

Elder Cultivator

#Chapter 101 - Read Elder Cultivator Chapter 101

Chapter 101

As it turned out, every part of the arm was rather important for firing a bow. That included the wrist. While it didn't need to be bent, it did need to hold up against force. Not something that Anton wanted to try with a broken wrist. Supplementing with energy to protect his wrist might work, but the tendons in the fingers attached all the way to the wrist.

He could just go a couple weeks without firing a bow, but he didn't *want* to. He also didn't want to do something stupid and injure himself worse, so he let his arm hang at his side with his wrist properly stabilized. Maybe with his foot?

His leg raised up. He had to admit he was now much more flexible than he had been ever in his life. He could raise his leg up to the same height as his outstretched left hand, but along with lifting a leg completely screwing up his stance *nobody* could be flexible enough to pull the leg back far enough to grab the string and then draw it. That was simply not how bones worked.

Teeth were immediately rejected along with everything involving the mouth. No flexibility in the teeth, and everything in that area was far too vulnerable and not muscled enough. If he could somehow manage it, the draw wouldn't be much shorter. Generally the draw of a bow ended with the hand beside the head, so it would only be centimeters off. Of course, the difference between beside and *in front of* could be very significant. No point in trying.

He wanted something *sensible* or he might as well not bother. Sadly, there weren't really any extra grasping limbs on a person. That was all he had.

If he wasn't a cultivator, he would have just given up as soon as his wrist was broken, but he still had one more option. He could just use his energy to pull back the string- it was already going to be attached anyway. He'd just have to find the right path for optimal stability. His energy could easily extend that far from his body without losing power, especially with his arm outstretched alongside it.

The first test was a hilarious failure. Everything seemed good. He formed a spirit arrow by reflex now, so adding a bit more energy along the length of the string wasn't too hard. He pulled it back from the center, let the tension go and the arrow stuck to the string. Probably would have caused some damage if his energy wasn't passively covering the whole bow.

He tried again but remembered to not attach the energy on the string to the arrow, except as necessary to pull it back. The result was much better, but Anton still found the

technique lacking. It was the same as trying to use the bone bow that far outclassed his abilities. It was simply too much manipulation of energy at once, though having an actual string there instead of merely having to replicate the effect of one made it work somewhat better. Of course it also helped immensely that he could bend the bow.

In the end, he drastically reduced the number of arrows he shot for a while. Not to none, because he found that it was useful practice even if it wasn't practical at the moment, but he also couldn't shoot hundreds of arrows per day with the extra expenditures involved. It reminded him how much work his body was still doing underneath all that convenient energy.

It had been more than a year since The Hunt, which allowed some time for the forest and creatures to recover. Disaster had narrowly been avoided due to Catarina's fortunate discovery of the hole in the barrier which allowed time for Hoyt to get help while Anton, Catarina, and Timothy defended Thuston from an unusual outpouring of creatures. Said help had eventually led to Grand Elder Vandale, who was able to affect the great number of beasts from afar, killing most of those around Thuston and in the outer part of the forest.

The hole in the barrier had been sealed, but nothing unusual about it was found. Even the best formations could fail given enough time, and as an exceptionally large one that was even more possible. The strange part was how quickly the beasts had found it and the way they acted as a group. Though there were some more intelligent magical beasts among them, it had still been unusual.

At the time Anton hadn't heard much more on the topic. Thuston was safe, the barrier repaired, the forest watched. Those were the important details at the time. However, now that he was much stronger when the opportunity arose to look further, he took it.

Much stronger yet he was still unqualified to participate in the current initiative to scout the deep forest. The name for the forest varied depending on the location and who was speaking of it. In the area controlled by the order, it was usually just called the Beast Forest. As it travelled to the northwest across the border into Ambati, it was often just the Western Forest. It was undecided whether it was technically the *same* forest that eventually blended into the jungles in northern Ambati or not, but creatures who handled the different climates well travelled between them.

Having heard about the scouting effort, Anton went to speak to Elder Anand. He was the man who had organized The Hunt previously, and was responsible for much of the work with the forest. Elder Anand had dark skin and was beginning to show his age with wrinkles and greying hair. When Anton came to his office, he greeted him with a smile. Anton! To what do I owe the pleasure?

Anton was briefly taken aback. Ah, I didn't think you would recognize me.

How could I not? Elder Anand said. You were one of those responsible for protecting Thuston. That could have turned into a disaster. Anything that ends with Grand Elder Vandale acting he shook his head. I would certainly not forget so easily. Besides, you must know that your rate of advancement is exceptional. There are few new members who match your speed of growth, and many of those who do are connected to you in some way.

I must admit not knowing as many other disciples as I should. Though I have been expanding my circles. Mostly he was making sure to keep in contact with those interested in archery, like Marcio. I have been fortunate in finding a good path. I *am*

aware not many people reach Spirit Building within two years of starting cultivation.

Not that many per year, either. We get a dozen on average. Sometimes only a couple, sometimes more. Though given our total numbers, thats actually quite reasonable. But you didnt come here to talk about that, Elder Anand gestured, What was it?

Well, Anton began, I heard you were continuing efforts to learn what happened in the Beast Forest. I am aware that early Spirit Building cultivation is not sufficient for even some of the middling areas, but I wished to help out if I can.

Youre an archer, correct? He could obviously see Antons bow. You have good eyesight?

Anton nodded, And experience tracking.

Then I think we have something that can work for you. Its not currently so important as to call in Elder Kseniya, and the rest of those with good eyes or tracking experience are occupied. Elder Anand shrugged, Which isnt that strange, with a good third of those beyond Body Tempering out of the country at any particular point.

I didnt encounter many in my travels, Anton said. I had no idea it was so high.

Well, you went to Ofurg, right? Theyre not so friendly to us there. Probably no more than a few dozen of our members there at any time, so youd have to just be in the right city on the right day.

Anton nodded. Right. About that opportunity?

Oh yes. We havent completed a thorough sweep of everything. Its probably thousands of square kilometers to cover, and weve also been trying to keep the current wildlife relatively intact. Wed not wish to spark trouble. Normally things were quite calm, and nothing truly worrying came too close to the Orders territory. Nothing that was encountered last year was concerning in its particular power, but how many Beasts and how they acted was the concern.

We identified several magical beasts that were somewhat in control of the attack on Thuston, Anton mentioned.

Yes, I am aware. That should normally not have been enough. There is the possibility something deep in the forest drove them away, intentionally or by virtue of its imposing presence. Elder Kseniya *did* make a sweep of the area, but powerful magical beasts have the instincts and intelligence to hide from strong cultivators. Kseniya is not the most stealthy sort of person. Anand smiled, Anyway, what I have in mind would be a search for oddities. Strange trails, unexpected populations of animals, checking dens, and the like. I myself am planning to head deeper into the forest, but we have areas not covered as thoroughly that an elder could escort you through. Or you and a team, if you prefer to get more combat experience. In that case the elder would merely be on the watch for creatures out of the norm.

Anton smiled. I certainly have people in mind for a team. Dont want people to get too much in the habit of just sitting around peacefully cultivating. Though I suppose if all goes well we should end up in few battles.

Anand nodded, Preferably, but there are a few types of extremely territorial creatures that have great ability to find intruders, and not enough sense to think about them being cultivators. So you could certainly find yourselves in combat, even if you leave things relatively undisturbed.

And if we manage to avoid fights Anton shrugged, Honestly, quietly slipping through the wilderness is a good training exhibition, though hopefully not one wed need regularly.

Good. When you are able to put together the team let me know. Ill be looking for an appropriate elder to accompany you, and well provide you with relevant data weve already collected about the area and especially changes from our records.

Chapter 102

Preparing for a short expedition in the Beast Forest didnt take long. Every supply they could need was readily available, and everyone Anton intended to bring with him had an open schedule. They would just be training- going on a mission that was close by was also a good opportunity. Timothy and Hoyt had few skills relevant to the mission besides combat capabilities, but they were reliable and familiar. Catarina could provide formations which would be relevant as they camped overnight. Anton himself would be doing the bulk of the tracking and scouting work. After discussing with the others, Anton also invited along Velvet. Timothy had previous experience in a team with her, and while he didnt have a positive opinion of her as a person, she had reasonable enough teamwork skills. Catarina had long forgotten any grudge she might have had with her.

Few people developed wide skillsets at a young age. Cultivators learned to fight because there was little point in having so much power if they couldnt wield it. Other valuable skills related to knowing about opponents they might face, so they could have

countermeasures in place. Beyond that, they might develop practical skills like pillmaking, smithing, or the use of formations. Those usually relied on preparing ahead of time, but everything came together in the end. For what cultivators did, most things came back to combat- or avoiding it.

Though Velvet didnt have as much experience as Anton did moving quietly through the forest, she had practiced stealth and had reasonable awareness of her surroundings. Her ability to find tracks was decent enough, she merely lacked training in recognizing how to make sense of them. Anton crouched down to show her some things. We have wolf prints going this way. More recently, a boar crossed that trail that way, in a hurry too. He mentioned the way the undergrowth was damaged and the dirt torn up more than normal, showing her why he could say what he did with confidence.

She seemed comfortable enough in the wilderness, but Anton noticed she relied more on her cultivation to manage than her experience. She might not know the signs of dangerous creatures in the area, but if they showed themselves she was capable of reacting. Does it matter if we know about them ahead of time?

With these? Probably not, if we dont intend to hunt them. But if we came across signs of a creature of normal size but abnormal power- such as some magical beasts- it could be important to know to avoid their territory. Anton glanced over at the elder traveling with them. Tshering was at the very peak of Spirit Building. From his age and the feel of him, his cultivation seemed to have plateaued there. Nothing seems unusual so far. Whatever sent a boar of this size fleeing so quickly must be quite strong, but it shouldnt be abnormal for this area. It seems to have been left well behind, as there are no parallel tracks.

