

Elder Cultivator

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The trip to Yedo was without incident. Anton understood that was true for *most* travel, because otherwise if attacks that had any semblance of danger happened weekly for every single group of traveling merchants, they or their guards would certainly perish within the year. Anton was an exception for having fought groups of cultivators multiple times in the last several months, otherwise there would quite simply be no cultivators of higher cultivation rank. While death was certainly a factor in the current state of things, it wasn't the *only* factor involved. Talent and available resources were also important. Anton knew he would be at least a few stars lower if not for the abundant natural energy available at the Order and the teachers providing guidance. There was also the one breakthrough pill that had made a significant difference, though not quite as much as he wished in the necessary timeframe.

Anton resolved to take some time for more *relaxing* cultivation when he got back to the Order. Or somewhere else, if they didn't want him anymore. Even though it was on a small scale, he *was* being disruptive and *technically* criminal. But he would just have to wait and see.

Before any of that, they had to return to Graotan. Travel to Yedo represented about one third of their journey as they looped around to the northern border of Graotan. There were more direct routes, but just in case Ofrurg was crazy enough to send people over the border after them he would be happy to be further. Hopefully they were still in the dark about the major details.

Now, he needed to see if he could find proper materials. They didn't have nearly enough copies of the Ninety-Nine Stars for everyone who wanted to learn, even if they shared. One for every twelve people was quite insufficient.

Hoyt looked back and forth between the two scrolls displayed in front of him. Both had the same sort of feel about them, though the words were somewhat different. The insights woven into the words were where the two scrolls varied the most. But even so, the differences were relatively minor.

What do you think? Anton asked.

It's good, Hoyt admitted. It certainly varies a bit from the others I've seen, but it covers Body Tempering quite thoroughly. None of the differences are so big as to be a problem. It just has more variants.

I've noticed quite some differences in how people cultivate, so I thought that mentioning that was worthwhile, Anton nodded to himself, Though I'm not sure if I might be leading people off course. I'm not far beyond Body Tempering myself.

It shouldn't be a problem, Hoyt said. Either people will have to forge their own path, change techniques, or they'll be able to work from the full versions of the Ninety-Nine Stars, should they choose to join the Order.

I was wondering, Anton said, Who scribed the ones we have? They're clearly not old enough to be any of the founders.

That's right, Hoyt nodded. Most of those currently available are scribed by the Grand Elders. Grand Elder Vandale was responsible for both of our complete versions, I believe.

That makes sense, Anton nodded. He is the closest to the peak we have, after all. Does Vincent make most of the basic ones?

Hoyt smiled, He'd run out if he didn't make his own. That man is quite eager. Though he doesn't spend as much time personally teaching people as you.

Maybe he should, Anton suggested. I'd like to talk to him about it. But speaking of the Grand Elder, I'm reminded I should look to the stars more.

He sure does like them, Hoyt admitted. I've never found the inspiration in them he has, but I'm still quite young.

Sometimes you just want to do something pleasant, Anton said. Let your mind have a break. Though I have to admit I haven't done much of that lately.

I understand why, Hoyt acknowledged, All of my friends and family are safely around the Order and Edelhull. Well, except all of us who are here, he smiled slightly.

Anton nodded, The hardest part was admitting that I couldn't do everything myself. Good thing I listened to Catarina, or I'd probably be dead in a gutter somewhere.

That's what family is for, right? Hoyt nodded, You old folk either think you're invincible or it doesn't matter if you die. But the former is never true, and if people still exist and care for you, neither is the latter.

Probably nobody would hear about it, in my case, Anton said morosely. But I don't plan to die. I have so much left to do, and a few long-term projects in mind I'd like to see to completion.

Very well, we have come to an agreement, Anton shook the hands of both of the Brantley siblings. Though they hadn't encountered any danger on the first leg of their journey the caravan wanted him back. If nothing else the other guards and a few of the workers wanted to keep learning cultivation with him. Mervyn and Ebba wanted to pay him for those services, but Anton didn't feel that was right. It was something he wanted to do and didn't cost him anything. In fact, he found he often learned a lot from his students. Maybe not so much from any individual, but so many different perspectives ended up with useful insight. Anton did accept a slight increase in pay across the board. That way some of those traveling with them could have a bit of money of their own after they were done. It was also easier for them to accept than if he were to try to give them money directly. Then they'd probably talk about how they had to pay him back for the clothes and weapons and all that junk.

We really appreciate what you've been doing, Ebba said, If nothing else, having communal activities while traveling is good for morale.

Doesn't hurt that it makes us safer, either. Though, Mervyn hesitantly asked, Isn't it dangerous, teaching so many people to cultivate?

Any power is dangerous in the wrong hands, Anton said. I have no worries about *this*. I've been keeping a close eye on whether people are being responsible. You two hold together a good caravan, and all of those with me have seen power in the wrong hands.

... Right. You said you came from Ofrurg?

I bought the freedom of many slaves. My village was attacked by raiders and I have plans to get them all back. Anton left out the part where he also killed a bunch of guards keeping some of them slaves, because that wasn't a useful part of the story.

Ebba spit to the side, Slavery is a detestable practice. I can't believe it's allowed.

That's what happens when the wrong people get in power, Mervyn shrugged. We could make quite a bit more profit if we went into Ofrurg, but along with the risks of foul play of some sort I'd also prefer to minimize the amount of profit I let into their hands. When I can, of course. It's unfortunately impossible to have a complete embargo on their goods.

Not in a way people are willing to accept, Ebba admitted. We do our best to only work with select trade partners. Though that's the case even here. Some people will try anything as long as it's technically legal. Like it's proper business to cheat others out of their money. It works, too. At least long enough for them to get rich and fat before they make a costly mistake.

Anton nodded, And it doesn't always happen the same generation. Like I said, power of all sorts. Giving people some personal power will hopefully allow them the skill and bravery to stand up to threats. At least they can make the choice to try.

At night they continued to train cultivation, more people from the caravan filtering in and out to see what all the fuss was about. However, there were only so many hours in a day and people had to sleep. Anton did too, but he'd not been much for sleep before being a cultivator and found little reason to change that afterwards. If he had been exhausting himself during the day that would be one thing, but he was being moderate with his training so that he could be always ready to defend the caravan if trouble arose.

Now he was looking up at the stars. He had no telescope, but his eyes could see more than a normal human. He remembered what Grand Elder Vandale had said about the stars and planets. Though they paled in comparison, stars were just like the sun, a bright burning ball in the sky. They were simply much, much further away. The great telescope had allowed him to see that, and also the closer planets. He'd learned about them somewhat as a child, but they were generally thought of just as brighter stars. Dungannon didn't have an abundance of telescopes or anyone who really studied the stars, and it hadn't really mattered.

Most obvious was the moon. It had a bleak surface with mountains and craters, but no rivers or forests or any visible signs of life. That didn't mean there was none, but it didn't look like anything where Anton was. Besides, it was far enough that the details were limited even with enhanced eyes. Grand Elder Vandale's telescope had allowed him to see better, but there was nothing he'd been able to point out.

He *had* mentioned that he'd been watching some developments on one of the other planets, however. He'd tried to show Anton, but despite the telescope and his eye enhancing abilities he just couldn't make anything out. Grand Elder Vandale said that the lines of the planet had been changing, either eroding hills or potentially odd colored forests or even signs of civilization. There was a very large difference between what could be seen by the two of them, but Vandale had nearly ten times as many stars and of course the energy that went along with it.

Some of the other planets were interesting to look at but Vandale said they couldn't support life as he understood. They were covered in a constant cloudy atmosphere, and Vandale said he'd been debating what that meant with several other astronomers he knew. Trying to figure it out involved a lot of tedious calculations and decades of study. However, Anton accepted that he didn't know and that was fine. There were plenty of earthly problems for him to deal with, he didn't need to take on mysteries in the heavens as well.

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Even as a cultivator Anton had generally dealt with normal animals. There were some magical beasts involved, but they had typical forms he would expect. There were occasional exceptions like the river beasts that had moved upstream from Helmfrith Rill, and the sand trap monster but even the tortoises had been *mostly* normal despite their

strange method of attack. On the trip from Yedo to Southpoint they were expecting something specifically strange. Or at least the Brantley siblings had told them to prepare for the possibility of finding them. Dangerous or otherwise troublesome creatures were killed when they could be to keep them away from roads or human civilization, but the creatures would be attracted towards their particular loads because they ate metal.

They had various names; metal eaters, spiked rollers, and armored rats were the most common. They didnt seem to be related to rats at all, though their head shapes vaguely matched. Either way, Anton could pick out a tall tale from a serious warning, and the Brantley siblings were quite sincere about the features of the creatures. They were made of overlapping armored plates with spikes coming out at irregular points. When curled into a ball they had basically no weak points and they had claws and teeth that could tear through metal. For stronger pieces their saliva had the effect of almost instantaneously rusting it into a softer form.

They would attack anything in the way of their desired meals and were quite capable of defending themselves, but once they had a belly full of scrapped metal they would generally choose to leave instead of continuing a fight. They were hard enough to kill and any metal would be ruined once they got their claws on it anyway, so at that point they had to be let go. Thus, the important part was preventing them from getting to the goods to begin with.

It wasnt much different from defending the people and mounts, but being informed on their potential tactics was useful. The caravans defenders split into even shifts as usual, but everyone kept their weapons on hand. Metal armor was generally kept in the middle of the camp with the wagons since it would only provide more tempting targets.

For the first several nights everything was quiet. Catarina set up simple formations that would conceal their camp, and while a few wild animals poked around the area Anton didnt really see much of anything significant. Magical Beasts generally learned to stay away from humans, and those who were too interested in humans goods or otherwise aggressive generally got killed fairly quickly.

He saw one snuffling around the edges of the camp. It truly was covered in armor, and if he didnt know better Anton would have thought the armor was made by a smith instead of being grown. He only saw the one, but it was as big as Fuzz and with stronger energy. It also took up all of the area it covered, with small limbs on its armored body. Anton didnt think there was any reason to let it continue snooping around, as it had clearly noticed them somehow. Before it could step over the threshold into their camp, he fired his bow towards its slightly less armored face. The creature sensed his attack and ducked its head. Anton was pleased to see that his Spirit Arrow penetrated through its defensive energy and into the plates, causing the creature to bleed. It seemed to find the danger too high and immediately turned around, at the same time curling up into a ball. Its energy *twisted* and it began to roll, the spikes of metal sending dirt flying as it moved at a quick roll away from the camp.

