

Elder Cultivator

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Being unable to affect his own circumstances was one of the worst feelings in the world. Pete was still extremely low in cultivation and had no combat experience to speak of. If anything actually happened while they waited, he would basically be helpless again. The best he could do was shuffle around the perimeter of their safe zone, checking the formation. He couldn't even fix it if there was a problem. He certainly wasn't going to do anything without talking to Catarina, because while he had a decent sense of how things were supposed to be he had merely a couple of months of experience. If he changed something that felt incorrect and instead broke the formation, he couldn't make up for it.

He had no real reason to believe he could help with anything, but patrolling around made him feel better. He couldn't even think about sleeping. Then he saw a flicker of movement and more importantly moving energy. He could still feel Catarina back in the center of their camp, but it wasn't nearly strong enough for that anyway. It wasn't James or Steven or the other two. But there was still one more thing it could be. The way it disturbed the energy yes, it had to be Fuzz.

Even though he'd been watching, Pete barely had any idea what Catarina had been doing with the wolf. For a while she'd been carrying the thing in her pack, all bundled up nice and safe. Safe for both the wolf and the people. Fuzz couldn't really hurt anyone if he wanted to, anyway. He was understandably nervous and snippy at first, but he couldn't really *move*. Whatever that moss had done as it ate into him messed up most of his legs. Personally Pete would have just left the wolf to die, or even finished it off quickly. Instead, Catarina had done something crazy. She started cutting formations into the wolf's fur. At first it was to encourage healing but when she realized that wouldn't be sufficient she started onto stranger stuff. Pete couldn't say how, but somehow she'd made up for whatever was missing from Fuzz's front right leg, letting it move. That was pretty recent, though. How could the whole beast be running off?

It was unlikely to matter that Pete attempted to be quiet as he followed after Fuzz. If he somehow avoided being heard- which was unlikely- Fuzz would still smell him. He wasn't even sure why he was sneaking instead of calling the alarm. Though honestly, if the wolf wanted to run off what did it even matter?

He followed the obvious disturbances of energy, occasionally catching sight of Fuzz. The way he was moving was almost comical. Only his two front legs worked. If Pete had been guessing how he would move like that, he would have imagined someone crawling or dragging themselves across the ground. Instead, the wolf had his rear lifted in the air. Not straight above his head like someone doing a handstand, but just enough that his rear feet didn't touch the ground. It seemed extremely unbalanced, but the grey-

furred animal plodded forward continuously. Pete was a bit faster, though, and that was while trying to be stealthy.

Before he could catch up, he heard something. A whine. Had Fuzz hurt himself? It seemed likely. Then he heard a voice. What are you doing, stupid mutt? A womans voice. Not one he was familiar with. Maybe one of the women theyd just freed? Lara, he thought her name was. Then there was a growl. Get out of the way! then, Let go!

When he finally could see through the trees and underbrush, the dim moonlight revealed Fuzz grabbing onto the arm of a woman, with her attempting to pull away. He was no longer walking in his strange way, instead his rear was firmly planted on the ground. Petes first instincts were to rush forward and help Lara, but something felt strange. His feet didnt hesitate to continue forward while his mind thought about it.

Ah, he figured it out. The woman wasnt yelling for help, even though the camp was not far. On the other hand, Fuzz was gripping her arm *firmly* but not in a way that would damage her. She only got hurt as she kicked at him while he kept his jaws tight. If he didnt know better, Pete would have thought the woman was trying to escape the camp. But she didnt *need* to escape. Nobody had forced her to come. But instead of speculating, he supposed he could try to use words. Fuzz! Let go of her. Fuzz responded with something between a whine and a growl, but the wolf didnt move. He continued his firm hold on the womans arm.

On the other hand, the woman startled at the sound of Petes voice. Her face was nervous as she turned to look at him. Oh! Uhm Peter. This beast is attacking me, please help!

Of course, he said, stepping closer. I cant just pull him off without tearing up your arm. Try to hold still. Pete was a bit nervous about folding his hands around a wolfs jaw. Despite the cute name, Fuzz was a full-sized wolf. Or rather, he was a *young* version of an oversized wolf. Hed been a feral animal less than a month prior, and no matter how much intelligence he had that wouldnt necessarily change. Cultivators had ways to influence animals, but Catarina was making up her own technique. She seemed talented, but he doubted it would work perfectly right away. Still, the way the scene looked to him How did you get all the way out here? he asked as he made an attempt to pry apart Fuzzs jaws.

The beast chased me away from the camp, Lara said, her voice faltering. Pete had to admit her emotional distress seemed genuine, and she was certainly afraid of Fuzz.

But she was lying. The camp wasnt that big, and hed seen Fuzz leave. He wasnt moving fast, and she would have had plenty of opportunities to call for help. Pete also knew that Fuzz had sharp teeth, and the fact that he hadnt torn through the womans sleeves and punctured deep into her arm was because he was being gentle. But Fuzz also wasnt helping the situation be cleared up either. Pete took a good grip on the wolfs jaws while he inspected the woman subtly. Long sleeves, pants, boots. She was

equipped in traveling gear they had purchased, not her own bedclothes or her servants garb. She was leaving. But why? Theyd done nothing to harm her. She had to know she would be caught if she continued heading towards Sarton. Ah. Maybe that was it. Come on Fuzz. I need you to be a good boy and let go. Pete matched his muscles against that of Fuzzs jaws. They were very close. Pete considered making use of energy, but he almost felt like if he pulled harder he would snap something on Fuzz. Just let go and we can all go back to camp, okay?

Fuzz was smart. Pete was *certain* that the wolf understood at least some of what he was saying. His jaws loosened and the woman pulled her arm out. Thank you. Could you please take that *beast* back to the camp and restrain him?

Of course, Ill hold onto him. Pete put his arms around Fuzzs chest under his front shoulders and lifted him up. He was a heavy thing, but Pete at least had the initial pass of Body Tempering done and had been decently strong to begin with. Come on, lets go.

You go on without me, she said. I need a moment.

Of course, Pete said. Take your time. He turned around, still carrying Fuzz. Fuzz whined and wriggled, but he couldnt get out of Petes grip. Pete walked away, leaves and sticks crunching under his feet while he listened behind him. Fuzzs continuous whining didnt help, but Pete understood the reason well enough. When they turned around, Lara was gone. Okay boy. Lets catch her. If Fuzz was able to walk at a full pace he would have put the wolf down. Instead, he was still able to move more quickly even carrying the weight. He couldnt say he was *fast*, but they werent slow either.

He first hurried back towards where she had last been. He couldnt hear her, but Fuzz *leaned* very hard in one direction. All that snuffling he was doing must be for something, so Pete followed his directions. Eventually he caught up to the sound of running feet, and he caught sight of the woman. She wasnt fast, but it was a bit hard keeping up with her while holding Fuzz.

You wait here, he said, putting down the wolf. Ill be right back. He didnt stop to see if Fuzz listened, instead calling after the woman. Where are you going? Instead of answering, she instead started to sprint away. Not that he expected much different. He put his energy into his legs, the way he saw Anton and the others do when they were trying to move quickly. He almost toppled himself face first into the dirt, but fortunately managed to hold his position. His legs still did the majority of the work but he was enough faster to continuously gain on the woman. Do you intend to go back into slavery? No answer. But he wasnt going to stop. He caught up to her and grabbed her around the waist, picking her up.

She started screaming and yelling, kicking and biting at him. Some of that probably hurt, because while his energy was pretty weak it still provided a tough surface all over his body. Pete felt bad, but she was running directly towards Sarton. Whether she intended to betray them or was fleeing in the wrong direction he couldnt be *completely* sure, but

either way he couldn't let her. He hoped nobody was looking for them in this area right now. The whole point of the formation was to hide their position, and now they were *far* outside of it.

He started jogging back towards the camp, kicking sticks and rocks and leaves in a strange attempt to mask his trail. He had no idea if it would work, but it didn't leave things any more obvious than he'd already been. About halfway back he saw Fuzz, doing his weird front-paws-only thing to move after them. When he saw they were both coming, he sort of wagged his butt and turned around back towards the camp. That was what Pete thought. Fuzz just wanted everyone to stay together. It wasn't clear if he understood the danger or just wanted everyone to be a nice little pack.

The woman's yelling woke everyone up, of course, and there was a lot of yelling and accusations going back and forth. Pete didn't even want to think about all the things the woman he was carrying said about him. The men from Dungannon seemed to be taking Pete's side, and they were all stronger than the rest. Things seemed like they might get violent but-

Enough! Catarina's voice cut through everything else. A wave of energy made everyone reel on their feet. Everyone quiet. We'll hear things out one at a time. Pete, set her down.

Absolutely, Pete said as he put her in the middle of everyone. He trusted Catarina to keep things fair.

You- Catarina pointed to Lara. Share your side of what happened.

He tried to rape me! Lara accused. He pulled me out of the camp and-

I see, Catarina cut her off. Pete. Explain.

I stepped away from the camp because I saw Fuzz run off. She was out there, heading towards Sarton. Fuzz had a grip on her arm, trying to stop her from going.

The beast attacked me! the woman exclaimed.

Shut up, Catarina said, I didn't say it was your turn to talk. Pete had to admit that Catarina was being a bit biased. Fuzz was snuggling up against her legs at the moment. But that bias really helped him, so he didn't complain.

As I was saying Fuzz wouldn't let go. I finally managed to convince him to let go. She asked us to return to camp first, so I began to. But as you all might notice, Pete pointed out. She's in full travel garb. She wasn't *forced* to go anywhere. Anyway, almost as soon as our backs were turned she ran off again. Straight towards Sarton. Now, I can't say she's a traitor. Maybe she's just got a bad sense of direction, but that was where she was going. You can follow our tracks easily enough

I see, Catarina nodded. You. Explain why you were going towards Sarton.

I wasn't! She pointed a finger towards Pete, He-

Catarina's sword was drawn and pointed at her throat in an instant, Explain why you were going back towards the people who enslaved you and left on your own. Nobody forced you to be here. You know it's dangerous for you to go out there, and you *snuck* away instead of just saying you were going off on your own. Why?

Lara didn't answer immediately, but another one of those from the manor did. She's the snitch, the second said.

What? Patricia gasped.

