Chapter 7

Tulpa Tutorial

“A Spy?” Kobeni gasped. “You mean that one of us is…?”

“*What?* No,” I disagreed. “I mean, I wouldn’t put it past Mel to try and make a deal to save her own skin, and maybe everyone’s but mine, but she got jumped along with the rest of us, I know Kaylee and L wouldn’t, and while I don’t know you that well, you were *unconscious* for most of the last Loop.”

Mel sat up, offended, “I would *never-*”

“Excuse hurting others to save yourself, as long as you didn’t have to pull the trigger yourself?” I cut her off, not doing this again. “Pull the other one, it’s got *bells on.* But sacrificing the town isn’t really your style, eh,” I hesitated, “Maybe it is. I apparently don’t know you that well, and you were playing so many games trying to get Jayce on your side, considering he *does* care, I can’t be sure which parts were real or which parts were manipulations.”

“Jayce… Talis?” she questioned, confused. “I did him a favor, but to say I ‘got him on my side’, you *clearly* don’t know what you *think* you do about me.”

“How old was Piltover when you left. Had it had its two-hundred year celebration yet?” I inquired. “It was certainly… *memorable.*”

“You cannot judge me for what I have not done yet!” she pronounced, which was an answer in of itself.

I nodded, as the unexpected love of a good man had not yet made this version of Mel a better person in turn, to be the kind of person he thought she was, “No, but I can judge you for being the kind of person who would do such a thing. But, regardless, no, our different behavior elicited a different reaction, and as it wasn’t our disagreement last time, given this room is sealed, it had to be something we did.” I couldn’t help but smile, “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to try and do what we did two loops ago, to check?”

“If you think I would, you’re even more of a fool than you seem,” Mel sneered.

I shrugged, unbothered. “Didn’t think so. Alright. Something made whoever was in charge switch from rabbits to wolves. The biggest change was that we didn’t spend two hours openly training. They might have done a scrying, might have watched us through the eyes of a falcon high above, or a nearby rat, or perhaps a local had been turned,” I mused. “I wonder if it’s Edward.”

“Don’t be like that, Lee, Eddie’s nice. He’s just a bit of a blowhard,” Kaylee disagreed, “Like Jayne, but he’s right up there with us on the wall every time.”

“Probably isn’t Edward,” I agreed. “Also, decent moves with the root-impalements and the buzzsaw you two. Not sure what that Deer was, other than Dire, but that enchantment on its antlers was *nasty*.”

“Dire?” L questioned. “You say that like it’s a name.”

“Template,” I agreed. “It’s fantasy atavism, where they’re the ‘primeval’ version of themselves. They’re bigger, tougher, stronger, and have bone plates. Bulging if it’s an herbivore, spiked if it’s a carnivore, though it’s a general rule instead of a law. For an Old Forest that’s not terribly odd, but the gate-busting enchantment is new. Might also be some innate quality of the species. *Definitely* magical, but it has to charge before it kicks in,” I stated.

I’d only seen it for a moment, but unfortunately, while my own Cultivation could tell me there was power in that move… *duh?* The issue was that other than a ‘watch out, this might be strong’ sense, Cultivation was often hyper-focused on its own domain, so I knew it wasn’t ***Stone*** aligned, but couldn’t get anything else, and, unless there were runes, tones, or some other specific calling card, ‘Glowing Green Aura’ could be any of a *hundred* different things.

“But, but how do we stop it from breaking down the gate?” Kobeni questioned.

“Oh, that’s easy,” I waved. “I’ll just go shore up the defenses. It’s not something I can do in a hurry, but ten minutes will lock up the gate pretty tight. Be a bitch to *un-*block the gate, if we don’t stick around, but beats being *dead.* Actually, I’ll do it subtly, but announce I’m doing so, so we can see if it’s a quisling, and then again obviously, to see if it’s scrying or an Animal Messenger equivalent.*”*

“But what do we do ‘bout the wolves and stuff?” Kaylee questioned. “I tried to fight them, but, they just…” she frowned. “Just pushed right through.”

I nodded, “Yeah, we trained on fighting swarms, not human equivalent size foes. We just need to up the strength and concentration of our Styles, and, dropping the area of effect, it should be pretty easy. Well, a bit harder for you than Kobeni, but doable.”

“How?” she questioned. “Hit ‘em with more?”

“That’d be the primitive way of doing so,” I nodded. As she frowned at that, seeming offended, I explained, “I don’t mean that as an insult, there’s essentially three basic ways to up your strength in your style, the Primitive way, the Deific way, and the Scientific way.”

“Which one should I do?” the mechanic questioned.

“You’re gonna end up doing all three, if you want to keep progressing,” I answered. “You can get *pretty* far by just going for one, but the more you do, the harder it gets to establish the other two, because the gains drop in a measurable way. Like, you know how, in the stories, the Protagonist sometimes ends up depowered in some way, but then regain their strength quickly, and comes back stronger than ever?” I prompted, the woman nodding. “Well, *that’s why,* as doing so *makes* them firm up their foundation.”

