

Before Dorian left, he made sure to pocket the leftover Relics. He ended up with a nice haul: three Scales, a minor Fang, and a strange purple, swirly bead. All of them brimmed with Bloodline Essence. *Perfect!*

He climbed out of the Serpent's mouth, still grinning, and was met by a sea of officials on the shore. They gaped at the sight of him, perched on this floating barge of a Torchdragon corpse. For a moment no-one spoke; they shuffled their feet and looked to one another, baffled. They seemed like they weren't quite sure what to make of this.

"Greetings!" Dorian called, waving. He nodded to the Torchdragon. "Lovely evening for fishing, isn't it?"

These guards were Heilong forces.

In *theory* they should in some way punish him. Detain him, perhaps. But Dorian was also, in *theory*, a Heilong higher-up—and therefore also their boss. So all they could do was gape and splutter.

Dorian shrugged. *Let's try this new Technique out, shall we? [Nightstalker]!*

He hopped back into the mouth of the Beast, dipping into a pool of darkness.

And vanished feet first.

He was swallowed by nothingness. Not quite darkness; he'd been shunted to a place where his physical senses failed him, and all he could do was grope around with his Spirit. No sound. No light. He was a cloak of cold, disembodied sensation, moving in mind if not flesh. He was in a space that was not empty. Instead it was filled with nothing—a subtle but important distinction. To the first-time teleporter, it would've been severely disorienting.

Luckily this wasn't his first time with teleportation. All of these Techniques worked much the same: by shunting you into an in-between space—in this case a Shadow Dimension, where the Laws of Darkness touched upon the physical Realm—and then shunting you back out again.

All he needed was an exit point.... there! Right behind a row of mute outlines, the imprints of the officials on the Shadow Realm, was an open space. Dorian dove into it.

He emerged head first, did a ballerina's flip in the air, and landed with a catlike, sinewy grace.

And then promptly fell flat on his ass when he forgot he was missing a foot, which rather ruined the effect.

The officials whirled around. Gasps peppered the air.

"I'll be heading off now," said Dorian with a spry grin. "Stay safe! Oh—and sorry for the property damage. You can keep the corpse." He jerked his head at the still-floating Torchdragon. "I'm sure that'll suffice as compensation. Good day!"

Without waiting for a response he stepped into shadow once more, and was gone.

He went back home in jumps, flitting between shadows, stumbling over himself like a drunkard, giggling a little. This new Technique, this Nightstalker, was *excellent*.

Floop! Another twenty paces covered. *Floop!* Now forty. He'd jumped maybe ten times, and was still at close to 90% of his qi pool. He cackled.

This was a game-changer! *Imagine if I had this during my fight with the Torchdragon. Could've just teleported behind him, and been done with it!*

He frowned. *Say... Just how wide is this thing's jumping radius?*

Next jump he stretched as far as he could.

He ended up somewhere near sixty paces forward.

Fascinating. It's not that far, but I assume it'll increase as I level this thing. And it should prove quite useful if I need a quick escape...

He thought again about that sweet Sinkhole, that Resonance singing to him. An untapped wellspring of possibility, *right there!*

He was going back. That much was certain. First he'd go home, figure out what to do with this peg leg of his, and have a rest. Right now he was running off sheer excitement; he was bound to crash soon enough!

But tomorrow...

I'll be bringing this funky new trick. And my upgraded Heilong Javelin, two, with its Second Forme...

He'd be back very soon for Round Two. He licked his lips. *And this time, I'm the hunter!*

He stumbled upon Kaya when he came back, halfway through downing five bowls of noodle soup. They looked at each other, and froze.

"Since when did you get to mid-Profound?" said Dorian, one brow raised.

She beamed. "I went to the Church of Jez and made them teach me all their power-getting tricks! I went up so fast the Church leader told me to knock it off. It was *awesome*." She slurped down a noodle. "See—they've got all these stuffy rules. All these dumb ideas about 'morality' or whatever. But if you kinda ignore all that stuff and do your own thing, you can get so much more done!"

Dorian blinked. *Huh. She almost sounds like me. Aww... she's learning!* He smiled, and was surprised to find he meant it. "Hey, that's great! I'm proud of you."

"Mmm! And what's up with *you*, huh?"

She squinted at his missing foot.