She's the one who always told when we weren't doing exactly as we should. I knew it. I just thought, if we were all going to be free it didn't matter. But instead she thought about the stupid rewards she could get for being a traitorous bitch.

You have one last chance to defend your actions, Catarina said. Explain why you snuck away and headed directly towards our enemies.

Look, I- I didn't trust you, okay? Sure, I was the snitch. I thought it would be better to run off on my own instead of staying around people I didn't know. Okay? I just ran the wrong direction. It's dark.

Fine, Catarina said. She pointed with her sword. That's the direction you want to go. Lara hesitated. Go!

Pete shook his head as he watched her leave. I don't feel good about this.

I don't either, the second woman said. I don't trust that snitch. Throwing around so many accusations

I didn't say I believed her, Catarina said. I just told her to go. Everyone else stay here and be safe. With that, Catarina went off into the forest after Lara. Pete collapsed into a pile, various people comforting him and some of the women apologizing for their lack of trust. He was about to wave them away so everyone could start going to bed when Catarina came back into camp, carrying Lara. She didn't even go half a mile before turning back towards Sarton. Lara was tied up and her mouth gagged. So she gets to stay like this until the morning, when we decide what to do with her. Catarina's voice indicated how angry she was, each word almost stabbing into Pete and he wasn't even the target of her ire. However, a calming feeling then washed over them. As for the rest of you. Please, if you want to leave just stay with us until we can get somewhere safer. We plan to take you out of Ofurg, but if you want to strike off on your own somewhere

Patricia shook her head, We know we cant do anything about cultivators. Were safest here.

The mood of being freed was dampened by what had just happened, but several hours before dawn Anton and Hoyt arrived- with all of the miners in tow. That of course included Oskar, and the reunion of him and Patricia filled everyone with hope. So did the baby that hadnt even seen his father until he was already several months old.

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Nearly three dozen ragged people were trudging through the wilderness northwest of Sarton. Their speed was hampered by the slowest among them, namely the various slaves freed from the manor. However, those same people remained determined to continue as long as they could, pushing themselves to keep up. Those with more cultivation carried heavier loads, mostly food, bedrolls, and tents. Much of it was repurposed from what they had at the mines, because even a poor blanket was better than nothing. There were also some nicer things to take as well as the weapons and armor.

The bodies had been disposed of inside the mine. It would take longer for them to be found that way, though it wouldnt do much to hide their trail. Whenever someone came for the next shipment it would be obvious something was wrong. There was only so much that could be done to hide blood and damage, especially since they didnt want to remain for long. None of the miners had a single complaint about their current situation. Oskar had managed to create a tight-knit community. It helped solidify it even more when they heard he had been offered the chance to slip off unnoticed and refused to go without everyone. Though they were now free, nobody quite felt it yet. Fleeing for their lives had something to do with it.

Though Anton, Catarina, and Hoyt had no trouble with the mere act of traveling quickly, they took more difficult responsibilities upon themselves. Hoyt constantly patrolled around looking for dangers. It was possible they would be found at any time, despite their efforts to hide their trail and chosen route. The first few times they camped it had been tense, as searching cultivators came close to finding them several times. The concealment formations held, however, and they hadnt seen anyone in the past two days.

There were several reasons they might not have noticed anyone. Perhaps they disguised their passage well enough. Maybe the damage they had caused wasnt considered worthwhile enough to continue to expend resources hunting them down actively. A couple dozen slaves probably wasnt valued that much, though the cultivators they had killed might have sparked more concern. It was possible Sarton was simply arranging a more organized attempt, which might include a formation master who could see through Catarinas efforts. At least part of the reason, however, was probably that they were traveling through the Black March Hills.

They were about as pleasant as their name indicated. When gathering information about the area to think of escape routes *before* they set everything off, they had heard the stories of a company of cultivators being slaughtered by denizens that lived in the hills, nearly down to the last man. What sorts of monsters inhabited the area was unclear, and the story of its namesake was so ancient it was hard to verify- but they were certainly dangerous. Theyd already come across several magical beasts, nothing that the main three had to worry about but any sort of magical beast was enough to be a danger to those in the early level of Body Tempering.

On that subject, when they stopped for the night they didnt just get to rest. That was when cultivation lessons began. Oskar and the miners had managed to achieve a level equivalent to the first star of Body Tempering through very messy methods that just involved taking in the overabundant energy from the mines. Oskar *did* have some guidance hed given the others that allowed them to be successful, but it was mostly just dumb luck that allowed them to succeed. Anton began to instruct them in more proper methods of cultivation, though any aftereffects of their rocky start wouldnt be clear until much later.

For the moment, they were bringing Lara along with the group. Her fate had already been decided, but leaving a body behind would only be a clear marker of their trail. They also didnt want to carry a corpse with them, so she was restrained and forced to walk- or sometimes carried. Nobody enjoyed it, but even when theyd allowed her to leave she simply began to march back towards Sarton to turn them in. Anton had been able to confirm Catarinas word on that- and it didnt take any convincing to the rest regardless. Shed admitted she was the snitch to those who knew her, and the miners were quite grateful to Anton and the rest for saving them. Even though their life seemed to be in danger every moment, it was apparently no worse than working in the mines. And they were free- despite not really having many options available at the moment.

Sharp eyes aided by carefully handled energy looked ahead of the group. Anton had managed to complete the eleventh star shortly after they freed the miners. Despite the fact that they were fleeing through the wilderness with unknown forces at their heels, Anton was in one of the best mental states hed been in during the last year. He was still worried for their survival, but he was *doing* something. It was dangerous, but not foolish or reckless. The fact that theyd made it this far indicated that theyd judged the situation appropriately. The response to their actions hadnt been adequate to stop them, and now they had not only managed to save dozens but also werent rewarding those who were responsible for their predicament in the first place.

It made sense to peacefully buy up people from Dungannon to save their lives. Timidly keeping his head down and acting like slavers werent doing anything wrong could be effective but the problem there was he was only saving a small portion of those he could see. How many hundreds were still forced to work in the fields around Veron and elsewhere? Of course Anton couldnt repeat his current actions indefinitely and assume

there would be no consequences, but remaining as he was wouldnt have been good enough. His future actions would be more difficult- especially finding and freeing the last of those from Dungannon and whatever few members of his family still lived- but he judged the difficulty would be worth it.

He wasnt going to just lead an army across Ofrurg. Even if the Order suddenly declared him as head and let him take every single elder, it would be far too costly. However, Anton would be certain to make use of the support he had in more than just training himself. He would ask for the Orders help with political pressure. They might be reluctant to act or he might find his contributions insufficient, but he felt that he would do better that way than on his own- or with the help of just a few others like Catarina and Hoyt. If the Order was unwilling he was certain that some other sect would be willing to do something. Spirit Building cultivators didnt just grow on trees. Despite the fact that it had taken him not much more than a year to reach his current level, he knew people like him werent just everywhere. Convincing a new sect of his growth speed and potential might be rather difficult and despite its stagnation he still thought the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars was the right group to be a part of. Their core values were not something he would find just anywhere.

But before he could deal with any of that, Anton needed the people with him to survive the journey into Estary. Estary was north of Graotan and thus mainly northwest of Ofrurg, and one of the closest borders. They were also likely to be sympathetic to the plight of a group of fleeing slaves. The border itself would be a problem, but they werent traveling along the roads so Ofrurg wouldnt be able to stop them and Estary would be able to ignore the specifics of where they came from. As long as they didnt enter the country with cultivators hot on their heels, everything should be fine.

If they made it there alive. Magical beasts were a bit too common in the Black March Hills, and if they faced too many of them at once then the weaker members of their group would be in danger. There was a problem directly ahead, as well. In fact, all along the ridgeline in front of them. Anton was still trying to puzzle out the specifics, but he could feel the energy of magical beasts. Not just a few, either. Yet he couldnt pick a single one out among all of the rocks in the area. It was only when he caught a glimpse of a rock moving that he figured it out.

Anton was relieved that it wasnt actually a rock though. There *were* apparently places where the rocks themselves came alive, but in this case it was merely a collection of giant tortoises. Their shells looked like rock and would no doubt be extremely hard, but they still had heads and legs and everything else expected of a tortoise. That would include vital organs, if they could reach them. Their eyes were big enough. Anton would have to discuss with the others how best to try to avoid the creatures, though. He wanted to be prepared if they fought, but *not* fighting was the best option, especially with so many of the brown-shelled creatures.

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The group stood well downhill of the tortoises, observing them. What do you think they're all doing up on the ridge? Hoyt asked.

Sunning themselves, it looks like, Anton answered. Doubt they'll take kindly to being interrupted though. If they attacked a contingent of soldiers they'll certainly plan to attack us.

Maybe not, Hoyt said, Maybe if we move a few at a time. I think one of us should approach them to see their reaction. He looked around, Me, probably. I imagine you'll be more effective at range, he inclined his head to Anton, And Catarina is the only one who can conceal the group. If we can draw them away or shoo them off it should be good enough.

I'll start setting up, Catarina declared. A stationary concealment formation was quite powerful, but if she was going to make it mobile it would be much less effective. Keeping the main group of people unnoticed before disturbing them would be much more likely to draw the tortoises towards Anton or Hoyt- or if they ran away, then it would just be a small bit of wasted time and effort.

Anton and Hoyt stood over to the side, discussing their plan. I'd prefer to just wait until they moved, Anton said, But if they're sunning themselves, that could take half a day. And there's no guarantee they won't just hole up for the night. There doesn't seem to be much vegetation here for them to eat, but they might not have to eat every day. Tortoises have a slow metabolism and some magical beasts sustain themselves half off of energy, I believe.

Hoyt nodded, So how do you want to approach this?

If I knew them to be a hostile species, I'd just as soon start shooting. The Black March might have been because of these creatures, or other inhabitants a century or two ago. It's also best to try not to startle them. Anton kept sweeping his eyes over the creatures, hoping to see a break in their line or any sort of overall movement. Some of them shuffled around, but they mostly remained still, flat on their bellies. If you approach close at a slow pace, they might just shuffle away. If you can do that, we can just squeeze open a path and walk through. That would be the best way. Anton frowned, The ground looks odd to you?

Hoyt just shook his head, Not really.

Hmm. There are a few gouges around. There, there, and there, Anton pointed them out. Can't figure out what they'd be caused by, though.