Considering that, the Water Cultivator questioned, “Then which one should I do *first?”*

“So, Flow is a key aspect of Water, just as Burn is for Fire, Break is for **Stone**, Grow is for Wood, and Cut is for Metal,” I reminded her, having given this speech to each of them when we’d gotten started. “But I haven’t asked then, because it wasn’t as important, but it is now. What is Flow to *you,* Kaylee?”

Perking up, she replied with a smile, “Oh, that’s easy! Flow is volume divided by time! Or, well, also velocity times the cross section of whatever it’s flowin’ *through.*”

“Okay, the *scientific* way is where you want to start, then,” I nodded. “You have the variables, so play around with them.”

“But, what would the *others* be, uh, if ya don’t mind sayin’?” she inquired. “‘Cause I know tellin’ me too much can-”

“No, it’s fine,” I reassured her. “The *Primitive* way is to go ‘Hit Water! Not enough? Hit with *Big* Water! Or just work on your maximum controllable amount until you can just hit them with an ocean wave’s worth of the stuff. And the *Deific* way is to make your Water more Water than Water so the Water can Water more than normal Water can Water, and thus your Water cannot be denied like normal Water could be.”

Kaylee stared at me. “Uh, Lee? That don’t make a *lick* of sense.”

“It would if you were familiar with Gods that hold Elemental Domains,” I replied. “Which is why it’s probably going to be the *last* of the three you pick up. Conceptual Bullshit is… *weird,* but would also let you make rain that falls like bullets, a small wave that could break apart a gate and *keep going*, or a pool that would survive in a blisteringly hot desert for years. As it is now, if you want power, you’re going to need to compress your water.”

“But water *don’t* compress. That’s, like, what it does,” Kaylee argued.

I tilted a head, “Are you telling me water pressure *isn’t* a thing that exists.”

“That’s not the same thing in the slightest,” L commented.

“Oh, would *you* like to give her this lesson, then?” I inquired, archly.

“No, no I think I get what ya mean,” Kaylee answered me, before the ex MiB Agent could. “I need ta put it under pressure, so when it hits, it *hits.*”

I nodded. “Exactly.” Holding up both hands, I created two head-sized balls of dirt. “Both of these are functionally the same, but…” Concentrating, and closing my fingers, I pressed inwards with my Chi, the ball of soil shrinking, maintaining complete coverage instead of just making big ‘mental fingers’ something I’d had to train at, but, a couple seconds later, I got it as small as it was going to get, now the size of a baseball, and, while not *rock* hard, in the colloquiel sence, it had a chalk-like strength to it.

Tossing both to her, which she caught, I asked, “Which would you rather get hit in the head with?”

“*Neither,”* she replied, with a smile that told me she still understood. “But, like, how?”

“Okay, hold both arms out, and close your hands into fists,” I directed, the woman, after a moment, doing so. Okay, leave your left arm alone, but for your right, I want you to clench your fist as *hard* as you can, but, not only that, I want you to tighten the muscled in your arm as much as you can, so that arm *cannot be moved.”*

She started to do so, as I watched her carefully, prompting her, *“*Harder. *Harder.* Your *bones* should be feeling it, the strain so heavy, so that-“

Lashing out, I pushed down on both her arms, and, while her left dropped in an instant, her right held firm for a moment, before, surprised she stopped straining, and dropped it to.

“Good,” I nodded. “Now, do that, but with your *Water,* and, once you can hold it in place, start *moving* it, just as you could, if you wished, moved your straining arm. It won’t be *easy,* or *fast*, but remember, slow is smooth, smooth is fast, and fast is victorious.”

Turning to Kobeni, I told her, “Now if you want to *physicalize* your Flame, to make your element *solid* in a way it isn’t *naturally,* that’s how you do it too. Though, you *also* have the option of concentrating the flame, not in mass, but *power,* by just packing more energy into it to make it *hotter*. So, something basic like physical flame-darts? Concentrate it, and fire them. Burn through your enemies? Up the power of your flame stream, which is the *Primitive* way of doing it, but, like I said, that’s not a bad thing, and all of them need to be learned eventually. You’re just not making a bigger flame, like Kaylee would need with water, since her element *is* uncompressible in that sense, you’re making a ‘bigger’ temperature, which doesn’t *sound* like it should work, but you’re also *literally holding Fire*, so we’ve left that territory since lesson *one.*” I smiled.

“And what about me?”

I turned, to regard Mel, the warmth in my tone I had talking to the others cooling, like lava shifting to black, glossy, obsidian. “What *about* you?”

“What would you suggest I do?” she inquired.

“Find someone who cares?” I suggested. At her offended look, I let out a single, derisive, bark of laughter. “What, did you think I’d go back to being all buddy-buddy? I’m *not* caught in the Loop like that, Ms. Medarda, and see no need to assist you.”

Sitting up, trying to appear more charming, she stated, “I could be of use.”

