

Elder Cultivator

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Not too far away from the group of fleeing former slaves the land was currently in a state of settling, roots returning to their position in the ground and trees bending back into their normal state. The signs of battle would still be obvious in the future, but it was proper to return things to the best state possible. The final segment of mercenaries intended to bring up the rear in the attack had found themselves grossly outnumbered.

Elder Varela would have liked to provide more public support for Anton and the rest, but the Grasping Willows still had to live in Ofrurg. Though he would have liked to rub his current actions in the face of others, some of the present company needed to remain unknown. There were a half dozen former gladiators among their company.

Thank you for our freedom, several of them came forward together, With this, I hope our debt is repaid.

You never owed me anything, Elder Varela shook his head. Its Lev who set you free.

Of course, they agreed, But your presence is what made it possible.

Perhaps, Elder Varela refused to commit more than that. Though in that case, Anton Krantz is more responsible than I. He is the one responsible for inspiring Lev, and would have doubtless freed you himself if he could bear the consequences.

The former gladiators inclined their heads. We will of course pay our respects to your disciple Lev at a later moment. They did their best to avoid looking sick or glancing in that direction.

Elder Varela smiled. Good. Im sure hell appreciate it. With that, he peacefully began to stroll towards his favorite disciple. He casually layered the dirt back where it belonged atop roots, and sometimes encouraged those roots to bury themselves deeper than they originally grew. He stepped over broken and twisted bodies, the likes of which werent sufficient to disturb gladiators who had fought to the death many times.

One of the mercenaries they had just fought was standing in his path, but he paid him no mind. He would be dealt with soon enough. Currently, Lev was placing his hands on another. He unceremoniously ripped his energy out of the man in front of him, leaving behind a ruined and half-hollow corpse.

It works as well as you said it would, Elder Varela admitted, But I have to admit its a bit unsettling.

Lev grimaced. You instructed me to learn from nature. I simply emulated the most dangerous sort I was able to witness and fortunately survive. Lev gestured towards one arm that still hung limply at his side. Elder Varela knew it was difficult to heal, but Lev had refused to try, leaving it as a reminder. I still barely have control of anyone. I haven't been able to get *practice* on humans before now.

Good, Elder Varela said. I doubt your savior would approve of you treating humans as just experimental toys.

I know, Lev acknowledged. I am quite aware that it is a horrid sight to behold. With a stirring of his energy, another body staggered over towards him. He spent some time looking over it, feeling the energy he had *grown* into what had once been a live person, then tearing his energy out and letting it collapse into just another corpse.

Don't forget to practice the traditional Grasping Willow methods, Elder Varela reminded him.

Of course. How do you think I get people to hold still? Lev grimaced. I don't plan to use this very often. But this group should have known the full circumstances and still made the choice to accept this mission. Lev looked at the remaining people he had to deal with and sighed. I wish I could have spoken to Anton.

You made your choice. I think he would approve, but it was better for him to not know of it at the time. It might not seem like it sometimes, but the power of genuine truth is greater than deception. Those people you freed were entirely unconnected to him, and can stay that way. Elder Varela rested a hand on Lev's good shoulder. I am proud of you for following your convictions instead of taking the easiest path with an early payoff.

Lev looked around, I'm not sure if I can look him in the face anymore.

Why not? Elder Varela asked. These people are just as dead now as all of those up ahead hopefully are. You didn't even think to keep them around even though it would be useful in future battles. That shows your mind is in the right place, even if you've created a forbidden technique.

I don't think I would have if I thought anyone else could practice it, Lev injected his own energy into what had once been the nerves in his arm, raising it unnaturally. But I doubt others would be willing to go through the same experiences.

Elder Varela was using the nearby roots to relocate the bodies, stripping them of valuable weapons and armor while properly distributing them about the area so that they wouldn't leave behind a hulking pile of dead bodies. Animals would be quite happy to eat fallen cultivators, but if they were all together the scavengers would squabble over them even if they couldn't consume more than a small portion individually.

Actually, Elder Varela commented, Speaking of forbidden techniques. Anton expressed interest in Everhearts Tomb. That new one that revealed itself down in Floelor. I believe you should be inside the restrictions for participating. You should turn up yourself, when the time comes.

You think Anton will really be able to get inside?

Elder Varela shrugged, I think hell show up. Everhearts formations are known to be fickle. New cultivators would almost certainly mean young for most, but hes just the sort to let people like Anton into his tombs. Elder Varela didnt mention that hed noticed Anton's use of a famous forbidden technique by Everheart himself. Lev would likely not be happy to hear what the man did to speed them up when he could have potentially been present as an ally. Elder Varela fully believed Anton would have done the same with the addition of Lev, but he didnt need to burden the young man with the potential idea.

Ill go, Lev nodded. I want to thank him again. Lev thought for a while before continuing the conversation, Its strange that nobody has found these places before. Was Everheart that good?

He was, Elder Varela confirmed, I know that firsthand from my own master.

What about Lev stopped himself, then continued, What about the rumors that hes still alive?

Elder Varela shook his head. Its been so long. Perhaps that was once the case. I do believe he faked his death many times to hide from his many enemies, but with the passage of time he must have now perished. Though I wouldnt put it past him to have hatched a scheme to make sure those rumors continued to spread long after his actual death, just so the descendents of his enemies could never fully relax.

The Grasping Willow-

Barely existed when he was active. Were talking larger sects some of which he took with him at the end. Some simply never recovered, but wont admit it. Elder Varela shook his head, I would prefer not to talk about those, but I do know the Frostmirror sect was an old enemy, like most of the region. They were just smart enough to make reparations before the forbidden technique maniac was pushed into a corner.

Lev took some time to digest those thoughts, before returning to a more practical conversation. What do you think the rewards of the tomb will be?

He managed to gather many resources and techniques. Hopefully some of those. Elder Varela shook his head, Otherwise its probably some great mess of a forbidden technique that would be better off never seeing the light of day, passed down onto someone with *just*

the right factors to cause trouble with it. Elder Varela shrugged, Or there was the one time it was a pile of dirt. There was a big uproar about that one.

No further trouble was encountered on the way to the border. That wasnt strange, because there were only a finite number of cultivators. More importantly, the payment offered to attack the group couldnt be unlimited. The Iron Ring Slavers had a great amount of wealth, but the amount of free cash they had to have after recent events was bound to be less significant. Since they mostly traded in non-cultivator slaves, there were limits on their wealth and influence.

There were also limits on how public their actions could be. If they made too big of a stir it would be the difference between people *assuming* they hired a mercenary group to kill people they just had conflict with and *knowing* they did it. An important difference when Ofrurgs policies wouldnt shield them from the Order of the Ninety-Nine Stars in the second case, nor even from the countrys internal laws. Whatever hand the Potenzas had was also limited by the same factors.

It was impossible to fully know why things ended up exactly the way they did, but Anton and the others hadnt come into Ofrurg just *hoping* that they could succeed. Paying information brokers and using Kohars experience, theyd made a reasonable estimate of the backlash they could expect and determined they could survive it. They had been correct, though they still mourned the loss of some of their number. Just because they werent powerful cultivators didnt mean the ones who died werent *people*.

Though the particular border crossing they were approaching was more out of the way and thus less traveled, the contingent of defenders was no weaker. That very out of the way feature could have otherwise allowed for slipping across the border unnoticed, and neither country wanted that. At least not when it was out of their own particular control.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly at the border with paperwork being processed normally, until the auras of several Essence Collection cultivators and the other arranged guards simultaneously bore down on the group. One of those cultivators was a stern looking man, and quickly made a declaration. You are all under arrest for violation of Ofrurg law.

What violations? Anton asked.

They are numerous in quantity and varied. Now then, submit peacefully.

Before Anton could reply, Kohar held up a hand. It is required to state crimes for each individual in specificity.

The man looked down on Kohar as much as he could from his position of similar height. That will all be made clear in due time.

Kohar shook her head, You cant arrest anyone without specific declarations in advance unless you obtain the approval of Graotan as well. It is not permissible to hold a group or individual on the assumption that you might dredge up crime in the future. Do you have any formal charges against any individuals? If not, you must let us pass. Despite the large gap in cultivation, she held her head up high and spoke confidently. Anton smiled. This was her area of speciality. He knew she would do the best that any of them could manage.

Very well. If you *must*

know, the man drew out the word. The individual known as Anton Krantz is being detained for murder. Now submit to arrest.

Murder of who? Kohar asked. Such a vague declaration is insufficient. She waited a moment, then continued, Since you are unable to declare a single crime in specificity we shall be on our way. She tried to step forward, but his presence prevented her movement

There were over a dozen individuals murdered in the Potenza Arena in Khonard by his very hand, the man declared. We have their names.

Every charge was formally tried and dropped due to aiding and abetting unlawful imprisonment. Kohar turned her gaze to look past the man, Do you intend to let them imprison members of your Order with no justification?

Auras clashed as the border guards from Graotan formally made themselves known. A much older but still very powerfully built man stood at the ready. We do not intend to allow it. I trust you have something to justify your position?

Of course, Kohar agreed.

The man from the Order turned his eyes to the Ofrurg guards, That includes you, Ashok. I hope you prepared a proper case.

The man known as Ashok snorted. Of course, Baltassar. We would only do things *properly*.

A quick comparison of the information proved his lie. Baltassar had heard their explanations and currently held documents that looked simply tiny in his large hands, comparing them for the dozenth time. I find it surprising that you only have the immediate information one side declared on the scene, not even complete to the end of the day or from both parties. And that you managed to not hear a word of such a high profile case after another month. A case which, I might add, has been heard about on this side of the border already. I was just wondering if you would lie.

Of course you would take the side of a disciple of the Order, Baltassar, Ashok remained confident and overbearing as he spoke. However, this is a matter of the law of Ofrurg. You really wish to risk war over a few criminal disciples?

Funny that you should mention that, Kohar said. Because I guarantee a backwater border guard like you has no authority to even *speak* of declarations of war. When that information gets back to the rest of Ofrurg, I wonder what sort of reprimands will be made for each of your sects? Kohar made a point of lingering her eyes on the two other Essence Collection cultivators.

They turned to each other, exchanging glances. Then they retracted their auras around themselves. Ashok is acting on his own in that capacity. Our estimation is that you have provided sufficient proof to pass the border.

Ashok turned to glare at the other two, but with the odds being between three-to-one in his favor at best, he backed down. Fine. Go. He waved his hand.

After they had been properly passed through the other side, Anton commended Kohar. I knew you were a specialist in law, but your quick thinking and recall skills are remarkable. I don't know the intricacies of certain laws as well as perhaps I should.

Kohar nodded, Thank you, though I will admit something now that we are well past the border. I might have fibbed a little bit on some of the details.

Oh? Anton raised an eyebrow.

While they might not have been able to restrain the citizens of Graotan on mere speculation that law doesn't technically apply to citizens of Ofrurg. But I didn't think they needed to know that, she grinned widely.

Anton laughed in return. Seems like they should do some brushing up as well.

I'd prefer it if they did not. My job would be much easier if my opponents were ignorant.

Can we really get that man's sect reprimanded? Anton asked.

Maybe, Kohar shrugged. Wouldn't hurt to try. I'll draft some letters.

Anton smiled as they walked. Sometimes, it was nice to win a battle without anyone dying.

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Nobody was entirely willing to relax until they were several days from the border and in more populated areas. At that point, only the most suicidal of cultivators would be willing to make any attempt on their lives. Anton still kept the services of the mercenaries until

the end of the week just in case. It was only money for peace of mind, and he couldn't use money to buy that back if something happened.

Then it was time to settle all of his debts. Anton shook his head at the exceedingly large amount of money that had been flowing through his hands since he became a cultivator. Even in terms of productivity it made some amount of sense, but he had been ignorant of how much wealth disparity there could be between people. Instead of finding rumors about cultivators being exaggerated they had almost been undersold.

Ayotunde, Ross, Lera, and Elisa were paid partly with shares of loot from the mercenaries who attacked them. It was a not insignificant amount of money, but only two of them had enchanted bags of any sort. Though there was some appeal to carrying the entirety of one's wealth on them, most cultivators actually didn't do that. That was even true of Anton- some of his payment was drawing on bank accounts set up through the Order.

Kohar had been paid in an ongoing manner during her legal work, including expenses incurred for legal fees, most of which were bribes to make the process not take years or decades. Though they'd managed to legally emancipate a large number of people and force the Iron Ring Slavers to pay huge penalties, those penalties had ironically mostly gone towards the slave owners and not those wrongfully enslaved. Only small amounts were actually awarded to people insufficient to even begin to cover the wrongs committed- if money *could* cover such wrongs. Anton had set aside more funds to help set people up. Nearly everyone was planning to move to Windrip, where the first wave of freed slaves mostly resided. They had the option to go elsewhere, but most preferred to return to some sense of the former community they'd possessed.

