

Chapter 150: Upgrades - Closer to Freedom

When spending my contribution, the thing I noticed was that there was a *lot* of it. Clearing the rifts counted for about twice, maybe three times as much as killing equivalent enemies on Eden, and we had cleared a lot of rifts. And then, there was the additional, tiny factor, that I hurt some of the keepers.

Now, ordinarily, that would be a bad thing. After all, they ferry Reflectors from Neamhan to Eden, right? But they were desperate for power to heal the wounds I'd dealt them, and thus inducted a *lot* more Reflectors than usual. Which meant that there were now more people in Eden, and a part of their contribution flowed right to me.

It did help that contribution could only be earned, not lost. Lurelia might have tried to dock me for wreaking havoc in her divine realm, but she was just unlucky. They couldn't take it away without rewarding me, and they couldn't give rewards I didn't choose myself.

So, there was nothing to do for them, for now.

Instantly, I allocated half of my contribution to levels, which would take me from level 20 to 25. Increasing my physical stats by a full quarter. It would make my Qi all the more potent, my strikes all the stronger, and my skin more durable. All of that for only half my contribution.

Then, Cass and I browsed the shop. There were things I wanted. Some were simple, others more complex. The first thing was something that let me defend more strongly. [Inexplicable Reinforcement] was a great defensive ability, but at the end of the day, it only helped after I got hurt. I wanted that to change.

And there was an option for a partial evolution - its name would stay the same, but it would now apply some kind of damage-shunting. Effectively, any damage I took would be partially applied to nonexistent parallel versions of me, shunted into a dimension where I didn't even exist. Which was very neat.

Another ability I very desperately wanted was some kind of armor manifestation. It was extremely common for metal affinity cultivators to have, and frankly, the fact that I didn't was a real shame. I added that functionality onto [True Mirror], buying armor that would reflect a part of the damage done automatically, with an option for full reflection, if provided enough Qi.

The ability would effectively just make it a lot easier to manifest an armor, using my glass-wings as an anchor for it. Each crystal would expand and graft itself onto my skin in a pseudo organic glass-metal construct. It would be watertight, easy to clean since I could dispel it, and keep my clothes in one piece. Wonderful.

Cass poked me next. *[Found something nice,]* she said, ponting at an upgrade I hadn't checked yet. I mentally read over the details.

[Hall of Mirrors (Fusion for *Swift Spear* + *Momentum Shift*) (Every molecule interacts with light. Every part of the air is a parallel world. Your spear is instant, your speed unlimited.)]

My breath hitched for a moment. The short description did not do it justice. This was, effectively, a technique for perfect teleportation. Where I'd previously relied on the Wanderer's Key, or stepping through reflections, this let me do smaller things. Teleport just my arm, or instantly complete a motion.

It would let me teleport an attack behind a parry, for example. Or even temporarily, say, have Astraeus exist in two places at once, both blocking an attack and attacking past that block. Terrifying. The name made it sound like a "domain" type power, but there was a slight difference; it wasn't a domain. It worked always. Everywhere.

I took it.

Upgrades in the store should always be things one couldn't do by themselves. That's why levels mattered. They were a multiplier one could only get from this place. And it was especially got for picking up bizarre new abilities like that one, ones that would be almost impossible to learn myself.

Now, I had it. And there was still a ton of contribution left. Astraeus hummed a bit in my core. The spear wasn't currently summoned, but he had a small request. I listened.

Slowly, the awakened spirit communicated with me. His words were slow, hard to decipher, but he conveyed his desires, anyway. The request was simple, really. A true bond, one that gave him his own maelstrom.

Instantly, I understood. If I had a maelstrom, and it was doubled by my parallel self, Ion, that was powerful. But if Astraeus also had a malstrom, and was also doubled...

It could escalate quickly.

'Hir, could you...'

'Yes, Fio. I can.'

[Parallel Soul (Evolution for *Spear Spirit*) (Your Path is shared with another. Walk together, ascend together, Soar together.)]