I nodded, “True, but the time I would waste *watching* you, double-checking your *every* statement, and trying to work around *your* manipulations, now that I know you would not act as an honorable compatriot, could be better spent improving my *own* capabilities.”

“And me?” L questioned, clearly not expecting any support, but at least *she* was honest about it.

“The term *pearls before swine,* comes to mind,” I replied without hesitation. “You don’t want my help, so I, again, won’t waste my time. And now, it’s time to get started,” I stated, turning on my heel, and walking towards where the welcoming party would stand, as the timer beeped, and the doorway opened.

“Greetings, Mr. Durande, we are here to help,” I informed him, before he could speak. “The opponent is utilizing supernaturally controlled forest animals, from swarms of squirrels to packs of wolves, and other foes, though our divinations suggested they may not only have Dire elements within their number, but supernaturally enhanced specimens as well. Luckily for you, *we* are supernaturally enhanced as well.”

With a gesture of my hand, and forming a floating spike of stone for effect, I continued, “I need you to gather all the oil you can, and soak the ground in front of the walls facing the forest with it, as we’ll need the fire to fend them off,” I instructed. “The attack will come within the next few hours, and I will make sure to reinforce the gate facing the forest to prevent it from being breached after an hour, so any business, like the aforementioned oil, will need to be out and dumped before that is done, unless they don’t mind a longer walk back. We have limited time, and a great deal to do in it, and while my teammates will practice their techniques, rest assured, they will all be ready for the coming battle,” I informed him. “Though if you could deliver some lunch, our divinations also said good things about Martha’s cooking.”

As always, the older man took a moment to process what I’d told him, before turning to the others, and calling out, “Well, you heard him! Get moving!”

The townsfolk got to moving, and I created two *stone* targets, one for Kaylee, and one for Kobeni, ignoring the other two, and took off for the jeweler’s store, as getting a feel for gemstones was now even *more* important than it was before.

<LDW>

Coming to with a slight groan, as a beeping alarm brought me back to consciousness, I sat up in my chair, and announced, “Okay, so it *wasn’t* a Quisling.”

“I didn’t think the deer would break its *neck* like that,” Kaylee frowned.

“To be honest, neither did I,” I replied. The reinforcement I’d put in had been subtle, picking a stone the same color as the wood, having had to dig out holes underground to put the supports in.

*Absorbing* the dirt had been as much training as it’s been to get rid of the evidence, and even know, my Chi pathways felt… *scratchy*, the impure material not fully **Stone**, but, the more I did so, the more I’d be able to use it to conserve energy in a fight, though absorbing my own *created* **Stone** would be easier, and ‘phantom’ **Stone**, given it hadn’t solidified and was as much Chi as it was the substance it was pretending to be, would be easiest to reclaim, though would never be a net *positive*.

Regardless, I’d set it up firmly, even tearing apart half the gate so that only an inch-deep layer of wood was left on the outside, hiding the equivalent of lower-end Dwarven Battlements, though if there were any *actual* Dwarves in this town, they probably would *not* have liked the comparison, as they were both slipshod in comparison and *undoubtedly* would be considered ‘Cheatin’’.

But I’d made them to hold, and, when the Gate-Crasher Stag had shown up, charging just as he had before, Mel and I had been ready to take him out when he bounced off the hidden defenses, only for the green of it’s horns to flicker out like a broken lightbulb, the dead deer hitting the ground with a meaty *thunk* that had almost seemed to make the *other animals* pause in surprise, though I couldn’t be sure if they actually did or that was my own sense of dramaticism kicking in.

“Discrete magical effects normally disperse, they don’t backblast like that, at least not normally,” I mused, “though, given this seems to be a general fantasy world instead of a regimented Weave-World, that might explain the differences. Eh, that’s both good and bad, because it means we can avoid Bullet-Sponge ridiculousness, but also I won’t be able to peg the strength of whatever we face nearly as easily. Eh, it’s all a trade-off in the end,” I sighed.

Waving my arms, I created two stone targets, the twin pillars draining a good bit of my Chi, but I was already starting to re-gather it. “If you want to pick up where you left off, Kaylee, and Kobeni, if you could work on compression, I’d appreciate it. I’m not sure of the ventilation or thermal conductivity of this space, so making *intense* flames *might* kill us all, not that that’s the end or anything.

“Y-Yes!” the Asian girl nodded, and got to work, while I worked on *my* project, which was trying to make diamond-tipped earth spikes, but mixing the sub-expressions of **Stone** like that was beyond my capabilities, even working slowly.

I *knew* it was possible, and that, despite the different composition, they *weren’t separate*, as, ultimately, *Separation was an Illusion*, but that *didn’t fucking help*.

And creating a spike of diamond was… *hilariously* expensive in Chi, and, even as much as I’d progressed, outside of my capabilities.

I *could* form a diamond-tip, though they were always *yellow* diamonds, no matter how hard I tried to make them pure, and grow the stone back from that, but it was a process that took a solid minute per spike, and while I could theoretically keep them in reserve, I had to make them *permanent* to stop from constantly being a drain on my reserves, and that, too, took an absolute *assload* of Chi, as Gems were *fucking expensive*, in *every* sense.

