

Elder Cultivator

#Chapter 1 - Read Elder Cultivator Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Outside a farmstead in the village of Dungannon, swirling winds carried cold snow onto the eaves and ground. All of the animals were safely tucked away in the barn, and the thought of repairing fences and other tiresome work didnt even cross the minds of any of those crowding around inside. Inside, there was something truly wonderful happening- the birth of a child.

Not that they hadnt all seen something like that before. Of course, all twenty-odd of the family present had *been* born, and the two grandparents in the room and ten parents had seen most of those in the very same room be born. Anton and Janina Krantz were excited because it wasnt so often that people had a chance to become great-grandparents.

The village midwife was quite experienced, having helped with Tabbys birth, and now Tabby herself was having a child. There were many things that could go wrong with a birth, but skilled hands and practiced care greatly reduced the dangers. In this particular case, the midwife might not even have needed to come through the burgeoning snow at all. The birth was quick and smooth, and less than an hour later a beautiful little girl was being held in her mothers arms.

Annelie, her mother said. Her name will be Annelie.

Anton Krantz had seen all five of his own children be born, as well as his nine grandchildren. When he first laid his eyes upon them, he loved them but even as he grew older and more directly removed from the process he found his attachment increased. He would willingly die for any of his family if it would help them somehow. If the little baby could talk and told him to kill himself he felt he would have done it without hesitation, even without anything to gain for it but a smile. Fortunately, neither of those things had cause to occur in his peaceful life.

Annelie was just the first in a line of great-grandchildren that would be born into the family over the next few years. Even if half of the third generation had chosen to move away from Dungannon into other towns and cities, their numbers were continuously growing. Everyone knew who they were, of course, with the ever growing family and farm but then again, everyone knew *everyone* in Dungannon.

Some of his children told Anton Krantz that he shouldnt be working outside, wrangling cattle and building fences, driving oxen and planting seeds. He was too old. Whenever anyone suggested that, he asked them *who* was going to do it in his stead. It wasnt that

they werent willing to work, but quite frankly it would take two or three of them to replace the work that he did, and they were all occupied with other things throughout the day. Janina had once worked out in the fields with him, but age had hit her more strongly, especially over the past few years. She still wasnt the sort to sit around doing nothing, so they had a constant influx of tailored work clothes coming from her.

Grand-grandpa, Annelie said from behind him where she was tossing seeds into the plowed field. Are you really a thousand years old?

Thats right! Anton Krantz might have been exaggerating his age a bit, but sometimes it felt like it. A thousand was a bit out of reach for a normal person. That was the sort of age that heroes in the legends reached, but even for cultivators a thousand years was probably an exaggeration. Not that he had any way to know, since hed only met a couple in his life, usually when he was visiting a big city. They were the sort to buy a whole animal without a thought, and with the sort of money they often had he didnt really blame them. At least they mostly didnt cause trouble. The whole country of Graotan was watched over by The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, at least in theory. Anton wasnt sure how they could manage to handle that, especially since they were a whole fortnight of travel away on horseback. However, he *had* heard that they regularly stopped by Alcombey, the large city to the southwest. At least, one of their disciples. As for what that actually accomplished, he wasnt sure.

How big is a thousand? Annelie asked.

Thats ten hundreds, Anton replied.

Oh. Annelie nodded, I thought mommy said you were almost a hundred years old.

Anton laughed, Dont you think I would know how old I am? I was around when your grandpa was born, too.

He says youre only a hundred too. Annelie was technically scattering seeds still, but several handfuls ended up in the same spot.

Maybe theyre right then, Anton gave up on the joke. Watch where that seed goes. You want to make sure not too many plants grow together. None of them will make those big potatoes you like so much if theyre cramped. Well, it didnt matter much. She only had a relatively small portion of the seed, and mostly she was just there to watch. Speaking of which, the oxen had probably rested enough. Anton wasnt sure if *he* had rested enough, but he could still keep going. Just because he wasnt young didnt mean he was weak.

With all the work on the ever-expanding farm, he rarely got out into the forest for hunting. Technically he still *wasnt* hunting, though he did have his bow with him. If he

saw a wild boar or a deer, it wouldnt hurt to take it back with him. However, he was looking for something else at the moment. He needed medicinal herbs that he knew grew in the area. Of course, if they didnt grow in the area he couldnt do much but wistfully think about them. While the farm was expanding, it merely took care of the family and provided little beyond what they needed. They werent poor, with some savings for harsh winters or the like but they also couldnt afford to spend a large amount of money on medicine. When they did it was for the great-grandchildren.

What Anton was looking for required a constant supply, and he made regular trips out into the forest for the herbs. Janina wasnt any older than himself, but the last few years had been harder on her. Shed developed a persistent cough, and anything that could ease her pain for a while was welcome. Anton was quite familiar with the locations it grew, how it liked to live in the shade and especially near sources of water.

He found himself ranging further and further looking for the herbs, letting them regrow in places hed already been and instead seeking out further patches. Since he might spend several days away, it was best if he came back with as much as possible for his efforts. Sometimes that meant some fresh game but usually it meant edible mushrooms or root vegetables.

This was looking to be one of the second types. He hadnt spotted even something like a rabbit- though realistically a rabbit would be harder to spot than larger game. At least he still had a bagful of *other* herbs they might be able to sell. As he finished plucking a few mushrooms after checking their coloration and placing them in a second little bag at his waist, he noticed someone in front of him. Oh Anton bowed his head. Hello, sir. I dont often see anyone else out in the forest.

The man in front of him was young. He might have taken him for a hunter as well with his obvious physique, but he didnt have a bow and his clothing was much too loose. The man bowed his head in return. Good day to you, sir. I dont suppose you have come across signs of any others? There are reports of bandits moving into the area.

Anton frowned. Bandits were never good news. No I havent seen anything of them. What have you heard?

There was an attack on Thorpes last month. I know little more than that, I fear. The man extended his hand. I am Vincent. If you stumble upon anything, please let me know. You can leave a message for me at the Prancing Deer in Alcombey.

The Prancing Deer that was one of the nicer inns in the city. The journey was far enough that whenever Anton visited he had to stay overnight, but hed never been willing to spend enough to stay at that place. It might not have been as overpriced as the Golden Swan, but it certainly wasnt within the range he was willing to pay for a place to sleep. Very well. If I hear anything about bandits, I will contact you there.

Much obliged, good sir, Vincent bowed his head. Good luck with your hunt.

Anton watched as he left, and strangely enough Vincent seemed to almost float over the land. Of course, he was walking with his feet on the ground but the patches of rough terrain didnt seem to slow him down. It seemed like every step brought him the same distance even up or down a slope or over rocks or roots. Somehow, the steps avoided being awkward or mechanical. There was something strange about it but Anton returned to thinking about his newly increased concerns once the man was out of sight. Now there were bandits.

There was no way for Anton to know if the mans blessing meant anything at all, but not ten minutes later he stumbled upon a large patch of the very herb he was looking for. After picking a handful of the most mature specimens, he left the remaining herbs to continue maturing. There was some chance someone else would come pick them up before he could, but he would prefer to give them a chance to grow and repopulate even if it meant perhaps not getting everything himself. Then he started on his return journey worrying about all sorts of troubles that might arise.

Chapter 2

Each great-grandchild that was born increased both Antons joy and his worries. He loved every single member of his family- despite the fact that none of them were perfect- and he wanted the best for them. Figuring out what was best and acquiring it was difficult. Anton knew he couldnt solve every problem his family faced but nobody was going to stop him from *trying*.

Janina wasnt the sort to give up either but the last decade had been hard on her. Now she spent most of her time in bed. He knew she hated feeling useless, but just giving up on her was impossible. Hed known her for most of the century theyd been alive, and loved her as soon as such feelings developed in him. She was his closest friend since the very beginning.

No matter how many herbs he found in the forest, she wasnt going to get better. In fact, too many and she would decline more quickly. Relieving pain was not without side effects. Anton missed working by her side every day, or seeing her when he entered the house at dinner time, and even just being able to talk without exhausting her. The thing that bothered him most about the situation was himself.

He knew he was well past his prime, long before. His strength was declining and his eyesight was blurring such that he could barely hunt. Yet if he were to compare his health to most of the others his age it was quite simple to see the difference. They were dead, and he was not. Compared to Janina, he was quite healthy and he would likely outlive her by a number of years at least. He was still in better shape than she was a decade prior. If he could only pass on with her but he also couldnt just give up on life after that. There were so many others who might need him. Work on the farm mostly was taken care of, but there was always more he could help out with.