Catarina was keeping an eye out for anything such as formations. She was better suited for sensing them, and while it was doubtful that anything would have been set up on the Orders territory some could occur naturally. They were usually of little concern, but if one was empowering or controlling the wildlife directly or indirectly it needed to be dealt with.

Anything within a day of the edge of the forest, counting the speeds those with tempered bodies could travel, was basically normal forest. There were occasional oddities and magical beasts, and common humans would do well to avoid the area. Even so, it was relatively tame. If she hadnt seen the transition, Velvet wouldnt have noticed the difference in her current area. She wasnt fully aware of all the differences, but they occurred everywhere. Large clusters of colorful mushrooms. Strange colored bark on trees. The sound of the leaves crunching beneath her feet fading. Skittish yet unfamiliar wildlife all too eager to climb up trees and dip down into burrows.

Shed been the one to spot the signs first, by virtue of the angle she was standing at. Anton had prompted her to check out the area- cautiously. There was a cut in the bark

of a tree. Not a gouge nor the slashing and tearing of claws, but a cut. A single line, about chest high. Velvet approached carefully.

She had no technique to enhance her vision, but simply approaching closer was good enough. She just wanted to be cautious about what she was stepping on in the thick undergrowth. She still didnt understand why her footfalls were more quiet outside of her advancing in technique, because everything looked the same. Was the ground softer, somehow? It didnt feel like it. When she was an arms length away from the tree, she had no further understanding than when she spotted it.

Antons voice almost startled her, If you could describe what you are thinking, please. She turned, and he smiled, So that we can measure your conclusions.

Velvet nodded, and turned back. Its just a cut. A knuckle deep, thin. No traces of energy which means either it faded or was done without. It should be a blade. Velvet frowned, Why would anyone swing at that angle? At what? she looked around, I dont see other signs of fighting. That was it. Just an oddity and various tracks.

What would Anton do? She didnt think shed ever truly be a scout, but she had the stealth ability. If she was to act independently being able to bring back usable information was important. She reached out her hand, after determining she wouldnt learn more from the way things were. She tried to peel back the bark, to see if something was hidden inside the cut. Instead she found herself unable to do so. Well. *That* was strange. Strong bark. It doesnt just break off. But that cut she shook her head. She pinched with her fingers and gave a solid yank. Bark snapped off. She had the strength, she just hadnt expected it to require it. Very strong. The cut was with something sharp *and*

strong. Normal blades would have failed at this.

Was there another cultivator? It wouldnt be entirely strange, though nobody should have been through the area in the last few days. She looked down. The ground was firm enough she wasnt leaving behind defined prints, and she didnt see other human prints. There were a few signs of creatures in the underbrush- but one stood out differently. It almost looked like an arrow, the sort that would be drawn to direct people. A triangular shape with a middle line. Something with three toes, then. A bird? It was strangely sectioned and the talon marks, if that was what they were, remained barely visible. Some sort of large bird? Traveling that way, Velvet pointed.

Her feet shifted. Leaves crunched, but just a little. She picked one up. Bent it. It was dry, and it snapped- but not without some effort. Durable, like the bark of the tree. So the twigs and leaves crunched less because they held their form against her weight- though not everything had that property. She needed to spot the differences somehow. The trees were absorbing natural energy but not storing it, so they all felt the same as the environment around them.

What made you think it was the bird? Anton asked, approaching.

Well it- Velvet looked around. It was just the only strange thing. Its going the right direction, and it would move something like this, Velvet held out her arms like wings hanging at her side. They were a bit below the mark. Something like this, but taller. Now that she said it, it was a pretty shaky description.

That makes sense, Anton acknowledged. Velvet smiled as she still faced away from him. But the damage is from a blade, not a beak or talons. How would a bird cause it? Her face fell. She hadn't thought about that. It was just that the two things stood out and odd, and she connected them. How would a bird cause it?

The repeated question prodded Velvet. It was a real question, not just a polite way to tell her she was wrong. *Could* a bird have caused it? Im not sure if it could have. She thought about where she'd placed her hands. Birds didn't have hands there. They had wings. Those certainly weren't sharp. They were soft and swooshy. It could be something else. Then again, the bark wasn't supposed to be so hard. That made it even *less* likely that a bird could have done it. Unless it has sharp feathers? She turned to look at Anton.

His face had a pleasant smile. Encouraging, but frustratingly not telling her if she was right or wrong. Then he shrugged. It could. There are some. Not listed anywhere around here, but it's not uncommon to have a few things out of place. Since we don't *know*, Anton drew out the word, We might as well follow the bird. It's the strangest thing we've noticed in the area.

Velvet nodded, though she kept her smile off her face. It was nice to know that even he didn't know everything all the time. It gave her confidence, like the elder watching over them who wasn't the wilderness sort at all. He had an overwhelming sense of strength, even restrained as it was. Strong, but not in the comforting way that Anton was- like a good solid roof over your head. She needed to keep learning so he wanted to keep her around.

Chapter 103

The tracks of the large bird weren't hard to follow. Anton let Velvet take the lead so she could get practice, but with the way it left impressions it wasn't difficult. Based on the properties of the leaves and the earth beneath, Anton got the picture it was a very heavy bird. That meant either it was truly gigantic in proportion to its talons, or perhaps it was a flightless bird. Those were rare, but Anton had heard of them. Though he had to admit until he saw a feather, he thought instead they might be mistaken about the origin of the creature based on its print.

As they moved, it started to become clear that the creature was indeed responsible for the cut in the tree. At least the cuts followed its same route, occasional slices appearing in plants along the way. Then they found a feather.

It didnt look like much, except the way it was embedded in a rock. It appeared to have sliced cleanly into it as it passed, but it stopped halfway. It took a moment of twisting and wrenching to pull the feather out of the rock, and as he did so Anton saw it slice a little bit deeper to the side. He very carefully trailed his finger along the feather. It looked soft and fluffy, but he felt it trying to cut into him through his defensive layer of energy. It was of little comfort that a free floating feather only barely didnt cut him, but that was how things were. He trailed his finger in the other direction and found that it didnt cut at all from tail to back in the direction of the shaft, only when he followed the direction of the barbs.

You were certainly right about it being a bird, Anton commended Velvet. If Im right, this is a grounded razorwing, or some relative. Hed been spending time looking into bestiaries of creatures in the surrounding countries. There were far more animals and types of magical beasts than hed thought. He knew other places had different creatures, but he hadnt realized how much variance there could be among the normal creatures. Any of the razorwings were not considered normal beasts, since their feathers cut like blades even without the use of energy. Whatever type it is, its far from home. A good target for investigating oddities.

It being a land bird explained some of the oddities- like why the trail was so *consistent*. Birds would walk along the ground for a short way in some circumstances, but most preferred to alight in trees or fly. Even a very large bird could find a perch in the natural energy enhanced trees in the area, but since this sort of bird didnt fly it cleanly solved that mystery.

The group walked quickly- if they were trying to catch up to the creature, they needed to move faster than it would. Even if it had just been heading back to its lair, they didnt want to spend more days out in the forest than they needed to. Tshering was patient, but he probably had other things to be doing than watching over relatively new cultivators. Anton could tell he was keeping notice of beasts that might approach, but he hadnt yet needed to give a warning of any sort.

Part of that was that Anton was keeping on top of sensing threats for himself. It took Anton a moment to judge an upcoming problem because everything felt so *off*

. However, his eyes and senses werent lying to him. Trouble up ahead. Looks like ants. Ants shouldnt be a problem for cultivators- no matter how many of them there were, they couldnt even damage someone with tempered skin or the thinnest layer of defensive energy. Not normal ants. They have abdomens as big as a fist.

Velvet squinted her eyes, clearly trying to make them out. I can see the mound, she finally said. Its still quite far but almost directly in our path.

Anton nodded, Thats the problem. Plus, theyre an aggressive sort. I see skeletons of large animals around the area, and what might have been a deer being dragged towards the mound. Creature that could hunt deer using numbers werent necessarily a

problem- wolves could do it. Anton looked over at Fuzz. He was sniffing the area with interest. Should we try to travel around them?

This new forest was great. Fuzz smelled so many new scents, and not *once* had a plant tried to kill him. He thought it had twice, but the first time had just been a root he didnt notice which didnt react at all when he clawed it. The second time had been a squirrel who thought he couldnt climb trees. It was half right. Fuzz might not be able to climb a tree, but he was able to jump high enough to chomp through the branch the creature had been standing on, chittering tauntingly. After that Catarina had asked him what he ate with a strange look on her face, but he didnt have any other squirrels to share. How selfish of him.

The fourth one appeared to be a friend now. She had been hiding nearby for a while, watching them, but now she was spending time with the rest like a proper member of the pack. This Velvet was a strange one, sometimes disappearing from scent and even energy. When it turned out she was a hunter like Anton, he thought it made sense.

When Anton said there were ants ahead of them, Fuzz was confused. Ants were little black creatures, and these were big and brown. A proper mouthful instead of just a crunchy texture on the tongue that sometimes resulted in stinging. Maybe hed only seen baby ants? That made sense, but he wondered why the pack leaders would leave their young all on their own.

But there were more important things for Fuzz, like dealing with these big ones *now*. They had a den right along the trail of the sharp bird they were following, and they seemed to not appreciate the intrusion upon their territory. While Fuzz pack avoided their den, it wasnt good enough. They didnt go a day out of their way to avoid the ants territory, so they were attacked. Stupid ants.

Fuzz had fought alongside the pack leaders several times. Usually he found that Antons arrows were greatly terrifying, but though he killed one or even several of the creatures with each shot, there were so many of them it hardly slowed them. He had to prepare himself to fight up close.

Everyone was told to stay together, which made sense. Being swarmed wasnt a fun idea. Catarina was doing that funny thing where she moved things around and dug up the ground. Fuzz had tried to help before but apparently he had done it wrong, even though hed dug much deeper. Humans were strange, but the pack leaders were strong so he just did his best to understand.

Then the ants were upon them. Fuzz was right, they *were* a mouthful. Very crunchy, but their insides didnt taste very good. He didnt have much time to savor them either, as they were also trying to eat *him*.