"This?" He wiggled it about. "Don't worry. It's alright—just a little fishing accident. It'll grow back."

She looked concerned. "Uhhhhhh.... are you *sure*?"

"Yeah. I might cook up an Elixir to speed it up—who knows?"

"Hmm." She scratched her cheek, as though chewing on a question. Then—"Okay!" She went back to her noodles.

Huh.

He waved a hand, yawning. “I’m turning in early tonight, I think! Big day ahead of me. I’m going back to snag a few more fish. Hopefully *without* losing a limb this time.”

“Fun!” She wiped some sauce off her cheek. “I’ll go back to my place, too—try to wrestle away a few of those secret Techniques they’ve got holed up in there, I think...” She grinned. Good luck!”

And that was that. He was a little surprised she didn’t pry further. *Huh*. Dorian rather liked this new version of Kaya. No fuss.

Shrugging, he went to his quarters.

He didn’t need to prep much for tomorrow. As far as he was concerned all of his materials were contained within himself, and with his new movement Techniques his foot was hardly an impediment! There were only two things to do before round two, really.

The first was rest, of course.

The second...

There were still three Bloodline Relics burning a hole in his Interspatial Ring.

Let’s see if my grand theory of fatness holds up!

He swallowed the first, felt it drop down his body and nestle into his chock-full Spirit Sea.

His Sea and Core churned as the Relic let out its Bloodline, squishing up against their walls, forcing them to flex out; he felt briefly nauseated, less ‘oh-gods-I’m-about-to-hurl,’ more of an unpleasant churning of the gut.

But then, after a few terse seconds, his Sea eased into place like clay hardening into a new mold.

[Level-up!]

[Bloodline Density]

[51% -> 53%]

[Core Saturation]

[106% -> 109%]

Dorian waited. He didn’t *seem* to be falling apart...He shrugged. *Here goes nothing!* He downed another.

[Level-up!]

[Bloodline Density]

[53% -> 55%]

[Core Saturation]

[109% -> 112%]

It took a few minutes for his stomach to settle, but once it did it felt... weirdly good.
Last one.

[Level-up!]
[Bloodline Density]
[53% -> 55%]

[Core Saturation]
[109% -> 112%]

And one more time his Spirit Sea stretched out, deforming and reforming to seamlessly enclose the new qi...

He probed his Spirit Sea, and found that its walls were as strong as ever. *Hmm.* No visible stretch marks... could it be like growing a muscle? The old bits didn't get stretched; it simply built upon itself, expanding, growing ever more robust. It didn't *weaken* as it grew—rather the opposite.

What could be the limiting factor here?

Dorian scratched his chin, frowning. *Here's another theory. What if the only limiting factor is physical space?*

That was—the Sea and its Core within could grow as big as his body allowed!

If this was the case he hardly needed to worry at all. Qi was some of the easiest stuff to store in the world, in part because it was mostly nonphysical. It was lighter and more fluid than a gas, and a Spirit Sea's worth of it could be held in a space the size of a fingernail! Though a creature's organs often varied greatly in size—a dragon's heart might be ten times that of a human's, for instance—Spirit Seas and cores seldom got any smaller than a sesame seed, and seldom bigger than a fingernail. All a creature's magic, stored in one tiny space.

Dorian's Perfect-Grade Spirit Sea at present was likely about the same as a typical adult Sky-Realm dragon. Maybe a fingernail, nestled under his heart. Which meant it had quite some room to grow. How *much* before his body really started to protest was in question—but could he get to 200%? 500%? 1000%, even and beyond?!

...

Interesting.

He licked his lips. *I suppose we'll find out, won't we?*

Day Two. Morning. Dorian went back to the Sinkhole, only to find that it'd been barred by security. Now double the number of guards milled about the gate.

He snorted, stepped into shadow, and promptly exited on the other side of the door.

Whistling, he went up to the edge of the Sinkhole—a Sinkhole still bobbed with ruined fishnets and the crushed remains of cages and even a segment of aqueduct, half-sunk into an edge... *oops*.

He closed his eyes, took a breath in, let it leak back out, and with it leaked any other nonsense cluttering his mind until only the task before him lay in his mind.

Then he opened his eyes, summoned the Javelin, and stepped into shadow with conviction. *Round two!*