Then there were the bandits. While in most cases, bandits lasted a few months at most before disappearing, the particular group of bandits were much more troublesome. Even with The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars looking for them, theyd evaded capture for a whole decade. They werent just normal bandits, of course. They were cultivators and as with anything else related to cultivators their effects were much more than those who werent. Regular bandits stole and pillaged what they could, and cultivators could do much more. They ravaged entire towns, taking anything they found of worth, killing those without value and selling the rest as slaves. Even if such events were rare, every few months at most they ranged throughout all of northeastern Graotan. While they hadnt yet been seen near Dungannon, the thought that they might have a base in the forest was a concern.

Perhaps Vincent had been incorrect about them hiding in the forest. Anton had trekked across the forest back and forth his whole life, and the last decade he hadnt found them. But whether or not they made their home in a nearby forest or elsewhere, they were a threat. Yet hed been all over the forests and never found them. Even if they moved camp, he should have found them. He couldnt range any further than a few days from Dungannon, both practically and emotionally. His children and grandchildren were already worried when he went out on a hunt. Perhaps they were right to be.

Thick snow swirled in front of Antons face, such that he couldnt see. Even more than normal, that was. He could barely pick out a deer from a tree at a hundred paces in bright daylight. In a snowstorm, he could barely see the ground in front of him. This was where the priorities of different people came into play. It had been a harsh winter, and the year before that was no good either. At home there were great-grandchildren complaining of hunger. His family told him to not go out into the woods to hunt, that he would die but they didnt consider what *he* wanted.

Janina was gone now. The previous winter had taken her with its bitter cold though it was not much harsher than most winters. She had just reached her end. She had kept a smile on her face as she lay in her deathbed, but while she might have been content Anton was not.

Maybe he *wanted* to die. The thought did cross his mind. That was why he was out in the blinding snow in the dead of winter. But that thought was just a thought. It passed. He had his bow and arrows, though he could barely draw the bow now. If he died in the snow his family would mourn. He didnt want that. He instead wanted them to rejoice at his return. For that, and the continued rejoicing afterwards when they had something more to eat he needed to bring back some game. But first he had to not die.

He could barely recognize the landscape entirely covered in snow, but he saw a familiar tree with peculiar knots. That meant nearby was yes, there it was. A cave. He could take shelter during the worst part of the storm. He *had* to. He knew better than to do what he had done, but the mistake was now made.

Anton gathered sticks and brush, whatever he could find. He cleaned it of snow so it wouldn't be so wet and began to set about making a fire. At least his hunting pack had been properly supplied and still had flint and steel in it from the previous hunt. Honestly, what had he been thinking sneaking out the door like he did? Now he was half a day from home in the worst storm of the year.

Eventually he started a fire, and the warmth it created was sufficient. The cave blocked the cold winds and snow from outside, his warm clothing did well enough to keep him alive until that point and as he brushed off the snow so he wasn't wet from it melting in the fire, he was at least not *cold*

as the time passed. He leaned back where he sat against the wall, drifting off into unconsciousness.

When he woke, Anton was pleased to see that he wasn't dead, and that the storm was over. The second was ultimately more important as it meant his family would not be needing quite as much firewood, so his grandchildren didn't have to go out into the snow to cut more. Plus, it meant he might get back home or successfully hunt something.

Every member of his family could attest that he was stubborn about some things. Even if he hadn't been thinking quite right, he was out in the forest to hunt. His family was hungry, surviving only on food they had to ration over the remaining winter. If things went on, they might have to dig into their seed for the next year and all the hard work expanding the farm would slowly decline. Perhaps they might borrow money in the city, but if there was another bad year they could lose everything.

He wanted a deer. So he trudged off deeper into the woods. It seemed fate, if it existed, had no intention to kill him just yet. He found some berries in the hollow of a hill that weren't quite frozen, providing him some energy to continue forward. He knew of another cave to spend the next night, and somehow found it.

The next morning luck seemed to be on his side as he found tracks. They were fresh, too, a light snowfall having come during the night. Deer. It didn't matter how big it was, any deer would be a godsend. He followed the tracks, happy that he had stumbled across them. He couldn't have spotted them from far on the blank white landscape with the sun glaring off of it not with his eyes as they were.

He squinted his eyes, crouching down. Just a few hours of tracking and he'd actually found it. Somehow he'd avoided spooking it off. He couldn't quite see what was its flank, a nearby tree, its head but there was certainly a deer. Or a log strangely floating off the ground. It had to be a deer.

Anton nocked an arrow in his bow, the string trembling as he pulled it back. Weakness from hunger and age compounded, but he grit his teeth and pulled with all his might.

When he released the arrow, only years of experience kept it on track as it nearly flew off target but he hit the deer straight in the side. Red blood spurted onto the white snow and the creature took off running.

Step by step he followed after it. It wasn't hard to spot the red blood, even with his eyesight. Perhaps his aim hadn't been quite right, or he was tired because it felt like it was hours before he spotted the deer again. However, he finally did seeing it collapsed on its side. He was lucky no scavengers had gotten to it before him.

He unloaded the canvas from his pack, using it as a sled under the deer. It was thin but still heavier than he could lift. Once when he was young and strong he could have slung it over his shoulder and walked all day, but now he could barely drag it on the canvas sled. But he had done it. He certainly wasn't going to leave his prize behind. If it was the last thing he ever did he had to at least get it back to his family. Then they could make it through the winter, even if he didn't.

Step by step he trudged along. It would likely take him two days to get back, because while he hadn't gone straight away from home he was also even slower with his catch. He had to pace himself so he wouldn't collapse along the way. That wouldn't benefit anyone but the wolves.

Then he spotted something. Strange blobs in the distance, not trees. He couldn't figure out what they were, but he detached the sled and crept closer. He had a feeling what it might be and once he was within ten paces he found he was right. Tents. Not just one or two, but a full dozen. A camp used recently, and one that would likely be returned to. It was in a place he was certain he had passed before many times. Perhaps it was new even his old eyes wouldn't have missed it.

If it was what he thought, he would need to head to Graotan after he returned home. He couldn't go directly there regardless- he would certainly die of exhaustion on the trip, and he wasn't going to just eat the deer on his own. It would likely take about the same amount of time regardless, since the only roads left from Dungannon. He could be slightly faster without the deer but if he didn't return with it, there was no point in killing it to begin with. And on the rations the Krantz family could afford to give to an old nearly decrepit man, he wouldn't make it. He was the only one who knew where Vincent would be, and where the camp was. So he walked, steadily, towards his home. Perhaps he might still accomplish one more thing before he died.

Chapter 3

The snowstorms had ceased, leaving behind clear but desolate skies. There was no sound reaching Antons ears except the crunching of snow from his boots and the sled behind him. As he began walking, still a day from home, he saw the comforting sights of smoke from the chimneys of the farm and the town. He was nearly back.

He walked onward with renewed vigor, eager to return home with his catch. As his steps carried him forward, his eagerness gradually turned to dread. He wasn't so close to Dungannon that the smoke from chimneys should be so clearly spotted. It was thick, black smoke.

He dropped the sled from his shoulders, running as quickly as he could through the snow towards the town. His better sense came over him and he slowed his pace to a fast walk, one that would likely still exhaust him by the time he arrived but at least he wouldn't collapse *before* he got there. His lungs and legs burned, but he kept pushing himself to move. His stomach growled from its prolonged hunger, reminding him why he had been away hunting.

He first spotted the Krantz farm from atop a nearby rise. His legs stopped as he took in the sight, his mind unable to process what he had already imagined was true. Black smoke slowly rose from the scene, but it was thinner than it had been. Barns were scorched and collapsed, and the family home was a smouldering pile of rubble. Anton fell to his knees, then forward onto his face. The cold snow shocked him enough to rattle him into action.

He shakily pushed himself up to one knee, then used a nearby tree to pull himself onto his feet. He ran forward once again, ignoring the burning pain in his legs and his lungs and fully giving into the sense of delirium that overcame him.

Spots of red stood out in one the white snow, next to the black. Blood. The first body he came across was a cow, emaciated but one they had hoped would grow quickly in the spring. Her body was lying in a collapsed barn, clearly killed before the fire. Why? Anton staggered further towards the house, where he saw more blood and more bodies. His children not young anymore but grandparents them and their wonderful spouses, loved parts of the family. Next came some grandchildren, young but old enough to be parents- and most were.

Hello? Anyone? Anton called out, hoping to find someone alive, someone he could save. No response came. He called out again and again as his legs carried him past the farm, but he heard nothing.

Automatically, he walked into town. He wasn't thinking anything, but if he had been he wanted to find *anyone* alive, someone he could save or talk to to ask what happened. Unfortunately, he already knew.

The bandits. That gang of cultivators that had been growing stronger for the last decade. Even normal bandits wouldn't be so brutal. Living people could be stolen from again, and there was no profit in burning down buildings. He should have come faster.

He staggered into town, completely unaware of his own body. Dungannon proper was exactly the same as the Krantz farm, merely burned out husks of buildings and bodies

of all sorts surrounded by snow covered ground. Most of the fires had sputtered out. Anton called out for anyone until his throat was raw, and even more beyond that.

