

Elder Cultivator

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There was a reason nobody had eaten anything like valley chomper before. The muscle was extremely dense and chewy. Anton wouldn't have called it *food* or even *edible*. Ayotunde seemed to derive great pleasure from watching others try to eat it though he also consumed it himself. Perhaps it was an acquired taste. Either way, it worked Anton's jaw muscles to try to eat it.

Though the merchants and cultivators grumbled about being attacked, Anton found the lack of concern for the deaths to be rather disconcerting. Proper respect was paid for allies, and while he wasn't interested in performing a nice ceremony for bandits it seemed strange to take so much death in stride. It wasn't like the deaths Anton had experienced for most of his life, the deaths of time and disease. On the other hand he had little emotional connection to the guards who had perished. He just thought that human life should matter more.

The promise of extra pay for the battle and the spoils of war did little to offset the sense of apathy. The rest of the journey gave Anton time to ponder on those thoughts.

Since there had been a reasonable chance that they wouldn't encounter any actual difficulties, the fact that the rest of the journey went smoothly was expected, if not particularly relaxing. Anton kept his eyes and ears busy looking for further trouble until the signs of civilization were visible on the horizon. Anton couldn't say that Khonard was much different from Veron, though its layout was quite different. Traffic was mostly expected to flow in from the east and north, instead of all directions like Veron. Their approach from the south came with fewer encounters of other travelers.

After collecting his pay, Anton found he made enough to purchase another one or two people from slavery. There was also a bit extra to be made from the sale of some of the bandits weapons and armor. If he made the same amount every week, within a year he could afford to free every villager of Dungannon who had been enslaved, if he could find them all. And in that same year how many others would have to die? In a practical sense Anton should have been concerned that it eventually might be him but he merely thought about the totals. Most journeys would be less dangerous and less profitable, but Anton could see why there were relatively few cultivators at the higher levels. Even if they had the talent, many would perish along the way. It was easy to say only the foolish or reckless would die, but it could also happen from bad luck. Then again, was it much different from a normal life? Anton was extremely unlikely to fall and break his neck or catch a sickness now that he was a cultivator, but such mundane deaths happened to people all the time.

But perhaps he was looking at things the wrong way. He should consider what good he did for the world, not what ill he failed to stop. Though the route they had taken was indeed more dangerous, several trips along the other route had a similar chance of danger. People had to travel between cities regardless of haste. So if he could prevent some death while earning money to redeem those he wanted to save, was that a bad thing? He just wished there were more things to do that didn't involve violence. He already felt the desire to return to the Order where he could be more productive with his cultivation instead of merely violent. Then again, Anton supposed other sects had to have similar peaceful methods- but for travelers like him the jobs would clearly fall on the more dangerous side.

Inns came in various levels of cost and value. If one merely wanted a place to sleep, getting a roof over their head was simple. Anton had a bit more desire than that, but a simple room was not hard to get. On the other hand, there were more advantageously located inns for cultivators that were around higher concentrations of natural energy and might even have energy gathering formations. The first was more affordable, and since Catarina could at least provide temporary formations for the group the price was most efficient.

Combat allowed for quicker growth in cultivation, though it was balanced by the risks involved. Each of the trio had gained something from the battle. Hoyt had reached the seventh star not too long before, but he was making great strides towards the eighth star through his own efforts and Anton's guidance. Even Catarina actually asked for Anton's guidance, because she didn't find herself naturally progressing as quickly while tempering her head. The problem was that she'd never really had to strain her eyes and ears for anything, and merely circulating energy only did so much. She was close to breaking through to the eighth star.

Anton found himself pushing towards the ninth star. The cultivation of his skin was nearing its peak, at least what he could accomplish. His skin regained a small amount of its youth, tightness and durability returning. Pushing himself beyond his limits was becoming almost a routine. With his eyes set far beyond Body Tempering, he cultivated with vigor and formed the ninth star. The next star was the real challenge. The tenth star was the third prime tempering and the end of Body Tempering, a recultivation of the whole body. Whether or not he could get past that point would determine his entire future as a cultivator. But there was no point in considering whether or not he could. He had to, therefore he would. That was all there was to it.

Pete and the other four from Dungannon were now past ten days into cultivating. By any measurement that was extremely new. Even the experience of battle did little for them, but Anton could at least sense changes to their body as they progressed through the first full body tempering. If nothing else they should be able to complete the first star, and that would improve the quality of their life. He wanted to give them the chance to seek their own futures but it was unsafe for them to go off on their own just yet and

nobody wished to remain in Ofrurg. He would lead them back into Graotan soon enough, but they hadn't come to Khonard for nothing.

Devon should be in Khonard. The last information was that he still lived, fighting in an arena. That could change at any time, but Anton had to hope he'd lasted the last few months after he made it half a year. He still found himself nervous about it.

Khonard had several competing arenas. The title of grand arena shifted between the various arenas in the city, but the northeastern arena had not held that title in decades. It had gained a reputation as a more mundane arena where common folk could more easily afford to watch arena fights. Unfortunately, the fact that it didn't display much in the way of cultivators fighting didn't make it less lethal, since generally people of *vaguely* similar strength would fight each other.

Those who owned the arena generally placed their name on it, along with any titles. Thus, the northeastern arena was also the Irvin arena, with no other names. But despite it being the least prominent arena in the city, it wasn't a place of no consequence. Anton felt the presence of several late Body Tempering cultivators throughout the arena, clearly guards and not visitors.

No matches today, the guards out front informed Anton and the others as they approached.

That's quite alright, Anton said. I'm actually interested in making a purchase of one of the combatants. Is the arena master or one of his assistants available?

You'd want the administration, across the street there. Everywhere else is off limits.

Even during a day with matches inside passageways would be guarded, especially to stop slaves from getting out. Though a single one of the guards should be able to handle any would-be escapees if it came down to that. While forcibly freeing his kin might be a pleasant idea, it simply wasn't practical even if they made it away from the arena. Well go check there. Having Catarina and Hoyt with him made Anton seem more important, at least he presumed so. At least he was clearly not a lone cultivator, and that could impact business dealings.

The offices across the street appeared quite pleasant, though Anton wouldn't expect any less. They were similarly guarded, though with somewhat lower cultivations. More of a reminder than a barrier to attacks. Any foolish attempt at a heist of some sort would have city guards coming in moments, in addition to those from the arena itself.

An assistant sat in the lobby behind a desk, shuffling through some papers. He looked up as Anton and the others entered. Welcome, what is your business with the Irvin arena? Do you wish to sign up to participate in battles?

Not this time, Anton said. I was hoping to purchase one of your combatants. Devon Gardner would be his name.

Of course, sir, the man bowed his head. Let me go check if the arena master is able to see you. He returned a few moments later and gestured them down a hallway.

It was somewhat uncomfortable to sit down in a luxurious chair that he knew was funded by the blood of others, possibly his own kin, but Anton maintained as pleasant of a demeanor as he could in front of the arena master.

So, youre interested in buying Devon Gardner, the man nodded. He was a large man, well muscled. He had reached the peak of Body Tempering by Antons judgement, though it was harder to tell with his cultivation method not being the Ninety-Nine Stars. In fact, your timing couldnt be better. He has recently advanced to mid body tempering, and we have few who are suited to match him. We would be quite happy to sell him to you.

Anton was glad things wouldnt be difficult, and even for Devons apparent gain of cultivation ability. He supposed it was natural to at least give people a chance to cultivate, because it could improve their performances- though he imagined they didnt receive access to any techniques of particular merit. The downside was that he would certainly be more expensive. Still, Anton should have enough to cover the price and he could borrow some from Catarina or Hoyt if absolutely necessary.

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The process of purchasing Devon moved quite swiftly. The longest part of the whole process was heading over to the cells in the arena where Devon was kept to make sure he was the right person. After all, Anton didnt want to spend so much money on the *wrong* Devon Gardner. The dingy cells they passed on the way didnt encourage Anton, but they passed all of those to enter another section. Devon had a full door with a small barred window. It allowed for more privacy but Anton was certain it was merely meant for added security. He only had to glance inside to see this was indeed the right person. Currently, he was sleeping and Anton saw no reason to change that. It would be nice to talk to him, but he would much prefer to finalize the deal first, including payment. Would an arena master raise the price just because he found out they were family? Absolutely. He couldnt expect people who bought and sold others to always engage in respectable business tactics.

Then they were back in the arena masters office, writing up papers and finalizing everything. Anton was certain he could have gotten a better price but only if he was willing to wait. He could have let the man stew on an offer for a while, while Devon remained entrapped. He could have also stabbed himself in the leg, but he didnt know why he would do either of those.

Things were mere moments away from wrapping up in a satisfactory manner when the assistant from out front scurried into the room. Arena master. An urgent message for you. He walked up next to the man and whispered in his ear. It was, of course, extremely rude to eavesdrop on private conversation. If Anton had any respect for those involved, he might have considered whether or not he should. Energy flickered to his ears to catch what the assistant was saying clearly. The young mistress of the Potenza arena is here. She has stated her intentions to purchase Devon Gardner the mans eyes flicked towards Anton and the others waiting nearby.