Fuzz hadn't been old enough to go hunting with the wolf pack, so he didn't learn all of the tactics they had. Instead, he learned from the humans. The way they fought was strange, but after he learned to control his energy just a little bit he found how good it was. He supposed their weapons made up for the lack of claws, but Fuzz much preferred attacking with his own body.

He stamped down on the creatures, crushing them at their thin point. He chomped into them, swept them with his paws and flicked at them with his tail. His tail wasn't much good for fighting, but with energy protecting it Fuzz was able to make some use of it. Maybe he wouldn't do that forever, but humans liked trying new things to grow strong, so Fuzz would too.

Timothy seemed to find trouble with the ants, because his shield wasn't suited to resisting them. His sword still chopped through them with a satisfying slicing sound, but apparently he was unable to perform his defensive position in the party.

Hoyt had some trouble as well, but Fuzz noticed he was on fire. That kept the ants away, but hopefully he could handle it himself. Fuzz was too far to help fix him.

It sure seemed hard for the humans to fight something so low to the ground. Fuzz had a much better time, because he only barely had to crouch to reach the height of the ants and bat at them. But nothing was perfect. Though they did their best to keep from being encircled and having ants all throughout between them, they couldn't stop them.

That was when Fuzz started getting bitten. He couldn't fully attack and defend with his energy all at the same time. Humans were so versatile and powerful. Fuzz envied their ability to fight like that. However, because there were so many ants Fuzz knew he had to kill them as quickly as he could- so he left his defenses weaker. Their sharp jaws bit into his hide, drawing a little bit of blood. That wasn't so bad, but then he was lit on fire. Fuzz couldn't see it, but he knew he was burning. He rolled around over the creatures as he fought, trying to put the fire out, but when he got bit on the nose he figured it out.

His nose wasn't on fire. No, it was much worse. Fire that couldn't be seen or put out. Fuzz howled, redoubling his efforts to slay the creatures before they could injure him. He felt the empowerment of Catarina's formation thing flowing into him, giving him a boost to strength and speed against the vile ants. Yet their numbers were endless. He found himself being overwhelmed. His vision started to cloud with the bodies of ants alive and dead and the constant burning pain.

Then he saw the new one. Velvet. Her arms flashed, carrying swords much smaller than the others Fuzz had seen. But they didn't need to be longer, for they did what fang and claw did just as well- rending the creatures asunder. With one sweep she slew a half-dozen, then she would take a step. Ants would leap towards her but lose track of her. Even Fuzz almost couldn't see her as her energy hid her among them.

Several more swings from Velvet and dozens of dead ants piled up along with the ones already around Fuzz. Then Catarina came, spinning low to the ground with wide sweeping arcs of her sword. Though her height wasn't suited to the maneuver, it was still effective. Fuzz could see why one would want weapons. They extended beyond the body to provide much greater reach and area. Energy could do that too, though it was hard to do it much. Fuzz resolved to obtain a similar ability, and howled to push away the pain.

What even was a little burning? It dug into his body, but it was nothing like the plant that had tried to live inside him. It was just a little bit of burning on his legs and tail and nose, a bit of blood. He pushed through the pain and continued fighting the creatures until there weren't any more around him. Then he tried eating another one. Its head was too poky, but the rest of it was okay. Not worth hunting though.

Chapter 104

No matter how agile a person was, withstanding innumerable attacks completely unharmed was not possible. At least, Spirit Building was not a realm where one could ignore a swarm of melon sized ants. Energy defenses accumulated damage and had imperfections where attacks could pierce through, and the team of five people and one wolf were binding their wounds and circulating their energy to remove the painful but otherwise relatively harmless poison.

Sitting introspectively slightly off by himself was Anton. His fingers rubbed on the string of his bow as he recalled the fight. Thousand Arrows had many good techniques for increasing his firing speed, but nothing that actually approached its name. Anton was only able to fire his bow *so fast*. With one arrow per ant, it would have taken him over ten minutes to kill the swarm of ants by himself- assuming they just let him hit them peacefully. He was able to guide his arrows to sometimes pierce two, but the angle just wasn't right. Nobody made techniques for shooting at one's feet.

It would be easy to accept what happened as a limit of archery. He could sweep his handaxes to hit a larger number of ants at once. The ability to fight a whole swarm of small, low to the ground creatures was something he would only use rarely. But fighting a large number of enemies *had* come up before, and while he was several times stronger than he was during the attack on Thuston, he still wouldn't be able to stop the beast swarm there by himself. Not before it reached the town. It was simply a matter of what he could do at once. He only had two hands, two feet.

But he wasn't cultivating to do what a normal human could. He had goals to accomplish, people to rescue and others to avenge. Besides, he couldn't say that it wasn't possible to attack so many creatures at once. He'd seen it done. Grand Elder Vandale had targeted each individual creature with his falling stars attack. Anton was well aware that was more difficult than just cratering the whole area, and he admired the ability to avoid friendly casualties. Anton wasn't so crazy as to think he should compare his thirteen

stars and less than two years of experience with ninety-nine and centuries, but it was something to aspire to. Perhaps he should ask about similar wide area abilities.

Anton turned towards Hoyt. Hey, hows that bracelet treating you?

Hoyt nodded, holding up his arm and letting fire play over his fingertips. Useful, though setting things on fire is a bit of a double edged sword. It almost worked *too* well. And now Fuzz doesnt want to approach me. Fuzz looked warily at the flame. I hadnt realized how much my techniques sort of rely on fighting large opponents. Or at least not very small ones.

Its difficult, Catarina agreed. They also ruin formations by walking everywhere.

Timothy shook his head, Shields arent really made for things around your feet either. It would be nice to have armored boots.

Velvet seemed hesitant to join in the conversation, but when Anton saw she had something to say, he gestured to her. Umm, I my fighting style was also not suited to them.

You did well though, Hoyt acknowledged, You crouched almost flat against the ground. Its difficult to do without just toppling over.

The group continued to discuss the battle for some time. They were never truly in danger- though Fuzz was significantly weaker than the rest of them and had been a bit reckless in his actions. Elder Tshering would have interfered if there was a true problem, but just taking advantage of that safety would make them weak. They had the power to defeat their enemy, but the battle simply wasnt what they had expected it could be. Then again, if the ants were just a little bit smaller and proportionately weaker, they couldnt have bit any of their group- just like with the diamondsilk spiders. They werent likely to run into something smaller *and* stronger that was still so numerous, but widening their tactics was worthwhile regardless.

After binding their wounds and resting, the group looked towards the ant mound from afar. Do you think we should try to destroy it? Hoyt asked.

Too risky, Anton responded. We didnt kill all of the ants. That was just an advance party, maybe. Theyll have at least several times more, and certainly some surprises.

I dont like the idea of surprises, Velvet admitted.

Can we just leave it though? Catarina questioned. Theyre so aggressive. It seems dangerous.

Anton looked towards Elder Tshering. I believe its out of our capabilities. Can you do it?

Elder Tshering nodded. I can.

There are several magical beasts in there that I cant tell how strong they are. Anton looked at the mound, which was bigger than the standard complex of four houses the Order employed- including the courtyards. It would take two sets stacked atop each other to equal it.

Oh, you can sense them? Elder Tshering smiled. Not bad at all. They wont be a danger to me, but to properly destroy the nest we have to kill the queen- and those who *could* be queens. Ill need all of you to watch the sides for things with wings. Anton nodded, raising his bow. This type of ant should only have the one mound. You can see the tunnels. I wont be attempting to dig my way through, and even if they were large enough Id rather not deal with it. Im going to break it down from the top. If Anton can catch any fliers, that would be best. The rest of you should stay back far enough that those who pour out dont attack you first but instead focus on me. Only move forward for any crawling out with the wings. Catarina, if you could put together a formation around the area, Elder Tshering thought for a moment, Something to hinder the ants, slow them. That would be more beneficial than fortifying us.

Catarina nodded. That will probably take a few hours? Its a big area, and I cant approach too close.

Good, he nodded. Ill go with you, just in case there is a problem. Everyone else, remain watchful. We may not expect anything else to inhabit this area, but stay cautious.

As predicted, a few hours later Catarina finished setting up the formation. Thats all I can do without walking up to the mound. It will slightly hinder their thoughts and actions, including decisions to flee. I just need a moment with each of the others to prevent it from affecting them.

Elder Tshering nodded, Its good to have another budding formation master as part of the Order. Its rare to find those with the talent and the drive. After gathering everyone around, Elder Tshering made sure everyone was ready. Good. Spread out, and dont worry about letting the workers past. Its best to leave them alone, if they do the same to you. Ill be waiting here until everyones in position and youll be quite aware of when everything starts.

With five people, they took spots even distances around the irregularly shaped structure, Fuzz remaining with Catarina. As promised, Elder Tshering acted as soon as they were in position- and obviously. With a single leap he was halfway up the structure, then on top. With a short sprint he was over the middle, then he leapt straight into the air then came back down. Though he only reached a dozen meters in the air, if that, his fall was like a meteor- energy gathered around him and he crashed into the structure

with a heavy, fiery explosion. Packed dirt flew in all directions, the top center of the mound being obliterated in an instant.

Nobody was able to see him after that, as he was below the edge of the mound, but subsequent though somewhat smaller explosions rang out. Anton watched carefully, and was the first to act when a handful of ants took off flying from the center. One arrow each was sufficient, piercing a hole right through them.

Ants started pouring out of the mound, some of them swarming towards Elder Tshering and others fleeing in all directions. The others besides Elder Tshering did as he said, watching for any ants with wings. Those who took off directly were shot down by Anton, but others crawled out of the sides and were generally impaled or sliced before taking off.

