

35 - HOW TO BECOME A FORCE OF NATURE

Daybreak of the promised day. As the cold pyramids gleamed in orange sunlight, two pairs of steps hiked into the depths of the Himalayan plains. When one of the two opened conversation, the other responded passionately.

"Dumbass!"

A fist soared onto the head of the younger one, not too harshly but still firm. It reached its intended effect when the victim declined forward to caress the soon-to-be bump.

"You've never used it before, you barely saw it *once* in action— you really thought you could just replicate *Range* like that?"

"I didn't do it consciously—"

"So you just *randomly* did the motion? 'Cause you thought it looked cool? *Yeah?*"

"I don't know!" Shimon groaned in light pain. "I just kind of did it! I'm sorry!"

The apology was followed by a loud, vocal groan from Miss Uramaki. The sort that said 'this is a total joke'. It echoed over the clear mountainsides for a second or two.

"No. No *Range* training. Nothing of the sort anymore. You got your *Unlock* working again, right?"

"Yeah—"

"Then it's *Envelop* first."

"*No way!* *Envelop* *again?* I know it! It's the *Style* I trained the most! Can't I learn something different?"

Zonya almost gave in to the urge to simply push the boy off the steep mountainside they hiked, but the request he made wasn't an inane one. More variety would absolutely benefit the marine warrior. Thus, she stopped their march and turned to face him.

"Show me your *Envelop*."

"O-okay, but," Shimon stammered, "right here? Right now? Shouldn't I get used to it again first?"

"No better time than now. Give me everything."

"Okay, okay," the boy said as his body clicked into position. He hadn't attempted properly invoking *Envelop* since his encounter with the Feather User, so nervousness shot through the roof. Regardless, this was inevitable. He folded his hands to a swift *Unlock* prayer, which released his coursing ocean to the outside, and began overlaying his palms to the flat pyramid he was learned in. Miss Uramaki kept a close eye on his technique. '*Quick Unlock*,' she noticed.

However, the next step took some time. The strain that Shimon put on himself to control his aura could be read from his face. But gradually, the light blue aura condensed. It became thicker and sturdier, all while slowly pressing against the 17-year old's skin. When Shimon finally separated his hands again, releasing a needed exhale, his aura was so dense that it was more azure than light blue.

"*Envelop!*" he proclaimed proudly, out of breath. "But I got some more to show!"

Before Zonya could intervene to comment, Shimon already placed his left palm onto his right arm. This time, things happened faster - the light around his arm grew more blue until it could've properly been called marine. The power it carried was by no means hidden; Shimon struggled to stop his arm from rumbling. Nonetheless, he presented it with a grin.

"*Haah...* Uh, *Arm-Envelop!*"

"Stupid name. You should rethink that one."

"Yeah, I gue—" and the blue around Shimon's arm dissipated. "*Aww,*" the boy whimpered.

"Still, pretty impressive. Not super stable, but we can work with this."

The boy couldn't recall the last time someone complimented his skills. "Thank you!" he smiled brightly.

"Cool, so you know how to fold aura around yourself," Zonya analyzed. Suddenly though, a smirk broke out. "But do you know this?"

Her gaze wandered from her protégé to one of the mountain peaks around them, just a few hundred meters away. Then, as Shimon stared expectantly, she pulled back her fist. No mere blink of an eye later, she threw her fist forward, opening it to the 'ok'-sign as it came to a halt. As she yelled a powerful '*Hah!*',

something flew from her palm. Shimon couldn't tell just what, but when the peak his teacher aimed toward puffed up a huge cloud of snow, he was certain that it was aura. His jaw opened wide.

"Whoa! You didn't even invoke Unlock!"

"Yeah, 'cause I've learned this for half my life," she said with a bit of pride.

"I thought you said shouting something wasn't necessary?"

Zonya blushed up. "Not necessary, but... it helps, I guess. Anyway. That's the opposite side of Flow Styles. You started with Envelop, but starting with the Stream Style is just as valid."

"It's just like my Push!"

"Your 'Push'?" the dark-skinned lady repeated.

"Oh, oh, wait," Shimon breathed in excitement, only to step forward with power. A few lunges later, he jumped into the air, pulling back his arms like Zonya had done,

"Push!"

and releasing his aura in a blast. Far wider and less precise than his teacher's version, but strong enough to create a whirlwind of snow in its wake. After landing again he turned back to his teacher, trying to hide how out of breath he was from this alone. Zonya took a second to react.

"Well, uh, cool. Didn't expect that. I was planning to do this anyway, but learning Stream would make you far more rounded as a fighter."

"I'm gonna learn Stream?" Shimon shouted in glee.

"Way too excited as always," the teacher replied as she rolled her eyes. "But defining that 'Push' a bit would work wonders. So yeah, wanna learn Stream?"

