

Chapter 86: Status Update

My next swing, with my halfway ruined body would not have cut as deeply as my last one. To make up for the difference, I charged enormous amounts of mirror Qi through my body, blasting through another quarter of my resources.

The gold extending from the tip of my spear turned into a radiant glaive, then the glass underneath my skin shifted. It felt like there was a mirror of myself, some alternate version, always a handful of steps ahead. Like I was strung along by a faster, better version of myself.

Glass wrapped around my bones, then dragged them forward, my muscles infused with shiny, silvery radiance. My body moved, Qi charging through it, and the golden weapon slammed into the side of the worm.

Vines, conjured up by Marie, held the thing in place against its thrashing, burning through her mana at incredible rates, but she stopped it in place just long enough for me to hit. Its hide might have resisted my body before, but the worm was injured. Every bit of its flexible carapace had been burnt and scorched by Ann.

Now, it was enveloped in a cracked, weakened shell of rock. I felt the resistance slam into my body as though I'd thrown myself against a steel wall, and my bones creaked underneath the effort, but it was nothing I couldn't fix with brute force.

[Swift Spear] triggered a moment after the impact, speeding my weapon back up and driving it deeper and deeper into the worm. My blade carved almost halfway through its body before I was interrupted.

A stone spike slammed into my chest, turned aside by a last moment [Reflection], stabbing into the worms hide and adding yet another wound to it, but also bringing my mirror well to horribly low rates.

Luckily, Matt slammed into the thing next, alongside Liam and Emilia, bringing our artillery to bear.

Our most frontline warrior slammed her mace into the monster, and, in an expression of brutal control and willpower, ripped its control of its own hide away from it. The sight was horrifying. Her attack landed, then the stone carapace rippled, shivered, then collapsed in on itself.

The massive sheet of liquidy rock suddenly lost that quality, turning coarse and hard as it contracted into a tiny ring, crushing and tearing the monster's flesh and cutting that whole part of its body off. With monstrous strength, Emilia stomped forward again, grabbing onto the thing with her shield hand, and tossing the headless half of its body aside.

Liam attacked the open wound. Shadows coalesced around him, forming an ever shifting shell of knives. The weapons of shadow spun around him like a blender, and the soft, vulnerable flesh exploded into a shower of gore in front of him, which the rogue faced with absolute calm.

Our swordsman, however, had chosen to not take any easy path. Instead, he was bearing the full brunt of the thing's gravity attacks, dancing through an ever shifting world, as he fell up, then to the side, then down, constantly dancing on small platforms made from flower petals.

Each footfall landed graciously, and somehow, the bastard managed to shift his increased weight perfectly with each movement, bringing it to bear as power against the worm, constantly slashing at its jaw in a storm of pink.

Not to be outdone, Ann and Marie barraged the other, still writhing half of the worm, incinerating the flesh that seemed intent on living without its head. I charged in again, swinging and cutting until the world turned red and my vision faded.

Because my vision did, in fact, go dark. It was an uncomfortable sensation, but there just wasn't enough air for me to keep going the way I was. Regardless of it, my endurance helped me stay on my legs. Slowly, things faded into red and black, but before it happened, the worm breathed its last breath.

Running purely on instinct, I carved another gash into its, now soft, corpse, and ripped out the gateway bits it had inside of it.

For a moment, all I saw was silver. Then I breathed in deep.

There was another figment. Another piece of myself, from another dimension to give advice. I knew, because my own voice rang in my ears again.

"Lean forward. Hands on your thighs. Breathe, deeply."

I followed the advice, using Qi to keep myself upright. I focused on my breathing, making sure I was expanding my lung properly into my stomach, and it slowly came easier. Divine warmth flooded me one more time, but by then, the darkness had already been receding.

What a silly message. I had to smirk as I thought about it - did this mean another version of myself had suffocated here? That was... such a pathetic way to die on a battlefield.

After that thought, I coughed up quite a bit of blood again. Then, my breathing slowly settled bit by bit. My mirror well was much fuller again after absorbing the fragment. My golden well had a little under a fifth remaining.

With deep breaths, and a thankful nod towards Reya, we faced the horde again. Many of the smaller monsters had perished as collateral against the worm. Its gravity effects had been slightly sweeping, crushing smaller monsters under heavier ones.

Shards of rock dug had flown about, as well as sharp petals, exploding arrows, and more. The chaos had thinned the horde considerably, giving us a clearer shot to the city gates, though not exactly what I would call clear.

Trevor flew around in front of me, covering our flank, with aerial assistance from Evelyn. Despite the blood covering him, he shot a confident smile, drawing back a bit and letting me step forward.

Golden Qi surged again, flowing from my hand into my spear.

Then, monsters broke against my weapon again.

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I stood at the altar in the local gateway hall. It was gonna be annoying, but better than the divines. With a deep, painfully stinging breath, I reached out.

[Greetings, Fiona.]

Jam's hollow voice was just as jarring as usual.

