

Elder Cultivator

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Finding Timothy wasn't difficult. They were neighbors, after all. Timothy wasn't in his courtyard, but that actually made it easier. He was running around their little complex, so Anton merely stepped out of his door to see him as he passed by. Timothy, Anton smiled and held up a hand to ask him to wait.

Timothy stopped, but continued to run in place to keep his heart rate up. Yes sir? What do you need?

Was sir better than senior? Anton wasn't sure. But that didn't matter. Catarina and I are going on a journey soon. I would like to request your presence.

Timothy's face fell. When is soon?

As soon as possible, actually. I'd prefer not to delay.

Timothy scrunched up his forehead in thought. I'd really like to but Anton waited for him to say what he wanted. I already promised to help someone with a mission. We leave in a week, and the mission might take several more. I already promised to help... Timothy looked quite disappointed.

I understand. It is good to keep your word. Anton tried not to let his disappointment show. It was foolish for him to assume that Timothy would have no other engagements. Just because he himself barely knew anyone didn't mean that others wouldn't be busy. That *did* mean the one he thought was a guarantee was actually out. I hope your mission goes well for you.

Can you wait? Timothy asked. I know a month can be a long time, but I'd really like to help.

Could it wait? It could perhaps. But if he waited a month, it might never happen. He could wait a month then what would another month to breakthrough be? Then he might as well try to get to the tenth star. Another few months, and half a year would go by. The first few months of his cultivation he had no chance of doing anything, but *now*

he could at least determine the full extent of what he was up against and perhaps save a few people. He wasn't going to foolishly think he could challenge a Spirit Building cultivator or two at his current cultivation, but he had leads on weaker individuals. It is best to not delay so long, Anton said. It won't be easy to meet up with us, so I wouldn't recommend it. I have no idea where exactly we'll be.

Alright, Timothy nodded, clearly still disappointed. Sorry. He waved and continued running laps around the area.

Antons skin draped loosely around his frame. There was a time his arms had been thick with muscle, and though he was regaining some of that size his skin would still be oversized and wrinkly. However, he was able to change that a little bit. Intentionally tightening up his skin required quite a bit of natural energy, and while not normally a necessary part of the refinement process Anton knew it was necessary for himself. Reforging his body was difficult and sometimes painful, but also quite exhilarating. There was so much more he could do now, with or without energy involved.

He was still harvesting northern creeper. The thorny plant required him to make the most of his manual dexterity as well as his energy control. They couldnt just break off all of the thorns, since those were involved with the absorption of natural energy and thus the growth of the plants. Even slightly pruned plants showed significant decreases in growth. Elder Howland had shown everyone the difference. So while people might complain, it was only the normal sort of bantery way it was done.

Hoyt was working with the plants as well. That was why Anton had made sure to come for the day instead of leaving as soon as possible. He knew he should make some more acquaintances, but it was too late to meet anyone new at this exact moment. Hoyt. Are you free in the coming weeks?

Hoyt nodded, I have nothing in particular. What do you need?

Well, I am about to set off on a mission and could use another companion.

Great, Hoyt said quickly. Id be glad to go with you.

Anton held up a hand. Hold on now. I appreciate the eagerness, but I dont want you to agree to something you didnt mean to. Its not an official mission. Its something personal. No contribution points to be had and perhaps quite a bit of danger. Though hopefully not the second.

Hoyt shrugged, You need me though, right? Ill do it. It shouldnt be something completely insane. If you knew we would die, I doubt you would go. Danger can be good training, and either way some travel would be good for me. I dont want to stagnate in place. You said another, who else is going already?

Catarina.

Even better, Hoyt said. A mission with two of the rising stars has to end up worth it, somehow. Im sure of it.

Timothy wont be coming with us, Anton clarified.

Really? Hoyt shrugged. How unexpected.

He found himself with prior engagements, actually, Anton explained.

Hoyt smiled, Thats alright. I wont change what I said. Even if theres a bit of danger, well all keep each other alive. I know you wouldnt ask if it wasnt important for you.

Yes, Anton agreed. It was important but he had no clear idea of how much of it was for himself and how much for the others. It could certainly be both but his mind couldnt sort it all out yet. We plan to set out in the next day or two. There is one more local thing to take care of on the way. Perhaps we could meet up in Edelhull.

Hoyt nodded. Just tell me a time and place.

Anton and Catarina stood outside a small dwelling in the middle of Edelhull. Anton just stared at the door, unmoving.

What are you waiting for? Catarina asked. This is the right place.

I know, Anton nodded. I just dont know what to say.

Does anyone ever know? Catarina asked.

Anton sighed. No. It never gets easier. But this is even harder than normal.

Stalling wont help, Catarina said. She raised her hand and knocked on the door. Then she stepped back. Go on.

Anton stood bravely in front of the door. Why couldnt he just face down a charging boar or something?

The door opened to reveal a woman showing the signs of age. Her hair wasnt fully grey, but she had age spots and wrinkles as well as the general tiredness of older folk. She still had a clear family resemblance, to both her grandmother and daughter and granddaughter. Yes, who is it? She looked Anton up and down, her jaw going slack. ...grandpa Anton? Then she noticed Catarina. Catarina? Her eyes flicked between them. How did the two of you find each other?

Fate, Catarina declared. Can we come in, grandma?

Ashlyn smiled. Of course, of course. I certainly wasnt expecting to see either of you today leastwise yourself, grandpa Anton.

Anton sighed. It was actually much better when Catarina said it. She was so much younger. Then again, he hadn't cared about being old so much before. It was only after things went wrong.

So, how are things in Dungannon? Ashlyn asked innocently. The way Catarina looked down and Anton's pursed lips told her some of what she needed to know. I suppose we best sit down. She led them to a small sitting area. Should I put on some tea? She got up to do that very thing, but even when she returned the awkward silence stretched on until Anton finally found some words.

Disaster struck the village, Anton explained. I'm one of the lucky survivors, if the others can even be called that. Cultivating bandits from Ofrurg came into the area, killing and enslaving.

Oh. Ashlyn bit her lip. I heard about things like that happening out east. I knew it got bad but she shook her head. We didn't send many letters back and forth in so long. When did this happen?

Ten months ago, more or less, Anton said.

Oh. Anton could see Ashlyn found herself uncomfortable. While she wasn't suited to life in Dungannon, that didn't mean her relationship with the rest of the family was *bad*. Just distant and infrequent. Who?

Not many made it, Anton said. I'm the only one to leave of my own will. I was out of town during the attack.

Can you Ashlyn turned towards Catarina, You joined the Order, right? Can't they do anything?

Catarina shook her head. They're from Ofrurg. It's not so easy. Some of the bandits are dead, though. We plan to kill more.

We? Ashlyn looked at the two of them. If they're cultivators, who else? I know you aren't her eye looked at Anton.

I wasn't. Now, I am. Anton declared that flatly. But I didn't come here just to bring depressing news. I was hoping at least we could share some pleasant stories of the past, and let Catarina hear about what things were like. We only met by coincidence-

Fate, Catarina declared.

Or fate, Anton shrugged. But I was able to meet her parents. I know a bit about her life, but little about your part and I'd like to explain everything that happened. Hopefully, more pleasant things than unpleasant.

It wasn't possible to cover decades of events in a single evening, but Anton and Catarina promised to come back. Anton resolved himself that at least Catarina would be able to do so. However, he also knew that meant avoiding trouble to begin with. His eyes and ears would be on constant lookout and if his goals would lead them into danger they couldn't handle, he would have to change them. Anton wasn't sure if he would have just led himself into death without having to watch out for her. There was no way to know for sure. But now, he had to live and be strong for more than just those far away.

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Everything had been properly explained to Hoyt before Anton accepted his final agreement. He didn't want there to be any mysteries involved when Hoyt might be risking his own life to help him out, for no specific reward. Anton was still not comfortable talking about the subject matter, but since he was going to *do* something about it he had forced himself to talk.

Hoyt met up with Anton and Catarina in Edelhull- which was more or less outside the front gates of the Order. From there, they began to head east back along the route Anton had taken months prior.

Ofrurg, huh Hoyt wrinkled his forehead as they walked. I don't know much about it, having grown up in the west. I grew up hearing about Ambati beyond the borders on the other side. Not quite so nice as Graotan, but a decent place.

Ofrurg's reputation in the east is certainly far short of stellar, Anton commented, But we never expected anything to come from there.

You trusted the Order to protect you? Hoyt asked.

That and we didn't think cultivators would bother us. It's not that we were naive to the ways of the world. In a full century, there was very little trouble. Perhaps the only mistake we made was thinking that it couldn't happen to *us*. Anton shook his head, But what would we have done? We heard about other towns being attacked, but we did not look, nor help them. We couldn't have, but beyond a shipment or two of food around the forest, we didn't consider it much. It's quite easy to get used to problems *over there* and never consider whether we should do something, whether or not it would ultimately affect us.

It's not fair, Catarina said. You worked so hard, and they stole everything away. Including family.

No. The world is not fair, Anton agreed. But perhaps we can take advantage of that. Maybe we can make things better than just some arbitrary fairness. Anton laughed mirthlessly, If we can affect the world at all. Look at us, two young folk on the rise, and an old man trying to hold onto a place in the world.

You deserve to have a place, Grandpa Anton.

He smiled, I appreciate the words.

For the first half of the journey, they passed a large number of other cultivators connected to the Order. However, the further they got from the Orders lands, the fewer they encountered. Graotan was wider than it was tall, and they were headed to the furthest corner.

The journey was much more rapid than when Anton had been going in the other direction even with some delays.

Good day, sir, Anton inclined his head to a man working in the fields. Were from the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. Is there anything troubling your fine village here? Beasts, Bandits? The Order accepted requests for aid from all of Graotan, but they also encourage their traveling disciples to offer aid, at reasonable prices. Some things people could wait weeks or months for a message to go to the Order and a cultivator to return but some things were more urgent. A cultivator could earn contribution points at the recommendation of villages, as well. It wasnt the best way to do so, but Anton didnt care. That wasnt the reason. He was simply not able to confine his worries to a small area any longer. He didnt want to delay his current journey, but to pass by something on the way would be a shame.