Which meant my plans of diamond *armor* were still… a good bit away.

Mind you, Armor Techniques were pretty rare, past the giant spiritual glowy ‘I can punch Kaiju’ bullshit, because why waste the time, and effort, in learning to armor yourself when you could just buy a Defensive Treasure that’d do it for you *and* not be a constant drain on your Chi.

But it was just us here, which, as my instructor would have reminded me, was a *good* thing as it let me cover the Basics *without* cheating, the Cock having a… *thing* about trying to jump ahead past where one was ready, and how it *always* had a cost.

So, I’d start with stone, but armor was… *tricky,* because unless you just went the ‘Smother Yourself In Your Element’ path, you had to actually *visualize armor that actually functioned*, and most Cultivators weren’t big on the *finnicky bits.*

Thankfully, I’d had some training there as well, across a couple Seminars, and while Celebrimbor might burst a blood vessel over the sloppy bullshit I was putting together, I *didn’t give a shit* because *he wasn’t here.*

Now I just had to get the fucking thing to *work.*

<LDW>

Good news? Eight Loops later, I *had,* and Kaylee and Kobeni had both managed to physicalize their element enough to start kicking some *serious* lupine ass.

Bad news? The things that were attacking us had started getting *random.*

Next loop after the dear, there had been *boars*, that ran like tiny furry battering rams, absorbing fire and making ramps up the walls, and then there’d been the oversized beetles that had just flown over the walls, each the size of a wolf, and while Kaylee and Kobeni’s attacks had washed over them, that was Mel and my wheelhouse, cracking them open, whereupon they were pressurized or burned out from within.

Then we’d been back to tiny animals, and, while we were all pretty fucked up by the end of it, we *won* that one, only for a pack of *Dire Badgers* to come up, right inside the walls, unleashing a flood of insects that’d *literally drowned us.*

Training myself, I got to the point that I could *feel* them coming through the ground, but doing so was a *constant* distraction. That said, running over, picking up a squeaking Kobeni, jumping off and holding her right over the hole as it appeared, the girl shoving her *own* flame forward and burning them *all* to death, had been… *very cathartic*.

And had stopped them using that technique for another dozen Loops.

I was *pretty* sure that, if Mel and L would listen to me, I could narrow down the factors enough to start pulling the kinds of causal strings that let you do some *really* ridiculous things, but they’d decided to avoid me, only showing up for the defense of the town at the end of the loop, and… okay.

They were clearly training on their own, so I was happy, and anything past that was just extra.

So, on Loop thirty-eight, having finished a vacation loop two previous, where all *three* of us *took a fuckin’ nap*, I finally decided things had progressed to the point that it needed to be addressed, calling out to the Asian girl, who was working on the basics of a Fire Armor, “Hey, Kobeni, come over and have a seat, we need to talk, and I promise it isn’t bad.”

Hesitantly, she let her flaming bracers dissipate, and moved to the indicated chair at our ‘starting table’. “M-Most of the time, when someone says that, that means it *is* bad,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, if they’re liars or manipulators, like Mel,” I agreed. “But I’m not.”

“She says you are,” Kobeni stated, hesitantly.

“You mean when she approached you, making sure I wasn’t there to defend myself?” I questioned, dryly, not upset at the girl before me.

The Devil Hunter’s eyes widened, as she asked, “H-How?”

“I can feel the gems she wears,” I shrugged. “Took me a bit to get a feel for them, but she’s about three hundred feet *that* way,” I informed my teammate, pointing towards the plains-side gate. “But, yeah, the politican decided that, being accused of lying and manipulation, the correct answer was to lye and manipulate to try and turn others against me? I’m shocked. Shocked and surprised. Let me guess, she was also wanting to know about what I was teaching you?”

“Y-Yes, I, was I not supposed to tell her?” Kobeni questioned. “And, I thought you said this wasn’t a bad conversation.”

“It’s not, and I don’t mind,” I agreed. “If she wants to bottleneck her Cultivation trying to lay a Flame foundation instead of a Metal one, that’s on her.”

The girl considered that, asking, “Like, when Ms. Frye got to the third level, but you warned her about telling us how?”

“*Exactly.* We’ve still got enough in common that it *should* be fine, but we’ve got time, yet the further we progress, the *less* we’ll have in common, beyond the broad strokes,” I agreed. “But that’s not what we need to talk about. *That* is,” I stated, pointing at the Flame in her hands, its shape having slowly defined over the Loops, and, while I *still* wasn’t sure what it was supposed to be, it was definitely *mammalian*, though the *three* tails it possessed was throwing me.

“I, did I do something wrong?” Kobeni asked, holding it protectively to her chest.

“No, creating an avatar is fine, as long as you do it right,” I reassured her. “So, to start with, *what* is it?”

The girl hesitated, looking down at it, confused, offering, “A… Kitsune?”

