

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 8: Skybound

You know what's worse than dying from tripping over your shoelaces? Dying twice. And let me tell you, holding a rusty sword while raiders charge your position is definitely not how I planned to spend my second afterlife.

"Tomas!" The burly man—I really needed to learn these people's names—yanked me behind a section of wooden barricade as another arrow whizzed past. "Stop daydreaming and help us! The Seventh Band doesn't leave survivors!"

"Azure," I thought desperately, "please tell me you have some insights about sword fighting?"

"I can provide basic movement analysis," the little spirit replied, "but this body has never held a weapon before. Also, you might want to duck."

I dropped just as a throwing axe embedded itself in the wood where my head had been. Great. Just great.

"Here's the situation," the young woman with the pitchfork said, crouching beside me. "Seventh Band broke through the east gate. About forty of them, mainly on foot. We've got thirty able fighters, if you count the miller's boy who can't remember which end of a sword to hold."

"I resent that accuracy," I muttered, then louder: "What exactly is the Seventh Band?"

She stared at me like I'd just asked what bread was. "By the Twin Suns, that head wound really did scramble your brains. They're the worst of the Red Sun raiders. Named for the seventh hour when the red sun peaks and drives men mad with bloodlust."

Combat Analysis:

Enemies: 40~ raiders (Seventh Band - apparently extra murderous)

Allies: 30 villagers (varying combat ability)

Tactical Options: Limited

Recommendation: Don't die. Again.

"Thanks Azure. Very helpful."

The raiders' war cries grew closer, a chilling sound that seemed to resonate with the crimson light from above. I risked a peek over the barricade and immediately regretted it. They wore mismatched armor painted with red sun symbols, and their eyes... there was something wrong with their eyes.

"Maya," the burly man called to the pitchfork girl, "take five to the south wall. They're trying to flank us. And remember—don't look directly at their faces during red hour. The madness can spread."

"Got it, Uncle Henrik." She turned to me. "Try not to die while I'm gone. I'd hate to have to explain to your father how his son managed to survive a head wound just to get killed doing something stupid."

She darted off with several other defenders, leaving me with Henrik and a growing sense of impending doom.

"So," I said casually while adjusting my grip on the sword for the hundredth time, "about this red sun madness..."

Henrik split a raider's shield with his axe before answering. "You really did forget everything, didn't you? The red sun rises alongside the blue, but its light... changes people. Most can resist it, but some embrace it. Become something else. The raid bands are the worst—they time their attacks for when the red light is strongest."

I glanced up at the strange dual stars. The blue sun seemed to pulse with a steady, almost comforting light. But the red one... looking at it made my head hurt and my thoughts turn strange.

Warning: Exposure to red solar radiation detected Effects: Unknown

Recommendation: Avoid extended observation

The first wave of raiders hit our section of the barricade like a tsunami of unwashed violence. Henrik roared and swung his woodcutter's axe in a devastating arc that sent one attacker flying backward. I tried to copy the basic sword movements I'd seen in martial arts training, but this body had all the grace of a drunken chicken trying to perform Swan Lake.

"Move your feet!" Henrik shouted, parrying a blade. "Standing still just makes you an easy target! And keep your eyes on their weapons, not their faces!"

Right. Footwork. I could do that. The System had given me plenty of practice with proper movement, even if this body didn't have the muscle memory. And the not looking at faces thing? Totally fine with that, especially after glimpsing the manic grins and blood-red eyes of our attackers.

Physical Analysis:

Current Stamina: Pathetic

Muscle Memory: Error 404 Not Found

Combat Knowledge: Theoretical

Survival Chances: We're still not calculating that

Warning: Incoming attack pattern!

Recommended action: 45-degree pivot, defensive stance

I managed to awkwardly block a sword strike, the impact sending painful vibrations up my arm. The raider grinned—what I could see of his face below my carefully averted gaze—probably assuming I'd be easy prey. His next attack came in a horizontal slash—

Movement Analysis Complete

Opponent: Overextended

Opportunity: Counter-attack available

Recommendation: Act now!

My body might be weak, but my mind remembered countless hours of combat analysis. I stepped inside the raider's guard and struck with the pommel of my sword, catching him in the throat. He went down gurgling.