Not here, the man said. But I heard something up in Helmfirst Rill they spotted some water monster, I think. Usually quite peaceful there.

Anton had hardly realized theyd gone so far. Helmfirst Rill had taken him a week of travel in the other direction, as it was around a quarter of the journey from Dungannon to the Orders headquarters. However, now he was a similar time in the other direction, and not far at all. I appreciate your time, he inclined his head, Good fortune to you.

Catarina spoke up when they were further away, Didnt you save a child from drowning in Helmfirst Rill?

Anton laughed, Just barely! I wasnt so far from going down with him myself. I was just at the Third Star, and my body was still feeling its age. A pleasant town. I hope this water monster is just a scare or at least that they have avoided too much trouble.

Antons eyes picked out Helmfirst Rill in the distance, and he once again focused his energy on his eyes. After tempering the organs in his head, he hadnt stopped developing them. It was just an initial boost. All of the practice- especially with eye techniques- kept him growing. Without energy being involved, his eyes werent as good

as when he was young. But he couldn't hope for that. With energy he saw better than he'd ever imagined possible.

His eyes scanned the bridge- much more sturdy than the temporary setup he'd helped with when he was last around. Past the bridge and then to the south was a small building he recognized. Outside, a man was working in some little garden beds. Oh, I do believe that's Darryl. I wonder if he'll remember me. Their feet crossed the bridge and turned towards the house. Darryl! Anton waved.

The man looked up. It took him a moment, then his eyes lit up. Well I'll be! Anton, isn't it? You saved my nephew Jimmy in the spring.

Fortunate timing, that was, Anton grinned. Is he doing well?

Better than ever. And he's taken up swimming. Though these last couple of weeks he's not been able to.

Is that the water monster? Anton asked. We heard about it in another town.

That's right, Darryl nodded. Oh! Pardon me, I didn't notice your companions. I'm Darryl, I'm sure you've heard. He held out his hand.

Catarina.

Hoyt.

That's a strong grip. You work in the fields?

Some, Hoyt commented. It's a good way to cultivate my body.

I joined the Order, Anton declared. We'd be happy to help you with that water monster, Anton patted the bow sitting unstrung in his quiver.

Oh! I see you've gotten yourself a fine new bow. I'm glad. As for the creature, well, it's hard to track down. The fishermen were noticing a lack of fish- and then some half-eaten bodies washed past. Fish, mostly, but there was also a bear. Half a bear, maybe. Darryl held his fingers splayed out, hands touching at the wrists. It must have jaws like this to take out chunks the size we saw. So we've been keeping out of the river. It's more trouble to draw all our water from the well, but people keep spotting a big shape. Mostly upstream, where it runs a bit deeper. Darryl looked over Anton and the rest. I wouldn't suggest trying to fight it, but if you stay out of the water

I see. We'll ask if anyone else has more information. Do tell others we're in town.

In a place the size of Helmfirth Rill, it didnt take long to speak to everyone. Description of the creatures shape were inconsistent, but it was mostly noticed underwater as a large shape, at least man sized. Someone *did* have the ribcage of the bear that had previously been mentioned. It had an impressively smooth area of bone missing. Clearly there was *something*, though how a water creature got a bear well, they *did* have to drink water.

It doesnt seem like any sort of natural creature, Anton said. Perhaps a magical beast or something exotic. Its not afraid to attack large prey, and people could easily be next. If not here, maybe further up the river.

I agree, Hoyt said. We just have to find it.

We'll start by looking in the deeper sections of the river, like they mentioned.

Anton had the most experience tracking down creatures. He didnt know what he was looking for, but he knew what he *wasnt* looking for. Deer and boar tracks didnt matter, though he paid careful attention to them near the edge of the water. He hadnt yet noticed any signs of anything being pulled in, but there was a lot of ground to cover.

There, Catarina pointed into the river. The flow is different. Energy and water are all jumbled up.

Anton squinted, trying to make out something in the water. With use of Hawk Eyes he could pierce the murk just enough to see something beneath the bank. Not a moving creature, but perhaps a den of some sort. Good catch. I thought it was just a rock disturbing the flow.

Should we set up here and wait for it to return? Hoyt asked.

Anton nodded, I think that might be best. Though we dont want to spook it away. Im not sure if this thing frightens easily at cultivators but if we simply force it to relocate elsewhere, the problem isnt solved.

I can conceal us, Catarina said. Im getting better at it. At least it should get close before noticing us, even if its a magical beast.

Excellent, Anton said. Now, we just need to keep alert. He looked around. No tracks, even close to its potential lair. He wondered at that. Perhaps it was just fully aquatic.

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Three people sat inside a concealment formation. They had to wait around for an unknown length of time, and what was worse was that they couldnt cultivate while doing so. Not without potentially compromising the formation. Anton's eyes continually scanned the area around them, but didnt reveal much of anything new. The area was

quite sparse of any creatures larger than an insect, however. No birds set down near them- even outside the concealment formation. That lent something to the theory that the underwater den belonged to the creature.

On a hunt it wasn't strange to wait for a few hours. Hoyt, however, was growing impatient. Should we just go in the den? It might be in there and we just can't sense it.

Catarina formed a response before Anton could reply. Our inability to sense it would indicate a greater danger. Its den is strange.

We should wait until evening, at least, Anton said. Whether coming or going, there should be movement by that time.

The first thing Anton noticed were swirls of blood in the water, flowing from upstream. As his eyes followed them, he saw the carcass of a boar floating- and a creature underneath it in the water. There it is, he whispered to the others. It would be best to fight it out of the water, if we can. Or on the edge, if we can coax it there. He could sense the energy swirling around it. A true magical beast. The energy wasn't too concerning, but it was nearly enough to match Hoyt. He was at the peak of the sixth star, not quite the seventh, but what *other* features the magical beast had would be more relevant than a direct comparison of power.

Want me to be bait? Hoyt asked. I can go near the river, but not too close.

The concealment formation was only ten meters from the river's edge, so he wouldn't be too far away from the others. Catarina nodded, I can quickly assist from there. And Anton

I can cover you as far as the other side of the river, if necessary. But preferably you wouldn't go that far.

Not planning to get into the river at all, Hoyt nodded. Alright then, get ready.

Hoyt walked out of the concealment formation. Anyone looking might have seen him suddenly appear, or maybe even have the hazy idea that they could see something in the forest behind him. The creature they were hunting was in the water, and wouldn't easily see that. Hoyt moved forward, then chucked a stick into the river, creating a splash.

At first there seemed to be no reaction, but the floating boar's carcass drifted more to one side of the river. Anton was prepared to shoot the creature when it leapt out of the water, but he *wasn't* prepared for it to throw the carcass at Hoyt. Fortunately, Hoyt had the reaction time for that. He ducked under the suddenly flying boar's body, and even had his axe ready when a creature leapt out of the river, the first part of it that was visible through the spray being two curved rows of teeth on its upper and lower jaws.

Hoyts axe swung into its side, their energies colliding resulting in the creature being deflected around him.

At that moment, Anton took a shot at one of the most bizzare creatures he had ever seen. Its head had sharp teeth the length of a finger, but instead of being inside a muzzle or even a fishs mouth it was more akin to the bill of a duck, with teeth all along the sides and around the front where the jaw couldnt fully close. The creature had webbed feet with claws on the end and a furry hide as well as a wide, flat tail. It stood on its four webbed feet, its head as high as Hoyts waist. Antons arrow flew towards it from the concealment, but surprisingly it twisted its body in the air and his arrow only managed to scrape along its tail.

The creature landed, and instead of turning back towards Hoyt merely flicked at him with its tail before digging its claws deep into the ground and flinging itself in bounds towards Anton. Anton took another shot, this time managing a better hit- but his Spirit Arrow only pierced through the creatures energy and hide enough to cause some bleeding. If he could hit the same spot again he might reach organs, but it moved strangely yet quickly. It also seemed to not be concerned by the concealment formation- though attacking from within it had certainly disturbed the formation enough to weaken its effects.

Catarina moved to intercept the creature, slicing with her sword as she moved past. Its rear leg swept at her in retaliation, and she only managed a small slice along its shoulder while she avoided the counterattack. Anton had to dodge out of the way as the creature continued towards him, but Hoyt had sprinted behind it and wasnt far. When the creature tried to move past him towards Anton, he swung his axe low, forcing the creature to jump. Once again it twisted its relatively short hind leg as it passed, and Anton managed to pick out a small stinger of some sort going into Hoyts shoulder. Anton managed to take advantage of that moment to shoot a second arrow right next to where his first had hit, ever so slightly deeper. With Catarinas help, the three of them should have been able to take down the magical beast quickly but they didnt quite have that chance.

Another one! Catarina called from closer to the river. Slightly bigger!

Ive got this! Hoyt said, and indeed he flung the creature into a nearby tree, pulling its stinger out of his shoulder. Help Catarina!

Anton had no hesitation with that, turning to fire spirit arrows at the second creature. It was indeed larger, but it was slightly less quick than the other. Catarina dodged its attacks, and though the fangs got quite unpleasantly close to her at several moments she seemed to be able to hold her own. Though Catarina moved cautiously as it flicked its tail at her, the most that could do would be knock her away. With her keeping the creatures attention, Anton was able to put a bit more power into his shots, and soon the creature was dripping blood from several holes. Anton realized the second creature didnt have stingers on its hind feet, unlike the first- and Catarina noticed that as well.

The next time it lunged at her, she avoided its bite and then stabbed her sword into its belly with little concern for its rear claws. Though the creatures momentum knocked her back, she was mostly uninjured.

Anton had been keeping a half eye on Hoyts fight. He didnt want to undermine the young mans valor, and he seemed to be holding his own but he was slowing down. Hoyt had still only taken the one hit, but the stinger had done more than just let blood trickle from his shoulder. Now that the larger and slower magical beast was down, Anton started firing arrows with speed. He couldnt be as accurate as he wanted and pierce fully through the creatures defensive energy, but Hoyts attacks were keeping it occupied. Three of Antons arrows connected to no effect except distraction, but a fourth found its way into one of the previous injuries, piercing a thin, condensed hole in the creatures chest. It staggered back, and Hoyt swung his axe down straight into its skull.

Are you alright, Hoyt?

