

Elder Cultivator

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Simply being in Spirit Building was not enough for Velvet to feel comfortable traveling alone. Her concerns were handled without her even having to voice them. While any of them would probably be safe on their own, it was decided that people would travel in pairs. That still allowed them to cover much more ground while still supporting each other. They were arranged more or less by strength, higher and lower being together. That put Velvet with Hoyt, who was well into the twelfth star. Catarina and Timothy were together, along with Fuzz who didnt really count. Though Fuzz seemed to think he did. Maybe, soon that wolf was growing stronger rapidly. Right now he was probably equivalent to a Mid Body tempering cultivator. Maybe a bit less intelligent. No, that wasnt quite right. Fuzz had a *different* sort of intelligence. He was currently unable to cultivate on his own, but Catarina had been the one to save him and was devoted to helping him improve.

That left just Anton at Spirit Building, with Kohar at the peak of Body Tempering. The two old folk together, though Kohar was probably closer to the age of any of the rest of them than to Antons age. Velvet couldnt be sure, because it was rude to ask. They would be handling some of the more difficult tasks, mostly on the legal side. Hopefully *just* that.

Well, Velvet looked down at the papers she held in her hands. They went into a proper carrying case so they wouldnt be damaged. I suppose we should get going.

It bothered her that she held in her hands the futures of over a dozen people. She didnt have the only copies of things, but the part that bothered her most was that they even *had* to do anything. That slavery was possible. Her early life hadnt been happy, not by a long shot, but she at least hadnt been at risk of slavery. Probably. The villagers of Dungannon probably hadnt thought about it either. Yet things came to where they were.

Awful.

Velvet cultivated, like many cultivators, for her own personal power. Sure, she had probably intended to lord it over people some. Maybe get back at those who deserved retribution. *Maybe* kill some people. Enslaving people was insane. And slaughtering most of a village? Velvet had heard about cultivators of the sort, but she thought they were simply scary stories. An insane thing that nobody would even attempt because they couldnt get away with it. But apparently they could. For a while, at least. Until Anton killed them. He *would*, too. His rate of growth was freakish. Not really any faster than the quite talented Hoyt and Catarina, but he didnt have to be. She wondered how

he grew so strong. Shed thought it was some sort of secret. Maybe it was, but not in the way shed thought.

Hard work. Talent. Cooperation. Those all fed into it. The last she was still getting used to, but she understood it in principle. That would get people somewhere, but people had noticed. Rumors spread. Anton was willing to share the truth about *why* he was cultivating, though hed greatly unexaggerated his desire for revenge. Velvet wasnt sure which rumors about his training were true, but the one she gave the most credit was the one where Vincent told the other elders. People werent supposed to talk about personal things like that, but it would always happen. Even if it was just a little. As soon as he got his hands on the cultivation scroll, he cultivated like mad. Not just day and night, constantly pushing forward. That better fit the descriptor *tireless*

No, he cultivated like a *madman*.

Tireless geniuses sat in a field or atop a nice mountain and breathed in pure air, rapidly reshaping their bodies. Madmen dragged their nearly dead bodies back to their destroyed village and cultivated their body by digging graves for months. The trickling rumors werent so detailed in that part, but Velvet had seen what was left of Dungannon. They had stopped to pay their respects on the way, and the fields of graves that wasnt something a normal person could do. She would have gone insane from that. Maybe he did, but Anton was certainly sane now. Scarily so, sometimes. Velvet had thought crazy people would be more frightening, but the way Anton looked at people in the courtroom made her glad she hadnt pushed things too far in the past.

Her mistakes *had* been forgiven, right? No, this was no time to doubt his sincerity. He wasnt the tricky sort, but the straightforward vengeful kind. And the compassionate, helping kind. To that end, she needed to do her part.

Travel with Hoyt was awkward. It wasnt his fault, but Velvet wasnt sure if it was hers either. It just *was*. They were two allies who had trained together and participated in a single mission. A few months of shallow experience compared to a stunning performance in The Hunt where they saved a village nobody even knew could be in danger. Maybe if she had no, she wasnt the right person to have participated at that point. She likely would have fled to protect herself. She couldnt say for sure if she was still that person or not.

Thank you, thank you, *thank you*, the woman squeezed Velvets hands as she cried tears of joy.

I didnt- I am just helping out Anton Krantz. She didnt do anything worth thanking. At best she was a delivery girl bringing money that wasnt hers. Were, uh, planning to travel

around to gather some others. We aren't leaving Ofrurg directly, but we can escort you as we travel. It might be safer.

The woman closed her eyes for a second. The two of you are cultivators? Strong ones?

Were better than the weakest. Velvet felt strong, but there was so much more growing she could do. She knew that many other cultivators were stronger. Most of them, in fact. She hadn't been cultivating for that long yet, despite her success. That wasn't the right thing to say though. I can beat some people who have trained for a decade or more. That was more encouraging, and was true even if she didn't count people eternally stuck at the beginning of cultivation. Cultivation speed could vary so widely.

The woman nodded. Then yes, I will put my trust in the two of you.

Shadows could cloak a person, but unnatural shadow was just as obvious as standing in the open. The proper way to sneak about involved good body control and careful regulation of energy for use only when necessary. A creaky door could be silenced, footfalls softened, and legs made swift to avoid the gaze of a guard. If she didn't have to worry about cultivators sensing her, Velvet could simply cease breathing and circulate air into and out of her lungs with energy. It was extremely strange, and rarely useful.

Perception was just as important. You didn't have to hide from a guard if you went where they weren't going to be. You watched their patrols from afar, heard their steps around a corner, felt the floor tremble.

She crept up behind her target. One hand went over the mouth. Immediately, hands and feet flailed at her. It's alright. Just don't scream. It took a moment for the scared man to calm down. Yes yes, I'm not supposed to be here. I get it. Will you promise not to shout when I remove my hand? The man nodded. Velvet did so and waited, preparing to run. She didn't have another way to get what she wanted. Hurting someone wouldn't help her. The man just stood there, stock still. Good. She pulled out a paper, holding it in front of the man. Do you know who this is? The man nodded. You can speak. Just quietly.

I know him. His name was Barnaby.

Was? Velvet asked. What happened to him?

Died of the bloody plague.

Are you sure? Velvet asked.

I think so. I mean, he was really sick. I hadn't seen it before, but that's what the doctor said it was.

A doctor was called in?

The man nodded once more. Keeps the rest of us from getting sick.

Sure hes dead?

Saw the body carried out. Well, it was covered up- but I dont doubt it was Barnaby. Nobody else got sick.

Velvet was gone before he could notice the silence and even think to turn around. If he had, she was wearing a mask to cover her face. A voice might be suspicious, but it was hardly something to identify someone by.

So this one was dead, just like the report said. Another slave not expecting to be questioned shouldnt be ready to lie, and shed seen no sign of Barnaby anywhere at work or in the slave quarters. She had to check though. She had no doubt that there would be a few deceivers among those enslaving their assigned people.

At the current time theyd confirmed six. Four traveled with them, Barnaby dead, and one was seen leaving the area on his own. He was free to do so, and leaving right away had been the best choice if he was going to do it. Velvet wasnt sure if it was safe to do so, but she also wasnt sure if traveling with *them* was truly safe. The world was crazy. There were people out there as much stronger than her than the bandits had been compared to non-cultivators. A scary thought, and something she planned to rectify if at all possible.

Just another handful, and they could go meet up with Anton. Then everyone could thank *him* instead of her and Hoyt, who wouldnt even have known anything was wrong without Anton.

Chapter 112

Everything should have been fine, but for some reason it was not. The pack had returned to the big pack, the Order-pack. It had been safe there, with abundant food that didnt even need to be hunted for and natural energy of the most pleasant sort. Even out in the forest where the unpleasant ants and razor birds lived the problems had been resolved with the help of a pack elder.

Now the pack leaders had taken him along with them, leaving behind weaker pack members. Timothy had properly reclaimed his status as friend, though Fuzz wasnt sure what Velvet was in relation to the pack. She certainly was part of the Order-pack. He could smell the same energy in her. She came with them as some sort of ally.

Then there had been a long time of remaining in a single city. Fuzz didnt understand why. Nobody was happy. They didnt hunt or gather other resources. The opportunities to cultivate werent anything special. Fuzz wasnt even allowed to come into the building

they spent all day inside, which was strange. It seemed a courthouse didnt allow low ranking pack members inside, but he scented many weaker than himself entering. Strange.

It was only afterwards that Fuzz understood they were looking for pack members. Anton had been part of a large pack, not as big as the Order-pack but still precious to him. Timothy and Catarina split from the rest of the pack along with himself. They travelled quickly to other cities where they found what were apparently Antons former packmates. They had been lost, somehow, but now they were found.

These packmates were weak. Without cultivation. Fuzz didnt know how to show them how to cultivate energy, but he made sure to bring them meat so that they could develop a strong body. At first he didnt understand why they cooked it on a fire and left the bones behind, but he did find it nice when meat was warm. The bones went to him, even when he tried to insist others should eat them. Fuzz would not let them be wasted, so he eventually ate them himself. They cracked apart easily, releasing tasty marrow and crunchy tidbits of bone. Fuzz remembered gnawing on bones when he was just a little pup, how hard it was to bite through- but now he was able to do it with ease even without using his energy. His new pack made him strong.

Cities were often paved with stone, and roads were made of packed dirt or stone. Such ground was unpleasant on his pads, but better than stepping on thorns. Fuzz had few thorns he had to worry about now, but he knew they existed. The Order-pack had plants with *very* sharp thorns that he only tried to sniff inside once. They had tasty energy fruit buried inside, but his snout was all cut up. Not a good trade.

Normally the pack traveled on such terrain but now they were off the road. They were looking for someone. A packmate of Antons. No, it was more than that. One of his offspring, or at least a kin of some sort. Fuzz wasnt sure exactly, but it was like the word for Catarina. A great daughter.

The one they were looking for had been gone for a whole week from where they thought they were going to meet her. Catarina and Timothy hadnt been happy about that, but apparently she hadnt listened to the other pack, or something. It was a big problem. One week was a long time. Scents were hard to follow after a week, and it was even worse when he didnt know what he was smelling for. He had been taken to Alvas room but it had been cleaned and it only smelled like other people staying at that house. They didnt have a trail for him to follow, or more than a vague direction they thought she had gone.

So Fuzz was running around snuffling up the forest. His lungs were very strong now, so when he snuffled too hard he pulled up dirt and it made him sneeze. He was surprised by that. Dirt was supposed to stay on the ground, not go in the air. He made sure to adjust his method, keeping his nose a bit higher. His scent abilities had gotten better, especially if he used energy. He just had to find signs of someone.

Five people besides their pack had passed through this area recently. Seventeen squirrels, two boars, a bear, some kinds of birds Fuzz didn't recognize, and countless insects also filled the area. But he knew what humans smelled like. Humans smelled like salt and like cotton and leather, and sometimes metal.

It wasn't clear to Fuzz which he should follow. He wandered back and forth on the trail. He had gotten ahead of Catarina and Timothy, but he was still close enough to hear them. They were very slow because of all the other pack members, so he didn't want to wait. He could cover more area on his own.

The trail split. Most of the human scents weren't from the same time, but it was an easy path to walk along. Now they could spread out in two general directions. Which one should he follow?

Fuzz sniffed hard, getting a noseful of dirt and leaves. It was all too faint. Who did he want? Something he sniffed more, using energy to pull in more air but also block big chunks from hitting his nose. Was that what he wanted? He was looking for kin of Anton, which would also be kin of Catarina. Besides the smell of the Ninety-Nine Stars, they had very little scent in common but there was one bit of smell here that matched that. With no better idea, Fuzz followed that one.

The trail scent grew stronger. Fuzz was much faster than a normal human, and though the trail wandered around without specific direction he knew he was able to cut ahead at some points. He was going at a quick trot. The current trail was no longer a week old. Only a few days. Maybe less. Fresh since the last rain.

