

Chapter 82: Alive

My Qi was empty. The snake woman was still alive, though she was currently held down by all members of our party. Then, though, she suddenly sunk into the floor, vanishing into the shadows.

A moment later, as my vision turned red and my world tipped onto its side, I saw Liam, too, lose cohesion and turn into a black blob.

Then, for a bit, the world was filled with dancing shadows and bestial howls. I saw claws and fangs and horrid monstrosities in the darkness.

The fight lasted only an instant. At the end, Liam returned from the shadows, his body now covered in lacerations, and bites, bleeding from a myriad wounds. Still, he grinned. "Made it," he whispered. "Wellspring."

Only a few seconds later, the snake reappeared, mauled and broken, barely clinging to life. She... had not expected an attack in the shadows, and never held that kind of battle, so Liam's rather suicidal charge took her by surprise.

He'd been brutal, too.

Both her eyes were clawed out, turning her blind, and bite marks like those from a wild beast covered her side, having torn off huge chunks of shadowy flesh. Her body seemed to barely hold its cohesion together, but already, shadows twirled to repair it.

Liam had run out of Qi before finishing her, but that didn't matter.

Emilia's mace came down, breaking her face, and a moment later, icicles made by Evelyn and Ann sunk into her flesh, until she stopped moving.

The camp was silent for a moment, and I staggered.

Briefly, I remembered the gaping wound in my chest. The flame of divinity burnt for a moment longer, then left like a flickering echo.

All the strength that had fueled my body suddenly disappeared, leaving me feeling hollow and weak.

A small, terrible smile appeared on my face. I really was hollow now, wasn't I? Who could boast about having a hole in their ch-

Then, I fell unconscious, once again.

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Awakening was a soup of pain, made worse by the fact that I saw everything and everyone from a hundred different perspectives. Maybe more than that.

The pain was a red hot iron diving into my brain. I tried to let out another scream but all that left my mouth was a wet gurgle.

Ah, nice. Punctured lung. Lovely.

[Fio. Cycle your Qi. Try to breathe. Your left lung is punctured.]

Okay. Luckily, the stab wasn't too thick. Only about... an inch in diameter?

[It's bad, but you can breathe.]

I could. Slowly, forcing myself to be as calm as possible, I drew in a small breath. My right lung moved, and oxygen slowly reached my blood. It hurt like hell, but... what was another bit of pain on top?

[Ah. Sorry. I can...]

Suddenly, some of the pain faded. I only saw darkness again. 'What... was that?' I asked. It was honestly hard to even form cohesive thoughts.

[Reflection. You can... see and walk through mirrors near you now? Something like that. It's still raining, so there are a lot of mirrors. I took that part of your perception. Easier for me to filter through than you. Let me see if I can't...]

My vision changed again as Cass tried out something. Images after images flashed by my mind, distorted, strange reflections of reality. The darkness before my inner eye suddenly became awash with twisting, blinding colours, and honestly I wanted to close my eyes.

Too bad they were already closed.

A few seconds passed where my world was awash with twisted brightness, until it finally settled.

Once again, my perception was different. The new... perspective, I supposed, joined my aura sense. I could already feel the world around me, my range having expanded again after the battle.

Now, though, in addition to the strange sense of my surroundings, there was also a clear visual image of the world around me. I could see all my companions, despite my closed eyes, and I could see myself.

Wow did I look bad.

The rain had washed away a lot of blood, but more still was oozing from my wounds, as Ann desperately tried to stem the bleeding. Oh. I was... still lying in the mud? Only a couple seconds must have passed...

[Two minutes. You were out for two minutes, Fio. Ann had been doing chest compressions on you.]

‘Oh crap.’

Just to calm my girlfriend down, I put in the effort it took to lift my eyelids. Honestly, there was little point to the motion. I felt raindrops falling into them eliciting tiny bits of pain, but they faded again moments after.

Okay, maybe it was worth it, to see Ann’s face.

She was... crying. Her red hair was a dark crimson, stained by the rain, and hung down in muddy curls. The rain mixed with her tears on her face, dripping down onto me. My ears popped and I could hear her sobbing.

“C’mon!” she cried, pressing down on my chest one more time, prompting me to cough painfully, bloody chunks of flesh evicting themselves from my body. I spat on the ground next to me, the dark mud tinged red.

“Fio!” Ann yelled again, suddenly turning to look at my face, her scarlet eyes lighting up with hope.

Despite all the pain in every tiny part of my body, I gave her my best smile. “Heya Ann. Sorry, I-” my clever line was rudely interrupted by another bloody cough. I was doing that a lot recently. I drew in a ragged breath and finished my sentence. “I must’ve... slept in. Did I... miss anything?”

Slowly but surely, Ann’s lips curled as well, a tiny smile mixing onto her face, and she started laughing and crying at the same time, drawing in deep gasps of wet air. She even smacked the ground next to me, scattering some bloody mud through the air.

"You're so grounded!" she cried in the middle of a horribly sad laugh. "Don't do that, Fio! Don't ever do it again!"

I was more glad than ever to have reached wellspring. The two minutes of calmly laying down and bleeding out were enough to regain some Qi. I immediately used some golden Qi to keep my insides inside, and some mirror Qi to move myself.

