

Chapter 76: Marching for Food

The damage was done.

Despite the fact that there was a huge attack on the city, there were still monsters in the trees. Bornins hassled us, and I could barely supply the effort to lift my spear and kill them. Matt still held onto his sword. He would raise it, then send out a blast of pink petals.

He barely controlled his power. Sometimes, the petals would leave gashes, other times, he straight evaporated the upper bodies of the monsters. Each time, I saw that bloody glint in his eyes flare up. Each time, he almost passed out and I dragged him further ahead.

Trevor recovered quicker with Sophia's buffs. He and Marie scouted.

Marie was, quite frankly, the only thing keeping us alive. Did we have rations? Sure. Not nearly enough. We had wounds, we needed to wash them, and she found a stream. While all of us were bathing, she braved the wilderness again, and found us more food. Even some herbs that had a light medicinal effect.

Trevor had hit his healing limit, and so had Emilia. I had as well. Any more Divinity would only leave lasting damage. But the herbs? The smaller healing effect would help regeneration, rather than exhaust our bodies.

We were also ravenous after all the damage and healing. Reya dug into the handful of roots, berries and herbs Marie gave her like a starving hound.

I tried to speak to the older woman, barely hearing my own voice, but she gently put a finger on my lips. I could see the burns on her skin. Despite it all, with only a small charge of healing she headed out again.

Despite every bone in my body being weary and worn, I decided I wanted to contribute. I dragged myself up. My wounds were all clean now, and they burnt like fire as I moved, but using my spear as a walking stick, I could do it.

There were, certainly, some animals in this forest. Not monsters, actual animals. I knew they existed. I'd find one, too.

For a moment, I felt Ann's hand on my shoulder. Half of her face was scabbed over, and some of the scabs cracked as her lips moved, dripping tiny hints of blood. I couldn't hear her. I just smiled. "I got this," I mouthed. Then I set off.

[Hero complex?] Cass asked.

I heard her voice and flinched in fear for a moment, expecting another attack. It was pointless, only leading me to stumble, fall, and scrape my knees. I grit my teeth, then pushed myself back up.

'I'm fine,' I thought at her. *'Actually. We have time now. What was that voice?'*

[A figment, if I'm reading things correctly.]

Figment? Ah. That thing from my gateway menu, right?

[Yes.]

'Details?'

[I can give you my best guess.] I nodded at the suggestion. *[Seems to me like fully restoring the gateway has given it the ability to access parallel dimensions. Other versions of, well, you. They can help you, shortly after their... death, it seems.]*

Another me had died to the monster, then. In fact, my entire group must've died over there. Iryel was too late. That thing had, somewhere out there, killed Ann.

Unforgivable.

[Fio.]

Cass's voice was like ice cold water on the fire of my rage. I stopped my hobbled walk, and took a deep breath. My vision was blurry with angry tears, now that I had digested enough water to produce them again.

I blinked them away. *'Sorry. I'm here.'*

[Good. You saved yourself. This is good.]

'Good?' I asked. I felt so angry, I had trouble comprehending that. *'I, essentially, died, Cass.'*

[Fio, breathe.] She commanded.

For a moment I considered lashing out, but I followed the advice. I drew in a deep breath, feeling my skin and muscles and bones ache at the thing. The pain grounded me for a moment. I breathed out. Calmly.

[It's good. We can network. Link up with other you's. Learn from them. We wanna be free, yeah?]

‘Yes.’

[So we'll make use of this. Every failure, every mistake by another figment. We learn from them. And if we fall, we pass the torch. Tell another Fio how to get free. Until one of us goes and fucking does it, Fio.]

I paused at that.

Yeah. Okay. A grin appeared on my face. ‘Let’s help ourselves, Cass.’

I swear I could hear her grin. *[Let’s. If one of us can’t do it, we’ll try a hundred times. And if that’s not enough, we’ll try a million times.]*

Now that was something I could get along with. But there were still the technicalities to work out. ‘How long until the figment recharges?’ I couldn’t imagine that with just one figment, I’d get a warning every single time I was in danger.

[Once every week, I believe.]

Ah. That was quite the cooldown. I only had one for now, after all. But that would grow with time. ‘Have you figured out what the other numbers mean?’

[Not quite,] Cass said. [Strength still links to the territory, but also to the length of the message the figment can give us. Fragments are a bit more nebulous, but they seem to generally provide you with a tiny fraction of the potential other versions of “you” have. I can tell that neither of those are all that those numbers do, though. Even figments aren’t just about knowing when there’s danger. I can tell there’s more to them, but [Gateway] is still not a high enough level.]

I’d need to level it more, then. In the future, though. Right now, most of my Qi was focused on keeping my body running. At least that was something I could make my mirror Qi do without worry of attracting monsters.

If I used it purely internally, then it was fine, though the control needed for that was quite intricate. With how much of my mind was occupied on forcing the pain aside, then the rest making my body move, I had little left for extraneous thoughts, so I stopped having them.