Most of the beasts avoided Fuzz. Squirrels and rabbits didn't want to be eaten, and he had no time to hunt them. Deer ran away quickly, but he didn't give chase. A boar wandered into view. It was big. Tough. He was on its territory. Fuzz growled. He didn't have time to fight a boar. The boar pawed the ground as if about to charge then turned away. Good.

Paws found their way over dirt and roots and leaves and sticks. Bushes got in the way and he ploughed through them or jumped over. The scent was getting closer. Now he was no longer close enough to Timothy and Catarina to hear them, but he would be able to find them. He knew where their trail would be, and was very familiar with their scent. He had to find this kin of Anton.

She was close. Then Fuzz heard a scream. His claws tore the ground as he moved, propelling him forward with great speed. He no longer cared about the trail. No more time wasted with scents, just running. His lungs and heart pumped quickly as he ran, panting to cool himself. Screams continued, but he was getting close.

Then he saw it. A great cat, and a king of the forest. One paw was on the leg of a human girl-child. It could have easily leaned forward to bite her neck and finish her off,

but it was toying with her. Fuzz barely even needed scent to know this was the kin of Anton and Catarina.

He howled and charged. He hoped that Timothy and Catarina would hear him. The cat was not just larger than himself. As a king of the forest, it had energy just like Fuzz did. That energy was stronger than his, deep and old.

The great cat turned from its prey towards him. It knew it could safely ignore the girl to face Fuzz. That was what he intended. He couldn't allow more harm to come to Anton's kin. If he had hesitated to draw the beast's attention, it could have slain her at any moment.

With no packmates to aid him, Fuzz could not use his usual tactics. He would have liked to circle around behind the creature and pull its leg, but that was simply impossible. He had to do this differently.

The cat had no time to ready for a pounce as Fuzz charged it. His paw slashed towards the cat's nose, and in return the cat clawed at him. Fuzz ducked his body under the attack while his own paw scraped along the creature's nose. Barely a scratch. The creature's energy was stronger, resisting his attack. He pulled back, wary of the cat's longer reach.

If he stayed too far he could not attack, but if he approached too close it could crush him with its weight. He also had to make sure it didn't go towards the child. Fuzz relied on his quick reflexes and turning ability to move around it, attacking from an angle on its right side. The right side was dangerous a quick paw slashing out, and he felt blood trail along his ear and down his head and neck. His own attack barely connected, and didn't even leave a shallow mark. His teeth remained ready for a moment when he saw an extended neck, but he found no opportunity.

He pulled back to circle around to the other side. His turning allowed him to see that the human girl was dragging herself away. Hopefully she could escape, but if Fuzz did not win the battle it would do little good. All that could be hoped for would be the cat getting bored and not her being far enough to escape.

Fuzz didn't want to let Anton's kin die, but he also didn't want to die. He wasn't able to choose between the two options, which meant he had to win even though he didn't think he could. He howled once more, hoping Timothy and Catarina could hear him. He was quite far, and human ears were weak.

He lunged towards the cat's left side. Its reaction was a bit slower, and his fangs dug into its shoulder. In return, the creature fell on him, then turned itself to tower over him. Fuzz lashed out with his teeth to keep himself safe, but it would only last so long. The creature was bigger and stronger, and he was in a disadvantageous position. Fuzz noticed that it didn't really focus its energy on one particular place, but it was enough stronger it didn't need to.

One paw pressed down on his chest, cracking his ribs. Jaw opened wide to bite down at his neck. Fuzz knew he was going to die. Then a tiny rock hit the cat in the head. Such a small rock didnt even cause its head to move, but it shifted its weight and slightly lifted its paw. Fuzz immediately attacked. He didnt have the energy to resist its attacks, so he didnt. Everything he had went into his jaws and teeth. It was almost too much- as he tried to lengthen his teeth he found it pushing against his mouth. He softened it to not affect him as he lunged for the cats throat.

Warm, sweet blood filled his mouth. He tore, flung away what he had in his mouth, then bit again. And again, and again, until the cries of the great cat faded away. The great cat had fallen atop him, pinning him down. His ribs were broken. His head and neck were bleeding, along with his belly and side. Fuzz pushed, trying to get the cat off. It would be a shame to die after killing it.

He couldnt do it. He was dizzy from loss of blood, tired. Nearly out of energy. Then he heard a little voice. It was the human-girl. She wasnt saying anything he recognized as words, just grunts of exertion. He saw her pushing against the side of the cat, as if she could even slightly affect it. How silly. Then he heard a cry of pain. She was pushing with her legs, her back pressed against the beast. That included her injured leg. But she didnt stop.

Fuzz growled, trying to get her to just leave him, but she either didnt hear or didnt understand.

How pathetic. How could he give up when Antons kin still wanted to rescue him? He growled, not with any sort of meaning but just to express himself. His legs pushed, his ribs strained and ached and felt like they might break even further. Then something snapped, but it wasnt his ribs. The great cats body flew off of him over to the side, and Fuzz rolled onto his belly. He tried to bend to lick the wound on his side, but his body wouldnt listen. He slumped into unconsciousness, but not before he felt warm arms around his neck.

Chapter 113

The howl of a wolf carried through the air as Catarina sprinted through the trees. Fuzz had been scouting ahead, getting further and further from the rest of the group. Timothy and Catarina could have both kept up, but even mildly dangerous animals would be a threat to the handful of common folk they had with them.

There shouldnt be anything dangerous to Spirit Building cultivators, but Fuzz was weaker than that. He was just a little wolf pup. Well, very big for a pup but still smaller than he would be when full grown.

His defenseless and weak form lingered in Catarinas memory as she moved closer to where the sound came from. Soon she could sense his energy, but it was weak instead

of vibrant. Closer, and she sensed a larger energy that was even more faded. Finally, she sensed another life, just before she came into view of the scene.

Blood was everywhere, soaking into the leaves and splattered across the bark of the trees. It took a moment for Catarina to figure out what one of the creatures was under all the blood and viscera. Some sort of large cat, bigger than a wolf. Its head might have been rib height on a human if it was standing.

It only took a moment for Catarina to find what she was actually looking for. Fuzz was there- along with a young girl somewhere around ten years of age wrapped around his bloody body. Was this Alva? She heard breath from both figures, but Fuzz sounded nearly as weak as when he had first been found- after the parasitic moss had been removed from him.

Catarina didnt have any medicines or treatments specifically meant for wolves, but she had coagulants to help stop the bleeding, bandages, and needle and thread for stitching. She carefully pried off the unconscious child, relieved that none of the blood seemed to be hers- though noting a broken leg.

Though she had little in the way of real medical training, Catarinas hands were swift and dextrous as she stitched closed the most grievous wounds. She traced her fingers along the patterns cut into Fuzz fur and above the new wounds without touching them. The practice of turning people into living formations was discouraged in Graotan because it often resulted in mutilations and death, but Fuzz had already been about to die.

Though he was visibly much worse looking at the moment, Catarina believed he was probably better off. His body was tempered with energy and though his durability had already been tested with his wounds, Fuzz' recovery should be higher. His flow of energy wasnt quite right, so she shaved more fur in an attempt to stabilize things. She had a feel for what was right, and some actual study on the topic now instead of what she had done spontaneously. When she was finished, if Fuzz wasnt covered in blood Catarina almost would have thought he was having a nap.

The little girl had bags under her eyes and was thin. Wandering around in the forest for a week was bound to be exhausting. She was lucky the area was warm enough for her to survive the night, and that she hadnt run into danger sooner. Catarina thought to let her rest, but they needed to set that leg sooner rather than later.

The first thing she did was cut down a small tree. A sword wasnt the best tool for the job, but with the addition of energy it was like slicing through a soft cake. She carved out straight lengths of wood to use as a splint. She didnt know if she should wake the girl up or set her leg while she was unconscious.

Finally she decided that waking up to pain wouldnt be a good first impression. Catarina gently touched her shoulder to shake her awake. It took more than just a little effort, but eventually the girls eyes opened. Hello, Catarina said softly. Are you Alva?

Alva nodded, staring for a moment. Who are you?

Im Catarina. Im hmm its hard to explain. Do you remember your great-grandpa Anton? He sent me to help you.

Really? her eyes grew wide. What about mom and dad? She sat up and winced.

I dont know, Catarina admitted. Listen, Im going to have to set the bones in your leg. It will hurt, but it wont heal right if I dont. Okay?

Alva bit her lip. Okay.

Get ready. Catarina really hoped it wouldnt hurt that much. She let her energy flow into the wounded leg, grabbing onto the larger broken bones and with them the smaller pieces. It wasnt a clean break, but if she could get it close there *were* bone-healing medicines for humans that she had.

Despite her best efforts to ease the movement of the bones, they made a *snap* as she moved them back into place and Alva cried out in pain. Catarina quickly applied the splints, wrapping them tightly. She realized she should have used painkillers of some sort. Shed spent too much time with cultivators who could push through the pain. Alva was doing her best, but tears streamed down her face. What medicines were bad to mix? Catarina could regulate what happened inside her own body, but Alva couldnt.

She shook her head and held out a pill, a little ball of crushed and refined herbs. The most important thing was the bone recovery medicine. Hopefully the pain wasnt too much now that things were properly set. I need you to swallow this. Alva nodded, sniffing, and Catarina floated it through the air with her energy. She knew it would taste bad, so she avoided letting it touch Alvas tongue. When it got closer to her throat Alva swallowed more out of surprise than anything else.

She coughed and sputtered, sending Catarina into a panic until it subsided a moment later- and she felt there wasnt anything stuck in the girls lungs. When Alva finished coughing, she looked at Catarina. Are you a cultivator?

Thats right, Catarina said.

Can you teach me?

An awkward question. She absolutely could- and *would*- but she didnt know how much cultivation young children could do. Since Body Tempering was first, it was somewhat dangerous for those whose bodies hadnt fully developed. Another danger was that during the teenage years hormones ran wild, disrupting thinking processes and increasing the chance of making a serious mistake that could lead to crippling injury. Maybe not right away, Catarina said, But I will, when its safe.

Moving Alva while injured was possible, but Fuzz was also unconscious. Instead of pushing them, Catarina gave Alva something to eat and started setting up a simple formation to protect the area.

It was nightfall when Timothy and the others finally caught up. Most of the others were exhausted, but elated to see Alva was found and *relatively* unharmed. Even those who didn't have contact with her before were relieved to know a young girl was safe.

I can't believe it, said a man with whitish-blond hair. I thought for sure you died in the attack. And to learn you're a cultivator

I wasn't, Anton said. And I only survived by chance. I was outside of town.

Anton knew the former owner of a small restaurant was called Reuben. Though most of his food was raised and prepared by his family, sometimes when they visited the main part of Dungannon they'd gone to eat at his place. Maybe not more than yearly himself, but they knew each other well enough.

In the giant snowstorm? Reuben shook his head. If it was someone else, I wouldn't have believed it.

It was a bad winter. People were hungry.

Don't have to explain to me. I know you well enough. A tough old guy, that's for sure. Reuben looked Anton up and down. You look younger? Maybe it's just faulty memory, but you were a bit more wrinkled before.

Like a prune, Anton admitted. Cultivation helps somewhat.

I tried it once, Reuben said. Cultivation. Didn't get anywhere in a couple years.

Maybe I can point you in the right direction, Anton said. It'll be good for you to even get some initial success. Anton looked over towards Kohar. I've found comparing experiences to be very helpful to my own cultivation. I'd be glad to have you join us, if you're willing. She had enough time spent as a cultivator he knew she really should have useful insights despite being lower cultivation than him. Since she cultivated a different technique than the Ninety-Nine Stars he wasn't sure if he could help her surpass Body Tempering, but he wanted to try.

I would be glad to exchange thoughts, Kohar agreed. Because of my chosen path, I spend less time cultivating than I might like. Many find the study of law a waste of time, and trying to help others with it even more so.

Its a most honorable choice, Anton said. I have some thoughts about helping strangers in some potential future where I solve all of my own problems first, but at the moment this is mostly just for myself. He inclined his head to Reuben, Sorry to say it.