As soon as he saw the camp he should have run to town. He could have warned them. What did food matter?

His feet carried him back and forth until his tracks criss-crossed the city square many times. There were a few tracks not his own, but he couldn't tell if they were coming or going. He started to follow them out of town, towards Graotan. His brain told him there was something there. His body told him it could do no more.

Before he even reached the edge of town, he collapsed face first into the snow. He didn't even feel the cold, the burning of his lungs, the pain in his legs none of it registered to him. No coherent thoughts crossed his minds, merely ideas of how he could have arrived faster. How he could have changed his route to spot the camp on his way out. How he could have immediately returned to warn people. As if such actions would make a difference. What would people have done? Prepared to fight? Fled their homes in the middle of a snowstorm? He didn't have answers to that. He didn't have answers to anything. At least he was going to die with everyone else. He *almost* smiled at that thought as consciousness left him, but he had neither the strength nor sufficient ironic joy.

Heaven was cold. Or was it hell? Heaven wasn't supposed to be painful. If it was hell it wasn't as bad as he thought, until his memories came back to him. Then it was worse. He opened his mouth to cry out, but he had no strength for that.

Bright light streamed into his eyes from the sky. Light mixed with snowfall. When had he gotten on his back? He thought he heard something. A hand touched his chest and his head. Something *soothing* flowed into him. It was like cool water on a hot day, but in the cold it was also like a toasty fire and a hot cup of tea. Then he heard something. A voice, calling to him.

...ton Anton!

His eyes focused on a man in front of him. His throat was just barely able to make sound. ...Vincent?

I saw the smoke. I ran here from Graotan. I know this is hard, but did you see where they went?

Anton tried to shake his head, but he couldn't. ...no. Breathing was hard. Saw their camp.

You found it? Vincent's eyebrows furrowed. Where is it?

Can show you Anton tried to stand up, but he could barely even move his fingers, let alone raise his body. Its out in the forest. By the oak with the seven knots

I dont know the place. Vincent sighed.

... drag me.

If I move you, youll die, Vincent replied.

...So? If you can kill the bandits at least Ill die *for* something.

Vincent grinned, Determination thats good. Fine. Point me in the right direction.

Anton had given piggyback rides to his children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. It had been probably ninety years since he had gotten one himself, give or take a few years. Yet he found himself picked up like a little child. He knew he wasnt as heavily muscled as he had once been, and there was no fat left on his bones but he hadnt expected to find himself so casually carried. Nor had he expected to then move so *quickly*.

Sorry about this, Anton. Im sure its not comfortable.

Anton had no energy to respond to the thought of discomfort. He could barely keep his eyes open as he bounced along, the scenery blurring past him- and not just because of his poor eyesight. He directed Vincent with as few words as possible, guiding him along towards his tracks, partially covered with new snow. However, he hadnt taken the straightest route from the camp. Hed gone the easy way, but he pointed Anton straight towards the camp, away from his tracks. At least, they would get close. For all his apologies, the motion from being carried by Vincent was quite minimal. No worse than walking speed on a horse. He recalled seeing him move smoothly over the land before, and he imagined it was the same now though he couldnt see his feet. Leaning would be inadvisable, so he stayed draped over the man. A few degrees right. Straight through that tree. At first he had thought he would have to find *slightly* traversable paths, but as Vincent jumped over a stream ten paces wide he realized they could be a bit more efficient. At the speed they were going they would arrive at the camp in less than an hour. Assuming Vincent could keep it up. Not only was that true, but Anton felt the speed actually *increased*.

I see it Vincent said. But I dont sense anyone nearby. Rest here for a moment, Anton.

Anton smiled, preparing to close his eyes for the final time. Vincent would surely catch them now. At least nobody else would suffer.

Damn, the expletive pulled him out of his reverie. So that was how they hid. The formation only broke because of the excessive snow. With a formation master among them Vincent continued speaking to himself, ... and they must know the formation broke

as they were out. They likely wont return here. Anton saw Vincent bury his head in his hands. Just empty tents

How can I help Anton couldnt just die now. They were so close.

Im sorry. Theres nothing more you can do. This is the best lead possible, and it might allow me to find them in the future now that I know.

... gonna kill them Anton muttered.

Of course I am. Youve seen what they do. Killing them will bring justice.

Anton wasnt listening to Vincent. Instead, he was trying to get to his feet. Im gonna kill them. Somehow, he made it to his feet before toppling forward. Gonna get them Once more, his consciousness faded.

Chapter 4

The wonderful smell of eggs and sausage trickled into Anton Krantz nose. He could hear the sizzling of a frying pan and the warmth of the fire. However, that very warmth reminded him of something. Now that he was not freezing, he felt his aching legs and raw throat as well as his terrible hunger. At least it seemed one of those might be solved, but remembering that he wasnt home with his family- and indeed couldnt possibly be home with his family- brought more pain than his physical maladies.

Vincent's voice came from nearby. Good. You're awake. Anton wasnt sure how he knew that since he hadnt even moved or opened his eyes. Breakfast is just about ready. Im sure you need it.

Why didnt you just let me die in the snow? Anton slowly opened his eyes, letting them settle on the younger man next to him.

Because thats something I cant take back. Vincent shrugged, If you really want to die, you just have to not eat. Then youll never kill a bandit or save any of your family.

Antons brow furrowed, wrinkling his forehead even more than its standard cragginess. How can I save anyone thats dead?

You cant, Vincent said, But not all of them are dead. However, their fate might not be much better. These bandits are slavers, and while that means that most of the young folk in Dungannon will still be alive things might not be much better. Likely they will be sold in Ofrurg, which cares little for where slaves come from. From there, they might be sold anywhere.

Anton had managed to crawl out of the tent he woke up in. He pulled himself to a sitting position and took the plate of food Vincent handed him, shakily grabbing a fork and

bringing food into his mouth. He chewed in silence for a while before speaking. What use is that information to an old man such as me? Ill likely die before I even reach the border, and have no way to retrieve them from the hands of cultivator bandits or a slaveholding nation.

You are correct, Vincent ate casually but seemed to disregard the heat of the food, making no attempts to blow on his food. There is nothing you can do. Even if you have the utmost determination in the world, it is likely impossible. The leader of the bandits has likely surpassed the body tempering stage and moved on to the next level of cultivation. If you only care about your own family you might as well give up your life. However there was a long pause. If you have the determination to stop more evils, perhaps there is a small chance you might yet do something. I already have sworn to kill these bandits, and I will do my best to see any they captured free from slavery. I cant promise to accomplish any of those feats in the next year but I wont be giving up on taking them down. Vincent shook his head, Old as you are, you can do nothing, but I at least have a way you can speed along your death without giving up. He pulled out a scroll from a bag by his side- a scroll that didnt seem as if it could have fit inside. He let the scroll roll out on its own, and Anton saw a myriad of sparkling lights. This is the core cultivation technique of The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. I am sure you know we are headquartered in the southwestern portion of Graotan. If you are able to practice it to the third level, then you can join the order.

Anton looked at him. Can I. cultivate? Even as an old man?

Vincent grimaced. I wont lie to you. It will likely be excruciatingly difficult. You will need natural talent to even successfully cultivate the first layer in a short amount of time.

Before I die, you mean. Anton nodded, Cultivation takes many years, and currently, I have very few left in me. Anton placed his hand on his chest. He could even now feel his heart straining, overworked by his recent events. It had lasted him so long already, but it might not hold out for just the bit more that he needed.

Thats correct. And theres no real chance of you actually being able to compete with the bandits who killed your family. Perhaps you might become strong enough to journey to find those who were enslaved, but thats the work of a lifetime. Vincent sighed, It wont be easy for you to even try, but if you truly have the determination to get revenge, you can make the attempt.

Anton reached out for the scroll, his hands still shaking even without the deep hunger. He looked at it, seeing the writing hidden behind the field of stars. It was too dense to read at the moment, but fortunately his eyes worked up close for the most part. Anton looked around him, at the remains of the bandit camp they were staying in. Will they come back here?

I dont think so Vincent said, But I searched around for their trail from the city and couldnt find it. More than just the snow was at play covering their tracks. So the best I

can hope is that there is something they want here. Vincent gestured to the campfire which wasn't emitting any smoke. They shouldn't be able to notice me here until they get close, but they might have given up because the formation collapsed. And there's nothing of value here just food and tents.

Food has value.

Not to those who steal it. Not when they can just take more. Vincent shook his head. You should rest. Think carefully on that. It's dangerous. Especially with a weak constitution.

Anton took his advice, though only because he could barely drag himself back into a tent. Rest might help. But likely not.