He wasn't sure if it would try to come back, but it was quickly out of optimal range and he didn't fancy his chances of hitting a good shot on rotating armored plates. There was a *reason* people generally didn't chase them down. Anton was glad it had chosen to retreat, because he could see it causing real damage if it had moved through the camp. Almost everyone woke up when Anton attacked, but he quickly reassured them that it had been driven off.

The next night there were several different metal eaters who found them, and there were some during the following day as they travelled on the road. The first ones on the road weren't a problem, but the third one immediately attacked from uphill. To the left! Anton called out. He began firing arrows at a steady pace, since he needed as much power as he could reasonably use for each shot. The spinning metal plates did a good job of deflecting his attacks, though he certainly scarred the creature. Hoyt and Catarina sprang into action, moving to the side of the caravan it was rolling towards.

Hoyt was in front, his energy reaching its peak as the magical beast approached. The creature clearly aimed to run him over, but he stepped to the side, swinging his axe at it. They collided with a violent clash of energy and metal, but Hoyt was at the completion of Body Tempering and very close to truly stepping into Spirit Building. It was to the metal eaters credit that it didn't get chopped clean in half but merely lost its momentum and had damaged armor plates.

With the creature much slowed, Catarina stabbed her sword into one of the already-damaged plates, pinning the creature to the ground. The creature stopped, twitching for a few moments, before it stopped moving. Two of the guards who had been with the caravan on a more regular basis breathed a sigh of relief. They were weaker in cultivation, and it would have been quite troublesome for them to deal with the creature. At the very least there would have been damage to the wagons. Fuzz stood next to them, loyally defending the cart as was his duty. Anton hoped he had intended to dodge the metal eaters charge, but that wasn't necessarily guaranteed.

Strange, Ebba said as she looked at the creature. They should be smaller than this. Because of their *particular* diet, they generally don't grow very large. They do eat other things, but they won't outgrow their armor so they need large quantities of metal or many years to grow so large.

Mervyn nodded, Yes, ones such as these should have been noticed before. They should be knee-height, I believe. Still quite troublesome, but

Maybe they found a vein of ore, Ebba said. That could be quite troublesome. How many of them are there, at this size?

... Only three or four, I think. Anton pointed at a spot on the creature's head. This is the first one I shot, two nights ago. It's just begun healing.

Thats somewhat reassuring, Ebba acknowledged, But theyre a danger. They seem quite able to track us. Im unsure how far their territory will range.

I think weve been moving *into* their territory. Thats why they showed up in greater numbers. Though still relatively few, Anton admitted. It might be best for us to try to track them to their lair, wherever that might be.

Mervyn thought for a few moments, If it would not leave the caravan vulnerable, that would be for the best. We dont want to leave others to deal with this mess after they grow bigger.

I can scout around the area to make sure none are watching, Anton said to assuage his concerns, And if their lair is close, I should meet any coming from their lair.

They did a few widening loops around the caravan to make sure there werent any in hiding. Their tracks were easy to see- deep impressions of their claws because of how heavy they were. Close by, Anton only saw one set of tracks. Catarina and Hoyt followed along behind him at a quick pace, with Fuzz barely keeping up. His nose could be useful, or they would have left him with the safety of the caravan. He might be growing in strength, but he was a bit short for what they were facing. Anton noticed more tracks shortly after Fuzz howled in warning.

The tracks continued increasing in density and gave them a more precise direction to go in. They moved up a hill in a consistent direction, but before they could find any sort of lair they were spotted by the spiked rollers. There were three of them, but one of them was half again larger than the other two. They hadnt seen that one before, and its armor and spikes had golden hues and hints of rainbows as well.

Anton was quick to fire arrows, hoping to catch them opened up. He had no luck with that, but at least his first arrow struck before the largest one began rolling, causing a minor injury just behind its neck.

Each of the creatures was very fast once it built up speed, but they didnt have to defend a wagon or other people. Thus, it was much simpler for them to dodge out of the way. Hoyt didnt risk a single swing to try to bring down the one on the left, instead swinging higher and chopping off some of the spikes that gave it danger and speed alike.

On the right, Catarina pulled away another of the smaller ones as she slashed at its sides with her sword, striking for any gaps in its armor.

The largest one had metal spikes on its sides as well, so Anton had to give it a wider berth. It seemed the creatures werent used to fighting mobile targets, so as long as he focused on dodging he was able to protect himself. He got occasional shots at its side when it turned around- he tried to sneak his arrows into the less armored parts within, to

various success. It would be quite difficult to defeat alone, but if he kept himself safe while he delayed it, he was certain they could avoid risk once they gained a numerical advantage.

Until then, Anton had to avoid instinctively using cover. When it barrelled through a tree almost as wide as him with barely a drop in momentum, Anton decided that just attempting to circle it was the best option. Swan Steps allowed him to avoid its blatantly obvious charges, and he could take a few pot shots when it turned. It seemed quite a bit more durable than the others, and Anton wondered what exactly it had been eating. It couldn't just be regular ores, that he was certain of.

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Insight was wonderfully useful at letting Anton dodge the spiked roller, though he imagined he would have been completely fine without the ability. All of the attacks were extremely straightforward, which made perfect sense when rolling up into a ball and spinning were the plan. Not really a lot of aiming that can happen after the momentum starts.

Conversely, knowing exactly what the creature intended to do didn't help him all that much in attacking it. Each segment of armor spun by too quickly for even Anton's eyes to properly take in. Springing himself off to the side when it rolled by and taking a shoot was much more useful, and if it got far enough away he could curve arrows around to the side. He could do that at any distance, but not fast enough to cut off its trajectory unless he had time to set up. The spiked rollers didn't have completely impenetrable defenses even discounting that all armor could be broken through with enough force. On the side, they *almost* matched up to a perfect circle, but there was a small ring in the middle that wasn't quite full of the interlocking plates. That was his target, and Anton found he was getting better at hitting it.

On the other side of things, the spiked roller was throwing itself at him faster and faster. It clearly took quite a bit of energy, but Anton had found himself just a bit too slow to move out of the way several times. He ended up with a cut along his ribcage and one on his arm which lowered his ability to shoot his bow.

Thus, Anton was quite glad when he sensed Catarina and Hoyt had completed their battles with the smaller creatures. Anton was fairly confident that he would win eventually, as he was being more conservative with his energy, but as the battle dragged on he was more likely to make a critical mistake while the spiked roller had little to fear from random chance.

It did, however, have quite a bit to fear from additional participants in the battle. Against just Anton it could turn around either by stopping with its armored back to him shuffling around and then rolling up into a ball once more or by simply taking a wide arc while rolling.

Anton was able to tell Hoyt where it would likely slow or stop, which forced the creature to use more energy avoiding him. However, its awareness of the world around it changing as it rolled was minimal. Several times Hoyt managed to cut it off and chop into it, sometimes denting its armor or slicing into the spikes. Dented armor weakened its perfect defenses as plates stopped overlapping, leaving more room for everyone to attack.

Catarinas contributions were mainly to be an extra body either as a target of attack or an obstacle at the end of its roll. The spiked roller was ranging too far too quickly for her to set up a formation of any practical value, but her skills with her sword were quite sufficient to contribute to the accumulation of wounds on the creature.

Hoyt! Anton pointed, firing a small dart of energy that had no real effect but to stop at a precise position. Catarina! He pointed to another position. While it would have been nice to explain what he wanted in more detail, he didnt exactly have time to say for them to go fifty meters to his northwest and thirty-five to his east with every pass of the creature.

It was still focused on Anton primarily, his source of energy being the largest still. Anton wished he had the confidence to use Golden Armor and completely stop the creature, but he honestly didnt find the technique to be very useful. Hed much rather avoid direct hits, and this creature was specialized for it. So instead he focused on the movements of the creature and how One Step Ahead and his experience told him to react.

Anton poured perhaps a sixth of his remaining energy into a single Spirit Arrow aimed at the spinning creature. He released at the point he was most confident in hitting a damaged armor plate, though his arrow snapped an instant after contact and he couldnt be sure how deep it had gotten.

Then he dodged early. It was quite a simple plan. Either dodging early allowed him to leisurely move out of the way, or the thing would turn to face him. Both were beneficial in their own way. In this instance, it had enough space to redirect itself and chose to try to catch Anton still. He dodged at the last moment, taking another portion of his energy- but Hoyt was straight behind him.

The spiked roller turned away from Hoyt, recognizing the direct danger he posed- but it wasnt able to completely avoid him as he moved to intercept. Another cut in its side and it was speeding back in the other direction. Most of the terrain was completely torn up now, trees toppled and bushes uprooted by the force of the creature and its ripping spikes. Anton continued to shoot at the creature as its side was exposed to him briefly, but it continued to move farther away from him. He had predicted it would retreat soon, unwilling to fight to the death merely for the sake of doing so.

Predicting his opponent several moves in advance so that Catarina was in its direct line was outside of his abilities. But she was only twenty or thirty meters off of the path instead of fifty or a hundred like she could have been. It was a bit slower now, with its body being beaten and battered, and she sliced towards its belly, cutting into its side.

That was enough that it lost the tightness of muscle that held it in shape, and it unfurled on its back ten meters past her. It managed to flip over onto its front before she arrived, but its back wasn't a perfect defense anymore. Her sword drove straight into it as it tried to waddle away, its energy providing little in the way of defense. Anton's final Spirit Arrows were probably unnecessary, but either way it finally perished.

Lets take a rest before checking out their lair, Anton said. If there are any more I doubt they will be much good at indoor combat, at least in comparison, but there are occasionally different creatures sharing dens.

Neither of the other two objected, of course. The spiked rollers were extremely durable and took quite an expenditure of energy to kill, and more because they had to defend themselves while doing so. It wasn't possible to recover their full energy capacity in twenty minutes or so, but the natural energy in the area was decently abundant and they felt quite refreshed soon enough.

