

It took him six shadow jumps.

A step into an alley shadow took him to a chimney's shadow cast on a nearby Guild roof. Then another shunted him down the street, and another farther down, and then again, and again, and at last he landed on the broad walkway atop the Oasis's thick outer wall.

He was greeted by a scene of chaos.

Below it was hard to say who was winning. The ground troops seemed to hold off a tide of wyrms and wolves well enough, he supposed. A light-show played across the sands, flaring bright reds, blues, yellows—a firestorm, hailstorm, and thunderstorm messily fused. Gales of qi ripped through the battlefield, stirring up clouds of sand and dust. It must've been worse at ground level, where you could hardly tell friend from foe. There was much screaming from man and beast alike.

Up in the skies it was more one-sided.

A dozen of the Oasis's battleships were already smoking wrecks half-buried in the sands. Two dozen more fought bravely, but they had their work cut out for them—they were struggling to merely fend off a thick swathe of Ugoc Shamans striking from atop giant Profound-Realm Vordors screeching bloody murder. Then there was the matter of the Frost Dragons, the real threat that no-one in the Oasis had an answer for.

On one side of the skies, the Oasis Head and a handful of the other Azcan leaders struggled to hold off one of the dragons. The battleships were left to deal with the other—along with the cloud of Vordors spearing through their ranks, belching acids. The ships were not coping well. Even as Dorian arrived, a bulky steamer was pierced by a lance of ice; it went down, wailing, in a plume of fire. The other ships' cannons boomed desperately, but their tries glanced off the Dragon's thick scales. Useless.

Dorian licked his lips, stretching his arms. What to do? He *could* try a Javelin, but he was also drawn to try something more pure. Something that might showcase more *directly* what he was capable of...

Something that might give Nijo some pause. And thus buy *him* more time. Something that would earn him a little respect—perhaps, if he was lucky, even *fear*...

He threw out his hands, and brushed the dust off an old Technique. A Technique he hadn't made much use of since he'd gotten his Javelin—but a potent weapon nonetheless.

[Yama's Chains!]

This time, he channeled his full base into it.

The neat thing about Yama's Chains were that they were made of pure qi. Which meant that the only limiting factor to their size was *him*.

And right now, *he* was no limit at all!

To either side of him there were two *THUDS* as two enormous chains of smoking shadow—each link big as a man, thick as a wyrm's neck—snaked along the top of the wall. He must've looked comically tiny, holding them with his two hands.

Gasps rang out from below.

"It's him! It's him!"

"The Hero's arrived!"

"Almighty Heavens, we're saved!"

Despite it all, a weak chorus of cheers rang out.

Dorian always rolled his eyes internally at the title. 'Hero.' Ridiculous! It was the last thing anyone should call *him*, of all people. Still he snorted as he flexed his hands, and the chains rose up to either side of him, coiling like pythons poised to strike. *I am here to save the day, aren't I?*

The Frost Dragon battling the ships whirled to him, snorting gales of frost, its crimson jeweled eyes glinting madly. It locked onto him. Its eyes narrowed.

Then it opened its mouth, bellowing, and the air warped with Laws of Ice.

It didn't spew an icy substance; rather it was like the world itself was infected by an unnatural frostbite that iced the air itself—a frostbite that arched straight for Dorian's head. [Serpent's Senses!]

Time slowed tenfold.

Dorian regarded the attack with mild amusement. Then he leapt forward, letting the attack smite a section of wall behind him. It was leisurely, almost effortless. *My turn.*

He thrust his hands out, and his Chains answered his will.

To either side of him two immense masses moved as one. The Frost Dragon snarled its contempt; it flapped its great wings to dodge, fluttering tiny tornadoes in the sands below. Its huge heft streaked up. It all seemed so delightfully *slow* to Dorian's eye.

One chain snagged it around a leg.

The Frost Dragon looked down. It snorted again, somehow with even *more* contempt this time. He could see its thoughts in its eyes—*this puny human means to constrain me? As if!*

It beat its mighty wings.

It did not budge an inch.

He saw its slitted pupil go still. Then it lased in on the chains, disbelieving. It beat its wings again, twice, three times, each mightier than the last, putting the full thrust of its Sky-Realm powers, its mighty draconic frame, into the motion.

The Chain held it with a serene firmness, like a patient owner leashing a disobedient dog.

When the Frost Dragon looked down again Dorian saw in its face a stark, naked horror. He smirked.

This was perhaps the first time in its life that it had run up against something mightier than itself—something that must've seemed in that moment an absolute power, looming before it like the endless depths of the Sinkhole, unknowable, undeniable. When it looked to Dorian he saw in its eyes a newfound fear. It was the fear of a predator encountering a predator bigger than itself. It seemed not to know what to do.