Congratulations!

Physical Essence increased: 12 → 14

Combat Experience gained

Note: No cultivation bottleneck detected below previous maximum

"Wait, what?" I barely had time to process that notification before another raider took a swing at my head. This one I managed to dodge more smoothly, my movements already feeling slightly more coordinated.

"The boy can fight after all!" Henrik laughed, splitting another shield with his axe. "Must have knocked some warrior sense into you instead of out!"

A third raider charged our position, this one wielding a wicked-looking curved blade. His attacks came in a flurry of steel that I barely managed to deflect.

Combat Analysis:

Opponent: Skilled swordsman

Threat Level: High

Weak Points: Favors right side, slight limp

"His left leg is injured," Azure observed. "And his attacks follow a pattern—high, low, thrust, repeat."

Great, except I could barely keep up with the first strike, let alone plan counters for a whole sequence. The raider pressed forward, his blade coming closer to finding flesh with each exchange. I stumbled backward, my borrowed boots catching on uneven ground—

And then Maya's pitchfork burst through his chest from behind.

"What did I say about dying?" she demanded, yanking her weapon free as the raider collapsed. "Honestly, Tomas, it's like you've never been in a real fight before."

"You have no idea," I muttered, then louder: "Thanks for the save."

She was about to reply when Henrik's voice cut through the chaos: "Maya! South wall's breaching!"

Maya swore colorfully, something about the red sun's favorite body parts. "Hold this section! And remember—if you see anyone with red markings on their face, don't engage! Those are the Sun-Touched. They're stronger during red hour."

"Sun-Touched?" I asked, blocking another attack with marginally better form.
"Let me guess—more fun side effects of our friendly neighborhood crimson star?"

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Physical Essence: 14 → 15

Combat Skills: Slowly improving

Azure's Patience With Questions During Combat: Wearing thin

"The red sun changes people," Maya explained between pitchfork thrusts.
"Some go mad. Others... transform. The raiders use them as shock troops. They—watch out!"

A massive figure crashed through our makeshift barricade, sending splinters flying. His arms were covered in swirling red tattoos that seemed to pulse in time with the red sun's light, and his eyes... well, I was trying not to look at faces, but let's just say 'human' wasn't the first word that came to mind.

"That would be a Sun-Touched," Azure noted helpfully. "Fascinating biological modifications. Also, you might want to run."

"You think?" I dove to the side as the transformed raider's fist cratered the ground where I'd been standing. "Any actual useful advice?"

"Well, your physical essence is now 15, which is approximately 7% of your previous maximum. At your current rate of improvement, you might reach 20% capacity in about... oh, you should probably dodge again."

The Sun-Touched's next attack split a wooden support beam like kindling. Maya tried to keep him at bay with her pitchfork, but he grabbed the weapon and snapped it like a twig. Henrik's axe bounced off his shoulder leaving barely a scratch.

"The Sundering's great gift!" the transformed raider roared, his voice distorted and multi-toned. "The weak will burn, and the strong will—"

Whatever philosophical insights he planned to share were cut short by an arrow taking him in the eye. He staggered back, more surprised than hurt, but it gave us an opening to retreat to a more defensible position.

"Seventh Band always monologues," a new voice commented. An older woman with a bow stood on a nearby roof, already drawing another arrow. "Think the red sun makes them philosophers or something. Name's Sara, by the way. Village hunter."

"Great shot," I managed between heavy breaths. "Does anything actually kill these Sun-Touched?"

"Fire works," Sara replied, loosing another arrow as the transformed raider recovered. "Or removing the head. Anything else just makes them angry."

"Unfortunately," Maya added, "we're a bit short on fire, and your sword work isn't quite at decapitation level yet."

Physical Combat Assessment:

Current Skill Level: Can occasionally point sword in right direction

Decapitation Capability: Please don't try

Recommendation: Find alternative strategy

"The Sun-Touched have enhanced physical capabilities," Azure observed, "but their movements are predictable. They rely on overwhelming force rather than technique. If we can—"

The rest of his analysis was lost as the transformed raider charged again, this time with an actual weapon—the broken shaft of Maya's pitchfork, because apparently we needed him to be more dangerous.

"The village's east side is lost!" someone shouted. "Fall back to the central square!"