... tell her I shall be out momentarily. The arena master smiled awkwardly as Antons eyes drilled into him. The man wrung his hands together for a moment before speaking. As an honest businessman I do not like to back out of an arrangement already in progress Anton wasnt sure if he could kill the man just by looking at him, but he did his best. ... and I wont, the arena master swallowed. But for your sake, I will give you the opportunity to let go of the deal. A member of the Potenzas is here wishing to purchase the same slave and it would be better for both of us if they were allowed to fulfill their wishes.

Anton knew a few things. Of key importance was that the Potenza arena catered more towards matches involving cultivators. Thus their arena earned more money and they had more influence than the Irvin arena where he was currently negotiating. Anton turned to see Hoyt and Catarina behind him. Then his eyes moved beyond them, though he couldnt see anything in that direction. He could, however, feel cultivators. One in late or even peak of Body Tempering, and one in Spirit Building. Early? Mid? It was difficult to tell. Catarina and Hoyt would surely support him. Would they actually be attacked in the city? Surely not. But things could be made very difficult for them and they had to leave the protection of the city eventually. A sticky situation. I will speak to her. Why dont you introduce us?

The arena master smiled awkwardly, Very well he looked slightly relieved, actually, since that would shift most of the displeasure away from himself. But he clearly also didnt want to upset three late Body Tempering cultivators. If Anton were alone things might have gone differently. The man led them out into the lobby. Young mistress Potenza, what an honor to have you here!

The young woman who stood in front of them had clearly put in the effort to be visually striking. She had long blonde hair that flowed past her waist along with armor made to emphasize the female form- yet still practical. The way she carried herself was certainly confident perhaps *too*

confident. The way she turned and looked at them spoke of a young woman who always got her way even when she really shouldnt. Im sure you heard what I want. Hurry up, then.

Before we get to that this man here, Anton Krantz, wished to speak with you on the manner. The arena master gestured to Anton, then shuffled backwards.

Anton stepped forward- not too close, seeing how the Spirit Building man she had as a guardian stood behind her shoulder. I am sorry to say after you came all this way that I am already in the process of purchasing Devon Gardner. Im sure there are others available you will find to your liking.

The young mistress of the Potenza arena folded her arms in front of her. So? Give him up. I already have plans for him in our arena.

Its not so simple-

Her eyes flashed, Fine. Ill pay you double. Happy?

Its not a matter of money, Anton said. I will not be giving him up for sale.

With a flash, the sword at her side pointed at Anton. He held up a hand to stop Catarina and Hoyt from moving. If you wont sell then fight me! We shall bet ownership of the man on a duel!

Anton internally sighed. He usually appreciated enthusiasm in people, but this young woman had hers directed in all the wrong places. He would prefer not to settle things with a battle, but did he have a choice? Fight now, one on one or possibly later, against an unknown group. Or let her take Devon to fight in an arena, one more dangerous to him than his current situation. Perhaps if he survived for a few months she would have had enough of him. But if not there might be no other chance. A duel between just the two of us?

Of course. I am not afraid to fight a weak old man.

I will accept on the condition that no grudges be held between us, regardless of the victor. Anton looked to the guardian behind her for that, who nodded slightly.

Then we shall fight! she pointed her sword towards the arena master. Prepare the arena!

How abrupt. But Anton couldnt say he would be more ready at any other time.

The master of the Irvin arena sighed as he looked up into the bare stands. What a waste. Tonina Potenza fighting would fill the place up and earn quite a bit of money even if her opponent was an old man. The cultivation disparity between them was not large, though there was a clear difference in talent. At least he would get away with the price of a good slave and neither group angered at *him* specifically. With the bet of the rights of ownership of Devon Gardner on the line, Anton Krantz and Tonina Potenza shall duel according to the rules of the arena. You may begin!

If he was a betting man- and he was- he would have bet money on Tonina. Unfortunately, he didnt get to bet on this fight either. That was too bad, because while the cultivation difference wasnt that great, one was young and strong the other quite old, clearly having struggled to reach his current level.

The fact that the old man was an archer barely mattered- he only managed to fire a single arrow formed of energy before his opponent reached him. Then a swift slice with a sword and he was actually, that was quite a good dodge on his part. The way the old man moved was actually quite graceful? How surprising. It spoke volumes that he was able to dodge continuous attacks with a sword while still firing his bow. Unfortunately, his attacks simply couldnt penetrate Toninas defense. Arrows struck her shoulder and her waist but never penetrated through her armor. All she needed was one good slice to cut the man in two, or at least lop off an arm. The Irvin arena was not set up for nonlethal fights between cultivators, though of course the old man could surrender if he managed to get an arm just *halfway* lopped off.

That would happen at any moment. Toninas sword wasnt even a centimeter from striking him half of the time. The old man *had* managed to gain a bit of distance, but fighting on the defensive with a bow was simply untenable. He might be able to retreat with extensive use of his energy, but he would use more backing up than Tonina would attacking. It was only for the moment that he was pulling further away. Except, the gap kept growing, and growing.

Toninas movements were slow. It seemed to be a struggle to lift her arm, and she held her right shoulder with her left hand. She stepped forward, a shot to her ankle piercing through her energy defenses but not her armor. It still had an impact, however, and sent her onto one knee. The distance between them was now more than a handful of meters. The old man Anton pulled back his bow with a particularly powerful arrow charged up. Surrender, his voice was steady. Calm.

I- you- Tonina stuttered. No way! You cheated! I know you did! she threw her sword onto the ground in anger.

The arena master swallowed. It seemed like things werent going to end very well at all. Should he step forward to diffuse the situation, or move out of the blast radius? A difficult question. But it was his arena. He should probably do something before he regretted whatever happened.

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It was unclear to Anton what he was supposed to do with an opponent who had thrown down her weapon but not officially surrendered. He was far enough away that he could afford a quick glance at her guardian off to the side, who merely tendered an apologetic look. The master of the Irvin arena rushed to his rescue. Do you wish to continue the battle, Tonina Potenza?

No. I lost. But it wasn't fair. I fought against an old man who's been cultivating for like a century! She stomped her foot down pointing her finger at Anton. I demand a rematch! Tomorrow! No- in one month's time! I'll be much stronger then. She spoke that second part quite confidently, and Anton honestly wasn't surprised. It was likely quite true that in one month she could be significantly stronger. That didn't change anything, however. So you refuse to honor the terms of the deal, Anton said.

It doesn't count! she demanded.

Young mistress, her guardian approached. Let me speak to him. I believe we can come to a satisfactory conclusion.

Fine, she stomped her foot and turned around.

Since any sort of official duel was clearly over, Catarina and Hoyt made their way towards Anton. What a brat, Catarina said.

Hoyt grunted, clearly not of positive opinion but perhaps a bit more reluctant to voice his opinion in front of her Spirit Building guardian.

The man approached to a reasonable distance. Anton Krantz. Were everything up to me, I would be happy to settle the matter here. But if the young mistress leaves in this state, the matter will become quite public regardless of my efforts, and the master and mistress of the Potenzas may not see things quite the same way. I assume you are still unwilling to give up your purchase? We can increase the offer even further. Anton's face told him everything necessary. I thought not. Let me be plain. The young mistress is not far from Spirit Building. In one month, you will be unable to win against her. I know it is not fair, but it is difficult for you to refuse the rematch. In that case, it might be better to accept the offer at this time.

One month Anton stroked his chin. The step between Body Tempering and Spirit Building was a big one. Even if he reached the peak of Body Tempering and she didn't even complete the first part of Spirit Building, their relative powers would swing in her favor. Her attacks really had carried dangerous force, and while he might still be able to win if he weren't concerned about heavily injuring her he also might die. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars couldn't stand behind him so easily with the distances involved. While the laws of Ofrurg theoretically protected him, he could be killed or made to disappear- and it wouldn't really matter whether or not there were consequences afterwards. It was unfortunate, but laws didn't apply to larger groups in exactly the same way. But he couldn't give up now. One month. We shall write up a formal contract.

The guardian maintained an expressionless face. Are you certain?

Quite.

Very well. I have no wishes to go against the Potenzas best interests but that also includes avoiding public incidents as much as possible. If you will but give me a moment to track down the young mistress and prevent her from publicizing events to her detriment.

The contract was solid, and the terms quite reasonable. Though some of that depended on whether or not Anton was able to win in a rematch. The official terms now included the caveat that whoever lost would be the one to pay the purchase price of Devon. In short, if Anton won he would be quite pleased and if he lost he would have no grandson and little money. But he also might be *dead*, and money was just money. While he could use that to redeem others, people werent just a price. He couldnt refuse to try to help family just because he *might* lose the chance to help others. The most important part was the result relied on his own actions.

He had one month.

The sound of a sword cutting apart the air and the sweeping of a wider bladed two handed axe were punctuated by the impact of blade, handle, and the energy covering both. Weapons clashed back and forth, colliding with each other and with the two wielding the weapons.

Anton gripped the sword tightly in his hands. The sword itself wasnt much. Just a reasonably priced weapon with enough weight and durability. The swings werent elegant, but they were quick. With the advantage of two stars of cultivation, he mostly matched Hoyt. Or rather, he was *forcing* himself to match Hoyt. If he used his bow, he could win handily but it wasnt about winning. It was about what his body did. His body had trained to use the bow sufficiently, but he needed to temper his entire body once more. Unlike the initial tempering, every part of him had already undergone significant change. Even a similar amount of growth required many times the work- not least because the tenth star was a prime.

Catarina maintained a formation that would stop the two fighters from killing each other. It couldnt fully prevent bruises and cuts and cracked bones, though for the most part they avoided injuries. And anything that Anton had, he pushed through the pain.

