

Elder Cultivator

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At the end of the first week of the competition, it had been widely accepted that completing The Gauntlet was impossible. It was a slog of endurance, combat, and mental challenges that weren't possible for a single person to have accomplished in five years of training. Even if they were the sort of genius who reached Essence Collection in that time, it seemed unlikely they would have also been able to learn knowledge on a variety of topics including formations and equipment crafting and enchantment.

Yet there were no rewards for partial completion. Nearly everything else had rewards based on progress. In the case of the trapped corridor, there were initial rewards in the form of equipment and ongoing rewards in the form of the training area. Though Anton and the others were fairly certain that having to pass through the traps every day was also intended for training. It would be a waste to *not* go every day, because the single hour in those training chambers was worth at least several days of normal effort. Only a certain portion of people were willing to repeatedly go through the area for the benefits, and those below Spirit Building generally weren't able to pass the hallway- so throughout the course of the day everyone who wanted to was able to fit in one of the available slots.

A week was sufficient time to settle into a routine, and Anton gladly settled into a routine where he visited a dozen different trials every day as well as spending time training with others. This ended with him getting five to six hours of sleep per night, which he felt was quite sufficient. During the planting and harvest a farmer needed to work hard all day or miss the optimal opportunity. There were times for slower work, but this wasn't one of them. None of those who came to the tomb were coasting along, but not everyone knew how much a human could be pushed for a month. Anton saw some people with bags under their eyes already and knew they would run into trouble by the next week at best. Even if they didn't make a terrible mistake during training they'd be significantly less efficient. Another two hours of training per day were meaningless if they had even a one in ten decrease in effectiveness throughout the day.

Before it had been declared impossible, Anton's interest in The Gauntlet was minimal. He had made an attempt, but when it started with formations he quickly backed out. One other time it had been far too busy, and he didn't want to get locked up in circumstantial damage from others' combats or traps.

After nobody was there, he actually became more interested. He wasn't the only one- Hoyt suggested that perhaps they try it together. Specifically, a group with the widest variety of talents they could. Either they would quickly fail or they might actually find a way to success.

They put together a group- most of the members were from the Order, of course, but they also had Firdaus, Lev, and Marsen join them. Annelie was invited as well, but she made the decision on her own to stay out of it. She was many ranks lower in cultivation and unsure if she would be able to pull her weight. Anton was quite glad that she had some sense of self preservation, unlike Alva. For the same reason of cultivation level Devon and Oskar would not be going with them. There were many challenges to test themselves against that were less dangerous.

That left eight people to show up at The Gauntlet, where only one other person was present- and leaving. Cant believe formations are near the front again, the young man shook his head as he walked past the group. Good luck to all of you, I guess.

Near the front did not mean first in this case. It was instead the pressure test. It didnt reach the levels required for the actual room, but it also wouldnt release the pressure on anyone who collapsed. Several people had to be pulled out by sect mates when they went too far and could no longer move.

Before entering, Anton thought about *why* he was making the attempt. Risking death for no reason was a terrible idea, and he didnt count nebulous rewards. If he was saving someone he would be quite happy to take on the risk, but it was simply unnecessary. However, that was if he had no other ambitions. If he was just content to continue as he was, growing steadily in cultivation and having a modest impact on the world. If he was willing to accept Annelies word that she *wanted*

to be part of the Frostmirror sect without her knowing he could help change that. If he was willing to give up on killing Van Hassel and dealing with inevitable retaliation from the Heavenly Lion Sect. If he didnt want to free all of the slaves in Ofrurg- or the entire world. Some of those goals were worth dying in pursuit of, and that included some level of risk in how he grew stronger.

He stepped into the area, feeling the physical force press down on him. His inner voice propped himself up with confidence, strengthening his energy. Being in a proper mental state had great effectiveness on a cultivators results, which was why completely divesting emotions allowed for a cultivator to avoid potential pitfalls- but they also couldnt reach quite the same heights. Consistency was good, but consistency with potential was even better. It was also more difficult. Anton had only done so well with training the emotion related stars because he had experienced a full life and could look over everything from a far perspective. Yet even then, there were some things close to himself that still tried to overwhelm him with emotion. A few years wasnt enough to truly erase the memories of Dungannon- not that he really wanted to forget.

He set aside his worries and stepped forward confidently. He was falling behind, and he didnt want anyone to have to wait for him. The others resisted in their own ways- sometimes as straightforwardly as Hoyt and Timothy, while Catarina seemed to be finding weaknesses in the field that she could move through. To Anton, everything felt uniform but the way she weaved around had to have a purpose.

Soon enough they were all past the first part of the challenge. That wasn't unexpected, because The Gauntlet wasn't just one thing. It was about whether or not they could pass through all of it safely.

This time, the second trial was golems. Unlike the training exercise with them, there were no requirements to fight and get hit by them. They could be defeated once a proper amount of damage was done to them.

As the group stepped into the area, an important moment of truth arrived. Whether or not they were actually allowed to proceed as a group would be decided here. Eight large stone golems stood out to face them, matching them in number. Anton was the one who began the combat by firing a shot at a golem to the side of him. The golems had quick reactions and tough bodies, but he knew they weren't particularly flexible. They were meant to face one opponent at a time, and were best at fending off attacks from the front. He still only managed a small red mark on the golem's chest as his arrow slipped between its forearm and elbow, but it was *red* and not just a slight blush.

The golems all rushed forward at the opponents in front of them- but Hoyt intercepted his and Anton's together, while Timothy intercepted another two. So far there hadn't been any adverse reactions, and Anton continued firing at whichever target was convenient while circling around the room. He had a target he wanted to reach, but for that he needed a different angle.

Velvet was the first one to achieve that goal. It was only a few moments into the battle that she disappeared from sight among all of the combatants, and then shortly after that she appeared as she stabbed one of her new daggers into the spine of one of the golems, in the middle of the back. To reach that height she actually had to jump off the ground, but for her efforts she got a dark red mark. Then the golem immediately lowered its arms and started trudging away.

It wasn't known if that was a *real* weak point of the golems since it still didn't cause any damage, but it was considered one by this system. A powerful enough attack could take them out by hitting that point, or another one just below the rear of the neck. Fatal points on humans were not always as valuable as targets, so there was some other logic to it.

Anton continued around to the back, and now that there was one fewer golem the pressure on those fighting was lessened. It was still more than one per person, but everyone was a capable fighter. Catarina and Velvet were swift with Firdaus nearly matching them, Hoyt and Timothy were strong, and Lev and Marsen were able to limit their opponents in different ways. Lev primarily used his energy as tendrils to wrap around the golems, and while he couldn't directly resist them he was able to make supple energy constructs that would stretch but not snap under their movements- slowing them. Marsen created ice on the ground, which made it easier to disrupt the movements of the golems.

Everyone was building up damage on the golems in front of them, but Anton was at an angle where he could start firing arrows. The golems *attempted* lateral dodges to avoid his arrows, but their movements simply weren't enough. When some tried to turn to face him they found their backs open to the others. Velvet also continued to take out the golems who had trouble tracking her, and she and Anton were basically solely responsible for half of the golems going down while contributing to the other two. That didn't mean they were more important, because without the teamwork of the others they couldn't have reached the critical weak points without some risk.

After the golems were defeated, they were able to take a short break. It seemed that after fifteen minutes or so golems would once more come out to face them, so they had to move onto the next area before then.

The next area was one involving formations. Catarina stepped forward and threw out formation flags- she had been collecting them as rewards from the various different trials, and her new set matched quite well, even synchronizing with the ones she got from the Order. The first section was passed easily as Catarina finished solving whatever needed to be done before Anton even figured out what was going on.

Next up is a trap. Be careful. Follow my movements precisely, Catarina instructed.

They did so, but it seemed her meaning of precise and the others weren't entirely the same. A centimeter to either side resulted in some electrical shocks, and though they could deflect those with their energy it was still draining. They needed to keep as much stamina as possible for the rest of The Gauntlet.

Next is a barrier. Catarina placed flags stuck into the air, arranged in a square like it was flat on the ground. Everyone attack together in the center of the flags. It will be easiest to break it with force rather than try to dismantle it.

Anton trusted her judgment attacking was the right choice and carefully built up power. One perfect spirit arrow would be better than a dozen poor ones. While he was still not terribly knowledgeable about formations, he knew that once anything was broken the weak points could be exploited for further damage. Eight simultaneous attacks shattered the invisible barrier, at least between the formation flags Catarina had placed and they stepped forward.

Next is Catarina began to explain, but instead started swiftly throwing out formation flags, sticking them into the ground. Everyone needs to power one! Steady and even, preferably matching everyone else.

Anton moved for one of the further ones, since he knew that some of their members wouldn't be as quick to react to Catarina's commands. He injected his energy doing his best to match Catarina's output. Everyone was close enough in cultivation that they were able to match, but

Stop! Catarina called out. She reached out, using strands of energy to pull the flags to her. She then threw them out to different locations. Its a shifting formation!

The meaning of that quickly became obvious, because everyone had to scramble around from location to location. Catarina had the worst of it, because she had to find the points they needed to react to as well as being the one that maintained the link between their energies. After an exhausting half hour, the waves of energy settled down. They were able to move onto the next room but-

Thats it, Catarina said. I cant keep going. Its not possible to manage all of that alone. We need to train together on formations.

Thats not really something I know anything about Lev shook his head. But Ill try.

Dont worry, she said. Ill still be taking the core, but I need people to be able to anticipate the changes with me. It shouldnt be *too* bad, and just speeding our teamwork should be sufficient.

They had to move back through the previous formations- but half were still disabled. Then they had to move through the rooms with the golems again. That was the danger of The Gauntlet, along with the fact that it didnt pull any punches. Except they didnt have to *defeat* the golems, just avoid them.

Some of their group engaged while others helped ease the pressure. Anton and Velvet actually found it easier to take one out to let the others break their engagements, and they were all running a moment later. There was a moment of panic as Timothy was struck in the back. He was sent flying past everyone, but as he struck the wall of the room he managed to land on his feet. He looked back and wiped some blood from his lip. Come on! Lets keep going! Hed certainly toughened up quite a bit.

Passing through the pressure from highest amount to lowest was quite a bit easier, and soon everyone was sprinting and then safe. They still had some strategy to talk about, but it was quite clear everyone was willing to make another attempt.

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One week of training was hardly sufficient to be a formation master, or expert, or even really an apprentice. However, the heightened level of understanding provided by Spiritual Connection allowed Anton and the others to learn from Catarina enough for her to direct them better. They treated it just like they would combat, requiring quick movements and precision. Catarina was able to set up a version of the formation that Everheart was using that made it easier to feel the flow of energy.

Now I no longer feel like Im running around an empty room, Timothy said. I can at least see some nodes of energy. Timothy and Hoyt were having the most trouble learning, since theyd chosen to forgo training Spiritual Connection so far. That didnt mean they

werent able to improve their sensing and control of energy, but it took a bit more effort. Catarina had to spend more time training them, but they put in the effort to play supporting roles. The fact that they had a team of eight meant that not everyone needed to be as good at that particular section anyway.