Hopefully we don't have to find out. Hoyt looked towards Catarina, barely able to see her even though he knew she was there. She was fuzzy and indistinct, and his instincts told him to just ignore the area. Looks like we're ready. I'll head to the right, I suppose?

Anton nodded. Ill take the left. If theyre aggressive, Ill try to draw some of them towards me, open up the middle there.

Hoyt started picking his way uphill. The terrain was rough and uneven with lots of little potholes. Hed have to watch out for that if it came down to a fight. There wasnt anything in the way of normal terrain that could stop someone at the peak of Body Tempering, but it *could* be an inconvenience. He wasnt in a hurry anyway, so he picked his way carefully up to a somewhat smoother spot. That would allow him to move around with less worry if he was attacked.

It didnt take long before the tortoises noticed him. He wasnt exactly trying to hide. Spooking them might work, but he was hoping theyd just move away in annoyance. However, as he got around a dozen meters away several of the closest turtles stood and turned towards him, groaning in a deep, rumbling voice. That was a pretty clear threat. He held his position for a minute, but they neither moved towards him nor retreated. That wasnt good enough. Hoyt took several more steps forward and finally got a reaction.

The closest tortoise bellowed, a horrible noise that he could feel carried some natural energy behind it. It wasnt enough to overpower Hoyts defenses, but it would likely be enough to momentarily stun anyone that didnt have energy defenses ready. The tortoise leaned back slightly then pulled all its limbs forward at once, throwing itself forward. As it did so, it pulled its legs and head into its shell.

Now Hoyt suddenly had a tortoise whose shell was almost as high as he was tall sliding down the hill towards him. That explained the strange marks, at least. It was fast, too. Hoyt barely managed to leap over it, running along its shell for a moment. He had barely touched ground when another several tortoises launched themselves at him in quick succession.

When it was quite clear the creatures were aggressive and fully on alert, Anton took action. An expanding area of tortoises was focusing on Hoyt, and it was best if he didnt have to deal with attacks from too many angles. He started firing arrows towards the tortoises. They were extremely quick to close their eyes or snap their heads back into their shells. He did manage to wound a few before they really got what was going on, but it wasnt long before Anton had to deal with tortoises barreling down towards him. However, he was much further than Hoyt. He learned several things. The most troublesome was that they continued to pick up speed as they skied down the hill, tumbling rocks along with them. They also coordinated themselves very well. Anton had been hoping he might get some to crash into each other, but they only attacked in sequence. That meant he *technically* only had to dodge one at a time. Most important, however, was that once they committed to sliding towards him they continued almost exactly straight along their trajectory with very little deviation. Their legs and head were all bundled up so there wasnt anything they could do to change it, except perhaps use a bit of their energy. Anton felt *something* that made them not go exactly straight, but he just had to focus on the closest few. Predicting their movements was laughably easy

even without insight, but he was still constantly having to change directions. If he made a mistake, he didnt want to know what a ton of turtle smashing into him would do to his body.

The tortoises that slid down the hill eventually stopped as things leveled out. By that point they were much too far to worry about, and as far as Anton could tell they werent even coming back up the hill. It made sense. They didnt seem to be fast except with the aid of gravity.

Catarina gestured to the group with her. The tortoises shouldnt be able to sense them easily, but formations werent perfect against everything. There was a gap in the tortoises, however, directly between Hoyt and Anton. It was large enough for them to slip through if they stayed close- and they had to do so for the sake of the formation regardless. Catarina was at the front, flicking out little bits of energy to change the terrain in front of them. She pick the path that would best support the formation they had which was unfortunately not the easiest climb. Hopefully all of the miners could support the weaker members among them.

Some of the tortoises, while not *aiming* for their group, started getting far too close. It was a good thing theyd started moving when they did, because the angles involved meant that the tortoises further to the sides would be more towards where they stood, at least from Hoyts side. Anton was far enough back that most of the tortoises would have gone behind them even if they didnt move.

Catarina kept a steady pace, keeping track of Pete on the rear-left of the triangular formation they were holding. He was doing just fine, but Oskars portion on the other side was unstable. He at least avoided making erratic movements, but he also wasnt doing anything to direct the flow of energy properly. That was still good enough for someone without training. He was responsible enough to know to keep his arms held in front of him carrying the rocks she directed even if he didnt understand the specifics. Everyone else was more chaotically arranged, filling out the rest of the equilateral triangle. Fuzz stayed right on her heels.

So far, things had been going pretty well. That was until someone broke away from the formation. Lara. She was allowed to walk unrestrained because of the difficult terrain, and she dashed off down the hill just as they were nearing the top of the ridge. There were several tortoises that had held back from flinging themselves downhill and several others that had just meandered their way up to the crest where they could actually slide down. Upon seeing a woman suddenly appear out of nothing, they had another, closer target than the two cultivators to either side.

Naturally they began to attack. Lara had run more or less directly downhill of the formation, which placed the trajectories of some of the tortoises directly through the group. Everyone get closer together! Strongest cultivations on the outside! She hoped the tortoises wouldnt really hear her words, but she couldnt silently guide people in the current situation.

If Catarina had just a minute or two she could have set up a passable defensive formation. As it was, the concealment formation had to suffice. It was good enough to keep the tortoises unaware of their presence until they were about to impact. The first one was almost directly at the point of the formation, herself. She could easily dodge it, but then all of those behind her would die. Instead, she gathered as much of her energy as she could onto her legs, taking a firm stance as she kicked the side of what was effectively a sliding boulder. She didn't hold back a tiny bit, but even with her body at the peak of Body Tempering and the energy that went along with it, the power she could harness in an instant was barely enough to deflect it. Sharp pieces of rock sprayed into the group as the tortoise slid past, wounding several of those on the outer layer. A few had passable energy defenses and held their ground, but they couldn't fully protect those in the middle either. That was the problem with traveling around with close to thirty people.

Somehow the formation held together from the first tortoise and another few that came extremely close to impacting the formation towards the rear. There were only a few more of the giant tortoises, but one was angled about a third of the way inward on the right side. It wasn't possible for everyone to get out of the way, especially those moving uphill. Then the formation shattered as Oskar grabbed the two people closest to him, flinging them away from the corner. Though Catarina's eyes weren't on the scene, she could feel his energy suddenly spike as he dashed forward. His arm wide, he managed to sweep up four others in the way of the tortoise's descent and shove them out of the way, along with himself. Catarina could probably carry four people, but she was at the peak of Body Tempering and not just somewhere around the first star. However, the instant after that Oskar's energy flattened. She would have turned to see him but there was one last tortoise straight ahead. With the formation scattered they were quite visible now. Before it even started moving, she gathered all of her energy and charged forward to meet it.

Her quick thinking probably saved a dozen lives, because though it moved straight towards her it didn't have as much time to build up momentum. Catarina once again kicked with her heel to throw the creature off course, this time being flung tumbling off to the side. But she diverted the creature enough that the left side batted it away with their weapons as they dodged out of the way.

Catarina looked downhill. At least there was some justice. Lara had been the target of most of the tortoises, and they were quite accurate. Catarina grimaced as several tortoises stood around a decidedly non-rigid body. Catarina didn't watch, but she was certain she saw one of them open its mouth to take a bite of the mess, before she turned away.

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Having survived the onslaught of tortoises flinging themselves downhill and now being uphill of them instead, the group did nothing. Not to the tortoises, anyway. They were certainly aggressive and dangerous, but that was exactly the reason there was no point

in staying around to antagonize them further. When approached from uphill, they did indeed start moving away to the side and since they were able to continue without any serious injuries, they left the area. Besides, leaving them all basically healthy would make it much harder for anyone trying to follow them. It might take the tortoises some time to return to the top of the hill, but they seemed to be already doing so.

The Black March hills were the final barrier to reaching Estary, and while they encountered a number of other magical beasts none were sufficiently powerful or in large enough numbers to endanger the group.

Camp had been set up just outside the border to Estary. It was already late when they arrived, and they preferred to cross the border during the day. They had decided that officially crossing the border would be the best option, with a few caveats. They *did* have some escaped slaves. It was unknown if Estary would honor Ofrurgs laws, but the bigger problem was Ofrurgs side of the border. It was decided that Hoyt would cross the border with the legally freed slaves. He was chosen in particular because unless they had been seen while traveling- in which case their pursuers had gotten much closer than theyd thought- nobody could recognize him. There was a small chance Anton and Catarina could be recognized from the manor. Anton wasnt sure if he could or *should* kill everyone there and while they had been quite far he couldnt discount the possibility one of the guards had extraordinary eyesight and good memory. Hoyt couldnt be recognized because everyone at the mines was either dead or part of their group.

While they had a break, Anton had something to talk to Oskar about. The man now had strands of grey hair among his dark brown, strands that hadnt been at all grey the previous morning. What was that technique you used? Anton asked calmly.

Oskar sighed. He looked exhausted, more than anyone else despite having been actively in combat for the same duration. He shuffled through his pack and pulled out the scroll. He held it out for Anton to take. I found it in the mines. A forbidden technique.

Anton left him with his hand awkwardly outstretched. I see. And you practiced it anyway?

Well not *really*. Oskar scratched his grizzled beard. I thought to leave it alone. But I couldnt help but keep thinking, his eyes flickering over to Patricia, Thinking that I might need more power than I had. I knew how strong the guards were. So I read it. But I didnt practice it.

Anton nodded, his face impassive. That is probably the worst choice, from what I have heard.

What do you mean? The technique indeed had warnings, but it also said that if it wasn't used there was no danger in studying it.

Of course, Anton said. But if you were going to end up using it anyway, it was better to practice it in safety first. Unless the technique can only be used three or four times total, it shouldn't have this effect on you.

Oskar shook his head, finally lowering the scroll. I don't know. It certainly implied it could be used somewhat more than that. It was difficult to understand.

Do you want my help? I have no intent to take it away from you. I've had more access to different techniques for study, and higher cultivation levels assist with understanding techniques.

I'm not sure, Oskar said. If Patricia was safe- and Kevin too- I might just get rid of it. But if they need me, I'm not concerned about burning a little bit of my life force away.

Burning your life force? Anton raised an eyebrow. That would explain the sudden aging. If it is any consolation, it is likely that continuing to rise in cultivation should recover some of that.