One month might be enough for him to finish the tenth star. Dedicated cultivation could produce great results. But stepping into Spirit Building that was something else. Unfortunately, Anton couldnt be certain whether he would find it difficult or simple until he attempted it.

One week passed. Then two.

Grandpa Anton Catarina seemed to not know what to say. I think youre pushing yourself too hard.

He looked at her, his face determined, but with a slight softness showing. But it hasnt been enough. Do you want me to give up?

Well no but-

Grandpa Anton, you call me. Devon called me that as well. He will have the chance to do so again. To be free, not fighting for the entertainment of others.

Catarina frowned. Clearly she wanted to offer an alternate solution, but could think of nothing. What else can I do to help? I know my energy gathering formations arent good enough-

Dont say that, Anton said sternly. Theyre wonderful. Just what I need. But actually, that reminds me. Where did that end up he dug around in his bags until he uncovered a cloth wrapped around a small stoppered bottle, inside of which was a single round pill. Here it is.

I thought you took that already. Catarina looked at the pill in his hand. To break through to the sixth star

Anton nodded. You did tell me to use it for that. But, I didnt need it. Let me ask, how long did you think it took me to reach the fifth star- when I first achieved it.

A decade Catarina said.

Be honest, Anton looked straight at her.

... a few decades.

Right. But at that point, it was half a year or so. I didnt need it. Anton looked at it, But now I do.

Catarina nodded. I have money. We can buy more pills-

Anton held up a hand to stop her. If I thought it would ultimately help save a single life, I would not resist taking every coin from you and Hoyt. But this is a good pill. If we can managed to get another like it- which may not be available here- the next wont be nearly so significant. Especially not taken at the same time. I am quite confident in reaching the peak of Body Tempering and forming the tenth star with this and the help of a nice energy gathering formation.

Over the past few weeks, Anton had pushed his body to the limit. It was aching and bruised, strained and cut and perhaps just a little bit *broken*. Now it just needed a proper influx of energy and that energy had to be properly controlled by him. If he pushed things too far, he could injure himself or even destroy his cultivation. But he wasn't going to do that. After all, he still had another ninety stars to go after that, and so many other things to do.

Energy swirled inside him, in and out. Starting in his dantians it flowed through his meridians to the rest of his body. From his marrow out to his bones, muscles, tendons, organ, and skin then back in. His body began to heat up. It was a fiery furnace, a star but as he continued he knew it was not hot *enough*.

He swallowed the pill. Even as it touched his tongue it began to dissolve. It was bitter, strong- foul. He wondered if it had gone bad over the months, but as it slid down his throat into his stomach he felt a surge of energy. Then he had no more time to think. The pill itself was like a small star inside of him, burning.

It spread throughout his whole body, and he felt like he was on fire. Then he was fire. He was heat and growth. He was the thing that burned, and not what was burned. The energy that resulted. Then he pushed, shrinking himself down to a reasonable size. The heat withdrew from his body, but the tenth star rested in his dantian, smouldering brightly as the others danced around with it. Everything hurt as he breathed out slowly. Now all he had to do was figure out Spirit Building.

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Spirit Building. It could be summarized as cultivating the spirit like Body Tempering focused on the body. But it wasn't really quite the same. It was the difference between tangible and intangible and at least in the case of the Ninety-Nine Stars there was only one prime tempering in the first half. Other cultivation methods might be organized differently to emphasize different parts, and they didn't even have to categorize things the same way. Body Tempering of course covered the whole body eventually, but the spirit was less *measurable*.

For the Ninety-Nine Stars, it was divided into seven parts, the final of which would be the prime tempering. With only one area being able to be emphasized, it was more of a matter of what Anton wanted to develop early than what he wanted to later emphasize. Or what he *could* do. He had no certainty that he would finish the eleventh through seventeenth stars which covered the first half of Spirit Building. He could save something he considered important for a prime tempering or begin tempering it early, allowing it more time to grow to a similar level.

The seven categories were: Instinct, Emotion, Mental Liberation, Earthly Connection, Voice, Intuition, and Spiritual Connection. Just from their names, Anton had little idea what he might want and further study didn't give him a full picture either.

Instinct focused on personal survival. It allowed the cultivator to react to previously unsensed threats and to act with little information. Contrasted with Intuition, which focused more on *knowing*. It was much more used for reading people and situations, understanding the big picture of how things might work and how an individual might act. Both were important. Instinct allowed the cultivator to do *something* even if they didn't entirely know why. It could help detect poisons and anything else that affected the body.

Emotion also centered on the inner emotions of the cultivator. Emotional balance could have a great change to the efficacy of energy usage and cultivation. Earthly Connection was being in tune with the emotions of others. Already, there were areas of clear overlap. The same wasn't untrue in Body Tempering. The muscles attached to tendons and bones, skin encompassed everything, and the organs provided services to power and filter the whole body. Everything was made possible by the dantian and meridians circulating natural energy.

Mental Liberation allowed for the resisting of the shackles of outside control. This could be through energy influences or merely a sense of fear. It merely allowed the circumvention of emotions and the like, without stabilizing them or erasing them. It would sometimes be necessary to ignore feelings, though removing them entirely would be harmful. Some emotionless sects existed, but more often than not they ended up going down a dark path which ultimately led to their destruction.

Voice was tied to both inner and outer voice. That is, how the cultivator interacted with themselves internally and also how they influenced others. In the latter case, it was basically the opposite of Mental Liberation.

Spiritual Connection allowed the cultivator to be in tune with the world around them. It had less ties to people or even physical matter than the flow of energy. It seemed as if it was important for formation users, though everyone would of course benefit.

Anton wasn't sure if he could even choose one, and if he did choose cultivating it would be difficult. He'd always had a body. Such a statement was blatantly obvious and unhelpful, except that he hadn't always been aware of the spiritual part of himself. He had grown used to cultivation of his body and the use of energy, but that part of him was still *new*. Less than a year, out of his one hundred. A hundred and one now, if he were precise.

Instead of trying to logic out what might be best for him in the long run, Anton simply went for what he thought he would have the most luck with. Intuition. He couldn't say he was a master of reading others, but he had some experience with One Step Ahead as written by Elder Kseniya- and in addition to that he had watched her demonstrations.

Saying he understood everything that was happening would be an exaggeration, but it was at least something he had some example of in action.

Unlike Body Tempering, there wasn't a clear method of energy circulation that would accomplish what he wanted. There were guidelines, but it was one step more abstracted from the physical world. Anton certainly could feel the energy circulating inside himself and maybe even improving in quality, but he couldn't say he was properly refining Intuition.

Maybe he'd made a mistake. Confidence was good for a cultivator but *overconfidence*? Could he really use just two weeks to catch up to a young cultivator who came from a wealthy clan and had already been trying to enter Spirit Building for some time? Tonina had been confident in properly entering Spirit Building in a month, but even then Anton was aware that she still needed to push herself for that goal.

He should have not accepted the challenge. He could have pushed to get Devon into his hands, then fled the city. It might have come with future trouble, but he was certain they could have kept off the road and hidden. And what hoped there were no trained dogs in Khonard? He might be able to hide their scent from normal hounds, but there were tamed magical beasts with powerful senses as well. They didn't have to be particularly *strong*, either, just better at sensing- and that was something Anton could say beasts had in abundance. Even with his eyes enhanced with energy, he was probably not better than an actual, mundane hawk.

Anton tried to calm himself. Thinking about what *could* have been done was clearly not going to help. He knew that, but dismissing the thoughts was difficult. For Spirit Building especially, clearing his mind of distractions was important. He had to focus. All around him were faint threads, ideas of how he might continue his cultivation path. He just needed to make one real and grab onto it. And *focus*.

Two weeks passed. It was almost like he was trying to learn how to cultivate all over from the beginning. However, he was now divorced from physical pain. He couldn't say the same for mental anguish. He *had* to succeed. If not, Devon would be taken away to another arena to fight until he inevitably perished. The chances of anything else- no matter Devon's talent and skill- were extremely slim. In addition to those thoughts, Anton's cultivation reopened old wounds. He had a handful of villagers from Dungannon around himself and had even seen Devon. A year of being away from the situation had merely numbed the pain. Visiting Dungannon had ultimately been a good thing, but it left him emotionally vulnerable. Now, he might encounter his first real failure.

That was simply no good. But there was no more time. He was completely out. Tomorrow was the day. But at least he knew he was doing his best. It would be small comfort if he lost, but then again who was to say he couldn't fight a Spirit Building cultivator at the peak of Body Tempering? He'd heard of it. Stories were often greatly

exaggerated, but it had to have happened in the past. Usually young geniuses who precipitated a great change in the world.

It was too late but if he couldn't physically save Devon, he could at least try to provide hope. Hope he himself was low on. The Irvin arena master allowed him to see Devon under heavy guard, of course. He should have already talked to him before, but he didn't want to get his hopes up.

Someone to talk to you, the arena master said as he opened the door. One of the two who might purchase you.

For his own part, Devon looked good. Healthy. A bit tired, but that was understandable. Uncertainty in the future didn't make for easy sleep. Devon, Anton smiled. I had hoped to make this a pleasant surprise.

You Devon looked at Anton, surveying him with his senses. Do I know you, Senior?