At that point, the team was ready to attempt The Gauntlet again. Theyd made improvements in more than that one area, and were better able to coordinate in other ways as well. Some of their abilities werent as useful in certain situations, but the whole point of the team was to be a cooperative venture. Just because Lev was lower in cultivation couldnt seriously harm the golems didnt make his abilities useless. He was one of the top three in sensing and manipulating energy, after Catarina and Firdaus.

When they returned to The Gauntlet, it was again sparsely populated. They waited for the few people in sight to move on to the next room before beginning their plan. Currently the first room was a trap room. Instead of static traps like the hallway they had dealt with earlier, each pressure plate changed slightly depending on how people moved through the area. It wasnt possible- at least not with cultivation in Spirit Building- to just run through the gauntlet of traps. Each of them was capable of seriously injuring someone if triggered.

It was a test of perception and pattern recognition. There were minute differences in how a dangerous tile looked compared to safe ones, and each tile changed others around it. The one rule that everyone knew was that a safe tile would never become dangerous while depressed. Thus, it was possible for the whole group to move through together. They werent certain if multiple people standing on the same tile would be safe, but with two groups- one led by Velvet and one by Anton- they started moving through the area, each person several tiles apart.

Anton looked carefully at a tile in front of Catarina. Its safe, right? she asked. My path here should have made it in the same state as when you crossed.

Anton nodded, I do believe so. Either way, he didnt see any of the signs that it was dangerous. He needed to see the smallest of differences in resting height but from just a handful of meters away with the use of Hawk Eyes, even height changes less than a millimeter were clear.

The group eventually made their way into the next room, which was one they hadnt seen before. A projection of Everheart was standing in the middle of the room, a book under his arm as he shook his head at the cultivator standing there. Thats three marks. You fail. Try again later. Then he swung the book with both hands like it was a club, flinging the young man out of the room and nearly onto the traps in the previous, before the door swung shut. Very well, next. This Everheart was somewhat more subdued in size and looks, portraying a handsome if scruffy man without so much muscle or physical prowess as others before him. He kept a neutral tone as he spoke. Each person must correctly answer ten questions on various topics before getting three wrong. There is a time limit before your answer must begin.

Senior Everheart, are we allowed to consult each other on the questions? Anton asked.

I am the one who will ask questions here, Everheart said.

Well, he didnt say no. Ill go first, Timothy stepped forward. He had seen Everheart unceremoniously bat the fellow beforehand out of the room, so he knew what he was getting into. Most importantly, this was one of the trials that had the smallest danger. Their information gathering over the last few weeks had merely resulted in people being annoyed that they lost due to random chance and tricky questions.

Everheart asked several questions Timothy knew on his own.

Which weapon has the advantage?

Why are different materials used in equipment?

How long would it take for a cultivator moving at this speed to reach his opponent?

What is the purpose of cultivation?

Timothy hesitated slightly on that one, but began his explanation. Cultivation is for the empowerment of the individual, with different goals such as seeking immortality or to defeat enemies.

... good enough, Everheart said, sounding disappointed. What is Northern Creeper used for?

Timothy immediately turned towards Anton and Hoyt, knowing they had worked with it. Before Anton could speak Lev chimed in. It fruit is used in cultivation enhancement pills to store energy, though its spines can be used as weapons or to medically alter the flow of cultivators who have lost control of their own energy.

Timothy nodded and turned back towards Everheart. He seemed to blatantly ignore that Lev said anything. So Timothy repeated it. Without saying anything, Everheart moved onto the next question.

Throughout the slightly more than eighty questions the group had to answer they covered martial combat, cultivation in general, botany, equipment crafting and enchantment, formations, and beast lore- with a smattering of lesser topics. They managed to get a few wrong or delay too much, but so far everyone had passed. The questions seemed to have generally increased in difficulty from person to person, so perhaps their teamwork plan wasnt quite as useful as they thought. Marsen was the last to go up, and he currently had eight correct questions but two failures.

What is my name?

Some of the questions were tricky, some simply difficult in subject matter. None were so straightforwardly a trap of some kind. Perhaps he had some other name that they were supposed to know. Nobody had an answer for Marsen, but he didn't even look to the rest and straightforwardly answered, Great Golden Emperor of the Most Powerful Techniques Everheart.

Everyone else couldn't help but get strange looks on their faces. He'd technically said that but Everheart didn't respond.

Then the slightest smile lit up his face. Ooh! You get the bonus point. That means you're done. He waved his hand towards the door.

Despite the next room containing golems that almost immediately attacked, the group mostly seemed interested in discussing what had happened while they fought. I can't believe you said that with a straight face, Lev commented to Marsen.

I considered that it would likely be a good answer, Marsen said. He said it himself, two weeks ago.

Still, Hoyt said, Don't you feel shame just saying that?

No, Marsen said as he hooked his leg behind the ankle of one of the golems, sending it tumbling on slippery ice as Hoyt's axe chopped into its chest. Its flailing fist clipped his face, the speed and friction leaving a bloody mark along his forehead. I do not feel shame. Nor anything else, as a competent member of the Frostmirror sect.

I still don't think that's the right method, Anton commented as he shot several arrows.

I agree with your assessment, Marsen agreed, But it is unlikely I will be able to change my current status without harming my cultivation. It seems that Junior Sister Annelies attempts to modify the structure are going well, however. Diana is livid. With the small percent of anger she still feels, anyway. I believe she might be jealous. Marsen shook his head as the last golem left. I should not add more details.

The group was able to push themselves further than the previous time. They even completed the formation room in half the time, and with less expenditure of resources. They knew they had to be getting close to the end, but there were still weeks left for them to make further attempts and they were beginning to feel the fatigue. In the end, they relied on Marsen's emotionless judgment that pushing themselves further was unwise along with their own fears of danger against their anticipation of achieving rewards.

They were glad they did, because they were all exhausted and nursing various wounds when they got back to the beginning. The wounds might have been quite serious for non-cultivators and indeed they would affect their ability to fight, but they could recover in a few days instead of a longer period of time.

As they were returning to the common areas, someone stepped out into their path. Marsens, specifically. There you are! the young man declared. I should have known. Colluding with outsiders still. Why must you cause trouble for our Frostmirror sect?

Marsen met the young man straight in the eyes. There was no trouble for any member of the Frostmirror sect in any way related to me, until you blocked my path.

Dont try to make excuses. Youre working with other sects just to improve yourself.

So? Marsen asked. This does not in any way harm the Frostmirror sects goals. He turned to Lev, perhaps sensing something- or perhaps choosing his own interpretation of Levs face. I see you are confused, Lev. You might not recognize this fellow disciple of mine. This is ceiling boy.

Im Jeston! Senior brother Jeston, to you Marsen.

That is incorrect, Marsen said. It is only proper to call someone senior brother on the condition that they are stronger than you, have more talent than you, or that you respect them. None of those are true for you. Now, are you going to challenge me to a duel, thus cementing your intention to cause conflict with your own sectmate?

A duel? Give me one good reason I shouldnt teach you a lesson right here!

First, because there would be many witnesses of your misdeeds. Second, because such a violent outburst would result in chastisement by the sect. But most importantly, because Great Golden Emperor of the Most Powerful Techniques Everheart said so, and Im certain hed enforce that.

Despite his bluster, Jeston was part of the Frostmirror sect. He was not going to get his emotions enflamed to uncontrollable levels. Yet he clearly still had them. He seemed half a step away from attacking anyway, but seeing that he was outnumbered, and perhaps remembering his time on the ceiling, he restrained himself. In fact, I was planning to challenge you to a duel. You have chosen to train with outsiders instead of with the sect, and are a traitor.

That is not how being a traitor works, Marsen commented flatly, But I accept your challenge. Tomorrow.

Fine. Jeston said. He turned to glare at Anton, I still cant believe he let an old man in here. Then he walked away.

Marsen turned to Anton, What I cant believe is that hes currently walking on the floor.

Perhaps Everheart got bored with it, Anton said. But anyway, is this alright? We would not wish to set you against your sect.

You have not, Marsen said. Jeston is an individual. Just in case, I shall properly remind others that they not only would not have been assisting me with training but that they were also allowed to train with our alliance. It is simple logic that I would make this choice.

Im honestly surprised we havent had more trouble before now, Hoyt commented. The prohibition against fighting outside of duels is one thing, but that only goes so far.

Yes, Anton agreed. I expect we will run into more trouble in the coming days. Hopefully not because we were trying to help people grow.

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The rooms reserved for duels were fairly sparse. There was a small section for viewing and a section where the duelists could place bets. Other than that, they were just empty spaces of varying size.

In one of the smaller arenas, Marsen and Jeston faced each other. They were watched by much of the training group as well as a few members of the Frostmirror sect- including Annelie and Diana. One of the two combatants was the very symbol of impassiveness, and the other was obviously annoyed even before the battle started. Marsen had no visible weapons, while Jeston carried a large sword in two hands.

The instant the barrier in the middle of the room disappeared they sprang into action. Jeston swung his sword at Marsen, who evaded the main attack but wasnt able to completely avoid the trail of frost that spread from it. As he moved around the attack he countered with his own palm strike to Jestons side, leaving a trail of ice behind where he moved.

At the two continued to match each other, even the walls at the edge of the arena began developing frost crystals. The breath of the two combatants soon became visible as they moved about on the ice at their feet. Jeston continued to swing his sword with reckless abandon, with Marsen left with little choice but to avoid it and sneak in attacks where he could.

The clothing of the two young men began to stiffen, and the cold had clearly begun seeping past their defensive energy. Jeston couldnt catch Marsen with a solid blow, but the reach advantage of his sword meant he was able to sustain a number of cuts while only receiving insignificant blows himself. That was the disadvantage of unarmed combat- weapons were meant to multiply the force of an attack, and without it one had to rely solely on the effects of their energy. Against another member of the Frostmirror sect, Marsen found his opponent quite resistant.

The sweat of exertion froze as it trickled down the faces and bodies of the two combatants, layers of frost building up on their bodies and turning their skin blue. Alright, enough of this! Jeston stepped back, taking a wide stance. A swirling vortex of

icicles surrounded his sword, extending beyond it in all directions. Marsen rallied his energies as well. A sweep of the sword flung icicles in a cone in front of Jeston, many of them piercing into Marsens arms which covered his face. However, Marsen moved in towards Jeston along the trailing edge of his sword and grabbed his arm.

While most of the audience expected them to begin wrestling for control, everything just stopped. Neither of the two of them moved, frozen in space. One second. Ten seconds. Thirty. After one minute, a cracking sound rang out from one of the combatants. A thin but clearly extremely powerful layer of ice fell off of him.

Jeston stepped back, having broken out from the freeze first. He immediately raised his arms to bring his sword down onto Marsens head. It cleaved directly down, striking him. There was a shattering sound and a cry of pain.

Marsen then finally moved. The layer of ice on him sloughed off like the end of a winter thaw and popping sounds came from his joints. He shook his head at his opponent in front of him whose arms were twisted in ways they were never meant to be. You thawed far too quickly. You're far too reckless and emotional.

