of random sparks. By the second hour, he'd finally found the spot where he could "get" the most mana out of a single attempt, meaning it was also the spot nearest to the core. According to the scribbles, it looked like the core was roughly level with its bellybutton, and closer to its back than its gut.

With that step over, he now needed the very hard step of establishing a direct link to the thing.

Between him and the core there was probably a meter's worth of highly compacted and very dense metal created out of a wood-metal mana emulsion. For the purposes of his objective, this wasn't quite as bad as it being made out of literal rubber, but wood-mana and anything made by it was insulative in nature. At least the metal made it less so.

Gritting his teeth, Liam began to push some lightning through his hand and into the golem. The energy struggled at first, and immediately after began to disperse in every direction. He cut off the flow before he wasted any more mana.

Khalid's eyes were burning holes into the back of his head from across the courtyard.

Liam grit his teeth.

"Need to keep it from dispersing."

Was there any way he could successfully path the electric mana towards the core? Not possible when the jolt would move and disperse faster than he could react. He also didn't have any actual control when it went beyond his palm.

He'd need to take the painfully slow method, then.

“If there’s too much material in the way, then I just need to remove some layers.” Placing his palm on the metal, he began to suck to charge up, filling up his reserves until sparks began to arch across his skin, blue veins glowing underneath his skin. “Maximize output, minimize surface, don’t give it time to disperse...”

Only the very tip of his index finger was touching the golem.

Liam focused. He needed his arm to take every bit of charge it had, and unleash it in one go. Mentally, he tried to visualize a bucket full of water, a bucket that was on his shoulder, and that he needed to toss over to the very tip of his finger.

Unleashing it all, a rapid burst of lightning worth roughly a tenth of his capacity unleashed a small flash, followed by a steady stream that let go of the rest.

“Again.”

Draining the golem, he prepared, tensing. Another flash, followed by a stream.

“Again.”

He drained his target to fill himself up, trying not to marvel at just how immense its reserves must be for him to have reached capacity and the stream not having weakened any. Liam focused on the feeling as mana surged from his shoulder, traversing down his arm, and into the golem. He paid very close attention with how little energy that initial wave was pulling along.

“Again.”

The electric mana was like a wave moving across a pool. It shook the “other” mana, but it only moved a small portion of his reserves. He wanted a tsunami, so he began pulling on himself, trying to mentally draw everything towards his shoulder.

ZAP

A bolt of lightning arched from his shoulder into his leg, Liam held back the shriek but could not avoid collapsing as his leg went entirely limp.

There was a lilting sound of chuckling behind him.

“Again.”

Too much charge in one spot.

If a giant tsunami wasn’t how to do this, then... he imagined his arm being split into four segments, with his elbow marking the center. Slowly, he began to pool the mana from

each section near the back of it. It was almost like having to write something with one hand while listening to a conversation about something else and talking about a third subject. Liam's mind felt itself strain and pull, the sleep deprivation working like a noise machine in the background, trying to distract him.

Four times his focus slipped, each time unleashing a painful jolt of mana through his arm or body. But during his fifth try, he managed to properly pool the electricity the way he wanted.

When he tried to unleash it, the whole thing burst out of every pore at once, creating hundreds of tiny sparks of lightning.

He'd mistimed it.

"Again."

Drain mana, push the tip of his index against the golem, pool his mana into four sectors.

And...

Spark-rain.

Another mistiming.

"Again."

Visualize the electric mana running down his arm, moving from the point of high-charge to a point of low-charge. He couldn't unleash them all at the same time otherwise the middle charges would spread in every direction at once. He needed to unleash from his shoulder, then bicep, elbow, and wrist. Each step should be ever so slightly faster than the last as the charge coursing down his arm would grow.

ZAP

"Again."

There was no shortage of attempts, no shortage of mana available for him to drain and use. The golem stood as if a mountain and him with nothing but a spoon to dig at its seemingly endless reserves. But bit by bit, he'd chip away until he got it right. Again and again and again. Every time something went off in the wrong place, at the wrong time, but he was getting closer, he could taste it.

"Again!"

Liam's arm felt numb from how many shocks had gone through it. No longer trying to keep his arm still, he swung it as if to slap the golem, a whip that lashed out and missing by just a hair.

ZAP

He froze, eyes widening. It was impossible to miss, a tiny red spot barely half a dime in width, glowing hot and slowly cooling down.

“Shit.”

Hastily absorbing more mana from the golem, Liam prepared to repeat his attempt, charging and splitting the charges up, and-

A bolt of lightning burst out of his shoulder, striking the ground. He'd rushed it, improperly splitting the mana.