Hoyt grunted. Poison. I think I can handle it.

Anton looked at Catarina. Perhaps we can help?

I can keep things away, Catarina said. Or I can try to remove the poison.

I can do it, Hoyt said. But perhaps some guidance on energy usage? And maybe an energy gathering formation?

Anton smiled. Hoyt was tempering the organs in his torso. Several of them dealt with removing toxins in the bloodstream in one fashion or another. It was a perfect situation to make use of. Though Hoyt sat down stiffly, his energy was still vigorous.

Anton began to guide Hoyt in removing the poison. Hoyt managed to pull out some of the poison still in the wound, but the rest was firmly in his bloodstream. For that, Anton showed how he would circulate his energy to Hoyt, though mostly he provided moral support. Catarina was providing some energy with a quick formation, which helped more and soon energy was swirling around Hoyt.

When Hoyt opened his eyes, Anton smiled. Congratulations. Youve reached the seventh star.

Hoyt half grinned, though it was clear his body was still feeling a bit weak. The Order certainly cautions against putting yourself in dangerous situations to cultivate, but its quite helpful, isnt it?

Good for a bit of a boost, anyway. Though I think the experience will last for some time beyond now.

If nothing else, Hoyt said, I got practice fighting a creature with very different movement than anything before. If we had been in the water he shook his head. Im not sure how that would have gone.

Perhaps we should train in the water, Anton suggested, After we make sure there arent any more in that den, or throughout the area.

Catarina looked over towards it. I can sort of see it now. I think it had a concealment formation. Not a complex one, but I wasnt expecting it so I didnt notice it. Sometimes, magical beasts will instinctively arrange simple formations like that but Ive only seen the magical beasts you have. None of the others did that. I think these also concealed their tracks from when they were on land.

Anton sighed, Magical beasts using formations? Unpleasant. Though these were mutated magical beasts. Ive heard of creatures similar to these before though perhaps without the fangs, if what I heard was right. I dont believe theyre native to the region. We should inform the Order. Helmfrith Rill should be able to send them a message, if we dont think its urgent.

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After surveying the area around Helmfrith Rill, no more dangerous beasts were found. While no humans had been attacked, their very first actions were aggressive and territorial. Even if they were just defending their den- a possibility- Anton knew it was far too dangerous to leave them alive. Not that they had much choice in the matter, once it came to that. They arranged for information to be sent back to the Order. There might be rewards, but either way Anton found himself satisfied with the results even if he received nothing but the thanks of the village. The villagers certainly couldnt afford to pay anything appropriate for hunting such monsters, and they werent asked to do so.

Once they moved on, Dungannon was not far away. Anton both dreaded and highly anticipated his return to his hometown. It was no longer his *home*, though. He couldnt see himself living there again even if it was in a different state.

It was with mixed feelings that he approached the village. He mainly experienced dread, anger, and sadness but he also had a bit of hope. He was only returning because he had confidence in himself to begin vengeance against those who had wronged them and salvation for those who still lived. Anton would have liked to come back in Spirit Building, maybe even the peak of it, able to wipe out the entire bandit group single handed. But he was willing to settle for at least having enough strength to begin.

The other two were quiet as they passed overgrown fields that had no crops and came into sight of the sagging and crumbled buildings of the city proper. Even those that had been relatively untouched by the fires were showing a year without maintenance, and

the weight of early snows. Though he knew they were merely being respectful, Anton couldn't stand the silence. That was the home of Melinda, a seamstress. Best in the whole village. Across from her was Deo... possibly the worst baker in the world. But a wonderful man, regardless. Anton wished he remembered every single one but Dungannon wasn't the same place anymore. He could barely recognize some of the buildings or what they had been. His memory wasn't perfect, and while he'd known most everyone, some he'd merely not interacted with. He did his best, however.

Houses on the outskirts, workshops and stores and other nearby farms were all there. It was a place Anton had spent his whole life, and it had changed so much from when he'd first seen it to when it last existed. It had been most of his world. There was the nearby forest and other towns, but they were only a small part of his life. But as they finally arrived at the former Krantz farm, he realized how small it was. Anton tried to introduce the farm, but he couldn't.

Is this it, then? Catarina asked. Where you lived?

Anton nodded. He could at least do that. At least, until all of the memories flooded over him. He wandered about in a daze, unaware of anyone else remembering. Janina had caught his eye in the city, but when she first came to visit him on the farm he remembered how she'd slowly come into view on the horizon. The first cow he'd helped give birth. Each field that slowly expanded. His own children, grandchildren, and more. A hundred years and then everything was gone all at once.

His cultivation was still insufficient. Anton knew that. As he was now, he couldn't handle any of the bandit leaders, even if they remained the same. No more Anton spoke to himself. He wouldn't allow it to happen anymore. Killing the bandits was something that needed to be done but that wasn't good enough. He couldn't allow it to happen to anyone else. As he began to come back to his senses, he realized the stars were out. He couldn't just try to be stronger. He had to be the *strongest*. He had to reach the peak of Ninety-Nine Stars.

No, that wasn't it. That was the problem, wasn't it? Anton was quite confident in himself in general, but as a cultivator in a new field he felt unsure. Even if just a little bit, he was thrown off. He hadn't thought he could reach the peak of cultivation, but now that he had the determination he realized he was just a little bit off.

It was no good just to match those who had come before him in the Order. To reach the peak of Ninety-Nine Stars. The only proper goal was to go all the way. He shouldn't be walking the path to ninety-nine stars, but to a full hundred. Or beyond. One hundred matched the limit everyone in the world knew about, a limit nobody had spoken about surpassing but that didn't mean it couldn't be done. So whether it was a hundred or a thousand or all the stars in the sky Anton would walk the path to reach it.

But he wouldn't ignore the world around him along the way. That was the most important part. Cultivation was merely what would let him accomplish the goal. Not that it made it

any less important to what he wanted. But he would be cultivating for himself, and for the world and for all those who could not defend themselves from those who would abuse their power.

Anton breathed in. He felt like he hadn't taken a breath all day. A ridiculous thought, but as his lungs filled up he felt refreshed as if it was his very first breath. Air swirled around him and natural energy circled and pulled into him. It was truly nothing compared to the control Grand Elder Vandale had shown but so what? He might not be there yet, but he would be. Even if it took him a hundred more years. Or a thousand, or ten thousand. He wasn't going to let time get the better of him.

Catarina and Hoyt watched from afar as Anton wandered in silence. He hadn't responded to any of their prompting, but he didn't just stand around stunned either. He went from place to place, taking it in. Even when it grew late, he moved around the ruins of his former home. Then Anton looked up at the sky, and both of them felt the energy in the area roil around him like a storm. For a brief moment his cultivation was hard to fathom and then it returned to the feeling of its accustomed place in the eighth star of body tempering.

Anton's head turned towards them, and he slowly approached. Thank you for your patience. I believe I am done here. Tomorrow we head for Ofrurg. It's not far. I would not plan to fight anyone there. What I want Anton shook his head. I shall merely buy the freedom of some, for the moment. But I plan to track down as many of those responsible as I can. If they move outside of Ofrurg, I plan to kill them. Anton looked over the other two for their reactions, Though there are some who will be too strong at the moment. I plan for only subtle inquiries into them.

Hoyt shrugged, I haven't killed anyone yet. But I'll have no compunctions about doing so to bandits and slavers. As long as we can confirm their involvement.

It might not be possible to track down only those responsible for Dungannon, Anton said, But as long as we can confirm the villainy of someone, I shall not be concerned as to who in particular they have destroyed the lives of.

What about those you're going to free? Catarina asked. How will we keep them safe?

I have looked into the situation. Ofrurg may not be the most pleasant country, but they aren't a lawless land. Their laws on slavery don't allow for arbitrary kidnappings. Anton shook his head, Of course, very few care if people come from outside the country with no documentation, but once I obtain ownership of someone and free them, records will exist that prevent them from being enslaved again so easily. Of course, I plan to help them move into Graotan so that there is no opportunity to begin with. Even back to Dungannon, if they wish, but most likely further from the border. Though it should be more secure now, it would be better if they felt safe.

Catarina nodded. What about family?

Anton sighed, I am afraid to say that I have very little information on family. My plans are much the same. I can afford to set a number of people up in Graotan, and if I don't have enough now, I can earn it. There are a few I hope will be simple purchases. Devon has been sold to an arena, which will be trickier and he may not even still live. Anton closed his eyes for a moment. Then there is Annelie. She was I thought she was my first great-grandchild, though I was apparently quite wrong about that. That would be your mother, and even you are older than her. She was sold to the Frostmirror sect. I have no information after that.

Hoyt bit his lip. If they care for good cultivators, she should be treated well. It seems you have talent for cultivation in your family he looked between the two of them.

Perhaps, Anton said. Though we are but two in dozens, many generations apart. Hardly anything to draw conclusions from.

Hoyt shrugged, That's still not actually that bad. Some of the sects are very picky about partners and don't end up with top tier cultivators in two out of five generations.

Top tier? Anton asked. I'm merely in body tempering yet.

If you can say that again in the Spring, I might reconsider my thoughts, Hoyt grinned.

You should be more confident, Grandpa Anton.

Anton smiled, I'd much prefer not to be overconfident. But while I might not consider myself anything of the sort now I *will* reach the top. That I swear to whatever it is that governs the lives of people. A ripple of energy flowed out from him as he spoke, brushing over the two other cultivators.

...wow, Hoyt said. I like that confidence. So while you're not too far, I'd like to humbly request your guidance in the future.

Of course, Anton said. I shall always support you, such as I am able, he inclined his head to Catarina, You as well, of course. Even more so. Though your skill with formations far outpaces anything I imagine doing.

Maybe so, Catarina said. But you can always ask me for help, when you need a formation master. Or apprentice, right now.

Chapter 45

It didn't take long to reach the border between Graotan and Ofrurg, just a couple days of travel. The border had two clear areas belonging to each country respectively. As cultivators, it was quite easy for the trio to tell which side was which even without flags

and geographical location. The Graotan side had three early stage Constellation Formation cultivators. Two of them practiced the Ninety-Nine stars, which left the third one as the odd man out. While the Order was the only major cultivation group throughout Graotan and generally was considered to have one of the best cultivation methods around, there were still others.

