

Chapter 111: Rhythm

[Golden Wellspring advanced to **5th Step**.]

[Mirror Wellspring advanced to **5th Step**.]

It took little time more on the frontlines for my combined talents to begin truly shining. Seeing the stars resolve in the usurpers was strange. I could see theirs were different, colours that I could not describe and that made my eyeballs itch on the inside.

The feeling was miserable and disgusting, a power I was entirely incompatible with, yet, when they fell, that power, too, became just power. It was nothing that special. They were also simply people wielding what they were given, and suitable for.

If I twisted my own galaxy enough, could I make myself receptive to the power of the usurpers and invade their worlds in return? Would that... be fair, at all?

The question mattered little, as I cut another one apart with my spear.

Next to me my companions fought through the hordes, putting their new talent to work. It affected each one of us differently, but we all grew more because of it. And Orvan grew, too.

He was an absolute monster, the archmage. Having gotten access to my [Precipice], he threw himself into the hordes over and over, emptying his mana until he was left punching monsters to death as a regular, fragile old man. But he survived, miraculously, summoning torrents of power and destruction wherever he went.

In the last few days of fighting, I had also gotten used to the leyburn showing up when I was on the battlefield sometimes. It seemed to have deemed me “worthy”, choosing to fight next to me whenever we were faced with the hordes.

Which made me curious. Was it originally from Eden? Was it a usurper? Its network of stars seemed to indicate a little bit of both. Perhaps it had evolved... or simply learnt to use the strange, malformed Qi of the usurpers.

The final, truly strange thing that [Stargazer] revealed to me was about the enchanted gear module of [Transference]. Whenever I killed a usurper, parts of their energy, sometimes even their entire body would be siphoned away, and a magic item would appear sometimes in exchange.

And the items carried some of the same radiance from the monsters.

Within the magical metal, within the glowing runes and conduits of power forged by masters from other worlds, there were hints of the monsters we'd killed. And hints of ourselves, crafted from lingering energies our attacks left on the corpses.

My sash, for example, carried mirror Qi. It used that to fold dimensions and let me move so fast. But there was also gravity mixed in, and a bunch of other magic that I could hardly discern.

It was beautiful to see. And it was something I could interact with.

Whenever I reached out to the stars, within myself and within others, I felt I could rearrange them. For myself, it was easiest, and still terribly hard. Then came inanimate objects, then magical items, then people whose permission I had, and finally, enemies.

Someone who did not want their constellation altered had it encased in an inviolable sanctuary. I could not simply rip out another's talent. Even the faintest bit of resistance became an insurmountable wall.

But still. I could now learn to change my magic items. Perhaps even create new ones, by implanting sources of power in mundane items, and studying their constellations and-

Because of the thinking, an attack grazed my face, barely batted aside by Astraeus. The spirit chided me slightly, almost as if he were pouting within my spear, and it made me crack a faint smile.

"Right, right," I consoled him. "I'll focus up."

My habit of getting distracted throughout the battles was something that had recently popped up because of just how much *information* I was getting. With my mirror vision through [Reflection] I saw so much, and all of it counted as being seen by me for the purpose of revealing the constellations of [Stargazer].

Everything was a mess of light and sound and brightness and I was still adjusting to it. Cass was helping with it, of course, but she could not lift worlds, either. But we were mastering it. And once we were there, the talent would only be an even greater boon.

Already, we were learning so much faster, being able to consciously see what changes things made within me. I was able to speed up my cultivation even more, digesting everything I'd seen and lived through now.

So, I fought, and fought, and fought some more, until my Qi ran more than dry, and my arms were endlessly tired, and I could not go on anymore. Then, finally, our shift was over, and we headed back to the dorms.

There, we slept for a few hours, then I kicked Olivia out of bed, and it was back to practicing.

Fighting against her in sparring matches, Olivia truly was talented. Worthy of being picked up by Zinnic. She adjusted stunningly quickly when taught something new, and hardly ever made the same mistake twice.

Ironic, then, that she tried to fight me twice before.

"You're smiling that smile again," Olivia said with a frown. "It's like you're mocking me inside my head."

"I'd never," I said, letting the butt of my spear fly at her from the side. She barely brought up her rapier in time to parry. Astraeus gave me a few pointers to correct my form, and on the next strike, my fundamentals had advanced again.

My weapon hit Olivia with all the force of a gentle feather. With the spirit inside my spear and my high [Weapon Resonance] I could control every minor movement, dull the blade when needed, and even make my strikes nearly weightless, or weigh more than they ever reasonably should.

Since Astraeus had picked a name and truly awakened, my spear had felt even more a part of me - because to a significant degree, it *was*. Similarly to how Cass was tied to me and we would forever work together, Astraeus and I shared a similar bond.

Core bound, even. I smirked.

"Sure you wouldn't," Olivia said between breaths, panting. "What... did I mess up... this time?"

"Your feet," I said. "You bent your knees inward to absorb the blow, but it made you too slow to sidestep my thrust."

"Ah," she said. "Makes sense. Again?"