Following the rest of the trail, once they found outside all of the torn up terrain, was easy enough. They hadn't been far at all from a little cave in the hill. It was large enough to stand in with a slight crouch, and the walls were mostly dirt with very little stone.

We should really invest in some torches or lanterns or something, Hoyt said as Anton used a small ball of energy to create light. Though whatever it was would have to last a couple months of travel. Still, this isn't exactly efficient.

Anton nodded, Agreed. I believe some of the miners kept lanterns, but I didn't think to bring one.

It turned out to not matter very much. The little cave didn't go that deep, maybe fifty or a hundred meters. It was mostly straight inside as well, and at the back of the cave was a little open cavern. The entrance wasn't exactly clean, it was likely one of the creatures had accidentally scraped through the wall with one of its spikes. It was hard to tell exactly because they had clearly traversed in and out many times.

Inside there were scattered piles of junk. Though it wasn't *all* junk. There was the sparkle of gemstones in various states. Some were quite large and intact, while others were small and most were shattered. There were scattered bits of armor, still radiating remnants of energy. No metal, but instead straps and cloth armor along with boots. There were wrappings for the hilts of swords, wooden shafts of weapons, random slats of wood that had to have once been part of chests, and much more.

A cultivator cache, Hoyt said. Or what's left of it.

Anton nodded, That would explain how they got so large, then.

Catarina was already digging through the piles, trying to find things that weren't broken. Even the pieces that had no metal on them to eat had clearly been stomped on by the

creatures. Some things were pressed deep into the dirt and others had snapped under the pressure, so it took a bit of unearthing to get some things. Oh, is this a bow? She yanked something half buried in the dirt. It looks like it, right?

Anton caught the object as she tossed it to him. Looks like. It doesn't have a string, though. Anton tested its give, but maybe it's not. He pulled a little harder, not wanting to break it, but it remained firm. Maybe it stiffened with age, because it certainly fits the look. Unless it's just a strangely curved staff weapon. Anton swished it through the air, but that didn't feel right either. It feels like some sort of dense bone, but it would have to be from something massive.

Beyond the bow they found little of practical use. There were some things that they thought could be sold as materials, but only a black stone bracelet and a cloak made of some sort of sparkling scales appeared usable. As for what they did, it wasn't clear. None of them were appraisers or enchanted goods, and though it was tangentially related to formations Catarina had no experience in the area yet. They could try testing with their energy, but it seemed wiser to get them properly appraised somewhere.

After gathering everything that seemed to be of value, they headed back outside the cave. We should probably also take the bodies of the metal eaters, Anton said. If they consumed enchanted equipment, there should be quite a bit of value in them.

Hoyt sighed, They'll be damn heavy though. Guess we should get started. Catarina, can you go ahead and let the caravan know? We don't want them to get worried. Then come back and help us. Though Catarina hadn't done a prime tempering of her muscles, she was still at the completion of Body Tempering. While she would be somewhat weaker than the other two, it was probably no more than twenty percent. Quite a difference in a straight battle of strength, but she would still be stronger than any two of the others with the caravan, even if the miners who had begun cultivating reached the second star and tempered their muscles for the first prime tempering. Each star didn't *only* temper one thing, it just focused on one, and the tenth star was a prime full body tempering that smoothed out most of the unevenness in Body Tempering choices between members of the Order. Even with Catarina's help it would take at least two trips, because the biggest creature weighed at least a literal tonne. Hopefully the wagons could support it.

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Retrieving the bodies of the spiked rollers was almost as hard as the battle to defeat them in the first place. They could only be dragged with their legs down which was still extremely high in friction- just better than trying to drag them with the half-meter spikes on their back and sides digging into the ground. Nobody was quite sure what would be the most valuable about them, but most of the weight was in the metal parts, which definitely should have *some* value. The smaller ones could be carried by one person, as long as that person was Anton, Catarina, or Hoyt. The three of them together eventually lifted the larger one as far as they could go in a short burst, then relied on the others with them to drag the creature with ropes and the like for a while. They were just fast

enough that stopping to cut down logs to roll the creature atop wasnt necessarily going to be faster, since they would have to be close to the same size and individually strong enough to support a portion of the uneven weight.

Mervyn whistled, Damn, thats not something you see every day. Has to way more than a cow. What the hell did it eat to get so big?

Cultivator cache, Hoyt explained.

Really? Mervyns eyes lit up, Did you find anything interesting?

Hoyt shook his head, Not much. As it turns out metals are very widely used. Theyre strong but can be flexible as well. It seemed pretty old, and most of the non-metal things were broken down. Even with enchantments.

A shame, Mervyn said. Hope you got *something* of worth. We cant afford to pay you what this deed was worth. Of course, youll get the top end of the combat pay we negotiated.

Well also talk to our contacts to try to get you a reward for protecting the road, Ebba added.

Dont worry, Hoyt said, We just couldnt leave them behind to attack others.

Thats right, Anton said. Though well gladly accept your help trying to get a reward. If nothing else, building up some favor here in Estary should be useful.

Letting people know what youve done shouldnt be a problem, Mervyn said. And these things wont go unnoticed. Well have to shuffle stuff out of one of the wagons to support them he frowned.

Anton could see the way he looked at the wagons. Perhaps one of us should stay in the wagon to keep it reinforced with energy.

That might be best. The wagons are made for heavy duty work, but the uneven weight might be a problem. Cant just chop them up into bits though, I imagine theyre worth more whole.

In the end, supporting the wagon was delegated to groups of four earlier cultivators at a time. They rotated out throughout the day, but it gave them a good chance to test their endurance in a safe setting. Pete and the others were approaching the third star now, while Oskar and the faster of the miners were around the second star. Since all they had to do was distribute the effect of the spiked rollers across a larger surface that could otherwise support them, it wasnt too difficult. Still, trying different things was valuable.

The same task could have been accomplished with a simple formation carved into the wagon, but that would only last for a short time if they didnt use any special materials to augment the formation. The cost of a single wagon wasnt terribly prohibitive, so if the formation faded and became simply scars in the wood it wouldnt be too expensive to replace. However, since they were getting training out of the way things were it was better to just continue as they had been.

It wasnt too much longer before they reached Southpoint, only a handful of days from the Estary-Graotan border. The Brantley siblings had no plan to cross the borders, and Southpoint was large enough that finding buyers for the spiked rollers there was possible. It was certainly simpler than buying their own wagons and work animals to continue transporting them on their own.

The Brantley siblings kept their word about finding them what rewards they could, and though it took them several days they soon introduced the group to a representative of the Misty Hill Palace, a local sect that had a good reputation. Sects with *bad* reputations didnt tend to do well in Estary, but there was still a difference between neutral and positive.

The woman who was introduced to them was bent nearly at the waist. She showed her age with more than just her stature, with the exception of her skin remained only minimally wrinkled and spotted. She was at the very peak of Spirit Building, but instead of being intimidating her aura gave of the calming feeling of sitting atop a peaceful mountain. Then again, they were on friendly terms.

I see, I see. Youre from the Order. She smiled, gaps showing in her teeth. Wish we got more of your kind up this way. Its always quite a pleasure when I meet them. Her eyes and senses carefully roamed over the three cultivators in front, but she also took in Fuzz and the others. A strange group. Does the Order now accept those below the third rank?

Anton shook his head, No, but the Body Tempering technique can be freely disseminated. Most of those who join learn the technique in their own villages. These all are former slaves, and I knew a good number of them before that happened. Im quite invested in their ability to defend themselves, among other things. Some of them may later choose to join the Order.

Interesting. They all seem to be advancing quite well. But I shouldnt pry too much, she slightly nodded her head, I go by Elder Byrne. I do believe the Brantleys have already told you we wish to purchase these spiked rollers, and reward you for their defeat. She waddled her way towards the wagon that carried them. My my, thats a big one alright. A strange mix of colors, too.

They found an old cultivator cache, Anton said. Its hard to say what sorts of things they ingested from that.

An old cache? Any markings? Anton shook his head. Find anything good? She held up a hand, You dont have to say. Just curious. But I *can* appraise things. Its one of my jobs.

Actually, Anton said, I found a strange thing. It seems to be a bow, but has no string and is impossible to bend. He pulled it from a wagon, where it was sitting among other good simply wrapped in cloth. He held it out to Elder Byrne for her to inspect.

She carefully unwrapped it, squinting her eyes even as she put her face up close to it and looked along its length. She very carefully ran a trickle of energy over it. She also made a few attempts to bend it. I see. I cant say for sure out here but I think youre just not strong enough.

What do you mean? Anton asked.

From what I can tell, Elder Byrne said, It should be flexible. It is just that the point at which it starts to bend should be greater. Its a four, maybe five tonne draw? she gave a small nod. Though that wont do you much good without a string. Somethings odd about that too.

Five tonne draw Anton shook his head. Hed used a seventy kilogram bow before he was a cultivator, though mostly when he wanted to show off. Such a high draw weight wasnt necessary for hunting in most cases. But tonnes? Hed have to be as strong as a hundred men. When could I even be that strong Anton pondered, mostly to himself.

A young, strong cultivator could probably do something around early Essence Collection, Elder Byrne answered his casual question. Probably later, if you rely purely on the strength of your body. I dont know the inner workings of the Ninety-Nine Stars, but Id expect somewhere around there with a mix of body and energy.

It would be years, then. And by that point, it might not even be worthwhile. Heavy draw weights werent the only factor in whether a bow was good. Plus there was the matter of the string. He couldnt just get any random string, it had to match the bow.

Now, about these spiked rollers, Elder Byrne returned to the subject. She handed over a weighty sack, This is for defeating them. Misty Hill Palace benefits from Southports prosperity, and people need to be safe to travel for that. For the materials, I can offer the same again. Im also willing to appraise anything you found there- or elsewhere- if youre interested. That bow is likely worth more than the same amount. Possibly much more.

