

Chapter 112: Joy of Freedom

I don't quite know how we survived those days, not to mention how we managed to keep morale generally high. Every day was a grind. We still hardly slept, though more than when just marching. Battle was tiring, after all.

Every day, I would empty out my wellspring multiple times over. In sparring, in fighting. Once, I awoke in the middle of the night, and found Astraeus floating besides me, enveloped in slowly coursing Qi. Enhancing the material he was made from even further.

Fighting, fighting, then more fighting. Those were my days. And the cosmos within me shifted, grew and pulsed. It was bizarre to see it.

My allies rampaged on the battlefield. Regular soldiers cheered when we approached. An Edian asked for my autograph, once.

That was a bizarre experience, but I cannot say I minded walking into battle alongside cheers. The leyburn would turn up, too, whenever I did, as if oathbound. The coordination among our group improved, as Olivia grew at a staggering speed - though she was far from catching up.

She fought with the fury of a rabid animal, though, and once even took a monstrous claw through the arm to protect someone. That was a day she spent quietly, and we left her to think.

It was impossible to keep track of time, watching the eternally dark skies now light up with fiery, divine radiance to my new sight. As the battles ticked by, though, I grew used to seeing the stars. They no longer distracted me, and I was able to focus.

And that was what I did. Focus, focus, focus. Hold the wall for just a day longer. Just another minute. Just another second, as Edians streamed out from the other side, retreating towards the capital. Inu, our city, would fall.

But I couldn't stop the desire to protect it.

So we fought. I talked with Ann at the end of the days, and hugged her and kissed her sometimes. Once, she proudly asked me to look, presenting me with a bright green flame upon her hand. Apparently, she really was going for rainbow fire; according to her it was an excellent way to practice different mana infusions for her flames.

It would help against barriers, or so she promised. I just smiled and nodded. She was incredible, as she always was.

One day, Chris talked to me, too. "Fio? Do you have a moment?" in that calm voice they always used.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Please listen to this," they said, pulling up a part of their status. "I have crafted a new talent, with the help of [Stargazer]. Let me read it to you. '[Permanency]. You have embraced your nature as everchanging, and unforgetting. Whatever is part of you once, a little of it will stay forever.' That is what it says."

I gave a small whistle. "That's rather amazing."

They smiled. The face had gained some amount of new wrinkles, so it no longer looked as bizarre - which, by itself, was a strange thought. "I think so too. It is, amusingly, acting retroactively. I have regained some measure of power from my previously lost shells."

My eyes widened slightly. "What?" That was... terrifying. A talent that reached through time? Monstrous. "And how many shells have you lost?"

At that question, their smile turned sad. Mournful. "Half a dozen."

For a moment I almost commented that it was not that many, but then bit my tongue. To them, it was like losing family members. "My condolences."

They brightened. "Thank you. Sincerely. But I mainly broach this, because I wish to show you one of the talents I had crafted in a previous shell. It was related to weapons. I wished to gift it to the group. You deserve to see it first, since I believe all of you may approach it a little differently."

I tilted my head. "That... seems like a rather personal gift."

"It is," Chris nodded diligently. "But I believe you deserve it. For everything you have done for me." They bowed, deeply. "I am grateful. The talents I have been given are nothing short of enlightening."

I blinked. "Ah, you don't need to do that. Seriously."

Gently, they shook their head, still bowing. "I believe I do. Annabelle has explained that humans take attempts upon their lives seriously. The fact that I was hired for one makes me

untrustworthy, and yet you accepted me. I understand how much this gesture means, now. And for that, you have my gratitude.”

“Okay, okay. Uh, gratitude accepted. Please, raise your head.” I flushed slightly at the gesture. But at the same time... I was glad I’d given Chris a chance.

Swallowing heavily as they rose, I quickly composed myself. “Uhm, thank you as well. Could you maybe show me the... weapon thing?”

They smiled gently. “Of course. Let me demonstrate.”

A sword of ice formed from the air, using the capabilities from their current shell. They held the large crystalline formation, and closed their eyes. “The trick is a little... strange, so let me see if I can make it work for you. It’s a little like... the weapon is one of your limbs, yes? Now imagine you could detach that limb.”

I blinked. “That’s uh, a difficult mental image.”

With a small smirk, they nodded. “I imagined. Perhaps it makes more sense to you if I explain it as... using your tie to the weapon more thoroughly. It is core bound to you. Who says that means you can just make it reappear in your hand?”

“Huh,” I hummed. That was an interesting thought.

“Watch,” Chris said, throwing their sword upwards - where it stopped. Hovered beside them in the air. Without a single movement from them, the weapon began twirling, hovering around them slowly. “You see,” they explained, though their voice was heavy with strain, “I can do this with a weapon made from Qi. That bond is enough. Yours is far stronger. Use it.”

Astraeus almost vibrated with excitement in my hand, and I smirked at his enthusiasm. “Okay, let me give it a try.” With a somewhat awkward motion, I threw my spear upwards. Then, I felt for my connection with it. It was a little like using [Lost and Found]. That realization then was enhanced by Olivia’s [Connections] and suddenly, my tie to my spear felt more solid.

It froze in the air. For a brief moment, then suddenly disappeared and reappeared in my hand. “What a strange feeling,” I mused.

Chris smiled faintly. “This is just a starting line. But, I suppose, what I mainly wanted to say is to trust in yourself. Explore your abilities. It feels as though it is in your nature not to care about limits, so don’t impose them on yourself.”

With another bow, they walked away, letting the surreal experience sink in. When I looked at myself, the stars within my chest had shifted again. I understood my spear even better now. What a strange feeling.