Slowly, gently, my arm reached up, and I wiped a tear off Ann's face. "Come on, I must've... looked really cool, didn't I?" I grinned.

She laughed again, her body wracked and struggling to cope with it all. Eventually, she managed to get out a couple words. "Yeah," she said between quiet sobs. "Thank- Thank you."

Then I let my hand drop.

'Cass, monitor my vitals. Make sure I keep breathing. Sync if you have to, but please, stay away from my pain receptors, alright?'

My keeper gave me a small affirmation, then I felt a bit more secure. I coughed again, lighting up the flares of pain in my chest, but it didn't matter for now.

"I'm so proud of you, Ann," I say, taking laboured breaths, and still feeling short on air. "Liam, too. You're all amazing." Another breath. "I'll... take a nap now."

Her face fell.

"Don't be... dramatic," I chided, then coughed again. Wow, I really unlocked a whole new stage of agony. "I'll wake back up."

She laughed again, a horribly sad giggle that almost shattered my heart. "You better! Or I'll come after you and kick your butt."

I gave one last smile, then fell asleep.

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Somehow, the next time I woke up, everything hurt even worse than before. At least I wasn't walking this time. Instead, I was gently floating in midair.

Rain still pattered down on my face, much more gentle now, and the wind was a cool breeze.

My hair was, however, still sticky with blood. In fact, all my clothes were caked in it. The rain did, however, let me see the outside world, overlapping with my Qi sense. My ears were...

better. No longer ringing. I could actually hear the sound of droplets coming down on my face, and my friends marching.

Other than that, there was the rustling of leaves in the wind. The storm had let off a little. But... there were definitely more footsteps than there were supposed to be.

I focussed on my sense and the images Cass projected into my mind. This kind of sight had limited range, and was a little blurry at times, since it was a patchwork of distorted reflections, but it was omnidirectional.

A quick review of what was going on around me told me that yes, there *were* actually more people. We'd picked up some refugees. Lots of people I had never seen, and a couple I had. Someone from the market, someone who'd been at a blacksmith at the same time as me, an alchemist I'd brought supplies to once.

Every last one an Edian.

They looked... well, I couldn't exactly say *worse* than me, but definitely more demoralized. These were people who had lost their homes to monsters. People who might've only seen the wilderness a few times. Now they were being escorted through monster infected woods by a group of ragtag Reflectors riddled with wounds.

Should not have thought of wounds. The reminder of their existence made pain in my lungs flare up. I forcefully made my breathing more shallow, trying to take in only as much air as I needed.

At the same time, I tried to envision how Liam moved his Qi. His technique had been made for turning flesh malleable - both for being a good scout, but also to truly reshape his body. I could surely take some of his patterns and apply them to me...

My next couple minutes of consciousness were spent cycling Qi. I took it slow, combining multiple tricks from multiple people to create a method that worked for me. It was a patchwork at best, but with my recent... intense... practice, I made progress faster than I usually would have.

Ah. Right, that was something my master had once told me. Advancing, then consolidating your experience. Push your boundaries, then settle your strength. I suppose now, I was onto consolidating.

Everything about my use of Qi had progressed by leaps and bounds, though at a cost. I had cried blood and cut up my insides, but I had progressed. Now it was time to settle into that new power.

Briefly, I took up a moment to turn to the side, and cough up some blood. Yeah, okay, there was definitely more internal damage from overly straining my Qi pathways. But it would heal, I hoped.

It did mean that I needed to be careful now.

Strangely, my mind still felt fresh. Well... not exactly fresh. It had been more than through the wringer, but by now the headaches were so constant they were more of a background hum. So, I simply remained with my eyes closed, and focused on moving my Qi.

Eventually, I was interrupted by a small tap on my forehead. I didn't bother opening my eyes, but I did focus more attention on my outside senses again. "Ann?" I croaked. Wow, my throat was scratchy. "Water, please?"

She smirked. "Really? Not even gonna look at me?" Despite her protest, she brought a small cup-like thing to my lips and poured some water into my mouth.

"Your beauty is too radiant," I countered after taking a moment to swallow.

"Oh my gosh," she said, then giggled. "Seriously, though. Your skin is glowing. It's making people nervous."

"Ah," I said, then checked. "So it is." Golden body did indeed make my skin glow. A part of my current Qi circulation was taken from that Skill, and really, most of it was. What I was doing now was more a special application than a real overhaul.

"Your wounds also seem to be scabbing over in gold. That's you, I'm guessing?" She asked.

I gave a small nod, managing the tiny gesture since my neck muscles were some of the few I hadn't had to completely overwork. Still hurt, though.

"Okay. Nothing dangerous?"

I shook my head.

Ann nodded. "Okay." She paused for a moment, then placed a light kiss on my lips. "You focus on getting better soon, sleeping beauty."

At that, I could not hold back a smile. “Okay,” I said simply. I would’ve loved to tell her more, but I was already feeling short on breath, spouts of dizziness setting in, and so was forced to focus on my meditation again.

Quite a bit of time must’ve passed like that.