Is that why you look so relatively young?

That seems to be the case, Anton said. It seems that each star of the Ninety-Nine Stars has the potential to raise the user's lifespan between one and three years, and similar totals are had at the same stage for most cultivation methods. So I may still live another decade, though it could be less. Little study has been done on the extension of lifespan for those who begin cultivating late.

I don't know much about it, Oskar replied, But I certainly heard it was difficult to begin cultivating when older. How did you do it?

Anton shrugged, It's amazing what you are willing to endure if you don't care if you die.

I understand, Oskar nodded sadly. I don't wish to put you in danger, but I *would* like your thoughts on whether this technique will have any additional side effects.

Anton smiled reassuringly, I will do my best to help you out.

Hoyt had no idea why he was nervous. He was quite capable of being independent. He had the papers from when he originally crossed into Ofrurg, and the documents for Pete and the others declaring them free. He didn't feel like he would have been nervous if Anton were around. He couldn't say the same for his *real* grandfather. Maybe he was just destined to be a follower. In that case, at least he could be standing behind Anton.

But if that were the case, he at least had to be able to carry out a plan theyd put together on his own. Growing up with the shelter of the Order so nearby maybe hadnt been that good for him.

Still, he felt justified in being nervous. While there was only *one* Essence Collection cultivator at this border, it was still nerve wracking. He was used to any he met being much more friendly, since they were usually part of the Order or at least friendly to them. There was another similar cultivator to match on the Estary side, but that did little to help.

If Hoyt had been able to ask Anton how he avoided being nervous, the answer would have been simple. It wasnt that he didnt get nervous doing things. Hed just come to accept that everyone did and some just hid it better than others. While eventually repeated experiences limited the number of situations a person would feel uncomfortable, there was always something new that could elicit the same feelings.

Hoyt walked into the small office. There was no point in waiting. The others came along with him.

Papers, please, a bored looking clerk said. He was technically a cultivator, but he appeared to be in his forties and was still somewhere in early Body Tempering. Which was why he had this job, instead of something more *exciting*. Hoyt handed over what hed gotten at the other border. The clerk looked down at it, then picked up a little bell which he rang. Another more junior clerk came running, Process these, please.

Everything seemed normal. But there was a slight change on the clerks face when he read the papers. What was that for?

Were checking everyone crossing the border. There was an incident. The clerk gestured to Pete and the other four. Papers, please. The only identity papers they had were the ones that declared they were freed slaves. He started looking through them one at a time. These dont match. These documents arent for cultivators.

Hoyt bristled at that, Are you telling me Im not allowed to teach free people how to cultivate? It was quite obvious to anyone who was willing to look that they shared the same cultivation style. Sure, Hoyt technically hadnt been the one to do it, but the clerk didnt have to know that. He didnt like where things were going. Was that incident? This was the closest border and sending a message along the roads would have been faster.

His question was answered when two Spirit Building cultivators approached. They hadnt been far away to begin with. Were they listening in? It was a security checkpoint. Well need to do a thorough search of your group, they said. Along with that, they extended their energy to press down on Hoyt and the others.

That actually made Hoyt stand more firm. This was just a battle without weapons or *attacks*. Nothing to worry about. On what grounds? Hoyt said, his voice brimming with confidence and projecting forward with the aid of energy.

Slaves were stolen from Sarton, and cultivators were killed.

I see, Hoyt said. What does that have to do with us? I purchased the freedom of all five of these men in Veron. That has nothing to do with anything that happened in Sarton. He continued to project his voice past the men. He wasn't sure if it would do any good, but sometimes the loudest voice won. And he wasn't doing anything that could be considered an attack, unlike them. The pressure of their energy bore down on him and Hoyt had to admit it was hard to stand up to but there were *two* Spirit Building cultivators against just himself.

The men have no other proof of identity, the clerk said, Just descriptions aren't a good enough match.

That was enough to set off Hoyt. Of course they don't! Slaving bandits from Ofrurg stole them from their homes in Graotan. I followed all of your laws to free them. Now you're attempting to brand me a criminal? The Order won't stand for this. Hoyt was currently making his cultivation very obvious. He couldn't possibly defeat the two Spirit Building cultivators despite their relatively low ability. But he really didn't believe they would dare to do something carelessly. While Hoyt agreed that the Order needed to be more active, it was also the case that they wouldn't stand for any violations that could be easily proven. A young, peak Body Tempering cultivator wasn't a nobody who would just be forgotten about if he disappeared at the border. Hoyt also got some confidence because he'd felt the senses of an Essence Collection cultivator sweep over him. Two, in fact. The one that bolstered his confidence was the one from Estary.

He felt the closer one approaching. Hoyt wondered if he had made a mistake. While the Order would certainly avenge him, he'd really rather still be alive. He did have one more card he could pull out but fortunately the Essence Collection cultivator from Estary had started to move at the same time. Quite a bit more quickly, as well. A heavy pressure bore down on him for an instant before it was lifted along with that of the Spirit Building cultivators.

What's going on here, hmm? The voice of a woman spoke out right next to Hoyt. He hadn't even noticed when she got there. As he turned to look he found her younger than he'd thought she would be. She looked to be in her thirties, and while Hoyt actually doubted that was her *actual* age, it showed she had advanced fairly quickly. Hoyt had no chance to answer, because there was another *definitely* older voice.

Stay out of this, Adrastea. The man in front of them was certainly older.

My job is border security, Adrastea smiled in response. It seems to me your men are causing untoward trouble for this young man, *Yust*. She spit out the name like it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Hoyt just tried to look small. He wasn't sure if he'd made the right choice, but it at least made him more confident to have someone strong at his side. He just hoped their obvious personal conflict wouldn't be trouble for him.

Chapter 75

If Anton or the others knew their way around Estary, they could have arranged for a discreet location to meet up. As it was, their target was a city not far from the other side of the border. Hoyt and those with him were quite a distance away at the proper border crossing, while Anton and Catarina planned to just walk across some distance away. That meant they'd have to avoid anything that ended up with their identities being checked, but they really didn't have any intention for that regardless. He wasn't planning to buy anything particularly strange and exotic, nor did he plan to commit any crimes. Except sneaking past the border, he supposed.

Stop! Catarina held out her hand to the side. There's a formation.

Anton surveyed the area in front of them, but shook his head, I don't feel anything. It's too faint.

It's weak, Catarina said. It's not a barrier or an offensive formation. Nothing will stop us if we just walk through.

I suppose it must be an alarm then? Anton asked.

I think so, Catarina said. But none of the actual parts of the formation is here. This is just an extension of the effect between two points. Catarina looked to the left and right. It's too far to go around, I think. It could encompass the whole border.

Was there anything like this at the Graotan-Ofrurg border?

... I don't know, Catarina said. I didn't sense it at the time, but I've improved in cultivation significantly. And practical experience with formations. She approached closer towards the invisible barrier, presumably stopping in front of it. I think I can open up a way through. As long as nobody's currently watching the barrier.

How long is it to go around, really?

Catarina shook her head, It would be a half day to the northeast before we could determine whether or not it ends or just has a relay point.

And the other option is sneaking through this formations effects. If were still being pursued the detour might cost us. But if were caught here Anton shook his head. He continued to look around them. It was just a regular stretch of land. In fact, hed thought theyd already *crossed* the border. Of course just that didnt make them *safe*, but still. Catarina, can you tell if there are formation techniques from Estary or Ofrurg supporting this formation?

She shook her head, Even if I could study the core of the formation, from what I know of formations this entire region should have the same basis. Close enough for individual styles to overwhelm regional differences.

Too bad, because I was hoping we were fully in Estary. If its not something both sides control, Id rather bet on explaining things to Estary. He looked back at the dozens of people following behind them, waiting to see what they did.

We just have to not get caught then, Catarina started shuffling pebbles around, I will need you to lend me energy. Then we can open up a path for everyone to move through.

The two Essence Collection cultivators were having a staredown, with the side effects being for the floor between them. Adrastea kept any energy from flowing towards Hoyt and the five others, while the older man named Yust protected those from Ofrurg. Where their energy met cracks formed in the ground.

The woman who had been referred to as Adrastea pushed forward, and the crack widened. However, as she turned towards him to speak instead of any sort of retaliation from Yust the crackling energy lessened. Who are you, young man?

Hoyt cupped his hands together, bowing slightly. I am Hoyt, of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars.

And these? she gestured to Pete and the others from the farms.

They were captured from Graotan and taken as slaves. I legally purchased and freed them, as those documents show.

Theres no proof of that! Yust said.

Adrastea turned back towards him, Perhaps. But the papers are legitimate, are they not? Why have they not been allowed through?

They have no other form of identification. It could be anyone.

Adrasteas snort stirred up the air so much that one of the two early Spirit Building cultivators standing behind Yust staggered back slightly. Ofrurg never provides freed slaves with proper identification. That is a fault in your own system, and inadequate reason to hinder someone on legitimate business. Anything else?

Citizens were killed in Sarton and slaves freed. This is the nearest border. We need to search him to see if he has any connection to the incident. These slaves-

Adrastea pulled a spear from nowhere and leveled it at Yust. These people are not slaves. Nor should anyone be.

Yust swallowed, My mistake. However, this being the closest border we have legitimate reason to search this fellow, and any others crossing.

Adrasteas eyes flickered to the side for a moment before turning back towards Yust. Is that so? Then well be glad to search any disciple from the sects of Ofrurg passing through our land as well. Im sure they have some lovely techniques.

I dont-

Many people would like to get their hands on a fully copy of the Ninety-Nine Stars. Im sure youre among them. Adrastea turned to Hoyt. Hoyt. If you will allow us to jointly search you and your companions, I can promise no techniques or private correspondence will be read.

Of course. Go ahead, Hoyt really didnt have much choice- and they really didnt have anything on them. Pete and the others had little more than the clothes on their back, travelling supplies, and weapons. Hoyt had the Ninety-Nine Stars, but all of the more *suspect* things were with Anton.

It didnt take long before they were past the Ofrurg side of the border. Adrastea lead them forward to the Estary side. We still have to fill out the paperwork, but that wont take long. It didnt, either. It probably helped that Adrastea herself filled out the documents, her hand flicking with remarkable speed as she wrote. There. How many others?