That technically meant the third would be called an Essence Collection cultivator instead of Constellation Formation, or whatever name might be specific to their cultivation technique. Ofrurg side likewise matched with a smattering of lower level cultivators and three early Essence Collection cultivators. They all cultivated different techniques, though exactly what they were was more difficult to discern.

If Anton was actually planning to cause trouble inside Ofrurg, he might have been worried. But despite the power they displayed on the border, Anton was quite certain that most places wouldn't have as many high level cultivators to worry about. In the grand scheme of things, early Essence Collection wasn't that amazing. It was enough to be an elder in the Order, but not necessarily one involved with the council. Even so, they were still more than a full tier ahead of the trio. Out of five total cultivation tiers- or four, if it were considered realistically- a full tier and some small levels was the difference between heaven and earth.

The group was stopped on the Graotan side, not to prevent them from going but purely to make sure they knew what they were getting into. Ofrurg was a dangerous place, but it still had laws that protected cultivators, especially in public places. That also applied to foreign cultivators, because they could not afford to have all the surrounding countries and sects angered at them. Despite the fact that bandits came from Ofrurg, such troubles weren't rampant within their own borders. However, that was because of ruthless laws that travelers needed to be aware of.

As they approached the Ofrurg side, the pressure of the Essence Collection cultivators displaying their energy was clear. There were fewer warnings and more fees on the Ofrurg side. They got a pass indicating they had passed the border legitimately, allowing them to stay for a period of several months. It wasn't hard, because Ofrurg knew that traveling cultivators brought with them profits to be made. There was precious little other traffic beside the trio, just a few cultivators who had apparently just been passing *through* Ofrurg on the way to Graotan and a handful of merchants.

The whole time they were at the border, the pressure of the Essence Collection cultivators continued to rest on them like a hand pressing them down. Anton breathed a sigh of relief once they were away. It was just like seeing a cultivator back in Alcombey. I could barely keep my back straight.

Were they a real problem? Hoyt asked. I doubt the Order would let them do anything to you.

Living further away from the main body of the Order, we didnt know so much about them. Im sure they would have punished anyone who did something, but that doesnt help if someone can kill you before anyone can help. They werent really so bad, just keep your head down and walk past but I really felt it here. Anton took a deep breath, Theres still a long way to go.

On the most basic level, Ofrurg wasnt different from Graotan. It still had people, cities, and farms. Those farms were largely worked by slaves, but they still produced food. Probably more of it, given the expansiveness of some farms. From what Anton was able to learn, a small handful of people owned the majority of the farmland between the border and the first decently sized city they came to, Veron.

That was where the Iron Ring Slavers made their home, and where most of the transactions for the enslaved villagers of Dungannon had taken place. While they likely had records on where people had been sold, that wouldnt necessarily be public information. However, he did have a handful of locations and if he found and redeemed those, they might lead him to more.

The first order of business was to go to an information broker. The Orders information should be accurate, but it wasnt necessarily *current*. Ofrurg was willing to buy and sell nearly anything, and on the less unpleasant end of that was information. Among the various information groups was one known as the Ears of the Fox. They were a reputable organization, as such things went. At the very least, they charged fair prices and didnt sell information on their clients. That is, they wouldnt tell anyone what others went in to learn from them. People might guess, but they would never know for sure. Anything gained outside of that, however, could reasonably be sold. Not that anyone would care about Anton in the slightest. He was just an old man looking for people sold as slaves.

Anton took a moment to ready himself before he entered. Internally, he told himself to not be nervous. He was just going into the market to buy something. He could be casual about it, even if some of it was information on people who could easily kill him. Though that latter information might be outside of his price range. The two of you should wait out here. I shouldnt be too long. He assumed so, anyway. Either they would have the information, or they would not.

As he stepped inside, he was approached by a young cultivator in the late body tempering stage. The lobby was filled with others of various cultivation levels, to match pretty much any sort of customer. Good day sir. Is this your first time working with the Ears of the Fox?

Thats right, Anton nodded. That information, at least, he could share.

This way, please. The young man began to lead him down a hallway, lined with rooms that he couldn't sense inside of. That helped them keep secrecy, he was quite certain. We can offer information on almost anything happening in Ofrurg or the surroundings. Information is valued by its rarity and thoroughness. If we do not have information you seek, you can commission us to learn it for a premium. He opened the door to a simple but comfortable room with two chairs and a table, gesturing for Anton to sit. There are no refunds, of course, except in the rare case of terribly inaccurate information.

What if I just want to know how much certain information would cost? Anton asked.

Of course, we are willing to work with you in that regard. We will make available the price and depth of information. Once you have the funds, you can return. You won't find better information anywhere else.

Very well, I would like the price on information about three cultivators, as well as some others. The man nodded, gesturing for Anton to continue. Maximilian Van Hassel and

Nirmal Slusser are the first two. The third is Annelie Vanchev, a slave sold to the Frostmirror sect.

The man took notes. And the non-cultivators?

Anton listed some of those whose locations he didn't know. They should have been sold as slaves around the same time. Anton knew that they weren't of much importance, so the information might be listed by the category of occurrence rather than by individual people. Even if they recorded pretty much anything, knowing *actually* everything was impossible.

Very well sir. I shall check on each of these. Enjoy some refreshments while you wait. As the man left, a servant came into the room with a tray of fruits and other light food. Anton hoped they were a servant, at least. If they were a slave at least they appeared to be healthy and not unhappy.

Anton was certain the food would be untainted, but he had no appetite for it at the moment. He wasn't even sure what information was available, or that he could afford it. As he waited, Anton noticed the room had abundant natural energy. Certainly more than the ambient level and if he was just going to be sitting, he might as well do some basic cultivation. He breathed in and out, letting the natural energy flow into him through his lungs and even directly through his skin. Every little bit of progress would add up especially when travel reduced the amount of time he could spend cultivating at full effectiveness.

The representative of the Ears of the Fox returned in about half of an hour. Anton wouldn't have minded if he were a bit slower. He pulled out four sealed boxes. Maximilian Van Hassel and Nirmal Slusser, he gestured to two of the boxes. Mostly older information, but includes origins and some recent activity. The information on

Annelise is up to date, though limited by the flow of information out of the Frostmirror sect. Anton noticed it was still twice as expensive as the other two boxes- almost everything he had on him. However, he needed that to buy back as many people as he could. As for those sold as slaves, we have information on who seventeen of those you listed were sold to in public auction. That was cheaper, probably around the price of one slave the actual value, and not the price Anton was resigned to have to pay. It should contain information on at least five people Anton didn't know the locations of.

I shall take the last one and I hope to return later for the other information.

The man nodded. Very well. After Anton handed over payment, he gave him the box.

Anton was pleased to see that the names of those who purchased the slaves as well as some information on them, including primary holdings. He supposed it was somewhat necessary information, but he wouldn't have been that surprised if that had been separate either. The main list was clearly copied from a longer document, but it included several whose names Anton had missed. A reasonable deal, though Anton supposed all the work the Ears of the Fox had to do was keep track of large or unusual sales and then do some simple copying. Even if it only paid out rarely, they could profit. Though of course just the information on any of the cultivators was quite expensive.

Anton did learn one other useful bit of information. There was continued information on Annelise, which meant she was still alive. He couldn't know more than that just yet but that was good enough. Thank you, Anton inclined his head.

Of course, sir. It is our business. Anything else? Anton shook his head, Then we hope to see you again. The man retrieved the other boxes and led Anton out.

As he caught sight of Catarina and Hoyt, Anton found himself encouraged though also more desirous of money than before. At least cultivators *could* make good money, even if it was often dangerous.

Chapter 46

There was basically no chance that the Iron Ring Slavers currently held any of those Anton knew. It hadn't been quite a year, but if slaves did not sell before that time Anton wouldn't expect anything good would come of them. Not that the prospects of a slave were golden if they were deemed more valuable, but at least the owners might be interested in taking some care with them. Anton never thought of people as property, but those who ran profitable businesses generally took good care of their tools. Hopefully they shared some of that mentality.

It bothered Anton to walk into a place that sold slaves with a pleasant smile on his face, but he worried if he didn't set his expression to begin with his actual feelings might get the best of him. Finding the location of the Iron Ring Slavers wasn't hard. They were a legal business who intended to sell, after all. Being hidden would do them little good.

Out front of their offices stood two guards. They appeared to be at the peak of Body Tempering, the equivalent of the tenth star. Perhaps it was his own judgements, but Anton felt that their energy was stagnant. Ungrowing. They still appeared to be in their middle years, but if they began cultivating while young, it was quite possible they were unable to advance to Spirit Building.

Do you have an appointment, sir? One of the guards asked.

No. I wasn't aware I needed one Anton kept his face as pleasant as possible.

It's not strictly necessary, but it is not always possible to arrange for a proper escort without notice. He opened the door behind him, See if the vice-manager is available to escort a cultivator! He turned back to Anton, It will only be a few moments. You may wait inside.

Thank you. Anton stepped inside. It wasn't hard to be polite to the guard. While Anton didn't approve of his current employment, he had a pleasant enough demeanor. That reminded Anton that not everyone who was pleasant was a good person. Anton couldn't judge if he were truly evil but those who supported slavery- especially with the methods the Iron Ring Slavers allowed- could most certainly not be good people.

It didn't take long before a slightly balding man walked down the hall. His cultivation was in the middle of Body Tempering, and unlike the guards where he was uncertain, Anton could guarantee this man was never reaching Spirit Building. Not unless he'd started cultivating only in the last few years. Sir, the man bowed his head to Anton, Welcome to the Iron Ring Slavers. My name is Marty Dittmar, vice-manager of operations in Veron. What are you interested in purchasing today?

I'm not quite sure, Anton said. I was hoping it was possible to browse. He couldn't just provide them with a list of everyone he was looking for. Even if they had some, the fact that he wanted them in particular would certainly increase the prices.

I see, the man nodded. Of course, I can escort you around the area. Come, follow me. It didn't take long before they stepped into back rooms. Unlike what Anton expected, despite the surroundings becoming more austere with smooth stone walls instead of decorated hangings, the conditions didn't change dramatically. Women or men? he asked, gesturing to either side.

