

Chapter 79: Campsite

Each and every step through the damned forest along the damned stream was agony.

I desperately clung to my spear with both hands, barely keeping upright, only by expending almost as much Qi as my wellspring made. The wound the icicle had torn into my side reopened, not just once, but *five* separate times.

With each damned reopening, new flashes of pain wracked my shivering body. My muscles were worn down by the enlightenment I had grasped on the cusp of death, too, so they protested even more now, and I felt more like a skeleton puppeteered by strings of Qi.

Still, when my wound opened up, I diligently stopped, circulated my Qi to form tiny flakes of leaf gold, then had that cover the wound up again through a clever twist of [Golden Body]. I would probably evolve that into my own Qi circulation method soon enough - maybe something like [Golden Mirror]?

The agony of the next step shook me from my thoughts.

It took every ounce of discipline I had to remain standing. And, according to [Disciplined], I was quite good at managing my body.

Only [Iron-Will] and [Single-Minded] let me continue my dreadful march back to my companions.

I just had to take it step... by *agonizing fucking step*.

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It took me two hours to make it back to the base camp.

Two full hours of shambling through the forest while barely alive, leaking a trail of blood. I drank from the stream while I followed it, then from filled waterskins, keeping my blood replenished whenever I started feeling light-headed.

By the end of the march, I was relatively sure that each and every muscle in my body, both physical and mental, was at the verge of breaking. Liam found me before I arrived at camp; well, he felt my shadow, rather.

He didn't pick me up, cause he was literally unable to move himself. Didn't even have the Qi to tell the others I was coming, just a simple sign telling them the rustling was a friend rather than a foe.

Secondly, I noticed Matt. He had a big grin on his face. "Fio! Guess what!" he yelled before I even came through the bushes, his voice a dull thrumming in my barely working ears. Maybe I was detecting the vibration through the Qi? Genuinely couldn't tell.

Anyway, with this annoyingly chipper tone, he yelled at me. "Guess who hit wellspring realm just two and a half hours ago!"

THIS MOTHERFUC-

[Calm down Fio, or you'll fall unconscious from blood pressure!]

'Cass. He got to wellspring before I did, when I literally almost died!! How do you want me to be ca-'

Then my blood pressure spiked, and I did, in fact, fall unconscious.

The third thing that I noticed was that my face never impacted the forest floor, because a warm, comforting, familiar presence entered the Qi near me. The smell of fire - not smoke, but fire itself, really, mixed with a faint hint of orange and an even fainter touch of cinnamon.

Ann.

Like lifting a mountain, I opened up my eyelids, dried blood leaving my eyes as I caught a glimpse of her beautiful, beautiful and incredibly worried face.

My lips twisted into a weak smile.

"Hey there, gorgeous," I croaked, then fell unconscious properly.

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When I woke up, it wasn't to the lovely sight of Ann, though. Instead, it was the noise of footsteps and swinging weapons. Pained howls from monsters, and grunts of exertion from my guild.

Opening my eyelids was like lifting mountains, yet I did it anyway. I saw the lilac sky hang above the clearing for a moment. It was so peaceful...

Three celestial silhouettes hung in the sky. The sun, and the two moons, not too far from each other, really. I smiled, and reached my hand up high into the sky. For a moment, I let the feeling of peace run through me.

Then, blood splashed onto my extended arm.

My smile turned into a frown, and my fist in the sky clenched, my spear weaving itself together from my Qi. It was a bit different now, I noticed, since my mastery increased. It felt closer, more like a part of myself. I smiled. Maybe soon, I'd learn more of my master's techniques-

Once again, my thoughts were ended by something entering my field of view. A bloody bornin flew by me, splattering blood onto my face. It joined the dried stuff that was already there.

My entire body still ached, my muscles burning with pain and soreness. They couldn't have used healing magic yet, so my body was wrapped in bandages, and I quite distinctly felt the hole in my side.

Despite it all, I got to my feet.

A bornin saw me and lunged, but with my newfound Qi, it was easy to send it into my spear. I made the weapon much longer, and a tiny movement of my arm annihilated the creature.

The dull ache in my head grew stronger, the strain from manipulating Qi getting to me, but that one was just pain at the end of the day. I pushed it aside, into the corner of my head, and moved on.

Two wells rested inside my body. Neither of them were even remotely full. After my recent fight, their capacity must have increased. I was leaning so heavily on my Qi I would be enormously surprised if those stats *didn't* increase.

So, I decided to go with my new advantages.

[Golden Body] activated as I began cycling my Qi throughout myself. I mixed in some tricks from Matt's style, and some of the things my master had shown me to get more efficiency out of it. Frankly, the ability was the only thing that allowed my battered body to move.

A faint smile wound its way on my face nonetheless.

It felt good to be alive, you know? Sure, I felt dizzy. I wanted to throw up. I was disgusted with *cutting someone's hand off*. But I was alive!

