

Chapter 83: Qi Control

I was woken up by a tap on my nose from Ann. My meditation had most certainly ended up with me drifting into sleep. Which... wasn't the point, but at the end of the day, circulating Qi was mentally exhausting, so it was only really a matter of time.

"Oh, good. You're thinking again," Ann chimed in with a smile.

Hearing her voice, I took a moment to focus on the present again - and immediately regretted it.

Every single bit of my body hurt and complained. My bones ached like I was over three hundred, my skin felt paper thin, the windchill already cutting through it. My muscles had it worst, the pain of their overuse mixing with the pain of my countless cuts and bruises.

Of course, it still paled in comparison to the aches on my head and chest, where I got my skull scraped by a sword and my lung pierced. Divines, my lungs *hurt*. I could have been breathing nails and I swear it would've felt better.

Despite that, I forced myself to take a shallow breath. Only half my lung was moving anyway, so I supplemented Oxygen with Qi. It was not exactly sustainable for long, but it was better than nothing.

With the magical energy coursing through my circuit, I felt a lot better already. My eyes were still heavy, so I instead tried to give a smile to Ann. "How'd you know?" I asked.

"Your face. You look peaceful when you sleep, but that was your thinking face just now," she said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"I have a thinking face?"

"Oh, yes," she agreed. "Very serious business."

Despite all the pain, I was still glad to see, no, feel the smile on her face. The rain had... not stopped, but slowed a lot. With fewer reflective surfaces around me, my view of the world shifted again, essentially only encompassing my Qi sense. It made the world less clear, certainly, but at least the pressure against my mind decreased a whole lot.

Less sensory overload - I think that might have actually knocked me unconscious without Cass to handle it. I sent her a quick thanks before focusing on Ann again.

“So much thinking,” she teased, giving me a kiss on the nose.

“Sure, sure. Why’d you wake me up, then? Just to tease me a little?” I asked, innocently.

“No, really it was uh... I was worried you’d bleed out. Also, your blood is attracting monsters a bit, and your mirror Qi was increasing, also drawing more of them to us, so... yeah. We’re not in dire straits yet, but it would definitely be better for you if you closed the wounds up again,” she explained.

“Ah,” I simply mouthed, and focused some more. Within a few moments, my Qi was circulating. My wells were half full, which meant I had probably slept for a couple hours at least.

Their capacity had increased a whole lot since they became wells, so half full was about as much as my cores used to hold. Sadly, that meant very little, since [Golden Body], the technique at the foundation of my Qi cycling, was a very hungry skill. Of course, I could reduce the amount of power it used by augmenting my own strength and speed less, but enhancing my regeneration still consumed a lot of resources.

Still, I did it. I contained my mirror Qi, using it instead to plug gaps in my wounded body, to seal smaller scraped and medium sized lacerations. The blood dripping out from my wounds decreased, then stopped as a whole, when my skin once again shone with radiance.

Ann smiled. “Okay, love. You’re doing great. Wanna hear some news on how things’ve been going?” she asked.

“Sure,” I replied with a smile.

She nodded. “Right. We picked up a couple more refugees. Some angel came by and told us to head to the nearest city. Same guy who shielded us. He looked bad. Not as bad as you, but a close second.”

“Iryel?”

“He did not stay long enough to introduce himself. But he’ll live, I’m sure. Had the type of tired expression that told me if he was going to fall over dead he already would have.” She said the words in such a deadpan tone I had to try hard to stifle a giggle

“You’re probably right.”

"I am quite brilliant," she said, giving me a shrug and a dramatic sigh, before giggling at her own joke. "But yeah, unfortunately he had no healing left in the tank. Not that you are in a state to accept it. General wisdom tells me to drop you off at a gateway now."

"If only," I said with a grimace.

Ann nodded somberly. "The soul stuff?"

"Yep. According to Cass it's still not looking good. Really, eventually, I should just be able to gate myself back, no other mirror needed."

She sighed. "Alright. Let's hope it's sooner rather than later. Iryel seemed troubled. More than he should be, I mean."

I used some strength to reach out and squeeze her hand. "We'll make it through," I said. "We will." And even if I didn't, I'd make sure Ann did.

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't suppress the small smile on her face. "Alright, love. We will." Once more, she gave me a small kiss. "Make sure you heal quickly."

"It's not as easy as it looks!" I said, trying to put a grimace onto my face.

Ann chuckled. "Well, then you'll just have to figure it out, little genius."

I gasped at her audacity. "*I'm* the genius now?"

All Ann gave me was a slight shrug. "Look, I dunno which one of us reached wellspring twice over..."

"That's cause you don't cultivate!!" My offended yell tapered off into more of a whimper and a cough as I used up the air in the lung I had left.

My lovely girlfriend gave me a sad smile. "Okay, that's enough teasing for now. Just... make sure you heal, okay?"