Instead, now that my talk with Cass was mostly done, I decided to focus on hunting. There had been flashes of movement in the trees around me, but it seemed like it was mostly bornins. Nothing edible.

Monster meat decayed in the wild, back into ambient energies. Qi, Mana, sometimes even Divinity. But without alchemical preparations, it was absolutely inedible. None of us had that kinda experience in alchemy. So, I'd need to find something that wasn't a monster.

With the little hearing I had, it was honestly already hard to just keep my balance. I stumbled through the undergrowth with my spear as a crutch. Maybe the bornins were grouping up to attack me. Ah. There was a decent chance of that, wasn't there?

Whatever.

I kept the glass underneath my skin shifting as I moved on, disregarding the potential of monster attacks. I was weakened. Had almost died, even. But I still wasn't going to die to some fucking beginner mobs.

Indeed, they *had* been grouping up to attack me. I realized when they gathered in the trees, watching me. So, I indulged. I faked a stumble, and a fall, letting my spear slip from my hand.

Of course they pounced, instantly.

At the same time, I turned my stumble into a roll, feeling the skin on my back scream in pain, and resummoned my bound spear into my hand, then infused it with whatever dregs of golden Qi I still had. My muscles burned and hardly listened to me, so I moved my body by willing the shifting glass to move. That did it.

My spear spun above my head once as the little monkey-kobolds jumped at me, and then five bisected corpses dropped to the floor. I pushed myself up slowly, staring into the forest with feral eyes. For a few more minutes, the bornins watched me. I stared them down.

They fled.

I let out a deep breath, then sucked in more air, panting. Slowly, I took another shaky step. The second one came easier. Breathing slowly, I continued on my walk.

Eventually, I smelled something. My sense of smell seemed like it was still mostly working, especially compared to my blurry eyesight and ringing hearing, so I relied on it. It was like... wet moss. Maybe a river?

Following the sensation, I made my way through a much more uncomfortable part of the forest, and some thorny bushes that I had to push aside and sometimes even cut apart with my spear. Eventually, though, after a few minutes of trekking through the undergrowth, I did find a larger stream than the one we were camping at.

Not quite big enough to call a river, but it definitely had a source somewhere. Maybe a pond? Some fish could be good. Hells, I'd eaten rats before. I'd eat just about anything, really. Frogs, maybe even snails. Could Ann cook snails?

I shook my head as if to clear the thoughts away, then started single-mindedly walking again, upstream. Occasionally, I stopped to drink some water, or pour some on my more egregious wounds to clean them of dirt. Infection was, luckily, not that big a deal, since I could use Qi to kill microorganisms in my body.

Despite that, I decided to be careful, because I was still running on dregs, using Qi to make my walking possible at all. So, I just put one foot in front of the other.

Step, after step, after step.

An hour, maybe two passed as I marched. It was uphill slightly, and the undergrowth was thinner around the stream; probably cleared away by monsters and animals who used it for drinking. It made the march less troublesome, at least.

Eventually, though, after a while, I did find a pond that the stream originated from. Maybe it was even large enough to call a lake? Something in between. Surely large enough to grab some fish.

I slowly approached the surface of the water, careful about any aquatic monsters, but when none leaped out at me, I looked a little closer. My face was haggard, my eyes wild, my hair in a mess. Parts of my skin were sticky, and the hand gripping my spear was slick with blood. I took in a long breath.

This was me. I was alive.

With a shift of the focus of my vision, I started to look underneath the water for any fish, but of course, I couldn't find any this close to the shore. The water was relatively clear, though, with most of the lakebed made from stone. So, I took a deep breath, held it in, and stepped into the water.

The Qi made my muscles more dense, so I didn't float. I could have, of course, but instead, I just held my breath and walked along the bottom of the lakebed. I didn't have to walk very long.

Only a couple dozen steps in, the water got quite a bit deeper, with a rather steep drop in front of me. In there, I saw a school of fish. Bass, or something. Large, and very edible. They probably survived here by being out of sight of the monsters. Lucky for me, I supposed.

I wound back, infusing my spear with another bit of Qi, then tossed it. The Qi helped it glide through the water, spearing two fish at once. The school instantly dispersed, of course, but I had my haul. With some small, and still painful, motions I swam to get my spear with the fish on it, then quickly made my way back to the surface.

Being underwater wasn't uncomfortable per-se, but my lungs burned a bit from holding my breath, so I panted for more air, as the water dripped onto the rocky shore beside me. I grinned as I looked at the fish on my weapon.

Despite the fact that I was in lots and lots of pain from all my wounds and the water touching them, I grinned. This was a good amount of food. Especially for superhumans like us, this could sustain you for a while, surely.

I raised my head, just about to start making my way back, tossing the fish into my inventory. Then, I saw the tip of a sword pointed at me.

"Ah," I said to the swordswoman, Olivia, in front of me. "So this is how it's gonna be, isn't it?"