Anton's dreams were filled with nightmares. He wasn't just seeing the faces of his dead family. Somehow, he was witnessing the bandits kill them. His wife was there too, but young. She was carried away by the bandits. When Anton awoke, he *knew* it was a nightmare, that he hadn't seen any of that, that Janina had been old and dead for years but that didn't make the impact less.

Even though it was the middle of the night, Vincent was still awake. Did the man ever sleep? Did he *have* to sleep? He was a cultivator, after all. Anton wasn't sure what they could do but they were certainly far beyond the capabilities of normal humans.

His thoughts drifted back to the nightmare and he shook his head. He wanted none of it. Perhaps it was better to just die, but if he was going to die anyway he pulled out the scroll. It glowed in the night, the stars on its surface flickering and moving. He read the words hidden in the stars.

The scroll explained many things about cultivation. The beginning was body tempering. During that stage, the cultivator would lay the foundation for body tempering by guiding energy from the cultivation technique all throughout their body. Once that was complete, that was the first level. Then the cultivator had a choice to make. Throughout body tempering, they would refine their skin, bones, marrow, muscles, internal organs in the head and torso separately, their tendons, and perhaps most importantly their meridians. Then there would be one final refinement of the entire body to complete the stage. That was the tenth of ninety-nine stars.

The full body was first and last, but in between any choices could be made. After each refinement it grew more difficult but the cultivator would also likely grow more skilled with the technique. However, the specifics didn't matter to Anton yet. He wasn't even sure if he *could* gather energy from the world. He read through the breathing technique that described how it was supposed to be done.

His lungs were barely up to the task of breathing deeply, so expelling the impurities inside of him was clearly not going to be easier. He wasn't even sure if he had any success at that as he inhaled, attempting to gather the energy of the world. Out and in. In and out. Anton didn't notice Vincent turn towards him, his eyes closed in concentration. Then, he felt it. Just a little strand of *something*. He was supposed to guide that throughout his body. Through his meridians but he couldn't even really sense them. He followed the description as much as he could, but as the energy entered his stomach it burned. It felt like he was on fire, and like he might die. However, he pulled it into him anyway. If he truly exploded at least everything would be over. Once it settled inside him the pain decreased, but he didn't stop. He encouraged the energy to flow through his body, and it seemed to naturally find the meridians, whatever they were, as it flowed in a set path. His insides were on fire, and the energy quickly ran out but he grit his teeth and started the whole process again. Either he would succeed sooner or die sooner and he didn't really care which. If nothing else, the physical pain kept his mind away from the rest.

Chapter 5

Though every tiny piece of his body hurt, Anton found himself more able to actually move about after some time spent cultivating. With that, he thought of something more important to do than just moping about thinking about dying.

Anton trudged his way back towards Dungannon at a measured pace. A bit of food had given him some strength, but movement still hurt, both from fatigued muscles and whatever it was that cultivating was doing to him. Possibly tearing him apart, but it was really damaging him he felt he would already be dead. Even though he had once been quite tough at around a hundred years old, he felt like he could fall apart at any moment. He was almost surprised he'd made it so far, but he didn't let his mind stop on any of that.

On the way back towards town, he passed over the frozen and snow-covered carcass of the deer he had hunted. It had surprisingly not been touched by scavengers, so it was in relatively good shape. Anton couldn't rely on Vincent to provide him food and Vincent wouldn't be in town regardless. So he grabbed the straps and started pulling the canvas sled towards town. He followed basically the same path he had taken before, his previous tracks barely visible under new layers of snow.

It was a long walk still, to reach Dungannon, but he was able to reach the town before evening. He stopped outside the Krantz family farm, unwilling to go closer. Instead, he gathered sticks and cleared snow to make a fire pit. He didn't have a good table to work on the deer, so he just cut off strips of meat and roasted them over the fire, keeping the main portion of the deer away from the heat so it wouldn't thaw and refreeze.

The meal was awful. Frozen deer didn't cook well, and the thoughts he had harbored of sharing it with his family only brought their faces back into his mind. However, he needed to eat and he had come back for a reason. So he ate as much as seemed

reasonable to build up his strength, before setting a tent next to a ruined barn and using a bedroll pilfered from the bandit camp to keep himself warm for the night.

Anton could only take so much cultivating. His entire body screamed as the unfamiliar energy he pulled from the world around him tore into it. Though it hurt to move after that, he didn't feel *weakness* which was good enough. As long as he could move he could work.

First he found himself digging through the rubble looking for tools. It took a day before he came up with a shovel, and then he could begin the real work. His oldest son could have reasonably been considered an old man in his own right. He was a grandfather, but like Anton himself he worked his whole life. His body still had quite a bit of muscle on it, so bringing it to the top of the hill where Janina was buried with Anton's parents was quite a chore. Then Anton set about removing the snow and digging through frozen soil.

Eating, sleeping, cultivating, and digging graves became Anton's life.

The venison lasted him two weeks, and after that he began on the organs, eating whatever he could despite how tough it might be. Everything was roasted over a fire, which wasn't the optimal way to cook all of it but he didn't exactly have many other options.

The bodies of Anton's family were all buried by the time he ran out of food. Digging through the rubble had been slow, but with nothing else to do all day he kept at it. Despite the constant pain from muscle fatigue and cultivation, he felt stronger than he had in a long time. Perhaps it was just the weakness from winter rations fading, but he was able to push his way past his difficulties.

Anton knew that Vincent had been right, but seeing that only about half of his grandchildren and their spouses were dead didn't fill him with joy. Getting carried away as slaves was not necessarily a better fate. As for his great-grandchildren Anton knew he couldn't fight even the weakest cultivator, but he wanted to stomp off to Ofrurg and tear down the whole country.

Perhaps the attempt would have allowed him to die content, but it wouldn't have really done anything productive. He still had work to do where he was. Dungannon wasn't just his own family after all. The rest of the villagers also deserved the respect of a proper burial.

Before he could do that, Anton needed to survive. That meant food- and with all of the villages stored food eaten, stolen, or destroyed- he had to hunt. Somehow his bow had held up through being buried in snow with him several times, though he had to replace the string with another he had fortunately stored in the quiver. Heading out far into the

woods wasn't something he wanted to do, so he looked for tracks closer. If he was lucky, he would find something smaller, since he didn't need to feed a whole family and it would be easier to carry back.

When he was willing to settle for smaller game, his eyes were drawn to any prints he saw. After a few hours of following some rabbit tracks, he finally found one. He would have preferred to set up traps, but he no longer had the material for them. As he spotted the rabbit, he noticed his eyesight was slightly less blurry. Even with its winter coat, he had seen it from over a dozen paces away. He couldn't say which end was the head, but he stopped and carefully drew his bow. It pulled back slightly more easily now that he wasn't quite so fatigued, and his arrow flew true- and the rabbit didn't notice the movement. Unlike the deer, a rabbit couldn't even move with an arrow in its side, so he didn't have to chase it. That would provide food for a day, at least.

Whenever he breathed out, Anton could feel *something* being forced out of him. It wasn't just stale air, either. Whatever it was quickly found itself replaced by new, fresh air and in that air was the energy he was seeking. According to the cultivation manual, it was possible to absorb it directly at a certain point- but for the moment, he could only take the energy from the air inside his lungs. Each breath had a small strand of energy that he pulled down to his dantian, a place below his navel. He wasn't sure if it was a *real* organ. He'd seen enough of the insides of people over the past month and a half to be fairly certain there were only guts there but then again, the meridians this energy flowed through didn't seem to be real either.

Or maybe *real* wasn't the right word. He could feel both, and he stored up energy in his dantian before moving it through the squiggly meridians going throughout his body. Each time he did, it strained him. He had to practically force it to move through the meridians, like water through a clogged pipe. As he did so, they opened up slightly but he also was capable of gathering more strands of energy that he needed to circulate throughout his body.

In this particular cultivation session, his body and energy seemed to be resisting his every move. It felt like every step of the way he was dragging claws through his body. Perhaps he was making a mistake, and would destroy himself but he still fell into the vain and stupid hope that he might actually become a cultivator and become strong enough to avenge his family- or rescue some of them.

It was the only thing that kept him going when surrounded by corpses all day. The nearby villages had likely heard about Dungannons tragedy, but they could barely take care of themselves in the winter. Sending people to help bury bodies was a pointless gesture that nobody would even notice and they didn't know that anything was being done at all. He was fine with that, but he hoped he could finish the job.

Yet he was perhaps about to kill himself cultivating. The sharp pain he felt as he prodded and pushed and pulled the energy through his body might have been a warning of danger. That was often the case, but the technique *had* said there would be pain. It wasn't so verbose that it said the exact level of pain, but Anton knew that cultivators were superhuman. It wasn't so easy to become one, so just the amount of physical pain he felt what did it matter? He'd thought to ask Vincent for advice, but after a month he was no longer waiting for the bandits to return. He was off somewhere, hunting them down if he could.