I suppose we should begin with women. As he followed after the vice-manager, he could see into the constructed cells. Four women shared each cell, each of which had two pairs of bunks. Anton had imagined dirty and smelly places, but it was quite clean. That was all Anton could say for the area, as the conditions were quite lacking otherwise. Straw mattresses and cheap burlap clothing, and very little room. But even so, the conditions seemed tolerable. As his eyes passed over one woman, he stopped for a moment. How much for her?

Vice-manager Dittmar quoted a price. It wasn't much different from what Anton had learned was the standard for a youngish, healthy woman. Would you like to purchase her?

Perhaps later. Of course, that would be never. Not that Anton wouldn't like to free these women from slavery, but he couldn't afford to do so for those he didn't know. He would very quickly use up all his money and merely help a small number of people, while providing a slight boost to the slaving industry which would result in little net benefit to the world. He had just asked about that particular woman because she seemed like a reasonable starting point, and to see if the vice-manager would give fair prices. Unfortunately, Anton didn't see any women he recognized. Perhaps we shall see the men next.

Of course. If you are looking for those who might have cultivation talents, the vice-manager shook his head, I am afraid to inform you we have none at the moment. They are sold quite quickly.

No, that's not quite what I want. Anton did his best to remain vague, like he actually wanted *something*. However, after asking about the prices of some of the men, he found nobody he recognized among the dozens present.

We have some trained for particular purposes, Dittmar offered. If you have something in particular you want.

Anton wasn't sure if he could keep up his extremely vague desire for a slave, so something more specific might be best for the moment. Do you have any able to cook or clean?

Of course. We could have them brought out, if you wish

I'll save us the time, Anton said confidently. Confidence was key. He could even act like he was doing the man a favour by getting what he wanted. They moved further into the back of the facility, to rooms about the same size but with only individuals or pairs. They had slightly better accommodations, linen clothing and decent mattresses. Anton looked over everyone he could, but found nobody. Not that he had expected otherwise, but if he had left someone behind at the easiest point to purchase them he would have regretted it. Anton clicked his tongue, trying to seem just vaguely annoyed.

Are there none to your liking, sir? If you have any specifics in mind, we can contact you when we find something suiting your tastes.

No, I don't think so, Anton said. Perhaps I shall return later.

Dittmar's pleasant smile faded slightly. He had, after all, invested over an hour escorting Anton about for nothing. Of course, sir. If you can specify what you wish next time, we can set an appointment and save you some walking.

Hmm. Indeed. Anton took the opportunity to remove himself from the location with haste. It wasn't as terrible as he had imagined- but that didn't say anything for conditions elsewhere. After he left the place, he curled around several blocks in a leisurely fashion. He didn't sense anyone following him, but it was better to be safe. Eventually, he met back up with Catarina and Hoyt. He shook his head, Nobody. Not that I expected different.

Hoyt sighed, The next step of the plan then?

Anton nodded. Well check out the farms. Everly is a big landowner around here. He seems to have bought several of the men, at least.

It wasn't hard to find the right area. The real issue was seeing what he wanted. Anton described the handful of fellows he was looking for, I can't guarantee that Pete will still be chubby, Anton said, But that scar on his left cheek should still be there.

Wandering onto farmland would quite annoy people Anton would rather not mess with. Even if most of the guards he sensed were lower cultivation than himself, it was better to just pass by on the roads. Hawk Eyes techniques allowed him to focus his eyes at a far distance. Even if he lost a bit of area, picking out faces of those in the fields wasn't so difficult for the most part. The problem was the full extent of the fields stretched far beyond that of a small town. These were farmlands that fed into Veron and the rest of Ofrurg, and Everly had a large portion of them. There's one, Anton finally said. After picking out five men, Anton passed by a second time but found no more. He then rode towards someone who looked the least like a slave. You there! Taskmaster! Anton waved.

The taskmaster turned towards him. Anton carried a bow that was clearly not of standard make, so the taskmaster would likely have recognized Anton as a cultivator even if one of the nearby guards hadn't whispered to inform him. Yes? What is it? This is the property of the honored Everly.

Of course. I don't wish any trouble. Anton was getting a lot of practice putting on fake smiles. He hated it already. As I passed by, I found myself with some interest in some of your workers. I would like to buy them. I can pay a fair market price. I'm sure you can replace them.

The taskmaster grinned lopsidedly, We *can* replace them, but then I'd have to go to market and purchase more. We only lose out on that.

The man didn't directly refuse to sell. In the end, Anton ended up negotiating a price that was about fifty percent above market value- and that was if the men were in top shape instead of having been engaged in hard labor for most of a year. Though that fatigue was only a temporary detriment to their price, since they seemed to be in mostly good

health otherwise, if worn down. It was more than they were worth, but less than Anton had been worried he might have to pay. The five men- including a quite significantly thinner Pete- were gathered up and formal papers were drafted. The actual exchange would take place in the city. The slaves were branded, so merely handing them over wouldnt suffice. Anton hated every second of negotiating for the freedom of those wrongfully enslaved. If only he could get away with killing all of the guards but that was too dangerous to those he wished to save, and they couldnt escape with *all* of the slaves. How strong would he have to be? Whatever it was, Anton intended to reach that level.

Chapter 47

If it wasnt a journey out of Ofrurg and back, Anton would have preferred to bring the five men away as soon as possible. However, a couple weeks here and there would add up quite significantly. Besides, just leaving them somewhere wasnt his intention. He wasnt sure if he could afford to set everyone up with a proper job and home, but he could at least give them some tools to survive. That included at least the basics of cultivation.

The best part of body tempering, Anton explained, is that even if you dont intend to continue on the path of cultivation, it will still have clear benefits. I would like everyone to at least be able to gather and circulate natural energy before we move on. That will also give you some time to recover your strength.

Pete and the others had been working hard labor on the farms. It wasnt necessarily too far from what their daily lives had been, but with the duration and difficulty of labor increased, and the amount of food decreased. They werent starved, because that wouldnt let them work at all but they were certainly a bit undernourished, and had scars from the whips of the taskmasters. An unnecessary cruelty for the sake of motivation.

Of the five, Pete had the quickest initial success. With some guidance by Anton, he was gathering strands of natural energy within the first hour, slowly circulating small amounts of energy through his body. It would be good for him to move his body while he did so, but at his current point his concentration could only handle controlling the energy while stationary. The others took somewhat longer, and Anton had to gather energy for them to be able to sense it and take a small piece. He guided their flow, tracing the path through their body once then letting go as they repeated the action on their own. The first day of cultivation would show few results besides pain, but if they could complete the first refinement of their body, it would provide benefits for the rest of their lives. They were still young, after all. If nothing else, work in the fields would grow easier. If they chose other professions- something Anton would blame them for not in the slightest- it would still help their daily lives to have increased health.

There were some questions Anton had. The Order freely allowed citizens of Graotan to study the Ninety-Nine Stars. Common knowledge was that cultivating was difficult. While that was true, the benefits for those who didnt have the intention to fully devote themselves to cultivation still seemed significant enough. Anton *knew* the Order cared

for the citizens of Graotan, and would prefer them to be more efficient in their everyday lives. Yet they only really encouraged those they found with talent to cultivate. Perhaps that was the problem. Creating a copy of a cultivation technique wasnt trivial work, and those without sufficient talent might find themselves stuck at the very beginning. Most individuals would need guidance, as Anton was finding. That said, it would be of great benefit to Graotan if everyone could reach even the first star. Perhaps one teacher in each community could achieve what he wished for. Though he wasnt sure how to get to *that* point either.

After a few days, everyone was comfortable enough with cultivation to control energy while walking at a slow pace. While they would certainly be less efficient, it was enough for the moment. Good enough that Anton could move onto the next stage of the plan.

We need to earn money, Anton stated.

Catarina held out a heavy bag of coins, I converted all my contribution points.

Hoyt smiled, I cant say I converted *everything*, but I can help buy the freedom of a few people.

Anton nodded, I would love to be stubborn and refuse, but I cant say to someone, sorry, youre just not worth as much. Anton shook his head, And thats just those I know. But my point still stands. All of what we have now, well just use up. Food and accommodations for travel arent free. Though I would love to find and free everyone this month, its impossible. Even so, we can earn money while we travel. Anton showed the two the map he had, Here in the northwest is Khonard. That is the last known location of Devon, one of my grandsons. He will be easiest to track down. They have an arena there, and if he yet lives I would expect him to still be there. Its a minor arena where only those without cultivation or of low cultivation rank fight, so he has some chance. But the route there is dangerous. Theres another route thats safer but twice the distance, but the shorter one is to our benefit.

Because we can work as guards, right? Catarina nodded. How dangerous is it?

A difficult question to answer, Anton said, However, traveling with others will be safer than with just our group. Wild beasts appear along the route, sometimes territorial magical beasts. The danger shouldnt be too great for us at late Body Tempering, but nothing is certain. The journey could pass with no fighting at all, in which case we would earn a basic rate. Otherwise, we fight alongside others and have higher earnings and more combat experience.

Sounds worthwhile either way, Hoyt said. Do you know the frequency of attacks?

It was hard to find specific details. About half of the travelers along the route encounter some sort of danger, though a portion of that is quite low in tier. Of course, I wouldn't suggest it if I thought there were untoward levels of danger. We need to be alive to save anyone else.

Caravans from Veron to Khonard varied quite significantly by travel pace and size. Those carrying valuable goods- including slaves- might travel with fewer higher ranking guards to keep the pace quick. Those with somewhat lower value goods that still needed to arrive in a timely fashion would gather together in larger groups to distribute the cost of hiring guards among them. After all, a caravan of twice as many people didn't need twice as many guards if there were only incidental attacks by beasts to worry about. Even if bandits were included, a proportionately smaller increase in guards provided a significant deterrent. Ofrurg also cracked down hard on banditry inside of their borders, though just like the Order in Graotan they couldn't completely eradicate the danger. Not without completely eradicating *people*

.

While Anton was willing to pay to free those he knew from slavery, that was already the limit of how far he would support the system. He settled for a group that at least was not transporting slaves, though some of their workers were certainly enslaved. It wasn't going to be possible to completely avoid slavery in a country where it was legal.