With that, Marsen walked over to the box where the bets were kept. It opened, signaling his victory. Yet Jeston chuckled from the ground. What were you hoping to find in there?

Your dignity. But apparently you didn't have any.

Jeston's face twitched and he passed out on the floor.

Marsen walked over to Anton and the others, smiling. That was fun. Or rather satisfying. Marsen touched a hand to his chest and composed himself, his face returning to a neutral position.

Anton grabbed his shoulder and leaned in close, using his energy to make sure only Marsen could hear his whisper. Feelings aren't a weakness. It's not a failure to have kept some. Then he straightened up and clapped him on the back. Good job, that was a resounding victory.

Of course. I did not spend that time training for nothing.

As they were leaving, Diana cut them off, clearing her throat. Excuse me. Your group has clearly been causing a stir among those of our sect. To that end, I will be participating to make sure nothing untoward is happening.

Will you? Anton asked. You can, but you have to follow the same rules as everyone else. You need to contribute to others' growth.

I understand, she nodded. I will follow your rules.

Then there shouldnt be any issues, Anton said.

The vast amount of training resources available in the tomb greatly accelerated everyones cultivation speed. By the end of the third week, they had the equivalent of another half a years training putting them solidly one rank further.

Anton himself trained Mental Liberation, and he found that the best place to do that was in the pressure training hall. The pressures suppression wasnt purely physical, but also partially mental. That was the case with all suppression from a cultivators aura, unless someone was simply physically restrained by the greater power of another cultivator.

His next star- the seventeen and the next prime tempering- was going to be Earthly Connection. Even with partial training in it, he felt it advancing his understanding of others beyond his previous capabilities. He had been somewhat concerned about Diana joining their group, but she was actually quite helpful with Annelies training once they were more open about things. He was also able to discern her real reason for wanting to join them.

It was the same basic reason as why anyone joined groups. Personal power was on the list, of course, but there was something more fundamental. Loneliness. Even among other members of their sect, it was possible for cultivators to be lonely. Anton suspected that was why the cultivation courtyards were arranged the way they were- to make it more likely for people to develop connections with at least a few people. While they could have made larger complexes that had many people, having just a few people constantly around was a better starting point for some. Those who desired even more people around had other places to meet them.

By its very core the Frostmirror sect tended towards emotionlessness. Without emotions, one would not get lonely. They would be able to focus solely on improving their cultivation without distractions. But Anton was no longer sure it was even truly possible to divest oneself of emotions completely. There were always things that clung to a person, things fundamental to their person. Diana was lonely, but she wasnt alone. Independent cultivators notwithstanding, many of those who joined the training group simply couldnt find companionship amongst their own sects. The fact that it also helped improve their training was a good excuse, but there was more to it than that.

Having completed Voice previously and knowing his inner thoughts, Anton was surprised that his beginning in training Earthly Connections revealed some of that same loneliness in himself. But it was only a small amount- an old wound that had mostly healed. Though he would never quite fit exactly with Catarina and the other youths, they were still a real source of companionship. Of family, in addition to the family he had managed to regain after the point where everything could have been lost to him.

Another attempt was made at The Gauntlet. People began to notice that it could be attempted with a team, but Anton and the others had been spending work on coordination for the whole duration of the training already. While some other groups might have some success, they still thought they had a competitive chance to be the first ones to complete it. They would just have to make new attempts as soon as they recovered fully. It seemed that they must be close to the end, but there was only so much they could do at once. Still, they were certain theyd passed every challenge and merely had to face them all at once. The next attempt could very well be it.

Some conversations needed to be straightforward. It was somewhat difficult to pry Annelie away from Diana- or rather, the other way around- but he got some moments alone with her. How do you feel about the Frostmirror sect?

Annelie thought for a few moments. I like it. They take care of me. Im suited to the technique as well- though I agree with you about the emotionless aspect going too far.

I see. What do you think about leaving, and coming to join the Order with me?

I- Annelie hesitated. I dont know. Id rather not see Graotan right now. My parents...

Anton shook his head. Neither of them had made it. They wont be there. But Alva would love to see you.

Annelie held a hand over her heart. I want to see her too. But this is the best way for me to grow. You saw those two- late Spirit Building now, if they werent before. I cant just let them *live*. Walking around like they havent done anything wrong.

It hurt, realizing how much like him she was. I dont plan to leave them alone, either. Are you sure you wish to stay with the Frostmirror sect?

Annelie nodded. Yes. Though sometimes people are distance, I am taken care of. Not quite like back home, but its better that way, I think.

His appreciation of his great-granddaughters emotional maturity was dulled by the fact that she should still be acting like a girl, barely a young woman. She still had her emotions- and his assistance with her training should ensure that- but the troubles of her life had robbed her of some of the way things should have been. Another crime to attribute to Van Hassel and one likely shared by the Heavenly Lion Sect as a whole.

Platinum oak formed the shaft of the bow. It was not quite so silver as its name implied, but it certainly was expensive like that very same metal. The bowstring was made of the sinew of a great cat from the Beast Forest. Together with some auxiliary pieces they

formed a whole bow, one that Alva held above her head triumphantly as she walked out of the armament hall. She had done all sorts of stupid *work* to get enough contribution points for this thing, but she finally had it. She supposed the work was also training and was useful because it produced stuff, but it was so *boring*. It made her want to fall asleep, which was even worse when she was tired from spending extra hours working and training. But she had it and now she could go on a hunt before great-grandpa Anton got back. And she would do it with a bow just like his.

Well, it wasn't *just* like his. The materials were different. It was also a lot smaller. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do with a bow taller than her anyway. There was no way she could draw it that far with her arms. A shortbow suited her just fine, and anyone who made fun of her for it would get an arrow to the face. She had bought arrows too, but they weren't anything fancy. She was still trying to learn Spirit Arrows, but it was difficult. She needed to ask for help with that later.

But before later happened, she needed to go on a hunt. She had gotten to the fifth star now and tempered her muscles, and she was *strong*. She was maybe not as strong as those who were older than her and also cultivators, but at least as much as a normal adult man? That seemed right. She was listening to the advice she'd been given to make sure she didn't hurt herself by cultivating too quickly, and there were many elders around to help if she asked. She didn't really want to talk to most of them, but Elder Vincent was a friendly one. She'd even seen him once or twice when he came through Dungannon. But she didn't want to think about that.

She wanted to hunt. Fuzz was obviously going with her. She also needed *more* people before it was probably considered a proper team. Fortunately, she knew just the right people. She didn't know Pete much outside of being from Dungannon, but she knew Patricia. She was a nice lady, and she was also a cultivator. She'd been cultivating for longer than Alva but she was also at the fifth star. She said she was taking it slow, though Alva didn't know why anyone would do that.

There were also a couple other people in the same complex as them. Gerd was a round woman that was far too nice for Alva to call her fat, and Malcom was a fifth person. There wasn't anything really wrong with him, but Alva didn't really care if he came along. Since he was from the same complex, it would be weird not to invite him- and it didn't hurt to have more people along.

Alva was a bit on the weaker side to be going with them. Pete was more than a full star ahead of her, but since she didn't know anyone else it was fine. Besides, the rest of her family would probably be happier that she was being *safe*.

She did intend to be safe, too. That was why she had a saddle for Fuzz and everything. He was fast and could run away from anything coming at them as she shot them with her bow. She wasn't sure how she would be against beasts, but Pete had watched her and approved of her skills. He even called her a Little Anton which made her turn away and blush. She wasn't *that* amazing yet. But she would be.

Chapter 134

Something disturbed the brush ahead. Alva readied her bow, drawing and nearly shooting before she saw what it was. However, when it started darting away she slowly released the tension on the string and lowered her bow. It was just a deer. If they needed to eat it would be fine to kill it, but they were intending to hunt aggressive beasts. Even if Fuzz sometimes ate a lot, he didnt need a whole deer right now.

Alva scratched Fuzz behind the ears, reaching down in front of her specially made saddle to do so. Good boy Fuzz. We dont need to hunt that. See if you can find something else.

Fuzz put his nose to the ground and was sniffing away rather quickly. He moved ahead at a pace the rest of the group could keep up with comfortably as they all scanned their surroundings for dangerous beasts. As they continued forward, Fuzz was the first to react. He growled at a large area of brush ahead, and everyone prepared themselves.

A few moments later a boar of similar size to Fuzz- head around chest height on a man- charged forward. Alva had hesitated slightly after the deer, but she quickly drew and fired her bow, coating the arrow in energy to increase its piercing power. Her arrow flew straight towards the beasts head, glancing off the skull and sticking in its shoulder a finger deep. If shed hit the eye it might be dead, but without an arrow through the brain a boar was bound to keep charging.

As the boar charged, Alvas first instincts were to flinch away- but a proper archer would stay focused on her target. Fuzz had started running around to the side to give Alva a better angle as the boar reached the front lines. Gerd had positioned herself in front, a large two-handed hammer in her hands. With a great cracking sound it rang against the boars skull, imparting momentum that sent its charge to her side. Yet the boar still wasnt down. Pete and Malcolm were on the other side of Gerd so they couldnt use their primary weapons, but Pete threw a dart into the hindquarters of the boar.

Two more arrows went into its side by the time the boar properly turned around as Fuzz tried to keep pace parallel to it. The boar seemed indecisive about who it should attack, but settled for Malcolm with his shield and shortspear. However, even with that name a shortspear still had decent reach- and Malcolm was able to stab his spear into the creatures chest before it was close enough to gore him. Its momentum carried them both along together, but the solid blow to its heart laid the boar to rest.

Good, Pete commented. If we can handle something like this, we should be able to handle most of the things in this area safely. Dont get careless, though. Sometimes beasts wander into different areas where they dont belong. Any rewards arent worth it if any of us get injured.

I agree, Alva said. I dont want to see Fuzz or anyone hurt again. If she was more accurate with her shots, she could help that more. If a beast never got close, it couldnt

harm anyone. Though they also needed the battle experience to grow stronger properly, so she should probably let her allies face *some* danger. It was difficult to keep both in mind in the right amount. Cultivation was hard, but she never thought it would be easy to be like great-grandpa Anton.

Everyone breathed in and out at a steady pace, feeling their own cultivations and checking for problems. What did they *need* to grow stronger? Besides just time and energy to temper themselves, of course. Some of the people in the training group were talking, discussing problems they had encountered while others remained available to provide help where they had expertise. Though nobody was significantly more advanced in cultivation, they all had insights to share with each other. Some things that seemed obvious to one person wouldn't be so to another.

Then the peaceful atmosphere was disrupted. Lev staggered onto the scene, his one good arm bound and in a sling in front of his chest. Eyes were drawn to him as he sat down heavily.

What happened? Anton asked.

The Heavenly Lion Sect. I was heading to the trapped corridor to train when I was stopped by two of their cronies. They said something stupid about it being reserved. Of course, they couldn't just attack me so I didn't think anything of it and started moving through the corridor. I didn't expect them to throw things to set off extra traps around me.

Hmm, Anton frowned. I hadn't expected the rules to be so easily exploitable.