That meant Anton had no way to know how to handle the situation. Choosing the most straightforward option of charging ahead was the only thing he could be bothered to do. Either it was a hurdle he needed to overcome or he wasn't cut out for cultivation and should just become another body among the rest. So, despite the excruciating pain throughout his body, he pushed the gathered energy through his meridians and to all of his extremities.

Chapter 6

At a few points in his life Anton had gotten too close to the heat of a stove or an open fire. A quick jerk of his hand and maybe some cool water or a salve to soothe the burn was enough to comfort him after that. However, he'd never had fire *inside* of him before.

As the pressure of the energy in his meridians built up, it transformed into fire. It was already far too late to stop, if he did nothing the fire would rage inside him uncontrolled the best he could do was circulate it through his meridians and hope he hadn't killed himself. The energy inside him circulated from his core, the area underneath his navel the cultivation technique spoke of as the Dantian and out to his extremities and back. Each time it completed a full circulation, the power increased. If it continued, Anton didn't know if he could keep it under control.

Each circulation left a little bit of flame in the middle of his dantian, extremely hot and spinning around releasing *more* energy. Anton continued the circulations, trying to remember the instructions down to the tiniest detail. He wasn't sure, but perhaps this was supposed to happen. As the energy circulated more and more, it wrapped more strands around the fiery core, twisting like a ball of twine. Then he reached the limit of his control and the strand snapped away from him, coiling around the burning ball. However, instead of unraveling or exploding it suddenly *condensed*.

Anton had only skimmed over the section of the cultivation manual related to reaching the first level of cultivation. It wasn't something that should be quick, and he knew age would make cultivating slower. However, perhaps he had underestimated the time it would take. A month and a half didn't seem like long to a man a hundred years old but for someone who was ten or fifteen years old it was indeed much more significant.

Now that he wasn't dead, he pulled out the starry manual again. Indeed, the text covered igniting the first star. He'd only thought he was making progress along the way,

pushing himself closer not making the actual breakthrough. However, he couldn't deny that he certainly had the first star inside of him now. There was nothing else that he could call it.

Anton sighed. Was he young and reckless again? Then again, even if he'd been prepared what else could he have done? He was ready to break through or it wouldn't have been possible, and there was something to be said about letting things happen as they came naturally.

He stood up and noticed a cracking sound. He looked down at himself and noticed a layer of blackness on his skin. Was he burnt? He scraped some of it with his hand and found it was more of a sort of goop. It didn't hurt, but it smelled foul. He would have to clean himself off.

After having ignited the first star, Anton's body no longer hurt, whether cultivating or not. He felt much stronger as if he were ten years younger. Granted, that would still be what he was like at ninety years old, but he thought he was a fairly vigorous ninety year old. The most important thing is that his meridians felt more durable, so he was able to cultivate more smoothly.

The manual for Ninety-Nine Stars described the choices he had to make next in body tempering. Upon reviewing them once again, he decided that fully refining his meridians next would be the best choice. Better cultivation was good, right? He felt his chest. Since he hadn't died his heart should hold out for the moment. He might want to consider refining the organs in his torso next, however.

Out in the forest, Anton's body felt lighter. Young people never realized what they had until it was too late. That was true for Anton, and he hadn't even really noticed the decline over the past decades, gradual as it was. However, returning to some of his former strength and feeling of youth reminded him. He had the many decades of experience hunting to rely on as well, since farming alone had never been sufficient. His body moved stealthily through the brush. He saw a small pack of deer, and could actually pick them out well enough from a distance that he didn't startle them. His eyes still weren't *good*

, but he didn't need to pick out their patterns just hit them in the side.

He was able to achieve a draw on the bow he hadn't in quite some time. It was still far below the bow's capacity, but his arrow flew true, sinking deep into the side of the deer. It didn't run nearly so far as the one during the snowstorm, and he was able to quickly bring it back to the village where he would eat some and turn the rest into jerky.

Anton turned dour as he looked over the rows of graves. Was there even any point in cultivating, swearing vengeance upon the bandits? Hes taken the first step, but was it even possible to do more?

He shook his head. At least, he had to finish this job. His shovel drove into the frozen ground, much deeper than hed been able to before. Within three hours, he had a shallow grave prepared. Deep enough to keep scavengers out, at least. He moved to find the next nearest body. Lily, he believed her name was. He tried to remember everyones name, but some he only spoke to occasionally. He made a simple grave marker out of wood, carving her name into it. It wouldnt last forever but it was all he could do. He had no access to stone or a chisel to make a lasting headstone.

Focusing the next tempering on his meridians was more difficult than he had thought it would be. Perhaps he had grown cocky after having ignited the first star. If cultivation was so easy everyone would do it. The first star inside of him stored more energy than he had been able to before, as well as allowing him to gather it more quickly with the proper breathing technique. However, using that energy to temper his meridians beyond where they already were he found to be quite slow. Even spending more time each day cultivating, his progress felt minimal.

Then Anton realized why it was so hard. Hed become aware of his success, his ability to live on at least for a while. He was being cautious, when his only chance of becoming relevant was to surve forward. He couldnt be happy with just the first star, or even the second. He had to complete all of the Body Foundation stage *at least* to be able to avenge his family- the first nine stars.

With the fire of a small star inside of him, he had to be able to do more. It was quite calm and gentle at rest, but if he riled it up it could spin and more rapidly release energy. That was what he needed. He flooded his meridians with energy, straining them to their limits, limits he more clearly understood now that he had experience cultivating. The fire burned through him, down each extremity one at a time seeping into even the smallest parts of his body. Once his energy faded to a small ember, he gathered more, breathing it in from the world around him.

He barely slept, not wanting to give up cultivating but also needing to bury as many bodys as he could before the thaw. He was rarely glad for a long winter and of course he would have preferred the current one to be mild and gentle, but it might not have stopped the bandits. At least he wanted the villagers to be relatively whole in their graves, as much as he could do it. But he also couldnt afford to waste time not cultivating, because he wasnt sure if he could live long enough to become strong if he didnt.

He lost track of time, and soon enough another month had passed. Each day he cultivated, he was more efficient with the energy he gathered and he found he could store more and more in his dantian, and the first star. However, he had begun to slow down, having reached a bottleneck. Was he ready to advance to the second star? There was only one way to find out.

Anton continued gathering energy from the world with every breath, condensing it as much as he could into the first star in his dantian until it was overflowing. Then he called upon the energy, circulating it through his meridians, forcing its power against them and into them. Fire burned in his veins, but though there was pain, it was a good feeling. He wasn't beyond what he could bear yet. He kept pushing himself towards the limits, consciously breathing in more energy at a regular pace to feed the fires inside of him. When the fire inside him reached their peak and began to overflow, he grasped them in his control, wrestling the strands of energy around each other until they began to form another ball the second star. It grew and grew and grew, becoming harder and harder to control. His meridians were on fire, the pain constantly intensifying, but he pushed back the physical pain with his memories which bore much worse emotional pain, and the desire to somehow make amends for what had happened. As he pushed himself knew the energy would eventually exceed his capacity, but he was unable to pull back and when he reached the limits of his control, it once more collapsed into a more condensed star. The second star, burning bright. He'd made it. Perhaps he might be able to have some success at cultivation after all.

Chapter 7

With every breath he took, Anton felt the energy of the world suffusing his body. It wasn't so much as when he focused on cultivation, but after his meridians were tempered the process was much more automatic. The energy flowed more easily through him, and he found he was able to apply it outside of himself more effectively as well. It turned out there was a *correct* choice after all. His subsequent cultivation would go more smoothly. Though the next level was the most important. He would be able to join the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars if he reached the third level of the Body Foundation Stage. If he didn't then he just wasn't good enough.

The constant influx of energy allowed him to speed up the process of burying the villagers of Dungannon even more. It also helped that the spring thaws were beginning, and the ground was less frozen. That also gave him the impetus to work as quickly as he could. He had needed to change several shovels as they wore out, but with more energy providing a defensive layer and *sharpness* to the shovel, he was able to be more effective and wear out his equipment less. Anton's knowledge of cultivation was limited, but he was aware that besides cultivation techniques like the one he had, there were methods to make better use of the energy for various uses. At the current moment he felt he had only a basic grasp of how it could be used but it was still so powerful. Each step he took made him realize how strong those at the next stage must be. Especially if they had a young body to go with it. He didn't even know what the next stage was called.

The scroll he had for the Ninety-Nine Stars only covered Body Foundation. Not that he needed to concern himself with that when he was only at the second level out of ten.