It wasn't possible for Anton to forget his friends from the Order. If he were to pay them mercenary rates for the entire duration of their efforts, he would bankrupt himself. They weren't unwilling to help, but he made sure that the rest of the profits from sale of looted weapons and armor would go to them. If he ended up with just pennies to his name he didn't care. He could just work for more.

He did have one more expense he had to pocket, but it was perhaps one of the most important. He wanted to throw a giant celebration. Enough mourning had taken place to last the entirety of everyone's lives, but a celebration of those who still lived and were now free once more was absolutely critical. It would symbolize the end of the first step of making things right. Anton planned to clear his mind of thoughts of the rest. Revenge would be found and he still had to confirm if Annelie was able to be happy, but such a momentous success could not go uncelebrated.

The previous group in Windrip had been anticipating the arrival of more kindred spirits, freed slaves whether they were from Dungannon or elsewhere. There was enough room for everyone to settle in, though it wouldn't be comfortable long term. For the first week

nobody would be spending time in their quarters anyway as everyone was busy with festival preparations.

Though they were under no obligation to help, Ayotunde and the other mercenaries were instrumental in transporting goods from the nearby city of Stregate and helping to set up temporary pavilions for the celebrations. There were even a few more permanent structures flung together like they were nothing. When Ayotunde could support the frame of one wall of a building by himself and they had dozens of other cultivators more than a single stage into Body Tempering, labor was quick.

Every person who was even vaguely a chef from the little cultivation haven in Windrip was involved in cooking, and even more people from the town itself and the nearby Stregate. Stew cooked for days, and tables were laden with pies, roasts, and dishes of every sort.

Despite the accelerated timeline for planning, the concerted efforts of everyone made everything work, even if it was a bit early in the year for the sort of celebration they were having. Spring crops had barely begun being planted, but the abundance of willing hands brought everything together in a timely manner.

Then on the day of the festival, it decided to rain just as the final setup was complete. Wind whipped the rain underneath the covered pavilions, soaking people and food. The atmosphere immediately turned sour.

That simply wouldnt be allowed. Anton knew he was in no way capable of dispersing the clouds in the sky at his current level, but he could do something else. He grabbed a handheld pie and stepped out into the rain. He could have prevented the rain from touching his body, but not everyone could do that. He let it soak him and instead used his energy to draw attention to himself.

He held the small meat pie above his head. Everyone! he called upon the his training in Voice to not only carry the sound to the hundreds of people in the surroundings but also guide his speech, adjusting his tone where possible. Today we celebrate freedom! Freedom for those who were taken as slaves, but also freedom for those who were born and remain free! Those of you who cultivate energy do so to improve your work, but also to keep yourselves free! Today, we celebrate- and we wont let a little bit of weather get in the way!

With that, Anton chomped into the soaked meat pie. It was squishy and disgusting and one of the best tastes hed experienced in two years. If his life ended now he could die happy- but there were many times in his life hed had that feeling. Hed lived past all of them, and intended to live to reach more in the future.

The first one to join was Ayotunde. He grabbed an entire roasted chicken and ran out into the rain, dancing around in a circle chomping into carried food with Anton like a pair

of madmen. Catarina was next, but all of the stronger cultivators joined in almost immediately after that.

Fuzz dragged a whole roast pig out onto the soaking wet grass and started devouring it with Alva right next to him. Chefs began passing out bowls of steaming hot soup that people carried into the rain. People began shoving food into their mouths and running around wildly, exuberant in their freedom. Not everyone chose to run into the rain, but the rain and good spirit still came to them as they stood next to the tables.

More than just the former villagers of Dungannon and the other freed slaves were participating. People from the rest of Windrip and Stregate had come to join the festivities, and enough of them brought contributions of their own food that it was likely that everyone would be stuffed full for days.

It was a good feeling, Anton decided, seeing people happy. This was the thing that was most important. Hard work was necessary for the resources to allow this, and unfortunately battle was necessary as well, but it was all worth it in the end. With so many cultivators, even with small cultivators, the energy in the area was wild. Anton felt it flow around and through him. It wasn't really organized in any conceivable way, but the way it flowed through people was invigorating. It was more than just a good feeling. By the end of the night Anton reached the completion of the fourteenth star, and while he imagined people who cultivated Spiritual Connection or something like it would have gained the most, he knew at least a half dozen of the weaker cultivators advanced as well, along with Ayotunde who was the strongest among them.

For a brief moment, Anton wondered how they might replicate the situation but he immediately knew that the event was not something that could be manufactured artificially. He still intended to promote celebrations regardless, because the cultivation benefits were merely a nice convenience. Doubtless the relaxed atmosphere had simply eased the tension on accumulated energy. The Order already knew the benefits of occasional relaxation, though not everyone really seemed to take it seriously. Anton had ignored it, but he wasn't in any state to truly relax more than a small amount for the last two years.

Dozens of people woke up in the morning, covered in mud with hangovers. Yet as they adjusted to the rising sun, the previous night's joy eased their pain. Small groups of people tried to continue the celebrations to some success, but others went back to work on the fields. Anton was in the second group, and though they didn't *need* his help at all he was able to accelerate some parts of it quite a bit.

Ayotunde also lent his powerful body to the cause. Anton could see he was no stranger to such work, but he was missing decades of experience if he wanted to keep up with Anton himself. You worked as a farmer? Anton asked.

For a while, Ayotunde admitted. I was not too fond of it, but Western Steel Body understand that working the body is just as important as circulating energy.

Id like to hear more about it, if its not secret. My body is a bit lacking especially at the current moment. The cultivation method of the Ninety-Nine Stars didnt do anything in the way of cultivating the body in the first half of Spirit Building. While having completed the first ten stars would make a cultivators body sufficiently powerful, Antons use of Candle Wax had let his age catch up, and the first thing it hit was his body. He was able to compensate with energy and he wasnt *weak*, but he didnt feel like someone whod cultivated his body so much either. He also sort of wanted to use that bone bow still, but that was looking even more unlikely with his current bodily power.

There are many secrets I cannot share, Ayotunde admitted, But I still have things I can share that should help an old man like yourself.

I will do my best to respond in kind, Anton nodded. He was getting more experience studying other cultivation techniques from working with Devon and Kohar. While he couldnt alter their fundamental natures at his current level of experience, he still saw certain patterns that could be adjusted to better suit specific needs.

It was Antons desire to settle all of his family in Windrip, or possibly in Carran with Catarinas family. He wouldnt even mind if they wanted to stay in Edelhull or some other big city. He had more than a handful of adult descendants who were happy to choose a peaceful life. Anton knew he wouldnt be able to spend as much time with them as he wanted, but he didnt need to control their lives anyway. His great-grandchildren werent all able to be reunited with their parents, but in turn some parents had lost children. Everyone found new homes, and everything was basically as good as could be, given the circumstances.

Given his lingering injuries Devon settling down to live a quiet life would have been quite sensible, but Anton hadnt really expected that. Devon was still intent to grow stronger in cultivation, and joining the Order was the best way to accomplish that. While the Ninety-Nine Stars was the primary cultivation method and usually superior to other choices, it wasnt impossible for a cultivator to keep their old technique and be an official member. Devon had chosen to do so, though he intended to continue working with Anton to improve the basic method hed grown accustomed to.

All of that was fine. The one thing that Anton didnt want was to have a great-granddaughter not even in her teenage years declare she wanted to be just like him. Alva didnt simply mean a cultivator, but she wanted to be a fighting cultivator. No matter how many times Anton explained that he would have preferred to live a peaceful life, she wouldnt listen. It didnt help that she was almost inseparable from Fuzz and that Catarina encouraged her decision.

For that, Catarina was the one who had to keep Alva in her home. Their courtyards merely had a single wall separating them, but he thought it would be better for Alva. He would still do his best to help raise her, but he was quite worried about that. Even if she had already completed the first star, cultivating too quickly at a young age could damage her. Anton paid very careful attention so that she would not harm herself, but he couldn't be around all the time. That was as both a cultivation instructor and as a surrogate parent. He also couldn't just bring her along with him, because she was exactly the kind to throw herself into danger when it appeared instead of staying somewhere safe. Her injuries in the battle hadn't dissuaded her from that at all.

Anton sighed. Why did his descendants have to be so willful and *difficult*?

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A fist with the force of a charging bull hit Anton straight in the face. He was sent flying backwards, though despite how that looked it was actually the best result. That meant the force was nicely distributed instead of just focused on a single deadly point. It wouldn't entirely stop his face from bruising later, and he still had to land properly. As the wall came rushing towards him he twisted his body so that his feet were facing it, and he landed much as he would from a vertical drop, though with some awkward forward and ground-facing momentum.

He wasn't even fully on his feet when his opponent reached him, kicking him in the side. His body lifted off the ground slightly, and a kick from the other side tossed him back in the other direction. None of the attacks were powerful enough to truly break through his defenses, but it was shameful to be treated like a sack of potatoes. The attacks kept coming continuously, giving him no time to think between them. Which was, of course, the whole point.

Anton had only barely started to lift his hand to block the fist coming for him when it stopped, touching his nose. He sighed. Have you been holding back or something, Hoyt?

Hoyt shook his head. It's just the restrictions placed on you that make it feel so difficult. You're not used to fighting without a weapon. Besides, you're actually less effective than normal for another reason. You're trying too hard *not* to think.

I thought that was the whole point of training Instinct, Anton commented.

Depends on who you talk to, Hoyt said, But as someone who knows you and has trained with you, Instinct definitely doesn't replace thinking. What are you thinking about?

I was just trying to not. I wanted my body to react to your attacks on its own. Is that not correct?

Hoyt shrugged, Again, Im just one person but even I dont know how to not think. Besides, Instinct is just *another* thing. Youll still need to think. Just try to focus on something else.

The two of them went through several more iterations of training over the next several days with only minimal progress. Finally, they found what worked best for Anton. Since he wasnt an expert in Instinct he still needed to be in the mental state of combat to make use of it. So they returned to sparring, with some special features thrown in.

Arms and legs moved swiftly, but the subtle movements of small joints or the waist sometimes made the most difference. Anton could deflect every strike, but if Hoyt got ahold of his arm even his slightly greater cultivation couldnt save him. He had to use all of his concentration keeping himself out of a grapple he would likely lose. Then a rock hit him in the side of the head. Hoyt was kind enough to slow down slightly as Anton was thrown off, but he didnt let Anton have the freedom to think about other things.

At the current moment Anton was able to avoid a simple rock about half of the time. Energy charged rocks he was slightly more successful with, as they were easier to notice. Anton had to admit that he wasnt using Instinct as his sole method for dealing with the flung projectiles, but he didnt like looking so sloppy. It was also not unreasonable, since relying on *just* Instinct later would doubtless get him killed.

The ones to throw the rocks had been Catarina and Timothy at first, but as Anton advanced in his training Velvet had taken to participating. She upped the difficulty too much with her stealthy, so she usually chose to abstain, but a certain small someone had picked up her technique. Alva didnt have the bodily strength to launch a rock fast enough or with enough precision that Anton wouldnt just have moved out of the way before it reached him even if he didnt intend to, but with a little bit of stealth technique mixed in she nearly matched Catarina and Timothy. Some of that started with Anton wanting to make her feel like she was succeeding, but soon enough he was legitimately finding it difficult to avoid her attacks. Though as his level of proficiency in Instinct increased, he was better at avoiding every attack even when he wasnt expecting them.

Even outside of sparring, It had become a sort of game where any of them could attack Anton at any time. Never anything serious, but even a touch counted as a loss. Anton lost quite a bit until the point where he started doing the same. Hoyt was the only one who had trained Instinct so far, though Velvet was learning along with Anton. She was quite capable of training it without people pelting her with rocks while she focused on someone else, but that just made her experiences more valuable for Antons notes.

Though he was only at the fourteenth star, among their little group everyone had trained everything but Earthly Connection, the final piece of the first half of Spirit Building. Catarina was beginning her training in the area, but she didnt have much to say at her current point. It was one of the least appealing possible purifications, since being in tune with others emotions didnt inherently make one stronger. Yet Anton knew it still had value.

Insight allowed something similar, but it only related to surface level actions. It allowed people to predict someones movements yet lacked understanding their motivations. Likewise, Earthly Connection would theoretically allow for prediction of more long-term actions, as well as how groups as a whole would react. Anton was actually quite interested in that, but that was the very reason he was putting it off. He was considering taking it as his Prime Tempering. If it proved to be less useful than he anticipated, he could still put in more effort to catch up in other areas.