I saw them there earlier, too, said one of the independent cultivators, I was too afraid to upset them.

I would appreciate it if everyone reports similar matters, Anton said. We may not have more than a temporary connection with each other, but I think we can all agree we wouldn't like to have people interfere with our training. Anton looked to Lev, Any other details you can provide?

Lev nodded, They seemed fairly careful not to get their attacks too close to me. So they still seemed to be wary of the limitations.

Frost was creeping over the scene, present from all three of the Frostmirror Sect but surprisingly focused around Diana who prided herself on control. Those arrogant bastards.

We should be wary of such tactics, Anton said, But I'm not sure if we should seek further conflict. Lev, what do you think?

Lev shook his head, We dont have the people to have them stand around at all hours of the day ready to cause trouble. Id like to get revenge somehow though. Cant just shove them onto the traps, though. Some people have tested the limits for what counts as an attack, and it can be pretty strict. Apparently they ended up with injuries for a few days as a warning

Is there no projection in that area? Anton asked. It does seem like a circumvention of Everhearts rules. He might tacitly allow it, but we should bring it to the attention of the projections anyway.

Cant be bothered, the projection in charge of a different area said. The traps take care of themselves following the rules. Deal with it yourself.

Very well, Anton said and looked to Lev. What do you think?

I dont think letting them go without retaliation is reasonable, Lev said. I only imagine theyll get worse.

Anton nodded. I can spare a few hours, Anton said. What are the chances they have people in that training room?

Pretty high, Lev said.

Then let us go.

Thanks, Lev said. Id rely on other members of the Grasping Willows, but we arent really a match.

What about retaliation later?

Lev shook his head, Theyre causing trouble for us here and now. And theres an unspoken rule to keep conflicts in places like this restricted to just this area. Of course, that doesnt happen- but dealing with a later grudge is better than being walked on *now*.

Of course I agree, Anton said, I just wanted to make sure youd thought about it.

Should we follow? Hoyt asked.

If I dont make any mistakes, I shouldnt be able to be harmed, Anton said. But if you wish to show solidarity, I would not mind help.

Ill come too, Catarina said.

Might as well make this a semi-official Ninety-Nine Stars stance, right? Velvet asked.

We should probably inform the others first, Anton said, Even if we make the declaration as our training group, it will affect them. Then again, people are already beginning to cause trouble anyway. Everyones getting antsy about the end.

After finding as many people as they could to spread the word, the group found their way to the trap corridor. Passage is forbidden, said two large men, standing menacingly. With that said, neither of them were in Spirit Building so the intimidation factor was minimal.

I am aware of your declarations, Anton said. He just stood there looking down the hallway.

That means leave, one of them said.

Go ahead, Anton gestured. Make me.

The two guards turned to each other then harrumphed, as if they were simply choosing to ignore him instead of being unable to do anything.

When another cultivator showed up and was told passage was forbidden, Anton explained what they meant. The Heavenly Lion Sect has decided to declare war on everyone else and is setting off the traps when anyone else tries to pass, Anton said. Thats what they actually mean, but theyre too cowardly to admit it.

Thats not- We-

If youre not cowards, Lev said, We can duel right now. To the death, if you want. Lev still had his normally useful arm strapped to his side and glared at the guards.

They chose to keep their mouths closed. The difference between Spirit Building and late Body Tempering was enough that they werent confident.

The cultivator shook his head and left. Shortly after that, another member of the Heavenly Lion Sect arrived. Passage is forbidden, Anton said.

Not to us it isnt, said the two guards.

Anton shrugged, I guess not then. It seems the Heavenly Lion Sect owns this area now. He turned around and stepped away.

Thats right, said the early Spirit Building member. Youd better know your place.

Anton continued walking away until the man started down the actually trapped part of the corridor. He was dealing it much the same way as the others, quickly moving to avoid the traps. Once he was about a third of the way, Anton spun around and fired five arrows in quick succession, passing the man and hitting traps slightly in front of him.

Unfortunately only two triggered, but an unexpected blade and a gout of flame in front of the man left him with slight scorch marks and a cut along one arm.

I changed my mind, Anton said. If passage is forbidden, I would prefer for it to be universally enforced.

The cultivator had stopped retreating slightly to reach a safe area down the corridor. Do you realize what you are doing? he said.

Do you? Anton asked. You chose to attack others first. Before giving him any time to respond, he continued firing arrows at tiles all around the man. While technically going backwards was *safe*, Anton was able to trigger any trap in front of him. Assuming it passed the random chance involved.

The cultivator from the Heavenly Lion Sect made a mad dash back towards the entrance. Even as quickly as Anton could fire arrows- with some of the others tossing darts and ranged weapons as well- it was only slightly more dangerous than the traps the man could trigger normally. The only difference was they could trigger in front of him instead of at his location. When he arrived he had at least half of his ribs broken and numerous cuts and some poisons. He looked as if he was going to attack, but thought better of it and immediately began binding his wounds. Then he left in a staggering huff.

The two guards just sweated nervously, unable to do anything but also unwilling to leave. Anton smiled at them. There, nice and fair I'm sure you agree. Less than a quarter hour later, someone entered the corridor from the far end. After sensing that they were indeed a member of the Heavenly Lion Sect, Anton shouted at them. Corridors closed! You have to stay there forever now!

Hes serious! Yelled one of the guards, And crazy!

The cultivator at the end ignored Anton's words, simply raising his energy at mid Spirit-Building. He began calmly walking towards Anton who immediately made use of the best techniques of Thousand Arrows. Since he didn't even have to cause real damage, he was capable of rapidly firing continuously without worrying about running out of energy. The only thing he needed to do was impart proper speed to his Spirit Arrows, and enough force to trigger a pressure plate.

The cultivator from the Heavenly Lion Sect apparently had a trick in mind, as he lunged towards some of Anton's arrows- but Anton had already anticipated that possibility. He didn't want to find out if that counted as him attacking, and so he wasn't going to. He was quite capable of redirecting his arrows in flight, or just erasing them from existence if necessary. Explosions and poisons and blades surrounded the man- and Anton was really starting to get a sense of timing for optimal placement of arrows. He could also cover the entire width of the hallway, whereas a person running down it would normally only trigger one. Even if they triggered none themselves on the way back, the danger was five or more times as high.

The cultivator retreated to the end of the corridor before even making it a third of the way. There was a standoff between them for half of an hour, and a half dozen other cultivators came with the intention of entering the training areas. A crowd built up at both ends of the corridor as everyone finished cultivating and wouldn't be allowed out by Anton.

Sensing many people building up, even just curious onlookers came to watch. Eventually things got to the point where one of the two top cultivators in the training area came. He was in late Spirit Building- close to the peak and breaking through to Essence Collection, in fact. What the hell is going on here?

The Heavenly Lion Sect members at the far end of the corridor were the first to shout overlapping complaints. They all summed up to Anton blocking their way. By setting of the traps.

Is that true? Anton felt a pressure of a strong aura bearing down on him.

Anton stared unblinkingly at the man. He practiced the cultivation technique of Glorious Flame Palace. There weren't many people at his level. Anish was his name, if Anton recalled correctly. I was just helping them enforce their own rules. The Heavenly Lion Sect declared passage forbidden quite vehemently, he gestured to Lev. So I was simply making sure it applied to their sect as well.

The man's eyes landed on the two guards still standing in their positions. Speak.

It wasn't our idea! they immediately caved. Senior Brother Zvonko came up with the idea, and others agreed! We were just told to do it.

Anish slammed a fist into the wall, fire bursting from around the impact point. It very carefully weaved its way *around* everyone, but the intent was clear. Enough! There won't be any more of this foolishness, he gestured to the guards, On *either side*, he glared at Anton.

I wouldn't have had to do this if they weren't the instigators, Anton said. If anyone continues to try anything like this, I'll be matching them.

I said *enough*, Anish stood over Anton.

Anton just met his gaze. I don't intend to start anything, but I won't let people off without retaliation. If you disagree, you can complain to my sect elders when we get out of here. I'm not going to count on Glorious Flame Palace to enforce things.

Good. Anish snorted, You'd better not start anything. He put his finger as close to pressing on Anton's chest as he could without actually doing so.

With all of that, the crowd dispersed- Anton and the others left first, because if anyone planned to monopolize that training area they would have to reach the far end, where they were in the worst position to retreat. Though Anish had declared an end to foolishness, Anton knew that there would certainly be more conflicts coming.

Chapter 135

The golems offered cumulative points for fighting them- though repeated performances at the same level gave significantly less. One category of rewards offered was medicine, and simple recovery from wounds was easily accomplished given a few days and some expense. Those few days were still critical parts of the month, and Anton wished he and the others had been able to enact a larger retaliation for Lev. Not that he felt like they weren't able to be effective.

The Heavenly Lion Sect had taken care to not bar cultivators from some of the strongest sects, but all of the independent cultivators and smaller sects were still reasonably outraged. Some of the larger sects spoke up as well, though their outrage could have been an excuse to promote their rivalries. Either way, it suddenly became harder for them to act as they pleased. Spots were filled up *just* before they attempted a trial of some sort, and rewards their members were eyeing were taken by others before they could obtain them.

Despite Anish's proclamations, the approaching end of the training session only seemed to encourage people to cause trouble for others, though generally in less extreme ways than the nearly direct attacks. There was also perfectly acceptable competitive spirit that didn't involve sabotaging others as people pushed for the last few days.

With Lev healed, the group decided to try their hand at The Gauntlet one final time. Either they would sustain injuries they couldn't recover from in just a few days or find success. They thought they were close on the last attempt, though they couldn't be completely sure.

It was not a surprise to find that The Gauntlet was already busy. Others had the same idea as them, and were likewise making use of teams to try to push through the trials. It was impossible to know exactly how far others had gotten, but it seemed no one had reached the end just yet.

The first challenge always involved some sort of physical or combat test. This time it was a series of traps. Not hidden ones, but obviously swinging blades and gouts of flame. Picking a path through and advancing with the right timing was the safest bet, though anyone with sufficient cultivation could simply plough their way through. Interestingly enough, the group found that this time that was more literal. Traps were usually never damaged and if they *were* damaged the formations quickly repaired them, but there was a straight path through the first room. Anton went through first just to

make sure it wasn't some sort of trap and things were actually active, but he didn't spot any changes from the obvious- and arrived at the other side unscathed. At least they didn't have to expend their effort just yet, though it threw them off slightly.

Future trials had nothing to destroy- though they did see some damaged floors as they continued through the pressure trial. They passed puzzles and the knowledge as well as another round of traps that were only *slightly*

damaged. Then they came to the golems.

Everyone was quite confident in defeating the golems, but it seemed a group was already there ahead of them. It seemed to be a dozen members of the Heavenly Lion Sect, with cultivations ranging from just entering Spirit Building to one member on the border between mid and late Spirit Building.

They would have been quite content staying out of things and watching the fight, but apparently entering the room was sufficient to trigger more golems. Eight more golems, one with a curious cut on its otherwise flawless body, stepped out into the area. They headed towards the new entrants, but things didn't end there.