Hah! Reubens face spread into a wide smile, Im not going to complain about whatever reasons you had to help get me free. Besides, I know you have a good heart. You didnt ask me to swear eternal loyalty to you or sacrifice my life or anything.

Oh, did I forget to mention that part? Anton grinned.

It was nice, to be happy for a few moments, but he still had some of his most important steps ahead. He was absolutely willing to admit that his own family was worth more to him than other people, and Devon was waiting for him.

Chapter 114

It was almost hard to remember life before everything had become a total mess. Yet those precious memories from before were the things Devon clung to the most. Memories of comfort and community. There was little enough of each in his current life.

His accommodations were ever so slightly better than they had been in the Irvin arena. The bed was nearly tolerable, the floors were cleaned almost monthly, and the food was more abundant. The danger was more variable.

In the Irvin arena he had to fight for his life primarily against wild beasts. Sometimes they were starved, the effects of which varied by the animal. If they were too starved they were easier to fight, which suited Devon just fine. He didnt mind killing an easy opponent. He would even do his best to make it look somewhat difficult. He didnt care about the crowd but when his life was in control of someone else, he had to adapt. There had also been a few fights against humans there. Not all of them were to the death- slaves cost money after all.

After hed been casually given an admittedly poor cultivation technique, he quickly grew stronger. A cultivators body was much stronger than anyone else, and the versatility and power of energy couldnt be overcome by simply having a stronger build. He ended up against stronger opponents but he himself grew quickly enough to defend himself. Enough that the Irvin arena was running out of opponents for him- and the guards were barely higher cultivation than himself.

Then he had been bought by the Potenza family- or more specifically by a daughter of the family, Tonina. His grandfather Anton had found him and planned to purchase his freedom, but she arrived before the deal was finished and used her familys influence to coerce him into a duel- and when she lost that one, a second duel at a time most convenient to her advancing cultivation.

After that he had been thrown into an endless series of matches against other cultivators and magical beasts. He *had* to grow stronger to survive, and so he did. Somehow he came through it, and a few weeks later things calmed down. He thought he would be pushed until he died, but it seemed to not be the case. Perhaps they had plans for when he grew in cultivation.

Just because they were going to send him against greater opponents as he grew didn't mean he could stop. They would do it anyway- and Devon preferred to live. He had little in the way of discussions with others about cultivation since talking with rivals wasn't good for his own safety. He knew he had pushed himself from mid to late Body Tempering, but not to the peak according to the cultivation method he had available. He wasn't sure if it was a mismatch between himself and the technique or if something was simply wrong with it, but he couldn't manage any more advancement.

Even so, he survived. He was fortunate to find himself matched against beasts he could kill or kept out of death matches entirely. He thought perhaps he might survive until he could grow strong enough to escape, or until his grandfather returned.

Those hopes had been shattered when his next match was announced. There was a giant man named Moreno, more than a head taller than any of the other men and coated in rippling muscle. His build was secondary to his cultivation at the peak of Body Tempering. More than that, even. The rumors weren't entirely clear on whether he had a foot into Spirit Building or had fully stepped into it. Devon's only time seeing the man he hadn't felt like he'd completed a full level of whatever cultivation technique he used, but that could have changed in the last few weeks.

Regardless, it didn't matter. Moreno had more than just higher cultivation than Devon. Moreno wasn't a slave, or at least not fully treated like one. He was the man chosen to end most every arena combatant's streaks- permanently. Devon didn't know what sort of bets were involved, but anyone involved would be foolish to bet against him. The matches weren't fair. He was always equipped with better gear- high quality and enchanted. Even if his opponent was more skilled or nearly as strong, even a lucky hit by them wouldn't be enough to change the tide of battle.

Devon had found out about the match only three days before, directly from the lips of Tonina. The evil grin on her face told him that he was going to die just as much as her words did. If he had a weapon nearby he would have tried to stab it through her heart, despite her presence in early Spirit Building meaning he had no hope to kill her.

So he was going to die. Three days wasn't sufficient for any sort of breakthrough. The only solace he had was on the training field. Moreno had his own place to train secretly, with outside opponents. He was still able to watch the others train to inspect their weaknesses. It was clear he hadn't been informed of the match any sooner than Devon- he hadn't been watching him fight at all. In fact, he was out of town.

One of the other men used the same sort of weapon- if it could be called that instead of a torture device. A chain with spikes along its length designed to cause maximum pain. Devon had convinced him to help train- since Devon would be dying in a few days regardless any secrets couldnt be used against him later.

His goal was still technically to win and kill Moreno, but Devon didnt think it would happen. He had no control over the shadow of death looming over him, but if he was going to die he was at least going to go down swinging. That might be exactly what the arena wanted, but he never had a choice in the matter. If possible, he wanted to take out an eye or at least chop off a finger. Something lasting to remind the world he had been alive.

He held his head high as he walked towards the arena floor, only to be thrown for a loop one last time. He wasnt assigned his typical weapon, but instead a fencing sword and small bucklers. Someone didnt even care if he was entertaining as he died.

The walls of Khonard loomed before the small group. Some of the less fit members were falling behind, unable to keep up with the pace Anton set. Kohar was able to keep up with the pace, but she gave a side-eye to Anton. Why are you pushing so hard? Were here, are we not?

We are, Anton acknowledged. But I have a feeling last time I came here, if I had arrived just minutes earlier, maybe a quarter of an hour, things would have been different. I just feel that- his eyes caught a figure in the distance. He turned to the few former villagers of Dungannon hed been able to gather on their route to Khonard. All of you have your papers, your pouches? They nodded. The inn is two blocks that way, big sign. Well meet you there later. Go ahead and get rooms, and a meal. Kohar, with me.

Sprinting through the streets of a city was considered rude, but Anton didnt care. Half a minute later he stood in front of Elder Varela of the Grasping Willows. No time for formalities, Im afraid. Elder Varelas long white beard fluttered as he turned his head. Kohar, I presume. If you could find Elder Rocha in the government district and tell her Anton is present, we will be heading to the Potenza arena immediately.

That urgent? Kohar glanced at Anton, then back to Elder Varela, I will return with as much haste as I can manage.

Kohar split off from the others, and Elder Varela began to explain as they were on their way, weaving through the people on the street. You were right about the Potenza family taking things poorly- or rather a certain foolish girl. My contact was able to convince them to restrict the sorts of combats Devon ended up in, but the elder members of the Potenza family are out of the city for the next few days. I did not know that until Tonina refused to release Devon, even when I showed her the copy of the document. It seems

we accidentally provoked her into quick action. That was three days ago, and Devon was scheduled for a deathmatch immediately. One that is about to start at any moment.

I can go faster, Anton declared. Trusting that Elder Varelas advantage in cultivation would be sufficient for him to do the same, he rushed through the streets. His eyes picked out the way people were moving and where they would be when he arrived. He avoided their movements before they even knew he was there, and when someone noticed him and made uncoordinated movements that would have resulted in a collision he was prepared for that too. Was there a slight flow of energy along his path, guiding him, or was that his imagination? He couldnt be sure, and simply relied on his Insight to avoid people.

As they approached the arena, Anton was able to sense many sources of energy. Guards with cultivations around the peak of Body Tempering. Further in he sensed at least a handful of those in Spirit Building. Some might simply belong to those watching the match, but Anton sensed Tonina and the guardian shed previously had with her as well. If the information was correct, he was known as Masozi. Then Anton sensed Devon, combating someone unknown.

Anton unfurled a document as he stopped in front of two guards who had spears drawn to block the entrance. You are illegally holding a man and will release him at once.

Bring that up with the Potenzas, said one of the guards.

I know Tonina is inside, bring me to her now.

Cant. Match is happening.

The guard seemed awfully confident Anton wouldnt do anything to him, despite him being weaker. Even as his eyes drilled into the man, he stood firm. That match involves a man illegally taken as a slave. Take me to him. The men continued to block the entrance. Do you intend to ignore the rule of law?

Like I said, the guard stood firm. Take it up with the Potenzas.

Anton turned to Elder Varela. There was just a simple nod response. Then there was a blur of motion. On the left, the shocked head of a man landed sideways on the ground, shortly followed by his body. On the right there was a snap as the mans neck was twisted completely around by Elder Varelas seemingly innocuous long hair and beard-unthreatening before they latched onto him like giant hands.

With a powerful flick of his handaxe Anton cleaned the blood off, before returning it to hang at his side and drawing his bow. Should we announce ourselves more clearly? Anton asked.

Theyll be able to put up an organized defense. Dangerous. But it will help justify our actions and might help your grandson. Elder Varelas hair and beard wriggled around in the air in front of him and to the sides. Ill support whatever choice you make.

Chapter 115

Authors note:

Theres more description of injury than average in this chapter. If you read The Immortal Berserker by me, its not more than some of that, but if you dislike gore you might just prefer to skim the first section.

The sand beneath Devons boots was depressing. Not because it was too hot or too cold, but just because it was *there*. Sand didnt belong in the middle of a city. Dirt was easier to get. But sand was preferred for some reason. Maybe it was the clean color, or maybe it was how it absorbed blood. He had the feeling it was the latter.

It was possible for Devon to get behind the idea of fighting or dying for a cause. Sometimes, you had to fight and kill others. Hed had to do so. Hed been *forced* to do so. That or die, and since *somebody* would be dying, he preferred it to be the other guy. It was nothing personal. But now he was in the worst sort of situation. He wasnt fighting *for* something. He didnt have the choice to do so, nor did he even have the option to kill his opponent. Not *really*.

He held the unfamiliar fencing sword in what he hoped was a reasonable stance, looking at the too-small buckler held in his left hand. It was probably a perfectly reasonable setup for someone who trained that way. The weight of his armor rested on him. It was the same as all the rest of the armor. Inadequate. The helmet and breastplate were fine, but the arms and legs didnt cover everything. So that there would be more blood. People liked blood.

If those sorts that liked to watch humans die were *people*. Maybe they were just monsters in human skin. Devon looked up at them, the bright sun making it difficult to make out their faces. They were just a mass. He only saw *one* face he recognized, and that was more a matter of remembering her energy. Tonina Potenza. The person most responsible for his current situation. Hed like to live today, just to spite her.

But that wasnt possible. He knew that, as he turned his eyes towards Moreno. There was more than just a single step of cultivation between them. In fact, though he was concealing it, Devon felt that Moreno had more than just stepped into Spirit Building, but completed the first stage of his cultivation technique there. Maybe that was even the reason hed been away, to complete his advancement. Devon noted how *his* armor covered his knees and elbows and how the long chain he was dragging along behind him sparkled in the sun.

He never consciously heard the call to begin fighting anymore. When it was time, it was time. His legs moved, pushing off of the sand as it flew up into great clouds behind him. He didnt have the stamina to draw out the fight. He probably didnt have the power to finish the battle early, but he had to try for *something*

The chain writhed on the surface of the sand, Morenos powerful arms manipulating it to flick towards him. Devon slid underneath it, taking advantage of the sands malleability to sink low. He carried as much of his momentum forward as he could, thrusting with the sword straight towards Morenos eyes. A slight turn of his head and the mans defensive energy absorbed most of the blow- with the helmet deflecting the rest.

Pain. Chunks of flesh were pulled out of his back as the spike laden chain raked along his back like he knew it would. It tore through energy, breastplate, and skin before slicing into muscle and bone unevenly. He shoved the buckler into it to divert its momentum as he shifted around Morenos side. He wasnt sure how much of his success was his own, and how much was the man playing with him.

A series of thrusts with his unfamiliar weapon allowed him to get used to its motion. If hed chosen it, it wouldnt have been a bad weapon. Beyond just relying on his armor and energy, Moreno was forced to dodge and even tried to grab the sword with his weapon, twisting the chain around it. However, before it could bind the sword Devon pulled away.

The rest of the length of chain was not idle during that exchange. It twisted and snaked around, savaging the rear of Devons left thigh before coiling around his left arm, pulling away parts of him as it left. The pain was sharp yet lasting. Some of the finer sand was already finding its way into his wounds, clumping together with the blood. It was the sort of pain that should make him cry out to the heavens for relief.

