

Dorian wracked his brain for a plan and came up blank. The bone around him was now so scalding it were gave off a sickly pale light. Where he was crammed up against it he felt his skin curdle; searing jolts of pain shot up his body. He felt like a lobster in a pot. The temperature around him would not stop creeping up, and up, and up...

He groaned. What was he supposed to do?

Break out? *How?* He was straining to keep the holes of the Torchdragon's skull plugged as it was. The shadow-space, soaked with Torchdragon qi, were no refuge. He could not be more stuck.

It was getting rather hard to think in all this heat. A fog of boiling feeling was slowly creeping over his mind; he blinked his filmy eyelids and held up an arm. The air here was so hot, so humid he couldn't even sweat properly.

His skin was getting soggy. Like butter heating up, relaxing its firm yet soft shape, getting sloppier...

But again: what was he supposed to do?! He heaved a laugh, then choked on the scalding air. *Damn it all!*

Then a single bright thought pierced the bog. He blinked.

...*Wait.*

What if what he was supposed to do was to simply do nothing?

He perked up. This should cost those infernal creatures a *hell* of a lot of qi, shouldn't it? There were four Torchdragons, sure, but they had to keep feeding this boiling sphere.

He didn't need to break out. He didn't need to stop them. There was no use in thrashing about, in wasting his energies on escape attempts. Simply by *being* he made this a contest of endurance. He simply needed to *not die!*

*Granted*, he thought, watching the skin on the back of his fingers sag off like melted wax, *not dying is hardly a trivial matter*. But he did have some help.

He flexed his fingers. No pain, weirdly; perhaps the nerve endings had been burned off. He tapped his Interspatial Ring and scanned its contents. Lots of knick-knacks floating about in there; arrays scattered about, Stick prototypes, Relic fragments, heaps of artifacts... aha!

A mound of healing elixirs of all colors. Leftovers, to be sure—he hadn't had time to restock of late—but these would have to do. He uncorked the first and downed it in a swig. Tendrils of icy qi swept down his throat, trickling to his limbs and nestling there. It helped the way a cool towel might help a fever patient. He was still burning up inside and out—his arms and his legs had melted so much he could pick out the gross strings of tendons through warped flesh—but it was *something*.

He just needed a lot more *somethings*. Out poured the rest of the elixirs. Really any healing artifact he had! Then he uncorked them one by one and drank, drank, drank. An great upwelling of healing energies went into him like a icy spring, pouring out into the wildfire burning across his body. His flesh became a battleground, a tug-of-war between hurt and heal, melt and mend, and he felt like he himself had become some crucible of wild energies breaking upon each other.

All the while his qi was added to the mix, tirelessly working to stitch back whatever bits of him it could.

And it was working!

...Sort of.

It was, at the very least, *slowing* the melt. Less ‘butter-in-hot-sun,’ more ‘ice-sculpture-left-at-room-temperature.’ His skin was still, on the whole, drooping distressingly off his bones. Even his eyelids had softened up far more than he’d like. He’d pulled out his last trick, downed his last elixir. Now all there was left to do was wait!

And wait.

...And wait.

Was it just his fevered imagination or was there more flesh than skin on his arm now? The skin was sloughing off him like reams of hot, sticky silk. Blearily he noticed a pool of his own melted skin was starting to form about him. He was sitting in a puddle of himself.

And that puddle was starting to bubble. He blinked again. A surreal feeling struck him. It had gotten so hot the *puddle of his own skin* was starting to *evaporate*.

Only then did it really hit him that there was a decent chance he might actually go out like this.

The healing elixirs and his qi, tireless as they were, were starting to feel like chucking buckets of water to put out a burning house. He sought his interiors and found them starting to flag. The elixirs were petering out. His qi, still churning, was having a damned hard time keeping up. The pressure was getting excruciating.

Even his Spirit Sea was feeling it! Under the immense heat, the oppressive force of it, it was starting to condense, drawing into itself, growing ever-thicker... heavier...melting into the core, which itself was soaking up the qi about it, packing it on like new clay... it was starting to gain its own mini-gravity, even. It was starting to *spin* in slow, tremulous revolutions. It was starting, unbelievably, to *glow*.

Dorian frowned two burned-off brows. *What the hells is happening here?*

It brought to Dorian’s mind the process of advancing from the Earth to the Sky Realm! But that involved a setting free of the Laws in the Core. The Core broke open, suffusing the sea, which then spread out into a vast plane in which each little strand of qi brimmed with a smidge of Law; in this way a Sky was formed.

Except here there was no Laws in his Core. And rather than expand *outward* the Core seemed to go *inward*, packing on more mass, growing *denser*, spinning, glowing, burgeoning with greater powers—

Not a Sky, but rather becoming a *Star*.