The members of the Heavenly Lion Sect had clearly noticed them. The strongest one among them-who should have been the Senior Brother Zvonko- shouted orders. Formation C!

There was sufficient room for the two groups to fight the total of twenty golems, but the members of the Heavenly Lion Sect began weaving themselves among the others, drawing their golems along with them. The group that was slightly more than half members of the Ninety-Nine Stars responded in kind.

Nobody could directly attack another, but standing in front of someone while a golem punched with a multiple ton fist did just as well. It became a mess of fighting the golems while getting in the way of other combatants- while not also being blocked by them.

Anton found himself forced into melee- even if he retreated, the members of the Heavenly Lion Sect would follow him with two or three members, since they had some spares. The golems likewise came with them. While Anton was still able to avoid the ponderous attacks of several golems, since they were intentionally being drawn towards him instead of fended off like his companions normally did he was less effective at damaging them and simply ended up drifting back towards the larger mass of people.

Marsen had the most direct effects on the Heavenly Lion Sect. His frost could make the ground extremely slippery, but he was in no obligation to withdraw it when others moved through the area. Thus, he spread the effects wildly without directly touching anyone, limiting their movements while he simply removed ice where it would inhibit his companions.

Timothys approach was the most extreme. When he found it difficult to direct attacks to their competitors he seemed to simply devote himself to battle- but then he suddenly jumped in front of someone who was being attacked. A member of the Heavenly Lion Sect, specifically. He raised his shield- a new one obtained in the various trials- directly intercepting the attack. It was then that his purpose became clear. He hadnt suddenly decided that working with them was the best option. Instead, he was struck and sent rocketing backwards- into a very surprised cultivator who wasnt prepared to dodge someone launched by the golem. Timothy simply rallied all his energy for defense and let himself be catapulted into the man. Both of them crashed into the wall, but only Timothy quickly brushed himself off and was moving.

Despite all the efforts to sabotage each other, the golems were steadily being defeated. It didnt seem that anyone could leave until they were all gone, so the end results were drawbacks for both sides. They expended much more energy than they should have and both sides sustained at least minor injuries. Both sides glared at each other as they moved on, neither willing to give the other priority.

If he had the slightest bit of faith in the integrity of the Heavenly Lion sect, Anton might have advised letting them go first and promising to not interfere with them- but he thought it most likely that they would attempt to set up something to harm them even if Anton and the others were sincere. It wasnt just idle speculation- there were their previous interactions to go off of as well as his ability to read people. The emotions on display from both sides were anger and annoyance, which Anton couldnt really blame. Though the Heavenly Lion Sect was entirely at fault for the conflicts beginning in the first place.

The next room was the formations room. Zvonkos face lit up and he pushed forward a skinny young man in early Spirit Building. Time for you to do your thing.

The instant he began pulling out formation flags and throwing them about the area, Catarina leapt forward and started doing the same. The formations already set up in the area had various dangers- fire and lightning were very prominently featured, but instead of being triggered by pressure plates they were constantly active, filling the whole area. The two who were trained in formations matched off against each other as they advanced their own groups forward.

The young man was quick, and Catarina seemed to be falling behind. She wasnt even able to retrieve all of her formation flags as they pressed their way forward.

Tell me how I can help, Firdaus offered.

Catalina just held out her hand, fending him off. He was the next most proficient with formations in their group, given their relation to enchanting equipment. His help would have been useful, but Catarina seemed to have taken the current situation as a personal challenge.

Anton watched her in pure concentration as she continuously moved through the area, only occasionally directing them to their normal tasks of helping her place flags in the shifting formations. The Heavenly Lion Sect continued to get further ahead, until at the last formation they were able to complete it with time to spare before the others could even reach it.

The formation user wasn't done with just that, however. He was setting up more flags around him. I need contributions of your energy! he called to the others.

You heard him, Zvonko said, contributing his own energy to the growing formation, a barrier of golden light.

Hmph, the formation user held his head high. You thought you could compete with me? I'm a journeyman in the formation arts already! As he proclaimed that the barrier completed, while Catarina was left just watching. Anton could sense how difficult it would be to tear apart the barrier.

A journeyman? Catarina questioned. Then she stepped forward, pulling out another formation flag and stabbing it point first into the barrier in front of her. What low standards.

As her flag pierced into the barrier, energy swirled through all of her other flags in the area. Anton didn't feel like it would be sufficient, but as he was about to add his own energy he felt a sudden flood of energy as the effect spread to previous formations- making use of the other flags that had been forgotten. He'd sensed Catarina's haste, but hadn't read the undertone of her true intentions until that moment.

The power of the formations inherent to the chamber they were in all activated, pressing against the barrier with mixes of fire, lightning, and pure force. There were a few moments where nothing happened, then the barrier cracked. Instead of the elements washing over the members of the Heavenly Lion Sect, it simply shattered the barrier then turned into a massive whirlwind.

All of them were sucked into it and pulled back to the beginning of the room while Catarina stepped forward and towards the next room. With a flick of her wrist she pulled her formation flags to her- though she left the other flags scattered about in the final section. She smiled, The formations here are amazing. I'm just starting to get the slightest idea of how they work. She looked longingly at the spare formation flags. Unfortunately, the restrictions on this entire place are too enigmatic for me to completely learn. As she stepped through the door into the next room, Catarina waved. Good luck, mister Journeyman! I hope you have spare flags!

The next room was empty. Completely empty, and worrying for that. There was simply a closed door and a simple sign on it. Please wait.

Anton looked around. Any traps?

Catarina shook her head. It seems to be fine.

About what you did in there I'm not going to complain, of course, but I would have liked some advance warning you could do that.

Sorry, Catarina shrugged. Honestly, I wasn't quite ready for something like that. I've been studying the formations here, of course. Everything is buried behind myriad other layers. I just got the idea and I kind of picked up on that particular flow as I was going. I was planning to get ahead and encircle them with that formation I was setting up, but I slowed down once I got the idea.

... Firdaus seemed speechless, You've been cultivating for how long?

Almost three years, Catarina said. Why?

Ah. I had initially assumed all of you were closer to the upper end like myself. Four or five years. How foolish of me.

There wasn't much more to say, and instead they just waited. There were no signs that the Heavenly Lion Sect would be joining them, but they remained cautious as they circulated their energy to refresh themselves. After fifteen minutes, the door in front of them opened. A disheveled looking woman with a sword at her side calmly walked out. She looked at all of them, then shook her head. Didn't make it. Good luck.

With what seemed to be two swift steps she was gone, and back in the previous room- where they couldn't catch a glimpse of the Heavenly Lion Sect at all.

That was Lev stared back behind them, That was Chikere, right? She's a hair away from Essence Collection.

Anton tried to recall that name. Oh yes. She's the other one at that level. An independent cultivator, even. I wonder what sort of trial stopped her at the very end. Assuming this *is* the end.

The door ahead of them was still open, and a voice called out from inside. Oy! I don't have all day! Or at least, you don't. Get in here or get out.

All of them looked at each other, then hurried inside. Once there they saw another Everheart. His appearance changed as they looked at him, suddenly growing a longer beard and adopting a different posture.

Everheart frowned, then patted his chest and felt his face. How did I? he scanned the people in the room, then pointed to Anton, What the hell man, why'd you have to throw everything off? Women want a dashing young fellow, not a nearly middle aged man. You threw off the average so much. Anton avoided commenting to wonder if being a

dashing young fellow ever worked, either. Yet he was answered anyway. No it doesnt work! But it will someday! Though Im just a projection so Im not long for it anyway.

Is the real Everheart still out there? Anton asked.

Eh maybe. What year is it? the projection in front of them frowned. Probably dead. Or immortal or whatever. Couldnt be bothered to come back and check on us if he *is* alive. Selfish asshole. He stomped his foot on the ground, cracking it. And yes, I know thats me Im talking about! Now are we fighting or what?

Everyone blinked. Thats the trial? Anton asked.

The last one. Everheart punched a fist into his palm. Gotta at least get a little bit of entertainment out of this. Now come on! Lets do this.

Chapter 136

While it seemed a little bit unfair to fight an eight-on-one battle, Anton wasnt sure who it was unfair *towards*. The advantage of numbers should have been useful, but the way Timothy was flying past his head he was going to say the advantage was held by the one with greater cultivation. Though he wasnt an actual person, the aura around the projection of Everheart was similar in magnitude to an Essence Collection cultivator. Hed felt it change as they entered the room, so presumably it was matching them in some way. Whether that was to be fair or not was a different question.

Everhearts blows were as powerful as the strikes from the golems, but he was much quicker and also a smaller target. Spirit Arrows flew past him as quickly as Anton could fire them, but striking him seemed impossible even as he dodged numerous other attacks.

Everhearts projection fought without weapons, but that was simply because they werent necessary. Weapons were for providing reach and multiplying force. The latter was completely unnecessary when fighting them, and if he used a weapon he would simply kill them. Though Everheart could be an ass, he was at least *basically* fair in his trials. Anton was even starting to doubt the legitimacy of calling this place a tomb, though some careless fellows *had* died- mostly in The Gauntlet during the early days.

One bow, two swords, a pair of daggers, and an axe were the weapons of the members of the Order. Lev fought mostly unarmed, relying more on the effects he could produce with his energy rather than physical attacks. He created tendrils of energy meant to restrain as well as leaving traces of his own energy that attempted to burrow through Everhearts defenses. Though Marsen had fought with no weapons against the other member of the Frostmirror sect, he was currently using a staff with which he primarily targeted Everhearts lower body. Marsen of course also made use of his frost abilities. Firdaus primarily made use of his spear, though he also took advantage of bladed

gauntlets and boots he wore, kicking and punching where advantageous. He incorporated lightning into his attacks, resulting in the area being a mix of colors.

Everheart was so relaxed he could talk while fighting them. Your swordsmanship isn't anything to speak of, Everheart said as he swiped an elbow over Catarina's head, You should probably try to focus on those formations of yours.

Of course, she was trying to do that. Everheart just kept moving her formation flags and moving to attack her directly, disrupting her efforts as she had to defend herself.

His fist slammed into Timothy's shield, sending him staggering back several steps but not catapulting him through the air. Your ability to take a hit is fine I suppose, but what's the point in blocking if you can't even reflect the damage to me? Everheart hooked his leg behind Timothy's knee and whacked him on the back of the head with his fist as he lost his balance, And your stance sucks.

Everheart's eyes constantly scanned his surroundings, looking for his next target. He found it, grabbing Hoyt's axe just below the blade and stopping his attack. He twisted it to block a spear of ice shot by Marsen.

Your technique sucks, he said to Hoyt. You'd do better focusing on external projection rather than your physique. He tossed Hoyt's axe at Marsen, Your face isn't as unreadable as you think. Seems the Frostmirror sect still doesn't have any *actual* mirrors. His next target was Lev. An interesting technique you've got, but that arm at your side is slowing you down. Better to just remove it. As if to punctuate his point, Everheart jabbed Lev in the guts on the side of his useless arm. At the same time, that useless arm slammed into Everheart's face, getting the first solid blow on him in the battle. It didn't do much more than damage his defenses briefly, but Everheart's eyes flashed with anger. Then he laughed. What a dumb technique. Using your energy to control your own useless arm from the inside like a parasite on yourself. I love it! That declaration didn't stop him from kicking Lev halfway across the room, though.

