

A/N: Sorry for the

Dorian pierced the heart of the Frost Dragon. Blood and innards spilled out the back end, a glorious shower of gore that splotched the sands crimson, drenching soldiers and Beasts alike. They all saw it — the Oasis fighters, the Beasts, the Vordors and their Shaman Riders.

A silence fell upon the battlefield.

Then Dorian raised his hand, and the chains bulged out, blurring, splitting. In a blink they'd *doubled*. He bared his teeth.

Almost all at once the Ugoc forces fled for dear life. He laughed.

Below, all about him, Azcan soldiers stared up at him. Their eyes shone with something like hero worship—no. Even *more*. They looked to him with reverence befitting a *god*.

*"Hero! Hero! Hero!"*

The chants blew up all around him. Men were ecstatic, leaping up and down, thrusting their fists at him, whooping and hollering. Dorian surveyed the battlefield, nodding. They'd lost maybe a sixth of their men. Not terrible, all things considered.

Although—if he was honest—in the end, the loss of only one man here would *really* matter...

Up ahead, a bedraggled Oasis Lord flew down to him, trailed by a crew of frazzle-haired old men and women. Dorian counted Artificer Head Thon among them, along with the Alchemist Head and a handful of other heads of Noble Houses.

"A timely save," said the Oasis Lord. He looked a little too shell-shocked to muster up his usual sagely smile. "Gratitude—"

"Yeah, listen." Dorian cleared his throat, then put on his most serious face. "Clearly, *I* am now the difference between winning and losing. Without me, this Oasis would be in ruins. *With* me, you at least stand a chance!"

The old Heads looked at one another, blinking. Nobody disputed it. Not even the Oasis Lord.

"So here's what's going to happen. We have a little more than a week until Nijo arrives—or so I have so I have some admittedly dubious reason to believe. In that time, *I* must be the center of this Oasis's efforts. Of course, do the usual—arm yourselves. Declare a state of emergency. Fit a Stick into every hand that can wield it, and so forth! But when I make a demand in the following week, Soul Contract or not, let's agree it's in the best interest of both of us to follow it. Agreed?"

The Lord hesitated. His brows quirked. "That... would depend on—"

"Are we *seriously* quibbling about this? You saw that Frost Dragon. There's dozens, maybe *hundreds*, where that came from!" Dorian sighed. "Right now I'm nowhere near strong enough to handle them all. I'll need your full cooperation. Can we agree to save the politicking for *after* the once-in-a-millennium crisis is over?"

"...Fair enough." The Lord swallowed, looking pale. "What do you propose?"

“First...” Dorian wiggled his stump of a right foot. “I’ll need your most potent healing Elixir. Pull it out from your storages. Brew it. I don’t care. Just do it fast.”

“We shall have it at your doorstep by evening,” said the Alchemist Guild Head. She was also looking rather pale. A palor had drawn across the lot of them.

“Second! I’ll be conducting certain training exercises around the Sinkhole for the next few days. Keep the gates locked. Do *not* disturb me, no matter what you hear. Got it?”

The Oasis Lord nodded slowly. “...Fine. What else?”

“Hmm.” Dorian scratched his chin.

Plying that Sinkhole was suddenly a risk. He was strong, but likely nowhere near strong enough to poke the creature slumbering in its depths! But he still needed that sweet, sweet Bloodline...which meant he had to draw out his prey. Make those *Torchdragons* come to *him* somehow.

He grinned.

“Say, do any of you have a fishing rod I can borrow?”

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Dorian spent the night recuperating and regrowing his foot. He’d been given a sickly green elixir that tasted as awful as it looked, but it did the trick. His limb was growing back—albeit with a sensation very much like a child’s growing pains, except ratcheted up to scale with its growth rate. But by now Dorian had gotten used to withing around on the floor, so he didn’t mind.

At some point Kaya had come in. She didn’t so much as greet him. Just stepped in, trailing golden smoke, blinked twice, face-planted into the floor, and passed out. ...*Fair enough!*

And she was now, inexplicably, Peak Profound.

...*Fair enough!*

Dorian was too busy writhing to think on it very much.

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Later that night he found himself in a familiar place. Blank, hazy, shimmering void.

A dreamscape. He groaned internally.

And a familiar figure resolved out of the haze. Black suit, white gloves, stern features—his butler, Gerard, stood face-to-face with him.