Faintly, in the back of my head, [Mirror Mind] still buzzed, mimicking the Qi circulation, and, strangely, it also let me mirror the bornins. For a moment, I saw one lunge at me.

I was so familiar with the critters, though, that the ability showed me its next movements. I could see exactly how the fight would go. Then, it also let me borrow something from those creatures.

Curiously, I let myself learn from the monsters - the usurpers? Perhaps.

With the mirror in my mind, my body followed, moving with cruel ferocity. Rather than lash out with my spear, I followed the instincts, and stabbed forward with my hand. It was longer than the monster, and I latched onto its head.

For a moment, the mirror told me to rip into it with my teeth, but that was quickly shut down. I was *not* a monster. I could learn from them, though.

Instead of becoming animalistic, I used my spear as a claw, driving it through the creature's heart.

Another one lunged at me, and I sidestepped. Every move it could make played out in front of my inner eye, but I ended the fight by jumping right at the monster, and smashing its head against the ground.

Blood pooled, turning the soles of my boots sticky, and more bornins fell. One after another, we tore them apart. They were ferocious and numerous, some throwing rocks or crappy javelins carved from sticks, but they were no match for us.

Trevor and Emilia bashed, Ann and Evelyn cast, Marie fired arrows, Matt sliced them apart.

Qi bubbled up in my wells and was almost instantly consumed by my hungry abilities, as my spear turned into a shifting weapon of destruction. When enemies came too close, I could even create a secondary blade purely from Qi, or shift the entire shaft into being a blade. Once, I even made the main blade into a scythe, and drew it back, cutting one of the bornins in half.

Fifteen minutes later and the assault was over. I allowed my mind to rest a little, and the dull ache returned. A moment later, with my Qi seeping out of my muscles, I collapsed to the ground, my spear disappearing.

Ann instantly appeared next to me, kneeling down and holding me up. "Fio?" she asked worriedly. "You there? Come on, lay down, you shouldn't be moving, let alone fighting right now..."

I held up a hand to stop her, gently laying a bloodied finger on her lips. I cracked a smile, attempting to be reassuring, but there was blood in my mouth, so some of my teeth might've been red. "Don't worry, love. I'm okay-"

My calming speech was interrupted by a coughing fit filled with chunks of blood. It felt like I was coughing half my lung out, really. Ann attempted to guide me to a makeshift bed of leaves, but I stopped her again.

"Fio, please. Lay down, it's-"

"It's just pain," I said. I looked into her eyes for a long moment. "It's just pain, Ann."

Her face fell, not into anger or disappointment. She just looked... sad. Defeated. "Fio..."

Marie spoke instead. "Fio. You need to rest to recover."

I looked at her for a moment, then swiped my gaze across the camp once. Trev, Evelyn and Sophia wisely kept out of the discussion. My eyes focused on our leader again. I saw that her expression was stern, set in stone. "No, Marie," I shook my head. "I won't be a burden this time. I reached wellspring realm, on both my cores. I *will* heal."

Our leader frowned even more now. "Resting does not make you a burden-"

"YES IT DOES!!" I snapped. Then I coughed again, more blood seeping into the grass. "Yes it does," I whispered.

"Fio," Matt tried, but I shot him a glare, and he wisely closed his mouth.

I looked at Marie. For a long, long moment, I held her gaze. She was our leader. The most adept at keeping a cool head and at keeping all of us alive. But I'd fucked up before. Each time I fucked up the others paid the price, in time and effort and pain and money, even.

Not this time.

Slowly, stubbornly, I rose to my feet, then moved to a fallen over log, sitting down heavily. Then, I looked at Marie again. Her face had softened. She understood. "Sorry for snapping. Marie, everyone, please, just trust me. I know I look bad, but we *all* do. We're in the wilderness. The next city is dozens of miles from here. Monsters *will* find us. You can't afford to protect me, and I don't *need* protection."

I let out a long sigh. "As long as I can move, I'll move."

Emilia shot me a smile. "Alright princess," she said. "You're being mighty strong right now. I'll rely on you, then, and you rely on us as well. We'll have your back, and you'll have ours."

It brought a faint smile to my face, too.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Reya and Eric nod. Marie spoke up again. "Emilia is right. We're a team. Trust is important. If Fio says she can keep going, she can. We trust you."

At that, there were more nods around the camp. I smiled. "I did bring home a bit of food, I said," taking the two large fish out of my inventory. "Mountain lake without aquatic monsters. It's where I got ambushed by some of the Zinnic murderers I taught a lesson to."

Liam flinched, which was... impressive, given that he was laying down. *Shit!* He was resting! I knew he was worrying about being a burden, he- "Will they come after you again?" his voice resounded in my ears.

It was terribly sad, even less than a whisper, barely more audible than a croak. He sounded hoarse and defeated. "... No," I said solemnly. "I cut off the swordswoman's hand. There was a mage, but... he's afraid, now, I think."

"Zinnic won't continue supporting them if they're that hurt," Emilia said.