"Gladly," I said.

Of course, for the spars, I restrained my physical supremacy over her to a reasonable level. In fact, often I would hold back my stats enough to be slower than her, working on minute

mastery with Astraeus and Cass. Every strike, I saw my master executing the same one with [Mirror Mind] and learnt a little more from him.

And every spar, me and Olivia grew.

Matt eventually woke up. Stretched. Poured a bucket of water over himself, then joined us, that glint in his eyes. With casual ease, he laid Olivia out on the floor.

The woman grimaced, even at the soft impact. "And what did I do wrong this time, *master* Matt?"

Our swordsman cringed at the epitaph. "Just Matt, dang it. And that was just cuz you were getting too cocky in your movements. Fio didn't have any openings, you just got lost in the sauce since you felt so fast."

Her grimace deepened, but he was right, so she just nodded, got up, and brushed off the earth. "We'll do alternating spars, as usual?" I asked Matt and he nodded.

"Sure, sounds good," he said. "Should we two spar?"

"Watch closely, Olivia," I reminded our student. Then me and Matt went at it.

For him, I did not restrain my physical stats at all - his were at a similar level after all. My endurance was higher, on that I'd bet money, but I was also sure he had better manipulation than me.

So, we learned from one another. He tried to overwhelm me with sheer force, attacks raining in from all sides, while I used the breaks between my attacks to slightly angle Astraeus and see attacks coming from behind me with Cass' help.

It soon turned into a blazing exchange of metal on metal. Whenever someone got hurt, despite the dullness of our weapons, Reya and Iryel were there to patch us up. The cleric was now also aware about the forge of Divinity within herself, and had consciously begun trying to regenerate her supply of it on her own.

Which was always strange to see, since she would close her eyes, and suddenly that inner radiance stirred.

Chris took to the new talents quickest, and already showed results. They had managed to make it so that a portion of powers from all their shells would become part of their true self and carry over if they took on new bodies. Never again would they lose access to the wind

and water powers their current human form had. It would be diminished, but they could grow them again, albeit slower.

Liam soon also joined, getting involved in the sparring, while Emilia watched and meditated. Her cultivation had been advancing at a breakneck pace, as she threw herself into the bloody battles happily.

It was amazing to see. Her raw physical prowess increased so much with each step upon her path it was genuinely inspiring. There was nothing quite like seeing your friends advance at breakneck speeds to make you wanna keep pace.

By now, it was pretty clear that more and more of the talents were seeping through [Transference], because I, too, was growing far faster than I should reasonably have any right too.

Especially now. With every clash, I could feel my own constellation changing, taking form, rearranging. Watching the stars move was mesmerizing, and showed me every improvement I made, as well as ones I had yet to make.

When my spear clashed against Matt's sword, his grin widened. His own nebula was changing, too. Forming clumps of stardust in the shape of a great tree. Almost every exchange we learnt, improved, and came back a little stronger the next. The tiredness didn't matter.

Even when my hands ached from the vibrations through my spear as we clashed, I swung again. My footwork got better, and every twirl of my spear was a little faster than the last. My cultivation became faster, each step a building block, taking me a step further on my path.

And then, the battle ended. Matt and I came apart, panting heavily. The stars at our centers were churning, moving like leaves in a storm. Then, he turned to Olivia, still breathing heavily. "You next," he proclaimed, leaving no room for arguments. "Show me your swordsmanship."

Instead, I turned to Liam, who had placed down his whetstone soundlessly. I met his eyes, already trained on me, and saw them light up in mirth. He rose limberly, stretching a little, before flicking his hand and catching a knife in it.

I smiled at him, and gave a simple nod. Then, he vanished from my sight.

Without hesitation, I raised my spear, feeling the impact grind against its shaft, the stab coming for my throat twisted aside in the same motion that blocked his knife at my side. My

eyes coursed through the air, and I couldn't see him, so I listened. No sound, either. No movement of energy.

It was like I was fighting the air itself.

Except... a small disturbance, as he strengthened himself in anticipation for a blow. I slammed the butt of my spear forward, and felt the air shift around it as Liam twisted out of the way, so I slammed it into his direction.

Moving with inhuman flexibility, Liam sunk down further, bending his back until the spear sailed above him. But it gave me enough time to step back as he stabbed at me. But he let go of the knife, throwing it.

With some ability, he even hid the sound of it coursing through the air, but with Cass and Astraeus giving me instincts and vision beyond what a single human mind could handle, I felt the glint of metal and knew by instinct what had happened. Coating my hand in metal Qi, I snatched the weapon from the air.

Briefly, I stared stunned at myself, then the dagger was pulled back. No matter how strong I was, I could not resist Liam's full strength when holding onto the weapon with one hand. A moment later, I was once again blocking a whirlwind of attacks I barely knew were coming.

But still, the cosmos at my center moved, thrived, grew.

Eventually, the training paused, as we were warned our shift was coming up. We took a few minutes to catch our breath, regenerate our Qi, and when we were ready, I took Ann's hand, stepping into the air.

Once again, we stepped forward to battle.