“Nonononono...” He cursed, trying to drain more mana and stopping as he saw the red hot spot had vanished already. His jaw clenched shut, he spoke through gritted teeth.

“Again.”

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The air was heavy with the smell of ozone, heat and static crackling together.

SNAPZAP

The two sounds mixed together, a barely audible snapping of fingers followed by thunder. Each time, the courtyard illuminated in a flash of silver light, only long enough to illuminate the two figures standing there. One that couldn't help but sway, body too exhausted to properly bother with balancing itself. The other a metal golem that had not moved an inch in days.

SNAPZAP

The human's right arm glowed with bluish lightning-like veins, aether smeared across his shoulder and forearm glowing a ghostly pale light. Each swing of the arm made the aether shrink ever so slightly, the arm ravishing the mana-rich substance.

SNAPZAP

There was a spot on the golem's back, glowing red, barely the size of a plate, pulsing at the rhythm of the human's swing. Each time he reached out, unleashing a bolt upon the metal construct, the glowing spot would grow ever so slightly brighter.

SNAPZAP

Fingers bled, skin cracked and blackened, each time Liam swung, the world tilted, threatening to topple him over, forcing his feet to dance to catch him before he fell. The attacks were irregular, but the gesture had been burned into his mind by now, ingrained out of hours of mindless repetition.

SNAPZAP

The skin of the golem distended ever so slightly, a pinprick of white hotness that broke, releasing a single drop of molten slag that trailed down the golem's back until it cooled half-way down. One of countless others, each droplet making the trail thicker and deeper, trying to reach the ground inch by inch.

Liam inhaled a bit too quickly, coarse and dried throat breaking into coughing. The heat from the ever so slowly melting golem was like standing in front of a pyre. His face cooked and bristled, sweat drenching every inch of his body and copiously staining the ground underneath his feet.

The pain had vanished at some point, replaced by nothing but numbness.

SNAPZAP

Liam had missed the swing, missjudging his distance, fingers passing a full foot away from the metallic surface. Despite this, there was an arch of lightning connecting his bleeding skin with the glowing-hot spot of melting golem. His arm screamed in hunger, then drained the aether slathered over his skin.

Vaguely, the human remembered taking the aether from his pouch, but he also remembered not having this much aether on his person. Thoughts and memories jumbled as he took another swing, squinting through the blinding flash of light and the searing heat.

SNAPZAP

It was all blurring together, he could barely see, eyes too teared up from the extreme heat, head stuck within a ringing bell. But if he stopped now, the golem would cool down again, and most of his progress would go out the window.

So he swung.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Every passing moment created a growing pool of molten droplets of metal, staining the ground in hissing spots that mingled with the blood from his arm.

He continued until something within the golem jostled, and the construct twitched.

The red-hot glow increased tenfold, a blast of volcano-like air blasted out and around him, the spreading hotness pouring out to the ground as if the giant were bleeding out through its back. Except the blood was molten metal. Hissing flames and steam spread across the ground.

Something came out of the injury, something spherical the size of a bowling ball, crackling white and violently vibrating with sparks. The object was letting out a shrieking sound as cracks began to form on its surface.

Despite being sleep-deprived, he realized he'd made a miscalculation. The intense metal-melting heat from his constant attacks upon the golem had heavily damaged the core, a grave injury that was exacerbated once it had directly absorbed the lightning mana. The pure mana within the core was shifting, copying the electric mana and becoming increasingly unstable. An instability it could not contain.

It was going to blow.

Someone was screaming at him, but it was impossible to discern anything over the sound of the core's death-throes.

A mantle of darkness rushed through and around the golem and the core, a sudden wave of coolness followed by the shrieking core shooting upwards. Liam's head snapped to follow it as the blinding white core was launched into the sky with incredible speed.

Like a firework, the thing trailed a hissing scream as the white spot of light went up and up and up, shrinking further and further even as its brilliance only grew, until-

**BANG**

Night turned into day, Liam's pupils painfully shrunk into pinpricks as he was suddenly staring at a second sun. The sky was covered by branching archs of lightning spreading

all the way to the horizon. The heat followed a moment after, and the human screamed, covering his face and looking away, the dark mantle descending over him right as-

# BOOM

The explosion was like a punch to his whole body, as if someone had dropped a mountain on him, shoving him down with more force than his legs could sustain. The very ground underneath him reverberated with the power to rattle his bones.

*“That was very foolish.”* A Goddess’ voice whispered into his mind as a wave of refreshing soothing healing coursed through his whole body. *“Incredible and beyond impressive, but foolish.”*

Whatever witty response Liam wanted to say died as his exhaustion finally caught up to him.