Instead, he grit his teeth. If his jaw clenched any harder he was certain he would crack it or his teeth or both, but he wasnt willing to give anyone the satisfaction. If hed been faced with a real weapon he would just be dead now, his torso sliced in two or at least his arm on the ground. Since they wanted to cause him pain, he wouldnt show it.

His energy surged inside of him. He had not held back one iota since the beginning of the match, but he began to exceed the maximum output he thought he could control. Maybe he couldnt. It felt more like the energy was controlling him, leading his attacks and twisting his body. Then again, wasnt it all *him*? He didnt know. He just fought, oblivious to anything but himself and his opponent.

Thrust after thrust failed to pierce Morenos defenses, but he wouldnt give up. He pushed his body beyond its limits, since it was the last time hed have the chance to use it. He even stopped using energy for defense- if Moreno could break through anyway, why bother?

Blood trickled down his back, his arm, both legs. He continued to attack. His helmet was torn off, and with the same motion the spiked chain twisted around his head and neck. It traced a line along his scalp, across his right eye, tearing through his right ear, and circling around the back of his neck to his left shoulder.

For a moment Devon thought his eye had been destroyed, but he used his energy to clear the blood and he could still sort of see out of it. Just damage to the white, but not superficial. He hadn't even managed anything to Moreno yet.

He continued to press the attack, making use of all his training with his usual weapon and skill and the bit of practice the older gladiator had allowed him fighting against the spiked chain. He was almost starting to feel comfortable with the foil in his hand, and tried a series of feints and attacks.

At a critical moment he stepped forward, thrusting with all of his power. He was too far forward, his shoulder nearly touching Moreno's belly as he stepped toward Devon and to the side of his attack. A mistake was what Devon wanted it to look like. His left hand was already coming up, clutching the buckler. Since it was useless against the twisting chain, it was just another weapon. There was no chance it could break through Moreno's armor, but there was one place that it could just barely work. As Moreno stepped forward, the edge of the buckler slid into the partly open face of his helmet. There was a crunch, and Moreno took a step back.

Devon shook his head. Not enough power. His lower rank of cultivation was to blame, and the blood loss didn't help. He barely stood on his feet, unable to make a proper follow up attack as Moreno snapped his broken nose back into place, blood dripping down his front. All around him Devon felt the chain filling with energy. It would constrict him, tearing him apart once and for all. It was over but he allowed himself a slight smile.

Then Moreno twitched, taking a half step forward to catch his balance. Devon didn't even try to guess if it was some sort of feint, he just used his remaining energy to thrust his sword forward. It hadn't even been necessary, because Moreno's weight carried him forward into it- and the energy just allowed it to pierce through his eye and come out the back of his head, clanking into his helmet.

Devon looked down at the body on the ground in front of him. Moreno ultimately fell awkwardly onto his side, and Devon could see something. A hole in the bottom of his right armpit. The hole went through the armor, and though blood blocked him from actually seeing Devon was certain it went all the way through widthwise to come out to the sand below.

Then the pain reasserted its presence along with his awareness of the rest of the world. He quietly grunted as waves of energy poured over him. Four people at Spirit Building. Not only that, but actively engaged in combat. He recognized three of them- and the third was both the most unexpected and yet the most natural. That was the energy of his grandfather Anton, and the same energy that he hadn't really comprehended that

made the hole through Moreno. Devon slowly turned his head to see what was happening, and realized that the stands were mostly empty- the only watchers remaining fleeing for the exits at top speed.

Anton wasn't sure if he was a hypocrite, or if the word even had any meaning with the way that humans acted. Sometimes, you just did what you did with no prior intention of deceiving others or oneself.

As soon as Elder Varela had given his full support, he had burst into action. Any cultivator would instantly be able to tell his intentions with the way his energy surged, and as he shouted at the top of his lungs everyone who wasn't deaf would be informed. I have declarations that Devon Gardner was illegally enslaved! Anyone who stands between me and my grandson dies!

Of course, that immediately resulted in guards rushing his position. The first one to round the corner got a spirit arrow through his head. And the second. Normally it might have taken two or three shots even if they were below his level, because they weren't unaware of his presence. However, if there was ever a time to use forbidden techniques it was when storming an enemy fortress.

Candle Wax flared as Anton burned years off of his life. His legs carried him forward, arrows piercing into anyone who showed their face. When several came at once, he restrained himself slightly and let Elder Varela tear into some of them, snapping their necks with his knee-length white hair or simply piercing their heart with a dagger.

The corridors entering the arena were twisted and maze-like on purpose, in case anyone thought to escape past the guards. That meant they ran into many squads of guards, from mid to late Body Tempering as well as a handful in Spirit Building. They killed them all.

When they came to the arena floor, barred gates stood in their way. Elder Varela moved forward as if to lift the gate, but before that Anton took his shot. The bloody figure of Devon in front of him was clear to his eyes, and Anton didn't hesitate to throw himself along with a full bundle of years into his attack. He was a streak of energy, one moment outside the arena, the next piercing through the formation on the gate, the next meeting armor, ribs, lung, heart, lung, and finally one last piece of armor before putting a hole the diameter of a finger in the arena wall behind the man.

A cloud of black smoke came out of Anton's mouth as he felt himself burn on the inside, but it didn't matter. Each rank of cultivation was at least a year. Burning his lifespan felt truly awful, but as long as he continued cultivating at a rate that outpace his growth in lifespan, he only needed a year as a buffer zone. He didn't care how overconfident that made him, because while revenge was his ultimate goal it would be empty without friends and family.

White hair extended, growing even longer than its actual length as Elder Varela took advantage of the momentarily broken formation to grab the metal bars and twist them. They snapped apart, leaving room for a man to walk through upright. He was first into the arena, but Anton was only a step behind.

Elder Varela spoke before Anton could. Members of the audience, I am here to inform you that you have been witnessing the Potenza Arena in the midst of committing a crime. As you must have already heard, this man should have never been enslaved. I provided proof of this to the young lady there, but instead of following her legal obligation she arranged for a spiteful death match. Now stay out of our way.

There was just enough patience within Anton to let him finish speaking. It was a nice reprieve to let him clear up his energy as the immediate side effects of Candle Wax were very disruptive. Tonina stood up in the stands and opened her mouth, but by that point a Spirit Arrow was already flying towards her.

It was a disappointment when he merely managed to pierce through her defensive energy, the flexible armor she had on, and a couple centimeters of flesh and bone. The arrow was supposed to have gone all the way through her heart. She was the equivalent of the twelfth star, having continued her cultivation but ultimately having been surpassed by Anton, but that one step wasn't quite enough for him to kill her instantly. The second arrow was blocked by Masozi, who was in mid Spirit Building. The man had not been immediately by her side, but now he stood in front of her.

Then he charged towards Anton, leaping directly along the path Anton had shot, his body completely concealing Tonina. Anton prepared another Spirit Arrow. One last use of Candle Wax should leave him no closer to his death than when he had first begun cultivating. Maybe even with a handful of spare years. The arrow shot straight towards the mid Spirit Building man but of course Anton had no hope to kill him in a single shot. As he rode with the arrow, it spiraled around the guardian out of his reach, once more flying towards Tonina behind the man. Masozi reached out, stretching his energy to grab the tail of the arrow. He reduced half of its power before Anton was able to break apart and continue forward. He was the arrow, and he once more struck towards the heart of Tonina. Her energy was fully committed to block, but she was slow to parry with her sword and he pierced through her defenses with some small amount of momentum left. He was precisely on target for the same spot, but barely had the energy to pierce another half centimeter, merely scratching her heart and not puncturing through it as intended.

Tonina's guardian immediately reversed course once he hit the ground, blocking the next dozen arrows Anton shot. He knew that would happen, and didn't commit himself to anything extreme. Young mistress, we must retreat!

But hes- you should kill him!

You'd die. The man didn't let her give any more argument and yanked her along with him.

Anton's ears were barely able to pick out her words, even with his enhanced senses. ...but I beat him

With that, they were almost out of sight and moving into the structure of the arena. He considered trying one more shot but resisted the urge. A waste of energy, or lifespan *and* energy. There were multiple ways into the arena, all full of cultivators. While he might be able to fight through them, he would not have the power left to combat her and her guardian. Elder Varela could no doubt match the guardian, but they weren't here to kill. All of the guards along the way died simply because it was easier than sparing them, and their chosen profession gave them no sympathy from Anton.

Anton looked to Devon, smiling. Devon smiled back, then began to fall off his feet. Elder Varela was already there, gently catching him and picking him up. While I am certain you would like to seek further revenge, now is not the time. We should leave the way we came. I sense Elder Rocha is there waiting. She cannot shield us if we move away from her.

Anton nodded. I understand. Is he-

Elder Varela's hands and hair were moving, plying Devon with all sorts of medicines both on his wounds and internally. Even as he ran towards Anton and performed so many actions, Devon remained perfectly level as if he were simply floating. Do not worry. His breath continues.

Authors note 2:

Well this one got long. But splitting it up wouldn't feel right, so have almost two chapters together.

Chapter 116

Either there were no remaining guards in the section they had entered through or they chose to stay well out of the way of Anton and Elder Varela. Either way, Anton strode confidently out of the arena, keeping his back as straight as possible. He briefly noticed some sort of commotion in another part of the arena, but had no way to affect whatever was happening from his location. By the time he would arrive, everything would be over. Seeing to Devon's safety was the most important thing at the moment.

Outside was Kohar, along with a woman who had to be Elder Rocha. Her actual age was hard to judge, but she was dressed in fine robes and had the aura of late Spirit Building. Along with the two of them were several dozen cultivators dressed in uniform

ranging from mid Body Tempering to early Spirit Building. Elder Rocha spoke in a very concise manner. We have now confirmed the situation with my own eyes. This young man was unjustly harmed under the instruction of Tonina Potenza. That declaration was for those watching from afar. Anyone in the nearby area who was a cultivator would have felt the conflict, and where there was conflict there were curious onlookers. At a safe distance, of course. Now then, we shall escort this injured man to safety. With that, she turned and everyone followed.

A quite serious procession began, walking at a quick pace only suited for cultivators but not one so fast as to worsen Devons injuries as he was carried by Elder Varela. Elder Rocha stood at the front, with Kohar, Anton, and Elder Varela behind her. Around them on either side and behind were the other cultivators in city official uniform.

They only managed several blocks before another group moved to intercept them, Tonina at the head. Her guardian Masozi was next to her, attempting to support her without it being obvious- but it was clear she couldnt stay on her feet by herself, let alone walk. There! she pointed, coughing as she raised her voice. Catch those criminals!

Tonina Potenza. Elder Rocha said the name like a mother chastising a child, though without any sense of affection that might otherwise be present. What do you think youre doing?

What are you- she coughed, - *You* doing? They attacked my arena!

You have made interesting choices as of late, Tonina Potenza. Elder Rochas voice was perfectly steady and calm. She gestured towards Elder Varela, who pulled out a paper. Do you remember this document?

I cant see it from there. Hand it- she coughed and a small amount of blood trickled from her mouth. Hand it to me! Elder Rocha flung the piece of paper to Tonina who instantly tore it up it when it reached her hands- though she had to make use of her energy to do so. Hmph. I dont see anything. Her guardian placed his head in his free hand as she did so, sighing.

Thats three counts of ignoring official legal orders, and two counts of destruction of official documentation. Kohar spoke with great confidence, despite her low cultivation compared to the rest of those involved. Plus unlawful imprisonment, attempted murder and she looked at Devon, Torture.

You cant- Tonina winced and held her hand over her chest, You cant prove anything.

I have witnessed several of these accusations with my own eyes, Elder Rocha said. Her face remained impassive, but her energy in late Spirit Building stretched over the area. Even if you had merely destroyed an order in front of my face you would be facing arrest. Surrender peacefully or face the consequences.

As Tonina was about to speak, Masozi clamped his hand over her mouth. Of course, he said. We will comply willingly. He looked to the city guards Tonina had gathered, who were standing around awkwardly. Feel free to return to your other duties. Your continued presence is redundant. Tonina tried to struggle against his hand, but she quickly passed out. Now then, I believe we have two people who could use greater medical attention. He scooped Tonina up in his arms. Shall we proceed?