Anton's face fell. Had he forgotten? It was certainly the right man, but something could have happened. Do you not recognize me? He already had the price written up in a contract, so revealing his relation shouldn't be a problem. It's me, Anton.

There was a long pause. Far too long. ... Grandpa Anton? Have you always been a cultivator? And you look so different.

Anton breathed a sigh of relief. So he did remember. No. I'm new to it.

But you're Devon shook his head. No, that doesn't matter. I thought you were dead. With everyone else. So many people but you were out hunting, weren't you?

Fortunately. Perhaps. I couldn't have done anything.

Are you really at the peak of Body Tempering?

That's right. Due to various circumstances, I will be fighting for the right to purchase you.

Devon smiled and relaxed. Is that so? I was aware of what was happening, but I had no idea one was you. I'm glad.

Listen, Devon Anton bit his lip. I just want to say, I'll do my best. But I can't guarantee I will win.

... It's that serious, is it? Devon shook his head. Well. What should I say? I am grateful that you are alive. I certainly want to be free but I've managed to keep myself alive thus far. Maybe there's a chance to earn my freedom on the small chance that you fail.

Anton scratched the back of his head. I wouldn't say it's small

I've never seen you fail at something you set your mind to, Devon said. It's already crazy enough to believe you're like *this*. I'm confident in your ability.

At least someone has confidence, Anton said. I'll carry it with me tomorrow. And if I don't get another chance, I just want to say I love you. I won't give up on you or any of the others, even if I fail today.

Devon grinned, See? I told you. Don't worry. I'll be waiting. Hopefully, I'll see you tomorrow.

Chapter 55

The night before the rematch, Anton didn't have a miraculous breakthrough. In fact, he barely slept. When he tried to sleep, his mind told him he should be cultivating. When he tried to cultivate he could only think about how much he needed to win. That was motivation but not usable. He needed a clear and focused mind, not scattered near-panic.

For her own part, upon her arrival Tonina didn't look entirely fresh either. She clearly hadn't had a leisurely month of pleasant cultivation. Her eyes were filled with determination. Anton might have congratulated her change in demeanor if circumstances had been different. However, she was still going to fight him for possession over his grandson. Even if she didn't know the relation it was still someone's life. And of course, they would not be having another match to begin with were she not a spoiled brat throwing around her family's influence.

As soon as the match started Anton fired and shot arrows, the twang of his bow crystal clear in the arena nearly devoid of life. Anton no longer had the inclination to be gentle. The previous battle he had simply pieced through her energy defenses to weaken her joints one at a time until she could not fight. Now, if he found the opportunity, he would not mind filling her with holes. While there was merely one level of difference between them still, Anton had merely reached the peak of Body Tempering and she'd fully stepped into Spirit Building. He couldn't hold back, even if it meant future trouble. It was already far too late to consider additional consequences. He merely had to win.

Tonina Potenza was from a wealthy family quite interested in her survival, so it was no surprise that her armor was top tier. Though it was durable, it also appeared light enough for her to move easily. No more than the standard weight of steel plate, at least. Her movements were swift and her attacks sharp, while her defenses couldn't be underestimated.

Even with his energy concentrated to a fine point, her energy at early Spirit Building was a large step more durable than it had been during the last battle. While Anton was confident he could have pierced through her armor as well as her energy in the previous battle, now he was having trouble causing more superficial wounds.

Her sword brushed past his face. It wasn't supposed to be so close. When they last fought he let her attacks brush close to him because it required less effort to avoid by a narrow margin, and he was confident in his ability to judge her attacks- but now it was all he could manage. However, he wasn't willing to give up. There was too much on the line and he *knew* he could do more.

It physically hurt Anton to parry her sword with his bow, despite him being aware that his energy and the nightwood could withstand some level of damage. But if he didn't do it, he would die.

He pulled out all his techniques. Thousand Arrows allowed him to fire at an unreasonably quick rate, but he simply couldn't break through her defenses consistently enough. Tonina wasn't just letting him hit her, either. Whenever he gathered more energy, she took the opportunity to attack or divert her defenses to withstand his improved attacks.

Swan Steps kept his head on his neck, and he found his body was indeed faster than it had been but he needed more. Reading her movements with One Step Ahead was more difficult as her speed was more than before, and the change in quality of energy as she stepped into Spirit Building exemplified that. As with all weapons, the speed of her sword also directly translated into deadliness. It cut through his own energy, leaving trails of blood even where Anton's armor protected him. So far it was merely surface level, but the difference between a trivial wound and a deadly one wasn't even a full centimeter.

It wasn't enough. He needed to know where she would move before she started, maybe even before *she* knew. Her sword might slice up at a certain angle, or thrust at him just so. If he twisted his body just right he could avoid the attacks. In a way he was successful. At least he got away with his life. Anton was extremely grateful for the diamondsilk woven into the armor on his chest. Its strength had saved him from some deep cuts that might have decided the battle.

Had he underestimated Spirit Building? Overestimated himself? Should he just give up? He might not be able to save Devon, but he could save others. But giving up simply wasn't possible. Win or lose, he couldn't do anything but give his very best.

The stars inside Anton flared as he pushed his energy to its limits, moving his body as quick as he could, shooting arrows made purely of energy that would pierce ever so slightly deeper, leaving blood dripping from several places on Tonina. But it wasn't enough yet. He needed to find an opening. To see her movements.

And he did. One battle and half of another weren't enough time to get to know an opponent fully, but Anton almost saw her moving ahead of where she was. In fact, he *did* see it, just not with his eyes. He just knew. The stars danced around inside him, one pair, one trio, and the final group of five. They offered up energy to their limits and

even more. There was a veritable whirlpool around Anton, his lungs pulling in every strand of energy in the atmosphere he could and immediately putting it to use.

As he became more confident in the visions Anton pierced into a weak point in her armor at her shoulder joint several times in a row. When she gathered her energy to defend, he simply targeted her lower torso, slowly piercing through the armor at a particular point. He even gathered an especially large spirit arrow to shoot into her thigh as he dodged an attack by a hair, using every ounce of the skill and energy he had available.

Then he saw it. A sweep of her sword, swift and nearly undodgeable. But he could do it. He could but his body couldn't. His energy was nearly dried up, and blood was flowing out of numerous wounds. A trail of blood was sliced along his ribs, *into*

some of them, sending him flying onto his back. Even as he lay there, his eyes locked on her. If he could just take aim but his arms refused to move.

He could still breathe. Energy flowed into his lungs, but to move he would have to prop himself up entirely with it. Then he wouldn't be able to attack. How could he?

Anton didn't even hear the announcement of his loss, though he couldn't debate it. He had lain still on the ground for far too long. Energy rushed into him like the crashing emotions he had inside. He had lost. Even though he had given it his all. It was much worse than simply not being present. He'd had the chance to redeem one family member, but on his first opportunity he fell short. He couldn't say if it was because of his earlier choices- those might have led to his death, or they might not have. He didn't have the clarity of thought to process any of that, or the emotional fortitude to get even a modicum of solace from the fact that he had broken through to Spirit Building.

The match was private. Only the participants, the master of the arena, and a few others were there to watch. Devon watched as two young cultivators rushed out to where Anton lay bleeding on the ground. He wished he could go there but he couldn't. Even if he could, he wasn't sure if his grandfather would find solace in his comfort.

Anton was the pillar of the family. He had been what held everything together over the generations. The farm had only grown because of his determination, a determination he passed on to others. Then there had been devastation.

Devon had been there. He was young enough. Healthy. And incapable of even scratching the attacking bandits. He wasn't able to keep track of everything happening in the confusion. They were led away in chains at the fastest speed they could maintain. Faster, even. Some people were thrown away along the way, never even making it to Veron to be sold. They'd all been split up. Many of the strong young men went to farms or the mines, but he'd been sold to the arena.

Hed been given a simple cultivation technique, along with an ultimatum. Win, or die. While it wasnt quite so black and white, if he didnt take care of himself he wouldnt survive in the arena. So he had practiced with a weapon and trained the cultivation technique and won. For no particular reason than he had nothing better to do. He knew he didnt want to die, but he didnt remember why. He kept winning and then there were no more fights. Weeks of that, then another month with talks of him being purchased.

Then Anton had shown up. It was supposed to be a nice surprise, but instead it was sort of a bitter apology. As if hed known he would lose. But it helped Devon remember something. That was why he hadnt given up. Grandpa Anton wouldnt. Even as he lay bleeding on the floor of the arena, Devon felt his energy clawing at the air, trying to do *anything*. Not just any energy. *Strong* energy. The energy of a Spirit Building cultivator.

That was crazy. Devon was not well versed in cultivation, but he had reached mid Body Tempering. He wasnt the youngest man in the world, though certainly not old. Even so, hed felt his age. Anton, his grandfather had far surpassed him. It wasnt just possessing a good technique. That could never do so much. Instead, it was the undying determination he possessed. Something Devon had thought gone from the world. But now he saw it.

Would he have preferred to be saved? To no longer be subject to slavery fighting in an arena? Of course. If only he had been just a bit stronger but Devon couldnt say that anyone else could have done better. For his own case, however, Devon had merely been going through the motions of survival because that was what he was expected to do. Yet his grandfather Anton had thrown himself into danger, just for a chance to save him. Hed almost done it, too.