It was powerful, but I could also tell it was not quite exactly what I had asked for. Slowly, I tilted my head. 'Something's strange,' I noted.

There was a hint of a smile in the divine's voice when they spoke again. *'Yes. This applies to Cass as well.'*

My eyes went wide. If Cass had her own maelstrom, that would mean her own wellspring, which would mean... the ability to permanently manifest if she so chose, and-

'Yes. Both your bonded companions would receive access to their own version of the Gift.'

Without hesitation, I take the upgrade. It takes the rest of my contribution, and even puts me a little into debt, but Hir waves it away. *'Take it as an apology for Lurelia's actions. We shall compensate for it ourselves. Cass' contribution has earned her this much, by far.'*

Astraeus hummed in offense at being forgotten.

'And your spear has, of course, earned it too,' Hir replied with a giggle.

The weapon hummed in satisfaction.

With my selection placed, I smiled faintly. 'Thank you, Hir,' I thought at the divine, then locked in my choices. The ephemeral power of contribution flowed out of me, allowing the gods to assist me in turn. I had helped this world, now it was permitted to make me stronger, and stronger I grew.

My muscles tensed up, and the breath wrenched itself from my lungs. My skin crawled as my entire being was reforged. Muscles stretched and rewound themselves around my bones, like spooling up an old cassette tape. Sinew stretched and compressed, renewing. Old scars faded, tissue was revitalized, and everything about me improved.

I leaned on Astraeus, as my legs went weak, my muscles reknitting themselves. But I remained standing. I didn't throw up, even as the horrible sensation crawled all over me. First my skin, then my muscles, then my bones... and then, it crawled in further, across my spirit.

Perhaps, when I took [Parallel Soul] I should have expected it, but somehow, I didn't. Like a fungus, the power crawled over my core, then across the connection to Cass and Astraeus. Something within all of us twisted.

It churned and spun, then crumbled and stretched. It was like being caught in a washing machine on a roller coaster doing loopings. Astraeus started shaking and I couldn't support myself with the spear anymore, but my legs were strong enough to stay standing.

The wood of the weapon bent and churned in my hands, feeling more like putty as its spirit was changed. They linked to me, to my path, to our freedom. The world spun as my maelstrom split and regrew to full size, the two pieces each assimilating with their owners as well.

And then, the feeling faded.

My core was free from fungus, and I had completed the spiritual version of mitosis. My stomach roiled at the memory, but I kept it down. It felt disgusting, but I kept it down. The knowledge trickled into my head, my new abilities becoming clear... and I ignored it in favour for listening.

Cass spun with joy in the astral realm, where my gateway laid. Qi poured out from her, and it was different from mine. Where I laid between metal and glass, Cass was purely glass aspected. She had dimensional Qi in the truest sense of the word, a master of parallel dimensions, illusions and proper manifestations.

[Thank you Fio!] she chirped, happily. [It feels incredible!]

And it must have. From one moment to the next, she gained access to an incredible source of power, and the volume of her spirit increased terribly. Before, she had barely been an ephemeral spirit, now, her spirit-self was a mannequin carved from glass. And underneath that, there was a pale, silver liquid, as if her shell was filled with moonlight. Warmth and kindness in a dark space. Cass was... Empathy?

Compared to her, Astraeus felt more firm in my hands. The metal was cool to the touch, and it was the only aspect his core carried. Metal. Resplendent gold. Qi poured from him in a torrent, warping the air. His tip easily shifted as I beckoned it, creating crescent blades, or a long spike. I could feel him roar with joy at the simple freedom that power gave.

I smiled. Two of my oldest companions now each had a core of their own. It was a little strange to feel those connected to my own, the way Qi fed across them, but it was nice. They now had the Gift, too, and would be able to level and gain abilities and contribution.

But that was their duty to handle, not mine. I would not be making those decisions for them.

For now, I took a deep breath and faced my party again. I smiled. Then, slowly, my smile faded. Where were Matt and Rae?