One moment, Elder Rocha said. Why bring these, she gestured to the dispersing guards, Then so easily surrender?

I do not have a death wish, the man replied. Earlier, I assumed that this man, he nodded to Anton, Was simply fabricating a false legal claim for the sake of his grandson. Thus, calling upon the assistance of the city guards was a reasonable action. He began to turn, walking slowly along the street, For the record, I was not aware of any prior documents.

At the current moment, Anton was busy regulating his emotions. It was unnecessary and foolish to think of launching another attack on Tonina, but he really *wanted* to. His anger was righteous and justified, but if it could be resolved without bloodshed at the current moment it was probably best. Either way, the attempt would not help his cause in the slightest. He *really* hoped she would die on the way, but the amount of blood she was losing at the moment seemed insufficient.

As they reached the core of Khonard and the government district, several powerful cultivators that were likely a match for Elder Rocha seemed about to stop them, but Masozi always shook his head. We need to make our way to the infirmary without delay. With that, there were only harsh looks but nothing more.

Only when they arrived in the infirmary, and had actual healers looking at the two injured people did Anton relax. The guards Elder Rocha brought separated Devon and Toninas sections as well as watching the outside.

Do you need-

Im not injured, Anton said as a third healer walked up to him. I appreciate the concern, but I am just fatigued. He wasnt quite sure if hed pushed the forbidden technique too hard or not far enough. Logically speaking he understood that not killing Tonina would be safer for him, but if he could have done it actually, he was unsure if it would have made him feel better at all. It would be nothing compared to the relief he felt when Devon was declared to be stable, his breathing steady if a bit weak.

Waking up was unexpected but welcome, except for the pain. Devon had made the unconscious mistake of trying to open both of his eyes, and his right eye protested the effort greatly. He thought he managed to avoid damaging it further, but he had to just

grit his teeth for a while to help the pain dull. Speaking of dull pain, it was sort of all over his body. Why had he survived?

Recalling memories was much less painful than trying to move, despite the unpleasant nature of the memories. When compared to the current pain he felt the memories were worse, but they were also less *real*. Hed been in a match with Moreno. One where he was going to die. Yet just as he was defeated Moreno fell. Anton! His grandfather had come back! He never really doubted him- but in the three days hed been waiting for his scheduled death he hadnt even considered that his grandfather might arrive. But he arrived just in time. That had to be a cultivator thing. Would have been nice if he was an hour earlier though.

He heard footsteps- and felt the auras of cultivators. Two strong ones. Anton and one of his companions. Hed sensed it before, but they hadnt had the chance to actually meet.

Dont try to sit up, Devon. Antons voice came through the door, Doctors orders.

Tch. How did he even know he was trying? It just felt so awful to meet his grandfather flat on his back.

I heard that, Anton said as he opened the door. Which is good. It doesnt hurt to talk? It was wonderful to see the face of his grandfather again, and to feel *safe*. If he could stand up he would be hugging the man- and if he wasnt injured, he knew his grandfather would have his arms around him, nearly crushing him. Instead, Anton gripped his hand gently.

No. That was one part of him that really didnt hurt, which was good. His one functional eye went to the familiar form of his grandfather and a strangely familiar form of a young woman hed never seen before. Who is this?

This is Catarina, Anton answered. It would have been nice if I could have introduced you in happier circumstances, but that did not work out as hoped. But now that you are free- legally, if that makes you feel better- we have the opportunity. She is Ashlyns granddaughter.

Really? Amazing! Ashlyn had left the farm while he was still young, but he remembered her somewhat. That explains why she looks familiar.

Its nice to actually meet you uncle Devon?

He smiled, Thats probably the easiest thing to call me. New family. He really wasnt sure what to think about that, but hed have plenty of time in the future.

There are others waiting to see you later, Anton said. Weve had great success with freeing those from Dungannon, but did not wish to overwhelm you while youre injured. Others were now free? More than before? Devon was almost crying now, but it hurt to

even think about it. Besides, hed spend so long just staying alive nothing felt quite real yet.

I appreciate keeping things small. Thank you for saving me, by the way. I dont know if I said that.

I promised to return. He said it as if it were so simple. Perhaps he didnt even know there was exhaustion in his voice.

Devons eye turned to Catarina. For some reason, she was standing excessively close, her face now a hands length from his own, though she was looking over all of her head and torso. Hmm

What? he asked. Something wrong with my injuries?

Catarina pulled back and blushed slightly. Ack. Umm sorry. Its, uh

Its fine. Im aware Ill be badly scarred. I might not be able to move, but my energy is just fine. I can feel it all.

Thats not quite it see Fuzz was really injured too she shook her head. Nevermind. Its probably a bad idea.

Well now Im curious. Devon really wished he could sit up or even turn his head without the dull pain greatly sharpening. Even turning his eyes hurt his right, as there were injuries on its surface.

Anton looked at Catarina for a few moments, then rolled his eyes. She was probably thinking about turning you into a walking formation.

Like a building? Devon asked in confusion. I know formations are the protective things on the cells.

It doesnt matter, Catarina said. Youre not like Fuzz, so it would probably hurt to try. And I cant guarantee I wouldnt mess it up.

You know about formations, though? Devon was quite curious. Im missing most information about cultivation, honestly.

Im sure we can help with that, Anton said. While I cant say I have much more experience than you, I had a much better learning environment.

Yeah. Devon frowned, Is that bitch dead?

Anton shook his head. No. I tried.

Good. Ill kill her myself. Maybe. Im stuck below the peak of Body Tempering.

His grandfathers face turned into a very wide smile at that. Id love to hear about it, and help you through. In fact, I could teach you a much better cultivation method.

Im not sure, Devon said. Ive come so far. Id like to continue this path, if I can.

Anton nodded. A reasonable choice. And I should be able to help ease the journey somewhat. You dont have to follow the prescribed methods exactly as written though do be cautious.

Thats something I learned quickly. The only problem was Devon wasnt sure how well his body would recover. Some of the wounds were deep into the muscle. But even if he couldnt continue cultivating, just being alive and somewhere relatively safe was wonderful.

Pack dynamics were getting more and more complicated since they met up in the big city. There were so very many new people! However, Fuzz preferred not to think about that. He was one of the members of the pack, friendly with the pack leaders, and treated very well. Not only that, he was now also a mighty steed to carry one of great import, a pup in the line of two of the pack leaders! Another from the line of Anton and Catarina. Surprisingly, not even the youngest, though she was even smaller than Fuzz himself.

The child known as Alva had started riding him around when he recovered from his injuries, as her leg had still been broken. However, the situation had been amenable to the both of them so they didnt stop when she recovered the ability to walk on her own. Alva was very willing to hug him and scratch his fur, both of which were very pleasant. Her weight on his back was comforting and not too burdensome, though he certainly wouldnt be able to fight with her riding him.

The pack seemed to be both very busy yet they also seemed to do nothing at all. He hadnt remained in a big city so long before. Usually they continued to travel, or at the great and small homes of the pack he was able to run free in the wilds. Now, he had to have one of the pack leaders with him as he traveled about. Truly strange.

Chapter 117

The next weeks were filled with more boring yet stressful legal proceedings. Kohar had to make the utmost use of her legal prowess, and Anton was astounded at how many seemingly small circumstances could change things. Fortunately Kohar had been prepared for what they had done. Killing everyone in their path had always been the backup plan, it had simply been intended for a later time when Catarina, Hoyt, Velvet, and Timothy were all present. Toninas actions had forced them to act much earlier than intended.

The insurmountable extent of evidence on their side was helpful. First was the official courier who swore he delivered the first copy of the document directly to Tonina's hands. Elder Varela had shown her the copy sent to him in the presence of several of her guards, and though they hadn't read it his verbalized summary was remembered by one of them. Probably more than one, but only one admitted it.

Then there was the quarter-full arena. Not all of them had been able to clearly make out Anton's shouting declaration, but out of hundreds of people they were able to track down a handful who heard clearly enough and could confirm that Tonina ordered the match to be continued. Once more there could have been more, but many likely feared reprisals from the Potenza family. There were also witnesses of Tonina's destruction of the orders outside of the arena, and Elder Rocha had significant influence.

Not everything went smoothly. Both of Tonina's parents had been out of town for business and were quite furious when they returned. They immediately started calling in favors, but the delay minimized their impact. They also brought counter charges against Anton and Elder Varela- the legality of slaughtering the guards preventing their passage was already settled, but there was another matter they attempted to leverage. The other slaves had broken out of the arena while they were there.

Kohar counterattacked savagely, at least as much as could be done by pulling up legal precedent. The accusation only served to slow down the whole situation. There were no witnesses of them being in that section of the arena, and there *couldnt* be. All of the guards were dead. The freed arena combatants had been even more savage than the caged magical beasts that seemed to have been unleashed first to soften up the guards.

Despite cultivators' patience for certain matters, legal proceedings weren't generally one of them. The Potenza's influence only went so far when held against Elder Rocha. In the end they merely sufficed to keep Tonina alive. The sentence was a paltry three years of confinement and penalties that amounted to ten times what Devon had been sold for. The first was nothing compared to death, but not quite as worthless as it sounded. Proper confinement for cultivators involved a prison where there was no natural energy. If they could cultivate, it would hardly be a punishment at all. And while it was just three years, for a young woman like Tonina missing even a single year of cultivation would significantly weaken her compared to her peers.

I owe you both great favors, Anton said to Elder Varela and Kohar. I promise to pay you back properly, if I can.

I will not refuse the offer, Kohar said. Your goals aligned with my own, but I will admit that there is more risk to myself than my normal business.

You painted a big target on yourself, Elder Varela said. I hope youre ready. So many eyes are on you right now that I doubt youll *immediately* be in danger, but dont let your guard down.

I was aware when I started all of this what the consequences might be. Anton looked towards his other companions who had arrived during all of the legal mess. In a way, Im glad things turned out just like this, without any of your involved.

Catarina hung her head, I was willing to share the burden with you.

Thats right, Hoyt said, I wanted to fight with you.

Im not saying you wont still get to do that, Anton pointed out. Rather, nobody took notice of any of you. At least, not in the same way. Its not so easy for you all to be unnoticed with, well everyone. There was quite a large number of people to bring along with them now, as each group had over a dozen freed people. I do mean it about that favor, Elder Varela. I may have saved Lev by coincidence, but you called in a big favor to help Devon.

Elder Varela smiled beneath his massively long beard. Oh, dont worry about not paying me back. I know the value of favors. I hope you dont mind if I wait until youre in late Spirit Building, so I can get a fair exchange.

Thats some confidence you have in me, Anton laughed.

How long? Elder Varela asked, more seriously.

What do you mean?

How long until youre in late Spirit Building? Im sure you have an idea.

... four to seven years, Anton said.

And thats why Im confident. You didnt even consider not reaching that point. Yet here I am, stuck in mid Spirit Building. Just last year I saw you as you were stepping into Spirit Building, and now you are a solid three steps in. Anton just smiled in response.

His muscles trembled as he pulled back his bow. Anton hadnt felt such strain since he was first firing it, at the fifth star. He gathered his energy, forming an arrow. It flew forward, straight and true. He breathed out slowly. At least it wasnt too bad. His body took the biggest hit from using the forbidden technique. He didnt regret it one bit. If hed been half a second slower, Devon could have been dead. What was a few years of his own life for that?

At least his energy was still strong and steady. Age simply didnt affect his ability to use energy as much. It was somewhat more difficult to cultivate, but that seemed to be more related to the short-term aftereffects of Candle Wax rather than the increase in age. Hed used more energy than his meridians could comfortably handle.

He had so many ambitions left, and found himself in a strange state. He might actually be able to accomplish them, but he might also have to give them up for his other goals. If he had to die for the sake of Devon, sweet little Alva, and the rest he would not regret it. But if it came to it, he wouldn't go easily. Anton couldnt know exactly what trouble they might face on the way out of Ofrurg, but if they ran into no trouble at all he would wonder what sort of dream world he ended up in.