[Establishing connections. Reading contribution data. Processed. Reading personal data. Processed. Significant injury detected. You are recommended to put your body in stasis in the gateway in order to recover.]

'Lovely talking to you again, too, Jam. I will not be going into stasis, though. Not keen on having my soul ripped out,' I told the guidance spirit.

My gateway was stronger now, but not strong enough.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **12**

- Fragments: **16**
- Figments: **2]**

The categories now also helped me understand better. Strength very directly enhanced the raw power of my abilities. I could step further through reflections, see through ones more distant as well. Fragments gave me potential and instincts I wouldn't have had. Figments were like lifelines, where another version of me would bail me out.

But. It was not enough for me to enter another gateway yet - it was far from enough. Right now, the other keepers would still have torn me apart like a piece of cheap paper.

[Accepted. You are required to pay a portion of your contribution in order to acquire a mending potion and imbibe it before continuing your growth.]

That was frustrating. But needed. The wound had worsened during the battle. Heck, in another world, I had died from it. So, reluctantly, I confirmed.

A small, green vial appeared in my hand, and I downed it immediately. It tasted like slightly salty spinach-broccoli soup. Not... miserable, but not exactly my favourite meal. Still, I could feel it working.

Potions of mending were different from healing ones. Firstly, they were far more pricey, because they required high level alchemical skills and more rare herbs, some of which could only be found rather deep in the frontier.

Secondly, they worked differently. Rather than try to immediately heal any wounds, they enabled stem cell production and enhanced the DNA's ability to replicate itself without flaws. Which led to the possibility of reconstructing injuries that would have been permanent, and also reduced the risk of cancer slightly - though that was something Qi and the other energies already helped with.

The potion also did its work over a much longer timespan. For the first time, my current status read 'Healing'. How lovely.

With that dealt with, I took a deeper breath, facing Jam again. 'Done. Can I browse, now?'

[Affirmative.]

Having the robotic voice's approval, dozens, then hundreds of choices appeared in front of my inner eye, immediately overloading my mind. The pounding headache set on, compounded, then slowly faded as the information settled.

‘Never gonna be less uncomfortable...’

[It will be, slightly,] Cass provided. [As you grow, you will become more able to handle this kind of stuff. It scales with manipulation.]

‘Thanks, Cass,’ I thought at the little ghost in the machi- in my head, ‘help me sort through it all?’

A small noise of affirmation later, we leafed through the choices.

[You have amassed significant contribution, Fiona Bellum. It is enough for you to increase in levels and gather new abilities if you so wish.]

I didn’t give more than a small recognition to that. Jam must have been leaving through my status sheet - something I would also be doing after picking these abilities. There were, unfortunately, hundreds to look through. Each one with only a title and vague description, as well as the feelings it invoked in me.

One by one, I checked the abilities, discarding them one after another. I would not purchase basic swordsmanship techniques. I would not purchase advanced spear techniques - a lesson from my master, skills like that were only worthwhile when earned.

“Always bet on a warrior who trains,” he’d said.

Very solid advice, that. So, I discarded most of the non-esoteric weapon skills. More strange ones, such as [Thrice-Cruel] I did consider, this one letting me “deliver a vicious strike with greater power the more hatred you harbour.”

Sinister. Also, gimmicky, and not worthwhile. I wanted something else something to properly synergize with me. And eventually, I found something.

[Spear Spirit (Your weapon has resonated and fought with you. Now, it actively cooperates.)]

This was clearly a technique borne from weapon resonance. Something enabled by the fact that my spear was bound to one of my wells. An ability I had essentially no chance of picking up myself.

‘How much?’ I asked the spirit of growth.

[Twenty percent,] Jam supplied calmly.

It felt... low. ‘How much to level my primary class?’

[Ten percent,] Jam replied again.

Wow. I had *really* amassed a *lot* of contribution, then. That was... impressive.

That skill was definitely getting bought.

[Fio!! Found something, something incredible!]

Cass' voice rang out in my head, and I followed her prodding instantly. She was diligently going through abilities, albeit quite a bit faster than me. Somehow, she seemed rather nimble inside my head.

I saw the technique she'd selected and already felt that it was a rather potent one, related to my gateway abilities. And by potent I meant *powerful*. The ability was at the higher end of things I could purchase, and entirely unrelated to anything I could hope to achieve by myself.

[Gifted Fragment (Your paths grows with each branch. Grant others pieces of their branching selves - and take some for yourself. Root your network deeply and reap your future.))]

Three sentences of description were the most I had ever seen. And... it was perfect. I had felt it, after all. The differences in our party. The way Matt and Ann left the others behind. This was an equalizer.

I wanted it.

[Fifty percent.]

Jam's voice cut deep, and hard. I grit my teeth. It was necessary. This was fine.

With that in mind, wanting to purchase some levels meant that these would be my two abilities. One on the border between my golden core and my spear technique, the other firmly rooted in my mirror Qi. I finalized the selection of the abilities, using the rest of my contribution to buy levels - one in Spearwoman, two in Gateway.

