

Author's Note:

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Part 20

I sent everyone home and told them to practice on their own until mid-morning because I had to prepare the medicinal baths for the three Nascent Soul elders. Of course, I also had other things I needed to take care of.

::Little Spring! Wrap up there. It's time to consume your medicinal meal or join me while I handle the Nascent Soul baths alongside yours::

::!::

::You're not getting out of this. You need treatment!::

::Sister Lin! Come see our progress so far!::

::You're trying to distract me. I'm not falling for it::

::Don't you want to see if we're practicing everything correctly?::

Yes. But... *::You want me to go to the area with all the beasts who hate me on sight?::*

::It will be fine! Every beast here was trained perfectly::

Fuck it. I did need to check on his progress. And if anything wanted to try me... well, after all that yelling, teaching, and repetition, I wouldn't mind kicking someone's ass.

I landed on a hill that peered down at a clearing. One side had lines of large boulders that had been cut to resemble people lying down or standing. There were a few bushes, small saplings, and grasses between

the statues, but most of the area was dirt and gravel. From this distance, it looked like a vague stone army was threatening a group of beast tamers and their pack of wolves and mice.

Little Spring stood next to the several dozen cultivators at Foundation Establishment. While most had gray or brown wolf-ears, about fifteen had large, round mouse-ears.

“Elder Linlin!” the kid yelled at me. “Watch this!”

About a hundred wolves and twenty mice ran over the gravel toward the army. The rodents rubbed up against specific statues that had expensive defensive tools Wrathful Waterspout provided, hidden in spatial rings. Then the wolves would come along and put the blank yellow talisman paper on the statue that had been marked.

Xiao Bai ran off to the side and quietly yipped encouragement... or direction. I wasn’t sure what the not-dog was doing, but it was adorable.

Once they finished going down the line, the beasts returned to their tamer in a zigzag pattern for praise and treats.

I walked down the hill but kept myself several yards from the group. Even then, the closest wolf eyed me and lowered its upper torso as if it wanted to attack me. The tamer noticed this and redirected the wolf’s attention back to themselves. Once they were focused on the treat in his hand, he gave them the morsel of spiritual meat.

Damn. The training this sect did for its beasts was beyond impressive. I was glad Little Spring was learning it, even if it was considered unorthodox.

The kid ran up to me with Xiao Bai trotting next to him. They moved perfectly together... at least until the puppy came close to me, then he darted forward and jumped into my arms. I tapped his nose before he could lick my face.

“Xiao Bai! You’re starting to get too big for that!” Little Spring said.

"It's fine. He's still just a not-puppy. I could even hide him in my robes if I wanted."

"Bork!" He agreed and put his doggy paws on my shoulder as if to show off how small he actually was.

Little Spring pantomimed a massive bulge down the front of his chest and stomach. "I don't think 'hide' is the right word when he's that big."

When I ran my nails through his thick white fur, Xiao Bai's eyes turned into cute arches. He made rumbling happy noises. I set him down and gave him proper head pats. His tongue lolled happily.

"Good boy."

Little Spring picked him up and carried him under one arm. "So, what did you think of our training so far?"

"Needs work."

"Suggestions?"

"Too many."

He stared at me with determination. "I'm ready for them."

"To start with, you should place used armor and robes on the statues. Use black and red for the Leashed Claws disciples, and green and gold for the Harmonious Sound ones. Make them smell like body odor and blood if you can, since they'll need to find the treasures despite the various strong scents on the battlefield. They'll also have to stick the talismans to the cloth, not stone. Don't let them get used to the wrong textures."

"I'll see what I can do."

"The closer you make your testing field look like the real thing, the better your chances are that you won't freeze up during the fight."

He quickly turned to one of the beast tamers with mouse ears. "Silver Seeker."

"On it, team leader!" The tamer pulled out a small fan from his sleeve, enlarged it, and flew off.

"Anything else?"

I nodded. "Once they get used to the still targets with clothes, add moving obstacles coming toward you. War is chaotic. You can't assume that just because one group stays still, the rest of them won't move."

"Good point! But we're trying to limit the number of people who know about this mission, so it will be hard to find trustworthy disciples to work with us."

"Just have a third of your team put on enemy robes and act as your opposition. Switch them out with another third every few hours. I'll also send over the puppeteers once Doll Monarch comes through for me."

I'd have to check in with her soon. I thought for sure she would have found the disciples for this project already.

"Were we good otherwise?"

"What gave you that idea?" I crossed my arms. "This is a *stealth* operation. The beasts are moving out in the open too much. And your tamers are too focused on their pets. They need to practice blending in with warriors who are there to fight. Everyone needs to be practically invisible."

He nodded as if taking mental notes.

"Also, your wolves and mice should move in fast and get out faster."