But just accepting the risk was foolish. What was all that money for if he didnt spend it? There had to be mercenaries around. Anton wouldnt put the lives of his companions over his own, but random people he was paying absolutely. Though preferably the bolstered strength would protect *everyone*

from serious danger.

With everything finished, they were ready to leave Khonard- and Ofrurg. Every part of his list had been marked off- either confirmed dead, free, or missing with no way to track them. The one exception was still Annelie, but he couldnt just go see her. The risk was too high, and there were many people he still had to protect. Besides, hed received some very interesting information from the Ears of the Fox. An additional tidbit that found him in Khonard, free of charge. Or rather, they seemed to include it in what hed already paid for.

A Tomb of Everheart was going to be opening. Many ancient cultivators had created fancy tombs to test potential successors of their techniques, if they didnt have a sect or anyone specific to leave inheritances to. A last act of egoism to make them feel important, for the most part. Very few of them were actual tombs, though some had trusted friends actually place their bodies within or chose them as a place to die from injuries or age. Everheart had created many tombs. More importantly, Everheart made it clear that none of them were *his*. It was a Tomb for those participating. According to the information they usually werent entirely deadly, but they were unpredictable like the man himself had been. Tricky, difficult, frustrating, confusing. *Also* deadly, but not just that.

There were some restrictions on who could enter. So said the grand formation Everheart set up. That was also how people didnt just enter when it was found. The *exact* details werent spread, but apparently it was for new cultivators. As a member of a large sect Annelie would certainly participate, or at least attempt to. Anton was also interested, though he doubted he would count as a new cultivator. He was a century old. Still, he might see her there and he had many companions he would like to bring

along. Before that, they had to be alive. That meant leaving Ofrurg. Staying in Khonard had been safe so far, but that wouldnt necessarily remain forever. Nobody wanted to stay, anyway.

To leave, they needed to be strong. Five Spirit Building cultivators was a good start. Elder Varela might accompany them, and Kohar was nearly in Spirit Building and likely to be interested in leaving the country. Seven might be enough, but Anton would rather spend money to make sure. Devon was quite happy to give up most of the fines for what happened to him to help protect everyone, though Anton knew he could hire a few solid individuals with his own money.

What he wanted were mercenaries. Hiring from a company might have worked if he had a stable structure to rely on, but instead he thought to look for strong individuals. There were locations where free mercenaries looking for work gathered between jobs. They might petition sects for work, but when they werent on a job or hunting monsters or training, they would gather hoping to *get* a job. If they were lucky, they could make more money as an independent mercenary than as part of a company. If they werent lucky, they died.

It was quite surprising to feel an Essence Collection cultivator as he approached the building. Someone that strong could easily find a place in a sect or mercenary company, or both. They would also be monstrously expensive to hire. Maybe hed ask, but for an escort all the way to the border it seemed unlikely.

When he noticed a familiar aura he was surprised. When he stepped inside and got visual information of Masozi sitting at a table, he slowly approached. His ability with formations was still minimal, but Catarina had been helping him with Spiritual Connection. He could tell there were formations in the area, and he had to trust they were for secrecy between tables as he had been told. I hadnt expected to see you here, Anton said.

Hmm, the man who had been Tonina Potenzas guardian shifted in his seat. I *did* expect to see you here. If you were smart. You shook things up quite a bit. Unsettled some established positions. Masozi held up a hand, Dont get me wrong. I dont intend to take you as an enemy. I am here because the Potenzas care more for their daughters opinion even in her current situation than for good sense. Blame for her actions somewhat ended up on me, despite the fact that she specifically went behind the backs of her parents and myself. Id rather be independent than demoted.

Sounds dangerous, Anton commented.

I dont plan to be the only mercenary going on whatever mission I receive, Masozi sat calmly with his hands folded in front of him. I am smarter than that. Which is also why I hope we can leave any matters of the past behind us. I do not look forward to dying next year, or whenever it is that you surpass me in cultivation. I *do* remember quite well that you werent even at the peak of Body Tempering when we first met.

Anton took a deep breath, then nodded. Fine. Though we have personal history, your actions were no worse than any of many others in this country. Anton leaned closer, But I would think very carefully about what you do in the future and who you choose to support.

Masozi shook his head. In ten years, you will be an important figure or a dead one.

Im already past due, Anton smiled. Then he turned towards another figure hed noticed. There was a delay before recognition sparked in the mans eyes.

He approached the dark skinned man, waving casually as he did so. Ayotunde slowly and obviously gave Anton the once over, his eyes and senses carefully appraising him. Youre stronger. Yet your body and youre far too much older. Ayotunde shook his head. I will not judge your choice of techniques. Forbidding useful abilities is only for those with the luxury to do so.

Theyre unrelated, Anton clarified. My cultivation advanced more or less naturally, and the forbidden technique that re-aged me was simply necessary for recent events.

So you *were* the old man to cause trouble with the Potenzas. What an astounding change. The other two that were with you?

Similar advancement, but less exposing themselves to side effects. I must ask, why are you no longer with the caravan? It seemed like a solid job.

It was, but the caravan changed hands to a fellow I did not mesh with. So I left. And now you are here to hire people for?

A simple escort out of the country, Anton said.

Who else wants to kill you? Ayotunde asked. Besides the Potenzas.

Anton shrugged. Them, probably the Iron Ring Slavers, some wealthy slavers who dont like change. I doubt all of them will cause trouble though.

Nobody important, then. Ayotundes declaration seemed sincere. I would be glad to offer my services for standard rates.

With combat pay extra?

It cannot be extra if it is guaranteed. If you were to have to pay proportionate to the danger, I am not sure if you could afford it. I would suggest offering a share of equipment sales- to myself and others. Anyone sent after you wont be poorly equipped.

Reasonably. Who else here can you recommend?

Ayotunde looked across the room, though he probably already had people in mind. The shrimp and the granny.

It wasn't too hard to determine which two Ayotunde referred to. I don't suppose they have actual names?

Probably, old man, but why even bother? Ayotunde smiled.

Chapter 118

Everyone was in high spirits as they were leaving Khonard. They were aware of the potential danger, but given how some of their lives had been over the past two years, they were happy to have the *option* to face danger instead of just living with what they were told. The spirit of happy reunion had diminished somewhat over the weeks they'd spent together after everyone met up in Khonard, but some of the joy still remained. It was a heartening sight, but it also made Anton realize something. He was barely one of them anymore.

That was not a change in any of the former villagers of Dungannon, but in himself. In most of them, he saw the desire to go back to lives they had before. All were grateful to be saved, and eagerly learned cultivation as a means to defend themselves, but most of them would go back to lives that resembled what they used to have. He didn't blame them. That was the life he had desired and fulfilled for a century. Now he could no longer be content just living a good life. He had to make sure others were able to do so- as many as possible.

Revenge. That thought still existed in his mind, but he had ambition beyond that point. He might not live to fulfill either, but that no longer concerned him. He just had to do what he could- starting with bringing the rest back alive.

Senior Anton, a young woman, somewhere just around thirty years old, approached him. I heard there was another group before us?

Anton nodded. It was not easy to find everyone. It took time. He looked at Silren, trying to recall details about her. These people were more than just names on a list.

Of course, I don't blame you for the time it took. I was just wondering. My sister was she with them?

It was as he thought. She and her older sister had worked together as tailors. He bought a coat from them once. He remembered her. He also remembered the brothel where she had been bought. He shook his head. She was not one of those that made it. He'd been able to confirm her death. A terrible task, and every one hurt. Hearing the news from the others wasn't any better. The majority of those brought into slavery had survived, but perhaps a tenth had died from ill treatment.

Oh. Can I ask?

Do you really want to know? Anton asked. There is nothing you can do right now but honor her memory.

Silren hung her head. I understand.

That I did not mean to discourage you. Even with training, what he said wouldnt always be right. You know she would want you to live your life in the way you are best able. But if you cannot let the thought go in the coming years, there might yet be something you can do. Not for her, but for others forced into slavery. You have a decent talent for cultivation. In time, you can be strong.

Like you? Silren asked.

Stronger than me, Anton said. At least stronger than I am now. I have been fortunate to only only fight those who are relatively weaker. I am close enough to see those at the top, but to consider myself truly strong That was a problem he had to deal with. How strong did he really need to be? Spirit Building was a good step, but he couldnt create the sort of change he wanted with just that. Its not quite good enough yet. But if you continue to cultivate, I am certain you will have the opportunity to do much good in the world with allies at your side.

I think I want that, she said confidently.

Then I will help you achieve it.

Hoyt. Youre on the right side. Elisa, the rear. Anton was handing out orders. He was the highest in cultivation except for the mercenaries they had with them.

Protecting a large group of people was difficult work. Velvet wasnt sure if they had enough cultivators. Only two people could go in each area. That assumed someone would be assigned to the middle with Anton, but nobody else could cover as much area as he could. But assigning someone to the middle would mean they had the mobility to support anyone. Velvet thought she was capable of that, and was hoping to be assigned there.

Alva.

Yes! The young girl stood at the ready and saluted.

Im going to need Fuzz to be able to freely run about. Please stay with the others.

But- but Im a cultivator now!

Anton's face was very stern. That's right. But you are barely at the first star. You have no more power than a strong man. You lack reach and training. You must let the cultivators at Spirit Building handle everything they can.

Velvet knew that even Devon, near the peak of Body Tempering, was remaining with the others. Part of that was he had lingering injuries, but there was a significant difference between his level and those truly in Spirit Building. At the very least he needed to avoid being the first line of defense.

But Fuzz isn't in Spirit Building! Alva complained.

Anton sighed. He's a magical beast. They work differently. Besides, he has experience in battle.

But I-

You have a weapon. If they get past the outer defenses, everyone will have to fight. Stay with the others to have a proper defensive line.

Velvet knew that a defensive line would barely help against stronger cultivators, but using the advantage of numbers was all they could count on if it came down to those without strong cultivation fighting. Running wouldn't be possible.

Now then. Velvet. Here it was. She was stronger than Kohar, so she *had* to be part of the defensive line somewhere. You'll be the scout.

Velvet blinked. What?

You're to move around the area, looking for approaching threats. You have the proper skills.

By myself?

Of course. You'll be most effective that way. Your concealment skills are excellent, and they won't be looking for you in particular. Anton smiled reassuringly, Even if I could hide myself as well as you, my absence would be noted. You've managed to keep a low enough profile that you should be unexpected.

Okay, Velvet nodded.

This was what she wanted, right? Real responsibility? If so, why was it so hard to breathe?

No, Anton was right. She could do it. She just had to watch for enemies. By herself.

She sure *hoped* Anton was right, because it didn't feel like it.

At night, they set up a defensive and concealment formation. That was through the work of Catarina and Elisa, a hired mercenary. The work of a formation expert wasn't cheap, but having the entire burden on Catarina didn't feel right. Anton knew she would happily do her best, and while her best was excellent she wasn't perfect. It took time and energy to set up a formation, and having another expert would help with both. She didn't even have Pete along as an assistant. The money would have just paid for a few other mercenaries anyway, and avoiding trouble was better than trying to fight through it.

The two of them worked together seamlessly. Anton wondered if it was a special form of understanding between them or simply their mutual knowledge of formations. Both of them had formation flags that would allow them to improve the effects of what they did by another level. With his current practice of Spiritual Connection Anton could feel the flow of energy changing as he was inside. He still didn't have the sense for *why* it was changing as it did, but he thought he could at least find the best place to disrupt it. From the inside, that was. As he stepped out of the formation, he almost felt like he had been teleported. He couldn't pick up even the slightest trace of energy from any of the others, and it looked just like an empty section of trees. He passed back over the border of the formation. He had been attuned to be able to pass through it, but he felt it flowing over him as he did so.

The camp was arranged to take up a modest amount of space. That made setting up the formation easier, and left fewer traces behind later. Simple tents were trivial to acquire, as well as practical bedrolls. The placement of those tents was dictated by the two formation experts, and that was especially important because people weren't just sitting about. Everyone was cultivating- all of those who were new, anyway. If the Spirit Building cultivators were serious, they would hog all of the natural energy in the area. The difference of a week or two of cultivation wouldn't be a big deal for most of them, the exception being Kohar who had just stepped into Spirit Building with the assistance of Anton and the others.