Time passed peacefully, with Anton often journeying back and forth between the Orders main grounds where there was the highest concentration of natural energy and Windrip, where he could visit a growing and thriving community. Training himself was important, but if he let that community fail most of his effort would have been for naught. Though more than the community itself, the people were important. If they were truly satisfied to go their separate ways, he would not object- but the majority still remained with them. Only a few set out on their own, and of *them* Anton knew of two who were planning to teach other communities about how even basic cultivation could improve their lives.

The first thing that Anton was glad to notice was that he had started sensing cultivators throughout the rest of Windrip. He hadnt *forced* anyone to teach others about cultivation, but he encouraged it. With how many were having success, they must have done more than just leave the basic cultivation manual with them. Anton knew he was fortunate to be the type that could get by without guidance, but most people werent. He wasnt sure if that was even true of him anymore, because he would be at least a few stars weaker without what hed learned from others.

Welcome back, Sir Anton. It is good to see you again.

Anton sighed. Come now Ebbe. Just Anton.

Alright, Anton. At least he dropped the formality easier. The square jawed man was large and talented enough at cultivation Anton thought he would have chosen to join the Order, but as he seemed quite happy where he was Anton didnt continue to bring it up.

How have things been going here?

The same as normal, Ebbe nodded. You have something to say?

Its just the road is a bit rough.

It is not hard for those with even a bit of cultivation, though it does make transporting animals difficult, Ebbe admitted.

That first parts the problem. Maybe it doesnt matter, but I cant help but think more people would come see how things are here if the road was better.

Maybe we should work on it, Ebbe conceded. Ill bring it up later. Or *you* could.

I dont want to force things. I know my opinion carries great weight, but I dont want to run things. He didnt even want to be a mayor when all of these people were just part of Dungannon. It was just that apparently people equated personal strength and leadership. Anton was willing to admit that people could have both, and even that cultivators could improve themselves in ways to become better at leadership, but he didnt think he was there yet. Not really.

Lets stop standing in the fields, Ebbe said. Have a drink. Were a bit low on the good things, but the well is plentiful.

I wouldnt mind a drink, Anton said.

Normally such a thing would be trivial and ignorable. Drop the bucket, wheel it up, pour it into a jug, drink. Easy. Even normal people had no trouble with that, cultivators even less so. Despite Anton feeling his age again, he wasnt *feeble*. But something felt strange.

His hand grabbed Ebbes wrist before he even thought about it. Wait, Anton cautioned. The water tasted sweet and clean but he had the feeling it wasnt. With that feeling he actually brought his energy to bear, and found that Instinct hadnt led him astray. The water was bad. It wasnt at the level that would kill a man, let alone a village of cultivators but it could certainly make them sick.

Anton had no problem exerting his influence for purposes like investigating the water. Within an hour someone was running into Stregate to get the water tested while many others were moving around the area looking for a source of contamination. Anton wasnt familiar with poisons, but he didnt think the well was poisoned. At least, not intentionally. The investigation would hopefully arrive at the same conclusion. If it was foul play of some sort Anton honestly didnt know what he would do. In such a case, he should probably ask Kohar for advice. She wasnt just an expert on legalities, but also the proper way to handle such things. Back in Dungannon most conflicts were settled easily as they were honest mistakes- and when someone tried to cheat him in a business deal, he simply refused to interact with them again. Once everyone knew someone was a cheat, they didnt last long.

He thought perhaps he should study law. By Kohars admission, she had been doing so for decades and still wasnt able to cover everything in a single field. That meant it wouldnt be easy, and he probably wouldnt have the time. But getting at least a basic understanding beyond village laws could help him maneuver through tricky situations. More importantly, if he planned to push for change in Ofrurg he needed to understand what laws were required at what complexity to make a functioning society. He wasnt a fan of complicated laws, but if they were too simple they might be insufficient.

What Anton knew for sure was that he grew bored when he wasn't actively participating in events, and he decided to scout around the area. He was several times faster than anyone else, and within an hour he found a dead animal upstream of the village that was likely the source of the bad water. It felt the same, at least. He properly moved the half-eaten deer away from the shore. That would prevent the problem from worsening, but he didn't know what to do to make the current water *safe*.

Fortunately, someone else did. Another reminder that he couldn't do everything, even if he wanted to. Anton supposed he was sort of justified being set in his ways, but the longer he remained a cultivator the less the old man's excuse would actually apply. He needed to take a moment to examine which of his future goals he actually needed to lead *himself*. Killing Van Hassel was a given, but he wouldn't mind giving the job to some Elders if the opportunity presented itself. Personal catharsis was nice, but he'd rather not risk his own life and that of his companions for something so ultimately meaningless.

Chapter 124

Most of those who worked in the Order's fields were new cultivators who needed a way to earn contribution points without experience. While some were quite good workers, they couldn't really be relied upon for consistency. Most of those who were consistent were those with stagnated cultivation. They wanted to maintain a pleasant lifestyle as well as occasionally obtaining cultivation resources to try to advance further. There were very few with Elder Howland's particular devotion to the task, which was why even though some older and more powerful cultivators sometimes helped him when the fields were lacking, he usually made up for any slack himself. Sometimes that was difficult at the fifteenth star. The Order didn't have just a small amount of lands, but dozens and hundreds of separate fields. Some of them were smaller or basically trivial to take care of, but some of the more valuable herbs required special care.

Lately, his job had become easier for several reasons. He had more help, and while he couldn't say it was *constant* it was as consistent as it could get. Hoyt and Anton both continued to work with the plants whenever they were on the Order's grounds, usually giving Elder Howland months of strong work. Even when they were just in Body Tempering they were as good as two, three, sometimes ten others. Now they were in Spirit Building and could do the work of dozens, though comparing them to the more experienced helpers he had they were only as good as a handful of them put together.

In relation to Anton were a number of others. Displaced villagers from Anton's former home. The situation that had brought them to the Order was unpleasant, but Elder Howland was glad to have them. Anton convinced them that working the fields was good for their personal energy cultivation- and he was correct. They even drew in some others to help them. Among them was a young man named Pete, who not only worked hard but also had a *feel* for how the fields should be arranged. He was a formation expert in training, and Howland could see he had the knack.

The biggest factor, or at least the one Howland felt most closely, was the changes in *himself*. Hed been stuck on the fifteenth star, trying to complete Spiritual Connection. Anton had helped him achieve a new perspective on it, and hed completed it and was well on his way to the seventeenth star. Mental Liberation was really just something hed put off for last rather than something he intended to have be a prime tempering. Of course, hed had no way to know hed stagnate for a couple decades, but if he had his decisions wouldnt have been much different.

He simply *refused* to be outpaced by an actual old man. Not that his refusal seemed relevant. Soon enough Anton would catch and then surpass him, but at least by that point hed be surpassing mid spirit building and find himself among the upper echelons of the Order. Though on the other hand, Elder Howland was slightly doubtful hed reach the twenty-second star before Anton. How long did he have? Five years? Though his cultivation had started moving again, it wasnt really *accelerating* like it would need to if he wanted to achieve that goal.

It was just a simple goal. If he failed, it didnt matter. In fact, he had more lofty goals now. Hed been out to observe the fields in the little community Anton had added to. The energy in the area certainly showed the effects Anton asked about, after less than a full year. Though he wasnt the social type, Elder Howland was also doing his best to spread Antons ideas. He didnt want to push for it *too* hard, but if even first star cultivators tended all of the fields in Graotan, Howland imagined it would bring great change. It seemed a lofty goal, but not a single person in Windrip seemed that they would fail to reach the first star given even half a year to cultivate.

Cooperative cultivation wasnt unheard of, but the personal care for every single persons beginning cultivation was a rarity. When a plant among the fields was failing Howland would provide it some additional fertilizer and water, but he wouldnt spend hours caring for it. Perhaps if they had enough workers they could reap benefits from such actions. The reciprocal effects of plants providing energy to the land and vice-versa might not show on such a small scale or in a single crop, but over time he wondered where it might lead. He was excited for the thought. Even more so because so few people surpassed Spirit Building, and better cultivation resources could push the standard of the Order higher, increasing their influence and power. While those factors should not be the ultimate end goal for righteous cultivators, they were still necessary to allow real change to improve the world.

Though most would have considered five months to advance from the fourteenth to fifteenth star quick, Anton found it was rather slow. Though it was not terribly slower than anything else, Anton thought he was better suited for it than he was Spiritual Connection. There had been no issues with Catarinas training, it simply had taken time. Anton simply felt that he was slower than he should have been for his training in Instinct. The only reason he felt it was slow at all was that Hoyt and Catarina closed the

gap in cultivation with him, reaching fifteenth star not long after himself. Until that point hed been able to keep a pace ahead of them.

He had a very simple place to lay his blame. Himself. Burning his lifespan with Candle Wax had been the right choice considering the timing involved with saving Devons life, but Anton would now have to accept a slower pace of cultivation. Even if his further successes in cultivation gained him more years of lifespan, he would always be a little bit worse than hed had the chance for.

But so what? He had no right to complain, as he still outpaced many people. Even his most important target, Maximilian Van Hassel, had been in Spirit Building for more than a decade.

Anton knew better than to complain, but he was still human. There was no way to stop himself from feeling a bit of disappointment at his current situation. Not regret, but dissatisfaction.

Those very thoughts were what let Anton know he was lucky. He was alive and prospering and he still wanted more. He could see how easily thoughts could take over, making cultivators feel they were above the world when really they were just part of it the same as any human. A more powerful part, but simply another individual in the grand scheme of the world.

Among all of the talk of the upcoming expedition to a dangerous tomb of some sort, Velvet found that she was most afraid of something else. Shed put off cultivating Voice, Earthly Connection, and Emotion as long as she could. All were intertwined in areas she didnt really understand.

Insight? Figuring out what people would do was easy, for the most part. It was all in their eyes, the way they tensed their muscles, how they shifted their energy. That was as far as shed managed with understanding others.

Immediately following had been Mental Liberation. Though Anton was the best at explaining the principles he hadnt yet practiced that particular area himself. The basic idea was simple enough. Resisting outside control came naturally, and ignoring her own emotions was easy. Velvet knew that was a bad thing, but she properly followed the Ninety-Nine Stars and didnt divest herself of unpleasant emotions, even if it would have been easier.

Instinct was fine. She was actually quite happy to participate in the training with the others. It gave her a sense of connection to everyone knowing she could be attacked at any moment. Rather than causing her stress, it allowed her to relax around others knowing she would be able to respond to any threats- both manufactured and legitimate.

Spiritual Connection was part of the essence of cultivation. It stretched beyond the cultivator into an understanding of the world as a whole, but despite the complexity it had Velvet was able to manage with the assistance of good teachers. Catarina had the knowledge and talent, and Anton was actually able to *explain* that knowledge. Catarina still hadn't attempted to train Voice, seemingly leaving a weakness for a prime tempering like so many others.

Including herself.

Velvet finally settled on training Emotion. Examining herself inside brought back memories of people she'd rather not remember, of a time in her life when she was weak and out of control of her life. She didn't feel as if she was making any progress at all, and she wondered if she should just abandon the effort and try something else. But neither of the other two options were more appealing. Voice also involved introspection, and she wasn't ready to try for a deeper understanding of people with Earthly Connection when she wasn't able to understand herself.

So that was what she was most afraid of. But the tomb still sounded like a close second. She was researching this Everheart through the records of the Order and by talking to other disciples.

How many traps did you say were in that corridor? Velvet asked incredulously.

Fifteen, said a disciple who had to be at least ten years older. Those were just the ones we found. There were probably more that didn't work. It was an *old*

place. And the whole time Everhearts were hounding us about how slow we were going. As if it was some kind of race. The man shook his head, I got out of there when the next projection talked about the different kinds of poisons that had been mixed into the upcoming room's atmosphere. I don't care if most things aren't stable for a century, if anyone could do it that man could.

How about the rewards? Velvet asked. Were they worth it?

Well the man shrugged. I heard the first three places in the race received some ancient treasures and some technique manuals. Written by Everheart himself. He sighed, *Forbidden* techniques. Like Sixty-Three Poisons Constitution and Burning Heels.

Those are?

Poisoning yourself so much you build up an immunity to pretty much anything, and then a way to run so fast you leave a trail of fire behind you. And *on* you.

Well, Velvet shrugged, They're probably useful?

