

A few important things had changed since his last visit to the Sinkhole.

First was his qi reserves. They'd more than doubled. Which meant his raw power output was also twice as great.

Second was his qi quality. His Bloodline density had *more* than doubled; its density had visibly reached a new level.

All qi had a ghostly quality to it, a sheen of shimmering energy—his qi had been like this at 20% Bloodline Density. It'd floated about like a shadow given mass, a stream of energy darkly tinted. Now, at over 50%, it'd thickened to an almost solid black. When he let it play across his fingertips, it looked like a river of ink—thick, heavy ink.

Third was his new-and-improved Javelin, and the fresh Techniques it'd gotten as he boosted up. It was shockingly agile as he tugged it about him; its once-white tip was now soaked in tarry black, a black which dripped qi like spilled, smoking ink, burning hissing fissures into the ground.

And there was Nightstalker too. It all but guaranteed him a speedy escape, should he need it—but also a speedy entrance...

It was with a great deal of confidence that Dorian stepped into the black unknown.

He sought the depths, grasping past the outlines of shallow kelp, past the empty dens of Gunk Eels, past the milling dragon-turtles and water wyrms patrolling the middle depths. He sought the places where the sun did not shine. Where he could exit anywhere he wished.

So he did, at its outer reaches. There was a shock as his body snapped back to physical place, then a second shock as the deep, dark waters swept him up in their chilling embrace.

Below him stirred a churn of Resonances. They were some distance away, muddling together but clearly there, like the smudged glow of a lighthouse through heavy fog.

He swam closer.

How many? He honed in on the Resonances. Six—no, seven? *Eight?* As he got deeper they resolved more and more before his senses—senses that'd grown so precise after his latest Bloodline infusion he could navigate the darkness about him as though it were mid-day.

But Resonances went two ways; he'd taken notice of them, sure, but now he felt the nearest two glows perk up. He felt them shift closer, higher, piqued. He felt their senses, huge and smothering, drift over his body.

He summoned the Javelin. He let its aura leak out proudly. He cycled his Bloodline, holding nothing back, letting the full brunt of it shine beacon-like in the dead darkness. These other Torchdragons must've felt the death of its brethren—perhaps *sibling?*—just a day before. And now this little worm, who'd had but a smidge of Bloodline yesterday, came back wielding double?

Dorian felt a stillness take hold of one of them.

And then a blast of icy rage swept the waters like a blizzard, shivering him down to the bones; something was coiling, tensed to strike, deep in those waters! Something locked square onto *him*.

He braced himself. *Serpent's Senses!* The world slowed tenfold and then some, buoyed by his chunky new qi reserves.

He held the Javelin tensed and at the ready, and waited, his mind locked onto the space below. In his mind the Sinkhole appeared as a vast cylinder of shadow, a three-dimensional portal of exit-points—any of which his Javelin could strike from. Too many. He isolated it down to one slice. One plane, spanning the breadth of the Sinkhole.

His mind tightened, honed in; the rest of the world faded to a background hum. All he needed was to predict and select but a *single point*.

What happened next happened very, very fast.

The Torchdragon screeched in a realm unheard, in a realm of the Spirit, and Dorian nonetheless felt it and winced.

Then the thing was a blur of vivid motion in his mind, streaking up to devour him.

Caught off-guard he would've been slower to act, no doubt! This thing was at *least* mid-Sky Realm. He might've been swallowed whole!

But planning was critical. And in a fight of such great powers, margins of error were but fleeting slivers of a second. Dorian bought himself time. Time was *everything*.

That—the initial flicker of motion itself—was Dorian's trigger. No hesitation. He acted instantly. His mind had already settled on a very simple algorithm; he executed it with brutal efficiency.

Its trajectory—linear. The path was a straight, clean line in his mind, crossing the plane he'd chosen, ending at his body. The point it'd cross—the latest point at which it'd open its mouth to swallow him—crystalized in his mind.

Before the Torchdragon even reached that point, before it'd even opened its mouth, he shunted the Javelin. A pre-emptive counterstrike, timed with pinpoint precision.

It opened its mouth, bellowing madly—
—and ate shit.

There was a gagging, a thrashing, a full-throated bellowing, and above all a horrible shearing, tearing sound that carved through the core of the massive beast.

And then it was still, hung motionless in the water.

Dorian grinned. *Yes!*

A very simple trap, a textbook bait-and-strike. Yet still damned effective!

He made to go in for the Core. And froze.

SHIT—

A *second* Resonance had reared its ugly head! He hardly had time to recall the Javelin before it streaked for him, cleaving the waters of the Oasis at mind-bending speeds. It was only early Sky-Realm, much weaker than this one, but still *fully* capable of swallowing him in one gulp!