A large ant flew into the air- not through the power of wings, but as it was tossed by Elder Tshering. Then another. Both were about the size of a man, perhaps slightly bigger considering the roundness of their abdomens. They had large heads and sharp jaws, and Elder Tshering punched at both of them. The two royal guards resisted his fists, at least for a moment, snapping back with their mandibles. Neither seemed able to get through the others defenses but after a few rounds of punches and kicks, Elder Tshering suddenly had a spear in his hands. A moment later, he drove it straight down the middle of one of the large ants, energy exploding out of its abdomen in the rear. He pulled his gorey spear out of the creature in time to block the other, its mandibles impacting its own energy against his.

At that moment, a similarly large ant took to the skies. It dragged behind it an abdomen like a deflated wine pouch, but it flew with purpose and speed. Likewise, Anton shot arrows one at a time. The queen was likewise somewhat larger than a human, and had sufficient energy to protect from Antons arrows. At least, to resist them. He didnt continue to fire standard arrows in easy patterns. He began to use trick shots, firing slow curving arrows while gathering more energy for frontal assaults. The queen was forced to shift around her energy inexpertly, and Anton pierced an arrow through her defenses- and one of her wings. It wasnt a simple hole, but instead he tore as much of it as he could near the shoulder, nearly severing the wing.

Elder Tshering slammed a foot to the ground, his energy crushing a dozen ants while he finished off the second royal guard with his spear at the same time as the queen started to fall. Despite her massive wings several meters long and the enhancement of natural energy, such a creature wasnt meant to fly. Elder Tshering finished her off with his spear, before returning to the nest and crushing the eggs remaining. Working from the center, he toppled the mound as the others finished off the few ants that chose to fight instead of fleeing.

He made it look almost easy to do what he did, but Anton could sense that the battle still took quite a bit out of Elder Tshering. The man looked positively manic, a wide grin on his face. Good job everyone! And excellent job picking your battles. No shame in

admitting you aren't equipped to face unknown but powerful forces. He flicked his spear, spinning it and applying energy to push off the filth. Anton found it amusing how the quiet elder suddenly changed demeanors, but he supposed he had simply been letting them make their own choices. He wondered why the man had stopped at the peak of Spirit Building. He'd ask, but that was probably inappropriate. Maybe it would come up naturally.

Chapter 105

The forest expedition continued after wiping out the giant hive of fire ants. Even just doing that could count as a successful mission, but the razorwing hadn't suddenly stopped being out of place. The trail was picked up past the territory, with more slicing marks and occasional feathers being some of the signs. The ground was slightly harder, so the footprints were becoming fainter.

The group encountered several aggressive beasts, but nothing turned into more than a minor scuffle. From the perspective of the group, at least. The beasts who attacked them would probably have different opinions- but they'd already made a final and fatal choice.

The next day, Anton noticed something interesting. It was not of immediate concern, so he waited for Velvet to comment on it. It took some escalating of the signs, but she eventually figured it out. Then again, she couldn't see as far as Anton could so perhaps she picked it up quickly once the information was actually able to reach her eyes. There are more feathers. That was true, but it wasn't the important part. And footprints. I think that means it lives near here?

Anton nodded. That seems likely.

There are a lot though, Velvet frowned. Maybe there's more than just the one.

I can't guarantee it, Anton said, But if not it is very busy.

The trees began to thin out, with more short and squat bushes. The area was still laden with energy, but some change in terrain led to different sorts of plants flourishing. Grass grew above head height, blocking vision, but it also made it easier to track their quarry. They simply followed where the grass was trampled- and sometimes just cut off, depending on the angle of their wings. It was merely a matter of what beast had trampled which grass that they had to contend with.

With his sight blocked, Anton occasionally hopped into the air to get a look at the surroundings. He felt rather silly for it, but he would feel *more* silly if he missed something important for not putting in the effort. A hop didn't leave much time for processing what he saw, but his brain was much quicker at taking in information than before he had become a cultivator. It was crazy to think he'd lived without any of the benefits cultivation provided his *whole*

life. Even just the beginning made so much difference. He still intended to spread cultivation it to as many people as he could, even if they only were able to manage the beginning.

Along with Anton, Velvet also hopped up into the air. That made Anton grin, because it wasn't so much a special technique as a necessity. She could probably just stand on someones shoulders, but he was a bit old to ask that. Instead, he eventually found a decent tree to climb. It was thin, and seemed like it would snap under his weight- but he could tell it had been strengthened just like all of the others and easily held his weight. Velvet climbed up after him, standing on another branch that barely bent under her weight, despite it being only two fingers thick. Do you see them? Anton asked.

Velvet nodded. They have long necks. And they're so reflective

That's just what I expected. I haven't seen any razorwings in person, but the bestiaries described them well. Their wings aren't metal, but they cut like it and shine like it. Quite a bit different from the spiked rollers we fought.

... You fought those things?

Yes. Some big ones, too. We can talk about it later. What do you think of those? he gestured generally.

Umm they're all stopped. Velvet squinted her eyes, concentrating energy in a beginning version of the Hawk Eyes vision technique Anton was teaching her. They're all on eggs?

Anton nodded, Quite right. They're nesting. Many of them. Normally they would be quite territorial, even with each other, but something has changed that.

Do we have to kill them all? Velvet asked.

I don't know if that's necessary. The ants were aggressively multiplying and dangerous. Razorwings aren't likely to move on humans, but they also aren't known to be a part of this area. Anton scratched his chin, Well have to report on them, at least. I wouldn't want to try to take all of them out either way. Though reducing their numbers somewhat is basically inevitable.

What do you mean? Velvet asked.

I doubt they're just coming to say hello, Anton gestured to several disturbances in the grass. The razorwings tended to trample the grass in front of them, but off to the sides their feathers cut into the grass leaving a fairly obvious trail. As magical beasts, I do believe a grounded razorwing should be able to keep pace with the slowest of us, so fleeing isn't exactly an option. Anton turned, You all heard, right? Everyone else nodded, including Elder Tshering. Good, then the five of us should get ready to fight, though I'd

like to try to leave if we can. There are only a few, and if those eggs are any indication they wont miss a few of their numbers.

After moving his arms around to test the space, Anton hopped down from the scraggly tree. It would just get in his way, though the vantage point he provided would have been useful for archery otherwise.

Catarina was looking around, clearly wondering how she might make a proper formation in the area. Initial setup might be easy with the grass, but that also meant it would be easy to destroy on accident. She seemed to give up as the group started to retreat away from the approaching razorwings.

Doesnt seem like theyre going to leave us alone, Hoyt commented. Theyre gaining on us, and I can feel their energy bubbling in anticipation.

Anton shrugged, It was worth a try. At least this way theyll be further from reinforcements. Anton stopped and turned back towards the approaching razorwings, mostly hidden by the grass. Everyone ready? Everyone nodded- and Fuzz gave a growl of acknowledgement.

The process of drawing a bow could be quick or slow. There was rarely any reason to spend any more time than required to aim, because that left strain on the wielders muscles, but Anton needed to gather more energy than normal. It still didnt take longer than the amount of time for a draw hed had as a non-cultivator, but was significantly slower than his possible fastest speed.

His arrow flew straight and true, and he rode the air with it. The arrow pierced through the grass. It was tough in addition to being extraordinarily long but it barely slowed the flight of the arrow. Anton was there with it, guiding it, when it struck the razorwing. He had been aiming for its chest. Hed expected it to dodge if it noticed him, but it didnt. But he also didnt hit its chest. Instead, a wing came forward and parried his arrow, slicing through the grass around its motion. That was the problem with magical beasts. None seemed to have human intelligence, but they could also be quite a bit smarter than normal animals. These even had complex control of their energy, gathering it on their already bladelike feathers.

The battle erupted into motion with that arrow. The grounded razorwings burst through the grass towards the group, reaching them before Anton could shoot more than one or two more arrows. If hed been ready for a deflection on his first shot he might have been able to score a hit instead, but now that they were aware of his own abilities they were too cautious. Hed have to find openings later.

Probably a bad idea to use fire, Hoyt commented to himself as he readied his large axe. He held it in two hands, stepping forward and chopping at one of the approaching razorwings. It moved its wing and energy to intercept his attack. Hoyt had a bit more mass than the creature, a bird of nearly the same height as a human, and was able to

push it to the side. It pecked towards him with its beak as it passed, but it was too far to deal any meaningful damage.

The others were all engaged as well. Timothy took it upon himself to engage two of the creatures, preventing them from running past him. The birds slashed with their wings, but only pecked when they were certain their necks would be safe from a counter. Timothy wasn't able to damage either of them in any meaningful fashion, but his shield protected him while he learned their movements.

Catarina and Anton both danced around one of their own. Anton found that they preferred to rush past, swiping with a wing, which suited him just fine as he fought with a bow and could use the extra space. Catarina slashed with her sword, trying to hit openings while keeping herself safe.

From low to the ground, Fuzz nipped at the heels of whichever bird he found at the moment. He kept himself concealed in the grass as he looked to find ones distracted by others. He was actually able to ambush one of them and bite its leg, but as he pulled to try to throw it to the ground it resisted by virtue of a stronger energy. Fuzz had to pull away as its beak came down towards his head.

As for Velvet she was gone. Even Anton lost track of her in the tall grass until she stabbed into the back of the neck of one of the razorwings with a long dagger. Anton felt her energy a moment before the attack, but the razorwing didn't- or at least felt it too late. The total amount of energy in Velvet's attack wasn't anything amazing, but she condensed her energy into a sharp point and stabbed where her opponent was weak. That was usually the goal with in battle, but it was hard to pull off.

Archery worked similarly, but the advantage it had in range became a disadvantage when it gave your opponent time to react. But Anton hadn't been training just to lose to a bunch of birds- no matter how sharp and swift their wings were. He felt a trail of blood on his shoulder and knew he'd let it get a little too close, but the razorwing that made the attack had continued on, as usual. Anton had an arrow ready and aimed at its back as it moved.