As Anton performed the breathing technique, he could feel not only his lungs pulling in natural energy but the pores in his skin where his meridians reached the outside of his body. It was only a very small force, but quite real. In a way, that made cultivation more complex. He wasn't sure whether to gather all the energy in his dantian or try to circulate it from wherever it ended up. Some experimentation showed him little noticeable differences, except he could more directly reach the pathways he wanted from the dantian, which connected with meridians stretching to every part of his body. If he didn't go through the dantian, he still had to take a circuitous route for over half of the energy. He also found it was slightly easier to use energy refined by the stars in his dantian, so that seemed like the best method.

Eventually, all of it would end up in his torso. Anton appreciated the thought of having better eyesight by tempering the organs of his head, and muscles and strong bones were always welcome but as all of his breathing in energy flowed through his lungs, he felt that was the next logical step. He was also somewhat concerned about his heart. Perhaps it would explode and kill him during this step, but if that was the case he might as well get it over with.

The energy from the world continuously flowed into him, through his lungs and pores into his dantian to be refined into a more usable form by the stars. Then it flowed right back into his lungs, his heart, his liver, stomach every organ in his torso. He thought to prioritize his lungs and heart, but it seemed wiser to give all of the organs their fair share. That way he wouldn't overload any of them, and to be honest he thought that having a stronger stomach could be quite useful. He had felt his guts working, and when they weren't working as well, his life could be quite unpleasant. His heart and lungs kept him alive every second, but the rest played their part as well.

Energy flowed smoothly through him, his newly tempered meridians making the work almost trivial. At the end of two weeks he found himself at a bottleneck once more, but he was able to quickly gather the energy to push through, and though his organs strained and groaned they grew stronger and tougher before finally releasing the excess energy which he formed into another star inside him according to the cultivation manual. Yes, tempering his meridians second had been the right choice. It was surprising how fast it made cultivation. Now, after just three months, he'd already reached the third level of Ninety-Nine Stars. If he continued at that pace, he might reach Spirit Building in a year or maybe two or three, since it was implied that the progress would slow down. He supposed the bandits would be cultivating as well, and they would pull away from him if he didn't keep pushing himself. However, Anton felt he could use the guidance of those with experience so he knew how much was too much. As long as he could make it to the Order, he would be able to join- and he could learn more there. Reaching the Order

wasnt as simple as it sounded, but Anton was much more able to travel across the country for a whole month now compared to at least the previous two or three decades.

Before he set out on his journey, Anton hunted some more animals to make jerky out of. He also did his best to prepare some hides that he hoped to sell on the way so he could buy more supplies. Hunting in unfamiliar territory was much lower on the list of things he wanted to do, since there could easily be magical beasts in unfamiliar forests- or they might be claimed by some local lord or cultivators. Besides, that would slow down his trip.

The Spring air wasnt quite warm, but it was refreshing. The most refreshing part was leaving behind Dungannon. A cloud of sadness hung over the whole village, inescapable as long as he was there. Concentrating on his cultivation and thoughts of revenge could only do so much to distract him. Now, he could try to enjoy new sights as he traveled along the road, doing his best to ignore the fact that the road was mostly slushy mud mixed with ice and instead focusing on the early flowers growing.

Anton found he was able to do basic cultivation as he walked. At least, he could absorb the energy of the world as he moved, gathering it for use when he stopped for the night. He would camp wherever on the road he found himself when it became dark, cultivating until he felt hed hit his limit for the night then sleeping until dawn. He would eat and return to the road. That cycle continued for a week before he found any significant obstacle on the road.

Spring rains poured down, not exactly warm but much more welcome than the snow of winter. Antons boots squelched in the mud as he walked, but he found that his balance was much more adequate than it had once been. His body was almost returning to a state where he felt *young*. Of course, he distantly remembered *actually* being young, but feeling less old was good enough for him.

He occasionally passed people on the road, but had little to say to them. He didnt know what people thought of an old man like himself, but he had little desire for conversation. He occasionally stopped in towns, but he couldnt afford the prices of a room at an inn. Food was the most important, and he needed to last a month.

As he passed through a little town he saw a crowd of people gathered around in the rain. That was certainly unusual, but the reason soon became clear. Up ahead was a river that hadnt been on any map that Anton had ever seen. Then again, it was more of a large stream and he hadnt needed maps of the whole of Graotan. It was impossible to tell how large the stream normally was but at the current moment it was overflowing its banks. The small bridge crossing it was half flooded and seemed unable to withstand the currents, swaying in a most concerning way.

A bridge flooding out was certainly enough to get a village gathered around with concern, but as he approached Anton noticed more. He saw a young child attempting to cross the bridge- from the far side.

Jimmy! Be careful! a worried mother called out from where her feet were just getting flooded by the river.

Anton took stock of the situation. The flooding wasn't caused by just the gentle rains in the area, but likely runoff from the nearby mountains at the same time. It was unlikely anyone could have anticipated the trouble at the current moment.

Anton approached closer. The bridge was certainly precarious, but it could likely carry the child as he walked across, clutching the railing and trying to keep his feet on the slippery surface. A sudden surge of water, however, immediately changed the situation. Anton heard the bridge crack and snap. While it somehow remained partly attached to the shore, it tilted- flinging the young boy off of the bridge.

His body reacted before his mind could process anything. He was surprised how easy it was to leap into the center of the river- but his surprise was tempered by freezing water in his face and the chaos of a flooding river. He had just missed the boy, grabbing out at him as he hit the water. It took a moment to reorient himself, getting tossed head over heels in the water. He somehow spotted a form further down the river. His arms reached out, pulling on the water as quickly as they could to propel him toward the boy. Anton just managed to reach the struggling young boy and grab an arm when another huge rush of water came over them, surging down the river, pushing both of them under.

Chapter 8

Turbulent waters completely filled Anton's vision. He was unable to really swim, keeping his grasp on the child with one hand and weighed down by his clothes and traveling gear. The two of them surged down the river without direction. Anton vaguely saw or sensed something up ahead and instinctively wrapped himself around Jimmy protectively. A moment later, he impacted a large rock in the middle of the stream. The sudden collision forced air out of his lungs as he only afterwards thought to summon his energy. It wrapped around himself and the boy as they hurtled downstream.

Newly fallen logs and disruptive boulders were all too common, and there were only rare moments when the pair surfaced- and they didn't have a real chance to breathe. Anton took all of the force of the river upon himself, unable to let a child be hurt. He kicked his legs, struggling to find the surface and a shore.

After what felt like an eternity of darkness and being underwater, he managed to bump into a root overhanging a washed out section of river. He grabbed onto it with one hand, stopping them. He pulled the young boy in his arm out of the water, but he had no expression- nor breath.

Anton didnt have the flexibility or strength of his youth, but with all his effort he managed to toss the child up onto the shore. He used both arms to drag himself up the root and onto the shore, where he pulled the child further from the river just in time to avoid the bank collapsing further.

Beneath him, the child continued to draw no breath and his lips were blue, but Anton wasnt done yet. What was the point in cultivating if he couldnt save even a single child? He pressed down on the childs stomach, hoping to force him to expel the water in his lungs. It barely seemed to work, and Anton knew he couldnt afford to waste time. He had to get the water out. Energy was still new and mysterious, but he placed his hands on the childs chest and gently reached inside with his energy. He could *feel* the water that filled them, not completely but far too much. He tried to drag it out, and combined with a small amount of force on the childs abdomen water spurted out. Then more and more.

A moment later, the child was coughing and sputtering. A good sign, if unpleasant. He stopped shortly after expelling more water, breathing raggedly. With his energy, Anton felt water remaining in the boys lungs. He wasnt sure what problems that might cause, so he once again carefully reached inside with his energy, forming it into a cup with which which he dragged the water until it was outside the boy. His breathing eased somewhat, but he was still freezing.

Anton looked around. He wasnt sure how far downstream they had gone, but finding which way to go was trivial. He just had to walk upstream parallel to the river, though not too close.

Clearly the exact area wasnt traveled too much, because in the dark it was hard to pick out anything like a trail. Nearer to the river would be clear but quite dangerous. He walked with the child on his back, step by step through the rain. If his body hadnt been tempered, he would have already collapsed long before. His heart and lungs were working overtime to keep up but while he felt the burn in his lungs as his steps quickened, he was able to continue.

Soon he stumbled upon the buildings of the village whose name he hadnt yet learned. He knocked on the nearest door, where they seemed to have a fire going. The door opened. Who are? a man opened the door, looking over Anton. Then he saw the boys head peeking over his shoulder. Is that little Jimmy? Come inside! You both look half drowned! More than that, even.

Anton managed to comply, getting inside the hut and setting down the boy carefully before collapsing into a heap himself. Then his consciousness faded as he felt safety.

When he awoke, he found himself wrapped in a bundle of blankets next to the fire, with nothing underneath. His clothes had surely been soaked through. He sat up, looking

around. The man who had come to the door was sitting at a table nearby and noticed his alertness. Ah, you're awake!

Anton nodded. Where's the boy?