Anton used his energy senses to count the coin. Getting an exact amount would be difficult, but being within a few percent was easy enough. It was, once again, more money than hed ever had. Even splitting it, he had little in the way of financial worries if he intended to free more people. Since he shouldnt be heading into Ofrurg in the near future just in case, maybe he could even offer a mission. The only problem would be

getting the right people- he had some details to give, but strong dark haired young men sold to work would likely not be the only ones in a particular area. He didnt mind buying the freedom of more slaves except for who the money would be going to. But still, being a cultivator was clearly extremely lucrative. He was several times stronger than he had been when farming and during The Hunt, and the few spiked rollers they had fought were honestly a similar threat than the whole of the beast attack on Thuston, just compressed into a few creatures instead of hundreds.

Since half of the point of transporting the spiked rollers was to sell them, they accepted the offer. It was within what they had been expecting, maybe even a bit more. Hoyt seemed to have a better idea for what cultivator prices were like, though he also admitted to it being guesswork. The important part was the reputation of the buyers. Elder Byrne representing the Misty Hill Palace would be offering a fair price. Anton could feel that much, at least. And he very much wanted that bow to be appraised. The other objects theyd found were nebulously owned by both Hoyt and Catarina, but of the three of them obviously Anton had first pick of the bow. Even if it couldnt be used, he wanted it.

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Though skies were clear, Anton got a good sense of how Misty Hill Palace was named. There was a wispy sort of energy so dense in some places that he could almost see it with just his eyes. While the overall results were simply a several fold increase in energy versus the surroundings, it was a good place to cultivate. It was quite full of scenic views, but of course practicality required that the cultivators have places to sleep and store things. But even the architecture fit nicely into the aesthetic of the area, and it was an almost unassuming building that was where Elder Byrne took Anton and the others.

She smiled widely, her missing teeth showing proudly. Here it is, my little workshop. In it she had a number of magnifying glasses set up for viewing things of different sizes, as well as a large number of other tools Anton couldnt see a use for.

The first thing she took a closer look at was Antons bow. He had already decided he wouldnt give it up, even if he wouldnt be able to use it for a very long time. He didnt immediately need money anyway, and its value wouldnt fluctuate suddenly after who knows how many decades or centuries.

She moved it around under bright lights, pressing her eye right up to microscopes the size of her whole face, making her eye seem to be almost the size her head normally was. Sounds of hmm and interesting were repeated as she looked over every aspect, carefully injecting energy into areas and occasionally tugging at it.

Then she began to explain what you learned. As you surmised, this is carved from the bone of a great creature. Im not sure what sort, besides the fact that it would have to be a land creature for this bone density. Its not enchanted. Im not sure if it even *could* be. Certainly not by someone of my skills. Even so, I would have trouble damaging it

intentionally. The most interesting part is that, while Im *certain* its a bow, you cant string it.

What? Anton asked.

See here. At the ends. Its clearly not made to have a string wrapped around it. There was never a string on it.

... But its a bow? Anton asked. Without a string its just a slightly curved staff. It was nearly straight, only over its full length could the curve be seen.

Thats right, Elder Byrne said. As far as I can tell, theres no physical mechanism to attach a string.

... but? Anton asked. The way you said that indicates more.

She smiled widely as she pressed her finger to one end, leaving a trail of silvery energy as she stretched to the other end. It readily accepts the attachment of energy. A clear string stood stiff in place.

Hah. No *physical*

method. Anton shook his head, But wouldnt that require powerful energy to hold tension against the draw weight of the bow?

Absolutely, Elder Byrne pulled back on the string, snapping the fragile construct before the bow even began to bend. Its a high requirement bow, but it should be *very* powerful. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars should have some elder who can use it. Im sure it would be quite a sight. Though if you let them use it, prepare to have it be snatched up! She laughed.

I doubt the Order would allow any snatching, Anton said, But perhaps I wont tempt anyone. He did kind of want to see Elder Kseniya shoot it though. But maybe it wasnt suited for someone as strong as her anyway. You said it could be used in early Essence Collection?

Well, I *did* say that. Its possible. It might require more than that. As for the upper limits it has, I cant quite tell. That partly depends on whether it can be enchanted. Plus, thats merely the *difficulty* of using it. Since I cant fire it myself, she shrugged, The actual power is unknown. It could be amazing or merely mediocre.

Hmm. It seems like it would be a boon to training, regardless. Thank you, Anton bowed his head as she handed the bow back to him.

What about the two of you? Elder Byrne asked of Hoyt and Catarina, There are two further enchanted items.

They looked at each other, then nodded. Hoyt stepped forward, We have this obsidian bracelet and scale cloak.

Ooooh, quite fine workmanship here. She almost lovingly stroked the two pieces, before starting with the inspection of the bracelet. Everyone startled when it suddenly burst into flame- except her. I see, I see. Could be quite useful. She didnt spend as long studying the bracelet as she had with the bow. After only ten or so minutes she handed it back. This is a flame enhancing bracelet. Even those who arent skilled in fire energy could make some use of it. Its simple to activate, she gave a short explanation, Try it yourself.

Hoyt did, and flames covered his hand without hurting him. The others could feel the heat when he brought his hand near them. Interesting.

The old woman took the scaled cloak next. This time they were less startled when it split in half, spreading out to the sides. Wings, she simply stated. Or a moldable armor. I wouldnt suggest trying to fly with it, at least not off of anything high. The wings can expand with more energy, but for enough to lift a person it would be more than an early Spirit Building cultivator is capable of for more than a few moments. It is, however, quite responsive if you flow your energy through it in the right way. She demonstrated by having it wrap around her arm and even stand straight up on its own. A decent armor or tool for deflection. A passable source of flight, perhaps. She looked around, Is there anything more?

Anton shook his head, Nothing in particular, though I did have some questions. If you could give me a few moments to consult with one of my companions. It wasnt either Hoyt or Catarina he meant, but instead he retreated to the outside where the others were enjoying the abundant natural energy. He had a short discussion with Oskar before returning. You seem to know quite a few things. I recently came across the name Everheart. Have you heard of him?

Elder Byrne laughed, Came across the name, hmm? He did like to leave things all over the place. Mostly in Ofrurg. I cant say that I know much about him, beyond the basics. He was a lunatic, a madman, but also a genius. He created a large number of forbidden techniques- some of which were merely threats to the established cultivators, and some that caused uproars whenever people *tried* to use them. Mostly unsuccessfully. I hope you werent planning to practice anything he made.

I had no such intentions. The one technique I heard of is completely useless for me. Anton barely had any lifespan left. If he burned it for power, would he even complete his attack before he died?

Dont be give any such techniques to youngsters either, she waggled her finger at Anton then at Hoyt and Catarina, Do things the proper way and you can end up old and decrepit like me, she laughed at her own joke. If that is all Elder?

Anton Krantz, he said. Just Anton.

I like to show proper respect for those from other sects. Especially ones like the Order.

Im simply not an elder though.

Really? she stepped closer to him, her face only centimeters from him. Interesting. You felt she shook her head. Well, youre no spring chicken, and youll have your work cut out for you if you intend to use that bow.

I imagine so.

They were offered the courtesy of staying at the Misty Hill Palace for some time. They had no reason to refuse the offer, since a break would be good for them and they could make use of the increased natural energy. Spending some time around the Misty Hill Palace was also useful for getting to know some people besides just Elder Byrne. Though they wouldnt owe each other anything after they departed, just *knowing* people could be helpful. If he later needed allies, he could come to them for help. Even if they still required payment of some sort, he would rather start with those inclined to do good for the world rather than pure mercenary sorts. More allies, friends, or simply fondly remembered acquaintances would always be useful. Plus, it was nice to relaxingly discuss cultivation with new people. Few of those close to Antons cultivation level were near his age, but several were a decade or two older than Hoyt and Catarina.

After a week and some, they set out towards the Estary-Graotan border. They did not want to overstay their welcome, and the energy in the Order was on par or in some places *better*, if different in temperament.

Since they had official papers, getting through the border was the easiest it had ever been. The only questions were about the dozens of lower level cultivators with them, but both sides were quite happy to hear they were former slaves. Those from the Order were more curious about there being so many potential disciples- though they couldnt be members yet since they werent at the third star. Most of them werent planning to remain cultivators anyway- or at least, they had no plan to live the lifestyle of a cultivator.

Anton was glad to be home, but the northern part of Graotan was just as new to him as most of the others. The border with Estary seemed safe enough, but everyone was quite comfortable with his plan to set them up somewhere in more central Graotan. It was tempting to try to refound Dungannon, but even those from Dungannon werent particularly interested in that prospect. Even though the Order had increased border security, being closer to the heart of the Order would be beneficial. Setting more than two dozen people up with homes in a big city would be quite difficult, but Anton knew they could find some good land for a reasonable price away from the city. Maybe theyd be part of a small village or start their own community- that would take some talking to the locals. Best not to cause any conflicts.

While Anton did that, he sent Hoyt and Catarina ahead, to return to the sect. Catarina wanted to stay, but she *also* wanted to get the chance to visit the library and study information on formations that hadnt been relevant before Spirit Building. She had stepped into Spirit Building fully now, though she hadnt yet completed the eleventh star.

Hoyt took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He stood in front of the council. He was glad that Anton wanted to give a full and honest report, because otherwise it would have felt like a betrayal. Of course, Anton probably didnt expect Hoyt to stand before the council of elders, but the basic reports had already reached them anyway. Eventually he stepped through the doors, where he saw eighteen people waiting.

Grand Elder Vandale spoke, Welcome back, disciple Hoyt. The words were formal, but the tone warm and comforting. We are quite happy to hear you all returned alive.

Hoyt had an awkward smile on his face. Of course, Grand Elder Vandale. I have already laid out the basics in my report on the mission, but it seemed best to keep some of the details for an in-person briefing. It was too bad they hadnt sent that mid Spirit Building guardian instead of him. Not that he wouldnt have gone along at Antons request, but they really could have used that extra *authority*. You might notice that Anton Krantz himself has not yet returned. It may yet be several months, by which point I fully expect him to have achieved the twelfth star Hoyt began his account in the most unbiased way he found possible, which was still quite positively weighted towards Antons actions and his own involvement. He *had* approved, after all. Even if he wished things could have been different.

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After he finished his explanation of what had happened, Hoyt got to wait awkwardly for a few minutes. Were the Grand Elders silently deliberating or simply thinking? Even if they had a way to communicate silently he would have still expected them to move their lips. On the other hand, he wasnt privy to all the possibilities that could come in Galaxy Construction or other high tiers of power. Maybe it wasnt even several minutes but it sure *felt* that long.