The creature couldn't bend its wing back to reach him, but it had the proper senses to dodge. Right into the *real* attack Anton had prepared. Firing two arrows *actually* at the same time was something new he was testing. It wasn't very good for the most part and would probably not work well against a human in its current form, but he at least tricked a bird. His arrow pierced into a section of the bird's back that had a lower concentration of energy. It wasn't enough to bring it down immediately, but Anton could see the blood pouring over its feathers. Now if only he could find where to sneak in shots from the front, he wouldn't have to let any of them attack him even once.

Chapter 106

As the group of six finished the survey of the forest, it became more obvious that a variety of non-native creatures had moved in, quite recently too. The razorwings who were normally solitary creatures were living close together, almost in communal nests though not quite. Anton had no prior experience with them himself, but he had read how that was only common during or shortly after a group migration. They weren't the only things, but they stood out the most. Anton also thought of the creatures around Helmfrith Rill, far out of their homes. He would mention that once more in their report.

I'm kind of disappointed we didn't find a beast king or something, Hoyt said. Though I suppose we wouldn't have been useful if that was the case.

Anton nodded. We were only able to survey one section of the forest. Doubtless others will have similar findings elsewhere. It could be unrelated to the unexpected coordination, but it is notable nonetheless.

I can't believe there were like a million giant ants living in the forest, Timothy commented. They have no business being that big. And yet they were also hard to hit.

... the mission in Ambati also involved creatures that weren't native to the area, Velvet spoke timidly, I think. The scout thought so, anyway.

Elder Tshering nodded his head. All good information. We noticed quite a bit I wouldn't have thought of just touring by myself. Which was the whole point.

Real combat was useful for experience that could lead to improvements in cultivation. That was something that was known and discussed, but Anton found that comparing experiences with others had at least as much effect. He wasn't suddenly going to shoot from the beginning of the thirteenth star to the fourteenth, but working with Catarina to understand Spiritual Connection helped him. He clearly didn't have the same natural talent in that area as she did, but he was at least able to take advantage of some of her learning. Anton in turn was able to help Hoyt with his studies of Insight.

Catarina also worked with Timothy on Mental Liberation. It was impossible to say when resistance to mental attacks would be useful- just that at some point it would be. The choice to strengthen those particular defenses earlier was merely one of many available options, and all of the seven purifications were connected eventually. Choosing one particular thing early should make little difference in the end.

Velvet was progressing quickly, and given some time would be stepping into Spirit Building. She was a good example of how certain guidance could make a significant difference in cultivation. While the Order freely taught what they could, there was little personal guidance. Just matching people up randomly wouldn't help though. Anton wasn't sure if he was the right person to teach *everyone*, but he felt it was an area he did well.

The change in Velvets cultivation was merely a measurable benefit allowed by the other changes Anton had been observing. She had chosen to trust him, at least enough for him to help her. Dealing with her still wasn't easy, but he didn't feel she was *purposefully* doing anything difficult. She was still somewhat paranoid, and that wasn't going to just go away over a few months. Interestingly enough, her combat style relied on having allies to fight alongside her. She would use concealment techniques so that she was unnoticed before attacking a critical location on a distracted enemy, usually to great effect. While this did result in more pressure on her allies temporarily, a quick defeat made it safer for them in the long run. Besides, she was under no obligation to allow herself to be a target.

The whole way she operated was interesting, if a bit depressing. Anton saw how she fought well with a team, but she never really tried to get along with them. Her only social interactions seemed based around avoiding anyone forming a negative opinion of her. While in theory that was a good thing, it also avoided a positive opinion forming- and eventually a neutral opinion might swing towards negative when her other unsavory traits. When she wanted something, her default thought seemed to be manipulating others instead of asking. That said, she had enough awareness of how people would react that it usually mattered little. Timothy had been an easy person to recruit as a teammate, and the only reason he was unhappy with the situation was because he'd accepted too hastily and been unavailable when his friends requested help. The situation with Hayden had gotten out of her control, but she hadn't repeated anything like that. At the time Anton had been very angry- and then imprisoned. It had basically dropped out of his mind, but recently he'd actually gotten past it, letting go of the unhelpful anger.

It was almost depressing how good she was at stealth techniques. A woman so young shouldn't feel the need to hide from everything. But that same youth was what made her actions forgivable. She wasn't full of plots to steal techniques or overthrow the Order. She just wanted to survive. Anton understood that, though he'd long since passed the point where he considered his own survival important beyond what he could do if he continued living.

Her combat style fit into the team well enough, but it was clear she wasn't *part* of them. With the exception of Fuzz, nobody was actively social with her. Fuzz was quick to accept her, and in turn she seemed quite fond of him. Probably because there was nothing he could want from her beyond simple scratching behind his ears.

There was no intention on Anton's part to force her to fit into their group, but he *did* want her to be progressing in a better direction. Cultivation hardly mattered in that equation except for her own desires to control her life. Maybe cultivation would lead to her being content with life, but not without help. Anton couldn't say he was the best at solving problems, especially where it involved young women. Janina was mainly responsible for troubles with their daughters and granddaughters, but Anton couldn't just ignore the poor kid. What was the point of teaching everyone to cultivate if it merely made them live long, productive, and miserable lives. The people mattered too.

With the completion of another mission, Anton considered how best to spend his contribution points. He *could* just exchange them for money. He still needed it to free people, after all. He knew that was a foolish idea, though. While cultivators were capable of functioning in combat by relying on their own energy, proper equipment and enchanted items were still useful.

He could think about everything on his own, or he could just ask. He was glad he chose the latter, because Elder Evan was quite willing to offer him advice. Your bow is still holding up, right? Anton nodded, Good, I thought so. With proper maintenance it should be usable until at least mid spirit building. Eventually you will find it insufficient for your needs, but the nightwood and black steel bow you have now makes the most of the materials. Now, if you don't mind my asking, how many contribution points do you have available?

About five thousand. Anton had more than that, but he wanted to keep some in reserve. He'd been earning contribution points for several months since his return, and his cultivation level allowed him to do much more than before. The recent mission had been worth almost a thousand as well. He didn't feel it matched up to saving a village, but then again it required a great bit more cultivation strength and more time.

Evan took stock of Anton. Bow, defensive undershirt you practice Spirit Arrows so an expensive quiver is of little use. As he talked, he was leading Anton through the turning corridors of the equipment hall. Here we are, Evan gestured towards a door with 1000, indicating the price items inside started at. We can get you several things from here. Evan stepped inside, reaching onto the shelves and tossing a pair of gloves towards Anton. My first recommendation. Archery gloves. I know your skin is tempered so you don't need any mundane version, but these are different. Specially enchanted to be used by archers. Well, any who need to quickly channel energy around their hands. Put them on and try creating an arrow.

They fit snugly- even though he was quite certain they hadn't been the right size when he first saw them. The gloves covered every finger without being restrictive like he might expect. The cloth wasn't *quite* the lightness of diamond silk, but the material was breathable and felt durable. His first arrow felt sluggish, as the material altered the flow of his energy.

It will show its worth in practice. Come outside with me, Evan gestured.

Once more Anton found himself at the attached practice area. His first shot still felt wrong, the arrow flying slowly. However, with each subsequent shot he noticed an improvement. It wasn't the gloves getting used to his energy, but instead the other way around. The gloves drew energy from all around his hands for whatever he was doing. Anton was used to just using the three fingers that would be holding a spirit arrow to form it, but drawing the energy from around his entire hand allowed for every meridian

on his limb to be involved. That certainly increased the potential output, but he wasn't sure if he preferred it. He was willing to admit it was something he might try training on his own, but the gloves seemed unnecessary. However, after a few dozen shots he noticed how it amplified his shots just slightly even when he was using his typical method. It wasn't possible for it to just get energy from nothing, but an increased efficiency was useful. He should have trusted that Evan knew what he was doing.

Without even asking if Anton wanted the gloves, Evan brought him back inside to try out several other things. He quickly discovered Anton didn't like anything that reshaped his energy. Anton ended up with a second pair of gloves that simply helped condense energy moving through it for his arrows. Anton also ended up with bracers durable enough to deflect early Spirit Building attacks with proper technique, boots that maintained traction on any surface, and goggles that could enhance his vision even more. The goggles were a bit inconvenient if he was dealing with anything up close, but he could see fine details from afar without giving up the benefit of both eyes, unlike a spyglass. They also didn't require use of his hands, which was important. There were still limits to how far he could shoot even if he could see, but he was learning to expand his range.

He had never been much for shopping, but Anton did like practical tools. He felt good after what he got- and he had plenty of contribution points he could convert into currency. He'd need that soon but first he had to return to a few places in Graotan.

Chapter 107

When he had first joined the Order, home had seemed so far away for Timothy. It was almost half the country, even if it was the *short* half. Yet now he could return home in just a few days. There were no specific obligations on his time, though through Anton's encouragement he worked to earn contribution points, cultivating as he did so. It was hard to believe how much his life had changed and how much it hadn't.

He was so much stronger now. Not just his body, but the use of energy added so much more. He could choose to do almost anything now that he was in Spirit Building- though proper practice of a profession or craft would still require dedication of time.

Yet there was so much more, a world beyond anything he had imagined. It wasn't *secret*, but information about cultivators wasn't that widely known. Maybe that was for the best, since they were so much stronger than normal people. On the other hand, Timothy liked Anton's idea. Everyone could cultivate at least a little bit, and it could do so much for them.

His father had only completed two stars of Body Tempering, but he was now able to find time to do other work besides woodcutting. There was only so much wood that Carran needed, and the area of woods he managed had a limit to how much he could reasonably cut. Most of his extra labor might have gone into helping on the Riley farm at one point, but they were now more capable of managing it all on their own, even with

some small expansions. It was comforting knowing that his father and Catarinas family could do more than just *get by*.

Six people ate together around a table that barely fit all of them. Even if productivity increased, it had been less than a year. A larger table wasnt the most important thing on the list for the Rileys, since there were only two of them and often Timothys father. They also had no way to predict when three extra people would be in town.

Catarina mentioned that you freed dozens from slavery in Ofrurg, Jasper said between bites of a hearty stew full of vegetables and chicken. Its amazing to hear about.

