

Chapter 108: Rousing Dragons

The march was fine. It wasn't easy or fun, but it was fine.

I hadn't lost my love for travelling at all. But part of what I enjoyed was seeing new sights at the destinations, and that... was taken away. Most of the landscape we passed through was not in a pleasant state. Trees had been razed, broken apart. There were carcasses, still dissolving into ambient energy, laying around.

Blood soaked the ground in more areas. There were so many usurpers that infighting had apparently started. We saw them tear at each other occasionally. For what? Territory? Glory? I couldn't tell.

Honestly, I didn't care enough.

Without a thought wasted, I cut them down. It felt cruel. It felt callous. But at the same time, I was so wrung dry that I couldn't bring myself to care.

The usurpers, despite everything, were not all evil. No species was. Most of them were creatures that just didn't quite fit here and were predatory towards the Edians, like an invasive species.

Usually, I would have preferred to just place them back in their habitat, but that wasn't an option right now. So, we killed them. One by one, stroke after stroke of my spear. Like wielding a paintbrush, splattering red onto a dark background.

Blood soaked into the ground, where it hissed softly and evaporated into ambient energy. Then we marched, and marched, and marched.

Did we sleep? A little. Collectively, maybe two hours a day. With bodies this strong, we didn't need much more. I would have preferred three, but this was fine, too. Time was short, so we marched.

Really, for a good chunk of it, we ran. It made my cultivation slower since focussing while running was quite a bit harder than while walking with my eyes closed, but I could still do it. The fact that the trees would splinter and break if I ran through them also helped.

That was loud though and attracted monsters, so I tried to avoid it.

Generally, it was quiet. Almost peaceful. Liam and Chris picked off any stragglers. Vines and shadows broke bodies before we even saw them, leaving only parts behind. We hadn't seen any Edian or Reflector corpses yet, though they might have already dissolved, too.

For three days, I mostly focused on breathing. One foot in front of the other. Killing, cultivating, running, sleeping. That was all.

Until, eventually, the walls of Inu came into view.

The city was close to the capital, so it was a massive population centre. People considered it safe. *Had* considered it safe. The place was known for enchanters and smiths. Working with resources that could easily be moved from the frontier without decaying. Alchemy had been done further west.

Instead, these cities had towering walls and fortifications. Magical ballistae and disc launcher to slaughter hordes. Towers full of archers, solid, enchanted stone protecting them. Right now, volleys of magical arrows reigned down on a horde that ground against the walls.

I saw dozens of tiny rifts further back, slowly growing, then contracting as waves of power washed over them. Thousands- no, more than that. There were so many usurpers it was like an endless tide. A millstone grinding at those fortifications.

They'd break. There was no way they wouldn't. After all, the usurpers had multiple worlds under their full control. It was a simple matter of resources.

Having that knowledge click in my head was depressing. The fact that, essentially, these people would flee westwards until the eclipse was over, and then we would go back to the frontier, pushing it back. Rebuilding. Until the next eclipse came.

Cycle after cycle, eroding the spirit of resistance.

I felt my grip tighten around the spear, as I coursed more magic through it. The horde was in sight, so we would do what we always did. I turned to Ann and she smiled. A calm, knowledgeable smile, like she knew exactly what I was gonna do.

My own smile was crooked in reply. It felt misplaced. The fatigue was set deep, weighing down my limbs like lead... But my will was stronger, and my body powerful enough to move even if it was made from lead.

Within me, I roused my energy. Both my wells stirred, and it felt a little like two sleeping dragons awakening. The energy moved slowly at first, having been happy to rest, recover, and grow.

Out there, in the horde, there were creatures that wanted to kill me.

Gold leaked from my fingertips, forming a second spear in my left hand.

They were coming for this world.

I moved, left foot sliding backwards as I prepared to throw. I breathed out.

No way I would let them succeed.

With a roar of magical power and a deafening crack, I threw the golden facsimile of a weapon. A similar fake of my spirit flew with it, adjusting the course, and having it slam into the horde. A dozen bodies were broken apart before its blade, splattering.

A moment later, more power coursed through my magical belt, and the space between the horde and us vanished. Within moments, all of us were amidst the fray. Blood sprayed. Bodies broke.