And this was so much messier. No time for a setup. No clean visualization. No pre-empting—it was already but a blink away from swallowing him!

So he got the hells out of there.

One foot into shadow—*out*. And very convenient, since he was steeped in the stuff already!

And not an instant too soon. A fraction of a heartbeat after he left, a cavernous mouth full of wicked-sharp teeth swallowed up the waters where he'd been. *Phew!*

An absurd idea struck Dorian. *Its insides are dark, right? Can I just...*

He felt for the Torchdragon as it went by. *Nope*. It was cloaked and suffused by the light of its own qi, a protective barrier. No entrance there.

Then an even more absurd idea struck Dorian, an improvisation.

He stepped back *out* of shadow, into the exact same spot he'd left, just as the creature's momentum carried it past. Suddenly he was behind it as it streaked up.

In a lecture that he'd been forced to sit through oh-so-long ago, Dorian had once heard his brother Houyi make the observation that the vast majority of organisms in this world were really straws of varying lengths surrounded by flesh and bone.

“Take the human, for example. The straw has two ends. It starts as the mouth, passes through the body, and ends... well. This holds for the serpent, as for the dragon, as for the Phoenix.”

At which point little Dorian had yawned, and said, “Why do I have to know all this, again?!”

And Houyi had frowned. “To defeat one's enemy, one must first know him fully, utterly—better than you know *yourself*. To know him is to know his *anatomy*.”

Weird how that stick-up-his-ass prick kept popping up in Dorian's head at the weirdest times lately. In any case it'd all seemed a heap of drivel.

Until now.

A straw with two ends...

Dorian's eyes flashed as he stared up. *I was too late to meet the first. But certainly not the second!*

He chucked the Javelin with all his might. It vanished into shadow and emerged at a very tender point.

There was a word for this part of a serpentine creature: cloaca.

Another observation Dorian had noticed, over the years. Creatures are so fast to guard their heads, and their hearts. Even their armpits and backs, on occasion!

No creature guarded its buttocks.

It was simply never a place the mind went when grasping for candidates for attack!

A surprise attack to the buttocks?

In Dorian's limited experience this had a 100% fatality rate.

And so it held true here.

Dorian winced as the Javelin went up, pierced through a brief flicker of resistance, and kept *going*, ruthlessly, viciously. He felt a stark shock though the Resonance. He felt the Torchdragon's sheer, unending horror as it felt the point carve up, as it realized just what the

Hells was happening. It trembled. It thrashed. It gave one last desperate bellow—more a whimper, really—and then it, too, was still.

All in all, one of the less pleasant ways to go, it had to be said. Still...he grinned.

What an unexpected windfall!

Now he had *two* prime Spirit Beast Cores. Cores that promised to boost him to such heights it made him dizzy just thinking about it!

He leapt for the first corpse, went down its throat, poked his way through the darkness and snatched up the Core. He did not make the same mistake as last time. No eating for now, though he *desperately* wished to chomp it up then and there. Into the Interspatial Ring it went.

He went back out and swam for the second corpse, happy as can be, and dove in. Seconds later he'd found his way to the second core, lovely little inky bead of throbbing power, and was working on prying it free. He swallowed back some saliva and with reluctant fingers stuffed it into his Ring. *Soon, my lovely! Very, very soon...*

Time to make his exit, he supposed!

Of course it was *then* that he'd felt it.

He frowned.

Something had changed in the waters. A new, unnatural stillness.

He swam out, still frowning, and cast his senses deep into the vast darkness below him.

The Resonances below were swirling faster than ever, spiking, and he could feel a swell of emotion boiling down below. An agitation of monstrous spirits.

Um....

Dorian hesitated. *Not good.*

And then, even further down, there was an exhalation. A long, slow breath out that seemed to run up and down the length of the Sinkhole, rippling across every inch of water.

Dorian did a double-take. *What?!*

It came from an aura he'd somehow missed. He'd missed it because it was so far down, and because, up until now, it had not made its presence known. It'd been dormant. Now its sleep had been disturbed. Even as he hovered here, heart pounding, he felt it like a mountain with no peak shrouded in thick mists; it gave off the muted presence of a sleeping giant. It was suffocating for him even to *exist* in its presence. It made him feel disembodied—like all the world about him, the water in which he swam, belonged to *it*. And he was but an insignificant speck of a trespasser. A trespasser it could extinguish with but a flicker of thought.

Oh, my...

Dorian knew in an instant that this creature could not be in the Sky Realm. This creature was of the *beyond*. And Dorian could guess exactly what it was.

He rather suspected its detached Fang was now the Javelin by his side.

Far below in those fathomless depths, a giant tossed and turned in an increasingly fitful sleep...

A giant slowly rousing from its long slumber.