The head of the caravan guard was a dark skinned man with a strong aura. He sat outside near where a caravan was beginning to organize itself. It wasn't just his cultivation in mid Spirit Building that made his aura strong, but also the way it was displayed. It was sharp. Like an unsheathed blade, though as Anton and the others approached he didn't feel a threat against them. Greetings, Anton inclined his head, I hear we must talk to you to be hired for caravan security? We would also like to bring five non-combatants along with us.

I am the man you seek, the man's deep voice spoke precisely, with a hint of an Ambati accent. Your names and specializations?

Anton Krantz. I am an archer. I can provide a demonstration, if you wish.

The man nodded, writing something down. In a moment. And you?

Hoyt shrugged, I focus on the axe. I can break through heavy defenses, if we encounter wild beasts.

He nodded again, And you? he turned to Catarina.

I wield a straight sword, but I am also an apprentice formation user.

That seemed to catch his interest. I see. We shall test if your abilities align with your cultivations. He stood up from the table he was sitting at, I am Ayotunde Idowu. I shall challenge each of you there, in that field, to test your skills. He gestured, First, the old man. As he moved, he pulled a large sword out of a sheathe leaning on the table next to him.

He could have said the *archer*, Anton thought as he moved towards where Ayotunde gestured. But perhaps that was the point. To annoy him and throw him off. Ayotunde gave him a generous ten meters of separation to begin with. Enough he could certainly fire a few shots before the man got close. Anton had no belief he would defeat a man in Spirit Building even with a bit of range to begin with, but he could hopefully make a good showing.

Make the first move, Ayotunde said. As you move, so will I.

Anton nodded. With that permission and feeling the mans energy defenses were in place he raised his arm as if to grab an arrow from his quiver, but instead moved his hand to the string, drawing a Spirit Arrow and firing directly towards the mans chest. Ayotunde flicked his sword towards the arrow, but Anton very slightly pulled back on its momentum. That reduced its impact, but let it bypass his parry. The arrow did no damage to the man as it struck his energy, but it slowed him slightly.

Ayotunde was fast on his feet, and his long legs certainly didnt hurt his speed. Anton fired two more quick arrows as the man moved, trying to track his exact motion. He would have liked to move away, but he couldnt even move at half the mans speed so it would be fruitless. Instead, he steadied himself for one final shot. Ayotundes sword came up, ready to sweep towards Anton- its power overwhelming but clearly restrained below the level of a Spirit Building cultivator- and the arrow flew forward. It curved upwards, striking the mans wrist as Anton dodged to the side, shooting another arrow into the mans side as the sword veered slightly off course, slicing smoothly into the ground. The arrow hit his side directly, but it couldnt puncture a hole all the way through his energy.

Anton prepared to sweep out with his leg to throw the man off, but as he did so- Enough, Ayotunde said. Your combat skills are sufficient. He pulled his sword out of the ground, where Anton saw a clean cut in the dirt. He would have needed to expend all of his energy on defense to withstand that attack. Next- Ayotunde gestured to Hoyt.

Chapter 48

Hoyt didnt have the luxury of starting at range like Anton, which meant he had to deal with Ayotundes swift and sharp blade the moment they began. The Spirit Building cultivator was only holding back in terms of energy used, not technique. Hoyt used the momentum of his swings to parry the sword while dealing glancing blows to the man himself. However, he wasnt able to break through Ayotundes defense. The dark-

skinned man was restraining his attacks, but his defenses had the full power of a Spirit Building cultivator.

With a forceful swing, Hoyt knocked the large sword back to the furthest extent of Ayotundes reach, seeming to nearly knock the sword out of his hands. On the backswing, Hoyt aimed straight for Ayotundes chest. With a flash even Anton found hard to follow, Ayotundes sword had crossed in front of the two warriors. Hoyts axe was flying through the air and he had a shallow cut along his forearm. Hoyt held up his hands, Ah a feint. And I fell right for it.

Ayotunde nodded, Your skills are sufficient as well. Next the girl. Show me your skill in formations.

Catarina first displayed a concealing formation. Anton hadnt been on the outside of one, and it was quite a strange experience. In one version she merely disappeared. It wasnt quite perfect, because he could sense traces of her energy, but then again he already knew where she was. If he did not, he could easily miss her. The second version she hid not only herself, but the table Ayotunde had set up for his papers. The wider range allowed Anton to see slight visual flaws but again, he knew where to look. If he were just passing by, he could easily overlook them. Ayotunde also tested Catarinas barriers, ramping up the power of his attacks until he broke through.

Good. All three of you pass. The payment shall be standard for a cultivator of your level, eighth or seventh with the formation user being one higher, at eighth. Combat pay is extra. Ayotunde produced contracts Anton was aware were quite standard. They were quite simple, as such things went. Obviously if they abandoned the caravan they would not get paid- though they could get partial payment if they had to depart the caravan along the way and properly got permission to leave. For the particular route they were going, it was unlikely to be relevant.

A tall man in fine clothes approached. His height limited the visual effects of his pronounced belly, which might have otherwise made him quite round. Idowu! Youre not hiring *more* guards, are you?

Ayotunde looked the man dead in the eye. Caravan Master Wilbur. You tasked me with protecting the caravan. I am merely doing so. Anton could see the sharpness in the mans eyes and almost feel it. The type of energy he cultivated was not a style Anton recognized, though he hadnt been exposed to *that* many types of cultivators. Mostly those from the Ninety-Nine Stars and those hed seen in Edelhull and Veron.

The tall man backed down. Alright. Fine. But I think those youve already hired will be quite sufficient.

With the addition of these three, it shall be enough, Ayotunde said agreeably.

The portly man sighed and turned to the trio of cultivators. A pleasure to meet you. I am Caravan Master Frank Wilbur. I deal mostly in herbs and spices. Normally we do not hire so many guards, but we have quite a number of attached groups this time.

There are a dozen others, Ayotunde explained, Mid to late body tempering. Then an equal number of early body tempering and non-cultivator guards.

All for a dozen wagons. It seems quite excessive to me, Wilbur shook his head, But at least were splitting the costs.

Should trouble arise, you will be wishing we had more. No matter how many we have. They have five followers as well, Ayotunde mentioned.

Right. Have them bring two weeks of rations. We can supply that, of course, but it would cost you. We can handle the water for five more without issue. Now then, I have other things to see to. The caravan master turned and left. Off in the distance he could be heard chastising some workers for how they had loaded goods, Youll unbalance the wagon with a setup like that!

Ayotunde smiled at the group, He is a fine enough man to work for, but he must keep the costs in mind. I too hope that we will not meet much trouble- but if we are to run into trouble we will need each of you. He looked them over, You cultivate the Ninety-Nine Stars, yes? I do not see many from your sect here. More in Ambati. I walk the path of blades, and cultivate the Western Steel Body technique.

Ive heard of it, Hoyt mentioned, Theres a stronger focus on cultivating the body at every stage than many others.

That is correct. Many neglect the power of their own body in favor of the power of energy beyond the first stage. Ayotunde shrugged, It is not impossible to temper both. Just a bit slower.

Id like to hear about it, Anton said. The Ninety-Nine Stars still considers the body during Spirit Building, but Im sure the methods differ. Though of course I dont have any experience at Spirit Building yet.

Ayotunde grinned, Many keep the secrets of cultivation to themselves. They do not know they have the key to treasures the other hold. I would gladly exchange thoughts with the three of you. The young ones have much potential Ayotunde frowned as he looked over Anton, But you are much more difficult to read. Youre not an elder guiding the others, are you?

Anton shook his head, No. Im just a disciple.

Hmm. Now I am very curious. But we must introduce you to the others.

Anton didnt find himself impressed by any of the other guards. It wasnt that he expected them to be as strong as Ayotunde. Obviously they wouldnt be, since they were still in Body Tempering, but their demeanors didnt impress him. However, he knew they should at least be competent in battle.

The entire trip should be about a week in duration, if they did not run into any delays. Pete and the others walked along with the caravan, as did many others. The wagons could carry drivers and a passenger or two, but the majority of the space was reserved for goods. Anton, Hoyt, and Catarina were stationed together in the middle of the caravan. The first day had little of interest, but it was also one of the most unlikely points to encounter trouble.

At night, Catarina arranged the area around the camp into a bit of a formation. Without the ability to modify the wagons themselves or special materials to add power it was only able to have a slight aversion force to keep people and creatures away subconsciously, but Anton knew that should be sufficient for most cases.

Guards stood four shifts during the night, with Anton being in the second. There wasnt much to do except look out at the darkness and up at the stars. He could only do so much of the latter to prevent his thoughts from drifting away. Even if there probably wouldnt be danger, he wanted to be as responsible as possible with his watch. Still, he could cultivate. He focused energy on his eyes and ears, picking out the sounds of myriad insects and the noises of nearby animals. His brain had to filter the large amount of stimulus he was receiving and make sense of it, and the more he practiced the better it was.

He circulated his energy through the rest of his body as well, and of course through the surface of his skin. He just needed some time or one more good push forward to reach the ninth star. Rescuing Pete and the others was emotionally satisfying, but the feeling was tempered by knowing there were so many more people still in captivity. Not just those he knew, but many others. The stars inside of him pulsed as he considered how strong he would need to be to change that. It couldnt be just himself, either. One man couldnt match a country. After all, even if he reached the very peak there would be others as well.

A bolt of golden yellow energy streaked into the woods, spattering into the forest floor below the feet of a wolf. The creature turned to flee, and so did those around it.

... did you miss? Hoyt asked.

They're just wolves. Hungry, maybe, but this is wild area. They should be allowed to live here. Now they'll be a bit more wary of humans. Anton shook his head, And wolf tastes awful. I'm not carrying a carcass with me for a bit of hide, either.

I haven't sensed any magical beasts, Hoyt said.

They don't live close to the road, Catarina commented. But some of them might choose to come here. But I'd be more concerned about bandits. We have too many guards.

Wouldn't the guards dissuade them from attacking? Hoyt asked.

Yes. But the caravan master and guard leader Idowu must know the value of the caravan. They would not hire so many unless there is something of value. But perhaps nothing will happen.