He's alright. I went to find his mother, and he already went home. That was a brave thing you did, old stranger. Lucy and the rest of us are extremely grateful. The man inclined his head respectfully, I'm Darryl, by the way. That little Jimmy is my nephew. So, thank you for saving him.

Anton smiled. I couldn't do anything but. I had children of my own, and couldn't bear to see one lost. Especially if it just exchanged these old bones of mine for someone with youth. Anton meant that, even though he still had to live to get revenge on the bandits and save his family. That goal was too far off if he let himself lose his humanity and couldn't even save a little child, what good was he? At least he knew he still had part of himself, because he hadn't even thought about it. I'm Anton Krantz, by the way.

It's good to meet you. Darryl scratched his head. Listen, about your things your clothes will do fine once they dry. The tent too, obviously, and that strange scroll somehow seems fine. But your travel supplies and your bow seem quite ruined. The bow itself snapped in half from some impact in the river. You yourself have some nasty bruises

When he thought about it, Anton *did* notice the pain from those. It was just not nearly so much pain as he'd felt over the last few months, even just physically. I'll be fine. I lived this long.

Darryl nodded, You're a tough old man, alright. Listen, we don't have any bows that can replace yours here, but we can fill your pack with supplies. Though your travels might be quite delayed with the bridge in the state it is.

That is fine, Anton said. I can wait.

The villagers of Helmfrith Rill- that was what the village was called, once he had the chance to speak to them- were all very grateful for Anton's arrival. A small village like theirs only had a few children, and losing one of them would have been devastating for more than just his family. Everyone knew everyone, so each child was treated almost like everyone's own.

The flood died down within the next two days, though the drizzle continued over the village- but a sudden flood from the mountains was likely no longer a concern. Listen, Anton, we appreciate what you did with Jimmy you really don't have to. Darryl seemed to be trying to stop Anton from working on the new bridge, but he couldn't stop him. He might have been able to physically wrestle Anton to the ground- though it would be *close*- and he really didn't want to.

Anton pounded stakes deep into the earth. I appreciate the concern, but Ive been working hard my whole life. If I stop now, maybe Ill just turn into a pile of dirt. Anton hadnt built a bridge before, but hed set up fences and barns many times. He might not have been able to design the bridge, but he could certainly contribute as much as an average man. Besides, I might as well help speed up the process, get out of your hair a bit earlier. Now dont go saying I can stay as long as I like. I know you all dont have too much extra food, especially after such a winter. Darryl didnt have much to say to that, just nodding and getting back to his own work.

It took several days to complete the bridge, and during half the night Anton continued his cultivation. Circulating the energy throughout his body really helped with the bruises, clearing them up rather more rapidly. They might still last a week or two, but for an old man like himself the fact that they would ever heal was quite remarkable. Cultivation was an amazing thing. Anton thought everyone should try it, though he had to admit it had been a bit risky at the start.

He was working on the fourth level, where hed chosen to refine the organs in his head. Basically, his eyes and ears and everything connecting down to his torso. His brain too, apparently, though he had to be careful with that. Hed chosen the next step mostly for his eyes, though now he was down a bow and archery skills werent much good without. Still, spotting things from a distance was good.

Soon enough he would move on from Helmfrith Rill. It was enticing to just stay in a small village forever, but they didnt need him and he had all of Dungannon to avenge. Or if nothing else, at least he might help others along the way to the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars.

Chapter 9

Just a few days travel away from Helmfrith Rill the population density started to pick up. There was more farmland and each village and city seemed to increase in size. He began to notice cultivators in the cities. The way they carried themselves and how they were equipped made their status clear, but Anton noticed something else. He could *feel* them. It certainly wasnt any of his normal senses, but nonetheless he clearly felt it.

About halfway through his journey, he came across a group on the road. Five cultivators walking in a loose formation. He thought to pass them, but as they were next to them on the road the leader turned towards him and spoke. Are you from the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars?

Anton took stock of the man. He had an average build, maybe a bit on the small side. Clearly young. However, his tone was friendly and Anton sensed something from him. Not answering wouldnt help him if they were enemies, because at the very minimum he

could tell each of them were stronger than himself. I am not, yet but I am hoping to join. I was told I would have the chance if I reached the third level. Antons eyes finally made their way to a subtle pin on the mans cloak made up of nine stars.

The man smiled and nodded, I thought so. Whos your sponsor?

Vincent, Anton responded.

Thats usually the case. Hes quite a recruiter, the man nodded pleasantly. Good luck with the test. Perhaps we will be brothers in the future. As they walked away, Anton became more certain of the sense of familiarity. Somehow, he could feel the resonance between his own cultivation technique and them. However, he felt they were all at least at the fifth level of Body Foundation, with the leader being eighth or ninth. Pinning it down exactly was difficult.

Behind him, Anton heard a whispered voice from one of the others. Why encourage him like that? You know how unlikely someone of his age is to be accepted

The leader responded, That may be so but theres no reason to be discouraging either. Besides, Vincent seems to have a knack for such things. Perhaps the man will find a place for himself.

Once they were quite a bit further away, Anton sighed. None of them appeared over twenty years old. Perhaps his estimations were slightly off, because it was said cultivators aged more slowly, but he knew it would be quite difficult to match them. Still, he had to try.

From that point on, he saw more patrols by members of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. Not all of them stopped to talk to him, but they were all quite pleasant when they did though he could tell that they didnt have much thought for his actual chances.

It wasnt long before Anton found himself at the end of his journey. Edelhull was just outside of the territory of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. It was the biggest city Anton had ever seen- not that he was that familiar with large cities. However, Alcombey was quite a large city for the region he had grown up in. It just paled in comparison to Edelhull. Anton noticed all sorts of cultivators- including many practicing the cultivation technique of the Order of Ninety Nine stars.

Though he would have loved to tour the city, he could only really pass through. He had no money, and would have to camp out nearby. As he passed through, he overheard some people talking. It was hard to ignore, especially with his hearing being enhanced- he was close to finishing the refinement and hed already benefited greatly.

Im glad we made it so quickly. If we took a few extra days, wed miss the recruitment period and have to wait a whole month for the next one! The speaker was a young man who radiated a feeling Anton felt as the third level of the Ninety-Nine Stars, just like himself. They were likewise talking to another youngster. Anton was taken aback for a moment as he saw her face. She looked like a younger Tabby or an older Annelie. But then the feeling passed. How many young women were there with dark hair, especially in a city of this size- or drawing from all of Graotan? He was just still sensitive about everything that had happened.

Another month wouldnt matter either way, the young woman answered. More training would be good for us.

The young man sighed. Come on Catarina. You cant be satisfied with just the basic cultivation manual. Theyve got training grounds with abundant energy, special techniques, and masters to learn from! Every day we cultivate there will be so much more effective.

The young woman seemed to not be overly excited at the thought of such amenities. I suppose so. But Id rather just not bother with the test.

Hmph. You might be able to make it in another month, but Id still have to take the test. Id at least like to get a chance this time. The young man crossed his arms.

At that point, Anton was far enough away to not hear any more of them, and he pulled his eyes away. It was amazing how well they worked now. He could make out people from an entire city block away.

Outside of Edelhull, Anton found he wasnt the only one who would be camping. There were a few other tents set up near the entrance posts declaring the land behind them belonged to the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. He set up his tent away from the few others, for privacy in both directions. Anton thought to sleep to rest up for the morning, but he couldnt. Besides he had spent a month on the road cultivating. It was a habit that was hard to break, and he felt he was close to reaching the next level.

As he began cultivating, he felt the energy was much stronger than anywhere else he had been. Around Dungannon was actually fairly decent compared to many places on the road, but the natural energy in the area seemed twice as thick, though he wasnt sure how to actually compare them.

Regardless, he soon found himself full to bursting. Besides successfully completing the initial body tempering, the fourth level had taken him the longest. Even with more experience in cultivation and tempered meridians, it seemed that he would be slowing down. But he could at least make this next breakthrough right now.

Energy flowed through him like a rushing river. However, Antons tempered meridians kept all of it exactly in line with his wishes, circulating from his dantian below his navel

up through his torso and into his head. From there the energy was intentionally dispersed through his head. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue all of them received a portion. His spine was left untouched- the cultivation method noted that a different technique was required for bones and the like. The upper portion of his throat received an inpouring of energy as well. The area he had to be most careful with was his brain. He felt the energy rushing into it, little rivulets that strengthened it bit by bit. Then everything reached its limits and he was done. From his head flowed another star. His fourth star.

In the morning, Anton found his way towards the gates of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. Or at least the building at this border. There wasn't a large wall surrounding the area and as Anton looked into the distance, he could see why that might be. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars didn't just own a complex of buildings, but if he was correct they owned an entire mountain and the area surrounding it. A *small* mountain, perhaps, but the area was much too large to build a meaningful wall around. In the distance he could just barely spot the walls of a larger complex up the slope- even with his newly refined eyes. Then again, they were still slightly short of his peak when he was younger.