It was a distant hope to think he would survive long enough for Anton to manage to free him now. If it was just about money, he could have been bought away already without the sacrifice. What would be required to force a sale? Devon wasnt sure, but as he felt the Spirit Building energy flickering from his prone grandfather as he was pulled away, he knew he had to survive to find out. How could he give up on himself when someone like that was still looking out for him?

Chapter 56

The sky was full of bright stars. Though Anton didnt have quite the same connection to them as Grand Elder Vandale, he appreciated them. Besides, thinking about the old cultivator gave him some perspective. There was no way the path to the peak was smooth and flawless. Anton knew he should consider himself lucky to have lost just money and his chance to free Devon. He didnt lose an eye or get killed. That meant there was going to be another chance.

He couldnt change the past, but reflecting on it was helpful. Wallowing in it wouldnt do him any good, but he could at least try to figure out what went wrong. In the end, he

decided it was simply some of the regulars. Fear and arrogance. Anton himself had less trouble with those than others, but it was something he saw with people constantly. Making poor choices because of perceived *potential* danger. There was indeed some chance that the Potenza family would send people to try to kill them away from the city if he had just gone through with the purchase of Devon. But if he was just going to trust in his own ability anyway, why not do it that way?

Accepting the one month challenge was stupid. He should have been the one to set the time limit. He hadn't even misjudged his own ability, just underestimated the difficulty of entering Spirit Building. Which was stupid, because Tonina needed *another* month to reach it from where she was, and Anton himself hadn't even been at the peak of Body Tempering yet. He was right to believe he could reach it and he'd even stumbled his way into Spirit Building during the rematch, but it wasn't enough.

The real problem was it put the entire burden on himself. The problem was, he was usually capable of doing so. But things were more than what one old man could handle. He'd even known that then ignored it. He had to go find Catarina and Hoyt. It was almost a shame that in his lifespan he'd actually made what he thought were a below average number of serious mistakes. Perhaps he might have more practice. Then again, it would mean less.

It was not hard to find them- they were the closest two with any significant cultivation, and there were only so many places they could stay in the inn. Anton was relieved the dining area was empty except for them. It was hard enough to say the words regardless. They both looked over as Anton approached. They might have expected him to still be lost in his unpleasant thoughts, but he simply didn't have time for that. He couldn't afford to pity himself for weeks on end. Once he was close enough, Anton threw himself onto the floor in front of them. I'm sorry.

Catarina almost recoiled. I- you- um you don't have to apologize for anything. I said I wanted to help.

Hoyt nodded. Me as well. I understand needing a bit of time to yourself.

Anton shook his head, still prostrate in front of them. That's not it at all. Though I do appreciate the space to think. I'm sorry for not believing in you. I brought you both along, then tried to do everything myself. Like a fool.

Catarina smiled awkwardly. Grandpa I don't know if umm-

Hoyt interrupted, You're right, actually. You might be very strong, but that doesn't mean you can do everything yourself. Though I'm not sure if we could do anything in this case.

Catarina squirmed. I did feel left out. Like I was just watching you grow stronger without me. But I accept your apology.

Oh right, Hoyt said. Me too. Please raise your head. Its really awkward.

Anton slowly stood up. Its not good for my back either. I thought Id get over all of this maybe Im just bad at Body Tempering. He only received stern looks in response. Alright, fine. I just thought the second full tempering would make me feel actually young. But I was too far gone. Anton sighed. I dont know where to go next.

There was some awkward time of silence. Eventually, Hoyt spoke up. How about the mines? There were some more on your list at the northern mines, right?

Anton thought for a few moments. Thats right, but Pete and the others are still with us. I dont know if we should drag them around forever.

I might be wrong, Hoyt said. But I think the best thing for them is to travel around with a cultivation master.

I dont know if I would call myself a master, Anton said.

Youre in Spirit Building now, Hoyt pointed out. But its more in the manner of one who teaches. Youre good at that. Speaking of which, any good tips for entering Spirit Building?

Hmm Anton stroked his chin. Besides desperation? Not just yet. Ill get back to you on that later. I suppose now, I should speak to the others. Might as well ask them what *they* want.

We want to come with you, Pete said. At least, I do. I still need to pay you back somehow and Id like to keep cultivating with your guidance. Ive almost finished the first star. I can feel how much of a difference it makes. If I can grow strong enough to protect myself Id like to avoid anything like what happened in Dungannon ever again.

The others nodded in consent. Wed like to stay with you. Especially if you are planning to emancipate others. Each day well, it would be better to free them as soon as possible, if you have the means. I know we were quite expensive.

That isnt untrue, Anton said, But something important to know is that cultivators are very capable of making money quickly. Its usually dangerous, but efficient. I have no reason to wait around now. At least, I feel somewhat safe traveling Ofrurg. If you do as well, I would welcome your company.

As long as we are with you, Pete said, I cannot imagine somewhere I would feel safer, especially with Hoyt and Catarina. The three of you are very strong.

Flattery wont make training any easier, Anton grinned.

In addition to training with and guiding the others, Anton had to cultivate himself. It kept him busy. Busy not thinking about the past. And, even though hed messed up in an almost irrecoverable manner Anton still felt somewhat freer now. He wasnt sure about the confidence he felt in himself right now, but the confidence of others was keeping him going. Especially Devon. Ill be waiting. A simple sentence. He said it like it would be the next day but perhaps he knew. Anton had offered some hope, and even though it was shattered, some still remained. Hopefully Devon would persevere while Anton pushed himself further forward. At least hed been able to act this time, even if he failed.

But such thoughts didnt help with cultivating. Visualizing the fight *did*. He replayed it over and over in his mind. Looking for flaws in himself and in Tonina. He couldnt go back and repeat the battle and demanding a rematch would dig him into another sort of hole. He couldnt be mired down with that method of trying to free Devon, unless he could become much stronger. There had to be other avenues, even if he couldnt tread them yet.

The biggest flaw Anton found in his own attacks was the lack of deadliness. Hed killed only a small number of people. Before he became a cultivator it was none and on the trip from Veron to Khonard it had become two, maybe three or four. It was easy to think of bandits as not people, but they were. He couldnt fathom what led them to those choices. Revenge he could understand, but he felt it had to be more a sense of desperation. Something had caused them to stop caring about human lives. The environment of Ofrurg was certainly quite capable of that.

Regardless of whether it was ultimately a good thing, Anton had little experience killing people. He never wanted to treat them like animals, but then again he had reasons to kill animals as well. Food and hides were practical and useful, and animals could be a danger. People werent quite like vicious wolves, but he needed to be decisive with his attacks like he was facing them. There were of course other flaws in his movements that he found, but those would be refined out by practice naturally, slightly faster for having noticed them.

Repeating Toninas movements in his mind was merely for the sake of practice. He had missed some of the intent behind her actions, slight feints to push him off balance. While she was an arrogant brat, she clearly had good teachers.

While he could circulate his energy as much as he wanted, Anton felt that Spirit Building especially required him to get practical experience. It didnt just have to be combat though. Intuition wasnt just about combat. That was just what all cultivation ended up leaning into. Predicting how people would respond to things in any situation could be useful in all sorts of situations. It wasnt as if he would be able to read their minds but then again, it was hard to fathom how it would develop towards the peak of cultivation.

Anton certainly didnt feel comfortable saying anything in particular was *impossible*. Just out of his reach for the moment. There was so much more growth he needed to achieve and he couldnt stop. He had too many things he had to do. If he accomplished them all he would just have to find more. The world wasnt going to run out of problems on its own.

Chapter 57

It was hard to figure out why Anton wasnt dead. Hoyt didnt think he was a frail old man, but when he responded to both excitement and depression with *more work* it was hard to figure out when the man ever stopped. Perhaps that was the trick. Maybe he was cursed. Unable to stop forever. That had to be it. Because otherwise Hoyt would have to admit that sparring with an old man two-on-one tired him out. If he kept going, he didnt think he could move for a week.

Technically they would have beaten him with the two of them together. Probably. What happened in an actual battle couldnt be predicted with certainty. It was possible Anton would put a hole through either him or Catarina before they could take a step forward, but once they were up close they were able to grind him down. But that was the limit of what they could do. They could never land a solid strike, as if he could predict every move they made. Since theyd sparred with each other an exactly equivalent amount of times- it was literally impossible for that to not be true- Hoyt wondered how he did it. Except, of course, the answer was plain. Spirit Building. Anton was traveling down the path of Intuition for the moment, as the eleventh star. Hoyt wasnt sure if the results were supposed to be so immediate, but then again Anton was always good at reading movements. Hed even trained a technique for it at some point. Written by that crazy Archer elder, if Hoyt remembered correctly.

But while two people could match Anton for a while, it was absolutely certain that just one of them would die quickly. A significantly more well trained and talented lower tier cultivator could potentially fight one at a higher level and win, but thats where the qualifiers came in. The lower tier cultivator had to be *better* than the higher tier one. Anton had a good foot into Spirit Building and was absolutely not worse than either of the other two. The only real chance they had to win was if Catarina set up a formation ahead of time, but it was possible for Anton to just break through it if they were careless. Plus, they would have to remain in one area- which just meant he could just shoot them from a distance.