Its just the six of us, Hoyt said.

Adrastea took a good hard look at Hoyt. Fine. Just one moment, though. She picked up another pile of documents, filling each out in an instant. She put half to the side and handed half to Hoyt. If you happen to run into any other members of the Order, say an eleventh and tenth star, or perhaps two dozen miscellaneous others, they might need these. When Hoyt hesitated, she spun them through the air so they landed in his bag. I can tell you havent been expelled from the Order, and I believe you about the method these five were enslaved and freed. So Im willing to take the chance. Though if they really arent with you Adrastea stroked her spear she hadnt yet put away.

Hoyt gave up. She obviously knew who had passed, and probably *where* they were more than he did. Actually I was planning to meet up with some others. Maybe they lost their papers.

Adrastea smiled and waved them on. As they stepped out of the structure, Adrastea called after them, Oh, dont forget to tell your grandfather I said hi!

Dammit. Stupid Essence Collection cultivators knew everything. At least they got past the border.

Hoyt was waiting outside the city for Anton and the others. He handed over the bundle of papers after they approached. You were found out. Fortunately, by someone friendly to the Order. Maybe thats Estarys opinion in general, Hoyt shrugged.

Catarina frowned. How was there a secondary formation to detect tampering? It didnt resist my efforts she muttered to herself as Anton looked over the papers.

Some of the details seem to have been left vague, Anton said. Thats something. The papers for him mostly said Spirit Building, Ninety-Nine Stars along with the date and other legal stuff. The papers for the miners just said Body Tempering, undeclared. Are these safe?

Hoyt shrugged, The Essence Building cultivator can probably see us from here. And if she wanted you to be dead, youd be dead.

I only detect anti-tampering formations, Catarina said. But if they want to track us

Let them, Anton said. It appears we underestimated the border.

... Im sorry, Catarina said.

Its not your fault, Anton said. Truthfully, both of us are inexperienced in this area. Nothing bad happened this time, so we can learn. Anton looked at the nearly three dozen people they had. Hed hunted animals when necessary as they were fleeing through Ofrurg, but hed rather not poach in Estary if he could help it. It would be a poor guest that received such a helpful welcome only to turn around and break laws. That meant theyd have to buy food, and they also should probably at least get everyone into a common room instead of their somewhat lacking tents. Theyd saved quite a bit of money by not paying for any of the last group, but they should probably get some work. Preferably some that looped around to the west, so they could return to Graotan.

Except it wasnt guaranteed everyone was from there. He hadnt really stopped to talk with the majority of the miners and the servants. An oversight on his part. There was no way any of them were going back into Ofrurg, but if there were any who had homes in

Estarý going a bit out of their way to return them home would be the proper thing to do. Anton wasn't even completely where Pete, Oskar, Patricia, and all the others wanted to go. Dungannon was no more, and it really wasn't very safe.

Chapter 76

It was humbling that they were found out while crossing the border, but that only reinforced what Elder Varela of the Grasping Willows told Anton. Even if he wasn't strong enough to contend with the best yet, he could rely on allies. Granted, he hadn't known the woman who helped in this particular case but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. From what Hoyt had said, she could have been supporting them or just getting back at Yust, or Ofrurg in general. Probably both. Intentionally making allies in a receptive country would be a good move. That should have included the Order, but he'd been focused on all of the wrong things at the time. When he was told the Order would not or could not act, he hadn't really pushed for more. Anton wasn't sure if he could have convinced them at the time since he didn't know what to say and was just a new Body Tempering cultivator, but he might have gotten *something*. Even a strongly worded letter could have been to his advantage if he hadn't gone in so cautious, as if *he* had been targeted for some reason.

He briefly entertained a fantasy where he went directly to the Iron Ring slavers, using the pressure of the Order to have them buy back all of those they sold from Dungannon. Even in that fantasy his more practical thoughts butted in and forced him to take out a loan (in Graotan where he could get a reasonable rate) to pay for all of that.

And if it had gone perfectly Anton looked at the group of people around him. Dozens of people he was now acquainted with would be slaves still. People from Ofrurg, Graotan, Estary, and everywhere around. Anton made sure to talk to each and every one of them one-on-one. Some of them were sparse with the details of how they became slaves, possibly because they didn't want to think about it or perhaps because it had involved some sort of crime. Anton understood why they would be leery of mentioning those details and didn't press them. He'd been fortunate enough to never have to choose between a life of crime or not surviving. Though now he was *technically* a criminal in a larger manner than any of them could have been.

Anton had no regrets for his actions except how it limited him in the future. Before he could enter Ofrurg again he would have to wait for things to settle down and get information on what they really knew. If there was a bounty with his face on it, it would make life much more complicated. Anton didn't think the consequences would spread throughout the whole of Ofrurg, but it could be troublesome if he later had business in the north. Anton didn't think he'd killed anyone important, and with how Ofrurg worked he'd likely be forgotten within the month. Though Ofrurg *did* crack down a lot harder on crimes within their own borders compared to what their citizens chose to do elsewhere. Hypocrites.

Of more concern was what the Order would think of what he'd done. Anton had no intention to break ties with the Order, and he didn't think hiding his actions would be useful. Hoyt and Catarina could remain quiet about things, but the Order would wonder how he got so many people freed. Currently all of them approved of following along with him until they arrived in Graotan, though if some of them found opportunities on the way Anton would encourage them to take them. He couldn't do much more than teach some basic cultivation and provide for them long enough for them to become established somewhere. Though it seemed likely that several of them planned to truly become cultivators.

Pete was currently undergoing the difficult process of tempering his meridians as the second star. If he succeeded it would be in great benefit as he continued to work with formations, and Anton was providing the best guidance he could. It still wouldn't be easy. Anton did it quickly enough but he'd almost killed himself. Pete had a long life ahead of him still and could afford to be a bit more conservative with his efforts. Always being on the road doubtless wasn't helping, but he wasn't far.

Oskar was actually quite naturally talented. It seemed he'd never bothered making the attempt to cultivate, being content with his simple life. The tests the Order performed had passed him by because he lived and worked in small villages. Anton felt it was a shame. Vincent was so proactive about recruitment, but many people didn't even know the real benefit that could be gained from cultivation. It was just a *thing* that they would never be able to interact with.

Currently, Oskar was rebuilding his cultivation. He'd managed to temper his body more or less equivalently to the first star so it was just about modifying his energy so his body could get used to the way the Ninety-Nine Stars felt. Anton was certain part of his success had been luck, but there was nothing wrong with that. Oskar worked hard and took the chances he had to.

That brought Anton back to the forbidden technique. He'd borrowed it to study, and he was quite certain he absolutely would not use it. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to practice the techniques without actually activating them, because even *that* might cause him to age. The potential to burn up the remaining portion of his life for momentary power wouldn't do him much good if he killed himself before he ran into danger. He agreed with its creator, Everheart, about its forbidden status. He did find some benefits from studying it, and he passed the insights he gleaned along to Oskar. It was up to him if he wanted to practice it further, but Anton was fairly certain some of the age he'd lost could be recovered. It was just his body was unused to the burst of energy and not that he'd burned away so many decades of his life in an instant. But probably a single decade.

No, Candle Wax treated the cultivator's life force as an energy source and Anton certainly had none of that to spare. As an auxiliary technique, however, it *did* teach him how to try to sense his life force. Anton wasn't certain if that would be useful, but it was interesting enough he began to practice it.

The second half of Candle Wax interested Anton, as secrets dangled just out of reach often did. He would love to study it but he had no intention to put in the effort to find it. There was no guarantee any copies of it actually existed. Anton didnt know who Everheart was, but the scroll was hundreds of years old. Which technically could have made him not much older than Grand Elder Vandale. Maybe if he had time he would research Everheart at the Order. If they didnt decide to expel him or something.

While searching for potential work along the lines of caravan guarding they had done in Ofrurg, they came across bounty notices. There was one that instantly caught everyones eye. Hoyt was closest and read it aloud. Wanted: Group of eleven cultivators, cultivations from mid to late Body Tempering. Crimes: Illegal border crossing, suspected banditry. Hoyt paused, This is recent. They seem to have a location, as well.

Why hasnt it been taken care of then? Catarina asked.

The caretaker of the bounty board was standing nearby, and even though the question wasnt directed at him he helpfully answered. It will usually be taken care of by one of the larger sects within a week or two. And, because the recon has already been dealt with, the pays not generally considered sufficient. Nobody much cares to risk their life for something that will be handled by someone else.

I see, Catarina said. What if someone gets hurt before the sects deal with it?

It can happen, the man admitted, But border security has increased recently. They shouldnt find any easy targets around here.

Does that increased security have something to do with Adrastea? Hoyt asked.

You met her, did you? the man nodded. There were a few incidents some years back. Then she transferred in.

What sort of incidents? Anton asked.

Banditry, slaving. Its hard to believe Ofrurg is allowed to stand, but nobody really wants a cultivator war either. There are enough large factions that are perfectly innocent except for how they benefit from letting things slide. The man shook his head, Anyway, senior Adrastea has really helped solidify the border.

What do you think? Anton asked Hoyt and Catarina.

We wouldnt be doing it just for the money, Hoyt said. I think it should be manageable. We can at least get the details.

I agree, Catarina said.

Anton looked to the bounty board caretaker. If we could see more details, then. We'd like to know more about what we're getting into.

Of course sir, we have a general location, some specifics on cultivation, and several sketches from those who have spotted them in the area. The man looked through a few shelves behind him until he found the right bundle of papers. Here you are. We'll need those returned if you don't take the job. Or if you wish to consider it longer you can make a copy.

Anton's eyes flashed as he looked through the papers. He couldn't be sure, but some of the sketches matched the features of another he'd gotten from one of those he was looking for. It wasn't too strange, since the information from the Ears of the Fox had mentioned he was still active but no longer in Graotan. Even if it wasn't the right people, the information was detailed enough to confirm they weren't just simple border hoppers. Anton would hate to kill people fleeing criminal injustice like himself.