"Stream aho!" the pupil jubilated, throwing his arms upward.

'There's something else, though,' Zonya kept to herself. 'When he released his aura, something almost slipped out for a second.'

"So what other techniques can you pull?"

"Uh... that's about it, actually."

"I don't believe you," the woman replied with an unconvinced face. "I don't mean that Range thing you attempted once. What else can you do?"

"I, uh, nothing? I told you, I don't know anything else. Oh, I can stand on walls! But I guess everyone can do that? Hahaha..."

No response anymore. Zonya returned to her thoughts.

'Is it like his Eulanima usage? Something he's unaware of yet?'

"Okay. Alright. Let's refresh the basics. What Flow Styles do you know of?"

"Oh! Well, Envelop and Stream are the most basic Styles, right? And then there's Shape, I know that... Range, Effect—"

"Try to keep them in order, kiddo. Start from Envelop. Where do you go from there?"

Pause. Shimon's look told volumes about his confusion.

"Shimon," the woman stressed, *"what did Jin actually teach you?"*

"Envelop!" he replied innocently.

"That's it?"

For a brief moment, the boy wandered his mind. "Yeah, I think so."

"Holy hell," Zonya sighed. "Whatever, fresh start. Imagine Flow Styles as a circle, with Unlock in the middle as the basis. Circle, alright?"

"Circle," Shimon repeated with care.

"On the upper end you have Stream, on the lower end you have Envelop. You essentially have two different paths you can start from, since they're polar opposites. Envelop leads into two different directions - going left, it leads to Shape, going right, it leads to Alter."

"I've never heard of Alter."

'And despite having faced an Alter user before,' Miss Uramaki thought. "Shape then leads to Range and Alter then leads to Manipulate. You see now why using Range was a dumbass idea? You skipped an entire

Style, bumpkin."

"Sorry," Shimon mumbled semi-earnestly. "What about Effect?"

"Slow down, kiddo. That's on the Stream side of things. I should've brought pen and paper," Zonya sighed once more. "Anyway, getting to Stream..."

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"Stream leads to Scatter on the left and Select on the right. Scatter leads to Effect, Select leads to Order. Regardless of the path, the user ends up with Magnify as the hardest Style of the left and Diminish as the hardest Style of the right. Correct?"

"Correct," Jin replied. "I assume you also know that every two-handed motion forms at least one circle?"

"Sure," Dion lied believably. "I want to learn Scatter and Sele—"

"You'll learn what we agree on," the High-Rank interjected as four shoes kept climbing down a frozen set of stairs; one pair of Getas and one pair of brown boots. It had already been a solid minute since they started descending. "You chose this. Are you feeling cold yet?"

"Freezing," the Low-Rank clattered. "What even is this?"

"A side project of mine. It's laid here for a while."

"Wait, what? You made this *entire cave*?"

"Down to the last step," Jin said as his cold hands grazed over the even colder, deep blue walls of ice they kept descending into. Despite there being no visible holes or flames, the glacial stairway they descended shimmered in elegant blue, not unlike Jin's kimono. Dion would never receive an explanation to this, but small specks of aura illuminated the icy walls from the inside. They'd done so for years.

"Why?"

"Because." A typical answer from Jin.

"I just rattled down every Style for you, can't I at least get an answer?"

"*You* aren't entitled to anything, rook..." Jin said as he turned to his new student, "... ie. But I will provide you nonetheless. This cave was my magnum opus."

Obviously peeved by his nickname, Dion dug deeper. "The hell does that mean?"

"Art," was the last word Jin added before stepping into a wide, circular room, made of the same ice. "Here we are. Impressions?"

The bare adult gazed around the room. Something akin to a pedestal of ice rested in the very middle, while five doorless gates lead somewhere he couldn't tell, all the same distance away from each other in circular fashion. "It-it's so cold. I can barely move."

"Correct. We're now deeper than Juniper. Perfect to train Envelop, no?"

"What? I'm a Stream user! Why Envelop?"

"You lack defense, prowess and control over your own aura. You can't even defend against this cold. Why *not* Envelop?"

Dion wanted to defend himself, but realized that Jin's judgment was very much correct. "A-and how?"

"Sit on the slab and practice."

"Practice *what*?"

"Enveloping, rook-ie," Jin replied calmly, yet obviously delighted by the teasing. Dion was rumbling but bit back, simply making his move toward the pedestal. As he sat down and performed the flat pyramid motion, he had an epiphany.

"I've never tried this before."

"I'm unsurprised. Outline your body and press against the cold. Good luck," Jin gloated as always, planting his seat where he stood.

"Cool," Dion sneered, clenching his teeth and diving into the realm of his spirit. This proved difficult, as Flux was chilled to the core and Flare was too intimidated by the cold to break out. Endurance was all he could rely on.

"Allow me a question," it rang through the glacial halls after a while.