Hoyt shook his head. It was crazy that Anton had started cultivating at a hundred, and now a year later he was in Spirit Building. However, Hoyt couldnt complain. The man worked hard and he wasnt selfish with his insights. The elders at the Order werent secretive either, but there was a big difference between personalized advice and what was said to a roomful at a time. With the month Anton had been crazily training for the rematch, Hoyt and Catarina hadnt been idle. They had nearly reached the eighth star, and after the training started Anton had pushed them past that. They were rapidly approaching the ninth star and wouldnt be too much longer to reach the tenth. It might

still be a month each, but that was quite rapid. And while Anton had pulled ahead, once they reached Spirit Building they wouldn't be too far behind. A couple months wasn't so bad in the cultivation world. It was just relevant in the early stages especially where geniuses were involved, and at points like the threshold of a new stage. Hoyt wasn't sure if he could consider himself a genius, but he wasn't so humble as to say he lacked talent. But if anyone deserved the title, it was probably Anton. Even if a young genius might be faster growing so what? It wouldn't be by much.

Hoyt picked himself up out of the dirt. They were traveling along to the north of Ofrurg. There were mines with more slaves from Dungannon there. It was hard to believe just how many slaves the country had, but Hoyt had the perspective of growing up in a decent country instead of a trash pile. A trash pile with fancy cities and strong cultivators, but that was all it was with the way people were allowed to be treated.

This was a good decision, Hoyt said.

Oh? Anton raised an eyebrow. You want to continue, then?

Hoyt held up his hands. I meant coming with you. I doubt I'd train more efficiently at the Order, and we can actually do some good for the world. At least a little Hoyt shook his head.

A little bit now, a bit more later Anton shrugged, And maybe a whole heap in the future. I've got big ambitions.

I heard of ambitious people before. Usually people mean they're clawing for power.

Am I not? Anton asked.

Well Hoyt shrugged, You're not stepping on everyone along the way. So I prefer your method.

I'll need good backup, Anton said. Lots of it. It's purely self-serving.

Really? Hoyt said. If I said I was leaving tomorrow, would you keep training me?

How would I do that if you left? Anton asked.

Hoyt laughed, Good point. But I might have somewhere I need to go, in the future.

Just bring me along, then. As long as I'm not in the middle of something critical Anton looked down the road. It's already been a year. Another year and I'll hopefully have done everything I can here. There might be a few difficult points, especially with Annelie.. But I'm not going to be doing just this forever. Especially once there are no more slaves at all.

At all? Hoyt raised an eyebrow, Ambitious. Maybe dont let the wrong people around here hear you.

Bah. Im just an old man, Anton shook his head. Nobody will take me seriously. Though I wasnt planning to announce it in the cities. Not until at least Constellation Formation. What do you think, two years? Three?

Even the best take five.

Anton nodded. I guess I could settle for four, then, but Im not made of time.

Hoyt could tell that response was half a joke. The other half was the supreme confidence that he *would* reach Constellation Formation. And while five more years was about a quarter of Hoyts life, it was basically nothing for cultivators who could increase their lifespans by decades in each stage. Even ten years would be considered quite fast from Spirit Building to Constellation Formation. He had to be there to see it with his own eyes. How long would it actually take?

The young woman who traveled with them, Catarina, was an oddity. Pete was aware that women could be cultivators. *That* wasnt the weird part. It was just her. Whenever they stopped, she would fiddle with things. He had to ask, but he couldnt dive straight into it. Excuse me. You are Antons granddaughter, right?

Yes, Catarina replied curtly, not turning to look at him. She was adjusting sticks and piles of leaves.

I never saw you in Dungannon, that I recall.

I wasnt, Catarina stated. Technically, Im his great-great granddaughter.

Oh. Pete wasnt sure how to respond to that. It made more sense, of course. You have a lot of cultivators in the family?

Catarina shook her head. I was the first. She paused to think for a second. Thats a strange thought. I didnt have reason to wholeheartedly throw myself into it. I lived out west.

But theres also Anton and Pete wasnt sure if he should bring up Devon, considering the circumstances.

Grandpa Anton didnt begin cultivating until after the incident. I met him after that. Catarina picked up a small rock, placing it carefully, then she picked it back up and threw it away. That one doesnt help.

Why doesnt it help? Pete asked.

It had negligible effect on the flow of energy. I thought it did, but it was just a random fluctuation.

Oh. Pete thought for a moment, Anton hes really only been cultivating for a year? I saw the match. Well, I was there watching. I cant claim to have really *seen* anything that happened. It was so fast.

Yes. Absolutely. My grandfather is very talented. Determined. Catarina pointed. Move that one.

This stick? Pete said. Like this?

Yes. Catarina thought for a moment. You got it just right.

Well, you talked about the flow of energy, so I just Pete waved his hands.

Yes. Good. You will help with formations, Catarina stated. We will gather energy right here. Catarina moved to stand in a spot. But not too directly. We dont want to crush whoever is here.

I get it. Kind of a spiral, right? Pete looked around them. A formation, you call it? Its almost like magic. Though I thought all cultivation was magic two months ago.

Its not magic, Catarina said. But its not *not* magic. As much as magic exists, this can be it. Now, that one.

Pete couldnt say he fully understood what was happening. She seemed to just assume he would understand. When he didnt, she just corrected him without getting angry. He did his best to change the flow of energy in the area. It was hard to describe exactly how it worked, but the physical arrangement of objects was more than it appeared to be on the surface. Pete wasnt sure if he actually made the whole process slower with his presence, but he knew it was something useful. Even if he couldnt do much now, if he could *actually* help in the future he might be able to start paying back Anton just a little bit.

Chapter 58

The area around Sarton had a number of mines, and in keeping with that many slaves working in the mines. From what information the group had gathered, there were also more valuable sorts of mines worked by cultivators. Stones containing natural energy and high yield metals. Those were generally worked by free laborers, since it required a certain amount of cultivation to work those mines safely. Keeping sufficient numbers of stronger cultivators on guards wasnt profitable after a certain point. But the more mundane mines make liberal use of slaves, and some of those had connections to

Dungannon. There were also some who had been sold to energy stone mines. Anton was concerned about their safety. It was a small mine with low yield, but using slaves meant they had a low life expectancy in such a place. Lower than normal, even. But it wasn't possible to know for sure the status of everyone until they went to look.

From Khonard to Sarton was a safer journey than the route that had been taken from Veron to Khonard. It was well traveled and generally considered safe for cultivators, at least on the road. With that being the case, work as guards along the way didn't pay nearly so well and Anton and the others opted to travel alone for greater speed. Pete and the others from Dungannon had all completed the first star with some proper guidance. They were also healthy, young men- so they could keep up a quick enough pace. Anton found they were faster than he was at early stars, at least.

A good portion of the journey was through the Mossythorn Timberlands, a stretch of forest that surrounded many towns and villages along the way. Out of precaution, Anton continuously scanned the horizon around them. In addition to looking for enemies, it also let him take in the sights of the nature around them. It was nice to be in gentle terrain where there was very little danger.

Anton paid special attention to the people they passed. Some of them were travelers going the other direction. Merchants or cultivators or a bit of both, for the most part. However, he was more interested in the regular people. The farmer out in his fields, the woodcutter tending to his lot, bakers and tanners, tailors and innkeepers. People going about their normal lives in peace. One of those had been him not all that long ago, yet it seemed strangely foreign. He'd worked the fields of the Order and even the Riley farm. The people were so calm. As if they were safe. It was especially strange in Ofrurg, where people were sold into slavery. Just not arbitrarily where it involved their own citizens. An internally sustainable sort of peace, but tenuous. If the cultivators on Ofrurg decided they no longer wished to follow those rules, they could. Unlike Graotan, they already showed lack of value for human life.

Even the Order wasn't expansive enough to fully protect Graotan. Was anywhere truly safe? Even cultivators could face stronger cultivators. Anton shook his head. These were just depressing thoughts. Even if no cultivators existed, nothing would be truly safe. Those in power would declare wars and convince enough others that they must be gone along with that everyone had to capitulate- or fight them. Conflict and danger were parts of humanity but perhaps it shouldn't be that way.

Even so, the citizens of Ofrurg were safe enough. Even as the foolish thought crossed Anton's mind to take revenge on them for profiting from a system that had harmed him that wasn't what he really wanted. The people along the way probably didn't even really have a choice. Anton was successful enough he could have moved to another part of the country- or a different country entirely- but relocation was quite difficult for common folk. It was only attempted by the desperate. But with all his dissatisfaction with the world, Anton doubted he could solve any of the problems he had. If he could it wouldn't

be yet. While his thoughts were on a negative streak lately, the majority of his life he had been positive. It had been enough to just live.

Hes lost in thought again Hoyt whispered to Catarina.

Yeah. Whenever he gets like that, he wont say anything for *hours*

.

Anton laughed, I can still hear you, you know. Just thinking about changing the world.

Completely lost in thought, Hoyt nodded. Spouting nonsense.

You think I cant? Anton leaned towards him.

Hoyt held up his hands, I didnt say *that*. We just have to take things one at a time. Not all of us are in Spirit Building already.

Wont be too long, Anton said.

It was indeed quiet for a time as they traveled along the road before Anton stopped at the top of a rise. He was looking straight ahead, into the forest instead of down where the road diverged from its course in front of them.

Catarina stood next to him and looked as well. Is there a problem? Danger? She squinted, Every time I improve my eyesight, you go a step further. I dont see anything.

Trails on the ground, Anton pointed. Far off the road. It shouldnt be a danger to us.

... buuut? Hoyt asked. You dont seem to be done with just that statement.