Anton kept up a steady rate of firing arrows. He was beginning to see some patterns in Everheart's movements. The others were also acclimating to fighting one powerful and smaller enemy rather than dealing with golems of their own. As a group, they'd never fought a single person so they weren't as familiar as they could be.

Where is Everheart looked around, then kicked his leg up behind him, sending Velvet flying into the ceiling. There you are. Too much killing intent right before your attacks. She twisted her body to hit the ceiling feet first and sprang back down towards Everheart, slicing out with her daggers. He avoided, of course, but Marsen was able to clip him with his spear, drawing their first blood for the battle. Everheart caught the spear as it was being retracted, basically ignoring the electricity pouring out of it against his energy. You should work more on how to *use* equipment. It'll help with making it too. Then Everheart snapped the spear in half. Also, try not to freeze up in battle. It lets your

opponent do whatever they want. During that whole exchange he was dodging others attacks.

Catarina was actually seizing the opportunity to build up her formation. The energy she was providing was beginning to flow through them, and slightly slowing Everheart. Likewise, Levs energy had successfully burrowed its way into one finger and was causing internal damage. Those making more standard attacks were managing to land blows, though most of them didnt puncture Everhearts defensive energy. Anton kept his arrows densely packed with energy to have a chance to break through, though some of the time he simply intended for Everheart to avoid and take a lesser blow from someone else.

When Everheart appeared right in front of him, Anton wasnt surprised. Why the hell are you old, though? Perhaps if he werent so thrown off by the question Anton could have avoided the straight punch to his face- but only on a good day. His head snapped back and blood gushed from Antons nose.

Couldnt not be, Anton responded. He spun a nice new handaxe hed gotten from the reward points, slicing at Everhearts chin but only cutting a few beard hairs.

I feel that, Everheart said. But you just started. Anton managed to jump over a sweep of his leg, and Everheart had to respond to a half dozen other attacks which prevented from following up. Why start cultivating at your age?

Anton shook his head, I couldnt not. I had things to do. Still do, really.

I know what you mean. Theres always more. You know, the Ninety-Nine Stars kind of drops the ball in the first half of Spirit Building. You should have swapped them and done body first. Youd break fewer ribs. Anton *knew* the attack was coming, but he couldnt avoid the spinning kick to his chest. He only barely reacted in time as it hit his sternum, his hastily constructed Golden Armor shattering under the blow. And, as predicted, many of his ribs.

Anton coughed up a bit of blood. So? His response was punctuated with an arrow. He sent himself with it, feeling all of the energy of everyone else. Velvet was not *quite* directly behind him, Hoyt and Lev on one side with Firdaus and Marsen taking up the other side. Timothy had inserted himself on the front. The Spirit Arrow went past Timothys ear as Firdaus forced Everheart to hop into the air. The Spirit Arrow curved as it needed to on its way to Everhearts heart, piercing through his defenses- until suddenly they increased in magnitude, shattering the arrow. Blows from all around him rained down on Everheart, and he slammed into the ground, sending out cracks in all directions- throwing all of Catarinas formation flags into disarray.

Anton had noticed him steadily growing stronger throughout the battle, nearly matching their teamwork, but he hadnt expected a sudden increase. One or two at a time, Everheart used a single strike to send those around him flying with various numbers of

broken bones. With impossibly swift movements he reached Anton to backhand him on the side of the head before tossing him, then he ran around the room and grabbed all of Catarina's formation flags, throwing them around the sudden pile of people suddenly atop Catarina.

Ah. Everheart looked at the pile. Maybe I overdid it. He prodded the pile, and heard a chorus of groans. Nah, it's fine. Hey! Get up! Time for rewards and crap.

Somehow Anton understood the words through his concussion, but he was still the last to get to his feet except Catarina, who had ended up at the bottom of the pile of people.

Everheart threw open the large doors at the back of the room, to display another room where piles of books and scrolls were haphazardly placed. Hope you all like forbidden techniques, because that's what I've got. Everheart looked at the pile. Huh. And a staff technique, I guess. He tossed a scroll at Firdaus' head, and the young man barely managed to catch it before impact. I'm glad it was a group that did this first, because honestly I doubt anyone can use all of these themselves. Everheart looked at the dazed group. Well go on, get looking! Everheart shook his head, This group here, he waved his hand vaguely, is only forbidden because they're good. I suppose you can start there. This pile is for self-destructive techniques. This bunch just has really awful side effects for whoever you attack with it.

What about that one? Velvet asked, pointing to a lone scroll in the corner.

Hmm. Everheart walked over to it and opened it up. A swirling void opened up in front of him, and he swiftly rolled the scroll. I thought I got rid of the world destruction techniques. Everheart ripped the scroll into tiny pieces. If you see any of those, best hand them over. You kind of live in the world, after all.

Among the various techniques in the pile were a dozen copies of Candle Wax. Anton browsed them just to make sure they were the same, but they were identical in every respect. Still just the worst side effects. Most of the other techniques were of marginal value, as well. Nobody wanted to sacrifice their life to create a giant carnivorous forest. Lev *did*

scan that one, but he carefully placed it back.

Velvet claimed a stealth technique that Everheart claimed could let you sneak into- and with sufficient proficiency *out of*- any sect in the world. She let Anton take a look, and while he didn't understand the profundities behind it he did think it was probably true. It was just that minimum requirements to begin training it were Essence Collection and proficiency in about a dozen other stealth techniques. It wasn't expected that good techniques would be easy to train, but Everheart's techniques varied *widely* in usability.

Everheart tossed books at people as he browsed through the pile himself. Oh, the formation books aren't here by the way. He gestured to Catarina, Except this one. He

held up a manual titled Soul-Sucking Sanctum. This actually belongs in the fourth category of all of the above. Though it has some normal insights on formations still. He looked at Lev. You're some kind of planty guy? Everheart tossed him a scroll from the first pile, seemingly written on a large leaf. A nice book on gardening. Anton wondered what about gardening might have been forbidden by powerful sects, but he supposed he could ask Lev. Oh, here's a good one. It's a joke book, he tossed a book from the third pile to Marsen. Also other forms of mental disruption and soul freezing and crap. But you should look at the jokes. I got them from this great guy. Really funny. Everheart crossed his arms in front of him as he looked at Anton. The best one for you isn't here, sorry.

Best how? Anton asked. An archery book or?

Everheart posed dramatically and pointed, Fleeting Youth! Using the power of the grave to dredge out your potential. Perfect for an old new cultivator. It's not here, but I can tell you where it is.

Really? Anton asked. That sounds intriguing. Is it dangerous?

Only if you use it wrong. Probably. It was like ninety percent finished when I was made here. Should have worked out the kinks.

That does sound useful, Anton admitted. Though Everheart was deemed crazy and dangerous by almost everyone, nobody ever claimed his techniques didn't work. Even an incomplete one could be valuable. Do you know where other things might be? Anything about raising the cultivation of people on a large scale?

Trying to boost your sect for merit, huh? Everheart asked. I have one in that third pile. You might not want that though.

I was thinking wider scale. I've been trying to determine if it's viable to raise the minimum cultivation level of *everyone*, so that cultivators can't just run rampant over peaceful towns and villages.

Oho. Interesting. I don't have a technique for that, Everheart admitted, But I do have some notes. Should still be sealed. I could tell you where it is. Or that technique for yourself. Fleeting Youth is one of my best works. You'd have to pick *one* though.

The notes, Anton said without hesitation. They should be more beneficial to the world.

Tch, Everheart clicked his tongue, muttering to himself, Should have spent more time hyping it up. You sure? You could rule the world with the other one.

Yes, Anton said. I don't want to rule the world if people are helpless without my intervention.

Fine. Everheart took one of the scrolls in front of him, unraveling and then wiping his hand across it. All of the colored inks in it were ripped from the pages, leaving it blank. Then he slapped the scroll, leaving behind instructions and a map. Everheart looked it over. Yeah, that should do. Here you go.

Thank you, Anton accepted the scroll.

Well, Everheart said. Time for you to get going. He scooped up all of the remaining techniques with his energy and tossed them into a bag, which he threw to Anton. Do whatever with those. Its time for the end! Everheart stood tall, proudly announcing. Everyone! Im sure youre glad to hear that the trials are over. No complaints that its only been twenty-five days! Come to the main hall. All facilities will now become defunct. Everheart waved to the group. Shoo. Go. Dont delay.

Ignoring Everhearts projection seemed like a foolish idea, so they all started running. There was nothing blocking their movement- though they did see members of the Heavenly Lion Sect milling about outside the room where the golems would have been, awkwardly heading towards the main hall when they realized nothing was active for them to exploit.

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Hundreds of people once more found their way to the main hall of Everhearts tomb. There wasnt anything else they could do- all of the facilities had stopped working and even the standard amount of natural energy was dropping back to ambient levels. The atmosphere was confused but slightly excited. Confused, because it was still well short of the promised month. Excited, because they wanted to see the prizes- especially the grand prize.

The Everheart in long flowing robes was once again present. It wasnt clear if he was more real or just the one used for formal announcements. Lets get this started. Beginning with the second through fourth place prizes were two who made great strides in their own cultivation. Bags of assorted cra- cultivation resources for each of them! For a moment Everhearts *true* personality almost shone through the formal projection. Everheart tossed two storage bags to Anish and Chikere, the two with the highest cultivations- but also the most personal talent. A third one went to Zvonko of the Heavenly Lion Sect. Then we have smaller prizes for a myriad of others. Several dozen storage bags and hundreds of small boxes were distributed to people.

Anton looked down at his empty hands in surprise. Hed thought hed progressed an above average amount. It was only a single star and a bit, but he was in mid Spirit Building. He wouldnt complain, though, because hed already received some very useful information. Even just the chance to cultivate in the area for twenty-five days was greatly beneficial. He was just starting to turn to leave when Everheart continued.

Now Im sure all of you are wondering about the grand prize. You might even wonder about the rest. Its all about remembering what I said. Most cultivation improvements isnt just about raising your rank. Its about practicing techniques as well. Most importantly, its not just about your *own* cultivation. Half of you didnt even work in cooperation with your own sects! A shameful display. But the grand prize goes to the one who, overall, was most responsible for the greatest amount of cultivation improvements. Everheart held up a pot. Then he stepped forward into the crowd. Hope you like dealing with jealousy, because you have to learn it eventually. He set the pot in Antons hands. A silence fell over the crowd. Before they could fully process everything, Everhearts form wavered slightly, and the ground trembled. Well, thats that then. My advice is for everyone to run like hell. This whole place is coming down. I matched its stability against its future, so all of the remaining stuff has been decayed for centuries. That includes the walls and ceiling. Dont bother trying to dig it up, though I wont be here to stop you if you want to try. Another tremble. RUN! Everheart commanded.