His eyes grew wide. "I thought they were already fast enough."

"If the enemy discovers them, what do you think will happen to our entire mission?"

Xiao Bai wiggled, and Little Spring adjusted his hold on him. “Our opponents will figure out what we’re doing. Then they’ll do everything they can to stop us.”

“That’s right. Frankly, even if things go well, we’ll have around forty minutes before someone notices something is off. If things go poorly, we’ll have about seven.”

He nodded. “I’ll try to think of more ways for everyone to blend in.”

“A talisman or a spiritual tool could help.”

“Ah! I’ll ask Elder Wrathful Waterspout if his Dread Painter friend can make something for us.”

“Good thinking.” I gestured to the wolves. “Another issue is that you’ve limited them to one tag each.”

“Yes, that’s what we came up with. When they’ve used up their tag, they return to their master, who provides another.”

“That’s too shortsighted; it’s possible they’ll be discovered mid-run and get taken down. Or worse, followed. It could give your positions away.”

He paled and rubbed Xiao Bai between his pointy ears.

“Think of a way for them to have multiple tags on them, perhaps on a harness of some kind.” I frowned. If this universe had developed a weak glue like they had on sticky notes in my past-past life, I would have recommended using something like that.

The kid tilted his head thoughtfully.

I shrugged. “I can’t get close to the beasts so you’ll have to figure out what works best and test it.”

He grinned. “Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out!”

The mouse-eared tamer, who'd left previously, returned on his flying fan carrying an armful of uniforms. Unfortunately, the fucker wasn't alone. That damn rat girl had come along and was holding a bunch of the robes and armor.

Wasn't she supposed to be writhing around, itching herself raw? Shit. This must be the universe playing a fucking joke on me. Or, it was the original harem author's revenge for cursing at him all the time.

Fuuuuck, we could not have her here. This was a mission that should never become compromised. While I might have told the Nascent Soul elders that I would work with her if it came down to it, just to earn their trust, that didn't mean I wouldn't avoid that fate if possible.

I pulled out my new crab sword and pointed it at Silver Seeker. "Why aren't you using a spatial item? Also, this training ground is restricted. She can't be here."

He turtled his head sheepishly. "Elder Linlin. I didn't realize that my storage bag was already full until I reached the treasure pavilion. Fortunately, Little Teasing Mouse was there picking up some spiritual plants and kindly offered to help me carry everything. She's the most trustworthy member of the sect, so of course, I accepted her help."

Goddamn it. Those fools in her fan club must have given her an antidote and asked her to search for ingredients to make more for themselves.

I stormed over to them.

She took a step back and hid behind Silver Seeker. Together with their mouse ears, the pair looked adorable. But only fools paid attention to appearances while fighting to survive.



[\[Image Link\]](#)

Then again, half this sect was filled with fools, wasn't it?

Why was I saving this place? Right, Dread Lotus and the work I'd already put in. I couldn't let that go to waste.

I wrapped the used uniforms in my spiritual energy and threw them to Little Spring, who put them in his spatial ring and started handing them out to his unit.

While resting my sword on my shoulder, I looked down my nose at the rat girl. "While I can... *appreciate* your willingness to help others, you shouldn't be here. In fact, since you're so *loved* by everyone in this sect, you need to stay far away from the war. Maybe work with those assigned to heal injuries."

Her lip quivered. “But I want to help and be useful. There are other beast tamers with treasure-seeking mice here. If they can do something to help, then I can do something too!”

Silver Seeker nodded. “Elder Linlin, I think Little Teasing Mouse will be very useful. She has the most talented treasure-seeking mouse in the whole sect! I’m not just saying that.”

“Maybe her mouse is impressive, but from what I’ve seen, this girl is an idiot who will get everyone here killed.” I jabbed my sword toward the team for emphasis as they quickly began pinning the uniforms to the boulders.

“I’m not dumb!” Her small hands curled into fists, and she shook with anger.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “She really isn’t. We all just protect her a little too much, so she hasn’t had enough experience. Training for this mission will be good for her.”

“Do you think we’re here to train her to be smarter? Because we’re not. We don’t have time. What we are doing is saving this damned sect!”

The mouse boy squeezed her tighter. “Please, Elder Linlin. I really think we’ll need her. She’ll be incredibly useful.”

She stepped forward, out of his embrace, and clasped her hands in a familiar begging pose from the demonic dancing manual. The cultivators who were paying attention to us despite moving through the statues had a look on their faces like they were softening toward her.

I immediately sent a weak blast of spiritual energy to flick her glabella. She stepped back in shock, completely breaking her technique and her hold on the others.

Her eyes grew wide.

I grinned evilly and stepped forward. The mouse on her shoulder vibrated and hissed at me, but at a bork from Xiao Bai, it started shivering instead.