Maybe. Third place didnt even get a real technique. Just a scroll labeled Jump Good. One of the elders watched him try to follow it and he just hit his head on the ceiling, immediately knocking himself out. Then somehow he bounced four or five times into one of the nearby corridors and nearly lost an arm to an undiscovered trap. Then the closest Everheart projection *laughed*.

Youre mentioning these projections. Thats a formation technique to make an image, right? What does Everheart look like? Velvet was quite curious.

No idea, the man shrugged.

How? You said there were a lot of them.

Yeah. And they all looked different. The only relation some sort of handsome young man. And tall. Im pretty sure Everheart hadnt been the first ones for a couple centuries by the time he started making these stupid tombs, and he was probably *never* tall. Though probably not as short as some of his enemies said. The disciple shook his head. Sorry I cant be more help. You can ask Elder Karn for more information. Though if he throws you out of his office, dont say I didnt warn you. That mans got *opinions*.

Thank you for your time, Velvet bowed her head. That information was much the same as the others shed talked to, though nobody was a real expert. The real problem wasnt Everheart being malicious. He was, sometimes, but that was mostly due to his chaotic nature. So far, she didnt know what to expect except for traps and trials. Nobody even knew what he meant by new cultivators and they *wouldnt* know until the tomb opened up in the next month. Everyone who wanted to participate had to already be there, and Velvet would bet that Everhearts actual plan was to get thousands of cultivators riled up only to slap them in the face by telling them they couldnt enter.

She didnt want that, because Anton was interested but to be honest both of them knew he wasnt likely to get in. But Velvet and the others probably could, unless Everheart meant people with less than a year of experience or just *teenagers*. The only thing that was certain was he would have *some* sort of entrants allowed, and the Order was confident enough in the rewards they were putting together an expedition with any disciples who wished to volunteer knowing the risks. That part was good, because it would mean they had elders watching over them, at least outside of the tomb. Even the trial spaces were making fun of other cultivators of his time. No wonder Everheart died however it happened. Probably with a dozen sects dogpiling him and a big explosion or something.

Chapter 125

Though he had somehow managed to get Alva to take cultivation slowly, after slightly more than half a year of cultivating she was close to the second prime tempering, the fifth star. Even at that speed her road hadnt been entirely smooth. Anton and the others had been carefully monitoring her progress and there had been several points where it

was clear that her still growing body responded differently to body tempering than an adult. If it were so easy to begin training five or ten years early, it would be commonly practiced.

The correct thing to do was to prevent Alva from cultivating, but that wasnt possible anymore. Anton wasnt sure if it had *ever* been possible. Everyone she might reasonably be taken care of was a cultivator or at least learning how to be one, and Alva would certainly have coaxed them into teaching her or found the technique manual herself at some point. Then she would have been doing something dangerous *and* entirely unsupervised. The best Anton could do was impart on her the knowledge of the danger and take care of her.

He was currently satisfied that she probably wouldnt kill or injure herself in cultivation. A small comfort, since she was eager to participate in real battles. He could forbid that as well, but that was impractical. He and the others who could watch her were heading to Everhearts tomb. Only physically imprisoning her would stop her from running off into the beast forest or on some dangerous mission. By the Orders standards, she was able to become an official member with the proper benefits that provided.

The only other option was taking her along with him, but *that* simply guaranteed shed get into danger that she wasnt prepared to handle. The difference between the fifth star, when she reached it, and the fifteenth star that Anton was at were more than just a factor of three. Anton could probably fight ten of her without trouble.

You need to stay here, Anton said. Keep training as Ive taught you. Work the fields or any other job you like, to improve yourself and grow your resources. And Uncle Pete will be around if you need any advice. Technically Pete wasnt her uncle or a relative at all, but it was close enough.

But I want to go with you! Im much stronger now.

Youre not ready for real danger yet.

You always say that, Alva pouted. I know you were fighting beasts in the forest a month after you joined the Order!

Having smart grandchildren was a curse. But at least he had one more way to wiggle out of that. It was only a month after I joined the Order, indeed, but I was at the fifth star at the time. If you reach that level and find a team, you can hunt in the forest. It was best to compromise, especially if it would keep her overall safer. Shed already been in danger many times more than a normal child of her age, but that didnt mean exposing her to *more* danger was a good idea. Dont go outside of the proper depths. Ill *know*

if you get lost and go deeper than you should. You have a better sense of direction than that.

And, Catarina took the chance to interject. You'll have Fuzz with you. He'll be there to keep you safe, but if you go somewhere too dangerous he could get really hurt. You don't want that, do you?

Alva shook her head. No I want Fuzz to be happy and run around like normal.

One more thing, Anton said. You have to buy some equipment from the equipment hall. A good bow you can wield or some protection- but preferably both. That should delay her another few weeks maybe. Alva worked hard, but she wasn't the sort to go from dawn to dusk and she didn't have Anton's years of experience. The amount of contribution points she could earn that way was much less. And if she *did* work extra hard, well, that was training. Hopefully she wouldn't push herself too hard though. I don't know when we'll be back, Anton admitted, But since the Order is involved, you'll be able to ask the elders what they know if it's more than a month or two. The trip will likely be a few weeks, so we can't really return sooner than that.

I understand, Alva nodded. Then you'll take me with you on the next thing, right?

We'll talk about that later, Anton hedged. If she reached Spirit Building, he couldn't reasonably refuse to take her along with him. That shouldn't happen for another year, maybe a couple months less even at her more cautious rate of advancement.

With the vague terms of the tomb, all sorts of members of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars were making the trip. That included many there to guard the rest, since there would doubtless be sects they had conflict with heading there as well. Of the escorts, Anton recognized Vincent and Elder Kseniya. There were a few more Essence Collection cultivators thrown in, and if it weren't for the circumstances it would almost be equivalent to an invading army. Though Elder Kseniya was the only Galaxy Construction cultivator among them, sending just one was already significant. The exact number wasn't public, but the Order didn't have more than a couple dozen cultivators at that level, with only a handful in other sects in Graotan. Most sects didn't even have a single one, even sects considered relatively powerful.

Of the cultivators planning to participate in whatever trials would be in Everheart's tomb, Anton knew more than a handful. There was himself, of course. The usual group with Catarina, Timothy, Hoyt, and now Velvet. There was also Sterling who introduced Anton to the grounds and Marcio the archer. Oskar and Devon would both be participating as well, being at peak Body Tempering and early Spirit Building, respectively. Anton was surprised to see two Constellation Formation cultivators who were traveling as part of the hopefuls instead of as guards. They still looked quite young, so if Anton was right they might have been cultivating for less than a decade.

He hadn't thought that much about how wide the definition for a new cultivator might be perceived. He knew *he* felt knew at two and a half years, but a full decade? Well, it

wasnt as unreasonable as he first felt. For most cultivators, a decade was indeed very new. Cultivation was seen as a lifelong endeavor, and even those with modest talents tended to live more than a century. If they were practicing a trade, Anton would have considered those with ten years of experience as something like journeymen. Not necessarily new, but not masters either.

The vast majority of the hopeful participants were young. Early twenties for the most part. There were a few just at the third or fourth star, and while Anton was certain that they would fit the mantle of new if Everheart wasnt more crazy than he already knew. There was the smallest chance that it was all a farce and the tomb was empty except the outside formation or only available to cultivators with a month or less of experience. Anton thought it *would* be sort of funny, but he wasnt sure if even Everheart had *that* much free time and resources to set up that sort of thing for centuries later.

As a cultivator, Anton rarely traveled with a group that he wasnt part of the leadership. He didnt mind following instructions, but he found it strange not having to make any of the plans. All told over a hundred cultivators from the Order as well as a few from other sects in Graotan were traveling together. Fortunately the elders had magic bags full of trail rations. Nothing tasty, but they didnt have to rely on buying fresh food from every village they marched through. They still usually did, of course, and the villages and cities appreciated the business- but *relying*

on random availability of spare food was foolish. Though Graotan was prosperous enough that it was generally not an issue.

The first half of the roads were familiar, but instead of turning more towards the north they continued directly east and even slightly south towards Floelor. The border guards on either side showed no surprise at such a large group. Floelor was quite aware that they wouldnt be able to stop the flood of cultivators heading towards Everhearts new tomb, so they simply prepared travel routes that would bring people directly to the destination with minimal opportunities to get into trouble. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars and Graotans cultivators in general had a good enough reputation that Floelor wasnt concerned about them in particular.

As they traveled away from the border and the scenery changed, Anton could only describe the area as barren. Barren of plant life and barren of natural energy. Yet there were still large cities occasionally, and the cultivators watching over those cities were still of respectable power. He noticed several Essence Collection cultivators in just a single city- and he was certain they werent part of other traveling sects.

When he asked about it, Vincent had an easy answer for him. The tomb is out in the middle of nowhere. Likewise, the route was chosen to bring us through the least relevant areas with no resources to steal. I have been through Floelor previously, and though many areas are like this, some places have an abundance of natural energy and vibrant plants and beasts. Even here there is more than immediately meets the eye.

With that information, Anton kept his eyes and other senses open. He had to admit that Vincent was right. While the plants were mostly clumps of scrubgrass and scraggly bushes, there were occasional solid trees and robust and tall grass. The natural energy was still minimal, but he realized that much of it was condensed into what little plantlife there was. That included wheat fields, and Anton knew that eating grains with condensed natural energy would be almost as good as taking cultivation boosting medicines with fewer potential side effects. Anton didnt mind that in principle, but it seemed that lower level cultivators had trouble advancing without connections. Then again, wasnt that true anywhere? Even Anton had just been *handed* a powerful technique in the form of the Ninety-Nine Stars. It wasnt secret but the number of copies was still limited. If Vincent hadnt done that for him he might not have even been able to acquire any form of cultivation technique to start off with. That just reaffirmed Antons plans for the future.

The terrain gradually grew arid and hot. There were also more craggy hills and tall, freestanding rock structures. Some stood alone like towers while others had wide, flat tops. The soil itself was now reddish brown and claylike. Not good for farming much of anything, though the few plants that grew in the area seemed happy enough.

Most of the terrain was completely ignorable, and there wasnt much of anything to see. However, as they approached one of the large freestanding plateaus Anton could see other people. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands. They must have reached the destination.

The first thing he saw, while they were still far off, was the image of a tall man. Not a statue, but not really a person. Unless the man were eight feet tall and able to stand with his feet well above the ground. Possible, but he would have sensed the fluctuations of energy from the horizon. The way the light didnt hit his face quite right confirmed Antons theory.

From what hed heard, the chiseled jaw and sharp features were just the sort of thing Everheart would use for a projection of himself. Broad shoulders like an ox and muscle filled out the rest of the figure who had no shirt and barely anything covering his lower half. He was standing there in the air, grinning at the crowd of people.

As they approached closer, Anton managed to recognize a few further figures. Elder Varela and Lev werent exactly a surprise, though the young man was almost unrecognizable. His back was straight, and though his presumably still useless arm was concealed in an oversized sleeve, he radiated confidence.

The next two were a surprise. Faces he had only seen in drawings. Anton tensed up as he saw Maximillian Van Hassel and Nirmal Slusser in person. He thought about trying to put arrows through them then and there, but in addition to the fact that they felt like they were in late Spirit Building there were both formal and informal agreements about

conduct in such situations. The Order would be justified to not support him if he were to attack, and he would find himself mostly alone. Even if his usual allies supported him he wasn't certain of victory, and the two didn't seem to be alone.

Finally he saw a face he'd wanted to see for two and a half years. In that time Annelie had gone from a girl to starting to look like a young woman, but there was no way he wouldn't recognize her no matter how much she grew. She was standing at the center of a group of people with similar auras, presumably the Frostmirror sect. Each group was cordoned off from the others.

Anton knew he wouldn't be allowed to casually approach, but he was going to make the attempt. That was his intention, anyway, but around the time they were just a couple hundred meters away from the crowds of cultivators the large floating Everheart spoke with a booming voice.

Welcome, everyone, to my tomb! Or your tomb, if you are not worthy. This one is specially prepared for new cultivators. Somehow the figures back became even *more* straight, and Anton thought his muscles bulged unnaturally as his arms flexed in front of him. You might be wondering who counts as a new cultivator. It's quite simple. Just try to enter and if you fit the bill you won't get knocked on your ass! Anton had never heard a laugh that would have sounded like someone good spirits in other contexts feel so *malicious*. Though Anton could see a smirk that indicated it would at least be fun for *someone*. Though Anton doubted a projection could actually feel mirth, it sure acted like it.

As crowds of people started pouring towards an ornate entrance in the rocky plateau, Anton realized he would have to find a chance to see Annelie later. Hopefully inside, where she would have fewer people around her.

