

There were times when it was right to push. When opportunity crested like a wave, and it was the task of the master cultivator to ride that oh-so-thin line straddling destruction and transcendence. So when Dorian felt those Resonances swirling below him, he'd grinned and bared his teeth.

Bring it on!

Then he felt the Dweller, and his face changed.

Dorian was beyond the peak of the Earth Realm. He was as formidable a foe as they came in a mortal plane. Yet *this* aura was a well of gravity so vast it warped the very fabric of the shadow realm. So vast it made shimmering stretch-marks and yawning micro-tears up and down the Sinkhole waters—something that, by the *godsdamned laws of matter*, should not be possible.

But this aura did not care about the rules of this realm. For it belonged to a deity.

Deities could very rarely enter a Lower Realm. There were only two possibilities—one, they were inhabiting an avatar, a follower who'd donated his body as a host. They'd only be able to express a fraction of their powers.

Or two—and *this* Dorian suspected was the case here—it was *wounded*. And so its cultivation had dropped just enough, to some Pseudo-Sky-Realm state, to let it seek refuge in a Lower Realm...

This thing had been asleep. It might well have been in hibernation, nursing wounds centuries, perhaps *millennia* old, dormant.

But now there had been too much chaos of its Bloodline. There was a shock. It was waking, and likely because of *Dorian*.

Shit.

Even his presence here seemed to agitate those Resonances below. And in turn the Dweller grew more lucid—

There were times when it was right to push.

Now was most certainly not one of those times!

Dorian made a mad dash into the shadows. He was spat out in a tree-shaded bank of the Sinkhole, shivered at the warm of the sun, and whirled to the waters. He watched every ripple, wide-eyed, tensed from head to toe.

Deep below, the resonances simmered...

And, as the seconds trickled by, he was relieved to find that that was all they did. Boiling like a steaming pot over an extinguished fire. It was *he* that'd agitated them, he realized; he was an intruder upon their lair. But now he'd vanished into nowhere. With him gone their rage was losing steam. Those auras down below seemed to be settling back down into a normal-ish

cadence, wafting to and fro...But still he waited there, unmoving, almost expecting a Torchdragon to come charging up from the depths, screeching for his head.

Were Torchdragons solitary creatures, as most dragons were? Even mother dragons often cared little for their babes...it was a fair bet—or so he hoped—to guess that none would tear up the surface, seeking to even the score...

Still, only after sitting until the sun struck noon did Dorian let out a sigh of relief.

He gave the Sinkhole one last backward glance before strolling off.

Whatever—I certainly got what I came for!

Two Cores lay snug in his Interspatial Ring, begging to be absorbed.

If he wanted to tap this well again—and he most certainly did—he'd need a little more discretion. No sauntering in willy-nilly and chucking his Javelin about. He didn't fancy the thought of waking that monster nestled in the brooding dark.

Bah. I'll deal with this later.

For now, he had more interesting concerns.

Namely—chugging hyper-concentrated Torchdragon Bloodline until he either passed out, blew up, or got stupid huge!

The Heilong Estate, newly rebuilt, would make a fine site for his breakthrough. It was still a mess of scaffolding and workers milling about, struggling to slap steel plates back on its two main towers, but the bare-bones of a residence was here. Cultivation room—sealed blacksteel crates—littered the grounds, hauled in from other estates. Temporary residences that looked like army barracks ran along the perimeter.

As Dorian neared, he saw hundreds of Heilong grunts in grid formation arrayed out on the patchy wasteland that'd once been the front lawn. Each of them was armed with a shiny new Stick. As they waved the Sticks about, chests and heads held high, Dorian was pleased to see they almost seemed to know what they were doing.

“*Ha!*” A shout went up. Then a plume of fire scorched the air, dozens of tiny blasts fused to one.

Dorian raised a brow. *Not bad! Not bad at all.* They'd certainly improved from the bumbling mess from his last visit. He could see this troubling an Earth-Realm armada. Given enough Sticks in enough hands, maybe—just maybe—they had a shot of holding off the bulk of the invasion by themselves!

But the bulk meant nothing unless they could *also* repel the elite among the Ugoc ranks.

A Sky-Realm dragon, though? *That... maybe not so much.* Just one such beast could devastate the lot of them.

It would have to fall to Dorian to take those nasty creatures on, it seemed...

His fist clenched around his Interspatial Ring.

“Ah! Io. Well met!” Bin seemed as cheery as Dorian had ever seen him. “Training has been going most smoothly, as you plainly see.” He pumped a fist. “We shall drive back those scum savages before the moon is out!”

Guild Head Thon ambled by his side, sniveling and dabbing at his hairy face. “Isn’t it godsdamned beautiful?” he whispered, staring out at the field of glinting weaponry. “My babes—all grown up...”

“...Right,” said Dorian. He turned to Bin. “Anywho—have you got any spare cultivation chambers?”

“Of course. Use them as you please.”

“Lovely!”

He made to stroll off. But before he could, a Heilong messenger scampered up to them. “At the gates!” He gasped. “We have a visitor!”