“Are you willing to go through hell training with no complaints? Endure pain and hardship to improve and grow?”

She stiffened, then nodded seriously.

“During this training, if you say even one negative thing or imply that you’re too tired to continue, you understand that you’re out, right? Then you’ll have to stay deep inside the sect during the war. At most, you can work on the logistics team.”

Not that I wanted her anywhere close to something as important as logistics, but it was better than having her near the battlefield. And if she was away from the front, I wouldn’t have to worry about her followers breaking formation just to take whatever attack was aimed at her.

She nodded again, and I took another step forward until I loomed over her barely five-foot self at my full height. Her beast slipped and gripped her shoulder tightly. She grabbed its tiny paw to stop it from falling.

::And if I or Verdant Spring catch you trying to manipulate the disciples here like you just attempted, you’ll experience something worse than a blast of Qi to your forehead. Trust me when I say that we’re wise to your manipulative tricks. Do you understand?::

She swallowed, started trembling, and nodded.

::Realize that if you fuck this up. Or if you tell a soul what we’re doing here, I will personally end you for being a traitor to the sect, despite your young age. Keep that in mind.:: I patted her shoulder, the one without the mouse.

Frankly, the biggest reason I hadn’t tried to get rid of her secretly was that she *was* just a kid. I didn’t kill kids. No matter how fucking annoying they were. With the one exception of when they were actively trying to murder me, and I couldn’t stop them any other way.

“Alright.” I rested my sword tip on the ground. It cut through the gravel like butter. “You can join our training. But only time will tell if your efforts will be good enough to still stay with the team when the war starts.”

“Th-thank you, Elder Linlin.”

Ah, this was going to be so cathartic.

I turned to Little Spring to find him next to me, his mouth opened in shock.

::You actually allowed her to join?::

::I already told the elders I'd work with her if I had to, and the fact that she's here means she's already seen too much. We can't just let her leave.

Besides, this is our chance to finally get back at her.::

He eyed me suspiciously. *::What do you mean?::*

::You're going to torture her... I mean, train her for me!:: Muahahaha!

He grabbed my sleeve and tugged. *::Sister Lin. I can't. Everyone will hate me!::*

::It'll be fine.:: I grinned evilly. *::Because if she complains about it, you're going to kick her out of the unit. Then we can claim to be protecting the mission's secrecy and lock her up in that closed-door meditation area everyone loves so she can't mess up anything until after the war starts.::*

He hesitated. *::I can try that. But how do you expect me to train her?::*

Good kid. *::First, you remember the various demonic dancer poses?::*

::Of course. You wouldn't stop talking about it, so I memorized the whole manual.::

::Good. If you see her in one of those positions, even if you're in the middle of training, stop her.::

::Should I flick her forehead like you did?::

::That, or send Xiao Bai to trip her out of whichever position. Use a blast of Qi to move her legs or arms, and if she gets used to that, play a loud noise right next to her ear, so she has to cover them instead of acting cute. Cut her if necessary! Let her bleed. Attack her randomly, and if anyone asks,

claim that it's special assassin training. I want her to feel so out of place because she can't employ her dancing to brainwash everyone to her side, so she feels despair. I want her to feel so tortured mentally and physically that she leaves on her own.::

Hah! Muahahaha! Hehehe.

He stared at me with a mixture of horror and awe.

::Make sure you record everything so I can see it for myself.:: I handed him a recording orb. *::I'll try to contact you more often to make sure she hasn't put you under her thrall.::*

He scowled. *::I won't let her affect me. I'll protect myself and my unit.::*

::Excellent. This is good training for you as well. It will help you recognize when you're being influenced mentally. It might even save your life someday.::

Teasing Mouse used those small lotus footsteps of hers to come closer to Little Spring. "By the way, Little Brother Verdant Spring, what is this practice for, anyway?"

Little Spring gave me a long, pain-filled look.

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Author's Note:

Thank you all for reading! You are the best readers a writer could ask for!

This chapter made me happy. Finally, Lin is teaching Little Teasing Mouse a much-needed lesson! Well, it will happen through Little Spring, but just the thought of the hell she's going to be put through is cathartic.

I heard something the other day that reminded me of her: Evil can be guarded against, but stupidity cannot.

And my thought was: If you want to try to combat stupidity, you have to teach the stupid out of them. But if they can't learn, then at least have them gain wisdom through experience.

Of course, I know that the wrong experiences will only reinforce stupidity.

My goal for this next week is to finally finish story 11's rough draft and get it to Bapper, my content editor. I currently have almost 12 chapters in my rough draft backlog, and I estimate that I have about 5-8 chapters left before the story ends.

I'm very excited. I've planned so much for this ending, starting all the way back in story 9. It's fun to see it all come together.