You don't sound convinced, Hoyt said.

Cultivators both prevent and attract trouble, Catarina said. Ofrurg feels like the sort of place that has more of the latter.

We'll see, Anton said. Just remember to keep your eyes and ears open.

Chapter 49

Major, sudden changes tended to leave Pete Sharman in a stunned state for a while. He didn't think it would be much different for anyone else. After being captured and sold as a slave, that period was a few months. Most people in villages like Dungannon worked on farms at least part of the year. Being captured and sold as a slave was a dizzying turn of events that left him spinning for months. The sheer quantity of labor expected of him increased suddenly, and he had little time to think. Just work. Day in and day out. Work hard to hopefully avoid punishment, eat, sleep, repeat. The food was nothing much to speak of. Just enough to keep working and no more. The sleeping accommodations at least kept them from literally freezing to death at night.

He was resigned to that being his whole life, no break in the monotony or time to socialize with others. Combined with the lack of choice, everything just became worse. It dragged on forever, days blurring together and seasons turning.

Then he'd shown up. Anton Krantz. Or a man claiming to be him, anyway. Pete wasn't going to complain, but the man didn't quite look like he remembered. He'd expected someone older? Everyone in Dungannon knew the Krantz farm, or at least knew *of* them. Pete was quite certain he'd seen someone with the same features he thought was Anton, but this fellow was younger. Not young by any means, but merely *old* instead of *ancient*. Perhaps a son? Had one of the sons been named Anton too? That might be it.

It was awkward to ask, and they didnt speak much in a casual manner. He wasnt unapproachable, but it was a strange situation. He bought them out of slavery, freed them on the spot. He promised to bring them somewhere safe and began to teach them to cultivate. They couldnt thank him enough, and he wouldnt let them. Not too much, anyway.

Just doing what should be done, he said. Im trying to make the world a less awful place, for myself.

That was what he said, and Pete didnt have the mental fortitude to argue with him. Anton was one of those types, anyway. Hed do everything he thought needed to be done and not expect anyone to say a word.

Cultivation hed never expected to actually set foot along that path. He hadnt even really known anything about it. It was a vague, mysterious thing. But when Anton explained what to do, Pete realized there was simply more to the world than hed paid attention to. Maybe he just hadnt known where or how to look. Natural energy was a strange thing and while tempering his body was hard, it was no worse than a day out in the fields- and it felt better afterwards. He was improving himself instead of slowly wearing himself down.

Anton said they could do whatever they wanted. Maybe that was actually true, but Pete wasnt sure what he wanted except that it wasnt staying in Ofrurg. So he walked along the road with Anton and the caravan the cultivators were guarding. Some day he would figure out what Anton wanted and maybe he could pay him back. Though it was a bit difficult to pay back your entire life.

In accordance with his own advice, Anton kept his senses on alert as much as was feasibly possible. During the day he scanned the sides of the roads for anything hiding in wait. At night he listened, mainly to the comforting hoots of owls and other sounds to be expected of night in a forest. The howl of wolves was some cause for concern, but they did not seem to be close and would generally avoid large groups of people. If magical beasts were involved then any standard behavior might be ignored, but speculating on every possible event that might happen was merely a waste of time.

There were too many places for things to hide in the trees, so Anton was somewhat relieved when the terrain became more rocky, with less ability for large trees and undergrowth to thrive. The road itself was wide enough to provide little concealment along its length, and it had been in good condition for most of the journey.

Catarina walked alongside the road, in the rough terrain. She kicked rocks about and dragged the sheath of her sword in the dirt. She cut branches off of trees and replanted flowers at her whim. Perhaps some of it was boredom, but Anton knew at least some portion of it had something to do with formations. Except when they camped at night,

she didnt actually have the time to complete a formation, but just because she couldnt complete one didnt mean she couldnt think about how she would set one up in any given area.

Antons eyes landed on the road. From the middle of the caravan it was difficult to make out what was in front, but the constant practice was good for his technique. He didnt see anything that stood out on the road but perhaps that was the problem. It was *too* smooth. I think I see something. Im going to go talk to guard leader Idowu.

Hoyt nodded, and Catarinas eyes flashed. She began a more intentional series of movements where she stood alongside the road. The caravan kept moving, but Anton could move much more quickly than just horses pulling wagons.

Ayotunde obviously sensed Anton approach, turning his head to see him. Yes? Is there something amiss?

Im not sure, Guard Leader. But my eyes picked out a portion of road up ahead, it is too flat? Not enough pebbles and irregularities. It could be a pit trap...

Ayotunde turned his head back to the front, focusing energy on his eyes. While he didnt have a formalized technique, he could certainly improve his vision a reasonable amount. A pit trap? I think not. No, its something else. He raised his hand calling out behind them, Halt the caravan! Be on guard! The rear guard especially, check the back! He gestured to Anton, Hurry forward with me. I believe I have something interesting to show you. Ayotunde ran forward at a quick pace, Anton falling a bit behind. The dark-skinned man stopped a dozen meters short of the spot Anton had seen, picking up a small boulder by the side of the road. It must have weighed as much as a man, but after he used two hands to get a solid grip and hefted it high, he tossed it forward with just one hand. The boulder landed on the patch of too-perfect road and exploded.

There was only an instant between when it touched the ground and when the ground fell apart. At the same instant, the boulder shattered into pieces. Anton merely saw great pincers the length of his arms retracting into the ground, their initial movement having been too fast to see. The ground itself was no longer perfect in the area, but the dirt shook and it started evening out.

As I thought. A valley chomper, as expected. Which means- howls came from behind the caravan, -we should get back. Scavengers like to drive herds of animals into these, then feasts on whatever is left. Ayotunde kicked up chunks of road as he sprinted back towards the caravan.

Anton followed at a slightly more conservative pace. If absolutely necessary he could fire from one end of the caravan to the other, but as his eyes picked out the wolves in the rear he saw they werent magical beasts. They were somewhat larger than he might expect, but they didnt seem healthy. They had sandy brown fur, mottled with patches of black, white, and grey- but with patches also missing randomly. Anton could just make

out the ribs of some of the creatures. So far, they were merely barking and snarling at those in the rear, clearly hoping to chase them forward. The caravaneers had some trouble keeping the horses under control, but the rear guards were keeping the wolves at bay.

Then Anton's ears picked up an extremely familiar twang and the sound of something cutting through the air. Some of the guards had bows, but the sound Anton heard was off the road. Anton's eyes flicked towards the sounds with enough alacrity for him to yell, Bandits! with just enough time to give people half a second to react. Fortunately the dozen arrows claimed no lives in the initial volley. Though Anton could sense energy enhancing them, only one had the sense of an actual archery technique attached. That arrow struck the side of one of the other guards, but he'd managed to rouse some extra energy defenses with the warning. Enough to survive, at least.

Perhaps if they'd driven into the valley chomper, the chaos would have made the caravan completely incapable of defending themselves, but though some of the guards were out of place, they were able to react. Anton didn't even have to move further to fire back at the bandits. His first arrow flew straight towards the ribs of a tall fellow among the bandits. They were ready for an attack, but perhaps not ready for the arrow to redirect itself as they leaned backwards. Anton had thought they would retreat that way, pulling away from him at the angle he was shooting. As the Spirit Arrow pierced into their ribs, Anton realized it was a woman. He supposed that made just as much sense as anyone else becoming a bandit, but it threw off his rhythm slightly.

Out from crouching behind larger boulders or from behind some of the wider trees came yet more bandits. They were far enough from the road that they couldn't be easily sensed- and clearly they had trained to limit how much their energy was noticed- but that distance also meant they had to take time to approach the caravan.

With the woman he'd shot ducking back into full cover and clutching the hole in her side, Anton picked another target. It was a meaningless thought in the grand scheme of things, but Anton didn't want the first person he killed to be a woman. As his second shot flew true into the sternum of one of the archers somewhere in mid Body Tempering, his wish was granted. However, that shot drew the attention of the better archer among the group. Somewhere in late Body Tempering, perhaps even the peak.

As an arrow flew towards Anton, time seemed to slow in a moment of great concentration. He judged the trajectory of the arrow in a mere instant- compared to Elder Kseniyas shots it hardly moved at all. His body still was a moment slow to react and it took a portion of his defensive energy with it as it passed, but he took no damage to his person.

Nobody else existed. The people in the caravan next to him would have to handle themselves. Even Hoyt and Catarina faded from his thoughts, though not consciously. He *couldn't* think about them, or he would die. An arrow of his own was rapidly shot at the enemy archer, even as he tumbled off the road to where there was more cover. If he

moved to stand on the boulder in front of him he could get a good shot but leave himself open. Instead he turned slightly, running in front of said boulder. He lined up his next shot as he moved, aware that his accuracy would suffer. Another arrow came in return, swirling energy betraying its presence but also signifying its deadliness. It flew just over his head as Anton continued running straight ahead- into a small dip that couldnt be seen from the bandits angle.

A rock slammed into the guts of an approaching bandit as Catarina kicked it towards the oncoming group. It merely bounced off of his defensive energy, but it slowed him half a step. I told you I wasnt paranoid! Catarina said to Hoyt. She pointed to another rock, That one! Just throw it anywhere!

Hoyt reached down with one hand to grab a rock the size of his head. While she said *anywhere*, what she really meant was away from where shed been messing around to set up a formation, in the minute or so since Anton had said he saw something ahead. Hoyt wasnt sure if the formation was working or if he was lucky, but the rock hit straight into the ankle of one of the approaching enemies, causing them to stumble. He ducked beneath an arrow from one of the archers, though most of them were approaching closer and drawing melee weapons.

Bandits were attacking from the other side of the road as well, but Ayotunde had turned that way the moment they appeared. Hoyt didnt have the luxury of turning to watch, but several sources of energy had met Ayotunde and then disappeared a moment later. That seemed to be a good sign. The rear of the caravan was still beset by wolves, but they werent especially eager to attack. They were merely holding a standoff with some of the guards there, tying up resources and three guards.