Grand Elder Bohdana was the first one to speak. Are you certain he will achieve the twelfth star soon? she asked.

As certain as anything can be in cultivation, Hoyt said. I am as confident in his advancement as I am in my own.

Good, she said. Now about his actions. He seems to have restrained himself remarkably well. Or rather, he chose saving lives at the potential cost of making his revenge harder. That is commendable, even if his actions were a bit unsubtle. Though

Ofrurg will see this as an attack on their citizens, in my eyes it is reasonable enough to see this as merely stopping criminals in the act.

Grand Elder McAlister spoke up next, No news has reached us that Ofrurg saw this as an attack by the Order, to the point this particular act hadnt been brought to our attention until now. That is good, but as he continues to grow in power and deals with those in Spirit Building and later, they are more likely to recognize him as a member of the Order. I personally think his actions were too high risk, though the results the three of you managed are quite acceptable. His path through Body Tempering was quick enough that we did not have ample time to explain how to best align our goals.

That would probably be Hoyts job, though he found himself thinking more about what Anton had been talking about. The Order had become a little too unwilling to act. He understood why they couldnt just start a war- even if they could win it which wasnt certain with whatever guardians were throughout Ofrurg, they had to consider the costs. But there had to be better middle ground between fighting a whole country and the minimal level of retaliation they were currently at. There were at least a few sects with reasonable morals in Ofrurg. Hoyt thought that Anton would be better able to express his opinions on the matter, so he let it rest for the moment.

Now then, Grand Elder Vandale spoke, his single eye flicking back and forth to either side of him, Am I correct that we are all agreed the actions taken were within acceptable limits? He paused to allow time for a response, Very well. Then we can move on to more supportive topics. For various reasons, we cannot reward anyone for what happened in Ofrurg. However, though they already were rewarded for their actions in Estary some of the bandits there also committed crimes in Graotan. A small additional reward might be appropriate, but I will admit some bias towards the situation.

I think it unnecessary that we make a personal ruling, Grand Elder Bohdana stated. The rewards hall should have precedent for similar occurrences. There is no need for us to weigh in personally. Perhaps if something happens with Van Hassel which it very well could within the next few years.

In that case, this meeting is adjourned, Grand Elder Vandale said. His eye turned to Hoyt, and then he stood from his seat to appear in front of him. Im glad that everything went well. Your training is advancing spectacularly. If you need anything

Im fine, grandfather, Hoyt inclined his head.

I hope my focus on Anton hasnt bothered you, Vandale said.

Hoyt smiled, It doesnt. Im similarly quite interested. I find it quite refreshing to see someone new to the cultivation world unafraid to express their opinions. Many people just assume that things are the way they are for a good reason which is only true half the time.

Vandale shrugged. Wed better prepare for some hard times. Change is one of the most difficult things to deal with.

You think he can really make large change happen?

Think it? Hes already started waves. *Something* will change now regardless of what he does in the future. Hopefully, its for the better. Grand Elder Vandale just smiled as he looked up into the sky.

Anton had somewhat underestimated the difficulty of buying large amounts of land. His previous interactions with purchasing land had been a little bit at a time from people hed known for decades. There was also the fact that he was a cultivator. It was something about the way he carried himself now, how he moved. He doubted he looked just like Vincents flowing walk, but it was still something people could recognize. He understood why they would be hesitant to sell the land to a cultivator, but he wasnt going to hide who he was.

Part of the difficulty was merely finding the right place. He was running about all over the countryside looking for people with sufficient amounts of land, and he was on something of a time limit. It was already summer, late in the year to start a new farm. It also cost money to support everyone. They were a strange sight, camping out outside towns because nobody had room for thirty people to stay. The fact that they purchased so much food relieved the towns, because they could always use a bit of extra money.

It took a few weeks and more than two dozen villages visited before Anton finally found something appropriate. Windrip was a small village in central Graotan, but their population was on the decline. The ground was difficult to work and though its location was good, the actual connections to other places were somewhat limited. Traffic had flowed around through more prosperous regions, compounding the effect.

Of course, Anton didnt want to have poor land, but that wasnt what was available. It was of decent quality but it would take quite a bit of work to get use out of it. That was something they were able to handle. The land had been overtaken by trees and rocks raised by winter frosts over the last several years. The dirt itself really required ploughing by a team of oxen, an investment that was difficult to make for new farmers. But Anton had the knowledge, the money, and those willing to perform labor. Of course, not everyone wanted to be a farmer long term. Some actually wanted to be energy cultivators, while others had different professions in mind.

Everyone was offered the opportunity to strike off on their own, but the group had formed a bond from the dangers they had gone through. Even if it meant they couldnt immediately move to a desired profession, they would be able to sustain themselves and hopefully gain profits as well. Those who desired other professions could expand

into those as the opportunity arose, but at least for the beginning it was easier to have everyone working towards one goal together.

It took a bit of work to convince the mayor to sell the land to them. He was a member of the Order, but people were still wary of cultivators. However, he was able to properly express his intentions to contribute to the community and Windrips prosperity. The greater story of people stolen from their homes and then their valiant escape probably helped more than his cultivation of Voice, but he could feel that the latter certainly wasn't ignorable. He doubted he could force people to do things against their interests, but he didn't have any intentions to do that anyway.

What they had was a pile of boxes in an empty field. Four mules for a group of thirty was a very small amount, but doing the work with their own hands would be better for everyone's Body Tempering. The mules would be mainly for pulling wagons into town or transporting goods to and from the cities, but they could also help accelerate the work they had to do. They were already a bit late in the season, especially when the land had to be cleared.

However, the group soon found how much even the first level of Body Tempering helped with their efforts. They could lift heavier rocks and move faster with them to clear the fields. Chopping and sawing trees was expedited, and they pulled in the services of some of those from Windrip to help with the continuous transformation of the logs into usable forms. While they could have made a log cabin, they had the tools and available labor to make more efficient use of the wood in constructing simple buildings. Nobody wanted to live in a tent longer than they had to, and soon enough they were raising the first building. It was to be a communal sleeping area until they had homes for people, at which point it would be converted for storage. The group kept the local blacksmith busy making nails.

Anton guided everyone in their labor and their cultivation, which were both intertwined. As they worked their bodies and their cultivation improved, their speed increased, and though Anton had been counting on them being somewhat faster than he was used to, they managed to plant some fields early enough that they would have a full harvest of some of the faster growing crops before the season ended. Most of that would be used for seed and to sustain themselves. That was something else Anton had underestimated. He had forgotten how much normal people would eat compared to cultivators. It wasn't entirely crazy, but they'd underestimated the amount of supplies they needed early. He was able to pay for it, but it involved traveling to cities where they had more in the way of excess. Windrip had enough for themselves and a bit of spare, but an extra thirty people for a sustained period was a bit much.

The work that Anton himself was able to accomplish astounded him. He knew that the fields and special crops the Order tended had more exacting requirements, but he was still surprised at how much he could do. The amount of energy he could store and use

now that he was in Spirit Building was also a significant part of the change. The change in his abilities from the first three stars and the most recent three were both similarly impactful. He could pull a plough better than a pair of mules, to the point he could nearly run. He might have, if the plough itself could handle the stress.

Though the amount of natural energy in the area wasn't terribly high, Anton felt himself advancing. The tranquility of simply *working* was good for him. He didn't have to think about everything else he needed to accomplish. He wanted to wait for time to pass anyway, and he *was* still cultivating. Interestingly enough, he found that the amount of natural energy in the area was steadily increasing. Was it something they were doing, or was it a seasonal change he had simply been unaware of? Another question to find the answer to when he returned to the Order. He wanted to take Pete and Oskar with him when he went, and he also wanted to make sure the community was stable enough to not need him around. He would leave some money, but that would only solve a small subsection of possible issues that might arise.

Chapter 87

It was tempting, so very tempting, to rush things. He could cut corners and not take the proper amount of time to do things right. He could certainly push his cultivation to the twelfth star and rush back to Ofrurg. He could march right up to that young mistress Potenza and demand a duel for Devon. He was confident she would agree. But, after he won- and he *knew* he would win- even if he brought Devon away with him successfully he knew it would be a mistake.

Rushing things never worked out in the end. If one rushed the construction of a barn, it might seem fine for a year or two. Maybe a little draft one year, a small leak the next and by the fifth year you had to build a new barn. That was just normal, mundane rushing. If he started shoving pills down his gullet he could boost his energy but he didn't want to be a shoddy built barn. Barns were noble structures, despite what people generally seemed to think of animals, but shoddy work was unacceptable.

He would return for Devon and everyone else he could find in Ofrurg, but he had other responsibilities. He thought of the dozens who relied on him. Sure, he could have just pulled them out of slavery and thrown money at them. They would probably be *fine*. They were real people and not barns, so they could take care of any failures on his part. But he was still responsible for this group. Running off and leaving them to fend for themselves was unacceptable. Not until he had fully equipped them to the best of his abilities.

The attitude of Pete and the others who had been enslaved to do basically the same work was exceptional. Anton couldn't help but praise them- though he tried not to do it *too* much. Hard labor wasn't inherently bad. It was just when it was made harder than it had to be and the laborer didn't reap any of the rewards that it was a problem. Anton could tell that not everyone found the particular sort of work they were doing fulfilling, but the mere fact that they *could* leave was enough for most of them. He made sure

they each had weekly wages, paid out of a communal pool. He couldn't be quite as generous as he wanted to be, but the rate at which even beginning cultivators could work meant it wasn't unreasonable to pay them more than the standard rate.

Anton wasn't concerned about getting money back from his investment. He didn't want money, he wanted people who were able to function. Though they'd finished the planting of the crops now there was always still work. More construction for their little community was constant, buildings made of wood, stone, or wattle and daub depending on what they had available at the moment and the function of the building. That also meant clearing more area, which was still hard labor. However, the amount of work was winding down slightly. It would rise up again at harvest, but at the current moment people were expressing their desires to return to previous professions or learn new ones.

He gave his full support, but he knew for it to be practical people had to be better than average. They couldn't afford to spend the money for a dozen barely profitable workshops. To that end, he was working with people to try to figure out how cultivation could help them.