Anton shook his head. A recent battle. Not a lot of blood, but the areas damaged. Someone was dragged away. Like I said, its far enough from the road it shouldnt be a problem.

It was a few moments of silence before Pete stepped forward and prodded him. If you want to try to rescue someone, we dont mind. Nothing says you can only help those you know.

I dont like unknown dangers, Anton said, But, we can at least check it out. By we, I mean the three of us. Anton pointed, The five of you stay by the road. The current disparity between our cultivations is too great. We cant protect you, and if we have to flee Id rather not leave you behind.

Ah, I hate to admit it but I understand, Pete nodded. Dont take too long.

Its just a kilometer or two off road. We should be back in an hour, one way or another.

Anton, Catarina, and Hoyt moved through the forest at a quick pace. They werent quite running, but they were going faster than the running pace of any non-cultivator. It wasnt quite as elegant as Vincents movement, but then again Anton hadnt seen him concerned about speed.

Soon enough they came to the area Anton had spotted. From up close, it was clear enough to anyone that something had happened. There was torn up soil everywhere and scar marks on trees, along with a lingering sense of energy. In addition to that, sticks and plant pieces were strewn about as foliage got damaged during the battle. Others might not be able to pick out the small trail of blood and the drag marks, though the heavy footprints in the area stood out like a sore thumb.

What is it? Hoyt asked, looking down at them. Some sort of claw. A bear?

Anton shook his head, Its big enough for that, but it matches a wolf. Four toes instead of five. Magical beasts, maybe. The forest here seems dense enough with natural energy. But whatever they fought shouldnt be dead. Theres not nearly enough blood, and even if they devoured it there would be signs. Anton held his finger up to a scar on the tree, And this is clearly a fresh cut by a blade. So it should be a person. I wasnt entirely sure from afar.

Anton led the way, though the others were only a few steps to either side. Enough to give each other room to fight, if it became necessary. There were several sets of wolf tracks, along with the one dragging the body. There were continued drops of blood strangely little, for what one would expect of someone mauled by a pack of wolves. The three followed the trail until they spotted a cave. However, instead of approaching immediately they circled around to a relatively hidden location and watched.

Dark inside, Hoyt commented quietly. But I can feel the energy. Its not too powerful, but multiple sources, I think. Its not just a magical beast leading a pack.

Thats right, Anton said. But something still seems off. The cave is too open, even for large wolves and though they have excellent night vision its too dark before it turns that corner. They definitely went in there, though. Anton stepped slightly closer to the trail, still away from the cave entrance. Whats this? He picked up a small piece of greyish-brown moss. It had been elsewhere along the trail, and at the battle location. As he held it up to inspect it suddenly jumped.

Sudden movement from moss- or any movement for that matter- was quite a surprise for Anton. Tiny hooks appeared on the edges of the moss as he dodged out of the way, and he felt them stick into his energy. He flung the bits of moss away from himself, unsure if it could do any more. A moment later, other moss along the trail began

popping up, not exactly directed in its motion. That triggered more and more of it until it reached the cave and went inside. In return, out of the cave came a large wolf with bright yellow eyes. However, it moved strangely, and its fur was coated in large clusters of the moss. A small amount of blood on its fur indicated it had been involved in the battle and it seemed quite interested in fighting another one. Its howl was harsh and ragged, but more echoed it from in the cave and around the area.

Chapter 59

Wolves again. Anton was quite familiar how to deal with wolves, though he mainly avoided them when hunting. But on occasion he had to deal with those who roamed out of the forest, and then there was The Hunt at the Order. A single spirit arrow nocked in his bow then quickly released. The beast couldn't even dodge as the arrow flew straight and true into its eye, and into its brain. A simple act to defeat an enemy. Anton had expected it to be harder but he had also expected the creature to die.

When the wolf started rushing towards him after suffering the blow, he knew things weren't quite as they should be. He thought he'd misjudged his attack. Perhaps it had only looked like it penetrated deep into the eye but was actually absorbed into the beast. Some magical beasts had such high bodily defenses. But he could clearly make out the hole- despite the trickle of blood. A trickle that was perhaps too small in quantity for the amount of damage. Anton could also make out some of the same moss from the fur *inside* the creature. Careful! They're not normal beasts! The chance that the other two actually *needed* him to say that were slim. Unless they had looked away They won't die so easily, but nothing's immortal! Keep an eye out for those others!

Even as he was talking Anton had readied and fired another arrow, straight into the other eye. With the wolf moving it was a bit harder to hit with pinpoint accuracy. Predicting its movements was strange. His training with insight was completely failing him, though the creature wasn't *quick*. His arrow still grazed the eye, enough to make it unusable but not to penetrate deep into its body.

Anton pulled his neck out of the way of biting teeth as the creature pounced towards him. It turned more or less directly towards him, but as it swiped at him with its claws he noticed its range wasn't perfect. Sometimes he actually had to dodge, and sometimes it just missed. So despite not dying properly, it *did* seem to need its eyes.

Fighting in melee range with a bow was extremely taxing. He didn't have time to properly line up a shot, and the swiping claws threatened to strike his bow. Anton didn't think that it would break to even a quite oversized and strange wolf, but it wasn't optimal to fight that way either. A few arrows deep into its chest didn't seem to faze it, so he decided his smaller axes would do better instead. If nothing else, he could dismember it. A quick glance told him that worked quite well.

Catarina was fighting a wolf that had approached from one side of them. She danced around it with ease, stabbing her sword into its side several times. While she drew blood, it didnt seem sufficiently damaging for a creature of that size. She had hopes that its other internal organs might be more important to it than its brain- perhaps an abnormal wish, but it was an abnormal creature.

It wasnt hard to tell that the moss was one of the strange parts about it. It radiated an abnormal energy- and any amount at all was abnormal for moss. So was growing on a creature. A quick slice of her sword along a patch and she found it was surprisingly resistant to attack and also quite vulnerable. Her own energy was sufficient to cut through the defenses of a patch of moss, after which the whole thing *exploded*.

Spores flew everywhere. No, they burst out with great speed but they flew towards *her*. Her energy defenses stopped anything from touching her directly, but the spores latched onto the outside of her energy. Catarina was quick to push it away, letting part of her energy go with it. She didnt want to find out if it could harm her without touching her directly. Maybe the spores were why grandpa Anton hadnt attacked the moss. Or perhaps he hadnt felt the flow of energy from the moss. He wasnt actually perfect, after all.

As for the damage to the wolf it actually bled profusely from where the patch of moss had been moments earlier. Now she had a target but its movements also changed to try to protect the moss. It wasnt dodging, but instead it became more aggressive. Attacking recklessly would normally be a suicidal move, but it forced Catarina to dodge its attacks instead of making her own. That made sense, because the creature wasnt particularly fast. Even so, it took some effort to find an opening

Hoyt ran off to the right of the cave entrance, where he spotted two wolves were approaching. One was much closer than the other, so he moved to meet it head on. Hed rather not fight two on one. The wolf also seemed happy to rush towards him. As they were only a short distance apart, Hoyt solidified his stance as he swung his axe, right into the ribcage of the creature. His axe sank the full length of the blade, driving into the creatures heart. Hoyt had seen what Antons arrows piercing into its brain did- practically nothing- but he was still a bit disconcerted when it twisted, biting and clawing at him as if it wasnt twisting its sliced ribs around.

With all the strength he could muster, Hoyt kicked the creatures ribs, pushing it further and yanking his axe out at the same time. A moment later the creature had rolled to its feet, and while it seemed slightly unsteady with some of its structural support sliced apart it was a far cry from dead. As it charged back towards him Hoyt aimed for a different target. Tactics involving striking opponents limbs were rarely optimal. If Hoyt had the opening to cut off someones arm, couldnt he cut off their head? He looked at the creatures neck. In this case he could not.

But even though he couldn't take off the head, Hoyt found an opportunity to take a swing at a front shoulder. The leg was probably ten centimeters thick, going up to twenty just below the shoulder. That was already a bit much for the size of his axe- it wasn't crazily oversized but rather practical in terms of weight and size. It was sufficient for most things and for the rest, his energy could make up for it. Slight extensions of energy on either side, and as he leaned around an attack he took the swing. Hard bone and thick, sinewy muscle slowed his swing, but he cut straight through the limb. He might have expected the creature to die of shock or topple over from pain, but instead it merely continued to try to attack him. However, while it might not really *care* about the loss of a leg, it still needed it for support. It couldn't swipe at him with its other paw, so it was limited to biting.

Quite by accident while looking for another opening, Hoyt had moved away from the fallen limb. Even though he knew the thing was strange, he thought it wouldn't do anything but it continued to flop around wildly. More than just random twitching, though not really more effective. Whatever these things were, it seemed he couldn't make any assumptions.

As Hoyt was taking small swings at the creature's leg while avoiding its extremely long teeth, he circled around its side. He thought to perhaps go for a rear leg instead, as the head was being extremely annoying. However, before he could find the chance a section of moss on the creature shot out towards him. His energy defenses stopped it, but it latched on. Ah. He'd learned about things like this. In a way, it wasn't dissimilar to the northern creeper but much more aggressive. Though what he thought he knew about it didn't actually make a difference, because chop it to bits and don't get spored was already sufficient.

Circling around the creature wasn't too hard as long as he was ready for the spores, and he didn't have to waste any more energy with that. Then with one hind leg gone, the wolf was entirely unbalanced. Just in time for the second one to reach him.