"Only if you don't call me rook."

Jin snickered, almost breaking into a full laugh. "Fine. Why specifically me?"

The boy didn't bother to open his lemon eyes. Instead, he took some time to consider the answer.

"The fact that I'm currently too weak to amount to anything, the fact that I'm still a Low-Rank, the fact that I almost died two weeks ago, the fact that your training is proven to be effective and, last but not least, the fact that my brother is *still* missing, which is bothering the *fuck* out of me, so I try to repress it with training. Did I... No, I don't think I missed anything. Satisfied?" he said as his open gaze met Jin's. This time, it was easily the dominant one.

"Ohoho. Someone's got problems. Fair enough," Jin shrugged.

"Now onto you. You know Sennin. Do you know what happened to him?"

Another pause. There was a mental pressure on both parties' minds that neither could fight.

"No. I don't," Jin said, far more quietly than usual. Dion's heart sank. It knew to not raise any expectations, but it couldn't help itself. And silence reigned once more.

"But I believe he's alright."

The older one breached the silence again. Jin displayed hopefulness, an emotion so atypical for him that Dion flinched.

"You think?" he replied with a glimmer of hope himself. "Me too."

No other word was spoken; both immediately sank back into their astral worlds. Dion didn't even notice how he stopped feeling cold.

—

Shimon's hand was quaking like a twig in a hurricane. He pressed out whatever he could summon, but no amount of sweat and determination seemed to aid him much. Every now and then, something translucent flew from his palm, only to gently glide down to the ground, no harm done. This happened a few times until the boy crumpled onto the snow ground, face burning red, gasping for air.

"Haah... why can't I just... pull back?"

"Stop it, kiddo. No pulling. Get used to it."

"You did it too!"

"As a showcase. I learned it like that as well."

"Stream is hard," he whimpered.

"Careful what you wish for," Miss Uramaki sang in a chipper tone.

"Can we... do some more Envelop?"

"Hahahahaha!" the woman coiled in laughter. "What, now you wanna go back to Envelop? You're hysterical, kiddo."

No response but more heavy breathing. The boy lacked the stamina to laugh.

"C'mon. Get this down some more. It'll get easier. Promise," she said softly. It took Shimon some ten seconds to react, but as soon as his body cooled from seething hot to 'aware of the Himalayan cold', he rose from his snow angel. Again, he strut his arm forward - no pulling - and focused. The sheer strain was coloring his face, rarely looking as hard as now. At first, his open palm let out a few pulses of aura, but within a few seconds, they reduced to zero. This was the worst part, as it was now only up to hope and (internal) prayers to push out whatever lingered inside.

But suddenly, Shimon remembered something important.

'Theoretically, if I invoked it...'

His palm shifted in shape, forming a circle with his index and thumb while spreading the other fingers. And just before Zonya could raise her voice,

'... if it's like Envelop—'

a concise bang rang through the mountaintop. With it, a slim torrent of aura erupted from Shimon's palm. Again far less precise than the adult one's, but significant enough to dig a dent into the stone slope in front of him. The afterglow had a light cyan. The boy's breath halted for a second.

"Wh-whoa! That was crazy! Did you see that, Miss Ura—"

Then, another smack over the head. Firm, a little harder than the last one, but still well-meaning.

"I told you not to use the motion yet!"

"Sorry! I just— did you see that?" the marine student yelped while caressing his second to-be bump.

"Why *can't* I use the motion?"

"Because you're too quick! Because you'll skip the hard steps and fail when it's critical! Because this is *exactly* what you did! What happened to your will, dammit?"

Shimon shut up when he noticed how sincerely mad his teacher sounded. This was undoubtedly a symptom of her worries. After a sharp, long exhale, Zonya began anew.

"Stop doubting me, Shimon. I didn't quit retirement for no reason."

That cut deep. A little of the boy's latent guilt was released - but also trust in the process.

"Okay. I'm sorry, Miss Uramaki," he said, bowed and returned to his practice position with newfound vigor. Just before he could resume though,

"Wait one sec."

Zonya's eyes wandered to her phone. She read the number displayed as 6PM, right as the sun returned with an orange evening, just in a more reflective tone than an eager one.

"Let's call this day one, kiddo. More work would reverse progress. How's rest and rice sound for you?"

"Fantastic," Shimon replied with relief he couldn't hide.

The clacking of spoons against a bowl met with rapid chewing just half an hour later, when Uramaki took Shimon to the restaurant they first met. He got used to cutlery again, but he still applied too much force. Sometimes the shrill sound of metal against ceramic was interrupted by large gulps, as the biggest available cup of coffee was downed. Shimon's teacher took some pleasure in seeing him replenish his strength, especially as she witnessed his jittering. Stream took its toll. This took form when Shimon spilled a wave of coffee.