My skin split open, defenses weakened by the eclipse. Every battle was waged as though on the edge of a knife. But whenever I was hurt, I felt a faint trickle of divinity pour into me, Reya having our back and Iryel flying into the sky, lancing the battlefield with bolts of power and healing.

Emilia, despite her unsure footing, was smiling. Power poured out of her in droves, reshaping the ground. Boulders smashed everything apart. She opened up holes to swallow usurpers in droves.

Matt moved in a whirlwind of violence. His sword killed with every stroke, blood tinging his pink petals a darker shade. Violence followed in his wake, and so did carnage.

As for Liam? I could barely even see him. He stuck to the shadows, but I saw the effects he had. Quickly and silently, he spread death. Monster after monster felled by their own shadows, the darkness writhing and boiling.

Fire and ice rained in front of me at Ann's will, carving bloody furrows into the ground. Her magic was a torrent of noise and power, and it would have been awe inspiring if I took the time to look at it properly.

Finally, Chris moved across the battlefield with both their shells, breaking monsters with mixed magics. I saw them look around too, as if searching. Would they find a new shell to join the battle? I blinked. Perhaps they were taking note of other triz-adu? By now, the species all fought together.

Beastfolk warriors carved into the hordes by my side. There were people floating in the sky on wings. I saw the spirit people fight, too. Pale skinned sky spirits in the sky, or fire spirits, weaving through the battlefield in a blaze of glory.

Dozens of sights entered my mind in moments, until a long breath left my lungs.

I forced the ringing in my ears to be silent, until my breath was all that I could hear in the whole world. The time for violence had come once more. And so, I slaughtered.

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An hour later, covered in blood, breathing heavily, I still fought. My body felt even heavier, but my wellsprings still poured out more power. Qi coursed through my body, making my skin shine with liquid gold.

From the outside, I must have looked like a cast metal statue of a warrior, breaking the hordes. I charged in far, and fought and killed. Monsters, large and small, fell before my spear. The spirit guided me, and with my affinity for mirrors, I had no blind spots. With my ability to make more spears, I was always armed. My skin itself was my armor.

So I fought, and battled, and carved through the monsters - until I was stopped.

It was a rather simple, innocuous encounter, really.

I cut down a zurulen, a giant made of stone, and then... it stood there. A leyburn. A rhino-like creature with dark hide, humongous and silent. An oily sheen seemed to cover the air around it, and suddenly the world fell entirely silent.

Slowly, those eyes trailed towards me, and I saw recognition within them.

The creature looked at me, and let out a huff of hot air, as if challenging me. It was the same one that had crashed into us all those days ago in the black sands. The one that had nearly killed me. The one that had cracked the ground and sent me to the underground ruins where I'd found my gateway fragment.

The one that had *spared my life*.

I gripped my spear tightly, shoving down the fear. This creature was not unintelligent. It knew who I was. It was eager to test itself against me once more - not as a target of slaughter, but as warriors. Somehow, it felt like it would get along well with Ru, the war god.

"Fine then," I said, fighting to stop my arms from shaking as I gripped my spear with both hands. "Come at me."

Slowly, almost gracefully despite its towering figure of flesh and muscle and stoney hide, the leyburn stepped forward. When its hoof impacted the ground, it vanished.

A moment later, the impact slammed into me hard enough to rock my entire world. It had slammed its horn right into the tip of my spear, targeting me head on, and I gritted my teeth hard enough to almost feel them shatter.

Every muscle in my body screamed with pain, but with a great deal of effort, willpower, and a lot of Qi, I kept them in place. My feet remained on the ground, locked in place by my Qi.

The clash lasted only a moment, but I let out a roar as I pushed against the creature. [Momentum Shift] layered atop [Golden Body] layered atop [Mirror Mind]. It combined with my strength and technique and my general ability to manipulate Qi. My stats, that I had worked so hard for, combined with all the levels I had gained, and with a great deal of effort, one that made it feel like my arms would break...

I moved the creature.

With my own power, I shoved aside the living castle that was a leyburn, redirecting it and pushing it to the side.