There are so many more slaves, even among those I knew, but Anton allowed himself to smile, We were able to do some real good. Im not even close to done yet. Maybe I never will be, but I think I can live with that, as long as I make progress.

Timothy knew that was hard for Anton to say, but he clearly meant it. The kind old man felt it was his responsibility to do whatever he could now that he had power. I should have been there, Timothy said. I could have helped too.

You will though, right? Catarina reminded him. Were going back.

Yes, Timothy said, mostly to himself. Ill be coming with you. I made sure to have no other commitments.

Well be glad to have you, Anton said as he finished his stew. If all goes well, we wont need to fight but having another Spirit Building person around will be useful for negotiations regardless. Anton turned to the three parents, Your children wont say it, but theyre among the fastest progressing cultivators in this generation.

We knew they were talented from the very beginning, Flora smiled widely. Just a couple years ago they started cultivating, and it seemed like they were immediately off to the Order to join.

Timothy didnt bring up how he was almost a full month behind Catarina- barely reaching the third star in time to take that months test. Then hed failed the first time. It had been a sore moment, but Anton had talked to him about it. How he made mistakes when he was nervous and how in the end it just meant he had to try again. Timothy didnt feel like he was worthwhile all the time- especially after not being around to help with the previous journey- but he supposed that didnt matter as long as he could help those he cared about.

Jasper Riley continued the conversation, Now the three of us are cultivators. Certainly not the fastest growing, but its changed so much. Our neighbors have been asking about it. We tried to teach them, but we dont quite have the same ability.

Flora nodded, We didnt want to cause any harm, so we were cautious. We had your notes, but they were mostly tailored to *our* struggles.

I can provide a bit more in the way of general notes, Anton said. It might not help some people past the first star or two, but there are big benefits to be obtained with just that. Well also be around for a couple weeks, so I can teach you myself. I have the feeling the two of you can reach at least the third star. You could even join the Order! Anton grinned. Not that you need to. You have a good life here.

Were quite content, Jasper admitted. I believe we plan to remain a part of this community even if we achieve the third star.

Good, Anton responded. Im glad. I think what Graotan needs is more cultivators just living. There are certainly worthwhile benefits to joining the Order, but living a comfortable life is just fine. Now, did somebody mention pie?

Timothy grinned. It was best for cultivators to eat a healthy balance of food, but occasional indulgences werent a problem.

Anton left behind several copies of the Ninety-Nine Stars as well as his notes for cultivating at Body Tempering. That should be more than enough for everyone for at least a decade. Most would find themselves unable to advance more than the first few stars with the standard amount of natural energy in the environment, even with guidance. If anyone reached the end of Body Tempering they would be best served by joining the Order- probably long before that point. If they wanted, they could still return to live in Carran, though few disciples lived outside the Orders ground where it was easier to cultivate.

Flora was a bit ahead of Jasper and Kellan. Anton wondered if there was some sort of inherited trait for cultivation. If so, was it merely the determination to work hard and push through difficulties, or something else? The Order knew that children of cultivators were more likely to succeed at cultivation themselves, but he didnt know if that was any different than the son of a blacksmith going on to become a blacksmith himself. Being raised around something came with familiarity and comfort. Anton had no interest in debating the specifics. Instead, he just let himself be happy at the progress. He would have liked to stay for longer, but he wanted to get back to Windrip, and his plans with Kohar Tolvaj wouldnt wait forever. He was already doing his best to resist rushing back to Ofrurg.

It was clear that Windrip was the center of something amazing. Specifically, the dozens of former slaves that Anton had set up were constantly expanding. With a couple seasons of growth they were quite able to support themselves without any further help

from Anton. In fact, they offered to try to pay him back. James was one of the first freed, and he held out a bag to Anton. Please. Take it. Its not much, but you can use it to help free more people.

It took a moment of consideration on Anton's part. However, his training of Voice allowed him to express what he wanted with sufficient clarity. I will not be taking your money. I fully understand your desire to pay me back, and to free others from slavery. However, that money can do more good here. If it is not needed for construction of further buildings-

We can take care of that ourselves, James assured him.

-then use it to help people, in whatever way you can. Windrip must have those who need aid. If not, then Stregate. Money might not be what they actually need, but that lets you pay for food, shelter, or to take the time to provide those yourselves. Anton kept his back straight as he spoke, projecting his voice to all of those around. There are no slaves in Graotan, but not all are prosperous. I will remind you not to keep the benefits of cultivation to yourselves. Teach others freely, as they remain in good standing with the community. Those with little talent can improve their lives, and those with undiscovered affinity for cultivation can benefit more. Anton made sure to emphasize teaching those in good standing. Troublemakers would be the first to try to learn something to increase their personal strength, but for the community to be safe the rest had to have a base level of cultivation.

Every town and city already had ways to manage those who were somewhat stronger or more dangerous. A strong man with a knife could be a menace to any common person. Anton understood that giving them the chance to become stronger allowed for more potential danger- but those who would handle them could also become stronger. Anton wasn't sure if there was a way to fairly choose who could and couldn't be taught to cultivate in the end. Some of those who displayed good attitudes would go bad, and some of those not well thought of could do great good if given the chance.

You don't need to be guards for Windrip or Stregate, Anton said. If anyone is interested in that profession you can encourage them, but it is better if your group specifically isn't relied on. If even a tenth of the population becomes first star cultivators and are willing to act to keep society functioning, a strong fourth or fifth star cultivator won't be able to do much. They might kill people, but so could that same madman with a knife. Society functioned so well because most people weren't going to kill others. Deaths were more common among cultivators, but that had more to do with their common role as what were effectively wandering mercenaries rather than the fact that they cultivated energy.

After convincing James, Steven, and all of the others to use their money to pay forward his actions, Anton finished checking up on the rest of them. Anton was pleased that the little community he had founded attached to Windrip was doing well. They were quite determined to work together and improve themselves through cultivation, and while they

certainly weren't wealthy they were many times better than slaves if for no other reason than they could make their own choices. Meaningful ones, even.

Anton smiled to himself, thinking about what might happen if he freed every slave in Ofrurg. Utter chaos, probably. That was far outside of the scope of his current capabilities, but the idea stuck in his mind. A nice thought for what his goals might be after the next few years.

Chapter 108

There was a strange thing among cultivators both young and old where they might hardly feel the passage of time. The last several months were only a tiny portion of Antons life, but he found that the same feeling of it passing by quickly didn't apply to just him. It wasn't to the extreme of closed door cultivation where people hid themselves from the world for months, years, or even decades at the extreme in a single span of cultivation, but repeating similar actions and cultivating while doing so accelerated the feeling of time.

Catarina, Timothy, Hoyt, and of course Fuzz were going to accompany Anton on his journey. He had asked them long before, and he would have had a harder time keeping them away than bringing them along. Even if the plan wouldn't necessarily result in the sort of journey that was the most beneficial in cultivation, all of them were willing to lend their strength to his cause.

A slight surprise came when Velvet came to Antons door. Before he could even say hello, she was talking. Im coming with you. Velvet seemed to notice how improper her tone was, and repeated herself in a different manner. I mean I would like to come with you, if I may.

I only plan to be gone several months, at most, Anton explained. You should be able to step into Spirit Building shortly, and even complete the eleventh star without further guidance.

I know, Velvet said, But that's not why. I mean, it's not the only reason. You need help, right? You could use more allies, and as you said Im very close to Spirit Building. Or am I not good enough to help?

Anton smiled. She needed the warm feelings, even if he was internally worried. If you want to come along, I certainly won't reject you. I don't know what I might expect. Hopefully, it will be boring.

I doubt that, Velvet commented.

You never know. Ive been known to get wrapped up in decades of boringness.

Velvet shook her head. You're going into Ofrurg. Nothing is that simple. You'll definitely have to free some people through extralegal means. I'm the sneakiest person you know! I think.

Hopefully we won't need to do any of that, Anton said. But I'd be a fool to refuse your offer. You have some talents the rest of us are lacking. Anton had to admit he was somewhat stealthy himself, but there was a big difference between avoiding the notice of guards or distant animals compared to cultivators actively looking for you. Velvet had a chance against the latter- and a good one, since if he was the same cultivation Anton wasn't sure if he could so easily pick her out.

Great. So I'll go get ready.

I know you overheard, but don't forget a tent. You might not technically need one, but it makes a big difference.

Velvet sheepishly waved goodbye, Anton closing the door behind her.

He hadn't asked her along because he didn't want her to feel obligated. While she might owe him for aiding her cultivation, he also didn't want to force someone into danger. There were other ways she could repay him, and Anton didn't do what he did just to get favors from others. With her being the one to make the choice, she would hopefully be more reliable.

Travel to the Graotan-Ofrurg border was quick and painless. They ran into no trouble along the way, and Anton was pleased to see that Helmfrith Rill was getting along quite well. He was fond of the little town, unimportant as it was overall.

The border itself was still manned by early Essence Collection cultivators, three on each side. Despite being an entire tier below them, Anton found himself somewhat heartened by their presence. Ofrurg and Graotan were not on good terms, and the guards on either side were a show of military might. They only represented a small portion of the total forces of either side, but the point was that Anton was no longer so insignificant compared to them. He might not match them this year or the next, but he'd crossed the critical threshold of Spirit Building and still found himself progressing at a reasonable speed.

There was also something else. While the Ofrurg side matched the Graotan side, Anton knew that the internal politics of Ofrurg weren't so stable. He was better armed this time to achieve his goals, though freeing many slaves would still make him unpopular. That being said, those who managed slaves were generally no stronger than Spirit Building. Most slaves weren't allowed to cultivate, and thus their total value was limited- not worthwhile for the strongest cultivators to personally handle. That and his preparations and allies gave Anton confidence.