Chapter 77

Though the information on the bandits took them almost directly to the encampment, they didn't rush in and start attacking. Even if all of the information was perfectly accurate, it could still pose danger. The number of bandits and their progress in cultivation was more than at the mines, and while Catarina's aid would certainly make up for some of that it was better not to just rush into anything. They weren't in a rush, so watching from far away to scope out the camp was reasonable. It was extremely unlikely that any of them could see better than Anton, who was not only somewhat ahead in cultivation of their best members but also favored a technique to increase his eyesight. While doing nothing else he could keep Hawk Eyes active at the most basic level all day, and that was what Anton had been doing. Just as they were wondering if they ever left camp, he spotted several of them sneaking away early during the night.

Figures, he said. They stay inactive during the day and sneak off at night. Should have expected that. There was only a small group heading out, unless he'd missed others somehow. Just three of them, Anton looked to Catarina and Hoyt. Can't exactly let them go off on their own and just hope they behave.

We'll stay here and keep watch, Catarina said. If they split up more, we'll figure out what to do. If they spot us here Catarina shrugged. She'd put together a small formation that allowed for concealment and combat enhancement. We'll be fine. Though tomorrow we should bring some of the others. Whoever is best at combat.

Anton didn't like that. The reason was simple. While two dozen first and second star cultivators could indeed overwhelm a handful of mid Body Tempering enemies, their individual lives would be in danger. But Anton also didn't like the thought of leaving bandits to go off and do whatever they pleased. You're right. We can ask if the others

want to join. They probably would, regardless of their own feelings. Anton didnt know how to get around that, since it was simply loyalty to the group. He would at least make sure they knew how dangerous it was. He would have preferred not putting them into combat so early in their training, but they might be necessary. I need to get moving.

Stalking people was much the same as stalking animals. It was unlike tracking, since his target was already in sight. He just needed for them to stay unaware of him until he got close enough. Though he wasnt sure if he wanted to kill them just yet. Just assuming the information they had was accurate didnt sit right. So far all hed seen was them camping out. If they planned to do something, however, he would be close enough to stop them before they could go through with anything. Even at a hundred or two hundred meters, it would only take a short moment for his arrows to reach them.

With the way the three men he was following looked around, he almost thought he was compromised. However, they continued to regularly repeat the same actions, sneaking to behind a tree or a rise, looking for pursuers or foes ahead of them before moving further. Anton was fairly certain hed concealed his energy well enough. Though his greater quantity of energy at a higher cultivation was more prone to causing disturbances, he also had greater control over it when he wanted to. The end result was a passable stealth ability that still relied on keeping distant.

He followed the trio to a small community. A village with a tall palisade meant to keep out wild animals- and probably bandits. There were several entrances to the village, and guards at each. The trio seemed to be confirming that information, though they didnt speak except in whispers- and Anton was certainly not good enough to pick up such whispers from so far. He didnt have a formal technique for hearing, and hearing was naturally worse than vision for long distances.

Even in the dim starlight, Anton could make out one of the men well enough to be certain that he matched the description of a scout that had worked with Van Hassel. That matched the information from the bounty board. There was nothing wrong with that, but Anton couldnt help but remain suspicious. They had *too* much information about these people for them to not have already been removed. Was there corruption? One border guard helping them out didnt confirm anything for the whole of Estary. But if that was the case, why was the information accurate? Why post the bounty at all? It could be a trap, but for who? It shouldnt be for Anton, because he should still be an unknown from their perspective. Only a few people knew what he intended, and he didnt expect any of them to betray him. The closest would be the Ears of the Fox, but they had a reputation for professionalism. If hed already started targeting this group he could understand if some sort of information group found something, but the bounty was there before he even reached the border.

As the trio of bandits finished their scouting of the village- they seemed unwilling to approach the walls- Anton followed after them. He followed them back towards their camp and wondered if the same could happen to him. He hadnt exactly been incautious, but he was presuming that one of those he *knew* about would be the only

possibility. Someone in Body Tempering. But if there was someone with equal or higher cultivation than Anton, like Van Hassel or the formation master

A single glimpse of someone in the woods behind him was all he got. In fact, saying he saw *someone* was incorrect. He saw the edge of what might have possibly been clothing. With so many trees in the way and it being dark, it was impossible to confirm anything. But Anton was convinced. Someone was following him. No, that wasnt the only option. It could also be someone else watching the bandits who had noticed his presence.

He took a circuitous route around the camp to meet up with Catarina and Hoyt. He couldnt say if hed lost the tail, but he did his best not to lead them to his allies. At the very least he knew Catarinas concealment formation should keep conversation private, unless the extra was vastly more powerful than he imagined. In that case, there was little they could do about it. He told the other two about what he saw- including the tail.

Should we give up on this? Hoyt asked.

This figure doesnt fit the description of the formation master or the leader, right? Catarina asked. That is, neither of them are particularly known for personal stealth. And if it had been a concealment formation, you would have either not noticed them or seen something else.

Correct, Anton said, They simply moved behind trees as I turned my head. But just because they arent known to have those abilities Anton shook his head. Well, the methods of Van Hassel imply he isnt skilled at tailing. But the formation master, Nirmal, is relatively unknown. I regret not getting the complete information from the Ears of the Fox. Im mostly relying on the Orders info. Probably reliable, but incomplete.

So what do you think? Hoyt said. Are they a threat to us, or a competitor for this bounty?

It wasnt mentioned anyone else had taken the bounty. However, Ive been watching the encampment closely. Unless they have a way to turn invisible- a technique or formations or something- they didnt enter the camp. The bandits did a nice job of clearing out the area around it so nobody could sneak up on them. It also made their location more obvious once people looking were close. I dont think the formation master is with them. Otherwise we couldnt see the camp.

Unless its a decoy camp, Catarina said. But if that was the case, this entire group is the decoy. Or theyre doing something extremely complicated with people going in and out.

I cant say thats not possible, Anton admitted, Especially with my knowledge of formations. I didnt really talk to Victor about what he found, either.

I think Catarina calculated, Its unlikely. I dont actually know how one would accomplish what I saw. Compared to the formation at the border, where I just missed some functionality. Nirmal would have to be extremely talented in which case one would wonder why he was still in Spirit Gathering and not luxuriously working for some big sect. Raiding and slaving cant be that profitable in comparison.

Even if its him, Anton said, If hes not advanced past mid Spirit Building then we can fight him. We might need the others to hold off a good portion of the bandits though. Id prefer to not act rashly. Well keep an eye on them another day or two. Though we might want to start setting up an ambush point. I know their likely routes if they plan to attack the village, and if they attack before were ready we can at least warn the village. Any of us should be able to travel faster than their group.

Great, Hoyt said. I think Id like to train whomever coming with us in some tactics to take advantage of their numbers. We just have to balance that with having them close enough to be helpful but far enough not to be noticed.

I dont think theyll do anything during the day, Anton said. Maybe rest yourself and start them in the afternoon, then you can personally come here at night in case we need to act.

Ill also scout out those locations you mentioned in the morning, Catarina said. Some formations might be better than others along particular routes.

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Everything was so confusing. There were all sorts of new plants and new animals, some of which were a threat to the pack. Fuzz wasnt sure how everyone sifted through so many scents so quickly without even seeming like they sniffed anything at all. Then again, the pack leaders were so strong it was understandable. Theyd been the ones to save Fuzz and the others from the plants that were eating them. He was taken to be part of a new pack, though he wasnt sure why. He was injured and weak. Even his own pack wouldnt have wanted him. Everything was so confusing.

There was another one he thought might be one of the pack leaders for the first few days. He was just coming to understand what made the pack all so strong at the time, but the fourth maybe-pack-leader had been left behind. Then there had been a long time of going to new places with their pack of nine. They didnt hunt much, but they always had enough food. He didnt have to fight anyone for it. That was good, because he would lose. Even with one of the pack leaders making him stronger, he could tell the others were more.

Just as he was getting used to nine, there were suddenly many more. And some of them were even weaker than Fuzz. They didnt have any of the power of the pack leaders, and there was even a pup. It must have been younger than Fuzz, because it was very tiny. One of the pack members got lost and seemed to be unable to find her

way back. Fuzz followed her and tried to get her to come back, but she didnt until one of those with power came to get her. Fuzz liked being somewhere near the top half of the pack, but that didnt even last until dawn. Then there were a whole lot more pack members with power. It was small compared to the pack leaders, but more than Fuzz.

The pack started traveling more quickly. Was it a dispute over hunting grounds? Fuzz had smelled some blood and they seemed to be being chased. It was hard to imagine anyone stronger than the pack leaders, but they knew what they were doing. Along the way the female pack leader kept doing things to Fuzz that he felt gave him more power. She even made his rear legs work again!

Then they were attacked by big rocks. The rocks had the same power as the people, and the pack huddled together for safety. Two of the pack leaders fought away from the group, while the woman who was helping Fuzz grow stronger stayed to protect the rest of the pack. Fuzz wanted to hunt, but the creatures were so dangerous he understood why they ran away. The confused woman ran the wrong way and was killed, because she didnt stick to the safety of the pack.

Then the pack had gone to a very scary place. There were others everywhere. At first Fuzz thought maybe *all* of them were from the same pack, but it seemed to be some sort of neutral territory. That made some sense, because there were many dens to defend and the rocks were dangerous. The place with many packs also wasnt any good as hunting grounds. There were only humans, and humans didnt seem to hunt other humans.

At least Fuzz *thought*

that, but now they were hunting humans. It must have been some sort of territorial dispute. Maybe they were going to live here? He wasnt sure. For a day the pack leaders had gone away and left him in the den, but now he got to go out. Most of those with the special power did. Some stayed behind to protect the rest of the pack, but Fuzz got to go hunting. It was a good place, lots of prey to be had. It seemed the pack leaders were more concerned with the other humans though. It was probably dangerous to hunt prey when there was competition.

The oldest member of the pack had Fuzz memorize the scent of a specific human. It seemed to be a warning, because Fuzz could smell how much power that one had. It didnt smell like a pack, so it was probably a lone wolf. A lone human? Those could be quite fierce. Either way, it was definitely too strong for Fuzz, though he couldnt tell if it was stronger than the pack leaders. He needed to get better at using this *power*.

Now they were waiting where the scents of the probably-enemy pack had passed before. Since they were waiting in ambush, Fuzz was *nearly* certain that they were enemies. However, he was wary of attacking before the pack leaders gave the order. He didnt want to cause trouble for the pack.