“What now?” said Dorian, one brow cocked.

“We don’t have much time,” gasped Gerard. He held up a hand. “No sardonics, please, my liege—I’ll say my piece, and then this dreamscape will dissolve. Jez has conquered more than three-quarters of the Middle Realms. His forces have breached the Upper Realms, sire! Not since Thurin the Conquerer has such a feat been done.”

“...Huh.”

“We *should* be safe—and the other Godkings *should* contain the threat—but I felt you should know, regardless—“ His voice grew suddenly warbled. He frowned. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out; his figure grew ghostly. He looked on the verge of winking out.

It must’ve been a bad time. The planes were too far apart. Even to send this message from as distant a spot as the Unstuck Space must’ve cost Gerard a hellish amount of qi.

The scene broke apart, misted to nothing, leaving Dorian blinking at the darkness.

*Well, shit.*

*This ‘Jez’ has actually done it? Breaching the Upper Realms, eh?*

...

He suddenly recalled that strange, broken-up message Old Man Fate had tried to send him. The panic in Fate’s voice.

...

*Hm. They’re in a real jam, aren’t they?*

Then he shrugged his metaphysical shoulders. *Sucks to be them!*

The move to seal himself up in maybe the Multiverse’s most secure storage space was looking ever more prescient. He’d effectively removed the need for him to care! Short of collapsing the Zenith Plane itself, which held the Unstuck Space—obviously impossible; Jez would need to wipe out the heaps of Godkings defending the plane to have even a shot at such a thing—Dorian’s position was impregnable.

And so when he woke up he simply wiggled his new toes, got to his feet, shunted that vision to the back of his mind, and happily went about his business.

He had some juicy fish to catch!

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What does one do to bait out a Torchdragon?

Normally you’d throw on some meat, perhaps freshly bloodied. Bait. Dorian got a feeling such crude tactics wouldn’t work on creatures of their caliber.

No—he needed bait that worked on a deeper level. Bait that cut *deep*.

He stood at the edge of the Sinkhole, a high-grade fishing rod treasure made of Spirit Bamboo in one hand, his Interspatial Ring in the other. *What to pick...*

His eyes glinted. *Heh. What about this?*

Out came the still-rotting skull of the Sky-Realm Torchdragon he’d slain the day earlier. He hooked it to the end of the rod.

Then he lowered it down into the waters. It sank lower, and lower, and lower, until he was certain it’d gone to the depths of the Torchdragons’ lair.

And he waited.

Time ticked on. The time it took to burn an incense stick slid by. No response. Dorian frowned. *Really? I’m taunting you with the corpse of your dead brethren—nothing?*

Closing his eyes, he delved his Bloodline senses into the Sinkhole's farthest reaches, seeking out emotional cues. He could sense the Torchdragons there, slithering about, and he could sense they were *irritated*. A few were even fuming.

But they could also tell it was bait. These weren't dumb brute Beasts. None of them rose to it. *Aww*.

He could sense a few of them really wanted to, though. A few were a spark away from swimming to the surface to give that nasty human a piece of their minds. They just needed a little encouragement, as it were... a little push to *really* get them going.

Dorian reeled his rod back in and studied the skull. Then he brightened.

He dropped his pants and started to piss on the thing. He lathered it on thick, too, the way a gourmet chef might drizzle his signature sauce all over a dish. He sniffed. Suitably pungent! *Excellent*.

Grinning, he dropped the fishing line back in.

It didn't make it halfway down the Sinkhole before he felt sharp spikes of rage from down below. More than one. *Many* more. If Dorian was honest, a few more than he bargained for initially—

He sucked in a breath, summoning his trusty Javelin. *SHIT—Here they come!*

It was one thing to face down *one* Sky-Realm Beast. But here—what were there, three? Four? *Five*, even?! He must've pissed off most of the Torchdragons left in the Sinkhole!

One-on-one he could trounce a Sky Realm Beast just fine. But *five-on-one*? Suddenly he wasn't nearly so confident...

Yet in that moment, absurdly, those raging auras all appeared in Dorian's mind not as fearsome Beasts, but rather as a bundle of throbbing *+100%!* statuses, just *waiting* to be absorbed...

He cackled.

*Bring it!*

The sands began to rumble.