Dorian could hardly breathe. He was utterly bound by the sight. He’d never seen anything like it before! After Earth was Sky. Everyone knew that. But the paths of cultivation were innumerable and spanned the breadth of the Multiverse! Even quirks of biology would alter the paths of the individual. Strange, arcane powers lurked in the shadows.

And by his bizarre choice to forego a Law and bring on more *qi*, he'd strayed well off the beaten path. Had he stepped into one such shadow? Was *this* some new glorious path of advancement—packing in, growing dense and thick and massive beyond measure?!

Then it stopped. Dorian gaped at it—at this wonderful thing forming within him held in stasis, shivering. Slowly it started to unwind, streams of *qi* falling away, sloshing back into Sea form, unbounding from the mass. *No!* He wished he could throw it all back with invisible hands, hold it together—it was so close to becoming! *You can't leave me here with but a taste of you! Blast it all!*

Yet its impetus had vanished. The pressure was gone. The heat around Dorian was fast dropping. His eyes shot open.

So transfixed was he that he hadn't clocked the fact that his skin had stopped sagging. The healing forces of his *qi*, of the few trickles of elixir left in his system, were starting to reassert themselves—slowly stitching skin over dried-out swathes of blackened flesh. His whole body felt made of old, brittle wood—like one wrong move and he'd crack.

And yet he was *alive!*

He could sense the creatures outside, too. Baffled. Spent. Sense their rage, once burning as hot as their *qi*, give way. The space of shadow was empty once more, *inviting*.

That image still shimmered in the back of his mind—his core condensing, spinning, becoming something so delectably new! As soon as he got out of this fix he'd look into it. But it would have to wait. For now...

He snuffed out his *qi*-candle in the skull, the only thing holding back the darkness. Shadows drenched the space once more. In the next instant he was gone.

He re-emerged in a shadow of a tree, cross-legged—right in front of the pack of Torchdragons. It must've been a horrific sight—this shriveled-up mess of tissue that once was human staring at them with dried-out eyes, *grinning* with flayed gums and cracked teeth.

The Torchdragons, these great hulking beasts of the dark, recoiled at the sight of him! And they had good reason. For though they were spent in both flesh and spirit, their *qi* poured into that one all-out effort to fry him—an effort that had brought him to the cusp of transcendence and annihilation—*he* still had a good, oh, 300% of his *qi* left?

It was *qi* that powered Techniques. It was *qi* that gave a fighter power. It was *qi* coursing through their flesh that let these Torchdragons snap at supersonic speeds. It was their *qi* that let them spit acids to melt the skies and boil the seas!

And now that *qi* was nearly all gone. They were naked. Disarmed.

*You've had a grand old time frying me to within an inch of my life!* Dorian's mouth curled up cruelly. *Why don't I repay you in kind?*

Yama's Chains exploded out from his body. Two—four—*eight*—each as big as a Torchdragon, each costing him a huge swathe of his *qi*, casting long, ominous shadows over the Sinkhole waters. *He* had *qi* to spare.

Another one of Houyi's handy tenets: the most powerful tactic a fighter could muster was the counterpunch. Roll with the opponent's best punch and suddenly they're left out of position, overextended, vulnerable—now these Torchdragons were to him simply huge fish out of water!

Huge as they were they seemed suddenly hesitant. Unsure.

Then four Yama's Chains snaked to the Sinkhole, blocking off any hope of escape.

Then his Javelin rose above him, a reaper in white. His other Chains flanked it like an honor guard.

One of the Torchdragons couldn't take it anymore. It leapt for him, jaw wide, unhinged.

[*Serpent's Senses!*]

It was almost pitiful how slow it seemed to him now—slowed down, stripped of its qi, desperately lunging with only its scaly body. How in the Nine Circles of Hell had he been so careless as to let these things trap him—almost kill him?!

No matter. The fight was all but over; all he had to do now was execute. And his Javelin was as good an executioner as any.

The full heft of Dorian's massive qi reserves sent the Javelin streaking through the air so fast even with his super-slowed senses he only saw its after-image. He sensed it through *feeling* instead—the feeling of bone meeting soft, fleshy throat, and carving deep into the body beyond.

And then there were three. Three drained Torchdragons that had gone very still.

Dorian saw them, true. But his mind was already racing ahead, racing within them to their *cores*, the energies within that would boost his sea higher, thicker, chunkier... and his mind was gone even further.

Gone to that mirage of a dense black star of cultivation, that brief glimpse he'd gotten within himself, some fresh, new, glorious frontier...

As his Javelin emerged from a pool of shadow beside him, soaked through with black blood, his eyes were shining.