The first bandit to reach Hoyt found himself missing an arm as he tried to parry Hoyts axe. He would have liked to attribute that entirely to his own skill, but the bandit was slightly lower in cultivation and had been sluggish with his control of energy at the last moment. The formation at work. Though the formation only covered the area immediately around Hoyt and Catarina, there were perhaps only thirty or forty bandits total. They outnumbered those in the caravan, but they were individually weaker than the best. Though that was only because they could count Ayotunde. He was fending off almost half of the attackers all on his own. That was a middle Spirit Building cultivator for you.

Hoyt readied himself for the next enemies to approach, standing close to Catarina and one of the other guards as she channelled her energy into the simple formation she had set up. There had been some dangerous arrows from someone late in Body Tempering and Hoyt sensed that same energy further off the road along with Antons. Catarina obviously wanted to go help, but if she left the formation their side of the caravan would probably collapse.

Chapter 50

A large pack of wolves stood behind the caravan. There were a few cultivators fending them off, but several of those had split off to fight bandits. That left fewer people at the rear, and among those was Pete and the other villagers. They were technically cultivators, though probably shouldn't call themselves that without even having finished the first star. They might not have had the same strength, but they *did* have weapons. They stood together side by side. James. Steven. Watch the flanks. If any get too close, just swing at them. Don't let them spook the horses. This wasn't their job, but sitting around being helpless wasn't something Pete wanted to encounter ever again. The wolves were a bit tall, but they weren't too bulky. And they clearly didn't want to get in an actual fight. With a few people standing firm together, any time one approached a quick swipe at it with a sword drove it away.

It wasn't enough to kill the wolves, but they had to hold out. Relying on others to ultimately save them was a bit frustrating, but that was part of why they were cultivating. They would grow stronger, so they could do what they *wanted* to do, instead of what circumstances forced upon them. For that, they had to survive the moment.

Three of the wolves sprang forward at one of the cultivators. Pete wasn't that good at judging cultivation levels, especially not in the heat of battle. He should be mid body tempering somewhere? It didn't matter. The man held the wolves at bay with a spear, but they were spreading around him as he backed towards the rear wagon and more were moving in. Pete gestured the other two to one side, then came at the left wolf from its own flank.

His sword flicked out, barely scraping along the creature's fur. An overestimation of his own reach. He was intending to kill the beast, but instead focused it on him. There were a few moments of standoff after it turned, Pete holding his sword ready in front, trying to figure out how to attack. Then the wolf leaped at his throat.

More by virtue of having the proper stance drilled into him than any movement of his own, Pete's sword drove into the creature's chest. It didn't immediately stop the wolf, however. Teeth and claws scraped at Pete's face and chest. There would probably be more scars to go with the one on his cheek but only if he survived. Pete thrashed and struggled, trying to pull his sword out for another attack but after some time rolling around on the ground he realized he was just stuck under the body of the wolf. It was heavy, even when emaciated like it was but he had decent enough strength. Once he was more methodical, he pushed it off of him and was able to stand. Not a glorious battle but the wolves were beginning to retreat. As for the rest of the battle...

Splinters flew at Anton's eyes as an arrow struck a tree directly to his side. The arrow remained there as a reminder of how close he was to dying. But while he hadn't expected a violent end, Anton had already come to terms with his death. There were

new things he had to do before it happened, but he wasn't afraid of it. Besides, this death wouldn't be random and unexpected. He could *do* something about this with his own hands. Fighting arrows was much better than fighting age.

The two archers were moving further and further afield, away from the rest of the battle. Anton had driven them away half on purpose and half by it merely being the best cover for himself. Dipping around boulders and into gulleys made it hard to hit him. His own arrows seldom found their mark, but seldom wasn't never. It was merely an issue that his opponent had a higher cultivation. With the range involved, Anton couldn't keep quite the level of power he needed to pierce through their energy defenses. He had no interest in testing the converse.

His opponent seemed to be getting frustrated. That was what Anton read from his face. Why couldn't he hit Anton? It was quite simple. Anton already knew where he was going to shoot. With about two thirds accuracy. The remaining third he had to dodge once he picked out the actual trajectory, instead of just anticipating the attack. Anton's opponent likewise predicted his shots, but Anton had an advantage there. Changing the trajectory of Spirit Arrows was easier than that of physical arrows and his arrows were faster. He didn't have the luxury of time to study his opponent's bow, but from what he saw and the sounds it made it wasn't quite as good as Anton's. A little bit less *snappy*.

Even though he was the only one who had landed any hits, that didn't mean he was winning. His opponent might run out of arrows before him, or they might not. Anton could shoot a hundred or two hundred Spirit Arrows consecutively in training, but in the heat of combat where much of his energy went to movement it wasn't the same. More importantly, he felt the flow state he'd fallen into gradually fading. His awareness of the rest of the world was returning though really it was just the sharpness of his opponent that was fading and by contrast he was more aware of the rest by comparison.

Anton's eyes scanned the surroundings, falling onto Catarina far off in the distance. She was fighting against several others. Hoyt was nearby, bleeding from a cut on his forehead. Pete and the others were at the rear of the caravan, fending off the wolves with some of the cultivators.

He was aware that he might lose, but as he made the firm choice not to everything fell into place. Anton formed a Spirit Arrow, pulling his hand back next to his ear. He saw the bandit doing much the same. It was a question of who would choose to dodge which way, and how much that would throw off their aim. But as his last moment of clarity diminished, Anton released the Spirit Arrow. He moved forward with it, at great speed. His body remained where it was, but his vision locked on the other arrow. They seemed as if they might collide head on, but they merely brushed past each other. Though they didn't *directly* touch, the energy around them each diverted the other arrow slightly. Anton was now over halfway to his target. Three quarters. He could see the man's eyes with clarity, the way the bow was oscillating as it returned to its resting state. He looked straight into the man's eyes, and that was where he flew where his arrow flew.

He came back to his bodys normal senses as blood trickled down the side of his neck. Though he hadnt been fully in his body, he was stepping out of the way of the arrow to the best of his ability and it had been just enough. But hed once again been one with his arrow. It was something he wished he could do at will, but never really got the hang of. He placed his hand on his neck, where the cut was. He had no worries about being shot. He *knew* his arrow struck true, even though his opponents energy hadnt fully faded yet.

Seeing that their plans hadnt gone quite as they wished, the bandits were already fleeing. Fewer than a quarter of their numbers were dead, but while they might *possibly* win if they remained, no individual valued their life so little that they wanted to stay. Anton resolved to give them a reminder to not consider it again. It wasnt honorable to shoot fleeing foes, but neither was it honorable to be a bandit. Three arrows flew out in quick succession before the bandits were too far for him to reach, though he had no intent to chase them down on his own after that point.

Anton realized hed slightly underestimated the bandits casualties. On the side of the road he was on, his count had been accurate. Ayotundes side had much higher casualties. Though he was quite able to take down that many opponents by himself, Anton could clearly see why a further dozen cultivator guards had been necessary. Two mid body tempering guards were dead, and several others were injured. There were a small number of casualties among the merchants as well, and Caravan Master Wilbur was speaking to Ayotunde in hushed tones. The sort of level tempered ears could pick up easily enough with just a tiny bit of extra energy.

... after us? the caravan master said worriedly.

Ayotunde shook his head. They were merely interested in whoever ran into this hazard first. They could have been hoping that I would be injured by the valley chomper. Unless they failed to notice me somehow.

Wilbur sighed, You were right, as always. What bad luck.

Someone would run into this. Now, the journey should be safer for the next several trips, until some new group decides to try their luck.

Wilbur shook his head. Didnt have to be us, though. With that, he was off to deal with other issues.

Ayotunde waved as he saw Anton approaching. There you are! Good work. No doubt I would have spotted that valley chomper, but only once closer. The eyes of an archer are truly something else.

Anton smiled, letting his eyes flicker with energy, Its all about the technique. If I cant see as far as I want to shoot, Ill become worthless.

Ayotunde snorted, Its quite a distance. I heard you engaged someone at the peak of Body Tempering?

I believe so, Anton said. Its hard to say for certain now. Anton looked around. What will we do with the bodies?

We bury our own. Deep enough to discourage scavengers. The rest do not deserve a proper burial. If we did not have to watch out for the caravan, I would like to track down their lair

It took a moment for Anton to consider. He could indeed track them on his own, maybe even kill a few but there were enough bandits remaining that they would either leave the caravan undefended or risk too much with a smaller group. If only he was in Spirit Building. That way, he could attack from a further distance and retreat safely, even if he couldnt directly engage so many. What about the valley chomper?

You up for some more archery? Ayotunde asked. Its strong enough to pierce through most armor, but its mobility is negligible. I can perhaps trick it out of its trap once more, and if you can shoot it the instant it surfaces we might kill it. If not, it will flee underground. I would prefer not to pass the problem on to the next group to pass, if we have the option.

There are spare bows, Anton said. We might as well apply those too.

A few minutes later, any of the guards who were in good shape had a bow in hand. All of them would have probably fired a bow at some point, but few of them could be considered *archers*. If Anton were to judge, Hoyt and Catarina had the best form. That might have just been his bias, though.

Alright, Ayotunde hefted another large rock. Prepare to draw. You want your arrow to arrive the instant after the rock.

The rock sailed through the air. A handful of arrows were in the air after it but they veered off course and even passed it. Anton had gathered an exceptionally strong Spirit Arrow, and he was aware of how precise the timing had to be with the one previous view of the valley chomper. Before the rock landed his arrow was released. Then there was a loud crunch, pincers visible in the air, crushing the rock to pieces. Another handful of arrows struck the general area a second later after the creature retracted into its sandy pit. But blood splattered on the dirt behind it.

It should be dead, Anton said. If it cares at all for its organs.

I heard its carapace crack, Ayotunde said. Nice shot.

If I have all the time in the world, as an archer I would be ashamed to fail such a shot. I haven't been shooting arrows for a century for nothing.

After waiting for a minute, Ayotunde walked forward. Then he shoved his arms into the loose ground that had previously appeared so precise and smooth. He yanked them back out with a large bodied creature that seemed to be half mandibles. He turned the creature towards the group and looked through it at them. It was only a small hole, less than the diameter of a pinky finger, but the edges were nearly smooth.

Good! He said. Now we just need to pack the road firm again. He clapped his hands, And we can feast on valley chomper! I assure you, none of you have ever had anything like it before.