Chapter 126

On either side of the entrance into the plateau were large statues posing proudly. They were reminiscent of the floating projection of Everheart, though unique in their own way. People were already starting to rush towards the entrance, and Anton saw people either pass through easily or get violently thrown back. Interestingly enough, nobody seemed to be injured no matter how far it flung them.

For example, one eager man from the front of the pack landed right at Anton's feet still over a hundred meters away. He was a man of about thirty years of age, but he had clearly been rejected harshly. Though Anton would have thought he could have reacted while in the air to have a smooth landing with his cultivation in mid Spirit Building, he landed directly on his rear and sat there stunned.

Anton and the other proceeded forward at a natural pace, and the area in front was starting to somewhat calm down. People seemed to have noticed that if they were moving at a moderate rate they wouldn't get flung too far back. That was presumably

less embarrassing for them, though it left everyone looking at them as they struggled to pick themselves up and staggered out of the way.

One man barrelled into the entrance once, landed on his rear, then charged it again. The second time he was flung twice as far and instead of landing *gently* if in an undignified manner, he struck the dirt and tumbled. Anton focused his eyes to see the man lying on his back staring up at the sky with a bloody nose. It didnt look serious, but the escalation was a clear warning. Most people got it.

Anton clicked his tongue as the remaining disciples of the Frostmirror sect pulled out of the way, having been some of the first to reach the entrance. Those who could enter had already done so, and the rest stood to the side trying to look like they hadnt been rejected.

Though the situation precluded the various sects from engaging in violence with their enemies, it didnt stop verbal barbs and jabs. A member of the Heavenly Lion Sect jeered at someone who was unable to enter, then found himself similarly rejected.

The members of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars tried to keep a neutral composure though some couldnt suppress their eagerness, running forward ahead of the rest. Some made it inside, but others had to make the walk of shame back towards the main body of the group.

Anton and the others kept a measured pace. There had been nothing that said admittance was limited, and more people were rejected than able to enter. There was no need to rush.

When Anton and the others around him were about ten meters away, Anton picked out Van Hassel and Slusser trying to enter. They were swiftly rejected, with Van Hassel sliding past Anton. His eyes couldnt help but follow the man, and for a moment their eyes met. Anton was close to just whipping out his bow and killing the man as he was in the midst of their group, but that would give others a reason to attack them. He also couldnt justify his actions without taking long enough for the man to prepare himself or retreat. Even if he did, any accusations would likely be taken as, well, an attempt to justify killing the man. It would be, even if it was just.

His vision simply lingered on Van Hassel as he approached the entrance, and the surprisingly well kept man glared. What are you looking at, huh, old man? Where are you *going*? You think you can enter when I cant?

Anton refrained from comment, but had already made himself seen. He just kept his gaze on the man as he continued walking.

Van Hassel got up on his feet and gestured. If hed been gutsy enough to pull out a weapon Anton might have tried to manipulate the situation, but mere impotent threats werent sufficient. Hey! Answer me you- the sound was cut off as Anton felt energy wrap

around him. It was powerful, and stopped his movements. He prepared himself to be flung backwards and resolved to land with as much dignity as possible, but then his step continued and he was through the barrier. He wasn't sure if the pause was even enough for most people to notice, but he certainly felt it.

He turned to Hoyt who walked next to him, whispering, Did the barrier slightly stagger you?

Hoyt shook his head, I felt nothing.

Anton frowned. That was concerning, but he was clearly inside- and proceeding deeper down the hallway. Soon enough he stepped into a large hall with at least a dozen doorways leading away from it, where there was of course another Everheart. This time it wasn't a muscled man, but instead a young handsome fellow in long, flowing, royal robes. He had his hands covered opposite sleeves and bowed as the final group behind the Order trailed in. Welcome, new cultivators. Five years. That is the threshold I allowed for entry, allowing my generous and magnanimous and quite relaxed stipulations to bring so many of you inside.

Given the crowd outside, it didn't really seem like many people had made it in- but Anton couldn't really consider it few either. He scanned the crowd casually, estimating around a hundred people in Spirit Building including around ten from Graotan, mainly the Order. There were several hundred more in Body Tempering who were confident enough in themselves to come to one of Everheart's tombs.

Honestly, Everheart continued, I find myself disappointed. A generous five years, and not a single Essence Collection cultivator. How far things have fallen. The man's gaze rested on a few towards the front who had the aura of late Spirit Building. Not too far, but that step is quite important. Well, I suppose five years might be a bit too short to expect from people. This could just be one of those things. I wonder if I'm a few years off from a good cycle. The last part was muttered to himself- though quite easy for anyone to overhear regardless.

You said five years? a young man standing with the disciples of the Frostmirror sect asked. Why is there an old man here then? He looked pointedly towards Anton.

At that point, Everheart's facade of civility and proper demeanor shattered. With a flick of his voluminous sleeves, the young man was flat on his face. Then Everheart was crouching in front of him, legs spread wide and a lazy expression of contempt on his face. Listen up, maggot. There are two problems with what you said. First, I'm not you. I'm Everheart. Great Golden Emperor of the Most Powerful Techniques Everheart. Though everyone else can call me Senior Everheart if they're polite about it. Everheart poked the top of the young man's head. Second, I don't make mistakes. If I say the old man has been cultivating for less than five years, he *has*. An uncomfortable number of gazes were on the young man on the floor, but even more were on Anton. Everheart snapped his fingers, Oh, a third thing. My word is law here. Even if that wasn't true, if I

say the ceilings a floor, its a floor. With another flick of his sleeve the young man fell to the ceiling, where he was similarly stuck flat. Now then, where were we? Oh yes. Go ahead and explore for a few days. The test starts after that. With a swirl of sleeves and light he spun around, then disappeared from view.

Even with many people running down different hallways at the announcement that they could explore, far too much attention was on Anton for his own preference- but something good came of the situation. He ignored the young man glaring at him from the ceiling as if the situation was *Antons* fault and focused on a head poking out from the crowd. Annelies eyes were wide and her jaw was hanging slack. Anton smiled gently and he gave a little wave. Finally found you. I hope youre doing well?

Several of the other members of the Frostmirror sect stepped in front of Annelie defensively, but she tried to push her way through them. Thats my great-grandpa! she exclaimed.

Another voice responded to her statement. The one you said was invincible and could do anything? The figure that spoke that line stepped forward, a woman just past her teenage years with an icy demeanor. What use is he if he couldnt even defend your village?

Antons hand covered Catarinas mouth as she was about to say something in his defense. He would prefer to maintain cordial relations with Annelies sect, at least for the moment- the disciple on the ceiling already being a lost cause. Thats true. Im not even remotely invincible and there are many things I cannot do. But I would still like to see my great-granddaughter.

The woman looked like she was going to reject, but Annelies hands appeared on her shoulders and her chin rested on the womans head. Diana said you were dead but I told her you couldnt be. I was right!

Anton smiled sadly. I could have been, though. In most cases, she would have been right. How are things?

Fine, Annelie said from her weird perch. The woman she was resting on kept an impassive yet stern expression even as she was being climbed on. Cultivating is fine but I dont have any friends. She blinked then exclaimed, Youre a cultivator! I thought so! How strong were you before?

I was not a cultivator when we last saw each other, Anton stated. Only from shortly after.

Seeming to be finished with Annelie clambering on her, Diana gently but swiftly lowered her to the ground. You should not believe him. That is not possible. Even if it was, there are opportunities to seek. We must be going. She started pulling Annelie behind her down a hallway.

Annelie looked back, I believe you! Well talk more later once Diana loses track of me!

Thats not the sort of thing you should say in front of me, the woman admonished.

Given the demeanor of the other surrounding disciples, Anton declined to attempt to follow her. Fare well, Annelie. See you soon. At least he could confirm she was alive and in something like good spirits, though he didnt think much of her sect mates. Cold and uncaring or a bit too emotional like the young man apparently permanently relegated to the ceiling. He was standing now, walking around and trying to find a way to get to the other hallways- while still occasionally glaring towards Anton.

Shes terrible, Catarina commented. Diana, I mean. Annelie seems great.

Ah, I forgot to introduce you, Anton shook his head. Well, there will be chances later, Im certain. He wasnt happy with the brevity of the meeting, but his heart was uplifted. Lets go check out these death traps, shall we? There *should* be reliable rewards if we can pass them.

The other disciples from the Order had already left, except for the core group. Timothy, Hoyt, and Velvet were still nearby. Hoyt spoke up next, The Frostmirror sect is one of those that tends to divest themselves of emotions instead of *handling* them. Luckily Annelie there is still in early Spirit Building as far as I could tell, so she should have barely begun the process. It would be better if we could retrieve her from their care, but that might be difficult.

Is removing your emotions that bad? Velvet asked. Do cultivators really need them?

Hoyt shrugged. It depends on who you ask. But I will say this. You have two kidneys. You dont *need* both of them. But I doubt you would divest yourself of either of them just because they might inconvenience you in the future.

Velvet wrapped her hands around her belly. Right.

Much better to be able to suppress emotions for a short time than entirely remove them, Anton said. Its literally impossible to be happy about the results, nor sad. If properly handled, positive emotions can be made to outweigh the negative. Even if it takes much effort. Anton was making use of his training at the very moment, trying not to remember the emotions from two and a half years prior, when hed last seen Annelie. Breaking down crying wouldnt do any good right now. He could just do it a little bit inside. He didnt need to pretend the meeting was *only* happy though.

The group had been strolling towards the nearest hallway. When they arrived, another Everheart with coiffed hair and tailored clothes that were probably fashionable in a previous century was just finishing an explanation to a small crowd. ... and thats about it. Just follow those instructions and you probably wont get yourself killed. His eyes turned to the five just entering the area. No, Im not going to repeat myself. Figure it out.

Somehow, Anton found Everhearts intentionally provocative attitude reassuring. He could take his mind off of problems he couldn't solve right now with a little bit of mortal danger. He looked down what *seemed* to be an empty hallway with little decoration by tiled floors and started scanning it with his eyes and senses, while the others did so as well.

Chapter 127

Before any of the members of the Order could discern whatever rules governed the hallway, someone started making their way through it. They took four steps, each one matching the one meter length of the tiles on the floor, before the fifth step unleashed a volley of darts from the wall. The man twisted his body in place to avoid most of them, but one still stuck into his shoulder as it pierced through his energy. If he had been willing to step off of the tile he was standing on he could have certainly dodged them completely.

Anton was quite amazed at the trap, he hadn't been able to tell the pressure plate or the tiny holes in the wall had been there until it activated. Afterwards, he still wasn't sure he could really pick it out or if he was just seeing what he wanted to see.

Anything? he asked Catarina and Velvet.

It's not a formation, I don't think Catarina frowned. At least, I can only discern reinforcement for the walls and floor and nothing more.

Before Velvet had the time to give her opinion, a strong woman stepped confidently onto the first tile the previous cultivator had stepped on. In response, a dozen spikes pierced *through* that very tile into her foot. She screamed in rage and pulled her foot away- Anton couldn't be sure, but he doubted she was seriously injured, outside of her pride. After all, she was able to stumble back to the safe zone without consequence. She looked like she was about to yell at the projection of Everheart, but thought better of it. Perhaps she remembered the man who was doubtless still wandering around the ceiling in the main hall. Senior Everheart. I thought you said there was only one path through the hallway. Why did it change?

Hmm, the fancily dressed Everheart stroked a well manicured beard, Did I say that? He looked pointedly towards the five who had come in last. Who knows? I might have, I might not have.

The woman grumbled but chose to walk back towards the main hall rather than trying to continue down the hallway or argue with the proprietor. Anton thought that was a reasonable choice, though he doubted the other hallways would be intentionally less obtuse.

Several others of those waiting tried stepping onto the tiles, but most were met by various traps. One more person managed to step several tiles in along a different path,

before the leading cultivator had made his decision and took a step to his left. With no response, he then continued forward.

A ball of compressed energy dropped from the ceiling, and the man flung himself backwards. Losing progress was one thing, but he absolutely could not be hit by the ball of energy. As it passed through the spot he had been standing it simply exploded, sending a shockwave down the five meter wide corridor. The cultivator wasn't quite prepared for that and was blasted into the ground.

Anton exchanged glances with the others. He wondered if they noticed what he did. He still wasn't sure how everything worked, but he moved forward to the left end of the five tile wide hallway. He stepped onto the first tile and nothing happened. The second in front of him. The third to his right. Then right once more and a large axe blade was slicing towards his legs. He hadn't been able to anticipate the attack, but as soon as it was happening his training in Instinct took over and along with his previous intentions propelled him backwards, leaping over the tile between himself and safety. I think that's quite enough of that for now, he commented.