“Oh, that explains the tails,” I nodded. “So, your style is of the *Vermillion Bird,* which, depending on the setting, is essentially just a Chinese phoenix, while others have that be a different animal altogether and the VB just be a lesser spirit. That said, while that’d make avian expressions *easier*, you’re not hard-locked, just as I wouldn’t have to make Dragons, though my style would lean towards…” I trailed off.

“Yes?” Kobeni questioned.

Facepalming, I groaned, “*God dammit I should’ve been making Scale Mail instead of Breastplates!*” Sighing, I shook my head. “Right, just realized something on my end. Um, where was I? Right. *Expressions.* So, I don’t *have* to go draconic, though it’d be easier, and Kaylee doesn’t *have* to go turtly, is there a word for that? Either way, it’s a tendency, not a *rule*. So, Kitsune, that works. If you don’t mind me asking, why a Kitsune.”

“I…” the girl blushed, and looked away. “It’s, it’s stupid.”

“If you don’t want to-” I started to reassure her, but she cut me off.

“No. It’s. I. I wished I’d gotten a Contract with the Fox Devil. It. It *eats* part of you, and you have to heal, but then, but then I could’ve *done* something!” she exclaimed in a rush, petting her Flame, which nuzzled up against her a little.

Considering that, I nodded. “Makes sense,” I finally stated, catching her attention. “Your Contract was cost-less, but it was also effectively *powerless* against the foes you were expected to face. Having something that, while costlier, would mean you were more likely survive to *suffer* the cost is understandable. But, and here’s the part that’s important, that thing you’re holding *isn’t the Fox Devil.* It’s… do you want the short explanation, or the long one? The long one will need to cover mirror neurons, tulpa formations, and a whole bunch of other stuff,” I warned.

“Uh, the-the short one?” Kobeni chose, though she wasn’t really sure about it.

I nodded again, “Alright. *Super* short version is that it’s an imaginary friend, except when the supernatural is involved, imaginary friends sometimes don’t *stay* imaginary. Longer answer, the fox you’re holding *is still you,* but it’s a bit of your mind and soul that you’ve tethered off and separated to become it’s own thing, which, since you’re not *forcing*, will happen slowly, but naturally, with no harm to yourself, as both of those things naturally regrow, though this situation is *not* conducive to soul regeneration, given how we keep having traumatic experiences every three or so hours.”

Focusing, I made a foot tall golem, my anatomical studies letting me visualize and create its mineral musculature and **Stone** bones. “Now, like I said, it’s *still you*, and thus, while it *will* develop a personality given time, it will *always* be subordinate to your will. The problem is that if you don’t know this, or disbelieve it, and believe it’s the dominant ‘partner’ in this situation, *it will be,* ***because that’s what you want it to be.*** The issue is that a *lot* of this is subconscious, and, thus, you can do so without ever realizing.”

Making the golem lean over and flip me off when I ‘wasn’t looking’, I turned to stare at it, and moved it to nonchalantantly stand up straight, idly kick the ground, before, as soon as faced Kobeni again, it went back to flipping me off, making the girl giggle.

Sinking its arms to my own, I waved a hand, explaining, “Now, I’m controlling this one directly, but if I wanted to go the guardian route, for instance if I was doing this alone, I very likely would make one myself, but that’s not the way I’m choosing to develop mine, though that’s not to say there’s anything wrong with you developing *yours* that way. But, this kitsune, whose name is…”

Kobeni froze, clearly not having considered that, asking, “… Rishu?”

Shrugging, I told her, “It’s your soul-construct. In a way it’s kind of like your *kid*, so you get to name it.”

“I, what?” she squeaked, and I wondered what I’d said wrong.

“Not, like, *biologically*, and, again, it isn’t a *completely* separate entity, but you *are* its creator, which means, kind of like a parent, you are responsible for its development, through your action, *or inaction*, though action is definitely the way to go for these things,” I explained. “You carry its engram, its… *pattern* inside you, so, from any Flame, even the ones you create, you will be able to manifest it,” I explained. “Which means *you* should name it.”

Looking down, with wide eyes, she muttered, *“But I’m not ready to be a mother.”*

Rolling my eyes, I leaned over and flicked her in the nose, getting her attention. “You’re *not*. It’s *like* being a parent, it’s not the *same*. Just like owning a dog, or a cat, or, well, a *fox* would be. Except it’s magic, so it’s gonna develop sentience… *kind of,* since it’ll be borrowing yours, but in a way that doesn’t diminish what you have.”

“O-Oh,” Kobeni agreed. “I-I’ve never had a pet either. Couldn’t afford one. Um. I. Okay.” Addressing the Flame, she informed it, “Your name is *Rishu!”*

And the proto-Avatar crackled its flame in a way that almost sounded like a yip, as it nodded its head.

Looking my way, the girl asked, “Did, did *I* make it do that?”