Cutting all the way through a wolf's leg was a bit much for Anton and his more moderately sized handaxe. He had quite a bit of strength, but he didn't have the *weight* a bigger weapon would add. Then again, he hadn't really tested his maximum force. Anton had a better idea, however. Even if he could accomplish the same thing as Hoyt, he would prefer a bit more *efficiency*.

The creature didn't seem to care about their bodies much, but they were still after all *using* them. No matter what sort of force was controlling them, they had to have a certain structure. If Anton recalled correctly, the tendon on the leg should be just there.

If he wanted to exaggerate his prowess, he might have left out the part where he was in Spirit Tempering and fighting a blind wolf, but he sliced right through a tendon, then one on the other front leg. He considered chopping at the other legs, but instead he pulled

back. Somehow the creature managed to limp along even with the damage. There was a bit of pulsing energy inside it but it was even more awkward than before. Since they were already going to have to deal with the spores anyway he backed up and took a shot. One arrow into each of three patches of moss he could see. They exploded just like he saw with Catarina, but he wasn't close enough for them to seek him out. In fact, they seemed to go straight back along the path of the arrow even as he curved them around to hit the sides. It made sense, following energy. With the moss dying, the wolf eventually stopped moving.

Anton looked to see if the others needed a hand, and then to see if there were more. Not close, at least, though he thought he'd heard more than four howls total. If they were quick, they might leave before more came. However, there was still the matter of the person they had dragged off. He didn't imagine things had gone well for them, but at least they might be buried with dignity.

Chapter 60

Forming a makeshift torch and lighting it up wasn't difficult. It was doubtful if it would be able to burn away any of the strange moss, especially while fresh, but at least it would provide light. While any of the three cultivators could find their way around in the dark well enough by sensing the walls, they couldn't actually see in the dark. Hidden dangers might still lurk unsensed. Especially of concern was more of the strange moss, despite the energy it gave off.

The *good* news was that the cave did not stretch back very far beyond the initial bend. The bad news was the rest of it was covered in the strange moss, and more than just the walls of the cave there were a few figures. One human and several small wolves—perhaps almost normal sized, but their proportions indicated they were pups. Details were harder to make out under the cover of the moss, but they still felt alive. More than the other wolves had been, at least.

Catarina grimaced. I don't know if we can save them but we need to destroy this moss no matter what. Growing on and into things like this

I have no disagreements, Hoyt said, But practically, it's difficult. There are already so many spores outside, we'd have to burn down the whole forest basically.

Hmm, Anton intoned while he thought. Is that correct, though? Look here. The moss only starts where the sunlight would never hit. It might not survive sunlight without inhabiting an animal.

It's not windy, Catarina said. The spores won't have gone far, in either case. I can destroy it.

Should I go get the others? Hoyt said. Or at least tell them what's happening?

Catarina nodded. Pete can help. But first, we should check each other. It sticks to energy. After looking over each other and their equipment, they found no remaining traces of spores. Even so, they took ten minutes to let Catarina set up a first, smaller formation. They could see what it did to patches of the moss on the corpses of one wolf, shriveling it away into a grey powder in a single minute. Any spores they had on them while they stood in the area would have suffered the same fate. Targeted destruction of immobile foes is simple. It actually wasn't faster than attempting to burn each bit, though there were less side effects and they could be certain they encompassed the whole area.

I'll be off to get the others, then, Hoyt said. I'll stick to the same path.

I'll come with you part of the way, Anton said. To watch for some older spores. Catarina, I presume you can handle yourself here?

She nodded. I'll start on the cave. Maybe we can save something.

It wasn't possible for the group to go everywhere the wolves had been and might have spread the spores, but as far as they could tell any that brushed off onto the ground were inactive. If the origin of the moss was the cave they had found, then they could eradicate it. If not they couldn't be responsible for a whole forest in a country they weren't even allies with. They still planned to leave a report in the next cities they passed through, warning people of the dangerous moss.

Carving runes into the wall of the cave was difficult work, even with energy. They had to be precise enough to affect the flow of energy, and the more important part was that they had to affect *beyond* themselves. Catarina certainly wasn't willing to touch the moss to rearrange or carve anything beyond the start of the moss, and Pete was much more vulnerable than her. They had to inch along piece by piece, the formation destroying patches of the moss as they went along.

Hoyt and Anton contributed much of the energy the formation needed to do so. It was possible that the amount of destruction was unnecessary, but nobody wanted to leave the job half done. If they did, it would merely grow back and they didn't like thinking about it.

In the end, it took several hours to uncover the figures at the back. Several of the pups died immediately- the moss had grown too deeply inside of them for them to survive its removal. In a way, they were already dead before that. One pup still had a heartbeat afterwards, and the cultivator- a young man- also remained alive as the moss growing on, in, and around him decayed under the power of the formation. He started to bleed profusely, but that was something cultivators were more set up to handle. Coagulants were something they might need after a battle, and though they weren't dealing with

neat cuts some poultices at least stopped the bleeding. That said, there *were* also several day-old wounds from the wolves.

If the young man was able to regain consciousness, he should be able to kickstart the recovery process of his own body. From Antons assessment he would have nasty scars- and one arm might be crippled. The moss had grown deep enough into it that it was not quite everything it should be without it. Even so, it was better than death- and much better than becoming a half-alive thing seemingly under control of the moss.

Anton noticed Catarina spent more time helping the living pup than the cultivator, but he couldnt blame her. Despite its size, it was a rather cute animal. He hadnt had need for herding dogs on the farm, since they focused more on crops than livestock, but he could appreciate a good animal. He also knew when they were probably beyond help. However, that was taking into account his mundane knowledge.

The pups breathing was ragged and weak, its body torn and wrecked but Catarina began shaving its fur. Anton wouldnt believe anything from her was random patterns. As always, it was a formation. What are you doing?

I dont know. Catarina said, Something. She bit her lip. For not knowing, her movements were quite confident. Anton let her concentrate. He didnt feel any flow of energy from the formation even when she finished until she injected her own energy into it. Then he felt it. Catarinas energy flowed through the formation in a certain pattern. Though the shape of the wolf pup was quite different from that of a human, it would be rather dense of Anton to not recognize the circulation of energy through meridians. It was just that some of them were *outside* the pup, and it wasnt using the creatures own energy. Not that it likely had any. Even if it had the lineage of a magical beast, it was too young to have had much growth in that regard.

It was honestly unclear if the circulation of energy was doing anything for the pup. Perhaps its ragged breathing calmed slightly. Maybe its lungs were just giving out. Even so, Catarina continued the process. Anton wasnt going to stop her. Compassion was an admirable trait, and if it died regardless, then there was nothing to be done. He wasnt going to disparage an attempt to help.

The group stayed for the night in the cave- more towards the entrance than in the back with the dead-grey piles that had once been a terrible moss. Anton arranged to take watch for the first half of the night, with Hoyt taking the latter. One night a couple hours short on sleep wouldnt be a problem, and theyd had sufficient time to recover their energy after the battles and supporting the formation to feel comfortable.

In the morning Anton awoke to the stirring feeling of unfamiliar energy. It was slow and methodical, not sudden but it still startled him awake. Hoyt nodded to him, then inclined his head towards the cultivator they had rescued. He appeared to have survived the

night, and was slowly cultivating. It was unclear if he had regained consciousness or not. Anton was aware he circulated a small amount of energy automatically, perhaps a bit more now that he was in Spirit Building.

On the other side Catarina was curled up next to the wolf pup. The creature had ragged and bloody patches as well as carved out bits of fur. It looked like a real mess but it still lived. The formation Catarina had made still trickled just the slightest bit of her energy in a circuit throughout the beast.

Anton signalled to Hoyt to watch things while he went off to hunt. A few rabbits or small birds would do. He also surveyed the surrounding area carefully, seeing no other signs of the moss. Just the regular kind. It was quite visually different, and normal moss grew quite contentedly on trees instead of into animals.

When he returned, he found the cultivator and the others were fully awake. The young man inclined his head. He tried to clasp his hands together, but winced as his bad arm signalled to him its inability. I was told that you were the one who spotted signs of my struggle from the road. Thank you for coming to my rescue. I am Lev. I have no family name, but I am a disciple of the Grasping Willows. We are located a few days from here. I came on a mission to verify the sightings of strange beasts and well. He shrugged- which clearly also hurt. I think I found them. I have little to give you as a reward, but I should at least be able to give you the pay for my mission. I will request more from the sect, but I cannot guarantee anything.

Anton looked at Catarina and Hoyt. They seemed pleased enough with him. Not that he planned to deny the man common courtesy regardless. If it is not too far as you say, we would be glad to escort you there. We were heading to the northeast

How fortunate indeed, Lev said. The Grasping Willows are along the road in that direction, though off a side road some ways.

Im not sure if its fortune with only really two ways along the road, Anton said, But it was fortunate that we found you less than two days after the attack. It could have easily been just a bit longer.

And then we wouldnt be having this conversation. So I am quite grateful for your eyes, and your willingness to help someone you hadnt even seen, Lev inclined his head once more.

Anton was also quite pleased with how things had turned out. At least the young man seemed decent enough, though of course how could he act differently when surrounded by those he didnt know? Then again, Anton had encountered the truly arrogant type. Having good relations with a disciple of a local sect should be of benefit to them- and if he was truly a decent person, even better.