Others began to try, not finding any real path to success. The paths people chose all seemed to be wrong, with traps triggering at unexpected moments and forcing them to retreat with various levels of injury before anyone even got ten tiles into the hallway that was a hundred meters long. People started filtering out of the hallway, leaving only the five from the Order and the first cultivator to step into the area. The wound on his shoulder had barely bled, but Anton could see occasional glimpses of it and saw what looked like yellow and purple bruising in the area. It hadn't been a wide impact, so perhaps it was some sort of poison causing the discoloration.

Anton sat down, then gestured for the others to do so as well. I have an idea. When the unknown cultivator didn't respond, Anton waved him over specifically. You should join us as well. We might be competition, but the chances of us getting something if we work together are higher. The man reluctantly sat down. I'm Anton. You?

Firdaus, he said reluctantly.

Good enough. We're all part of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, but if you work together with us we can agree to give you an even share of whatever treasures are at the other end.

What do you need me to do? he asked.

Listen to my ideas, and if you don't have thoughts to prove my ideas wrong one of us will run down the hallway.

Which one of us? Firdaus narrowed his eyes.

Either you or me. At your discretion. Im sure youll understand why later. First, Ill say what Ive observed. Im sure some of you have as well. Firdaus, what can you tell about why the tiles activate?

Nothing, he shook his head, It seems entirely random. I cant discern a path to the end.

Thats it, Anton said agreeably. Entirely random. Does everyone else feel the same? Everyone nodded in agreement. But theres more to it.

Before you share that, Velvet interjected, Perhaps it would be best for Firdaus to share the rules he heard. Since were offering our insights to him.

Firdaus shrugged, Sure. For all the good itll do you. He closed his eyes in concentration, then recited. There is only one path through the hallway. Each tile has the potential to release traps. The only rule is that you must step on adjacent tiles for the whole path. He held out his hands, That was the whole thing, though he said it with more drama, Firdaus inclined his head towards the watching projection.

That last part is actually important, Anton said. Very useful. I might have made a mistake without that.

Hows that useful?

Because I was just going to leap as far as I could to avoid stepping on as many tiles as possible, Anton admitted. But if thats an actual rule I imagine its enforced, he couldnt read anything from the smug expression of the nearby Everheart. He doubted that face was ever *not* smug. There were two specific things I took note of. Anyone want to guess?

The traps are always the same, Hoyt commented. Theyre not actually random. Each tile has the same one every time it triggers.

The formation doesnt make the effects, Catarina confirmed, Ive been able to observe it. It simply fortifies the walls and perhaps helps reset the traps, but the traps are certainly real if nearly impossible to detect with the senses.

Its good to have confirmation on that, Anton admitted. Having the traps be the same isnt too bad, and theres one other factor that I think makes this safe enough to risk. Anyone?

Nobody answered for a few moments until Timothy finally spoke up, Im not sure about this but I dont think I ever saw a trap trigger when someone stepped backwards.

Exactly! Anton slapped his thigh to emphasize his enthusiasm. I dont think Everheart wants to kill people with this. At least not in a boring or unfair way. People have the option to retreat. I think everyone else subconsciously realized that. A good deterrent.

Anton turned towards their temporary companion. So, Anton continued his earlier line of thought. One of the two of us should just run down the hall. If we dont stop, we can avoid the traps. If something changes, I believe we will still have the option to retreat.

Why would I go first, then? Firdaus asked. I cant find any fault in your observations, but you could still be fatally incorrect.

Simple. Though we might split things evenly, whoever goes first will get first pick of similarly valued items. The same for each of us. Whoever goes last will have the easiest time avoiding traps, in theory, so even if they get a fair split they dont have priority.

Im not sure. But so you cant later say I didnt contribute, Ill go second.

Perfectly reasonable, Anton said. Any objections from anyone else? Good. Anton shifted to his feet. Might as well get started.

Anton stepped forward, coating himself with his energy. He always had *some* protecting him but now it was actively controlled and at a higher intensity. He needed defenses but also agility. Still, it should be slightly easier than a real combat because he wouldnt have to also worry about any sort of attacks of his own.

He picked the line where he was familiar with the first five traps, then started running. Each foot hit a tile. The first one sprayed gas towards him, but by the time it reached the target location he was already on the next tile. That one didnt trigger. Anton had no reason to divert to the left or the right since most of the traps were still unknown, so he might as well make the most progress possible.

As he ran, Anton focused on his training in Swan Steps to augment his movements while he relied on his memory of the next two traps to avoid them, then had to rely solely on trained Instinct. Blades and spears and rocks flew at him, poisonous darts and gas and pretty much everything. One tile even fell away from under his foot as he stepped, but his momentum carried him forward to the next step. Anton didnt think about what was happening behind him or what might happen ahead- he merely focused on what he needed to do in the moment.

One step in front of the other, a twist to avoid an incoming attack, fortifying his defenses on an arm where he had to block, breathing in and out. This hallway was a test of agility and reaction as well as general cultivation power. It wasnt a real deathtrap. Anton was certain of that. If Everheart just wanted to kill people, there was no need to pretend to have fairness. Though Anton couldnt say what the results might be if he angered one of the projections. Then all logic might be out the window.

After a minute, Anton realized he was standing still. Hed told himself to keep going until the reached the end of the tiles, and he had. He looked back at the hallway which was filled with flame, gasses, dust, and weapons. The weapons retracted into the floors or walls while the projectiles were retrieved by some mysterious force. The gas dispersed

and the flames faded, leaving behind no scorch marks on the surroundings or indeed any signs of his passage.

As for himself, Anton was still breathing heavily and had nicks and scrapes and burns all over, with traces of poison in his system. His movements hadn't been perfect, nor his defenses. He took a few steps away from the tiles and sat down, circulating his energy to jumpstart the healing process while he watched to see if Firdaus would really make the attempt.

Firdaus stuck to what he said and ran straight down the middle, along the same path as Anton. There were still many differences in the dangers he encountered, since the triggering of the tiles was quite random. There was a stretch of nearly eight tiles where nothing happened, then one that hadn't done anything for Anton suddenly tilted, flinging him to the side and to the right end of the corridor. He hit the wall but was running as soon as his feet hit the tile below, narrowly avoiding a blade chopping out of the wall. He continued running down the right side of the corridor, triggering traps with every other step. Anton found that the danger seemed more real when he could see all of it instead of just moving past it, but it was all somewhat appropriate. Firdaus used his spear to parry blades on the very last tile and then stepped to next to Anton.

Very good, Anton said. Instead of trying to get back on the path you just kept moving. That takes bravery.

... Thanks, Firdaus didn't seem to know how to respond to the complement. Honestly, I just didn't think about it.

I didn't either, Anton admitted. I just had to keep going. Still, whatever mental training you have done was sufficient.

That's what Spirit Building is all about, Firdaus said. He sat himself near Anton and watched down the corridor, also taking the chance to start healing small wounds.

Not going to try to attack me and claim everything for yourself?

That would be pretty stupid, He said. I know the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. I hope you will uphold the reputation of honesty, and I'm certain you would uphold the tradition of strength. He stroked his chin, Is it really true you've also been training less than five years? You don't look like it.

My opportunity came very late in life, Anton said, But it is true that I only began recently.

Close to mid Spirit Building in that time given your age, I'm quite impressed. The rest of your group seems talented as well.

Yes. We were lucky to join the Order at similar times.

Timothy was currently running down the hall, yelling at the top of his lungs. In his defense, it was a cry of determination and not fear, but it was a bit funny to watch. Anything that came from his left was skillfully deflected with his shield, and fancy footwork and simple forward momentum took care of everything else. He arrived with the other two soon enough, the least injured of the three.

Catarina was next, though it seemed the others had also been eager to try their hand. She relied less on judging attacks after they came and instead had memorized most of the dangers that would appear in front of her, dodging them before they could even be a threat- sometimes stopping short instead of continuing at full speed like the first three. There were still a few that were new and she had to react to without knowing what they would be, but she made it to the end in good health, though clearly fatigued like the others.

Hoyt seemed eager but let Velvet go next. She was clearly less aware of the pattern of traps she would be facing, since memorizing things like that was more in Catarinas field, but she still used her speed and agility to weave her way through the traps- and was even willing to step to side tiles instead of sticking strictly to the middle, despite possible unknown traps.

When it was finally his turn, Hoyts response to most of the traps was chopping through them. Though the method was aggressive, it was effective. Darts split easily, but while fire wasnt something that could be cut with a blade, energy could wedge it apart. That was even more true when the energy in question was also fire. Though chopping seemed as if it was a method of brute force, it actually took as much finesse as parrying everything. He still had to align his weapon precisely, he just wasnt meeting the threats with intent to solely deflect. He ran into some trouble with the floor spikes that were fortified to not break, but even in that case his axe pushed him away from the spikes.

Soon enough six relatively healthy people were at the end of the hall, with an impatient looking Everheart looming over them. Finally. Will you look at the rewards now? Honestly, I havent seen people so willing to wait for rewards in my entire life. You didnt even peek your head in the doors!

Anton shrugged, Sorry, Senior Everheart, but I wanted to see my companions successes. Besides, were the treasures just going to run away? Actually, he supposed they might.

Everheart sighed, Yes yes, loyalty and all that. We have two things. First, the door on the left. It has rewards for all of you. One item each. The other is for training. One hour per day per person.

Ah too bad we dont get to split everything. Still, second pick should be worth something, eh Firdaus?

The man nodded. Lets see what there is. If I know one thing about Everheart, he *is* generous with rewards.

Chapter 128

The rewards room couldnt be compared to the treasury at the Order, but the latter was a sprawling complex of rooms built up over many years. In fairness, the room was quite full of varied rewards- and it shouldnt be the only one of its type in the area. At least, Anton didnt see any other entrances or additional people in the area, and he doubted they were the only ones to have passed *some* trial at this point. There were hundreds of people, after all.

Senior Everheart, Anton didnt think there would be any problems, but he had to ask. What constitutes choosing an item? May we pick them up and examine them?

Theres no trick about it, Everheart said, Whatever you take out of the room. Or if you break something, but thats not going to happen by accident.

With his concerns assuaged, Anton set out examining the various things in the room. There were a few bows, but while he was interested in something he could use between his current bow and that bone bow he still wanted to try, he could get something better at the Order. It would be better to get something that the Order didnt have. Antons eyes were drawn to some crystals. They were the sort that could be worked into equipment as a method of empowering them along with whatever base materials were used to form the object. While most crystals didnt have any direct effects, they could allow something to store energy of their own and lighten the burden on the user.

There was a pretty clear outlier among the crystals, and indeed it stood out in comparison to the rest of the equipment. The powerful energy it radiated was nearly twice that of anything else. Anton picked it up, feeling the power of a storm wash over him, wind whipping in his hair and lightning shaking him. The feeling didnt completely encapsulate his senses, and he felt fluctuations nearby. He turned towards Firdaus, seeing the desire plain on his face. You want this? Anton held up the crystal.

Firdaus only hesitated a moment before nodding. It would be very useful to me.

Anton smiled and placed it back on the shelf. Its quite something, but I dont know if it would be of particular use to *me*. Go ahead, if you want it. Just make sure you give everything a once over. Id imagine there are some hidden treasures as well.

Weapons and armors of various sorts were placed along the walls, but most of them were nothing special. It would never be inappropriate to have more armor, but even the best quality armor would limit mobility past a certain weight or bulk. Anton was not without armor, though he was finding the limits of some equipment in Spirit Building.

There were other objects that didnt all have clear purposes, rings and necklaces that certainly were enchanted but the sorts of enchantments werent always obvious. Its hard to know the value of things here, Anton mused, holding up a pair of gloves. It seems inappropriate to choose something *just* for fashion.

Wyvern leather gloves. Good for protection and enchanted to improve manual dexterity. Anton glanced over his shoulder to see Firdaus clutching the crystal in his hand. Youre primarily an archer, correct?

Thats right, Anton nodded.

Theres an undershirt on the shelf there, he pointed, Tendonvine strands, covers the torso and arms an stabilizes and fortifies the muscles especially in the back and shoulders. That leaves the hands themselves, but it should improve your efficiency by a decent margin. A few percent, at least.