"You'd think so. I broke the swordswoman's legs just this morning though, and here she was."

At that, I saw faces turn into grimaces. Ann gently ran her fingers through my hair. "Zinnic wouldn't tolerate failure twice."

"That's true," Matt nodded. "And if they do come again, we'll be here to help you."

He and Emilia were in the best shape out of all of us. Matt, because he advanced, and Emilia because she was unbelievably resilient. I nodded. "Probably, yes. Might make her desperate though. But she won't come swinging a sword well, at least."

Once again, people nodded, and things turned quiet. The clearing smelled of iron, dark bornin blood staining the grassy ground. Our campfire crackled quietly, the fish cooking quietly above it. Reya had placed them there.

For a moment, the crackling was the only noise.

I used the moment to call up the divine gift, checking my Status. I hid the parts whose updates I'd seen in combat already.

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: Spearwoman (8) / Gateway (5)

- + Techniques
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Medium (**Intermediate**)
 - Agility: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Endurance: **High** (**Inferior**)
 - Resilience: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Manipulation: Medium (**Greater**)
 - Capacity: Medium (**Greater**)
 - Absorption: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Qi
 - Gold
 - Purity (Intermediate)
 - Realm (Golden **Wellspring**)
 - Stage (1st Step)
 - Path (Voyage through the Golden **Depths**)
 - Mirror
 - Purity (Perfect)
 - Realm (Mirror **Wellspring**)
 - Stage (1st Step)
 - Path (Imprint upon infinite Self-Similarity)
- Disposition
 - Covenant
 - Familiarity (Kind to the known, distrustful to the new.)
 - Temperament
 - Impatient (Time ticks and you wish to be ahead of it.)
 - Disciplined (Your command over yourself is admirable.)
 - Iron Will (Your tenacity is incredible, even among the outstanding.)
 - Talent
 - Slight Edge (Average is below your standards. Go above, even by a little.)
 - Single-Minded (Your focus is your strength. Once your mind is set, nothing will shake you out of it.)

- Mirror Mind (You reflect what is around you. Mimicking what you see becomes second nature.)
- **Precipice [New!] (Growth lies on the edge between life and death. Throw yourself onto the precipice... and thrive.)**

Current Status: **Moribund]**

I checked my current status first and winced at the divine gift's choice of words. Moribund was... well, essentially describing me as a shambling near-corpse. Then again, human bodies were not meant to have this many holes in it. And I was kind of only walking by making my Qi move my own body...

On a brighter note, that had done *wonders* for my manipulation. The stat that has always been one of my weaknesses suddenly turned into a strength. Of course, I was under no illusions about this - it had come from a long time of accumulation. Watching people who were better at it than me.

Heck, I may have been mirroring Matt and Rey, my old master, but I had certainly learned a lot of those principles from the way Ann handled mana. In fact, there were still things to learn from her.

However, seeing my endurance jump a major realm was even sweeter than that. It has probably happened sometime during the... body puppeteering march. My muscles still hurt from that exertion, yet I lived, and my body would grow. Because of the divine gift.

That was too long. Why did Iryel have to tell me, really? I'd just call it the Gift from now.

Gazing at my status again, though, I looked at what was by far the biggest gain. [Precipice]. It was the first new talent I had acquired myself, after three years in Eden.

I had heard of something similar before, though the wording on this one was slightly vague. Sinister, almost, telling me to get myself nearly killed. Just thinking of that moment made the deep gash on my forehead ache again. ...I'd have an eyebrow slit for a little bit, I supposed.

But reading the vague wording told me it did exactly what it promised: help me learn when I was hurt. Especially, if I was in a life-or-death kinda scenario. A thin smile found itself on my lips, that probably shouldn't have been there.

The thought of plunging myself into life-or-death battles was... dangerous. Reckless. I should treat this ability as a *safety net*, not as a talent to actively try my best to use.

Still... the Gift called me moribund right now. Almost dead. What if I sparred-

“Don’t even think it,” Ann hissed. “We’ll be moving out tomorrow morning. You’ll need to walk. Wipe that grin off your face and *lay down*, please. You are not sparring.”

Matt perked up at the word, then quickly lowered his head again. He let out a wistful sigh. Then he smiled at me. “So, Fio, when’d you reach wellspring?”

I felt an artery on my forehead pulse, one that hadn’t been severed in my last battle. “Half an hour after you,” I said through gritted teeth, clenching them so hard it ached.

The rat-looking fucker had the audacity to give me a bright, truly kind smile. “Ah. That is the smallest gap to me you managed yet! I’m proud of you Fio.”

For a moment I faked more anger, struggling against Ann’s grip as if I was about to kill him, but then my wound ached, and I dropped back down. Playing with Matt wasn’t quite worth aggravating my pain for tomorrow. I sighed. “Proud of you too, you prodigious Rat.”

He grinned. “I am quite talented, aren’t I?”

Quietly, I grumbled. Maybe I was gonna use [Precipice] a liiiiittle more than strictly necessary.