“Subconsciously, yes, though, in time, it’ll start to do stuff on its own,” I agreed. “But, again, will be subordinate to you, but, *again,* it will be subordinate to what you *really* want, not what you *claim* to want. So, last few reminders. I know you’ve been using Rishu to do most of your Cultivation, but, like the armor you were working on, you need to be able to do stuff *separate* from… her?” I questioned, the construct nodding in time with its creator, “Separate from her, which you already know you can, but can be a mental block if you’re not careful.”

Continuing to list the major points, I stated, “Unless something targets your *soul,* Rishu cannot actually be permanently injured or killed, though it won’t like having its current body injured, just like *we* don’t like getting killed at the end of these Loops, even though it’s not permanent either. Your Cultivation in no way *comes* from Rishu, as the *opposite* is true, and, if you’re having trouble with her, she can’t ‘shut off’ your power or anything similar. That said, once it can do things you don’t want it to do, if it does, *talk* to it, which, yes, *is* kind of talking to yourself a little, but treating it like a slave is treating *yourself* like a slave and…”

I waved a hand, “If you were more of an asshole, it could cause a whole host of problems, but as far as I can tell you’re generally a good person, though you do have some issues, but, really, who on this team *doesn’t?* Now, let’s give it a better body.*”*

Spending a little over an hour with her, walking her through the visualization exercises, ‘Rishu’ took form, head, paws, and tails becoming more distinct, its eyes swirls of yellow compared to its mostly crimson body, its claws and teeth glowing a bright blue.

“Alright, we’ve got half an hour until showtime. Mind if I pet it?” I questioned.

Kobeni’s eyes went wide, as she stuttered, “W-Won’t you get burned?”

“Only if you want me to be,” I replied. “It’s made of fire, but, as we established back on Loop two, that doesn’t mean it *has* to burn. And if it does, I’ll be healed in an hour anyways, though I’m pretty sure your control is good enough that I’ll be fine.”

And, also, getting it to touch things and *not* burn the shit out of them was pretty foundational to using this thing as anything other than a living weapon, but, introducing the possibility that it *would* burn everything it touch would only confirm her fears and make it *that much harder* for her to get over that mental hurdle.

“So?” I questioned. “Can I?”

The girl looked at the construct, which was standing on the *fireproof* table, and ‘Rishu’ nodded. “Uh, go ahead?” she offered, and I reached over to it.

Infusing my fingers with Chi, *just in case,* we hadn’t gotten to Bodily Reinforcement yet, as that was something that, from what I could tell, *none* of them would get easily, I gently scratched it behind its pointed ears, its yellow eyes narrowing in appreciation, as it let out a purring crackling noise.

And, while it was *very* warm, it wasn’t *hot*.

*Good.*

“So,” I commented idly, not making this a big deal, so *she* wouldn’t realize it was either, this hurdle a *massive* one for most energy-based users, “Kaylee made me aware that, while I’ve had *years* to get used to this kind of craziness…” I paused. “Well, not this *specifically,* but the ‘The World Is Bigger Than You Know’ kind of thing. Either way, you went right from your normal life to *this*, and I hadn’t really thought about that. The changing situation, yes, but not the entire ‘being ripped away from friends, from family, and from everyone that cared about you’ thing. I mean, I didn’t really *have* that when I signed up, so I didn’t consider that cost, but-”

“It, it wasn’t a cost,” Kobeni muttered, and I paused the scratching, the construct after a moment, butting my hand with its head to get me to continue, so I did so.

“But, you worked on a team?” I inquired, confused.

Looking down, wringing her hands, the girl said, “They’re, they’re better off without me. I was thinking of quitting anyways.”

“Okay, but *friends?”* I questioned, and, still staring at her own lap, she mutely shook her head. *“Family?”*

She let out a bitter laugh, and reached out to pet Rishu as well. “I, I’m actually glad. How messed up is that. I, I have an excuse to never see my family, and, and as bad as all this is, that’s, that’s still a good thing.”

“Were they abusive?” I questioned, suddenly unsure, but she shook her head.

“No, but, I, I’ve got eight sisters, and two brothers, so, so money was always tight,” she explained haltingly. “And, and my older brother wanted to go to college, and, and I wanted to, but, but they said he needed it more. So, so I got the choice, be a sex worker, or be a Devil Hunter. I, I chose Devil Hunting, but..” she sniffed, letting out a strained laugh, “but I was certain I was gonna die. I was so scared I was gonna die. But now I am. Over. And over. And over again. But, but it’s just…”

“Kobeni?” I questioned softly, and her head snapped up, staring at me, tears gathered in the corner of her eyes. “Would you like a hug? You seem like you need one. And deserve one.”

“I-*no*, no, I’m fine,’ she disagreed, sniffing again. “I, is it bad to say this is better than my old life?”

Shrugging, I replied, “I mean, it’s better than *mine*, in a fucked up way, so, yeah, I get that. That said, any family that says ‘Be a whore for us?’” Just the thought of it… “First of all, no, that *is* abusive, hands down. Second of all, ***Fuck ‘em.***”

“I, what?” she questioned. “But, Don’t, isn’t The Company that owns us called Slutlife?”

