

The rest was but a formality.

Yama's Chains struck out and bound up the leftover Torchdragons. They writhed and flopped weakly like fish stuck on hooks, but they were too sapped to put up a serious fight. It was like with that Sky-Realm Frost Dragon, trussed up and pitiful. Dorian gutted them like fish.

It was only after he'd happily collected his the last of the Beasts' Cores, however, that he realized just how severe the damage to his body was.

All this time there had been at most moderate pain. Mostly internal. He bet this was because the parts of him that could *feel* pain had been burned off. Really he'd lost all feeling in the whole of his body; he couldn't wiggle his toes if he wished, and his fingers were like pouting children, only sometimes obeying him—and even then slowly, reluctantly.

What set off the alarms in his mind was when he put his last Core into his Interspatial Ring, took a step, and heard a sharp *CRACK*. Then he frowned, lifting his leg, thinking he'd stepped on something. And found that his foot did not follow. He stared at the blackened stump buried in the sand. The brittle lumps of bone within, the tendons snapped clean off.

...*Huh*.

The heat of battle was burning out within him. And with it that superhuman rush, that exhilaration, was leaking out with it. He felt all of a sudden very old and saggy. A heavy fog of fatigue was slowly washing over him, tugging at his eyes, dragging at his bones. He was sinking involuntarily into a humid stupor. His whole body grew irresistibly heavy. Even his thoughts, usually a fast-flowing stream, now trudged through a swamp of the mind.

He had to get out of here. He was going to crash—was *crashing*—

He fled. Five well-timed shadow jumps took him to his apartment. Blearily he felt around, shoving blurry sketches of furniture aside, picked out his backup stash of Interspatial Rings, poured out all the healing elixirs within, downed them indiscriminately. Then his body flagged at last. He went out like a light. He didn't even feel himself hit the ground.

Father Zacharias had no idea what to do. It was like they'd let a hungry Vordor into a nursery! He'd been verging on desperation as he watched Kaya Rust run through their latest batch of recruits. Now he was verging on tears as she tore through their stack of Techniques in the sacred library—chucking entire volumes aside, saying “boring!” or “dumb!”. He had to swan-dive to save a centuries-old meditation by an old Jez Priest on the nature of being from falling into the hearth. Then she'd alighted upon a Technique—“Oooh!”—and of course it was their most risky and volatile of the bunch—‘Darkheart Sutra’—a cultivation method based on harnessing one's most fiery desires. Zacharias had had it locked up in one of the back bookshelves. How she'd gotten her hands on it he didn't know. Now he could only watch as she set to work with the thing, gobbling up elixirs and Spirit herbs and all manner of the church's precious precious resources as she did.

In his head he'd had this plan. The more he got to know her the more potential the girl seemed to have. Her head was most useful precisely *because* it was so empty—all the more room to put things in! Hopefully a lifelong devotion to Jez's creed, along with a dash of Ethics. Morality. Obedience. And so forth. So he treated her like a tamer might treat a wild beast. Entice it with food. Win it over by feeding it what it likes. And all the while, bend the thing to your will.

He cringed. *What a pleasant fantasy that was...*

He had never seen a creature so single-mindedly devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. It was absurd. She had no other interests or cares—none at all! Zacharias led a church. He had seen his fair share of devotion. This was something else; this was inhuman. Humans cared about things. Families, friends, hobbies, beliefs, ideologies—but her mind was fixed on a single sadistic point: get strong, hurt more. There was something deeply wrong with her.

Could it have been Jez's influence? He frowned. To bond with Jez was to bring out the core of one's soul at some deep level—but that couldn't account for all *this*. Though it might've made a broken psyche worse...

Whatever the case, no amount of sweet-talking on his part would fix it! She was proving a headache to persuade; getting her to care about anything else was impossible. Her appetite was seemingly endless. Zacharias could swear she was hiding an Interspatial Ring in her belly. He couldn't keep enabling this—she'd eat them out of a home! Yet if he stopped giving her what she wanted *now*, would she simply grow bored of them and leave? In that case all they'd gotten for their troubles would be the loss of a hefty sum of goods—alongside the collective infertility of a generation of Jez's worshippers. Either way was no good. No good at all.

The other church leaders shuffled behind him, swallowing and dabbing at their foreheads.

“What do we do?” whispered one of his elder priests, looking rather pale. “Sir Nijo said to rope her in, but, ah—I only mean—“ He spread his hands helplessly.

“I know,” croaked Zacharias.

“Can't we stop her? At least put a limit to this?” cried another priest.

“She hardly listens to me as is,” Zacharias kneaded his brow. “The only thing keeping her here is that we feed her what she likes! Besides—do *you* want to be the one to tell her to stop?”

The priest shivered, drawing his knees together. “Sensible point, Father. Very sensible.”

Zacharias groaned. He felt like tearing his hair out. He'd created this monster, after all. This could only end two ways. Either she ran through the whole of the House of Jez, or they chucked her out before she had the chance!