"I will, promise."

"Thanks," Ann said. She placed a kiss on my forehead, then stepped away again, though I felt her hand linger in mine before she eventually let go. I almost mourned the warmth for a second, but was able to swiftly focus on my own situation again. The powerful pain of taking a too-deep breath certainly helped.

[Don't worry about stitching yourself back together wrong, I have blueprints of your body stored!] Cass supplied cheerily.

A tiny smile found its way onto my face again. *'Thanks Cass.'*

- - -

Time... kind of started to fly by after that little exchange. Occasionally, my meditation would be interrupted. Sometimes it would be people trying to talk to me. Mostly, those conversations started with them waking me up, and me stopping any wounds that had reopened and were freshly bleeding.

Occasionally, it was for food. Most of the time, though, when I stopped meditating, it was because I had fallen asleep. I slept a lot. Twelve hours one day, sixteen the next. I developed a small fever, but I crushed the invading tiny lifeforms with the brute force of my Qi.

Then, the very next day, my body temperature dropped too low and I was constantly dehydrated from losing too much blood. It was truly strange. I was healing, definitely, but at the same time, I was falling apart inside.

Keeping my lung going was painful and difficult work, my own muscles and organs seemingly begging me for rest. But there was no more rest I could give them. I already wasn't marching - and I was truly glad for that.

I saw it in the eyes of everyone else. In the mornings, when ice formed on the grass, I could often see the whole group more clearly. See the bags under their eyes.

Liam was marching again before me. His flesh was supported by shadows where too many muscles had been lost. The duel he had with the snake was a brutal one, and while he had carved out bits of her flesh, she had taken some of his as well.

But he supported himself. And walked.

We didn't have many mages, so only the most injured could be levitated. Especially if we wanted to be ready for combat. Qi simply wasn't as good at utility as Mana, but it was just as well suited for combat.

So, the mages were busy levitating refugees that were truly incapable of walking.

And the march was gruelling.

Marie was a truly talented forager, and we had alchemists to prepare monster meat to be cooked now, but with that came trouble. Repelling formations were simply no longer working. Monsters would run right past them, smelling us.

It meant that we had to stay moving. Sleep in shifts. Never rest too long.

With the formations failing, cooking became troublesome. Fire and burnt meat attracted even more hungry monsters. We scattered so often, or needed to fight around a fireplace. And I just laid there, dead weight, slowly mending my wounds and knitting my flesh back together.

Of course, the meat also took a long while and resources to prepare - no expelling those wild energies without using your own. It took energy to purify monster meat, and it was not a short process either. So our meals became sparser rather than fuller as we found more refugees.

Despite that, though, they all hung on.

Some of the people were older, some families with kids, some kids without parents. But they took care of each other.

The hostilities between Edians and Reflectors didn't matter anymore when you had to rely on each other to get food on your plates. We could see the Edians doing their best now. Boiling tree bark, picking berries, making nourishing tea from leaves, and they saw us. The way that we cut down monsters, got hurt, then fought again.

All the little conflicts over the ages were washed away, because everyone had to make a sincere effort to survive and march on.

Because, despite all that effort, each day our group grew and shrank. People would fall down, and others would carry them on their backs. Emilia regularly carried three or four people, lugging them over her shoulders when they were too tired to continue walking.

And every time someone collapsed it cost us when we had to fight. Wounds piled up. People slunk too far back and were picked off. Creatures swooped in undetected from the ground or above, and someone lost their legs before being able to fight back.

Then, we'd find a new group of survivors and our numbers grew more than they shrank.

It was horrible, seeing it all, and yet being unable to help. But despite the horror of it all, my body could not move that much. The gift told me so, too.

[Current Status: Subsisting]

I was *subsisting*. Staying alive. Not yet properly recovering. And I knew it was right - while I was staying alive, my wounds were healing slowly. My resilience would most certainly

increase by the time I was done, though, which was nice. Nothing to take you over the hurdle of a major realm like a hole in your chest!

But it still bothered me, being unable to fight with the others. Still, it was something I had to endure, despite my impatience. So, I used the time to improve my Qi cycling.

There was nothing else to do, after all, and with recently unlocking aura sense, and being able to look through reflections, I could still see the world quite well.

Maybe the strangest part of the ability was being able to see the world through other people's eyes. Like, sure, they were called mirrors to the soul, but they were also actually reflective. But my ability also showed me what was reflected, creating a slightly distorted, strange perspective on the world - but a perspective nonetheless.

With the amount of refugees slowly increasing, my points of view also increased. Cass, luckily, helped me filter through them, otherwise it might have become overwhelming. My range was also limited, but the distance I could see was quite a bit further than the distance I could blink through them.

Mostly, though, I used this perspective combined with my aura sense to trace how people were moving their Qi. I learnt from them all.