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More battles past, coming in shorter bursts now. Time to rest grew even more sparse. No matter how many usurpers we killed, there were always more. Bodies dissolved into energy. Whenever we stepped out in front of the walls, the feeling of static in the air gnawed at my skin a little more, like a building wave.

Something was coming, we all knew.

But we fought anyway. Because it was only right. Because every second we bought was valuable.

Iryel felt it the most. The divines themselves felt nervous. In uproar. He complained about headaches, and the fact that they were bickering even more than usual. So, eventually, we went to the temple.

I placed my hand upon Hir's altar.

'Ah, Fio. It is good to speak to you. I assume you have questions,' the divine spoke, though I could feel they equally had things to ask of me.

'Yes. What is happening?' I asked.

Hir's chorus of voices sounded worried when they answered. 'More usurpers are pouring in than ever before. Powerful ones. It seems that they may have recently conquered another world. More forces are pouring in than they should.'

I frowned. 'So?'

'So our resources are becoming even more strained. Especially because with the change of the energy balance we are under more sanctions. The keepers are asking for more payment in order to supply us more chances. We are considering opening a passage to a third world. Whose people may come here, like those from Neamhan.'

'What payment?'

'One of our lives,' Hir replied. 'One of the divines.'

'Oh, shit.'

‘Indeed,’ they spoke mournfully. ‘We are forced to consider it. None of us, however, wish to perish.’

‘Obviously,’ I thought. ‘Do you have any message for me?’

Hir hesitated. ‘... Yes. We wish for you to hold the city. Please. If we may ask, do not flee.’

If they were asking that way, I *knew* there had to be a pretty darned good reason for me to consider fleeing. Not that I wanted to. ‘Not until the Edians are evacuated.’

‘We are grateful. Your contributions are great, but so is the price for more power, if you wish for it.’

I nodded. I’d need everything I could get if they were this worried. ‘Yes.’

‘By all means, then. Spend it.’

And so I did. With that sickening feeling of information appearing in my brain, I selected to level up my gateway class to 10. The extra stats would be powerful. But that was not the true goal. I *knew* what I was about. Because of [Precipice].

When I was in danger, I grew. When I was free, I grew. When I made my mark on the world, I grew.

The divines couldn’t upgrade my cultivation speed. That was a personal journey, after all, one I could only take by myself. But there were things I could get to help.

[Are you sure about this, Bell?] Cass asked me.

I nodded. ‘I am,’ I told my keeper. It was Orvan who had told me to look for it, and there it was. ‘I’d like to buy a Class Ascension.’

Hir’s gaze felt a little heavier that moment. ‘This will use up the remainder of your contribution to come even close. Are you sure? You will still have some way to go.’

Once more, I nodded. ‘Yes. I can get the rest of the way there. I’m sure of it.’

‘Fine then,’ the divine acquiesces. ‘You may need it. I shall take your contribution and deliver your rewards then. May you survive to defend our world another day. You have our gratitude, Fio.’

With that, Hir’s presence disappeared, and the terrible feeling of the level up invaded my body, making it difficult to move. But, with iron determination, I remained standing, then walked out of the temple.

At the door, I saw Orvan enter, and he gave me a nod with a faint smile. What did an archmage buy, I wondered? With his contribution... I shook my head slightly. I'd just find out when I was strong enough. For now, it was back to practicing. Astraeus appeared floating besides me, twirling, moving, bending as I willed him to.

I breathed the fresh air, then stepped into it, platforms of golden Qi holding me afloat. A small smile bloomed on my lips, and I leapt through the sky. This was my path.

Occasionally, I would see a usurper get too close to the walls, and blast it with a spear of golden Qi from the sky, but that soon ended as I was back at the small base my guild was staying in.

Ann greeted me with a hug and a kiss, and I returned them. "All done?" she asked, and I nodded. "Great! Practice with me. I've been working on something."

"Again?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Yes, again," Ann said, rolling her eyes a little. "Something more physical. I want to see how it holds up in a fight."

I walked along, to an open spot. "Fine then," I said with a smile. "Hit me."

"You asked for it," Ann replied, grinning.

For a moment, I considered if I should be worried, then the mana in the air suddenly grew so thick it gave me goosebumps. I didn't even have time to say "What've I gotten myself into now" before the ground came alive underneath me.

Spikes of earth from below. Thick spears of ice from above. And, to combine it all, Ann brought down incredible gravity on me, making every movement a dozen times harder. And as if that wasn't enough, her mana was so thick in the air that she could form tiny needles purely from the magic essence.

All of it was entirely solid, with full capacity of stabbing into me, though not through my reinforced skin. But it made for incredible training, and I doubt anyone without omnidirectional vision could have done nearly as well as I did.

Dodging between spikes, keeping my balance on shifting earth, deflecting attacks from above, below, and all sides simultaneously... I would not have called it easy, but hearing Ann laugh through it all, even in her focus, made me laugh as well.

My spear buzzed through the air, deflecting attacks as I twisted. It felt so freeing to move. I leaned back to let an attack pass over me and saw the skies above. I reached a hand upwards, as if to pluck the stars from the sky, even if I only deflected one of Ann's attacks.

Even with my body so heavy, it felt amazing to move. Even as I was attacked from everywhere... I felt free. What a strange emotion.

Even with closed eyes, I could see it all. Even as I floated within the golden seas.

[Golden Wellspring advanced to **6th Step**.]

I laughed with Ann, as we both celebrated the freedom of using our strengths and moving.