Grant wanted to be a smith. He had been an apprentice before he was enslaved, and had nearly enough experience to be considered a journeyman. I'm a bit out of practice now, he admitted, But I know all the techniques. And I'm much stronger now.

Of course, Anton nodded. Now, let us go over other ways to use energy. You could use it to reinforce subpar tools- though I wouldn't recommend it. Deviating your concentration for such an effect is bound to lead to trouble, and you don't want customers seeing you with shoddy tools.

Grant nodded, And I wouldn't want to use it to reinforce things I sell, because it wouldn't last outside the shop. So energy might not be much use in working metal.

Maybe, Anton said. I was never much of a smith- helped out a few times when I needed something quick, but I never did it myself. But it can't be used just to make things strong. It can make things more flexible, which might help forge things at a lower temperature. Though I can't say what results that would have. Still, just using it to temper your body should be sufficient. You've already done the prime tempering for your muscles, and I'd recommend skin or tendons next. Skin will help resist cuts and the heat of the forge. Comfort and safety aren't bad. Tendons help with dexterity. You can also use energy to supplement either of those for short term work, but whatever part of your body you temper will last all day. I can show you some exercises for both.

Derya was a weaver, before she became a slave and eventually forced to work at the manor. She had been quite skilled, so that wasn't a problem. Anton had no experience in the area, so he started with the most important question, What is the most difficult part of weaving? Where do the most things go wrong? If you can use energy to deal with that, I would expect the overall quality to improve.

She thought about that for some time, coming up with several answers. Some of it is the device. The loom or thread might break under stress. Keeping track of more complicated weaves and dealing with tangles. Some of everything, really.

I wish I could offer concrete advice, Anton said, But some of that should improve naturally. As you temper your body, the quality of your mind improves as well. You're close to completing the tempering of your tendons for dexterity, and I would recommend the head next. The acuity of your eyes should be important. Beyond that, if you're careful you can use energy to sense small scale problems and damage. Anton shrugged, I know there must be one at the Order. They made my defensive undershirt. It's partly made from diamond silk. That has to be a difficult one. Imagine a thread so fine you can't even see it except from just the right angle.

Derya grimaced, I don't know if I'd ever be able to handle something like that. But I can feel my body is under better control. I'm certain I can make fine cloth. I might want to make my own thread as well.

Anton smiled. She might get along better in a city, but it wasn't *too* far from Windrip to Stregate and she'd wanted to stay with the group. There was no home for her elsewhere. From Windrip to Stregate wasn't a trip suited to being made every day, but it was reasonable enough to stock up on supplies there every week or two, selling whatever she made in the meantime. If she made it to the third star- which Anton was almost certain of- she could even join the Order. A majority of the group just wanted to live a normal life, while taking advantage of the strength and safety a modest level of cultivation offered them. Anton quite approved of that. He would have liked to have learned cultivation early in his life for the boost in ability itself. He wanted to give others that chance now.

Traveling to different villages was a common thing for Vincent. However, in this case he wasn't going with any plans to teach people about cultivation. Someone else already was. Quite thoroughly, if he'd heard correctly. He understood how Anton was a bit hesitant to return to the Order proper, but he hopefully wouldn't mind a visit from an old friend.

Hoyt hadn't been able to provide an exact location, but Vincent didn't mind a bit of wandering. It gave him time to think about things. Clearly he and Anton had very different ideas. Vincent only had so much time, so he gave the option to everyone and only spent time with those he felt were special. There was an entire nation of people, and he was only one man. Even if everyone from the Order took on two dozen students, they would only cover a fraction of the people in Graotan. Thousands to teach millions.

It was easy to pick up the trail in Stregate. Tracking a group of over thirty people who weren't trying to hide was easy. People in the city noticed them- and the few cultivators

took special note. It seems they regularly visited the city from Windrip, and it didnt take long before he was looking at the little addition to the community.

It really was dozens of cultivators, and not all at the first star either. It was probably half a year since Anton had gone on his journey, but the progress of his students was decent. Anton himself even more so. The man was really in Spirit Building already, not that Vincent had doubted the words of Hoyt and Catarina. Their own rates of advancement were just as quick, though slightly less impressive due to their youth.

As Vincent approached, Anton turned to spot him from several fields away. He hadnt exactly hidden his own energy, but he didnt make it obvious either. Anton smiled, and Vincent quickly made his way over. Its good to see you again, Anton.

There was a sign of relief on the old mans face. It is good to see you as well. Welcome.

Vincent smiled back and nodded, Its just as I heard. So Vincent waved his arm to indicate the wider area around them, Why do this?

Farming is good, Anton said.

I certainly wont argue against building up communities, Vincent said. But teaching them all to cultivate? Why do it?

Why not? Theyre stronger, more able to work and to defend themselves. I think it is worth the investment of time, even if I didnt learn anything from the teaching.

I see, Vincent said. Defend themselves. He sighed, I wish I could say that would never be necessary. Still, even with your guidance, most of these here will never reach Spirit Building. You know that, right?

Does it matter? Anton said. All of this, it is an improvement for them. Each of their lives are better. Safer. I cant see why it would be a problem, but I sense you disapprove.

We do try to have reasons for things. Its not forbidden, Vincent said, But cautioned against. If everyone cultivates, they might band together in an uprising. Together, a hundred first or second star cultivators are many times more dangerous than the same who dont cultivate.

They are, Anton nodded. But more dangerous to who? Not to each other, I dont think. Those who are determined to hurt others will still do so, and likely find a way to cultivate anyway. The average person being stronger by a similar amount merely makes them more of a threat to cultivators. And if the Order is worried about that, then perhaps they should be more concerned about acting according to righteous tenets.

Vincent thought for a time. Unlike in some places, I *can* say that is not the stated or even implied reason that we dont teach everyone to cultivate. But long before, it may

have stemmed from that. Quite simply, I don't think anyone thought about it. The Order is already more open with opportunities than others, freely giving the opportunity to cultivate if not personal instruction. I think nobody thought about it. The mindset of cultivators, even in the Order, is of a struggle to reach the top. Nobody thought to raise the floor. But basically everyone who joins spends their whole life as a cultivator, past being a young adult.

So nobody saw the good it could do, Anton said. And nobody thought to wonder if anything should change. Actually, I think I have found the reluctance to change the status quo is discomfoting.

You have complaints, then. Vincent nodded, We should sit down somewhere. Ill hear you out. For many things- perhaps even most- we have good reasons to be the way we are. But it may not be obvious, and that is its own sort of problem.

Chapter 88

Two old men talked, both appearing more youthful than their actual age- but the older of them seeming much younger. Though Vincent was perhaps not *that* much older than Anton. I understand that the Order doesn't wish to be warmongering, but don't you think the problems with Van Hassel merited more of a response?

Vincent held up his hands. We didn't know the full extent of what he could do. Our borders are secure now. We won't forget about that failure anytime soon.

That's not quite what I mean. If a cultivator from Graotan went and *publicly* caused chaos in Ofrurg, there wouldn't just be a passive response.

... Vincent refrained from commenting about Anton's actions in Ofrurg. You're right. But I'm not in charge of any of that. I mostly work with simple recruitment. The Order had no specific sect or clan to blame, and the general policy to not escalate conflicts he shook his head.

Do Spirit Building Cultivators just pop out of the ground in Ofrurg? Anton asked. Two of them, even.

Vincent sighed, Van Hassel's former sect has expelled him years ago. There is no proof of any continued connection.

Which sect? Anton asked.

We can get you that information later. I will remind you to be cautious around them, because even if the Order chooses to support you, they're not nobodies. And they might *really* have no connection to him anymore. If you catch him outside of Ofrurg- or if we notice him outside of Ofrurg- that will be something different.

If he is officially expelled, they cannot act to protect him.

Well, Vincent shrugged. Its not like they become physically incapable of acting. It wont do much good if you get killed in the wilderness. Youre much stronger now. Im not sure if its enough to face him and Slusser, but if you keep growing stronger I am confident youll be able to accomplish your goals. Vincent hesitated for a few moments. I just hope you dont get yourself or any other promising individuals killed in the process. I wont say you shouldnt try, though. Just be aware of the full situation. We can give you more information, since youre strong enough to get yourself into real trouble now without it. And please keep the Order informed about your actions. We can add some more official backing to you, if you act within certain parameters.

Anton understood caution and a resistance to change. He had been pretty set in his ways working on the farm, though nobody could argue that what he did worked. Then the catastrophe in Dungannon had torn his life apart. In the past year and a half hed changed greatly, though most of that was in the area of his cultivation abilities and his knowledge of the cultivation world beyond the bare bones. He was just finishing his points to Vincent. ... I have the feeling that change is coming regardless of what the Order chooses to do. I would like to be an active part of that change instead of a bystander.

Alright, Vincent raised his hands, Thats quite sufficient. You dont have to convince *me*. Just everyone else.

I doubt it will be so simple, Anton said, Its not as if Im the first to pass through Spirit Building and train Voice. Everyone will certainly have their own view of the way things work, and *should* work.

It is what it is, Vincent shrugged. The biggest practical problem is the concentration of our forces. We cant just scatter people across Graotan without leaving people short on natural energy. A year or two doesnt matter much, but as the decades drag on the lack of concentrated natural energy will drag people behind in cultivation.

About that where does natural energy come from?

Its from the world itself. The sun and the stars, the earth, and especially all forms of life. Though I must admit I am not the best person to speak to on the subject.

That fits with what I remembered and observed. The area here grew in natural energy as we tended to it and the season progressed. Anton pondered, There must have been a drop I failed to sense as we were removing some of the native life, but now that things are growing the land is vibrant.

Theres something, Vincent stroked his chin, The way the energy flows he shook his head. I have recently pushed myself to learn more about formations. Im still very much an amateur but it seems you might have arranged it into a bit of a formation. Otherwise, I cant imagine it would produce more natural energy than wild land. At least I dont sense anything special here, only standard plants and decent soil.

A formation, huh. We should speak to Pete.

Which one is he? Vincent asked.

There, Anton pointed. The third star. Hes in charge of some of the finer details, and he was learning about formations from Catarina.

He might have a gift for formations.