The wind changed directions, and Fuzz smelled them coming. Several strong humans. They smelled stronger than the others with the power, but weaker than the pack leaders. Dangerous, but that was why theyd brought most of the pack. From his pack, Fuzz smelled anticipation and fear. He understood. However, the woman pack leader had claimed the territory, and he felt her power and the rest of them were stronger. Fuzz was nervous but also excited. He wanted to prove he could help the pack. They just had to take down a pawful or two of these strong humans.

Somehow, the approaching humans didnt smell them at all. They were so close when they realized that Fuzzs pack was waiting in ambush. And he was certain that was what they were doing, because the humans had their not-fangs ready. Fuzz had tried to figure out how they worked, but they werent part of the humans. Hed seen one alone, and it had been cold and tasted like blood. But also not like blood? It was also sharp, and it had almost tasted like *Fuzzs* blood. Fortunately, the power protected his tongue from the edge.

The female pack leader was the first to attack. Fuzz also thought he understood the words that said to do so, but he mostly followed everyones lead. This was their territory now. He looked for the most vulnerable enemy. He wasnt stupid enough to think that just because he was with the pack he could take down the strongest foe. He found one, and lunged for their leg. They stabbed down at him with a long not-fang with the sharp part on the end. One of the other pack members shoved the attack away. Fuzz liked this pack. He also liked his old pack, but they werent particularly protective of each other except for the pups. Fuzz thought he might still be a pup, except pups didnt get to fight.

His fangs wrapped around an ankle. The strange power made his teeth hurt, but his own power protected them. He didnt manage to sink into the leg, but he still pulled. Three pack members next to Fuzz used his own not-fang to maul the enemy. Even though Fuzz hadnt managed to pull him to the ground yet, it still seemed he could do some good.

Fuzz smelled a lot of blood. He could see some of it was from his own packmates. He could also smell the power of the other two pack leaders, who were fighting against enemies that outnumbered them. Fuzz wanted to go help them, but the rest of the pack was still fighting here. He sprang into action, biting and nipping at the legs of the humans. For some reason, the power they kept around their legs was usually less, even though it was so easy to reach. Once Fuzz even managed to crack through it and bite into some sort of already-bloody leg. But it wasnt wet? Then actual warm blood came out when he bit harder. How strange.

A not-fang cut across Fuzzs back. It hurt, but the power and his hide kept him safe enough. He could still fight. Besides, they were winning. He couldnt retreat while they were winning. Fuzz surveyed the battlefield, seeing one of his pack had been pulled down. He jumped up to bite at the back of the neck of the other human trying to attack with his not-fangs. He barely managed to stagger the man with his weight, but the human found it hard to attack him from its position. Apparently his not-fang wasnt made

to attack behind him, and while the man tried to grab onto Fuzz, Fuzz kept his jaw clenched. He wasn't able to bite deep into the neck, but he wasn't going to let go and allow him to kill the fallen pack member.

He did find himself being spun around in circles, though. His teeth *really* hurt, but he refused to let go. He couldn't really see, but he thought maybe he was getting close to a tree. Should he let go? Before he could decide, Fuzz felt the power of the oldest pack member. Somehow he managed to make it break off from the rest of him and attack at a distance. Fuzz wanted to know how to do that, but he probably had to be stronger first. Either way, that power killed the man he was latched on to. Fuzz took a few moments to unclench his jaw, extracting it from the weird hard fur some of these humans had. He'd used up all of his power and his jaw hurt, but he had to help. But his pack was winning. The other pack was retreating. Fuzz knew he couldn't give chase, so he chose to watch the downed members of the enemy pack instead. He couldn't tell if they were all dead, and without his power he felt like their not-fangs would be quite dangerous. So he took a guarded position and kept low. Until the female pack leader picked him up.

Fuzz! Catarina cried out. She was already pulling out bandages and needles to stitch him up. However, when she picked him up to move him to a better place she could tell his wound wasn't bleeding too badly. The others probably needed help first.

Even though everyone who had participated in the fight did so voluntarily, Catarina still felt bad for involving people at the first and second stars against mid Body Tempering opponents. One wrong move and they could have easily died. As far as she could tell none were, but a few were critically injured. Fuzz would have to wait. Though, she could help him at the same time. The most important thing was making sure nobody bled out, and she was getting better at medical formations. Fuzz had even helped with that, or rather the state they'd found him and others in.

The damage to Fuzz from removing the moss growing into him had mostly ignored muscle and bone, but it was the smaller and more important nerves that had been the biggest problem. Catarina honestly hadn't known what she was doing. Carving formation marks into the fur of a wolf was crazy, but she hadn't really known what else to do. So she kept doing it, and either the energy tempering his body had helped him recover or one of the things she tried. She considered trying to do it to herself, though she wanted to reach the eleventh star first. Though she'd like to wait until the prime tempering for Spiritual Connection, doing it as early as possible was the second best option. It was extremely important for getting better at formations, and Catarina realized that though she was good for her age there was still a lot more to learn. She couldn't afford to wait years to improve, either. Not if she wanted to help her grandfather. It was only a bit more than a year he'd been cultivating and he was already up to such crazy stuff. She needed to go for what was most useful *now*. Besides, she could always make up for it not being the prime tempering later.

An hour later all of the bandits were captured or dead, and all of their own people were alive. That was all that could be said for a few of them. They had to get them back to the city for treatment, and even then they were on shaky ground. The miners sure were tough. They worked together well, too. Sure, fighting two or three to one made things easier but there was always the chance that they could be killed in a single blow. Some almost had, with the difference being they were just *nearly* dead. Most of the bandits hadn't died instantly either- mostly the ones Hoyt hacked through. Even one Anton shot in the heart had lived until the end of the battle. He just hadn't been able to *do* anything but stabilize his own blood flow after he was hit.

Honestly the most important factor to their victory was probably the bandits themselves. They had decent cultivations, but saying they were *skilled* wasn't accurate. Most of them weren't young, having taken many years to reach where they were. And since they were intending to pick on weak villagers who only had a few cultivators as guards to protect them, they weren't really prepared for an ambush. Catarina was glad she'd pushed it to be just a little bit more effective at defending people. She wasn't good with people she knew dying.

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It was a big relief for Anton that they finished the battle without interference from the mysterious figure. He hadn't been able to learn more about whoever they were after that first instance spotting them, though he'd had a few similar moments. His detection abilities were just on the edge of where they needed to be to pick out that particular person. He enlisted the help of Fuzz to memorize their scent, but he wasn't sure about following the trail. He had a few tricks he'd used to try to make them reveal themselves. His most promising attempt he gathered much of his energy and tried to move it away from himself as if he were walking off away from his actual location. That had afforded him another glimpse as they moved, but that was it. Still just the edge of clothing. Not wanting to push his luck, Anton had gone on with the plan to ambush the bandits.

He'd kept a bit too much energy in reserve, and some of their allies were seriously injured. He couldn't say that he would have been able to avoid that entirely if he didn't hold back at all, because he'd still been quite effective and most of the injuries were earlier in the fighting when the bandits stabilized their positions right after the ambush. But he couldn't spend too long thinking about what he had done right and wrong. He didn't detect any serious mistakes, and he took much of the risk upon himself, fighting several cultivators at once. Well, he supposed he shouldn't count the one he brought down with his first arrow.

While Catarina stabilized the injured members, Anton and Hoyt gathered the heads of the bandits that the bounty wanted proof of. It was a grisly task, but really the best way of proving they had killed them.

Though some of them had been involved in the attack on Dungannon- Oskar even mentioned he recognized one- Anton didnt feel much elation. He had no worries about killing them, his inspections of their actions sufficient for him to agree with the assessment. It just wasnt very cathartic. Only a handful of them had been connected to the attack, and there were so many more to kill, and so many taken into slavery yet unfreed. So, Anton only felt a little bit of satisfaction that hed done good for the world. Then again, hed pretty much known that revenge wouldnt make him happy. Even though hed previously only experience pettier forms of revenge, any satisfaction it brought was fleeting.

Even though the dozens hed had a part in freeing from slavery were extremely grateful, he wasnt the sort to base his life around praise and adulation. Though it *did* feel good. He just knew that wouldnt be the driving force in his life. Revenge couldnt be it either, because eventually he would be done with that. Perhaps he was a bit overconfident, but Anton knew he had to have assurance in himself to cultivate well.

That was something he was working on at the moment. For the twelfth star, he was cultivating voice. It combined inner and outer benefits. The outer benefits were improved ability to command- and more usefully in Antons opinion- to teach. Internally, it let him organize his thoughts and act with confidence. Both of those effects were still quite minor at his current level of progress, but he thought it was the best choice. While he could chase after purifications that would be most useful for combat power he wanted to prioritize some other areas so he didnt lose himself.

As they travelled the half-days journey back towards Valburgh, Fuzz started acting up. He began with sniffing up a storm before he began alternatively whining and growling. Clearly he disapproved of something along the road. Anton didnt see anything but there was no hurt in taking a look. Fuzz showed no signs of stopping, however. He kept pace with the rest of them, continuously sniffing.

Whatever it is, Catarina said, It doesnt seem to be too close.

I dont see any strange tracks, Anton said, And were right along the road. So it should be a person. Since all the bandits are dead, it might be that mysterious figure. Anton tried to ask Fuzz if that was the case, but he was fairly certain he didnt get the right words across. Fuzz was an intelligent wolf, but he was still just a wolf. Even if he could learn to fully understand spoken language, he was still getting used to it.

Fuzz continued to whine as they entered the city. Catarina wasnt the only cultivator who had taken a beast as a companion, but the gate guards reminded them that they were responsible for Fuzzs behavior. Fortunately, he was well behaved- though Catarina followed right next to him ready to grab him just in case.

Before stopping by the bounty office they took their injured members to proper healers. The prices for their services were reasonable enough, but Anton was getting a picture of how expensive large groups of cultivators could be. On the farm people rarely needed

patching up by a doctor, and especially not in groups. Adding on to that even basic equipment and prices were quite high. Though they did still have some energy stones they could sell. Doing so right at the border seemed ill advised, regardless of whether or not Estary cared about their origins, so they were keeping them for the moment.

Only the official members of the Order returned to the bounty office- along with Fuzz. Anton wasn't entirely surprised when he began growling as they got close. As for what it actually *meant*, he supposed they'd have to find out. Catarina decided to pick Fuzz up under his front shoulders, just in case. It was a comical sight, his rear legs hanging almost to the ground. He didn't resist her, though he did still turn his head eagerly for new scents, and the growling continued.