It was easy to figure out where he was supposed to be going. A conglomeration of newer cultivators were lining up in front of a number of cultivators at the fifth level of Body Foundation or higher. Anton saw an older man as well. The man appeared to be middle age, but the aura he gave off was much greater. Was he in Spirit Building? Somewhere even beyond that? Anton hadn't been around Vincent since he started cultivating, so he had nobody to compare to but himself and the rest of those immediately present.

The elder in front was clearly part of the administration of testing, directing people in one way or another but sometimes sending them directly away, hanging their heads. From what Anton could tell, that was because they hadn't reached the third level of cultivation. He could tell some cultivated a different technique, but those who were of similar power at least were passed on somehow. The initial line moved fairly quickly, but there were many people and it took most of the morning before Anton was about halfway towards the front. At that point, one of the disciples in the area who was standing away from the line called out to him.

You there! the disciple pointed. The uh

Old man? Anton said in response, pointing to himself.

Yes, you. The disciple waved him over. Come over here. You're not supposed to be standing in that line.

Was he not? Anton didn't see anywhere else to go. What had he done wrong? He thought he would at least be given the chance to join since he'd reached the third level. Still, it was best not to cause a fuss in public. Perhaps he could talk to the man in

private. He stepped out of the line towards the younger man. It would be unfortunate if he lost his spot, but if he had to wait a day or a month for his next chance, at least he would have one.

Chapter 10

Anton moved forward to the disciple- sixth level of Body Foundation, by the feel of him- keeping his voice as steady as he could despite his misgivings. Im sorry. I was told that as long as I reached the third level I would have a chance to join, despite my age..

The disciple looked at him askance. Of course thats true. But you are at the fourth level. So follow me.

Anton did so, and soon they were outside the building where people were gathered. He saw some of the potential recruits off to the side, sparring with each other and performing other tests. However, they continued past them. Where are we going, young man?

What do you mean? he looked over his shoulder and asked. Were going to the sect, obviously.

...Why? Had he done something wrong by cultivating to the fourth level? Anton hadnt seen any warnings about that.

So that we can set you up with your plot and introduce you to things.

That didnt sound bad. What about the test? Anton asked.

What *about* the test? I doubt it would do you much good to take it. You didnt cultivate all the way to the fourth level just so you would have to take the test. The young man continued walking. We can always find a use for people who made it to the fourth level alone. Uh were you not told that?

Anton shook his head. No, I merely continued cultivating on the road while I traveled so I reached the fourth level.

You must be from quite far then.

Anton nodded. I am from the far east of Graotan. I was sponsored by Vincent.

Oh yeah? I was too! The young man nodded, Not that Im alone in that respect. About half of those from a background outside of cultivation that join seem to have been sponsored by him. Maybe thats an exaggeration but hes usually moving around on missions, so he finds quite a few people. The young man extended his hand, Im Sterling, by the way.

Anton, he shook the young mans hand, feeling the interplay of the energy that gathered about them. It is good to meet you.

Anton was quite used to walking, but he found the pace of Sterling hard to keep up with. The young man seemed to notice, slowing down to a quick but manageable pace. Anton could see why he would be in a hurry. The road into the sect continued quite far up the mountain. Half an hour of brisk walking later and Anton wished he had already tempered his muscles or bones. Yet with the basic tempering of his entire body, he felt young enough that it might be good for him to push himself somewhat. That said, he decided he would need to temper his muscles next.

As they climbed the increasing slope, Anton felt himself reinvigorated by the denser natural energy in the area. It wasnt a difference he could have noticed before cultivating, nor taken advantage of. Now he was practiced enough to slowly circulate his energy while moving. The very slow influx of energy into his muscles relieved any fatigue he might have felt from the climb.

Along the way they passed a number of modest homes, quite a bit smaller than where Anton had lived but he imagined they didnt house so many people either. Finally they began to near the complex he had spotted from so far down the mountain. This is the central area. Most everything you need can be handled here. Sterling waved to the guards at the gate. I have a new recruit.

The gate guards nodded in return. Just like Sterling, they were young. However, they were clearly past the tenth star somewhere in Spirit Building. Fourth star huh, one of the guards commented. His tone wasnt unfriendly, but Anton felt there was something more to it. What was it about fourth star people that was so bad? He didnt have to take the test. Beyond that, he wasnt sure. Hed have to think more about it later.

Inside the complex, Sterling showed Anton various places. Theres the armory. You can exchange contribution points for weapons and armor there. The technique library is important as well. You can stop by there to check out the options later. Of course, if you when you reach Spirit Building, youll need to pick up the complete version of Ninety-Nine Stars to study.

Anton didnt miss the stumble. Was it that hard to get to Spirit Building? He couldnt be sure, since he was only less than halfway through Body Foundation. He did notice that each stage was harder as each subsequent star took more energy. Can I see the technique before that?

You can. It wont do much good until youre at least at the ninth star, heading towards Spirit Building. Oh, but youll have to be with the sect for a year before you can look at it. We dont want people coming in to take our cultivation technique if theyre going to go rogue. Sterling paused, Its okay to leave the sect and even continue practicing Ninety-Nine Stars, but we cant have any evil cultivators going around using our technique. Its bad for those who they would harm and our reputation. Sterling continued to point out

more buildings. There's the lecture halls. Check the schedule every month, the elders have many helpful insights to give, even to those with years of practice. The sparring rings are there, with formations to protect people from serious injury. Occasionally we have competitions as well. Sterling gestured to a wing of the complex, There is where most of the elders stay. You're not forbidden to go there, but I would suggest not disturbing them without a reason. Sterling thought for a few moments, Oh we need to show you the job hall and the rewards hall. Unless you brought money with you, you'll need the contribution points you can get through various methods. The managers at the rewards chamber will also be assigning you to your plot of land, and give you your badge.

The complex they were walking through was still almost the size of a city. Maybe not one so large as Edelhull, but the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars was spread out over quite a large area. It had taken over an hour to reach the central complex. If he was going to be visiting often, Anton would need to make better time. Muscle tempering would help with that.

At the desk of the rewards hall was a woman Anton presumed was an elder though it was strange to call people who were younger than him an elder. Or was she younger? Cultivation had some effect on extending age, but the woman was barely grey and light on wrinkles. Could that make up for forty years of difference? Anton didn't know, because all his information had come from things he'd overheard from before he was a cultivator and instructions specifically to allow him to cultivate the Ninety-Nine Stars. New outer disciple here, Elder Lois, Sterling gestured to Anton.

The elder nodded. Very well, one moment. She moved away from the desk into a room behind her, coming out with a palm-sized token and a small map. I've circled your plot on the map. Do take good care of it. If you topple the house, you'll have to rebuild it. It doesn't sound like something I'd have to tell people, but every couple of years she shook her head. Well, I imagine you might be less inclined to recklessness at your age. She placed the token in Anton's hand, pouring some of her energy in it. Now put some of your energy in. Anton did so, and he felt a slight connection to it. Great. That's your identifier. Keep it on you, especially if you're leaving sect grounds. Don't lose it or destroy it, et cetera. They're not too expensive to identify Body Foundation cultivators, but it's best to start good habits. The ones to uniquely identify Spirit Building and higher require more to verify people properly.

Thank you, Elder Lois, Anton bowed his head. While it might have felt weird to call someone potentially younger than him elder, he didn't mind being respectful. It didn't hurt him, and having people think well of him was always good. Besides, he didn't spend so long teaching his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren how to be polite to then flaunt those teachings.

Inside the job hall, Sterling explained the system. It's pretty simple. It's generally organized by difficulty. A fourth star cultivator like yourself can probably handle anything up to about this point, though the combat missions might be a bit dangerous without

equipment. Some of the jobs change out, but theyre always looking for people to help with labor. Its not glamorous, but you can get contribution points for helping out the sect in any way.

Including introducing new outer disciples to the sect?

Sterling nodded, Thats one of them. Maybe youll do this yourself some day. If you have experience refining pills or equipment, those are the best pay but its no good for those who dont have the knowledge. Farming jobs are quite steady, as there are crops for every season. You can also help in the library, though those positions usually fill up pretty fast. I might try out a number of things and see what fits you. If youre interested in refining pills or equipment, taking any jobs working with the herbs or around the smithies, even labor, will give you a leg up. I took a variety of jobs before I got enough equipment to hunt wild beasts. The sect grounds are quite large, and certain beasts are attracted to the high natural energy and the fields. Inner disciples generally take care of the stronger beasts, leaving the weaker ones for the outer disciples, though be warned you might encounter numerous weaker beasts. If you arent prepared Sterling shook his head. Sometimes, cultivating peacefully for a while is the right move. Now then, lets find that plot.