"Brilliant," Maya muttered. "Because being surrounded is exactly what we need right now."

Our fighting retreat was... well, more retreat than fighting. The Sun-Touched continued his relentless advance, shrugging off arrows and spear thrusts like they were mild inconveniences. Other raiders followed in his wake, their grins growing wider as the red sun climbed higher.

"It's almost the seventh hour," Henrik warned, his axe now notched and stained. "When the red sun peaks—"

"Let me guess," I interrupted, "everything gets worse?"

"The Sun-Touched grow stronger," Sara explained from her new perch on a cart. "And more of the raiders start to turn. It's why they time their attacks this way. They—incoming!"

The transformed raider threw what remained of our barricade at us. I managed to dive clear, but Henrik wasn't as lucky. The impact sent him sprawling, his axe skittering away across the dirt.

Combat Analysis:

Situation: Deteriorating rapidly

Allies: Scattered

Enemy Strength: Increasing

Survival Probability: We told you we weren't calculating that

"You know, Azure," I thought while scrambling to help Henrik up, "a little optimism wouldn't hurt."

"Oh! Well, on the bright side, your physical essence is now 16, and your combat movement efficiency has improved by 23%. Also, that Sun-Touched is about to throw a cart at you."

I pulled Henrik clear just as our cover became an impromptu projectile. The old warrior grunted in pain—his earlier arrow wound was still bleeding, and the impact hadn't helped.

"Get him to the healer's house," Maya ordered, tossing me a small shield she'd scavenged. "Sara and I will hold them here."

"Two against that?" I gestured at the approaching Sun-Touched, who was now definitely larger than before. "That's suicide!"

"Sometimes," Sara said calmly, drawing another arrow, "you don't fight to win. You fight to buy time."

Maya picked up Henrik's fallen axe. "The children and elders need time to reach the tunnels. We can give them that much at least."

I looked at Henrik's pale face, then at the determined expressions of the two women. The rest of our defenders were scattered, some retreating with the civilians, others making smaller last stands across the village. The red sun's light was growing stronger, and more raiders were showing signs of transformation.

"Tomas," Maya said softly, "go. Get Uncle Henrik to safety. And... I'm sorry about that head wound joke earlier. You fought well today."

Status Update:

Physical Essence: 16

Combat Experience: Notable improvement

Emotional State: Complicated

"There's a 72% chance we could all retreat successfully," Azure offered.

"Though the probability drops to 31% if we try to protect the civilian evacuation. Also, the Sun-Touched has found another improvised weapon. Is that a wagon wheel? Creative fellow, isn't he?"

The transformed raider's next attack scattered us. Maya rolled left, Sara leaped right, and I half-carried Henrik toward the healer's house. Behind us, I heard Maya yell defiance and Sara's bow sing.

"Almost there," I told Henrik as we stumbled through the village's increasingly chaotic streets. "Try not to bleed on me too much."

He managed a weak laugh. "Been... through worse. During the last red summer, when the Burning Band came..." He trailed off, coughing.

"Save the war stories for later." I kicked open the healer's door, finding the small house already crowded with wounded. "Hey! Got another one for you!"

The healer, an elderly woman with surprisingly strong arms, helped me get Henrik onto a cot. "Arrow wound and impact trauma," I reported. "Also probably some creative internal bruising from flying debris."

She raised an eyebrow. "Since when does Tomas the miller's boy know healing terms?"

Right. Different body, different knowledge base. "Lucky guess?"

Before I could fumble for a better explanation, screams erupted from outside. Not the usual battle screams we'd been hearing—these were different. Terrified.

"The seventh hour," Henrik mumbled. "Red sun's peak..."

I rushed to the window just in time to see another raider transform. The process was horrifying—muscles bulged, bones cracked and reformed, and those red tattoos spread like living things across their skin. Within moments, the Seventh Band had three more Sun-Touched warriors.

"You know," Azure commented, "from a purely analytical standpoint, this transformation process is fascinating. The red solar radiation appears to trigger some kind of enhanced cellular regeneration combined with... oh, right, probably not the time for a scientific breakdown."

"You think?" I checked my borrowed sword and shield. Both had seen better days, probably sometime last century.