The previous time they had crossed the border, it had been over quickly. Anton noticed that more care was taken on his current crossing, though the fact that the Ofrurg side also more carefully checked them indicated it was nothing to be concerned about. A group of four- nearly five- Spirit Building cultivators was something to take note of. That also meant more eyes would be on them, but Anton had already confirmed the trouble they had caused already was forgotten and nobody was looking for them in specific. They just had to be careful not to cause the wrong sort of trouble.

It was actually somewhat comforting to feel the eyes of the cultivators from Graotan follow them until they were far past the Ofrurg side of the border. He wasn't just a newbie disciple anymore though he recognized how far he still had to go.

Veron was exactly as it had been the last time he came through. There were still far too many slaves working on farms outside the city, and Anton knew he could do nothing about it. At best he could save a few. Individual slave owners might not be as significant of a threat as they once were, but trying to upset the whole institution would be suicide.

The first order of business was to get in contact with Kohar Tolvaj. The Red Willow Inn was helpfully painted the same color, and Anton was able to spot it as soon as they turned onto the right street. It was possible she wasn't yet there- this was the earliest date she had said she would be around, but two people precisely meeting up across different countries might take some coordination.

The Red Willow Inn looked quite comfortable, but not extravagant. If Anton cared to, he could pay for more luxurious places for quite some time. For the equivalent of several weeks labor, he could spend a night somewhere with a proper energy gathering formation for cultivation. A waste of money. He was eager to grow stronger, but that didn't mean he should be inefficient with his money. Perhaps if he was close to a breakthrough he would consider it, but for the most part he was fine with just a dry roof over his head and palatable food. He didn't become a cultivator for luxury.

He walked up to the front desk. Is there a Kohar Tolvaj here? he asked. She should be expecting me. Anton didn't know what her energy signature would be like, but it wouldn't have mattered because one thing The Red Willow Inn *did* have was some privacy formations. He wouldn't be able to casually sense the energy of anyone staying inside.

One moment, the man said as he reached for a drawer in the desk he was standing behind. Your name?

Anton Krantz.

Oh yes, she was indeed expecting you and your companions. Follow me. The man led them up to the third floor, only briefly glancing at Fuzz, where he knocked on a door. Honored guest, Anton Krantz has arrived.

A short few moments later, a woman beginning to show her age opened the door. She should still be younger than Anton, though it might not be by that much since she was at the peak of Body Tempering. She could have gotten a late start like Anton, but he doubted it. With no barriers between them, their energies passively met. Anton didn't know what he was expecting, but she knew he was a member of the Order. Good timing. I have been here less than half the day. Come in.

Velvet was the last one in and closed the door behind her. By that point, Catarina was already shuffling about the room curiously. Various thinking noises came out of her as she poked her head behind furniture. Not too bad. They have decent privacy formations. I don't see any significant issues. She did slightly push a table when she thought nobody was looking, but other than that she left things where they were.

A formation master, are you? the brown skinned woman asked.

Not a master, Catarina said. Not yet.

Modesty suits you, Kohar smiled, But I've seen those with less ability claim the title.

I haven't even done anything, Catarina said.

You looked over the whole formation in a minute. That's certainly an indication of your skill. And your cultivation and age are similarly impressive. Kohar turned to Anton. On that note, I do believe your letter said you were at the twelfth star, but if I'm not incorrect you seem to be at the thirteenth.

I was, Anton said, And I am. I wasn't sure how well it would go.

I could have told you, Hoyt said. I knew you'd make it.

It's not that I have no confidence in my abilities, Anton said, But we could have left early. Besides, a month or two he shrugged. Could have been off by that much.

Congratulations on your advancement, then. I assume you have brought what I need?

Anton nodded, A full list. As much as it can be. As for the price...

I just need something to get started, Kohar said. Anything I do will require money to grease the wheels, along with legitimate fees. I can't guarantee this will cost less than buying their freedom, but it will alter what hands the money ends up in.

I understand, Anton confirmed. I'm more interested in setting the precedent.

This isn't going to make you many friends, Kohar warned.

I doubt it will be better for you, Anton countered.

I have methods to stay safe.

Doing this publicly should actually help, Anton said. The Order wouldn't just stand by if something happened to us. He'd gotten confirmation of that, at least. Nobody would be able to provide any excuses if something happened to them when they were following proper legal rules. Anton simply hadn't known all the laws.

Kohar did. From what she had explained, it was important for slavers to keep documents. It was at least *supposed* to be a legitimate practice. Among those documents were enslavement history and reason for enslavement. While getting anyone to show those documents would be work, none of the citizens of Dungannon could have been legally enslaved. While the Iron Ring Slavers might get away with just financial penalties for their carelessness, Anton much preferred that method to paying for people. Kohar had also assured him that once it was proven the slaves weren't legally owned, that would extend to later owners and they could thus track them down where otherwise they had to rely on information brokers. Even if they were reliable, they might have incomplete information.

The process wouldn't be quick. Kohar expected it to take months- but that would still be faster than tracking down every person individually, and likely safer. Anton and the others wouldn't just be waiting around though. Some things could be expedited. They also had other things to speak about with the Ears of the Fox. Anton didn't expect that everything would turn out pleasantly, but they would do what they could.

Chapter 109

With his experience of over one hundred years, Anton could confidently say that legal proceedings were the most boring thing in the world. There had been only slight bits of interest buried in the time leading up to it where he was introduced to the workings of the law. Seeing how it could be used to their advantage was interesting, but he doubted that he would enjoy in depth studies of the laws of a place that allowed slavery. Requiring the law to spell out every little detail was an exercise in frustration. Unfortunately, it was entirely necessary for the sorts of people who weren't willing to follow basic principles of not harming others. Anton could see that details were necessary where there were misunderstandings, but too many people tried to do whatever they could get away with and not what was *right*.

Consulting about legal matters with Kohar resulted in an understanding that while the law was supposed to be fair and just, it was always slightly less perfect than those who created it. It was also woefully insufficient for dealing with certain matters. While it was completely obvious that the Iron Ring Slavers willfully accepted slaves from illegal sources, they would only be punished for the relatively small fraction that people could prove. Such punishments were little more than a slap on the wrist, though much of that had to do with connections and influence on the court system.

Power was really what it came down to in the end. Laws that dealt with cultivators were only enforceable when other cultivators chose to do so. Ofrurg as a whole condoned slavery, and thus was only minimally interested in enforcing proper practices where it didnt concern their own citizens. Even if the lawsuit went flawlessly, the Iron Ring Slavers would survive, and they and others would just put more work into not getting caught. They would only stop if it cost more than they expected to make.

But just because the Iron Ring Slavers wouldnt be crippled didnt mean it wouldnt be worth the time, effort, and expense. It would still be *some* amount of damage to them, and it might encourage others to come forward with similar cases. It was also a statement that their practices wouldnt be accepted. One step. But inside the court certainly was *dull*.

Stepping outside at the end of the day, Anton allowed himself to sigh. Thank you, everyone, for supporting me in this matter.

Hoyt looked qually deflated, The worst part is we cant even cultivate. Gotta keep out energy on lockdown.

Its kind of like mental training, Timothy pointed out, But I still hate it.

The flow of energy in the courtroom is subpar, Catarina commented, It almost seems designed for misery, but its too random.

I just want to crawl into a corner Velvet said.

Kohar looked slightly better than the rest, but still tired. I just want to remind you all that great strides have been made. Your presence is helpful, even if you rarely are called upon to speak. I hate to say it, but this has been one of the more expedient cases Ive worked on.

Anton shook his head, Yet it has still taken more than a month. This task takes great fortitude. I appreciate your work as well, Kohar.

The various reports from the Ears of the Fox hadnt been cheap, but Anton found their contents quite worthwhile. The unfortunate problem was that they provided no solutions on their own. He was confident enough in his current strength to at least acquire the information on Van Hassel and Slusser.

The good news was that they appeared to have little talent for cultivation. Various sightings indicated that their cultivators were still lingering in mid Spirit Building. Still uncomfortably strong for Anton, but he felt he should be able to catch up to them.

Recent activities included traveling to various countries around Ofrurg, and the reports were able to tie more raiding and slaving to them with decent certainty. Nothing quite so extreme as what had happened in Graotan with entire villages being destroyed, but the continued destruction bothered Anton.

Their activities were known, but they hadn't yet been stopped. They didn't cause trouble in Ofrurg, but even so merely having a formation master shouldn't have been enough to keep them safe as they caused trouble outside of Ofrurg. There were signs of interference by a more powerful group. That was the Heavenly Lion Sect, from which Maximillian Van Hassel had technically been expelled.

Yet he was the son of an elder, and was clearly still receiving *some* support. That made things more complicated, because while there were no official ties, it would still be difficult to find and kill him. There weren't alternatives to that. Not that Anton was willing to accept. It was merely about how long it would take him to be strong enough to do so.

He was fairly confident that he and the four other members of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars could take two mid Spirit Building cultivators in a straight battle. If they managed to ambush them, he thought they might even avoid any heavy injuries on their side. Yet thoughts like that ignored the likelihood they would have additional men with them. Even if those men were mostly still in Body Tempering, that would shift the odds. That also discounted the possibility of a hidden guardian of some sort.

Making any sort of attempt on his life within the borders of Ofrurg was probably a terrible idea. The Heavenly Lion Sect was a powerful sect with dozens of Essence Collection cultivators, including Maximillian's father. Even if most of the sect truly rejected him, the additional power there wasn't something Anton could deal with even counting his allies.

The only option was to catch them outside Ofrurg, preferably somewhere sympathetic to the Order and Graotan. It would be safest if he could work with another sect. He wouldn't even mind just providing them with sufficient information to hunt him down, though if possible he wanted to be there in person to see him die. He'd seen portraits of the man, and only his training in Emotion kept him from tearing them up. That would be unhelpful. Even if he remembered the face, having something he could show others would be useful.

The other pieces of information the Ears of the Fox had for him were about Devon and Annelise. Overall he found that it was good news, but he couldn't say it made him happy.