Liam had a technique that was shapeless and quick, changing his body and allowing momentary adaptations. Matt was graceful but with a hidden fury, like a moving torrent of water, able to release a storm with the smallest movement of the floodgates.

Emilia's method was calm and solid. Reinforcing her. Letting her become an unmoving bulwark, and Marie kept hers light, keeping her quick on her feet but also strengthening the chain of her body, letting her shoot arrows faster.

Each of them was different, each something I could learn from. I even watched Trevor a little, and some of the other small handful of Reflectors who'd joined our group.

Strangely, though, each and every one of them paled compared to one memory I had in mind. I had seen it precisely once, before I could properly sense Qi, but the memory stuck out like a sore thumb in my mind, and even now, afterwards, I could barely comprehend the magnitude of mastery on display.

My teacher, Rae. It was a single display, the only time I had ever seen him seriously fight, and the memory was seared into the back of my head.

It was, after all, the first brush with death I'd had in Eden.

There were a lot of things that went wrong, as well as a bit of bad luck. With my first proper party, we'd elected to stay in Eden despite the eclipse happening. We'd known very little about it then, and thought that the other Reflectors were simply cowards.

They were not.

We headed out on a normal mission, the sky dark, the sun obscured by the moon. The world felt so angry, I still remembered the very air outside the protective magic feeling like it boiled against my skin.

Despite the warning signs we ventured out into the forest. I was not stationed at Renvil back then. The frontier was a bad place to be as a newbie, and I'd luckily spawned into the heartland. But that didn't matter when there was an eclipse.

We'd just fought off a group of starved, weakened bornins, when the rift opened.

I saw it, then.

The world, itself, torn open.

A gaping wound in the fabric of reality. An opening that let in an unbelievable hunger. Simply gazing at it was enough for me to believe I was starving.

Then, something crawled out.

It was a claw. It tore free from the rift, grabbed its edges and pulled it open further. There was a maw, ringed with eyes, each the size of a house. It was a truly enormous monster, clawing apart the world, and taking huge bites from it as the gash opened.

With a single snap of those dreadful teeth, half my party was gone. After a second snap, I was the only one left, since I'd had the sensibility and self control to crawl backwards. Chunks of the floor vanished into the maw, until he appeared.

A spear struck down from the sky. It was gleaming, a bright, blazing white, radiant and horrifying in its intensity.

The weapon struck like a lightning bolt, carving a ravine into the land. An enormous blow that uprooted trees, breaking them into splinters. The spear was gorgeous, too. Handle made entirely from steel, full of thousands of tiny engravings. A magical artefact made by the most skilled artisans all of Eden had to offer.

Its blade was pristine, with grooves cut into it, and slightly curved edges, giving it a brutal edge. It tore apart the monster.

A blink later, the fight was over. It had barely been a few blurs. A man, white hair and white robes, incandescent with radiance, picked up the weapon. He slashed out with casual ease, yet each moment gave a sense of supreme master, and a fathomless ocean of Qi moved with him.

Incandescence spilled forth. It was like seeing the tides, all condensed into a moment. A hurricane of unbelievable heat. An amount of Qi that seemed entirely inhuman. Impossible. Blazing with power and mercilessness. A consuming energy that left nothing standing.

Within moments, the world burnt. The rift burnt. The forest burnt.

My eyes dried from the heat and I shut them for a moment, then opened them again and it was all gone. The forest had turned into flatlands, and we were surrounded by glassy, barren soil.

“Oh,” Rae had said. “This isn’t good for my back. Ah, are you...? Oh, no. What is a newbie like you doing out here. Come, come. Get up, come on. That must’ve been bright, I do apologize.”

He’d extended a hand, and, dazedly, I’d grabbed it. A moment later I was on my feet.

“What’s your name, kiddo?” he’d asked.

I wasn’t really a kid anymore at all but... he was old enough I let it slide. The fact that he had levelled the forest within a kilometer also helped. “Fio,” I said. “Fio Bellum.”

His lips curled up. “A warrior?” Then his eyes flitted to the ashes that remained of my spear. I’d dropped it and it had not escaped the incinerating ocean. “Ah. Sorry. I’ll uh... pay for a new one?” He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

Slowly, I shook my head. He was like... a regular grandpa to talk to. “Teach... teach me, please.”

“... Huh?!?!”

Instantly, Rae’d taken a step backwards. But he couldn’t decline. And that’s how I’d ended up learning from him.

Now, that memory flooded to the forefront. The flood of Qi that was unending yet measured. Somehow, that entire ocean had been at his beckoning. Not a drop of the magical substance was wasted. Each bit terribly efficient and terrifyingly destructive.

Still, more interestingly was how he cycled Qi through himself to remain entirely unscathed. And keep me unscathed, despite hardly knowing I was there. How...?

The thought gave me a headache, and I abandoned the attempt for now.

One day.