Anton moved over to the indicated shelf, unfolding what had just looked like a square of cloth to his eyes. It had an interesting texture, but not an unpleasant one. It was a strangely stretch material but he determined it was still reasonably tough. Not relevant to consider as armor, but it wouldnt be damaged in casual use. As for its effects Anton couldnt be quite sure without trying it on. So he did. It was only a few moments before his torso was bare and then he slipped it on. He could immediately feel the effects as it tightened around his muscles. Even so, he was still able to move as he wanted and in fact he felt his movements supported. Just to make sure he held his bow and felt the effects as he pulled back the string. It was just a bit easier. Utility items of the sort were usually passed over for flashier items, but Anton liked it. Are you an enchanter of some sort? Anton asked Firdaus.

It would be inappropriate to say that with my experience, Firdaus shook his head. Im just an apprentice.

Is that so. Im certain you will do well when youre officially an enchanter. I dont recognize your sect?

Cloudtop Summit, from the southeast.

I see. I have not travelled that far just yet. Anton once more flexed his arm, feeling the undershirts effects. Thank you for your recommendation.

I should note that it will not have the highest market price. But I do believe it will be the most beneficial to you, unless you intend to acquire one of the bows. It seemed you rejected them, though.

Theyre not sufficiently better than I could get elsewhere, Anton agreed. And I have no desire to accustom myself to a different bow in the middle of all of this, he gestured vaguely around them.

A reasonable conclusion.

During the time Anton was choosing, most of the others had chosen an item of their own. Timothy acquired an armor made of green scales of some creature Anton didn't recognize but Firdaus said was a lesser dragon. Catarina took a formation flag made of material even Firdaus didn't recognize. It was a single piece and not part of a set, but Catarina was quite firm that was what she wanted and Anton had no basis to try to convince her otherwise. Hoyt took another crystal with a fire type energy, though it wouldn't immediately benefit him.

Velvet was the only one who had yet to make a choice. She was looking between two daggers in an almost desperate state. One had a blade of blackened metal, and the other white. She held one in each hand, looking back and forth between them. She moved to set one down, but couldn't seem to let it go. Can someone- no, nevermind Velvet hung her head. Senior Everheart. Is it possible to complete this trial again to get a second item?

No, it is not. The current projection stood nearby, not as towering as the first one but still taller than was reasonable.

What about if I did one of the *other*

trials. Could I come here for my prize instead?

I'm afraid that is not possible, Everheart said.

What if I did all of them? Velvet gestured around her with the two daggers in her hands. There has to be a way.

One item from a specific area per person who passes the trial. Those are the rules I have set.

So I can't have both of these? Velvet sighed. Then she muttered to herself, Maybe if I coerce someone into getting it no, I shouldn't but what if

Everheart snorted then burst out laughing, his well-groomed demeanor finally breaking. I'm not opposed to such methods. However, the risk is your own. But I've had enough for now. He moved down in front of Velvet, taking the daggers into his own hands as if she didn't have a grip on them. He held them up next to each other where the differences were most pronounced. One was longer, the other with a broader blade. The hilts were decorated and shaped differently, and with one purest black and the other an unblemished white they could hardly contrast with each other more while still being the same type of weapon. I put these on different shelves for a reason. I hadn't expected someone to actually put them together so quickly. He tossed them back to Velvet who automatically caught them by the hilts. They're a pair. That counts as one item. I'm not so crazy as to separately require people get a bow and a string. He tapped his chin,

Unless they're part of that Heavenly Lion Sect or whatever. Everheart looked around at the people listening and glared. Just remember that I'm an impartial arbiter. *Got it?* His face distorted and his hair popped up as his rough motions tore a seam in his sleeve.

Nobody dared to say anything, instead slowly filing out of the room. There was in fact another room nearby for training. They wondered how that might work. They were all genuinely interested, of course. But it was also a good excuse to get away from that *mood*.

Everheart appeared in front of them, hair properly coiffed and clothes perfectly in place. This training room is sufficient for nine individuals at a time. Do take care to stay within the marked boundaries. It is possible to choose the element and intensity of the natural energy in each area, though I would advise that nobody attempt the highest setting. Everheart sighed, muttering to himself. Not even a single Essence Collection among them

The room was nearly bare and empty of ornamentation. It was simply a square room, with paths criss-crossing between nine clearly marked square areas. The entire room had a higher concentration of natural energy than the rest of the tomb, but it didn't seem to be active at the moment.

Should we make use of it now? Catarina asked.

Senior Everheart, Anton made sure to maintain the formality to get the best reaction, You said these rooms could be used for one hour per day. I assume we have to repeat the trial every time, correct?

Of course. I'm not going to just hand out optimal training locations.

That's the answer, then. We use these now unless we want to go back through that with no real benefit. If we're doing it again, it might as well be tomorrow.

Everyone moved into the room, picking styles of energy that best suited them through a series of stylized pictures on the floor. Anton, Catarina, and Velvet all chose a neutral mix of energy, either preferring pure energy or not having chosen any particular element to focus on yet. Timothy chose earth, Hoyt fire, and Firdaus lightning.

Anton looked over the options for quantity and power of energy, choosing one two steps below the top. The top was for Essence Collection cultivators, so the next would be something like late Spirit Building. He was just on the edge of mid Spirit Building himself, so the next choice should be appropriate. As he finalized his choice, the area around Anton was flooded with energy. It was a violent torrent that threatened to overwhelm him, and while its density was less than on the peaks at the Order, it was difficult to work with.

Merely as a defensive precaution Anton immediately began wrestling it to be controlled, absorbing what he could where necessary. It was a constant back and forth wrestling match where he nearly exhausted himself constantly while also being refilled at the same pace. When the hour was over he was sweating and exhausted, but quite satisfied with the results. The precise combination of factors combined to be very efficient training, though he wouldn't *want* to attempt to do that for more than a single hour per day.

Well then, a voice came from the nearby Everheart that didn't have the same affectations they expected. It didn't fit the look at all. It's time to announce to everyone the real goal here. All of you will be staying here for a month, and the one who makes the most cultivation improvements will receive the grand prize! There are rewards for many others of course, but only one person can come out on top. Your sects outside have been informed of this arrangement, of course. They're having a wonderful time discussing the implications. Everheart clapped his hands, Now get busy!

Chapter 129

Shortly before Everheart's proclamation in a expansive room with walls smoothly carved out of the plateau's stone, dozens of cultivators pushed themselves forward against the pressure of the area. Oskar felt his muscles straining as he was nearly forced off his feet. One section ahead of him he saw Devon, likewise struggling to resist the pressure of the area.

The rules of their current test were simple. Reach the furthest point that one could without collapsing. Some candidates attempted to improve their results by moving as swiftly as possible, but the second part of the rules resulted in that rarely being to their benefit. The participants' location over a certain period of time was averaged- thus, if someone could run from the front of the room to the back but collapsed at the end, they would only count as having reached the middle. The participants instead needed to match their stamina and the strongest place they could resist, moving as far as they could quickly while not going *too* far and suffering defeat.

The weight bearing down on Oskar was oppressive energy, but he welcomed it. Though he now practiced the Ninety-Nine Stars, his first experience in cultivation had been in mines where the natural energy was far too dense for a normal human to operate. Even without any training as a cultivator he had been able to feel the energy there, and he had chosen to let it inside to slow the pressure instead of trying to hold out against it. That could have easily been the wrong choice- if so, he would have died slightly sooner. Of course, he wasn't dead and in fact had set himself down the path to power with his decision.

He used that same experience now to let the pressure flow through him, easing the burden on his body. The effects were easy to discern- Oskar had reached his current point next to several cultivators in early Spirit Building, and he felt he could go further.

Not much, but at least to the next section where the pressure would increase strongly once more.

Ahead of him, Devon seemed to be relying on another method to continue forward- pure grit. Though he was certainly using all of his technique to lessen the pressure on himself, he kept moving forward through the power of will, despite his body trembling in exertion and pain.

At least half of the participants had already collapsed, with some of those who rushed ahead despite the stated rules being the first. Their rewards would be the least, though Oskar wasn't certain that the rewards themselves mattered. An area like this required powerful formations- the likes of which even the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars would find too expensive to sustain for long periods. It was an excellent training method, though Oskar knew that if he tried to use it as his *only* training method he would end up quite flawed. Notwithstanding that its effects would be most helpful for body tempering, diversity in training was important. Energy was extremely important to a cultivator, but Anton had taught him that properly making use of whatever energy was available for training and combat was more important.

The energy flowed over him and through him, and though it wasn't in a pure form where he could absorb more than a modest amount into himself, he took advantage of what he could. He carefully guided it through his meridians starting at his head and exiting his feet with the greatest portion he could handle diverted into his dantian where it would be refined and used as his own.

His steps forward were slow and determined, bringing him to the edge of the next section. Every minute one or two more people were unable to continue, some ahead and some behind. Oskar stepped forward and felt a weight crash down on him. It was like a full tub of water, washing over him and destabilizing him. However, he withstood it. More than that, he *comprehended*

it. Personal control of energy was important to Oskar, and he'd resolved that his first step into Spirit Building would be Spiritual Connection. It couldn't wait for the prime tempering, and thus completing it first was the most efficient. As he stepped forward, he felt himself also take the more metaphysical step into Spirit Building. He wasn't at the completion of the eleventh star and wouldn't be for some time, but fundamental changes were starting inside of him.

He continued forward, each step feeling as if he had a boulder on his back. He could push himself further than he had thought, though each step took several seconds to complete. He could barely raise his feet off the floor, and ahead of him Devon was merely shuffling his own feet. Yet the two of them continued to make progress. Oskar soon found himself one section further than he'd thought he could reach, though he merely stood across the threshold with his body trembling, fearing he would stumble if he continued. Devon stayed ahead of him, stopping before the threshold to the next section for some time before flinging himself forward. Oskar thought he could hear

Devon's bones creaking- though that may have been his imagination in the relatively quiet hall. Before he collapsed ten seconds later, Devon had made it not just through one section but into the next as well, though barely. When Devon collapsed, he did so with a contented sigh.

Then the announcement from Everheart came. A decree they would be staying inside for a full month and having a competition to increase in cultivation for the greatest prizes. It didn't sound like anyone was allowed to refuse, but Oskar merely determined to be cautious in efforts. That was why he had chosen this particular room- it didn't have anything that would be deadly, unless a cultivator actually chose to push themselves to the brink of death. However, when people collapsed the pressure on them was released- so Oskar wasn't even sure there was any possible danger besides embarrassment in this particular challenge.

Outside of the tomb, the reactions of the various sects were quite varied. Some immediately attempted an attack on the entrance or the projection of Everheart, but in both cases he simply laughed. The attacks rebounded off of the barrier at the entrance and simply passed through the projection, respectively. I'm afraid you will simply have to wait until the time is up. The danger inside is no higher than it was before, so I should not think it would be a problem. Unless you believe your disciples are too stupid to know their own limits? Nobody answered that one at all. Then please do not attempt another attack on the barrier, or I'll have to break my fully neutral standing and *remove* some of you. As he said that, just to prove he did have power to affect people, he waved a muscled arm and toppled all of those who were close to the entrance of the tomb.

Most of the sects involved were quite calm about the result. As Everheart said, the danger hadn't suddenly changed- just the option for their disciples to withdraw. There was little they could do about it regardless, not without endangering themselves or possibly their disciples.

Among the members of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, the elders and those who had been cultivating longer than the allowed duration, Elder Kseniya was thinking about something else. She was an archer, and had eyes that could pick out a specific target on the horizon. She would of course notice anything happening right in front of her gaze. Her current feeling was regret at not having brought along the woman known as Kohar Tolvaj. Her training in law was irregular for a cultivator but had proved extremely useful for Antons goals.

Kohar was currently working with the Order on something as well. If things had ended with everyone leaving Khonard and nothing more the Order could have merely expressed disapproval that a lawsuit had been required to free unlawfully enslaved people. The attack by mercenaries and the trouble at the border, however, gave them some ammunition. The problem was using it in a way that did not harm the greater interests of Graotan for the sake of petty revenge. The mercenaries had generally

gotten their just desserts- most of them were killed in the attack with nothing to show for it. It was simply those who had hired them who hadn't yet been punished, and that would require some maneuvering. Along with direct legal advice, Kohar was knowledgeable in how to manipulate people. It wouldn't be useful to just make a declaration and assume that Ofrurg would enforce their will. Instead, they had to take advantage of their internal politics to make certain parties interested in taking the action they wanted from them.

All of that was probably more important, but when Elder Kseniya saw a criminal right in front of her eyes she wanted to just shoot his head off. She'd seen Anton resist the urge, however, and she would hope she was somewhat more responsible than him. Even though Van Hassel wasn't anywhere near the top of the list of the Order's enemies, because of Anton and the company he kept many elders were aware of him. And it would be so easy to just shoot him. She could even declare he was a criminal, and since he had been formally removed from the Heavenly Lion Sect they shouldn't be able to respond. Yet it would still probably be seen as a breach of the contract of peace for events such as these. So was following him as he left and killing him in the wilderness. Of course, nobody would be able to *do* anything about that second one, but anyone strong enough to get involved would be missed.