Once the selection took hold, I felt an immense power settled down on me and spread from within me. Liquid ambrosia settled into my veins, flowing all throughout me. My legs gave in, as they always did.

My cores burnt in my chest like bonfires, my battered body writhing with power. It was like every muscle was being reattached, replaced with steel cords. My strength became worth more. Every drop of myself became *more*.

A hopeless laugh left my throat, but I shoved down all other emotions until the sensation ebbed. Eventually, the euphoria ended, and I raised myself up again. No one had batted an eye at the display - Reflectors collapsed and laughed around the altars constantly.

Carefully, I stood on my legs, the feeling of standing a little foreign again. While my brain was adjusting to all the new sensations, I decided to call up my status page. I had a couple fights' worth of growth to look forward to, after all.

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: Spearwoman (9) / Gateway (7)

- Techniques
 - Spear Techniques
 - Spear Technique - Fundamentals (High)
 - Swift Spear (Intermediate)
 - Momentum Shift (**Intermediate**)
 - Qi Techniques
 - General
 - Aura Suppression (Intermediate) (Keeping your Qi contained inside your body allows you to appear perfectly ordinary)
 - Aura Sense (**Basic**) (Perceive your surroundings by being in touch with the energies suffusing them)
 - Golden Well
 - Spear Qi (**High**) (Manifest your Qi outside your body and on your weapon)
 - Golden Body (High) (Flood your body with your Qi to temporarily improve all physical attributes)
 - Weapon Resonance (**Intermediate**) (You and your weapon are one. It resonates with your Qi, amplifying its effect)
 - **Spear Spirit (Low) (Your weapon has resonated and fought with you. Now, it actively cooperates)**
 - Mirror Well
 - Gateway (Basic) (You are a Gateway, with all that entails)
 - Reflection (**Intermediate**) (Manifest a mirror from your Qi and use it to reflect enemy attacks back)
 - Lost and Found (Intermediate) (You have a tether to other problematic gateways, allowing you to feel their location)
 - Keeper Manifestation (Low) (Summon an Avatar for your Keeper to interact with the world)
 - **Gifted Fragment (Low) (Your paths grows with each branch. Grant others pieces of their branching selves -**

and take some for yourself. Root your network deeply and reap your future)

- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Agility: **Greater** (**Inferior**)
 - Endurance: Greater (**Lesser**)
 - Resilience: **Greater** (**Lesser**)
 - Manipulation: **Greater** (**Inferior**)
 - Capacity: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Absorption: Medium (Superior)
 - Qi
 - + Gold
 - Mirror
 - Purity (Perfect)
 - Realm (Mirror Wellspring)
 - Stage (**3rd Step**)
 - Path (Imprint upon infinite Self-Similarity)
- + Disposition

Current Status: Healing]

I was not disappointed. Three of my main attributes had broken through a major realm. My agility... it must've made the jump when I forced my body to move at the worm in the end. I could feel my skeleton accelerating before my muscles could. Which was an experience, to be sure.

For resilience, the catalyst to push it was my stab wound, and the fact that I was recovering from it. Plus, reinforcing my body constantly to heal it certainly helped. Manipulation was more insidious to raise, and not something I would have considered my specialty, but it must've been from mirroring the others.

By combining techniques for cycling my Qi, I had practiced my manipulation an incredible amount. Constantly doing so until I passed out for weeks at a time... if that didn't raise it, I didn't know what would've.

My other stats were all on the precipice of major realms as well. I would have to make sure not to slack on my training from now on.

Seeing my mirror well also increase by another step was a pleasant surprise. I had not expected it to increase, but there were plenty of experiences for me to cultivate on. This was the part where I could sit down in a cave for a month and meditate.

Of course, that wasn't happening. My paths were based on freedom, so that wouldn't exactly be very helpful. I could digest my previous experience, of course. Or, I could do that and make new ones to move forward at the same time.

A quick glance at the improvements to my Skills was also very satisfying. My ability to channel Qi through my spear had also improved a lot. I could feel it in the way the weapon responded to my desires. Now, with [Spear Spirit], that effect would only be enhanced.

Happy with the enhancements I turned around.

[There is additional information the divines want me to relay.]

Oh, lovely. I just couldn't catch a break.

'All right, Jam. What kinda information?'

[Restricted. You must pay a portion of your contribution to access it.]

'Is this some kinda joke?' I asked. Why would the divines tell me there was information, then restrict it. That seemed... silly. 'Who restricted it?'

[That is also restricted information.]

I blinked at the altar spirit. 'You're kidding.'

[I am not. Acquiring the restricted information will require eighty percent of your current contribution. Acquiring information on who restricted the information is not currently possible for you to buy.]

Eighty percent was a lot, but at the same time, not much. With how much I had left over, it was... maybe five percent of my original contribution? Fine, sure, I'd play along. 'Buy the intel.'

[An eclipse is beginning.]

Fuck.