He winced, watching her wolf down a thousand-year ginseng. The latter was looking more appealing by the second...

And in the final calculus she's but a tiny piece on Jez's vast board. It's not as though she's of any real importance... He swallowed and folded his arms. He grew more sure of himself by the second. *That's it. Enough is enough! Let us call this whole mess a failed experiment, absorb our losses, and move on. This fiend can find some other poor cult to terrorize!*

Dorian woke up not dead, which was always a nice way to start your day. He blinked—eyelids still working, very good—and got slowly up to a crisscross position. His whole body felt scraped raw and throbbed dully, but not sharply. What time was it? He squinted out the floor-to-ceiling windows. The sun was slowly rising. The next day?

Well, that's another day gone. Another day closer to Nijo's arrival. What did he have now? A week? Perhaps even less? He could hardly count on an enemy to keep his word—though Nijo had been almost disturbingly honest up 'till now.

All the more reason to get going! He tapped his Interspatial Ring. On today's agenda: First, absorb all his new goodies! Second, do some poking about that fascinating phenomenon his core had gone nearly gone through. But only after he'd gotten all the writhing out of the way.

Core number one! He tapped a finger to the Beast Core, and the floodgates opened wide.

It was almost starting to get routine, which was insane to think about. As he rolled over, dry heaving and feeling that mad rush of qi and Bloodline and that familiar burning in his gut, it struck him that in any other circumstance the chunk of qi he was about to get was transformative. Any mortal—hells, even lower-tier *gods*—would kill to up their reserves by the chunk now pouring into his Spiritual Sea! Yet to him it was but one of five lined up. And he intended to get through them all by day's end...he was spoiled for qi! Even as a god such a monstrous route would likely never come to him again. He'd been to firmed-up by then, too settled.

Status updates flashed by his fluttering eyelids. Sweat pooled around his body. There was much flopping about and groaning and even a mild loss of bowel control.

And then it was done. Up popped the final message—

[Level-up!]
[Core Saturation]
[554% -> 560%]

Only with the flexible, moldable, nascent build of a mortal could he throw on nearly +200% qi in but a few hours! It was the sum of both the total immolation of a Beast Core's Bloodline *and* the innate qi that Blood brought to begin with, and it sat heavy and thick and beautiful in Dorian's stomach. He even *looked* a little more bloated as he glanced down. He was starting to feel it now—the physical space of his Spirit Sea, small as it was, brushing up against his organs as he shifted his weight. A little like feeling his knuckles crack, but much slimmer. Slightly disturbing.

Yet also utterly *awesome*. He could literally feel his power growing within him! ...Sort of like a tumor! But a very good tumor. The best kind of tumor. The feeling *did* bring up a more disturbing implication, though. The thing did take up physical space within his body. And like it or not his Sea *was* a part of his body. Which meant that there had to be some natural limit for his body to impose on this qi growth.

Or maybe not? Maybe it'll just keep blowing up without end. Maybe my belly can simply keep expanding. Maybe I'll walk around looking like the most pregnant human in the history of the Multiverse, wielding the powers equal to untold hordes of gods! He brightened at the thought.

...Probably not. But one could hope.

Core Two!

And then there came another few hours of playing the dying fish. He gave up on controlling his bowels. At some point Kaya had walked in very angry about something or another, said something, but he couldn't hear her over all the ringing in his ears. Then she left and he went back to flopping and shitting himself uncontrollably. By the end of it he'd run out of sweat to excrete.

[Level-up!]
[Core Saturation]
[709% -> 715%]

Glorious! Wonderful! Lovely!

His whole belly area had gotten uncomfortably tight. He waited for more Bloodline from the Core. None seemed forthcoming.

...*Huh.*

He was quite happy in the grand scheme of things. He was still now *seven times* as powerful as he should have been, at the natural limit of his already enhanced Spirit Sea! It was not merely a difference in quality; it was a difference in kind. He could also hit seven times harder, and that made all the difference in the world. What was a light jab from him could now be a killing blow!

There was, however, one slight dampener to his glee.

If Dorian's math was right, this was substantially less than what he would've expected from a core. A 155% increase was what—30-odd% less than last time's boost? Some qi must've leaked out somehow. Maybe his Sea hadn't grown fast enough to contain it.

Suddenly he was nervous. Diminishing returns likely meant one sobering thing. That his suspicions were right. There *was* a natural limit to just how much qi his Spirit Sea could hold—even in its most stretched form—and he was, ever so slowly, starting to approach it.

The question now was how fast he'd run up against it. *With any luck, not before I've downed these last three Cores...*

With a little more trepidation, he popped in another. *Oh, Fate, you heinous little bastard. Don't you cut me off when I'm so close—at least let me hit that sweet 1000%! Let me hit 10 times harder than anyone else at my power level. Is that really too much to ask?!*