“It is, because names have meaning, and rebranding would break agreements older than your *solar system,”* I agreed. “And, yeah, are they slavers, yes, but to make you try and *volunteer* for that? What, because they had more kids than they could afford? Like, after a certain point, *fucking pull out*, and, what, were you the second oldest, after your brother?”

Confused, she stuttered, “I, no-no, I’m, uh, number five.”

Taking a moment to square that circle, because I could maybe see the eldest sacrificing for the others, it just didn’t compute, until…

I went still, as my thoughts shifted to different paradigms, and suddenly it all made sense. “Oh. You were the ***Sacrifice***,” I growled, possible control schema I’d learned of during my Seminars aligning. Because, among the *Evil* pockets that existed in almost every society, you’d find this paradigm, in a ‘family’, biological, adopted, or manufactured, where the ‘parents’ would choose a children, or two, or even *most* as the Sacrifice.

This wasn’t the standard ‘Push your kid to succeed so they can help you once they have’ behavior, which was fairly normal, even if it could be taken too far, especially in Asiatic-aligned cultures, because that assumed the person supporting the family would, in turn, continue to thrive.

No, the Sacrifice was supposed to burn out, but not before their ‘parents’ got their payday.

The most common manifestation, was, as she’d said, selling a child, usually a daughter but not always, into sexual slavery, or sometimes just *actual* slavery if the society allowed it. Second was to use them to commit crimes, but any ‘high risk, high reward’ endeavor, where the Sacrifice took all the risks, but the ‘parents’ took all the rewards, was sufficient.

Eventually, of course, the Sacrifice would burn out, and be blamed for not holding out longer by their ‘parents’, their *victim* making a *fraction* of the profit they could have generated over their lifetime if they’d been properly developed, but that would *take effort on behalf of their controllers,* while, going this churn and burn route, the victim would also do so in an even *smaller* fraction of the time, and, after a ‘family’ hit at least four kids, that was often seen as a ‘good trade’ by those who, if their dimensions metaphysics were set up for it, were *unquestionably* going to go to Hell.

So, *of course,* I’d been taught *exactly how to do that to a person,* how to set up the chains of ‘family’, and ‘duty’, lashing them with guilt and feelings of worthlessness should they try and ‘rise above their station’, as it created an intra-family *caste system,* with the Sacrifice effectively an *untouchable*, but, properly conditioned, they’d think they *deserved* it, and it’d become self-sustaining.

I had also been taught how to *co-opt* such a thing, as those people were always vulnerable to another taking hold of their leash, as those that created said bonds almost always did so out of laziness, especially if it was to blood relations, and they tended to hold such things with a similar degree of laziness.

Hardest of all was to *break* an active Sacrifice out of their assigned role, as it took someone of *uncommon* will to be conditioned, yet still have that Spark, that defiance, to retain a sense of self, and not break into becoming an obedient, demoralized *dog*, who grew to love their chains, and would shrink from freedom, always seeking out the comfort of a *collar.*

Suddenly, a great number of things about this young woman made sense, and why she was here, along with the likes of a genius starship mechanic, a ruler of Fantasy Venice, and a member of the Men in Black.

“Kobeni Higashiyama,” I informed her, the girl having also frozen, staring at me. “You are my teammate, and more than that an *honorable comrade*, and if anyone tries to do that to you while we are working together, I shall ***feed them their entrails.”***

Smiling slightly, I mused, “I’ve actually done that once before. *Successfully* at that! Helped that he was a supernaturally durable frog-lizard, thing, not that I think he appreciated his own hardiness at the end. God, I hated that city. Really, any place where *becoming* a Devil is an *aspiration* should be cleansed with *all* of the holy fire. Like living in a fucking ***C***-grade Horror Movie. Regardless, I probably could pull it off on a normal person now. It takes a bit to keep them from dying right away, but it *certainly* sends a message, in the only language people like *that* understand.”

“…Please don’t kill my parents,” the woman squeaked.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m never going to *meet* your parents,” I reassured her, going back to petting the somewhat wary fire-fox, who, getting its scritches, went back to being okay with me. “I just have a… *particular hatred* of those that attempt to turn bonds, especially those of family, into leashes, and *chains*. But, on to, um, happier topics, other than one last *fuck them for doing that to you,* you’re far away from them, and, honestly, there’s no real way to go but up here, as we got stronger, and continue to refine our cultivation. And, now that you’ve got Rishu, you’ve got someone you can rely on.”

Slowly, Kobeni started moving herself, asking, “B-But, isn’t Rishu just me?”

“Self-reliance is an important skill to develop!” I teased. “But, really, eventually she *won’t* be, not really, and, if you need help, remember, *I’m there for you*, and I’m pretty sure Kaylee would be too.”

Sighing, I told her, “And, trust me, you won’t be imposing if you ask. Wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t expecting you to take me up on it, and you won’t be bothering me. God knows *I* was bad enough when it came to asking for help before I started my training myself. So, honestly, you’ll be doing *me* a favor in the way, as I like helping. Okay?”

