

Chapter 77: Precipice of Death

Olivia grinned, pushing her sword just a little closer to my face. "Seems like it, spear-bitch." Her teeth seemed almost sharp.

Briefly, I wondered how she was standing in front of me. I broke her leg. And her sword. Yet, there she was. Zinnic. Sponsorship must've included healing and weapon replacements.

"Where's the rest of your little party?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"None of your business, is it?" she asked right back.

Then I opened my mouth to speak and she grinned. "No more stalling, lady. I see what you're doing. Tell me your name, so I can cut you down where you stand."

Staring down the tip of a sword, which she poked yet closer to my eye as she spoke, I strained my manipulation, drawing as much Qi into my cores as I could. I was low on mirror Qi after using it to march, but my golden Qi was even lower than that. Dregs. Tiny bits of it. It would have to do.

I stared the swordswoman down, the tip of her blade maybe an inch from my eye. With a lot of effort, I lifted the muscles of my lips. "You wanna know my name? My name means war, and I'll show you just how fucking serious I am about that!"

Then, I twirled the spear in my hand, knocking the rapier aside. It was a distinctly more expensive weapon than what she had before, and wouldn't just shatter against my bound one. I frowned, and a wild grin plastered itself on Olivia's face.

She took half a step back then grinned at me. She laughed. "Hahahahaha!! Oh fuck yes, fight me!" she yelled, words echoing back from the forest. We stood maybe two metres apart. I used every moment to grab more Qi, knowing it wouldn't be enough.

Olivia didn't give me much time.

Maybe half a second after her bout of laughter she lunged at me, stabbing forward with her rapier. My arm screamed as I moved it, batting the weapon aside, and sweeping my blade upwards from below.

Nimble, the woman sidestepped the slice, bringing her sword up higher, aiming for my shoulders to extend her reach. I commanded my muscles to move, and they refused, so

instead, I shifted the glass under my skin, bringing my spear up half a moment late, as the rapier drew a thin line of blood.

The pain from the wound was superficial. Slowly, I felt myself slip into [Single-Minded] focus. All around me, the world blurred. Only the battle mattered.

Olivia thrust forward and I stepped backwards and to the side, water leaking into my torn boots as I stepped into the lake. Instantly, the swordswoman followed up with yet another slice, which I deflected, making my body move via Qi again.

My follow up was raw physical power though, pain screeching through my legs, up my back, and into my arms as I moved. I grit my teeth and *endured*, half my mind focussed on clawing Qi from the air into my cores.

With hardly any effort, Olivia reflected the slow swing to her right, and went underneath my spear, aiming for my waist. She was skilled, quick and decisive, but she wasn't Matt. I pushed down on the spear with both hands, forcing her arm to pass by my right side, then brought the back of my spear up to slam into her stomach.

It didn't reach. Instead, her fist collided with my jaw. I could hardly hear, blood ringing in my ears, but I still heard the rattle of my bones.

My world started spinning, and I lost my balance for a moment. On pure instinct I stepped back, receiving only a small slash across my cheek rather than one which would have ripped out my eye.

Slowly, with a vicious grin, Olivia circled around me. She had hardly used any Qi. I didn't even know what type she used, or what stage she was in... It didn't matter. I breathed, ignoring the cruel words she spoke, but she stopped in the middle of the sentence to stab at me.

I hadn't expected it, sending more Qi throughout my body to avoid a deep wound to my upper body. Forcing my body to move was horribly inefficient, and quickly, my mirror Qi was running out, too.

With the tiny bit of golden energy I'd collected, I reinforced my spear. Then I decided against it. Reinforcement was not needed. Instead, I thrust forward, forcing Olivia back. She had an annoying habit of dancing just out of my reach, light as a feather. But she didn't expect that reach to extend a bit, for just a moment.

A golden blade shot forth from the thrust she avoided.

With brilliantly quick reflexes, she twisted, but the stab still drew blood. It tore through her fancy leather armor, leaving a small gash just above her elbow, on her non-dominant arm. If only she'd twisted the other way. I spat blood on the floor.

My golden core was truly empty. Floating sparks were all that coursed through it as I desperately clawed for more Qi to enter into it. But I got no breaks.

Olivia capitalized on my weakness, moving in while my spear was extended. I brought up the back of it to block her swing, but I needed two hands to stop one of hers, and a brutal kick against my thigh sent me kneeling on the floor.

Blood poured from my lips, now. I spat more of it onto the ground.

Then I got the fuck back up again.

"You fucking done?" I asked, my jaw clicking from the punch I'd gotten.

Viciously swift, the woman sliced at me again, and every muscle in my body screamed in protest, yet it moved as my mirror Qi demanded, blocking her first blow, then another. My reserves were dangerously low, but nothing remained except to use more of it.

Despite it all, I felt death closing in.

By now, my movements were too slow, permitting me no counterattacks, and only my significantly greater technique stopped me from being killed. Every moment was a dance on the precipice of death. Every dodge a step closer to that cliff.

Almost automatically, I slipped into [Mirror Mind]. Subconsciously, I was reaching out for every shred of power I could find.

My master's movements replayed in front of my inner eye, and I flowed like water. A slash came, and was gently guided aside. Olivia stumbled forward, taking three steps into the water.

