

## Chapter 133: Catch-Up

Coming back to the real world, I was unsurprised to find that it felt really rather strange. Which happened to be because Possession turned half my body into glass. Meaning that since my legs didn't exactly have muscles to move, Ann had to carry me inside.

Was I being dramatic? Just a little.

Functionality returned to my limbs within the next couple hours, though I walked a little stiffly the next day, too. Nothing too troublesome, though.

Another day later, I was already back to clearing gates when they showed up. Zinnic only staged a single assassination on me, too, when their little spies saw me limping. Well, the assassin got away with most of their hair gone. Ann was a much worse barber than me, mainly due to her liberal usage of fire.

Day by day, the Qi in the air grew thicker, and the world a little different. Plants had started to creep up, even if they were weird, and a little dangerous. Scientists were researching how animals interacted with the magic, trying to get populations back up.

I was a little worried about creating some kind of divine beast, but well. I'm sure it would be fine and no trouble would come of it at all. And yes, I did knock on wood for planting a flag after that thought.

The world was changing, that much was for sure. Zinnic was still doing their best to keep this change going, driving all gates to the edge of breaking before we were allowed to close them. And a few breaks did happen, which led me on a chase after bornins and jills in the middle of downtown.

Eventually, after another week, I got a day off and went to visit my father again. He was still in the clinic, which still remained standing, luckily.

It took me a few horridly long seconds before finally managing to push open the door, and take a seat in front of that plexiglass window. My dad appeared not long later.

Ivan Bellum had slimmed down. He was still strong, bear-like, even, but he was no longer as imposing. There were bags under his eyes speaking of poor sleep, but at least he didn't smell of beer anymore. I was grateful for that.

Instead... I felt a faint whiff of Qi from him. Just a touch. I stopped my eyes from widening, instead just looking at the man, waiting for him to speak first.

"Hello, Fio," he said, wringing his hands.

I gave him a nod. "Hi, dad."

He took a long breath. "I'm glad you're visiting again. How have things been?" he asked.

"Good," I said. He leaned back a little, giving me room to share more. I decided to indulge him. He already knew I was a hero, I had shared that much with him. Plus, he had gotten access to the internet again by now, to some degree. So he'd have read the news.

"Been saving the world," I said. "Normal stuff, really. Closing gates, fighting monsters. Been on a few dates with Ann. Matt is doing well for himself, too. His parents seem rather happy that he's taken up monster hunting. Emilia and Marie have taken well to moving here," I explained.

A faint smile spread on his lips. "That's... nice."

"Yeah," I said. "How about you?"

"Oh, same old," he assured me. "Nothing too interesting. Just... watching the TV, I guess. Sometimes I get to go on walks with the handlers. Ah, the facility is being expanded, so I should have access to a gym soon. Which I am looking forward to."

"That's cool. How did they get the funding?" I asked.

He looked to the side, eyes sliding to the floor. "Well, they're kinda participating in a program. We get paid if we participate, a cut goes to the facility..."

"A program?" I asked, as if clueless. Of course, I already knew where this was going. It was downright obvious, really.

"Yeah... It's, uh, an experiment to see how training influences rehab."

I nodded, very slowly. "Uh-huh. What kinda training?"

His shoulders fell. "You already know, don't you?"

"Kinda hard to miss," I told him. "Didn't think you the type, though."

"What do you mean?"

I leaned back, giving a small sigh. "Sitting down and meditating for hours? Alone with nothing but your thoughts?" I shook my head. "Doesn't sound like my dad. Well, unless they gave you some kinda special path."

He blinked. "Path?"

"Oh, wow, they didn't tell you much at all, did they? Just that you'd get to cultivate. How long did it take you to accept?" I asked.

Again, his shoulders fell. He looked pitiful. "The day after they offered."

For a long, silent moment, I stared at him. "Dad," I said. "Cultivation doesn't make it all easier. It's plenty hard in its own way."

"Yeah," he nodded. "I get that."

"Are you running away again?" I asked.

"What?! No!" He flinched as I asked, looking at me with pleading eyes. "I just... I thought this would be quicker! Reasonable! I wanna be healthy again, Fio. I wanna go outside, I wanna..." He lets his head fall into his hands. "Yeah... Fuck. I'm running."

"You could've just asked me, dad," I said with a sigh. "If you wanted to cultivate, I could've taught you how. In fact, I doubt that any of the government people here are as proficient with it as I am."

He didn't reply.

Finally, I softened my tone. "It's... fine," I said. "But, to give you better odds, I'm gonna explain some stuff, alright?"

"... Okay." He didn't look at me, couldn't manage. It stung, and I felt bad, but then again... he'd kind of brought it upon himself.

I took a deep breath. "Alright. Cultivation, unlike magic or healing, is all about conviction. It's not just will you need, not just belief, you need real conviction. In yourself, in your path forward. And you *need* to pick your path yourself if you wanna be worth any salt."

For a second, it looked like he wanted to talk, but I interrupted him. "I know, you might say you don't wanna be, but I am unbelievably serious about this. Cultivation, the path you follow, the affinity you choose... in a lot of ways, it defines who you are. That mismatch between who you are and what your cultivation requires? It can ruin you."

He nodded. "Okay," he said. "What do I do?"

"Pick a path. This would be easier if you had the Gift, but the way it is, you need to decide on one yourself. Who are you? What do you want?" I told him. "Why are you doing this?"

"I want..." the words took tremendous effort. "I want to get out of here. To see my family. To contribute. To not be a burden on you, or Ivan, or Beth. I want to let it go, to finally be able to move forward, instead of clinging to a past."

Inside his chest, slowly, I saw a star appear. It was dim, and tiny, but it was made of resolve. A spark of his path.

"I want- No. I *will* stop drinking. I'm gonna get out of here. And then, I'll buy Beth a plushie." He let out something halfway between a laugh and a sob. "That's what I wanna do."

"Cool," I told him. "That works. Now, you need to find an element that suits you. Right now it seems like they started you on fire, which I think suits you just fine. Then, you need to find a compromise between the two."

He furrowed his brows. "How do I do that?"

"Can't tell you that. It's different for everyone, but visualization helps, right? You wanna get out of here. What does that look like?" I asked.

"... An open door?"

I nodded. "That works. Now, you wanna discard your past, right, what does that look like?"

This time, a sad smile found its way onto his face. "A discarded bottle."

"Right. And to integrate your fire element, you can focus on the desire behind it all. Fire is passion, want, energy, after all. You needa walk it confidently. You know you can do this," I told him.

The spark in his chest grew a little more. "Right," he said. "Yeah, okay. What... do I call it when it's done?"

I smiled a little. "Can't name it for you. Mine used to be called 'Voyage through the Golden Shores', if that helps."

A moment passed, then he nodded. "It... does. I think I'll call it... 'Open Door of Burned Regrets'." He pauses, flushing a little. "Ah, maybe not, that feels childish, I mean-"

“Yeah,” I told him. “That works.” Then, slowly, I stretched. “Okay. Let’s... leave the cultivation talk at that, right? Any more and I’ll sabotage you. Some parts of that path needa be walked by yourself.”

And he did need to walk himself, now. Because he had gotten really rather close to the first stage of the first realm. But he’d get there. And hopefully not cripple his future like some kinda crappy technique might.

“Instead, let me tell you a bit more about how things are...”