She had been fairly confident in her preparations to keep herself safe, but things had escalated in a way that was unintended at the Potenza arena. She felt safer leaving with them, and Anton had been happy to bring her along. Even if she wasn't the strongest cultivator, she was enough to provide them an additional portion of safety.

Anton walked among the tents, feeling how people cultivated. Everyone had received personal guidance at the beginning of their training, which began as soon as they had met up with Anton or his companions. Catarina had quite appropriately been the one to teach Alva at the beginning. The staggered generations of Anton's descendents had ended up with Catarina being older than Alva who was technically one generation back. Alva had learned a lot from Catarina, but it became clear she was not the same type as Catarina. Catarina was a patient thinker, and Alva was the sort who was prone to leap before she looked.

It was a good thing Alva had talent for cultivation, or she would have already damaged herself. It was already risky for her to be cultivating with her body not yet fully developed, but it wasn't possible to exclude just her. There were several of her cousins about the same age that had thankfully been freed, but they took cultivation as a school child might reading. It was something they had to learn, and they took their time. That was probably the better attitude in the current case.

Fuzz was curled up around Alva as she sat cross legged. It didn't seem that his presence disturbed the natural energy she was taking in, though Catarina's formations allowed him to cultivate more like a human than a beast. For the moment he was peaceful, as he was the sort who was most energized while running around in the woods- an unintentionally beneficial method for cultivating the body. Alva was fine, the little bundle of energy at least being wise enough to listen to his cautions. When she learned he had cultivated his meridians second it wasn't possible to dissuade her from the task, but at least she was willing to slow down slightly. Anton might have slightly fibbed when he told her it took him two months, but if he told her it was a month and a half he was certain she'd push herself for a month or less.

Anton followed the flow of energy to Silren. She was nice and steady. Her talent was at least on the level of Pete and the others, though knowing for certain after just a month was difficult. Reuben was next. Proper guidance had helped him begin cultivating, and while Anton doubted he would be treading new territory any time soon, he was diligent and capable of working with a teacher.

Devon didn't feel like he was near the peak of Body Tempering as he cultivated. He *could*, but he was being properly cautious. He had been focusing on all of the wounded parts of his body one at a time, and now he was nearly healed. He would have wicked scars, even with medicines to minimize the damage, but his current reason to be gentle was because he was reorienting his cultivation. He had chosen to stick with his current cultivation method, despite its flaws. He mentioned insights gained from the battle with Moreno, and had declined the offer of specific help. So Anton made sure he wasn't doing anything harmful to himself and hoped Devon was right about knowing what he had to change.

For a few hours, energy flowed in vortices around the internal part of the camp until it thinned out enough everyone was better off going to bed. They needed the rest anyway. Every day was a long one where they hoped they could get to the border before anyone looking to cause trouble caught up.

Chapter 119

Scouting in all directions around the group would have been impossible if they traveled at the speed of well trained cultivators. Velvet wasn't any faster than the others, so handling the scouting duties by herself was a difficult task. First she moved in front of the group, along the road. Traveling along the road made them more predictable, but it

also made them faster. More importantly, they had many people that would be troubled by rough terrain.

The distance Velvet went in front of the group was about twice what she expected them to cover in a single loop around. Trying to get more distance would leave her vulnerable if she was noticed, and any less had a good chance of leaving them without advance warning and ruin the whole point of her scouting.

Then she would curve around the group, sensing for anyone approaching from the side, the back, other side, and then back to the front to get ahead of the group again. Nobody else had the same training in stealth she had, which left Velvet to complete the task on her own.

So far, she supposed she'd been successful, if finding absolutely nothing since the last big city counted. There was nothing wrong with that, as long as nobody was actually around and trying to kill them. It was strange, though. There should have been wild beasts at the very minimum. She saw a few animals, but nothing aggressive. No magical beasts. She should have encountered at least *some* of them, even if they avoided the large group moving through their territory. That was a problem.

Looking at the road they were following, it was impossible to say who had been traveling on it. Not from a lack of signs, but rather an abundance. Many tracks, old and new, all mingling together. But no people. Even if traffic between Ofrurg and Graotan was limited along the path they were taking, it was expected that *some* cultivators would pass them in either direction. Yet there was nothing. Suspicious.

The border was rapidly approaching. It was only a couple weeks from Khonard by the direct route at the rate they were traveling, and now they were a handful of days from it. It was a smaller border crossing than the one they used to enter Ofrurg, since the route had difficult terrain and little trade.

Front, side, back, side. Nothing. Just rocks and dirt and trees.

The terrain steepened, the road worsened. Most of those traveling with the group had healthy bodies and they continued slowly. Velvet moved quickly along the road. *Next* to the road. The road itself had nowhere to hide, and her stealth techniques weren't sufficient to make her actually invisible.

The road continued through a deep gorge, carved long ago by a river that had found another path. Velvet nearly entered the gorge to scout ahead, but thought better of it. Would people be waiting for them along the bottom? Perhaps. But being up above on either side was more advantageous. Even if most cultivators didn't specialize in archery, the advantage of the high ground could allow them to attack without retaliation.

The terrain rose so quickly that Velvet had to climb to reach the top of the left slope. She did so, slowly and carefully. She had little experience climbing, but any peak Body

Tempering cultivator could hold themselves up by even a few fingers. The slope wasn't even truly vertical at any point, so she pulled herself up arm over arm and foot over foot with only bad holds. She slipped once, when a hold couldn't carry her weight- but she latched onto the slope with her energy.

Velvet stopped. She didn't sense anyone up above, but if they were paying attention they might have noticed her. She continued to hang in her position for several minutes before she decided she'd been subtle enough. That didn't stop her from shifting a dozen yards to the side before continuing her ascent and finally peeking over the top of the gorge.

The people at the top were well concealed. At least, if expecting people to walk along the road. They would be fully invisible from down below, using their energy senses to pick up the group as a whole. Yet from the side and the back she merely saw people crouched and prone. Without actively using her energy to feel them she could only approximate their cultivations. Spirit Building were the best. Several of them. Then at least a dozen in Body Tempering, mid to late. If she were to suppose that the other side had a similar complement, it was quite a dangerous group.

With her new vantage point she could see that her route to the top wasn't the best. The face she had climbed up was in fact probably the hardest route. That would explain why this particular location was chosen for an ambush. Velvet felt the rest of the company approaching. She had to return to warn them- and if she had sensed her companions, they had likely already been noticed by the group.

She silently made her way back down the slope, running back towards her companions at the quickest speed she could maintain her concealment, glancing over her shoulder towards the gorge as she went.

The shifty one popped up on the other side of the company without Ayotunde noticing her approach. Ambush ahead! At the gorge, she declared. They've probably already sensed us.

Hmm. I see the area, Anton confirmed. Not the best place for us to fight. But if we go around, they can just follow us into rough terrain and catch up on their terms. We should try to turn things against them. He looked to Ayotunde. The dark skinned man nodded. He might have been simply hired as a mercenary, but he was also the most experienced with this sort of thing.

The company had stopped when the shifty girl appeared. Ayotunde drew from his experience and gave a warning. We should keep moving, if they know we're here. At a bit of a slower pace so we can strategize. Any recognizable markings?

The girl shook her head. Not that I saw. Standard assortments of gear, pretty much.

Ways up to them?

Yes, but not easy. The faces closest to us are the worst spots. I didnt have time to check the right side, though.

Ayotunde nodded, Good enough. I might suggest we find our way up as most of the group approaches. Even those of us worse at stealth can manage if they are distracted. If you have a route on the left side, take the granny here with you, he nodded his head.

I have a name, you know. Lera.

Ayotunde ignored that. Shrimp and I will go to the right side at a slower pace. I would suggest no more people peel off until the battle starts. The main group should remain back, where people can be defended properly. I trust you can still be effective at a hundred and fifty meters, plus the rise?

That I can, Anton acknowledged. I agree with the plan.

Well prepare a formation, Catarina said. It wont be much good if we have to set it up in an instant, but we can deflect weaker attacks.

Good, Ayotunde nodded. He knew many of these were solid combatants. The shifty girl he wasnt certain about, but the granny would make up for anything. Oh yes. Ropes. A good spike can anchor them into anything, though only one or two might climb at a time. At that height it should take a Spirit Building cultivator a good ten seconds, but thats much better than the alternative.

Ayotunde reached into his pack, throwing the granny a coil of said rope and spike. I have more for our side. Never know when you will need rope. Just kick it into a good rock, and protect it. Ayotunde looked up. Were close. Lets hope they cant see us. Time to split.

My names Ross, said the shrimp as he followed after.

Yes, no doubt it is. He pulled his energy inward, keeping it tight against him. Running with just his body wasnt a problem. In fact, he would be better than most without energy since he practiced Western Steel Body. He knew the members of the Ninety-Nine Stars did not cultivate their bodies to any significant degree in early Spirit Building, and he found that a weakness. Though the technique was stronger in other ways.

The shrimp followed behind, circular razor disks in hand. He was more of a mid range combatant than a short range type, but not competent at long range like a proper archer. He was good, though. Enough that Ayotunde *did* remember his name, even if he didnt choose to use it.

It was no longer possible to feel the shifty girl or the grandma, though the former had been concealed immediately once she was out of sight. A useful skill, even if it was not one Ayotunde ever planned to develop beyond a basic level.

He found a slightly climbable part of the slope. He thought for a moment. Yes, it had been long enough. The main group was approaching their position. Climbable for him, but the shrimp

His hand closed on the rock in front of him, grabbing a chunk of it. He alternated hands, tearing into the rock a half meter apart on either side, leaving behind proper handholds as he climbed. That should be good enough. Arm went over arm repeatedly over the next minute. He was concerned he might have been too noisy when he reached the top, but the main company had properly distracted people. His choice of climbing location still left him fifty meters from his targets, and one of them would notice him soon.

Then the shrimp reached the top, and flung out his razor disks. That was the opening salvo of the battle, and the lives of two body temperers were lost as their spines were cut. The next two targets as the disks wheeled through the air managed to block-though one nearly sacrificed an arm to do so.

The spike was driven into a nearby rock through a rope. A moment later Ayotunde's hands were holding his sword, a two handed beast that required a special sheath to carry properly. Fifty meters was covered in merely a few moments, just long enough for the surprised enemies to reach their feet. He wanted to take out one of the Spirit Building opponents, but he wasn't quite fast enough.

A spear stabbed out at him, but Ayotunde's sword was nearly as long. He nimbly wielded it, parrying the blow before striking back at his opponent, cutting his shoulder from underneath. Next to him was a woman with a bow ready to fire on those below- the unexpected flanking attack had rattled her enough that she didn't think to switch to her sidearm. Ayotunde didn't even bother trying to avoid her aim as he just sliced through the bow and her arm at the same time. Not an archer, then. She'd have been ready for that.

Ayotunde pulled back to where the shrimp's blades danced through the air, almost daring anyone to approach. With over a dozen enemies still standing, he needed to use proper tactics. That included stalling for reinforcements from below. He was hoping for the axe guy. More power was always nice.

By the time Velvet crested the rise after the granny- Lera- half of the ambushers were coughing and sputtering. She'd intended to sneak forward and stab one before she was noticed, but she wasn't going anywhere near whatever that cloud was. She used Lera as cover to approach closer, crouching low to the ground and wishing there were more

sources of cover than just a few rises in the terrain and the occasional boulder or scrawny tree.

Two body temperers attacked Lera together, but she simply stepped back and let their attacks pass through where she was. Meanwhile, both of them got a needle impaled into them. One in a shoulder, and one in the cheek. Nothing lethal normally, except they *had* to be poisoned. Some of those who had been coughing didn't get up, while others recovered.

Arrows flew towards Velvet- no, she hadn't been noticed, she merely placed herself in their trajectory on accident. Several more launched down below, but they were matched by more shots from just Anton himself. One Body Temperer went down, and even a Spirit Building cultivator got an arrow of pure energy in his side as he presumed that there would be no relevant counterattack and had only minimal defenses.