She slashed at me, and once again was intercepted, a slow slash blocked, a thrust batted aside. I had a moment to bring my blade down on her head, but she moved aside. A dozen more exchanges passed, and I felt my mastery of my spear increase with every moment.

[Momentum Shift has reached (Basic)!]

My core burned inside my chest with exertion. I was desperately gasping for air, each breath bringing life saving Qi, but it was endlessly slow compared to my expenditure.

Olivia panted, too, but it was a light exhaustion compared to my ragged wheezing. "Looks like you're on your last legs, hah," she gloated and I breathed in a hiss of air through my teeth.

She lunged again, suddenly dropping close to the floor. With a degree of mastery I never should have managed, I slid my leg out of the way, her blade biting into empty air. My footing was unstable, and I threatened to fall forwards, so I committed, lifting my other foot away, and kicking at her.

My leg connected with her skull, sending her careening back, blood trickling down her forehead. My shin cracked in the collision, pain racing up my body. The glass under my skin felt so lethargic, and I collapsed to the ground with the movement, only barely getting back up in time for Olivia to wipe the blood off her face.

Then she moved towards me again.

I commanded my hand to move up to block the blow- And it refused.

For a few moments, all I could see was death coming. My mirror core was empty. I bled from my eyes and nose, the strain of the Qi manipulation too high. My golden core had tiny sparks of Qi in it, and I dragged every single one out of it and into my arm, beckoning it to move, letting go of my spear.

It wasn't enough - it just wasn't enough!

The world slowed down to a crawl, then.

There was the tip of a sword approaching my left eye. I was raising my left arm, and with a brutal effort of my mind, I had, somehow, triggered [Golden Body] on it. But it was too little. I focused further. The zone of my ability condensed, down to two tiny points, one in my elbow, to move the arm, one in my palm, to block the sword.

[Golden Body has reached (High)]

And it was too slow.

I saw it - saw the sword about to enter my eye, with my hand only at the level of my cheek. The glass under my skin grinded against each other as I moved, no longer liquid and supportive, but instead rigid.

The golden power flowing through me wouldn't do.

When the blade was an inch from my eye, my life started flashing in front of me.

I saw scenes. Of my childhood, school, university, the easier nights and the tougher ones. Of the divorce, Jacobs funeral and the way my parents cried. Beth's birth. Desperately, I analyzed them for a hint of how to live.

My bits of enlightenment flew by. When I learned how to properly hold a spear, that it was an art. When the movements were drilled into me - and how imperfect I still was!

[Spear Technique - Fundamentals has reached (High)!]

Then more and more flashed by, until, for a moment, my mind desperately clung to my experiences with cultivation. My journey through the golden shores. My walk along the road of infinite self-similarity. The barriers I broke. The freedom I yearned for.

My small attempt to feel my connection to my cores on Neamhan.

Now, I felt them more than ever. They felt like two burning suns in my chest, searing my flesh, making it hard to breathe.

I had been desperately drawing Qi into them, through my connection to them, from the air. But that connection - it was there! I'd reached out to it, almost manifested a core back on Neamhan, but there hadn't been any Qi there to support it! The agony was my core collapsing; of course it was! It would have consumed *me* instead of the Qi!

The blade approached ever closer, but time slowed down even more as my mind *raced*.

I could feel my body try to spasm with enlightenment, but my mind tuned it all out. Only the memories mattered.

That connection to my cores, that consumption of myself for Qi... there was something there, on the tip of my tongue...

The tip of the sword came ever closer and suddenly, roiling anger bubbled forth from me.

I would not die here.

I closed my eyes. The blink was instant, even in slowed time. Perhaps my eyelids didn't even shut, but the outside world disappeared, and I was in two places at once.

On a road to the sky, and the shores of the ocean.

My intuition told me I needed a vehicle to travel. The road in the sky ended; imprint wouldn't carry me any further. The shores, the beaches, held no more for me, only the ocean had the answers.

But I didn't *have* those vessels. I could have made a ship from the palm trees for voyage.
Made my own road for imprint. But I didn't have the time.

I. Would. NOT. DIE.

Two destinies, and both of them were *mine*. Not for me to make vessels, but for me to move forward. Take my freedom. Make myself known.

With a wild dash forward, I dove into the ocean. The golden waters swallowed my silhouette, and I opened my eyes to the depths. The ocean would go down infinitely, the waves crashing over my head, and my lungs burnt, but I swam down into those depths, because they were *mine to see*.

Uncaring for the road in the sky ending, I didn't build more of a road. I simply ignored the wall in front of me. I stepped into the sky, my feet holding on pure willpower. I looked up, seeing an infinity of Fios, on different stages on the path, then I rose one step above the others.

More of me followed, taking their first brave steps into the sky. But I was ahead, up just a little further - carving out my identity.

My vision fluttered back, and it was all consumed by the tip of the sword. My world was tinged red, as my eyes bled.

I roared, as pain gripped my chest, as I dug *through* my cores for more Qi, shattering their bottoms, and more Qi spilled forth.

[Congratulations! You brave the depths on your **Voyage**. You have found that your Qi is yours alone, and made your Wellspring.]

[Golden Core advanced to Wellspring Realm!]

[Congratulations! You make your **Imprint** in the skies. You have chosen to rise above and prove your power to yourself.]

[Mirror Core advanced to Wellspring Realm!]