Anton stepped through the door first. The same man who had been there when they were first scoping things out was still there. Here to claim the bounty on the bandits? he asked.

It wasn't entirely strange for him to know that. They had signed up for the task properly, and Anton had a suspiciously sized sack at his belt- fortunately not dripping blood. They'd already shown the gate guards the bounty notice. Still, he was quick to figure it out. It made even more sense when a middle aged woman stepped out of one of the back rooms.

I told you they'd be coming soon, she smiled. For all Anton could tell it was genuine, but since he was fairly certain she'd been the one sneaking around he still remained slightly skeptical. I'll take care of this one. Come with me, please. She merely led the group to a small counter next to a door to one of the back rooms- not the one she'd exited. If I could take the proof of the deeds, please.

Anton really didn't want to hold onto a head anyway. He and the others handed over the heads as Fuzz growled and whined. Catarina patted him reassuringly.

Were you watching? Anton asked.

The woman just smiled, not actually answering. Things do need to be done properly. She moved into the back room for a few moments, returning with their payment. The whole process was quick and easy, We appreciate your contributions to Estary's safety.

Was this some sort of test? Anton asked.

All bounties offered are important for the safety of Estary, the woman answered. However, she didn't deny his idea. Anton wasn't really sure who it was a test *for*, but the woman was clearly strong enough to take out that group on her own.

Anton didn't think he would get much else, so he merely thanked her and left. They checked the bounty board for anything else, but there were relatively few and some of the bounties didn't indicate anyone local. Anton did his best to remember the faces

either as potential targets or some to avoid and report to the authorities, if they were too strong.

After they left the office, Anton spoke to the other two, What do you think about all that?

Id bet its a test for the younger generation, Hoyt said. And a sort of training opportunity. Let people experience live combat without too much chance of anything going wrong. Its sort of what the Order did with the forest, though clearly that got out of control this last time.

A troublesome problem, Anton said. The older generations can take care of all the danger more efficiently, but that leaves those following behind them unprepared.

Also, Catarina added, If they are always seen to be occupied with smaller tasks, people can take those opportunities to cause larger trouble. If only a few of the stronger cultivators are occupied and nobody knows when, theyre a better deterrent.

A reasonable enough system, Anton admitted, Its too difficult to perfectly assess and handle danger. He was quite aware that cultivators werent perfect. They were still just humans after all, humans who could make mistakes with even broader reach than normal. Still, from what he could tell Estary had its head in a good place and was also at least decently effective. Graotan wasnt *bad* either, but clearly there had been failures. Fixing a system that worked well for the most part without allowing other problems to crop up would be difficult. It was a good thing Anton had no intention to do it alone.

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There was something to be said about not being in enemy territory that made Anton much more comfortable. Fields still needed workers but they werent slaves and from what Anton could tell they appeared just as productive if not more so without people constantly watching for reasons to punish them. Though they could be even more productive if they were cultivating natural energy. Even the first level of body tempering would be greatly useful for common labor.

They were travelling with quite an oversized group. It wouldnt be dangerous for them to travel with just themselves- several strong cultivators and a couple dozen others who *could* fight, though some had injuries that would make it difficult. At least everyone seemed on the path to recover after the treatments they received, plus two weeks of rest and cultivation. A cultivator could fully recover from most injuries besides lost limbs or organs given enough time, though Anton could do little to guide the others in that regard. His injuries had generally not been close to life-threatening, and his experience there was limited.

Even though they *could* travel with just them, it was better to sign on as caravan guards. Nobody *needed* their particular selection of beginning cultivators and a few stepping into early Spirit Building, but they found one group willing to hire them. They had to accept a

minimal price that basically just covered the living expenses of the last two weeks, though that and food being covered was enough. Feeding nearly three dozen people could get expensive, and Anton couldnt just go out into the woods and kill deer or boar as he pleased. Well, he *could*

but hed prefer to abide by local restrictions and those could change from area to area. He wouldnt want to annoy a minor noble or a cultivation sect by hunting in their territory.

Anton had arranged for them to work with Brantley Siblings Transport, traveling along with Mervyn and Ebba themselves to Yedo, one of the trade centers to the west. It was quite possible this was the siblings *only* set of wagons, but he had heard they were reliable with their contracts. Having completed the bounty on the bandits made the two siblings more willing to take on the strangely large and imbalanced group.

Brantley Siblings Transport was carrying mostly heavy goods, metals and the like exported from Ofrurg, mainly Sarton. Many other goods passed through Valburgh but mined materials were the main export from northern Ofrurg. While good materials were valuable, whatever few bandits lived within Estarys borders werent much interested in such heavy wagons. They werent reasonable to bring off the road to whatever camp or hideout they had and they couldnt directly use the materials. That didnt mean there couldnt be attacks by bandits who thought the caravan carried something easier for them to transport, but attacks by wild beasts would be more likely. Large numbers could help discourage that, but the route went through some particularly aggressive scrubland. Various sorts of canines and larger cats lived in the area and while there might not be a frontal assault they could attack pack animals at night. Having so many people available to take watch was a benefit there, though the few mid-body tempering cultivators already signed up could likely have handled that on their own.

Mervyn and Ebba seemed experienced enough, both somewhere around their late thirties and early forties. Anton watched as they gave orders to the caravan, though they rarely had to do so. Their leadership skills might have been in question if their workers couldnt manage to hook up the wagons each day and get them pointed in the right direction on the road. For the most part they directed people to groups who were having trouble for whatever reason. Sometimes animals were stubborn and didnt want to be hooked up to a wagon on a given day. They always got it done quickly enough, but sometimes it took the more experienced handlers to get them to cooperate.

Speaking of animals, Fuzz was kept well away from the horses. He wasnt causing trouble directly, but the horses understandably grew nervous around him. Catarina implemented a simple scent concealment formation into what he already had so that changes in winds wouldnt suddenly remind the work animals that he was around. Fuzz barely even had much in the way of fur anymore with how many things were carved into his fur, but it didnt appear haphazard like formations laid into natural surroundings. It was like being tattooed, without ink. When he asked about tattoos, Catarina informed him that she wasnt ready to commit to anything permanent. That was sensible for a number of reasons.

Early morning training was the best in Antons opinion, but a bit impractical when traveling with a caravan. He kept training in the morning to a minimum, not enough to fatigue anyone. At night he alternated between groups that roughly split everyone in half. Those training on a particular day had group exercises to go through, but there was also a time afterwards reserved for individual help. Nobody learned in exactly the same way, and all of the miners needed different advice as they were converting to the more structured form of the Ninety-Nine Stars instead of their former style which required being in very specific mines bursting with natural energy.

The servants like Patricia were the only group that hadnt completed at least the first step of Body Tempering. Some of them were making great progress, though a few of them werent well suited for training that involved combat movements. If they were safe and sound in a city, Anton would have been fine adapting their training to their work, but he still believed basic self-defense skills could be necessary. Nobody really complained about learning to fight, since it would allow them to have a larger influence over their own future.

After a few days of travel, Anton found that a few of the caravaneers came to watch the training. He didnt mind that, but the way they were sneaking around was somewhat disruptive. You three can come out now, Anton said, eyes flicking to all of them. Unsurprisingly, nobody immediately jumped out of hiding. They had at least *that much* understanding of stealth. But Anton could have picked them out without the benefit of his cultivation- sensing them with energy was just trivial. Anton formed three fingers of energy, extremely loose and without any real power. With that he poked each of the hidden figures on the forehead. Did you think I wouldnt notice?

The first one out was a young man Anton knew worked with the horses. He sprang out from his hiding place and threw himself onto his knees. Im sorry great master, I didnt mean to spy

The other two were a few years older, bulkier sorts who were involved with the heavier work. Anton pegged them for siblings or maybe cousins. They bowed their heads to the ground, Please forgive us, master cultivator!

Im only going to say this once. Im not a master cultivator. My name is Anton. You may call me that, or instructor if you wish. The early stages of the Ninety-Nine Stars are not a secret, so theres no need to snoop around. If you want to train, you may do so. As long as youre not supposed to be working. He didnt want to upset the caravan leaders.

Just like that, he gained three more disciples or whatever they were. In the following days more workers joined irregularly, but the first three were the most eager to learn about cultivation. They trained with Anton every minute they could, and made good use of his advice for how they could train while working. It was a fairly simple idea to let

energy flow through the right parts of the body while working, but it took practice to really get it right.

Mervyn and Ebba even joined for a few sessions, probably just to see what everyone was getting up to. They had established positions as owners of a caravan, so it was unlikely that learning to cultivate would significantly change their lives, but Anton encouraged them to put in the effort regardless. It could make them healthier and able to live longer, if nothing else. While a persons lifespan might extend only a few years per star that was assuming they were going to live close to the limits humans had to begin with. That wasnt necessarily the case. The two of them werent inactive nor terribly unhealthy, but they could still be *more* physically fit. It would even make everything else they did easier, though not always by much.

Even the mid body tempering cultivators attended training with Anton. Since they were already significantly into their own cultivation techniques some of what Anton said was useless to them. However, except for a few extreme examples every cultivation method began with body tempering, and Antons experience and insight into it could be applied even to other techniques, at least to some extent. If nothing else working with a group encouraged them to continually put in the effort and not slack off.

With so many people Anton found it difficult to give personal guidance, but Hoyt and Catarina werent significantly behind him in cultivation. They had their own insights into different aspects of cultivation that were beneficial to people, and though Anton did his best to learn from *them* as well, he could never know everything someone else did or have all of the same experiences. On the path of cultivation even small experiences could greatly shape the way someone progressed with cultivation without them even knowing what it was that made everything slide into place.

There was one thing that was a problem. When people wanted to cultivate alone, they didnt have enough copies of the Ninety-Nine Stars. They had only three, though Hoyt and Anton also both had the complete technique. Cultivation techniques werent just words that could be copied onto a page. Writers had to impart some of their insights into the words for readers to absorb. For that, experience was necessary though having completed all of Body Tempering, perhaps they could recreate the basic version with sufficient quality. It still required good materials and special inks, but Anton thought to give it a try when they arrived in Yedo.