At some point Lera had managed to set up the rope, and Velvet could sense Hoyt was already halfway up. That was good, because Lera was getting swarmed.

A dagger sliced along the side of the neck of a large Spirit Building cultivator. Velvet cursed. There went her best chance at taking someone out instantly and she only managed a thin cut. Sure, she had to pierce his energy defenses and armor but she thought she had it. She dodged back away from a wild swing of an axe. She needed to be careful, or she might find *herself* dying instantly.

She was feeling more confident when Hoyt arrived to help take off the pressure and she managed to dodge around several people and make them lose track of her. The battle on the other side of the gorge was also going well.

Then she felt another group of cultivators charging along the floor of the ridge towards their main company. It wouldn't take them long to arrive, and now there were only a few defenders left below. Damn. She hadn't even thought there would be a third group.

Chapter 120

Sometimes there were people who seemed able to do anything they set their mind to. Anton Krantz was one of those. Reuben was aware that a farm had many different things it needed, and Anton could take care of them all. It seemed that even when the man hit a hundred the only reason the rest of his family had work to do was because he let them. The patriarch of that family was someone that everyone in Dungannon knew. But now he was different. Though honestly it felt just like the next step.

A cultivator always felt like something different from a normal human. Reuben hadn't really changed his assessment. Anton and his companions were *different*. People who were so willing to throw themselves into action were exceptional. They also had a wolf. That was just something Reuben had observed.

Beyond just learning to cultivate himself, Anton seemed to be proficient enough to teach it. Reuben had given a serious try for a few years but it just didnt click. Then he talked to Anton for an hour, and everything made sense. It still took a week for him to really have enough sense and control of natural energy to really feel like a cultivator, but the path had been laid out for him and he just had to walk it. Sometimes paths were rocky and full of twigs trying to snag you, but at least you knew you were going the right way.

Learning to cultivate was empowering but Reuben hadnt realized it would be so frightening. Actually being able to sense how strong cultivators were was intimidating. Anton had already been the sort of person who felt overwhelming when he was in action but like just a man otherwise, but the feeling was amplified. Others werent so restrained. There was the dark-skinned Ayotunde. A mercenary. He was even stronger.

Seeing some of the cultivators spar for training was entertaining, but when actual battle happened that was where he felt fear. When Dungannon was attacked hed *seen* people die. So many people, for no reason. As they approached the growing gorge, he *felt* people die. To the right, to the left. Powerful presences that were simply snuffed out. It made him realize just how much further he had to go if he wanted to really be a cultivator. What was the first star, even, against the attacks facing them?

Arrows he was certain could pierce through him and the man behind him flew in both directions. The ones from up on the cliff were greatly weakened by a sort of barrier set up by Catarina and another mercenary called Elisa. Enough that the villagers could block with the shields they had been given. Reuben held his shield above his head, doing his best to reinforce it with his energy. He should probably dodge, but he didnt know if he could do it in time- and that might just leave someone else in danger.

The arrows from their side were fired by Anton. Just him, yet he matched a handful of other archers. He didnt even *have* arrows, making them purely from energy. They didnt look like much, but the sharpness that radiated off of them combined with their speed and power made Reuben feel that they were indeed very real.

When Dungannon had been attacked, nobody could do anything. Now Anton was so strong. Reuben wasnt sure, but he wasnt too far from the stronger bandits. Since theyd had no real opponents, it was impossible to say.

Now the villagers of Dungannon were still weak, but they had hope. They were free- yet people were still trying to claim them. Reuben knew he was far too weak to matter, but he stepped forward anyway, just inside the edge of the barrier. Devon was right there as well, looking towards those approaching from the bottom of the gorge. Most of their warriors were atop either side, fighting opponents who outnumbered them. Reuben wasnt sure if he could harm some of the stronger figures approaching, but he was certain he could *try*

Each arrow was aimed at a precise spot. It wasn't always where someone was unprepared for an attack, or at least not where people *thought* they were unprepared. Anton was beginning to sense the subtler fluctuations of energy. He realized that there were always weak points, even in a person's defensive energy. He might have thought he had an even layer covering him like armor, but some places were simply weaker. When one of those matched up with a weakness in actual armor, he could use less than half as much energy to achieve the same result. Usually, that was killing someone.

None of his attacks were ever intended to go easy on someone. If he could kill them, he would. If he could wound an arm instead, that would make things easier for the future. People tended to overcompensate for areas they were injured, shifting to cover the weaker area with excess energy. Even if it was just a small change, he could catch someone while their energy was moving about and not perfectly placed.

It wasn't enough to kill other Spirit Building cultivators in just a few shots, but it could certainly distract them enough that they weren't able to fight effectively. Against late Body Temperers, he took them out by his third arrow in most cases. It helped to have strong allies on the front lines suppressing people. He was glad he'd hired all four of the mercenaries he did, because they were quite worth the expense just for this one battle.

He saw Ayotunde maneuver his large sword to change from a slash into a stab with his two-handed sword, piercing into someone's neck. The old woman, Lera, was a poison user- but Anton wasn't sure if anything was more dishonorable than trying to own other people or fighting for them. Poison wasn't a weapon he wanted to learn how to use, but he saw its value. Velvet, Hoyt, Timothy, and the small man known as Ross also performed excellently. They were nearly finished with their battle when the front lines of the group coming down the gorge arrived.

Another dozen body temperers and four at Spirit Building. The wide variety of cultivation styles indicated they were a mercenary group and not a sect of some sort- hopefully the Heavenly Lion Sect hadn't connected the dots yet. He'd done nothing directly against them or their little former disciple Van Hassel. Not yet, anyway. He didn't mind painting a target on himself, but he didn't want it to be *that* big until he could handle it.

The barrier in front of them shook. A direct attack, even though the origin of the attack was still thirty meters away. They weren't an archer, but not far from it. A man had formed spikes of condensed energy, but they were unlike Spirit Arrows. They depended mainly on their size to cause damage- and Anton had to admit it was effective. A hole appeared in the barrier and some of the Body Temperers started pouring through. Devon and Fuzz were there to head them off, with Kohar providing her support, but the situation was concerning.

His arrows continued to fly. Someone tried to chop into Devon with an axe, and while Anton's grandson handily protected himself the act wouldn't go unpunished. An arrow

into the neck, curving right under the helmet was an appropriate response. He also fired shots to help the villagers who were much weaker and in more danger, though they managed to keep enemies at bay with at least three or four spears prodding at each of them.

Anton had to twist his body to the side as spikes of energy flew towards him. Hed been taken as a priority target, and he didnt mind responding in kind. He couldnt afford to have an enemy who could target any of his friends or family. As his hands grasped his bow, Anton took careful stock of how his energy covered it. Some parts needed more, but he could thin it out on others. The main spine of the bow only got the bare minimum to protect it in case of an attack, but he wouldnt get much power from adding energy there. He needed to be efficient with his energy because his muscles were old and tired once more. Having completed Body Tempering he was still stronger than even the strongest who didnt cultivate, but somewhere at half of his peak.

He couldnt launch attacks simultaneously, but Anton managed a continuous barrage on the man, while he had to dodge four or five coordinated attacks at once. That wasnt impossible. In fact, it was made easier by the way the spikes moved in formation. He had to dodge further to the side, but he also slipped through the middle once or twice and they didnt curve towards him. Without anything to propel them but the energy themselves, the way they accelerated was also predictable. Anton got a few scrapes but he managed his energy defenses to resist before focusing on his enemys weakness. He needed to win before the other Spirit Building enemies joined the fight in earnest.

A two handed sword like Ayotundes was actually light and agile, without the sort of thick blades that were suited for cutting off someones head. He could still do it though. It just took a bit more energy sharpened to a fine blade and a bit more muscle. That was something he had in abundance. The final Spirit Building cultivator was finished off by him. Sadly the shrimp had gotten one alone and half killed that one, so Ayotunde couldnt tease him. He hadnt gotten the axe wielding youth to help, but he had to admit the shield and sword one was quite competent as well. He was a bit weaker in cultivation, but the way he stood by Ayotundes side and coordinated with him without previous practice was excellent. Being able to ignore an attack and instead counter with an attack of his own was quite liberating.

That was the end of those up with them. The plan had been to get Anton up to them for a good vantage, but clearly that wasnt happening. Ayotunde ran over towards the edge of the unnatural gorge. It simply didnt fit quite right into the area. How strong would someone have to be to?

Hed consider that later. Hey! Mercenary dimwits! he shouted to them. I hope you got paid in advance, because I look forward to looting it from your corpse. But that doesnt mean you cant run. We could use a few people to inform others not to work for those idiots who hired you.

Honestly, this group could have been enough. If theyd walked into the ambush, things would have gone the other way quickly. He still felt there should have been a fourth group to catch them from behind, but he looked with his eyes and senses. Nothing. Perhaps they were short on men, or bad at tactics.

I mean it! Run, and only the slowest of you will get shot in the back! Morale was important for mercenaries. He was honestly surprised they hadnt broken already. Still not running. Twenty meters down? That seemed fine. Ayotunde leaped directly down towards one of the Spirit Building cultivators who was flinging ranged attacks at the group. He had no room for subtlety or complicated attacks, instead settling for a giant overhand swing. His target didnt miss out on something so important as a mid Spirit Building warrior leaping at him, and he leapt to the side, admirably protecting himself and only getting one arm slightly cut through. If he didnt have bracers hed still be dead the same way, because Anton followed up with a perfect shot right into the mans waist, disrupting his footing and letting Ayotunde stab him through the heart. He needed to work with archers more.

The enemy mercenaries were turning to flee, and Anton began to relax. Then his eye twitched as he saw Alva running forward towards one wrestling with Fuzz. He was almost impressed how she managed to actually stab *into* his thigh. It took most of her energy concentrated into that attack, but it was well done. Antons arrow was already on the way, but he filled it with extra hate as Alva was backhanded by the man and sent flying a dozen meters. His arrow went up through the bottom of the half-prone mans jaw, and he swore to himself that if Alva was seriously injured he would hunt down every fleeing mercenary, his nearly drained reserves of energy be damned.

He should have told Alva she couldnt fight no matter what. As he reached her side, she was already standing up. She was trembling and blood dripped down her face, but she propped herself up with the butt of her spear. Yeah! You better run!

Thats right, Anton said. They should run. Which is why you should have let them instead of continuing to fight.

Alva turned up to him, blood streaming out of her nostrils. Its fine. Just a broken nose.

A little bit more and you could have died! Anton chastised.

Nu-uh. Broken noses dont kill people.

Anton didnt know what to say, but Catarina arrived to say the exact thing hed chosen not to. You can. The bones in your nose can be pushed into your brain, Catarina gestured. Its not pretty.

Alva turned to the side and threw up. What followed was a frenzy of activity as everyone tried to recover from the battle. They hadn't been lucky enough to be able to just avoid their enemies, and the consequences were severe. None of their top cultivators were dead, but Hoyt had a nasty gash on his arm and Devon had either reopened old injuries or gotten new ones in similar places.

It was honestly impressive that they'd only lost a handful of people against the enemy forces. They were outnumbered in terms of real cultivators, and there was only so much a little bit of edge in cultivation and skill could do against that.

Anton wondered if it was his fault the people were dead. If he hadn't taught them to cultivate, they would have been more cautious. Were his ideas wrong?

Something tapped his ankle. He looked down to see a man on his belly craning back to look up at him. Thanks, the man said. Anton just recognized him as Reuben under all the blood. I got to actually fight, instead of just being helpless. Then his head dropped face first into the dirt.

Anton flipped him over, seeing bloody wounds all over the man's chest. Before he did anything else, a quick check with his energy- and he found Reuben was alive, if only barely. He used his energy to keep as much blood in the man as possible while his hands moved as quickly as they were able applying coagulant powder, stitches, and bandages.

He still felt awful, but despite all the weary faces around him, he saw them strong and determined rather than giving into despair. These people had a second chance at life, and they were going to do their utmost to take it.