For two incredible seconds they stayed there, fixed in place, the Dragon beating and screeching in futility, Dorian holding firm.

Then Dorian *flexed*, the Chain *yanked*, and the Frost Dragon became a smear of bluish motion.

BOOM!

Around the crater sand rose in waves as though it was water. The Dragon struggled up blearily, on unstable legs. Then Dorian looped a second Chain around its neck.

It looked then like a greater black snake setting upon a smaller blue one, bearing down upon it, wrapping it snout-to-tail even as it thrashed and clawed and spat Law attacks which struck only sand.

Dorian looked at his handiwork, grinning. His qi was *already* the thickest, densest, heaviest he'd encountered on this plane. And now that he'd amassed more than 50% more than what even a Peak Sky Realm Dragon could hold? The thing stood no chance from the start!

For a moment he held one of the most powerful creatures of this plane in his iron grip, savoring the feeling.

He looked to the skies. *I hope you're watching, Nijo...*

Now, Dorian had really downed only one of the man's elite soldiers, so to speak. He'd have to take on *fleets* of creatures like these—not to mention Nijo himself, and all the god-powers he brought—as a *one-man-army*, pretty much. And he had only about a week's time to do it! It was far, *far* too early to celebrate.

But in this moment he felt like the king of the godsdamned plane.

Then he thought a funky thought. *Let's get a little cute with this, shall we?*

He squinted at the Frost Dragon. He imagined the thing like a towel. And then he *twisted*, as though to wring it dry.

The Frost Dragon's screeches shook the dunes. All around it the fighting had stopped—even the Ugoc Shamans, on backs of Vordors, were staring at the scene and gaping as the Dragon thrashed and bucked, its tail whipping about, but it could do nothing as one Chain went one way, and the other squeezed it the other. Dorian was, through sheer brute force, trying to snap the dragon's *spine inside its body*.

And *hells* did he try for it! Qi ran mad in his veins. The Chains wrenched and struggled against that jagged frame. Alas—he was asking too much. All this did was cause the creature a great deal of pain.

He sighed. *Fine...*

He raised his palms, and the Chains went up with them. The apparatus—Chains bearing up a wrapped-up, immobilized dragon—cast a long shadow over the battlefield, enrapturing everyone on it, man and Beast alike.

Then Dorian summoned the Javelin.

The world about him was drenched in shadow as the glinting black-tipped Head emerged, dripping an oily acid as it went. He willed the Chains to stretched outward this time—rather than wringing the towel dry, stretching it to its limits head-to-tail. The Frost Dragon was made into one horizontal line, every inch of it, muscle and scale and sinew, stretched taut. *There it is...* Dorian left a little opening between the Chains, right in the middle of the Beast. Where its massive heart beat nervously behind a stretched layer of jagged blue scales.

The Frost Dragon *whimpered*. The Javelin shot forth.

In a dimly lit room many *li* away, the Godking inhabiting the body of Nijo Ugoc saw a Fang go from one side of his lovely Frost Dragon to the other, as easy as a needle passing through fabric. His mouth hung a little open.

He was the least shocked person in the room.

His Ugoc generals were tripping over themselves. One blubbered. One cried out. Another was tearing out his hair.

"What in Jez's name was that?!"

"That's godsdamned impossible."

"It's the work of another god. Must be!" A bald giant etched all over with Jez's gold markings thumped the table. *"Someone else is interfering in this plane!"*

Nijo chuckled lightly. The moment of shock had passed; his mouth resolved to its usual happy line. *"It's a pleasant surprise, to be sure,"* he said softly. *"But not entirely out of the question. And you are correct, Amada—in a sense. There is a god's hand in this. But not in the way you might think."*

He leaned in, regarding the scene with big, curious eyes. *"Perhaps it ought to be impossible,"* he whispered, as though to himself. *"But I should expect that of you, shouldn't I? Mm. A most wonderful display."*

His eyes glinted. *"What other tricks might you have in store, old friend? Oh, I'm most eager to find out..."*

"What the Hells—I mean to say, in Jez's name—is this?!" The hairy man crossed his arms. *"Enough with the riddle-speak, your honor! Who is he?! Is this man a true threat? Should I reroute our Elder Wyrms from the East, or our baby Phoenixes from the south?"*

Nijo laughed. "You needn't worry. This matter is of personal interest to me—and our friend has now earned the right to face me in the flesh. I shall make the journey West. I shall see to him myself."

"...Ah."

That seemed to settle down everyone in the room. His generals went on to other things—like their plans to sweep the swamps of the South of the Plane, and to besiege the Eastern highlands. That this mysterious Io would be dealt with now seemed a foregone conclusion.

Nijo sighed happily.