"—Oh! Sorry!" he said to the faraway, bald man behind the counter, who dismissed him with a wave and exceedingly quick moves toward the stain. A few seconds passed and it was mopped up already. Shimon's amazement didn't cease since last time. "Uh, wait," he fumbled to the returning bartender, but it was too late already. The boy's hand went to the bell on the table, which rang once - and suddenly, absolute silence.

Even before the man could react, Zonya pressed her hand on the bell, diminishing any more sound. Her pupils shrunk half their size. Shimon was too busy comprehending what happened to notice the man drawing a worried face.

"Don't ring that bell, please," she whispered.

"Wh—"

"Some questions should not be posed," she continued over her student. "Van, we'd like some more coffee, thanks."

The bartender nodded sincerely and went back behind the counter. Miss Uramaki wanted to mentally return and ask her protégé a question, but before she could, a sentence drifted back into her head. It originated from the darkest depths of her life.

'Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.'

"A sk— a skill, bumpkin," she caught herself. "You gotta develop a skill. That's the goal."

Three whole seconds passed before Shimon felt comfortable talking again. "Yeah. Y-yeah, like the Feather User. He called his skill Icarus!"

"Names take time, don't stress over that. Work with what you have and become good at it. Make it your own."

"And... how?"

"Time and effort, bumpkin," the ivory lady sang. "We'll get there."

"Okay," her pupil nodded. "Dion has it easy. He's already got Flare and Flux."

"That alone's not enough. He's gotta develop too. Actually, how's he holding up under Jin?"

"Oh, good that you mention it! I'll ask him!" Shimon yelled as he grasped for the phone he carried below inside his sapphire tanktop. He never wore his cloak to training ever since Jin schooled him. Zonya cracked a little smile when she witnessed the boy scour his keyboard for each individual letter.

"Permission to write for you?"

"Fine," Shimon sighed with a tad of relief again, passing the phone.

—

"Shape," Jin's voice rang through the crystal cavern, and his pale palms opened up claw-like. Between them hovered a sizzling clump of tyrian purple strings. They seemed to multiply rapidly. After a bit, his hands clasped together again, eliminating the clump. Dion silently watched while channeling Flux, unaware of his phone containing an unusually well written message from Shimon.

"Stream," Jin continued, crossing each hand's motion so that the circles touched. A moment later purple aura shot forward, right into one of the cavern's five holes - diagonally. This caught the boy's attention. Just four seconds later, the stream of aura returned into Jin's hands. From the other side though; the stream formed a circle through the tunnel and came back from the same hole. Then it subsided, and then nothing. The adult inhaled for the next Style.

"Magnify," Jin said more seriously. His palms connected to a plus-like motion and his aura burst up.

'*Whoa!*' Dion thought as he was physically shaken by the energy's sheer pressure. It erupted out of Jin like a cascade, flowing into all five gates at once. Flux hid immediately. '*It's not quite like the black aura though,*' the boy remarked.

Then it faded, as quickly as it came. Jin extended his arms.

"Orchid's Razor"

From his elbows on, both of them shot into the icy hole at breakneck speed, connected to Jin via his purple strings. Even faster than before they returned, soaring into the adjacent hole. Then into the next one. This would continue five times, until the cavern was filled with tyrian aura. The arms wouldn't stop though and kept flying through, right until Jin dispelled his aura with a heavy breather. Then, they smacked against an icy wall.

'*One thousand and one hundred meters,*' Jin mused under hidden exhaustion. '*This can't be my limit.*'

"Nice," Dion commented.

"Nice doesn't suffice."

"Just trying to be friendly," he shrugged. "Why'd you shape the tunnels like a flower?"

"An orchid," Jin corrected his pupil. "Flow is art. Art was what I was told to create. Back to your workout, rook."

That was the breaking point.

"Stop calling me that."

"What? The R-word?" Jin snickered.

"You know damn well what it means to me. I told you to never do it again."

The teacher originally dismissed it, but Dion's sharp grimace of disdain clarified how severe the issue was. He remained confrontational, if just for the sake of confrontation.

"What will happen if I don't abide?"

"I'll quit you," the pupil shot out.

"Really? After giving me five reasons to train, you'll just quit?"

"I'll find someone else. It doesn't have to be you."

'*It doesn't have to be you*' echoed through Jin's heart. And for a split second, he recalled the picture of

Juniper's hallway. Gazing from the shadows into the eyes of someone determined to leave. Out of nowhere. He felt that he lost something right then and there, but he couldn't tell what that was.

"I was just messing around. No names anymore. But spare me your sympathies. I don't need them."

"Fair," the boy commented, exhaling a groan. "I want to be efficient. You want that too, right?"

"I do."

"Then let's try to be efficient. Teach me some shit. Or at least cooperate."

It was hard to deny an argument that he clearly sided with. Jin drew a long face.

"Fine. Scatter and Select, no?"