Hes a decent cultivator as well. Hes one of those that plans to officially join the Order once the season is over.

I am certain he will have no trouble, Vincent said. He seems capable enough. Come, let us speak to him about if youve made a formation here.

Everyone turned to look at Vincent as he passed. Anton wasnt surprised- he was somewhere in mid Essence Collection, the strongest cultivator theyd ever seen. He took the time to introduce him. This is Vincent. Hes an elder with the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. He was the one who found me after what happened to Dungannon and offered me the opportunity to cultivate.

Vincent grinned sheepishly, I honestly didnt expect your current results in the slightest. I should have spent some time personally instructing you, but

Anton understood. He had also needed to chase after the bandits. Besides, nobody had expected Anton to have any sort of talent in cultivation. It was just a kind gesture to let him die trying to grow strong. Then he *had*. Of course, he wasnt strong enough yet. Not for his full revenge, and not for everything else he needed to do afterwards. Pete! Anton waved, We had a question, if youre not too busy.

I can take a break, he said. Were not too busy right now anyway. What is it you need? He kept his eyes focused on Vincent, taking in his level of strength.

We should cut straight to the point, Vincent said. The two of us were discussing the area. Anton noticed an increase in natural energy. You have some knowledge of formations. Is there something like that covering this area?

A formation? Pete asked. I suppose its turned into something like that. We sort of went with the form of the land, moving with natural windbreaks and the like. I just sort of went with what felt right. Should we not have a formation?

There are no laws or guidance against it, unless its permanently drawing energy from the area around you, Vincent clarified.

Oh. Its not, Pete confirmed. This just sort of enhances whats already here.

Then it is a desirable outcome, Vincent said. Though it may be best to consult a formation master if you expand to a grand scale.

Like Catarina? Pete asked. I miss having her around to ask questions.

I dont know if she is a master or not, Vincent said. Truthfully, the term is somewhat vague. Past a certain point, everyone is called a master. Based on what I heard of your travels, she might have reached that point- though I am not the right one to judge that.

Hearing that relieved Anton. He sometimes worried about Nirmal Slusser, the formation master who had worked with Van Hassel. Hed seen what Catarina could do, and had been worried he would be many times more powerful. They would still need to be cautious, but at least it wasnt something equivalent to Essence Collection. It was still too early to think about Catarina matching him in early Spirit Building, but he and Van Hassel had been active for more than a decade. Since they were thought to still be in Spirit Building, at least their rate of growth should be something Anton and Catarina could catch up to.

Vincent stayed for several days, helping out with the mostly trivial tasks they had between planting and harvest. He also spent some time guiding people in cultivation, though Anton was the one who felt he got the most benefit from that. He felt like he was very close to the twelfth star. He just needed one more step.

Fuzz was dismayed when they left the pack behind, including one of the pack leaders. But he knew Catarina had a reason. They had a mission of some kind, or so he thought. It wasnt long before he realized it was something else. They werent leaving the pack, but instead reuniting with it.

Their pack was so much bigger than he could have imagined, but the evidence was plain for his nose to smell. The same sort of energy that flowed through the rest of the pack members ran through everyone at this Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. In addition, the packs territory was full of rich, invigorating natural energy. He felt like a pup again as he ran about, and supposed he actually was a pup still. Hed seen some normal wolves, and he was bigger than them already but he still had more growing to do. He wanted to be at least as tall as the other pack members. Though he walked on all fours and they stood on their hind legs, he thought his parents had been that large. They had died, but his new pack took good care of him.

Except for when Catarina made him eat nasty clumps of rancid dirt. The medicine smelled bad and tasted worse, but it was supposed to be good for him. He had to admit he had an easier time walking around, the muscles in his rear legs fully obeying his commands instead of merely acting like his thoughts were suggestions. Even that had been an improvement over when his new pack adopted him, but now he could move around freely. He liked to do so, but Catarina informed him of a particular area he was allowed. Perhaps the other pack members didn't want him messing up their sub-dens.

He spent some of his time in the group of dens that Catarina had claimed for her own. One of the four was empty, but smelled of Anton- one of the other pack leaders. Hopefully he would return soon. The third pack leader, Hoyt, was much further away- but Catarina let him roam to see him. He kept out of the fields and away from packs of people he hadn't been introduced to- with such a large pack, it would take them some time to know his scent, so he had to be careful.

The other two in the set of four dens were a man and a woman. Young, like Catarina and Hoyt. The woman was Velvet. The man was Timothy. Catarina said he was a close friend, but he didn't smell like her and they didn't visit much. Fuzz was still getting used to human speech, but he thought that didn't seem right.

Much time passed. He ran across the mountain, growing big and strong. Catarina continued to take care of him, assisting his energy flow. They even visited the forest to hunt occasionally. Like that, a season quickly passed. Then Anton returned. He brought with him some of the other, smaller pack. But before even saying hello, he settled into his own den to cultivate. It was like sleep, but done in a different posture- and it involved manipulating energy. Interrupting people from that was bad, so Fuzz waited patiently in the courtyard ready to greet him. As he did so, he felt Anton grow stronger. Another little fire ignited inside of him. He opened his eyes, smiling, and Fuzz jumped on him and licked his face. It was good to have more pack leaders around.

Chapter 89

During his time away, Anton had forgotten just how much of a difference there was between the quantity and quality of the energy on the Orders grounds and that elsewhere. The boost was just what he needed to push through to the completion of the twelfth star. That was all there was to it, the majority of the real work having already been done. The part of cultivation where he gathered energy was just more of the same.

He looked up the mountain towards the peaks. The energy there had been much stronger to the point he could barely handle it. Now, he wanted to test how it affected him differently. But though he fully intended to go and talk to Grand Elder Vandale, he wasn't quite ready and there were so many other things that needed doing.

He'd only been separated from Catarina a short time, though he supposed several months was quite meaningful to those who were young. It *had* been more than half of a

year since hed seen Timothy. The young man was at the ninth star, only a small portion short of the peak of Body Tempering. His cultivation progress was fine, but there was something Anton shook his head. One thing at a time.

The opportunities to enter the Order were held monthly. Anton knew he might be able to push for those he knew to be tested earlier, but he didnt want to show any favoritism. That wouldnt help them in the long run. Besides, he had full confidence in Pete and Oskar. Some of the others were on track to third star and planned to join the Order as well, but those two were the most skilled in cultivation. Patricia, Oskars wife, was somewhat behind since she didnt have a chance to cultivate until later. It seemed likely she would reach third star soon enough, but she wasnt sure if she wanted to join the Order. She would be able to stay with Oskar regardless- the Order allowed family and even a number of permanent guests.

Anton had considered bringing some of the others to train, but being able to reach the third star without relying on sheer quantity of energy was sort of the point of the tests. There was probably more to it, but Anton hadnt actually participated. He would observe this time. He was certain the entrance qualifications had not changed in decades or centuries, like most other things. Though he had his complaints with the Order, he didnt find that they were *bad* in how they handled things. He just thought they could be better. He might change his mind once hed had more exposure to cultivators but he was not going to just assume those who were older knew better. They might, or they might not.

First he was going to find Elder Howland. He should be able to answer some of Antons questions, or at least point him in the right direction. The man wasnt hard to find. He was always around somewhere, it just depended on which farming plot he was working with that day.

It had been nearly half a year since Anton had seen the man. During that time, hed grown from late Body Tempering all the way to the twelfth star, significantly closing the gap between himself and the Elder. Elder Howland was only at the fifteenth star, so his status as an Elder clearly wasnt for his cultivation prowess but his other usefulness. Not that Anton intended to mention that.

Charlton Howland was in a good mood. Hoyt had returned, in Spirit Building no less. Yet he still came to tend to the fields. Not just the more troublesome plants either, but some of the mundane ones. He could certainly earn more contribution points elsewhere, and having completed Body Tempering it wasnt even really good training. Sure, he didnt come by every day anymore, but he only needed to come by weekly to do as much as hed been doing before he set off on his journey.

He nearly didnt recognize Anton when he showed up. Trusting Hoyts word that Anton had reached the eleventh star was easy. Hoyt saw it and relayed the information. But the prediction that he would reach twelfth star in the next few months before he returned

to the Order had seemed somewhat unbelievable. Then again, it seemed likely barely a few months before that Anton had first joined the Order. What was another star or two when hed gone from four to eleven in that time?

Of course, Howland hadnt advanced a single star in that time. He was stuck waffling between training Voice and Spiritual Connection. That had been the case for quite some time, but he really didnt need to advance any further to complete his duties. Managing the fields required more knowledge than cultivation, though some of the more troublesome plants required proper cultivation as well. The Order just didnt keep anything *too* dangerous. Of course there were some herbs that could be misused as poisons, but they were carefully regulated. Other than that, the northern creepers were one of the more extreme examples of plants that fought those tending them.

But his own cultivation was not important. He was quite content with his own abilities. At the same time, he could praise the advancements of others. Anton! Its good to see you back. Here to work the land?

That was not my intention today, disappointment must have shown on Howlands face, But I would be quite content to do so while we talk. The man wielded a hoe like a fine spear, and he plucked weeds out from the rows like they were enemies he had to slay. It took a moment for Howland to find his voice and ask what important things he wished to speak about. Oh, its just a few questions really, Anton assuaged his worries. Probably important, in the grand scheme of things, but not urgent. Where does natural energy come from?

The ground, plants, living creatures, and sometimes special features.

I see, Anton sounded disappointed. I was wondering how a place like the Orders land here develops, with such abundant energy. Or places like the forest.

Howland shrugged, The answer is the same. Was he unclear somewhere? Cultivators and magic beasts make the largest difference in the short term, though certain special plants are good for longer term development and stability.

At that Antons eyes flickered in thought. Dont cultivators and magical beasts drain the area of energy?

They can and do, Howland confirmed. Sometimes that leads to damaging the area. But thats true of anything. Overeager boars root up the land, destroying it on a more mundane level. But humans are living creatures. They produce natural energy that can accumulate in an area. If managed properly, both cultivators and the land they live on grow together.