“Who?” said Bin with a frown.

“Hello!” said a sprightly voice. They all whirled around.

Pebble--now Crag--was strolling casually up the field, whistling. Behind him, yelling, streamed a horde of harried guards. “There he is!” cried one, pointing a trembling finger at Crag. “Seize him!”

Crag paid the man no heed.

“Sire,” he said to Bin with a bow, “Might I commend you on your compound’s stellar defenses! It took me the time it takes to burn a joss stick to crack them—and I’m usually through these in a blink!”

“Who the hells are you?” said Bin flatly.

“Easy. He’s with me,” said Dorian. He raised a brow. “So! How goes it on the Outskirts?”

“Wonderfully!” Crag beamed. “I’ve now got total control of all the gangs! It took some effort to convince Feiyang—he got real mad about it—but he saw reason after I plucked out his other eye! I guess *saw* is the wrong word there, isn’t it?” He scrunched up his face. “Anyways. He’s moody and pouting and stuff, but he’ll get over it. It’s for his own good. ‘Snot just his eye that got

poofed—his brain also got a bit screwy after you poked him. Retirement will be good for him—I told him as much!”

“This is great news.” Dorian grinned. “Thon! Might I introduce you to Crag, the new leader of the Outskirts in all but name? And Crag—this is Guild Head Thon. *He’ll* be the one supplying your tens of thousands of new slaves—sorry, citizens—with the weaponry they’ll need to defend their homes.”

He grabbed Thon’s big hairy hand and Crag tiny smooth one and put them together. Both of them looked a tad mystified. “Work out a deal, you two, or we might not exist in two weeks!”

On that happy note, he gave them a parting wave and set off. “In the meantime, I’ve got some breakthroughs to make.”

The inside of the cultivation room felt like its own pocket dimension. No sound trickled in from the outside, and the walls, floors, and ceilings were all a seamless matte-black fabric. It was designed to absorb and reflect all qi. No leakage in nor out.

Breathing deep, Dorian teased out the first of the Beast Cores. For a second he let it play across his fingertips.

He paused. *That first core took me from 0-100% saturation. That first core threw me a new Spirit Weapon Form and a crazy useful ability. Now I have two cores at my fingertips!* He could hardly fathom what’d come next. *Either I pop like a balloon, or—as I suspect—I ascend to a new, almost frighteningly girthy form...*

Here goes nothing!

Tepidly, he reached out with his spirit, his Bloodline, and made contact.

And the core answered with vigor.

Pitch-black Bloodline qi teeming with power rushed into him—

[Level-up!]

[Bloodline Density]

[57% -> 63%]

[Core Saturation]

[115% -> 120%]

There it is.

[Level-up!]

[Bloodline Density]

[63% -> 67%]

[Core Saturation]

[120% -> 124%]

And then—

HRGNDNGNGGG—

He doubled over, gasping, as his stomach bloated up inside of him. It was all he could do to writhe there as the walls of his Spirit Sea stretched and twisted, struggling to hem in the new chunks of Bloodline.

Until they didn't. Until his belly once more started to settle.

[Level-up!]

[Bloodline Density]

[67% -> 70%]

[Core Saturation]

[124% -> 129%]

Yes! More, more!

Then, an instant later as a sharp pain erupted in his stomach—*NO!* And he keeled over, trying desperately not to shit himself.

When they sing of this in the hymns and the legends—the moment the world's first super-Earth-Realm creature, the almighty Io, was born, thought Dorian through teary eyes, they had better omit this part!

He went back to moaning and flopping on the floor.

[Level-up!]

[Bloodline Density]

[70% -> 73%]

[Core Saturation]

[129% -> 134%]

Oh, Saints! Have mercy! It was so much *worse* than the first time! Maybe because each spurt of qi strained his pool. Maybe because each spurt came so much larger than it came the last time

he'd done this. And yet it was also so much *better*—his core saturation was rising so fast he was grinning despite it all.

He was rewarded with one last gift for his trouble.

[Level-up!]

[Weapon Technique: Void Shield] Lv. 0 -> 1

[Wraps a shadow around any incoming qi attack, swallowing it whole. Its qi cost is proportional to the magnitude of the attacking Technique]

Dorian cackled. *About time a defensive Technique came my way!*

Then he thought about that last sentence, and froze.

Qi... cost?

I'm about to get so fat qi cost is immaterial to me!

Does this mean—so long as I amass a truly obscene amount of qi—I can now void nearly any incoming Technique?!

My, oh, my...

At first he'd thought he was totally screwed going into this. Against Nijo and his god-powers and his endless fleets and his hordes of Sky-Realm Law-filled critters, he'd have put his odds at under one percent to *survive*, much less win!

But now a tiny ray of hope was peeking through the gray clouds...

If he could just keep this up. Keep stacking up qi. Keep picking up and honing and leveling a suite of potent Techniques...

His eyes hardened. *I just need to keep. On. Pushing. As fast as I godsdamned can! From now on, there is no such thing as too much!*