So Elder Kseniya did nothing except keep *careful*

track of how close Van Hassell stood to the Heavenly Lion Sect and also the few exchanges he had with his uncle and some of the others. They prevented anyone from overhearing their words, but they couldn't stop her from trying to read their lips. Sadly, she saw nothing incriminating beyond the very fact that an expelled disciple was still able to engage in pleasantries with his former sect. Then he left, along with many others- all of those who weren't chosen were being escorted away by part of the elders, while the others remained to escort the rest at the end of the month.

There was one last chance to shoot him, after he was just over the horizon. A simple Horizon Shot would be able to take him out, and nobody could say they saw her shoot the arrow that killed him. But they *could* say an arrow much like hers did it, and that she shot one at the right time. Maybe she should teach Anton that. Though by the time he could learn it, she would be extremely surprised if he hadn't already killed Van Hassel through other means.

...and thus I propose this particular course of action, Anton concluded. He looked at his current companions- including Firdaus, who had been included in the discussion.

Having expected strong disagreement, Anton was pleased when Catarina was the first to speak- and in support of his ideas. I concur with the idea. Even if it does not go well, it should not diminish our relative standing in the competition.

Im not sure, Velvet said. How will we enforce anything? What if we help someone and then they refuse to contribute in turn?

There is an entire month here, Anton said. Well take things one day at a time. If someone decides that one hint or piece of assistance we give is so valuable that they wish to take it without contributing in return, we shall simply ignore them. Of course, I am not suggesting we try to work with absolutely *everyone*. We should take stock of those who might be amenable to teamwork with other sects. I do believe I would immediately discount the Heavenly Lion Sect as whole, though that might be unfair to some of their individual members.

Probably not, Firdaus said. Nor do I think they would agree to cooperate in any fashion.

We should take careful stock of the allegiances of those involved, Hoyt commented. There are more than direct enemies of the Order, and some of those who are technically neutral are allied with them. Being as open as possible is fine, but we should not cross that line.

Fair enough, Anton agreed. Perhaps more in-depth examinations of people before we make the offer, then. Though of course we should coordinate with the Order and the Grasping Willow sect. As for Cloudtop Summit, Anton looked to Firdaus, What do you think? The personal offer to you will remain open of course, regardless.

I cannot say Cloudtop Summit is an ally of the Order, but we are certainly not enemies.

Neutral is fine, Anton said. Even with excellent training conditions, one month is still merely that. We shouldnt significantly impact another sect on the whole, and even if we somehow do they should be more inclined to be friendly towards us. This might drive a rift between certain groups but honestly cultivators arent naturally inclined to get along anyway.

Nobody had hard objections to the plan- but some were cautiously optimistic about the possibilities while others were just *cautious*. Before they could even determine if theyd actually be able to accomplish anything useful, they were first going to seek out their allies and ask about the other areas. It wouldnt do to miss out on the basics.

Chapter 130

The extent of the facilities were quite impressive. Even for top tier cultivators in Life Transformation- the analogue to Galaxy Construction- resources werent infinite. Of course, Everheart was the sort that would happily plunder the bounty of his enemies, and he had *many* of them. It wasnt inconceivable for him to have made more than one tomb, but together they had to have been the work of a century.

Anton was in one of a handful of rooms that had golems in them. Many things could be called golems, but the general idea was something made of sturdy materials, imbued

with energy and mobilized by a formation. What Anton saw was a man made out of rock nearly four meters tall, though details of facial expression and musculature were ignored in exchange for smooth shapes.

He held his bow loosely, looking at his opponent. As far as anyone had been able to tell, they were always accurate about when the challengers started the battle, but he didn't want to accidentally initiate combat early. He had watched a few fights and now was imagining himself in combat against the construct. After he'd gone through several iterations, he decided he would have to fight to truly know.

His bow came up, and the moment he was creating and drawing his first Spirit Arrow the creature moved. It seemed ponderous and slow, but that was merely due to its bulk. Each step took it twice as far as a normal person, so its speed could not be underestimated. Anton's first arrow flew straight towards its head, only to be blocked by a stone fist. A colored mark appeared on the back of its hand where he hit, not real damage but instead an indicator of what the damage *might* have been, if they were able to be damaged at all. It was a faint red blush that indicated minimal damage- but there was the possibility for there to be none at all, so Anton was satisfied.

The creature barrelled towards him, and Anton mobilized his energy to strafe around the room while firing arrows at the golem. With his age having returned he was less able to rely on his body for his movements and drawing his bow, but his energy was sufficient that he was still a real threat. At least, to normal opponents. Unbreakable golems sadly didn't get weaker as the battle continued, nor did they tire. Thus, while soon it had red blushes on every one of its joints and a deep red mark on its neck, it continued with the same unliving vigor it had begun the battle with.

This was the part of the particular trial that was difficult. One had to keep going, doing as much damage as possible while avoiding attacks. More than that, it wasn't possible to voluntarily withdraw early. That meant keeping enough in reserve to withstand at least a single hit by a several ton rock fist empowered by energy. Fortunately, the actual energy enhancements were mostly defensive- otherwise Anton doubted anyone below Essence Collection would have been able to survive a single hit. As far as he could tell the golems didn't adjust themselves to their opponents cultivation, either. Dangerous.

Anton felt himself slowing down. He just wanted to get in a few more hits then he would have to take one. His arrows struck the golem from behind, taking advantage of its inability to block or deflect attacks from the rear. Then he maneuvered towards the center of the room. He wasn't sure if he needed to actually fully *take* a hit, but apparently some people who dodged too well did not manage to trigger the proper defeat sequence.

He planted his feet and trusted that Everheart wasn't *just* interested in killing him. Otherwise, he was dead as soon as he entered the room and the door shut behind him. He formed his energy around him into a solid layer of armor, ready to take a blow head on. Golden Armor wasn't something he used often, but there were a few situations he

was glad to have it. He looked at a fist coming for him and decided that he could do with a *little* bit of impact softening. He prepared to jump back as the attack hit him. He was sent flying all the way to the edge of the room, where he rebounded off of the wall. His Golden Armor was shattered, but it distributed the impact across his body equally. That meant that he would simply be bruised everywhere, front and back, instead of having a hole in his torso.

Anton was glad to see that the golem had returned to its stationary position and the door opened. Perhaps he needed to work on Golden Armor more, if he was to keep training with the golems. At least he'd done a reasonable amount of damage. Unlike the trial with the trapped corridor, combat with the golems was cumulative. He was saving up points for a nice breastplate he saw in the rewards- and if someone got that first, there were other interesting things available.

There were two areas Anton hadn't yet gone to. First was a room for dismantling and setting up formations. He should at least see what he was able to do there, but he didn't expect much in the way of results. The other one was the most dangerous. It seemed to be the culmination of everything else. Trapped corridors, both involving formations and not. Crushing pressure. Golems. Puzzles. Random questions about cultivation. Everything had dangers, and unlike many other places it didn't allow for easy retreats. The further one progressed the more danger they would have to face on their way back out. There was no official name, but the cultivators had taken to calling it The Gauntlet. The only reason anyone knew all of the different aspects it covered was not because someone had gotten close to the end, but instead that which order things were arranged changed every day.

After the announcement that everyone would be challenged for a month, several new areas had opened up. Specifically, rooms for people to sleep as well as a mess hall and finally a library. Anton found that the food in the mess hall was highly nutritious and plentiful. It also tasted like mud, but to be fair to mud sometimes it tasted like very little. The food in the mess hall didn't have that wonderful feature. Still, it was beneficial to his training and he would endure it for one month. His rations would probably last, but they wouldn't taste much better and would be less helpful.

The library was something special. Anton wasn't sure if that was *good*, but it was full of all sorts of techniques written by Everheart. Some of them nobody would bother declaring forbidden, but some Anton only looked at to be certain how to counter them. He had no desire to implant parasites that would tear people apart from the inside even if it was highly effective.

Of special interest was an ancient copy of the Ninety-Nine Stars. Anton found it fascinating to see how things had changed over a few centuries, as it was both significant yet also minor. It was clearly still the same technique, but the older version was more difficult to practice and had significant weaknesses. Yet along with that, some

of the difficulty added increased strength. Little things that would slightly enhance prime temperings if performed correctly or a whole second layer of circulation through the meridians that could be maintained at the same time for either nearly a twenty percent increase in cultivation speed or probable crippling of the meridians and dantian as energy exploded inside the cultivator. That seemed to only be intended for Essence Collection and later, so it was possible the Order still carried that information in sections he hadn't been allowed to access yet. He still took careful notes regardless.

There were also the core techniques for the Heavenly Lion Sect and the Frostmirror Sect. Likely similarly out of date, but still useful to look at. Anton wished he could say he spotted a significant flaw inherent in the Heavenly Lion Sect's technique that he could use to defeat Van Hassel with ease, but honestly it seemed quite sound. He was more familiar with the Ninety-Nine Stars, of course, so deeper study might be useful.

He wondered who else was reading up on the Ninety-Nine Stars. Unfortunately, he did not have the time to constantly watch the library. In fact, he was only allowed a single hour per day- like everyone else. He could conscript twenty-three others to help him, but that would be a monumental waste of time. He would just assume all his worst enemies would know. That gave him the idea to simulate some of the weaknesses that the Ninety-Nine Stars no longer possessed. He'd give that a try. Eventually.

Each sect had staked a claim on certain sections of the individual rooms. Each room was identical, so there was little benefit to particular ones except a slightly shorter walk, but they preferred to keep separate. At the moment he was waiting outside the Frostmirror Sect's section.

He first spotted Diana approaching, but through her legs he could see some of another, smaller figure. He inclined his head. I hope your cultivation is going well.

It is, she declared without emotion. I wish the same for you. It felt more like she wished him to be covered in ice and frozen to death, but perhaps that was just her.

Annelie pushed her way past Diana. I'm ready to go! She turned to Diana. Thank you for allowing me to study with my great-grandpa.

It would be unreasonable of us to forbid you to interact. Please remember to consult me on what he teaches before attempting to practice it. We don't want to introduce any flaws to your cultivation.

I'll be back in an hour! Annelie waved. Then she grabbed Anton's hand and started pulling him away. They'd met a few times, but he'd only recently managed to get permission for Annelie to join their training group.

Besides Firdaus and those he'd known before, the group also included more members of Cloudtop Summit and one more member of the Frostmirror Sect. There were also a dozen members of some other major sects and twice that many from small sects or who were independent. A few others attended irregularly.

Oh! Annelie paused for a moment when she saw the member of the Frostmirror Sect. Marsen, you're here too. What convinced you to join when none of the others did?

Practical, he said. He was similarly inexpressive of emotions as Diana, but Anton had the feeling he'd always been more like that instead of it being a result of training. An exchange of knowledge for knowledge.

The group training sessions were much different from what Anton was used to. For one thing, the majority of those participating didn't practice the Ninety-Nine Stars. Thus, it wasn't possible for Anton to directly guide people. But he still did his best to fulfill the role of a leader. That meant even if he couldn't help someone finding who *could*. Occasionally there were disputes to settle where people felt the value of what they received was unequal, but most of those who would be dissatisfied quickly simply stopped attending. Now people exchanged cultivation thoughts almost without reservation, assuming that eventually they would similarly be advised by others.

After checking in on everyone, Anton took Annelie aside and began instructing her. He'd read over the Frostmirror Sect's technique, and he had to know if certain parts were the same or different. In the Spirit Building section, when does the severing of emotions come?

I don't know if I'm allowed to say that. Sorry. I'm sworn not to reveal details. Even to friends and family.

I understand, Anton said. I wouldn't want to push you. How about this. I will describe something, and you can say whether it is the same or whether it is not.

That should be fine.

Excellent. Let's continue. Anton's primary goal was trying to get her to modify the emotion severing. Even if the Frostmirror sect's technique allowed that part to be incomplete, he still found the ability to willfully remove emotions while still having them was better. Wherever it was necessary for her training she would still be able to divest herself of emotions, but she could still have them where useful.

The only problem was trying to slip that training past Diana, but while Annelie had sworn not to speak of her cultivation technique she had no qualms of directly taking his advice on how to cultivate without passing it by Diana first. She would likely still end up telling her one way or another, but as long as the proper results were reached Anton didn't mind. Annelie had some leeway as a talented cultivator, and Diana was really meant to be protecting her more than controlling her.