Devon continued to grow in cultivation, though his cultivation still seemed to be mid to late Body Tempering. It was presumed that was due to a lack of proper training and an inadequate cultivation technique. His talent seemed to be middling, not poor but not truly noteworthy. He was still kept to fight at the Potenza Arena in Khonard. He was alive, and hadn't been put into any fights where he was seriously injured. Perhaps that

was simply good management of resources, but Anton thought at least some of it was because of the pressure Elder Varela of the Grasping Willows had helped apply. From what he'd learned, if slaves were allowed to cultivate they usually were placed into harder and harder matches until they broke, for the sake of an entertaining journey for the crowds to watch. Another practice of Ofurg he despised. Anton understood appreciating watching a good battle, but cultivators could fight without bloodshed and death.

Annelise was now in her early teenage years. The news about her was encouraging, but also problematic. She had been purchased by the Frostmirror Sect as a slave. Now she was free, but a member of the sect. It was entirely possible it would be more difficult for her to leave them than if she was a slave. They wouldn't want to let her go, especially with what Anton learned about her progress. She was only in late Body Tempering, but besides that being a good result for less than two years of cultivation there were other factors. Age was generally important in cultivation. Too young and the body wasn't developed enough to cultivate at full potential safely. Too old, and the body also couldn't handle it. She was making impressive strides with those circumstances.

Anton knew he was far on the other end. His old body had still been healthy enough to have a chance when he first began cultivating. Cultivating without thought of whether or not it would kill him allowed him to push past the beginning stages where the burden on his body lightened. If he'd been a little less healthy or insufficiently determined, he might have died or failed to achieve even the first star. Now his body was rejuvenated to merely an advanced age and he had to immerse himself in gathering insights from every available opportunity to continue advancing. He knew even that wouldn't be enough if he wasn't suited for energy cultivation, but he was fortunate in that regard.

He wanted to meet Annelise, but it wouldn't be simple to contact her. Just approaching and asking the sect had a small chance of his message being delivered, but if she believed him to be dead she might think he was an impostor. If he tried and was rejected, future attempts to meet her would be stymied. If he could manage to see her in person, she would absolutely recognize him. The only question was how to arrange for that to happen. He was still looking into it, but there were various events she might get involved with. Cultivators liked competing against each other in contests of all sorts, though so far Anton had not been involved with any. He was too old to participate in many, even if he had only just begun cultivating recently.

Plans were already underway to retrieve Devon. He would prefer to do it without further conflict with the Potenza family, mostly so they couldn't retaliate against Devon, but he would have to go in person. Annelise would have to wait. Other family he would find those he could. It already felt like it had been an eternity, but now he felt capable of finishing the mission he had set for himself.

Chapter 110

Nothing was as easy as it should be. The Iron Ring Slavers tried every trick in the book and even wrote some new ones to hide their crimes. Kohar was determined not only to win, but to do so resoundingly. She couldn't do it all on her own, but she didn't have to. Having four Spirit Building cultivators around just providing their presence was beneficial by providing a greater sense of legitimacy to her case- and the fact that they were from the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars meant they couldn't be completely ignored. It also meant that if Kohar was to mysteriously disappear things couldn't just be brushed under the rug, though she had taken steps to prevent that regardless. When by the end of the first month the four Spirit Building cultivators became five, Kohar found herself somewhat jealous. Was stepping into Spirit Building so easy? Perhaps she might ask for advice, but she had business to finish first.

The Iron Ring Slavers did their best to drag their feet, trying to stall or entirely prevent having to produce the required documents. They attempted to claim that some of the people hadn't ever been sold to them. Kohar was certain they bribed some people to push back against the lawsuit. She received a threatening letter which intended to consume itself after she read it, possibly explosively. Catarina spotted that and disabled it by slicing just a single line in the paper, which left them with a useful piece of evidence- though tracing it to the Iron Ring Slavers in a sense of legal proof might be difficult.

Everything that needed to be done was far too much work for one person, but Kohar didn't have to work alone. Anton Krantz had been part of the village of Dungannon and was willing to throw *large* amounts of money her way. Kohar took her proper payment for her time, but even that part of it mostly went to the same place as the rest- hiring additional hands. When they finally received documents, there were far too many for even a peak Body Tempering cultivator to read over in a reasonable amount of time. Most of them were unrelated to the case or clearly falsified documents. It was frustrating that it took what was basically bribes to get proper sanctions against them and require them to produce the original documents, but at least the money was available.

There wasn't just work to do in Veron, because she needed to notify every person who had bought one of them. They were basically threats disguised as legal missives, informing them that any further harm to befall any of the former villagers of Dungannon would be prosecuted to the fullest extent. It wasn't possible to punish them for previous actions as slave owners could do almost whatever they wished with a slave and they could, possibly legitimately, claim that they bought the slaves in good faith that everything was proper and legal. Preventing any further harm even before the end of the legal action was critical.

As time passed it became more clear to Kohar that they would be successful, at least at the surface level. Those who still lived would be freed. The Iron Ring Slavers would be forced to refund the sale price for all of them. The slave owners might complain about that, but Kohar had already prepared to deal with them claiming increases in value. Honestly she was ambivalent about whatever resulted from individual events of that sort, because whether the Iron Ring Slavers or the slave owners had the money it still

supported the cause of slavery. What she was really pushing for was further penalties to the Iron Ring Slavers in the form of fines and restrictions, plus recompense for those who had been unlawfully enslaved. The latter of those was unfortunately not always required, but since it was *basically* intended to assuage cultivators if something happened to someone they knew there was actually a good chance to get some amount of payment- though ironically not nearly as much as the sale price of a slave.

The four younger cultivators displayed clear potential and the promise of later difficulty if things didn't go their way, but Kohar personally found herself more concerned about Anton. Well, not actually concerned- none of his ire was directed towards her. Instead, it came out in his every movement as he stood in the courtroom. His face was calm, his back straight, and his heart murderous. Yet he was in complete control of his emotions, never reacting to provocations in anger.

Nobody was allowed to use their cultivation to suppress others in the courtroom. That was the law, but what it *practically* meant was that nobody was allowed to attack people or put physical pressure on them. Once Anton had seen what others got away with he consulted Kohar, and then he began openly impressing those strong emotions upon people. It was occasionally enough to make the lawyers from the Iron Ring Slavers choke on their words or stumble and admit to certain sorts of wrongdoing. Every little bit helped the cause.

Dozens of papers sat on a table in front of Anton. It disturbed him that the lives of people were reduced to just ink and paper, but that was the current state of Ofrurg.

One pile were those who had not survived. Illness, accident, or foul tempered masters were the main causes. One had been killed by wild beasts while working on a farm that generally took decent care of its slaves. Another pile was those who were missing. Several were said to have escaped. Others were bought by roaming cultivators who were unable to be contacted. Some seemingly hadn't ever been registered at the Iron Ring Slavers.

Anton didn't intend to take every declaration at face value- owners might have decided that the slave was worth more to them than a refund for whatever reason. He doubted many would do that- they could receive payment as if the slave was new and in good condition- but some people were very attached to certain slaves or just stubborn and unwilling to give up something that was *theirs*.

He would be taking advantage of his friends and allies to move throughout the country and help retrieve those who had been freed. Some would not be in any condition to travel, nor would they necessarily have the resources. In the worst case, as lone foreigners they might find themselves right back in slavery with fewer tracks to follow.

So many friends and family reduced to pieces of paper, though Anton had to admit the majority were merely acquaintances. He might have fond memories of them, but his closest friends had been older. Even the ones decades younger than himself weren't slave material. As for family none of his children were alive. None of them were young. Even some of his grandchildren and their spouses had been older than people liked as slaves. Half had died in the attack on Dungannon, and he now only had six who survived and had known locations. Every individual who had not was another reason to kill Maximillian Van Hassel and possibly everyone connected to him if he was able. After everyone was as safe as they could be.

Anton's great-grandchildren started with Annelie, at least if he were counting those from Dungannon. He might have others elsewhere in Graotan, but he was confident they would have at least decent lives there. In the decade since Annelie had been born, he had ten more great grandchildren. All of them had been sold to various training facilities, and while they were alive two years of that at such a young age would certainly have been disastrous for their mental development.

The furniture in the room was trembling. Anton's control of energy was better than to accidentally destroy things, but he realized he wasn't fully controlled. He breathed out slowly, feeling the way his energy flowed out of him and affected the room. He wasn't naturally talented in that area. Sensing energy in the form of armor or an attack or in large concentrations was simple enough, but the *flow* of things was more obtuse to his senses. He was now taking the opportunity to train that sense. For the fourteenth star, he was training Spiritual Connection with the guidance of Catarina. Her natural talent had let her assist others who had similar leanings, like Pete, but only when she properly trained that sense in Spirit Building was she able to help others.

His energy circulated through his meridians, through his body, and a small part through the room. He brushed against the edges of the room and the formation Catarina had set up. While the inn they were staying at *should* be secure, being more certain of that wouldn't hurt. She couldn't carve into the walls and just shuffling furniture around wasn't sufficient, but she had purchased some formation flags and wardstone. They allowed quickly setting up formations and even keeping them more stable, though they weren't as good as anything permanent. With Catarina's talent, she would get more out of modifying the surrounding terrain in a specific area, but that could take hours to have a better effect. The reason she didn't purchase them before was that each set cost more than a thousand contribution points, and a larger formation could require all of them. The price wasn't actually excessive- both formation flags and wardstones needed to be made out of special materials that could withstand the flow of large amounts of energy. Those who constructed them were rare, even among cultivators.

The papers were left where they were, to be properly distributed in the morning. Looking at them longer wouldn't help, and Anton wanted to cultivate. Carefully, because he first needed to determine if his current mental state would poison his cultivation or allow him to push forward. He didn't want to settle for short term gains when he needed to reach the very peak or at least whatever he could manage. While Body Tempering and the

early part of Spirit Building had progressed far more smoothly than they should have at his age, it was inevitable that he would come across some sort of roadblock sooner or later. Whether he could surpass it or not was a different question.