Anton was already obeying, but was finding it difficult to get through the crowd in front of him. It wasnt a long distance down the path away from the main hall before they got outside, but the rumblings went from ominous to cataclysmic very quickly. As he was passing Anton scooped up a few of the slower Body Tempering cultivators, ignoring their sect affiliations and simply gathering two or three in each arm as he balanced the pot on his head. Moments later, Anton was outside and setting the handful of others on their feet.

An arm grasped towards him, and Anton ducked. However, the true target was atop his head. Anton felt the figure he recognized as Zvonko grabbing the pot while at the same time there was a flaring of *powerful* energy he barely had time to even comprehend.

Two sources of energy clashed- one Anton recognized as Elder Kseniya, and two members of the Heavenly Lion Sect working together to stop a hail of arrows.

Anton already had his handaxes in hand and was spinning about, slashing towards Zvonkos arm. Then everything froze. The buff figure of Everheart showed up as everyone was frozen in place. I do believe I had a prohibition against fighting. However, I also had one against stealing. I never said those were over. So I am going to let the actions here play out as they will. Just remember, there are always consequences for actions. Everhearts voice boomed loudly, *Never ignore my proclamations!*

Perhaps nobody was ever frozen at all, because the momentum of the scene continued directly from where it was before. Antons axe swung up towards Zvonkos arm that was grasping the pot hed received, but Zvonko was already withdrawing. But Anton had allies willing to watch his back, and Lev had seen the attempt coming. Tendrils of his energy wrapped around Zvonkos outstretched arm, preventing its withdrawal. The sharpness of the axes Anton received from the tombs rewards could not be underestimated, and Anton cleaved right through Zvonkos defensive energy, skin, muscle, and bone. A severed hand fell to the ground out of which Anton grabbed his pot.

One of the two late Essence Collection cultivators from the Heavenly Lion Sect charged towards Anton as Zvonko screamed in pain. Anton knew he had no way to defend against it, but no Spirit Arrows came from Elder Kseniya. Then he realized it was because she was suddenly standing in front of him.

Treachery! yelled the elder. How dare you maim one of our disciples under the protection of neutral ground!

Elder Kseniyas presence didnt match the vision of a great arm and eye in the sky from when Grand Elder Vandale had rained stars down on the beast horde, but it was also much more *present* than that event. Though she was only in early Galaxy Construction, she still possessed immense power. Her normally subdued aura flooded the area. There was no treachery on our part. Your disciple openly attempted to steal from one of ours, in the presence of hundreds of eyewitnesses. So you have two choices. First- you can bow your heads to the ground and beg for the forgiveness of my disciple. Second- you can all die.

The white haired elder from the Heavenly Lion Sect held his back straight under the suppression of her aura. You cant get away with that under the treaty.

Maybe not, Elder Kseniya conceded. She had an arrow drawn and pointed at him, brimming with condensed power. But nobody here has the justification to stop me either.

Two more presences made themselves known- from Glorious Flame Palace and the Frostmirror Sect respectively. The second was in response to the first. The older man from the Glorious Flame Palace spoke first. One sect breaking the rules does not justify excessive retaliation. Stand down.

Your Glorious Flame Palace is far too eager to jump into conflict, the seemingly ageless woman from the Frostmirror Sect countered. The rules state that whoever breaks the peace first shall be beset by all of the rest. But you knew that. You just want an excuse to lay down justice against a powerful opponent. It is my opinion that we should follow the rules and side with those who were attacked.

Zvonko had already backed away a dozen meters from Anton and Lev, clutching his severed forearm. I was just trying to get back what was mine. The old man stole my prize.

Thats a lie. The same or very similar comments rang from the mouths of at least a dozen people. Anton himself, his companions, five members of the Frostmirror Sect, Anish, Chikere and most damning of all one of the members of the Heavenly Lion Sect. The latter was one of those Anton had scooped up and brought outside during the collapse- which was now quite complete, the great plateau being half rubble behind them.

Elder Ksenia didnt seem to have been influenced by the surrounding circumstances. You have ten seconds left to kneel down and apologize to my disciple and the Order of Ninety Nine Stars. You two and that kid.

There was a long pause as the elders from the Heavenly Lion Sect considered the situation. Zvonko. Do as she says, they concluded. We apologize for the improprieties committed by our disciple, they clasped their hands and inclined their heads.

What do you think, Anton? Elder Kseniya asked.

What he thought was that he didnt need any more enemies, but he supposed that was already impossible given the events of the day. More importantly, the Heavenly Lion Sect was already on that list no matter what. They didnt even get on their knees, let alone bow their heads to the *ground*.

Anton could sense Elder Kseniyas smile as she fired four sudden arrows. The elders of the Heavenly Lion sect werent without defenses, but each of them ended up with at least *one* shattered knee, staggering them. Done. We can forgive you now.

The disciples of every sect had already been separating into what they perceived as allied groups. The Frostmirror sect subconsciously followed Diana, Annelie, and Marsen to stand with Anton and the others. Many independent cultivators were already slipping away, but Chikere stayed, standing with Anton. Likewise, those who had been harmed by the Heavenly Lion Sects short-term monopoly of training facilities stood against them. The Heavenly Lion Sect was not without their own allies, but they looked somewhat outnumbered. All disciples looked towards their elders to see if a battle would happen.

The two elders of the Heavenly Lion Sect made themselves stand on their shattered legs. We leave. Dont think youve heard the end of this.

Those could have been through your heart, you know, Elder Kseniya warned. But I chose to avoid irreparable harm out of respect for the other sects opinions.

The elder from Glorious Flame Palace had folded his arms in front of him and frowned, but he clearly heard Anish declaration of the lie, and saw his positioning. The other disciples had all followed their foremost senior, of course. These results are barely acceptable.

Somehow, all the sects split apart smoothly without any further conflict. While destroyed kneecaps might have been crippling injuries for most, Elder Kseniya had taken no steps to prevent their healing. Thus, it was little more than a slap on the face for Essence Collection cultivators to receive such injuries. Such insults could be taken just as seriously as killing someone, but in terms of the agreement between sects it was relatively minor.

Anton clutched the pot to himself and breathed deeply as they walked away. He would have to thank Elder Kseniya probably. Though she had also prodded him into digging a deeper hole for himself. Not maliciously, he was certain, but she was the growth through adversity type. Hed been quite happy to have removed much of the conflicts from his life, but now he doubted that could ever be achieved. Then again, if he continued cultivating maybe he was just fooling himself that it could be peaceful.

The Grasping Willows were going well out of their optimal path to travel along with the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, but it was quite a bit safer for them to do so. It also gave some time for Anton to catch up with Elder Varela, and Lev also regaled him of the events in the tomb.

The grand prize, even, Elder Varela shook his head, Did you plan that out?

Ha! Anton laughed, I wish. It just seemed like the best thing to do. Personally, I find I advance best in such conditions. Im not a solitary genius cultivator, even if I managed to push through the first few stars alone.

Everyones looking much different for a month, Elder Varela said. Stronger cultivation and enchanted treasures abound. One wonders what they might all do.

You could just ask, Anton said. The answer is, I dont know. He opened the pot and peeked in. There were strands of energy visible to the eye swirling about. In addition to that, he saw a pile of cultivation medicines and crafting resources contained inside what was apparently a space similar to a storage bag, given the pot was rather small on the outside. At least there didnt seem to be more forbidden techniques in there. Swirls of energy and resources. He couldnt tell what the pot did as it clearly wasnt active at the moment, but he would carefully investigate. If it was dangerous Everheart would have *probably* given a warning, but he might have just assumed Anton knew to be cautious. Unfortunately, Firdaus had split off- Cloudtop Summit was in the opposite direction. The Order had competent appraisers and crafters, but they simply werent part of the crowd that had come. Im sure it does something ridiculous.

You can be certain of that, Elder Kseniya commented. Youre right to be cautious. On that note that includes any further techniques you picked up. I doubt he didnt hand any out.

Anton looked down at the bag at his side completely stuffed full of them. He had a few, for certain. He was planning to destroy most of them, but the first category of forbidden was simply arbitrary suppression by powerful sects- that just meant they were worth looking into.

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With the crafting materials and other cultivation resources separated from the pot, Anton could take stock of what else there was. To him, it looked most like noodle soup. Where both the noodles and broth were made of natural energy in slightly different forms. There were long strands of denser energy floating in somewhat less dense energy without any coherent form. The liquid was still quite dense, and it responded to Anton's attempts to control it as he would expect from natural energy, though it was a bit sluggish.

After considering if he should be cautious and wait for appraisal of the pot, Anton decided he should do some investigating on his own. It shouldn't be dangerous, especially if he was cautious. More importantly, he wouldn't always be able to rely on others for appraisal of enchanted objects. He needed to be able to test things on his own.

He drew some of the liquid up out of the pot into his hand, keeping it separate from himself. Then he carefully dipped a finger into it. He wasn't sure what he expected. There was a slight chill, but little else happened. He didn't even directly distort the drops, because they reacted just like natural energy- including the property of being immaterial. The chilling feeling was from how the energy felt when touching his own. It didn't seem dangerous, just strange. Very carefully he took just a single drop of the energy and started to absorb it into himself, ready to forcibly eject it if necessary.

As it circulated through his meridians it broke down, revealing it was exactly what it seemed to be. Natural energy, simply condensed into something like a liquid. As it broke apart it expanded into a density more like what he would expect from areas like the higher slopes in the Order, a density he could manage with effort. If he were trying to control more than a few drops he might find it difficult, but with just a single one he merely ingested a significant amount of energy. He thought the liquid would be useful for both training energy or recovering in areas with lesser density of natural energy.

Then there were the strands. They moved around in the pot as he adjusted it, almost impossibly thin strands that overlapped and twisted around each other. Unlike the liquid, they didn't respond directly to his promptings for control. He found he could use his own energy or the liquid to move them just fine, but the strands themselves didn't react. He carefully lifted a group out, separating a single strand to hang down like a thin blond hair that shone with light.

He retracted his energy, allowing the strand to touch his bare skin. Nothing, except he could tell it was in a way even more ephemeral than the energy. It had no physical sensation at all, though he could hold it between his fingers. On the assumption that it was a similar sort of thing, he allowed the strand to be absorbed into his meridian. The power he felt in it was significant, but not sufficient to combat his own energy. As long as he isolated it there would be no danger of serious repercussions. Or he was making some sort of gigantic mistake, but Anton doubted it would be *that* dangerous. Not with a very tiny, single strand out of the whole mess inside the pot.

Though the strands didnt respond to his control directly, it easily enough slipped into the meridians in his left hand as he wrapped it in energy. Then he set about circulating it through himself, avoiding his dantian just in case it was problematic. The feeling of the Ninety-Nine Stars was warm and comforting, and as Anton was at the stage of improving Earthly Connection, he focused on thoughts of others subconsciously.

Cultivating the Frostmirror technique was cold and dispassionate, but in a way it also had the beauty of a frozen lake. A timely chill breeze could help resist the heat of a hot day and energy with cold properties could be used for many things. It flowed like a comforting ice through his meridians.