For a brief moment, our eyes met again, mine open with surprise at what I had just done, the leyburn's filled with... was that *pride*? Something I could only identify as a warrior's spirit seemed to glint from within it.

It was a brief moment, though, and a second later, I moved. My spear lashed forward, driven by years of training and muscle memory and honed by hundreds of fights to the death. Qi roared out from my core, resonating with the weapon and the spirit inside it. Reinforcing the edge, and slamming into the hide of the leyburn.

My attack landed cleanly on its side with all the force of a truck combined into a point as fine as a needle. It split open the grey hide, penetrated a few inches - and then stopped. Up against the hardened muscle of the creature, my weapon didn't pierce far enough.

So, I launched another attack. A brutal lance of Qi, extending out like a second stab from inside the creature.

Now *that* hurt it. A second impact slammed into the leyburn, and it roared, spun, and slammed into me before I could withdraw my spear. I let go, of course, grabbing its horn with both my arms to absorb the momentum, and I heard my bones creak.

A second later I was tossed backwards, slamming through some other creature's body, showering me in blood. While still flying, my spear appeared in my hand - I fucking love bound weapons - and my Qi anchored me in the air.

I launched myself back at the rhino, and we clashed again, and again, and again.

Each clash sent my muscles on protest. Each one sent my instinct reeling. Hell, I was fighting a monster the size of a small house. This thing could flip a tank on its side with barely a thought. And yet... here I was.

Exchange after exchange, we found ourselves *equal*. Power roared out my cores, two roaring streams of Qi pulsing through me. The glass underneath my skin had shifted into liquid gold again, as all my talents worked in tandem. The world felt crystal clear. I was fighting a battle for once.

Not a desperate one to survive, or one I dominated, but one where I was winning by the skin of my teeth, giving each clash my all. And I learned. Thrived. Threw myself onto that precipice, practiced my motions again, and again, and again.

Horn slammed into metal, Metal into hide, and horn into golden skin. Step by step, my focus narrowed, honed in on more details. Whispers were in the back of my mind, something else rousing. Cass directed me on where to move to keep the fight uninterrupted.

I almost laughed inside. How unfair. This was me and the entire team I kept inside me versus just one creature. But that was okay. I saw that the leyburn knew, and that it didn't mind.

So we clashed. Over and over. Until my muscles were mangled from the impact, and its hide was covered in gashes. I'd chipped its horn. How mad was that?! I'd chipped *its horn*!

And eventually, we came together one more, and my Qi roared, two dragons toussling, braiding, flowing through my spear like a raging river, braiding glass and gold into liquid metal. Reflective, shining, and gloriously powerful.

And an invisible barrier inside broke. An eggshell cracked.

[Spear Spirit has reached (Intermediate)!]

It awoke. Within my spear, that nascent consciousness turned very real, rousing, awaking, and bringing with it a rush of power and instinct and companionship that coursed through my veins like fire. This was *my* spear. *My* spirit. It would be with me until we both died, and that was that.

[Weapon Resonance has reached (High)!]

Instantly, my Qi sent the metal of my spear ringing in high tunes. The weapon, the spirit inside it, practically sung as it cut through the air. I slammed it into the leyburn, and the great creature was knocked back.

A living castle, trailing great furrows into the ground, slick with blood. Its eyes widened, and a grin split my face.

“Good morning, little one!” I greeted. “Come on. Let’s win, and we’ll find a name for you!”

My golden, burning, gorgeous spirit *sang* in response. Our moves aligned, and we fought. Everything felt fluent and radiant.

I pierced through the oily sheen, through all defenses of the leyburn. I thrust my weapon forward, coated in a volume of Qi that could make people of lesser stages unconscious by sheer volume, and hit its horn straight on.

Burning with power, my spear crashed into the material that had once shattered all my defenses effortlessly... and my spear cut through it.

Within a moment, I stopped the blow. The leyburn looked at me. Its eyes were full of awe. It dipped its head as if to congratulate me on a battle well fought.

The great beast took a step backwards, my skin sliding out of the small nick it had made in the horn before I stopped the blow.

And the living castle that had once made me despair gave me a huff of recognition, then turned around, and rampaged among the usurpers, tearing their ranks apart side by side with me.