“O-Okay,” Kobeni nodded. “Uh, what should I…”

“Work on Rishu, empowering her, making her bigger, and working *with* her,” I directed, pulling back away from the flaming construct. “I’m gonna go meditate and focus on my own Cultivation until it’s go-time, unless there was something else you needed?”

“N-No, I…” Dithering for a moment, she stood up, and bowed deeply, at the waist. *“Thank you for your help, Lee-san!”*

Gesturing for her to stand up, I told her, “You’re my teammate, and I take that sort of thing seriously. I’m glad to help, and, if you want to pay me back, then train up and *have* my back when it’s time to fight.”

Bowing again, she left, and, grabbing the purified cubes of **Stone** in the bowl at my place, I focused on them, turning my attention *inwards*. This was… *not* a technique that anyone below Sifu Realm should try, but it crossed over with enough of my other Seminars that I could do so with a *certain* degree of safety.

My ‘inner world’ was, at this point, very, *very* metaphorical, lacking in metaphysical substance, a bit like a Memory Palace combined with a Skill Screen with a dash of what *might* eventually be a Reality Marble, but all of it a protracted flight of fancy.

When we *eventually* got to the **Primordial** realm I’d be able to, with effort, and a quite frankly *ridiculous* amount of Chi, be able to super-impose it over reality, but for now it was just an odd sort of meditation aid.

And, ever since I’d gained my Cultivation, it’d changed location from, as Professor Cipher had called it, ‘The most pathetic Cabin in the Woods Imaginable’, to a mountaintop temple… which also had a nice cabin built into it.

Either way, it was still always raining, which I found rather soothing, with not a hint of thunder to be found.

Standing in its courtyard, the pillars that had slowly been erecting themselves were coming in… *okay,* though they only were a reflection of my own understanding of things on a subconscious level, not hard metrics, though, looking at them, yeah, the one upon which a malformed breastplate rested had cracked halfway up, and, just looking at it, I kind of get what I already knew: That the core concepts were transferrable, but all of the work I’d put in trying to flash-form the thing were pretty much wasted.

That said, breaking it apart with a gesture, and meditating on it, some of the parts that made it were drawn to the fortification pillar, and… yeah, while armoring *myself* that way was probably a no-go, the skills I’d learned *were* transferrable to reinforcing defenses, able to ‘grow’ the armor, a bit like I had for the door, but in more complicated ways.

And, looking at the statue of myself, made of clear crystal, through which glowing rivers of yellow sand ran through it, which reflected my own awareness of my own chi-flow, as I *was* technically meditating, and, thus could focus upon it, though, again, I was not *consciously* aware of it.

Aaand, I’d been skipping leg day. Leg Loop? Either way, I needed to work on my lower extremities more, but, then again, I *did* need to get that movement technique down, and, while I’d been working on my ‘seismic sense’ through it, though I was *certainly* no Toph, that was… *passive,* and I needed to work on my more *active* uses.

There was also that odd pool of black water that hadn’t been there before the Final, swirling over to the side, slowly collecting rainwater without ever rising, but that was *probably* fine.

Bringing myself out of it, and, yeah, I’d spent what felt like five minutes in there, but it’d been closer to *fifty*, which is how those ‘Closed Door Cultivation’ guys could spend *years* without noticing, and *another* reason why doing this early was *dangerous*, as it’d be very easy to, when one still needed to attend to biological functions regularly, *die of dehydration* long before they even realized they were thirsty.

Standing and stretching, walking to the wall, the others were already there. Focusing, gathering my Chi, I stomped down, and, with a straining *ripple*, the packed dirt that made parts of the wall shimmered, growing a layer of inch-thick obsidian, draining a fifth of my total reserve in a single move, but, slowly converting the bits of pure **Stone** I’d grabbed from the bowl into my own Chi, I had enough time to top myself up right before the attack started.

“Kaylee, Kobeni,” I informed them. “In four Loops, let’s go into the Forest. Mel, L, if you want to come along too, I have no objections, you just need to figure out a defensive and movement enhancing technique if you’re going to keep up, and survive the sudden but inevitable ambushes we’ll spring going into enemy territory.”

“Uh, Lee?” the mechanic replied. *“I* don’t have any ‘movement enhancin’ technique’.”

I nodded. “Yes. That’s why I said in four loops. Not in fifteen minutes.”

“And if we want to go earlier?” L inquired, her wood-armor now a full-body frame that she’d turned into a kind of pseudo-power armor that fulfilled *both* of my requirements.

“Then, just like when you ran when we began, please report back what you find,” I responded easily. “Just as, if you decide not to go with us, I’ll tell you what *we* find, so you’re not fumbling in the dark. As *much* in the dark,” I corrected.

Looking towards the forest, as the trees began to move, and, yep, it was Chicago again, because there were ‘Da Bears.’

At least it wasn’t *giants.*

“Yeah,” I sighed, hefting my first diamond-tipped spear, and sighting in on the lead *living tank*. “It’s about time to take this fight to *them.*”