I had not considered that. I only thought of the animals and plants. They had moved between several fields by this point. Some werent scheduled for work until weeks later, but that didnt matter. Anton left alone the areas where others were working and focused

on anywhere unattended. Howland worked along with him, but he didn't feel he could keep up with Anton's pace despite his higher cultivation level. Why does the Order not do this elsewhere, then?

What do you mean? Howland asked.

There's just this one location, shoved up almost against the western border of Graotan. It's quite extraordinary, to be sure, but the rest of the country has but tolerable amounts of natural energy available.

Does it matter? Howland wondered. The smaller sects within Graotan maintain their own areas, and the rest is not populated by cultivators.

It could be, though. Anton shook his head. Why not expand the area?

The Order doesn't have need of more land, Howland explained. Our numbers rise and fall as time passes, but we have an entire mountain and the forests for just a few thousand at any time. The area we control is already quite expansive.

That's true, Anton agreed. But think of the border. The formation keeps intruders in and out, understandably. But it also keeps the natural energy controlled.

The Order is not entirely selfless. The benefits to the surrounding farmers would be negligible compared to our losses. We put in the work and reap the rewards.

I fully understand that. However, couldn't the surrounding area instead benefit the Order? If the land adjacent grows more, it would contribute back to the Order's land.

Alas, Howland said, It's not quite so efficient. The maximum growth that would have on the surrounding area would not be enough to recoup the losses given any amount of time. If our numbers swelled and we had several times as many disciples, perhaps expanding would be prudent. But we can barely manage the area we have now.

It just needs to be tended to by cultivators, right? Anton asked.

Right.

Let me tell you about some thoughts I've been having. I think imagining ourselves as cultivators and the rest of the country as non-cultivators is perhaps merely limiting the Order.

They talked for some time. Howland thought Anton's ideas of how easy it was to teach everyone to cultivate were a bit exaggerated, but he had to admit that Anton had significant success in the area already. Howland couldn't say it was impossible, either. Anton had much more understanding of non-cultivator activities and the benefits even small amounts of cultivation would provide them. Unknowingly at the time, some buried

thoughts in Howlands head slipped into place. He wanted more people to care about the land and not just think of it as something low level cultivators did for contribution points. He hadn't even considered those outside the Order in regards to that. From that point on, his cultivation would creep forward from its formerly stagnant status.

Chapter 90

It was strange to be nervous, Pete thought. Certainly, he was about to take a test, but when Anton Krantz said that he would pass easily, Pete Sharman believed him. He believed him, but still joining a cultivation sect? The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars was known all throughout Graotan. But Pete still thought of cultivators as *something else*. Something that didn't include himself.

Oskar clapped him on the shoulder. Hey, don't worry. You'll do fine. Oskar decided against mentioning that this wasn't their only chance. Better to pass the first time. Oskar himself wanted to give it his all, because Anton believed in them. There were many opportunities as a member of the Order, not just fighting. He would still make sure he could fight, to defend his family, but he didn't want to continually risk his life. He had a wife and child, and though his death might support them financially he knew the loss of loved ones would tear them apart. Kevin was still too young to really understand, but both he and Patricia had lost most of those they knew in Dungannon.

Pete and Oskar couldn't help but be a *little* bit nervous as they found themselves lining up with a half dozen others who all seemed to be a decade younger. But age wasn't everything. Some seemed strong and muscular, but one young woman was quite round. They probably had a better chance than her, at least. Pete and Oskar had started cultivating later, and Anton demonstrated that age wasn't impossible to surmount. It didn't help that the one running the test *seemed* younger than them.

Welcome! My name is Sterling. the young man said. All of you have reached the third star. That's good, but not enough by itself. We have to test your body and mind. He gestured, pulling back the cloth covering a doorway to the outside. First we have an obstacle course. The rules are simple, make it to the end as fast as you can.

Pete stood on his tiptoes, trying to see as far into the course as he could. He couldn't see the end, but he did see a number of ramps along with strange impediments on the ground. He could see several routes he might take.

With twelve of you, we'll do two sets of six, a minute apart, so you don't get in each others way too much. Sterling pointed out six of them, seemingly at random. You'll be the first group.

Neither Pete nor Oskar were picked in that first group. That gave them a chance to watch the others go first. It seemed like an advantage, but he wasn't going to complain. As they ran ahead at a quick pace, Pete learned of something he hadn't spotted before. Mud. One of the dips was quite full of it, and it seemed to be both sticky and slippery at

the same time. It was quite difficult for people to go up ramps or hold onto ropes after that point. That added some appeal to a higher route that simply looked more difficult. Maybe we should go that route? Pete said.

Go ahead, Oskar said. Im gonna pick my own route though. No offense, but I feel like going with you would be too easy.

Pete shrugged. So Oskar wanted to deal with a challenge. That didnt exactly mesh with getting to the end as fast as possible, did it? Then again, he supposed they should all pick their own routes.

Around the time the trailing members of the first group were rounding a corner, it was their turn to go. Oskar ran straight ahead, stepping over wires seemingly placed to trip uncoordinated runners. Three of the others ran with him down the middle. One went to the left side, hopping between poles that were over a pit of water. Pete took the right side, up a ramp.

The ramp was steeper than it looked, and slippery. However, a bit of momentum and some energy on his boots to help resist the slipping got him to the top. Then there were swinging logs. They seemed to be powered by a simple formation. He considered trying to disarm it, but supposed that would be outside of the bounds of the test. He stopped for a second, watching the flow of the movements that would knock him to the left or right, off of his elevated position down into other parts of the course. It was just a few seconds, but others were getting ahead.

He stepped through, not at a run but a quick walk. One swings from the left, one from the right, then a tricky angled one to catch people off guard. Stop for a second, then three quick steps. Half of the pathway disappeared ahead, requiring him to balance as he moved forward.

Once past the swinging logs he climbed a rope even higher. Pulling himself up wasnt too hard. Then there was a rope hanging out in front of him, out of reach. He stretched out his hand, and extended his energy to grab it and pull it to him. He held the rope further down as he swung, then at the end of the arc let go as he flew over the mud pits. He was behind everyone else, but that was okay. He was saving his stamina for when it got hard.

Obstacles continued in the same vein. Climbing, dodging, jumping, balancing. Some points required quick reactions, and there was a pole with spinning sticks basically *attacking* anyone who passed by, but not only were its movements easy to predict the power it had was far below a cultivator with a weapon. It was also less scary than one of the turtles, and not sharp like the spiked rollers. He did get knocked on the back of the head as he passed, but his energy easily absorbed the blow.

It wasnt long before he came up behind someone *round*. She was attempting to climb a rope up a vertical wall. Pete could see the problem. She had exhausted her energy, and

her hands were slick with mud. There seemed to be no option but go up this wall- it covered the entire width of the course- and there were only *higher*

walls and not lower. Then there was the matter of her roundness. Pete didnt want to be rude, but it was quite clear she came from a life of affluence, to have reached such a weight. It seemed she hadnt tempered her muscles, either. While the first full body tempering would have given her *some* strength, she had more to carry than most.

She had clearly wiped her hands on her formerly fine garments, but there was enough mud on them that wiping her hands more didnt help. Pete stopped next to her, before attempting to climb up. I can try wiping that off for you, Pete gestured to the rope.

Her eyes turned to him. Sharp. Maybe a bit angry, but also tired. ... isnt that cheating?

Pete shrugged, I might want to use that rope. He touched it, and instantly became glad hed avoided the mud previously. It stuck to him like molasses, but slid along the rope at the same time. It wouldnt shake off his hands, and he didnt want to wipe it on his body and just make *more* things awful to touch. He used a little energy, with a trick Anton had done to get mud off his boots. Just sort of pushing from the inside out. It fell right off. He grabbed the rope and poured his energy into it, the mud sloughing to the ground. Could I see your hands?

She seemed reluctant. I think this is enough.

He shrugged. Thats fine. He stood and watched as she grabbed the rope. Her grip remained firm, but she just didnt have the strength to pull herself up. But she didnt let go either. If you work on that for the next month, Im sure you can do it.

He had meant it innocently enough. They were supposed to be words of encouragement. But the eyes half hidden behind rounded cheeks glared at him. Then she muttered under her breath in a way he clearly wasnt supposed to hear. ... Dont get to come back to try again. Want me to fail.

Pete waited until her attention turned back to the rope before grabbing the next one over. He didnt want to look like he was taunting her with the ease he could do the same task she was failing. She probably noticed anyway, but he didnt look. When he reached the top, he saw there was just a slide down to the end where Sterling was waiting. It seemed to be the final obstacle.

Pete looked down at the young lady struggling below, then at Sterling. Sterling had his arms behind his back, looking up. Come on, Pete called down. You can do it! He didnt think she could, but he wanted to motivate her. In return, he didnt even get a glare. In fact, the only thing he could see was the top of her head below her white knuckles. She seemed to have a death grip on the rope, but couldnt move. Pete looked over at Sterling. No reaction. Well, *technically* nobody had said they had to reach the end on their own. There was nothing he could change that would even end up with a minor

formation to bolster her energy. It was also clear she wasn't able to move under her own power anymore.

So he grabbed the rope. The young woman clearly wasn't willing to give up, and if she really couldn't try again he might as well see if he could bend the rules a little. He was glad he'd reserved his strength, because pulling a rope at his angle wasn't exactly easy. There was barely any room at the top before the slope down, and he didn't want to risk damaging the rope. So he had to pull straight up. That worked muscles he really hadn't had much reason to use, and he needed energy to augment them and keep the rope from slipping. Hand over hand he pulled, until he had to lift his hands over his head. She wasn't much shorter than him, so to get her feet over the edge he had to extend his arms to their full height. Then he gently set her feet on the ledge.

She just stood there with her arms raised, the rope hanging down. Pete could see her eyes were closed, but then she yanked on the rope, bringing her arms down in front of her belly. She didn't immediately seem to register what was happening, but she seemed stable enough to not fall backwards. Pete hopped over to the side and ran down the slope in the section next to her.

He watched carefully as he passed Sterling. If he was to get in trouble, he wanted to explain that he was the one who'd done everything. However, the only response he got was, A bit slow. With that, he walked past into the next section. It was full of tables, and people were already furiously scribbling away at papers. Well, he'd done what he could. Another member of the Order was waiting and pointed to an empty table. Answer as many questions as you can.