Combat Resources:

- One dubiously sharp sword
- One partially broken shield
- Growing collection of bruises
- Azure's questionably helpful commentary

"I heard that," the spirit protested. "My commentary is extremely helpful. For instance, your physical essence has increased to 17 during the recent exertion, and I've compiled a detailed analysis of Sun-Touched attack patterns. Would you like to see the spreadsheet?"

More screams from outside interrupted whatever sarcastic response I was about to make. The healer shoved a leather satchel into my hands.

"Emergency supplies," she explained. "Get to the tunnels. Take as many of the walking wounded as you can."

"What about you?"

She gave me a stern look. "Someone has to stay with those who can't move. Now go. And Tomas... whatever happened to your head, it seems to have improved you."

I gathered everyone who could walk, ending up with a group of six including myself. Henrik insisted on coming despite his injuries, claiming he could still swing an axe if needed. Given that he could barely stand, I had doubts.

"The tunnel entrance is in the old storehouse," one of the wounded explained. "If we can reach it—"

The wall exploded inward.

A Sun-Touched stood in the new opening, but this one was different. The red markings covered his entire body, and his eyes glowed like hot coals. In one massive hand, he held...

"Maya!" I rushed forward without thinking, but two of our group held me back.

"She's gone," Henrik said quietly. "Don't waste her sacrifice."

The transformed raider tossed Maya's body aside like discarded trash. Sara was nowhere to be seen—either escaped or... no, not thinking about that.

The Sun-Touched charged with impossible speed. I managed to get my shield up just in time, but the impact still sent me flying. The others scattered, trying to make it to the storehouse while the monster was focused on me.

Physical Essence: 17 → 18

Pain Level: Considerable

Tactical Options: Limited

Azure's Concern: Growing

"Any brilliant insights?" I thought while rolling away from another attack.

"Well, your pain tolerance has improved significantly! Also, that last impact cracked three ribs. Oh, and the red sun's radiation seems to be intensifying the transformation process. The subject's muscle density has increased by approximately 47% in the last minute alone. Fascinating!"

"Less science, more survival tips!"

The Sun-Touched's next attack reduced my shield to splinters. I barely managed to deflect a follow-up strike with my sword, the impact numbing my entire arm. This wasn't a fight—it was just a matter of time before he crushed me.

That's when I felt it. A strange sensation, like static electricity but deeper. The air seemed to thicken, and even the Sun-Touched paused.

"Oh," Azure said quietly. "That's... unexpected."

A figure appeared in the sky, floating serenely above the battle. Their robes rippled in an unfelt wind, and while I couldn't sense any qi or spiritual energy, something about them radiated pure wrongness.

"A Skybound," one of the wounded whispered in terror. "We're dead. We're all dead."

The floating figure raised their hands, and the air itself seemed to twist. Not qi, not spiritual energy, but something else. Something that made Azure's warnings scream in my head.

Warning: Unknown energy type detected!

Threat Level: Extreme

Recommendation: Retreat immediately!

The first spell turned the Sun-Touched attacking me into a fine red mist. The second froze a fleeing raider solid before shattering him into crimson ice. The third...

I didn't see what the third spell did. I was too busy running toward the storehouse, trying to reach the others. Henrik and the wounded had almost made it to the entrance.

"Master," Azure said urgently, "that energy signature... it's similar to cultivation techniques, but fundamentally different. Almost like—"

The fourth spell caught Henrik's group. I looked away, but couldn't block out the sounds.

Physical Essence: 18 → 19

Running Speed: Still insufficient

Survival Chance: Rapidly approaching zero

The robed figure appeared in front of me between one step and the next. Just blinked into existence like a glitch in reality.

"Interesting," they said, voice distorted by their hood. "Your life-force pattern is... unusual. Almost like..."

I raised my battered sword, trying to stop my hands from shaking. "Look, I'm just a miller's son. I'm not worth your time. I can't even fight properly!"

"No survivors," they replied simply. "The Red Sun demands it."

Their hand moved in a complex pattern. I tried to dodge, tried to run, tried to do anything—

"Oh," Azure said softly. "This is going to hurt."

The spell hit like a hammer made of ice and razors. My last thought was that dying three times seemed really excessive.

Then darkness took me again.