As it happened, Anton was aware of the thoughts flooding into him. Hed certainly never cultivated the Frostmirror technique, and as the moment passed he was aware he still had not. His energy still flowed through his meridians in the expected pattern, but he had just a moment of memory and insight. Not just random insight, either. If Anton was right, it was *Marsens* memory and insight. Anton stared cautiously at the pot, then sealed it. He wasnt quite sure how he should interpret what had happened, but if things leaned a certain way he would much rather destroy the pot no matter its clear value. He would not accept stolen memories or insights, especially not those of his companions. He decided to remain quiet about what hed experienced until they could get back to the Order.

Upon returning to the sect, the first thing that happened was an ambush. A large wolf and a small girl both pounced on Anton as he stepped into his home to set aside unnecessary extras.

I did it! Alva proclaimed. I went on a hunt and fought beasts!

Anton sighed internally, but smiled on the outside. He wouldnt be able to change Alva, and he had no objections to her cultivating in general. It was just too early. A child should be given the opportunity to *be*

a child. For Alva that wasnt fully the case. The fifth star, congratulations. I see your energy is quite steady too. Anton glanced down, Hows your leg.

Alva tucked it behind her. Its fine, she said. Its almost healed. Senior Brother Oskar said it was normal to get injured a little bit.

From what Anton could sense, it really was just a small wound. That didnt stop his chest from tightening up, though. Far too many members of his family were embroiled in dangerous cultivation but then again, it might be even more dangerous to *not* cultivate. Id love to hear all about it, Anton said as he set his pack and bow down in the hall. He could probably put them away later. I had quite some adventures as well. I wonder if you can guess who I met?

Umm Alva bit her lip. You went to a big tomb with lots of sects and stuff, right? Then could it be Annelie? She was a smart one. Alvas face lit up, You saw her, didnt you? Is she here? Alva ran toward the door.

The two of them were a couple years apart, but as part of the family they had grown up together on the farm. Anton sighed, Shes not here, he shook his head.

Why not? Alva asked. Where else would she be?

How was he supposed to answer that without making Alva feel like her cousin didnt care about her? Personally, he couldnt blame Annelie. The Frostmirror sect had freed her from slavery and offered her safety and stability where he couldnt. She had advanced into Spirit Building and seemed quite adept at their cultivation style. It wouldnt benefit her to change to the Ninety-Nine Stars, and it would just uproot her life again to do so.

Perhaps as her great-grandfather he could have pressured her into making that choice, but thoughts of what the Frostmirror sect might think of that were secondary to her own desires. She chose to stay. Since hed at least been able to teach her how to *subdue* her emotions rather than just sever them his biggest concern was assuaged. Her fellow disciples would take care of her as well as he could. Perhaps better, since he wasnt exactly a stable, ever present figure anymore. While he could bring her along with him, she should be able to make her own choices. Though she was still young, both she and Alva had been forced to mature past their age.

Shes not going to be staying with us, but if you continue to carefully progress your cultivation I am certain you can meet at future events. A deflection and a promise all in one, but it was the best he could do. At least Alva seemed to understand well enough, despite her obvious disappointment.

This is quite something, a wrinkled old woman said as she returned the pot to Anton. If you would like, the Order would pay a generous sum to buy it from you. Though I suppose I should first tell you about what it does, and what that would entail.

Thank you, Elder Siekert, that would be appreciated. I noticed some details, as I said, but I wasnt able to full tell how it operated. The old woman worked with elder Evan, but more on the appraisal and creation side instead of storage and distribution.

On that point, we are not entirely unmatched, she nodded slightly, Its a most potent vessel indeed, but also difficult to identify. I can, at least, assuage some of your worries. First, it seems safe to use. Second, it does not *steal* memories or insights from people around it. It simply replicates small snippets of nearby cultivation progress. It would be immensely valuable if it seemed capable of assisting those at the Galaxy Construction level, but it seems aimed strongly at Essence Collection cultivators. It should still be

usable by you at your current level, of course. Elder Siekert sighed, Many of us could use something like that, but thats not the end of it. First, it is already attuned to you. You did not mention making such a decision, but it is likely that Everheart forced that upon you. Severing that connection would be detrimental to you, though if you were willing the damage would be something we could compensate you for.

So the insights are copies? How fascinating. Anton was concerned they were obtained by stealing them from others, but if it was simply that. How does that work?

If we knew, Elder Siekert said, Wed be the most powerful cultivation sect in the world. Because while those insights dont give you actual progress in other cultivation methods, all sorts of insights into the nature of cultivation are greatly beneficial.

It would also allow me to better converse with others on those topics, Anton nodded to himself. Im quite capable of guiding people in the Ninety-Nine Stars, but Ive started encountering many others.

Thats where the limitations come in, Elder Siekert said. It is limited to insights gained in its presence. More than that, a warning. I would expect it to be quite dangerous if you attempted to use it to absorb anything significantly beyond your level. Along the lines of permanent mental damage, if youre lucky. So *safe* is relative to that point. Doubtless you will find other peculiarities to how it functions over a long time of use, but I thought that a week of study on my own part sufficient to declare it appraised.

I think I shall keep it for now, Anton said.

Before you go, let me give you the first offer to purchase it. Though I have the feeling it wont matter.

Grand Elder Vandale sat around with several of the other Grand Elders, not in a formal meeting but a casual state instead. If there was any doubt before, these are times of change. Whether Everheart anticipated this before his death or merely chose a random time, his actions are precipitating change. Though I do believe some of our new disciples would have that effect regardless.

Are you jealous that your grandson is being overshadowed? Matousek inquired.

Why should I be? He is the one who chose his own path very specifically different from my own. And its not as if he isnt involved with things.

Ivarsson had comments to make as well. It speaks highly of Anton that his first actions were to organize wider ranging training exercises. Focusing on those lower in cultivation than himself, in particular. This may still benefit his own cultivation, but interacting with those stronger than himself would be most beneficial to his rapid growth.

I wouldn't expect any different, Vandale responded. His focus has become quite clear. I don't doubt that he'll be traveling around Graotan soon enough as well, spreading seeds of growth. It is a shame that the results will take so long to manifest, even if they properly take hold.

He's still that same type, though, Matousek sighed. He'll draw trouble whether or not he seeks it out.

Did any of us get where we are without mountains of trouble? Vandale asked.

No. But that doesn't mean I'm looking forward to it. And it had to be Everheart, of course, Matousek shook his head.

You think he died? Ivarsson asked.

Of course, Matousek retorted. The man wasn't able to lay low for more than a few years. And even *this* isn't a big deal compared to what he got up to.

That doesn't mean he's dead, Vandale noted. He slowly looked up to the sky. There's the other option, after all.

Ascension? Matousek frowned. Even the founder wasn't sure that was possible. You've all seen what happens to those who try. Even you yourself said it was probably impossible.

Impossible for me, yes, Vandale nodded. But in general? It's hard to say. It's not like there aren't those with more talent than me in the world, striving for their chance.

Chapter 139

When Anton thought he'd gotten his hands on something too good to be true, he ended up half right. There were many things in the wide world of cultivation he didn't understand, and that included miraculous objects that were extremely beneficial to cultivators' growth. But as this particular object had come from *Everheart*, he had his doubts. He wasn't exactly wrong, either. If he'd gotten a proper explanation from Everheart, he would believe its accuracy- but what he got instead was a collapsing tomb. He also expected the Orders' appraisal to be accurate- and it was.

Especially the part about optimal for Essence Collection. Though he might have preferred it to be said difficult to use while in Spirit Building. The ability to absorb insights condensed into metaphysical strands was a wonderful thing- and *difficult*. After all, they were just brief moments. Seconds, here and there. Absorbing the first strand hadn't been terribly taxing for Anton, but he found he could only handle a handful per day before his mind was overwhelmed by thoughts not his own.

More importantly, while general insights into cultivation were beneficial a large majority were specific to cultivation techniques or specific skills he didn't possess and never planned to train. Thus, they were of limited to no use for him. In addition to that, it didn't just absorb insights automatically. He had to activate it, and while it was capable of drawing in surrounding natural energy to power itself, that energy had to be channeled *through him*. At least, he didn't see another way to do it. Thus, it was extremely tiring.

Yet Anton had no serious complaints. Cultivation was all about overcoming difficulty and the benefits that could provide. This was no different. He began to gather groups of cultivators from the Order, consulting with them on their cultivation and having them practice in his presence while he managed the Vessel of Insights. Calling it just a pot seemed inappropriate.

Anton was able to separate out the strands that related to the Ninety-Nine Stars, and absorbing them was easier because of his familiarity with the techniques- though that could have been because the insights were from lower tier cultivators in general. He didn't directly learn much from them, but he found he was able to converse about certain difficulties in a more useful fashion. Sometimes someone might say they were having trouble with the fifth star and tempering their organs when what they actually meant was their control over energy wasn't refined enough to progress.

He invited his companions to participate as well. They had deeper knowledge of what he was doing, but the insights were devoid of thoughts unrelated to cultivation. At most, he might learn someone was distracted by personal matters but not what kind. He wasn't sure if this was a limitation of the process or intentional, but he appreciated it. He would rather not directly deal with the emotional baggage of others. He had his own, and he was still sorting through it. Ultimately he intended for some well placed arrows to lighten that burden, but of course not everything was that simple.

Attempting to deal with matters involving Ofrurg would certainly be more expedient if Kohar was in that very same country. However, the form of expediency that would result would probably be detrimental to her, as she would likely end up dead. Yet any attempts to form legal proceedings from Graotan were extremely difficult. If the Order wasn't sending escorts along with her missives Kohar was quite certain they would end up missing somehow. Matters were further complicated by recent events.

Though on the grand scale of cultivators Anton cutting off the hand of a disciple of the Heavenly Lion Sect and Elder Kseniya shooting the knees of two of their elders could be considered a minor scuffle, it opened up room for accusations of personal biases. Just because Kohar wasn't part of the sect didn't mean that her staying in Graotan left her completely unaffected by them or unsympathetic. That was partly because they were in the right and not horrible, but still.

The only benefit to her to come out of that whole expedition to Everheart's tomb was that the Heavenly Lion Sect had been seen interacting in a positive manner with Van Hassel and Slusser. It wasn't enough to be able to heap anything on their head, but they couldn't completely distance themselves from the two and the many substantiated claims of banditry against them. Currently Kohar needed to gain the assistance of others in Ofrurg to make much progress. She was still attempting to get in contact with some people Anton had met, so she wasn't certain if she would see any results. But that was fine. The strange thing was, this was the most progress she'd made towards any sort of real change on Ofrurg in some time.

Cultivation was a slow process, and law did not flow quickly. Laws concerning cultivators were difficult to enforce during the best of times, and the fact that some events had only taken several months by monopolizing some of the courts was actually a great boon. Her cultivation was actually improving, as well, which made her optimistic about eventually returning to Ofrurg in person. Perhaps in a few years, when it would be harder to make her disappear without a big fuss.

Just reading the technique manual obtained from Everheart scared Catarina. She would absolutely not be practicing wide-scale formations that indiscriminately absorbed life force. But that didn't mean she should ignore it, either. She had to know how it worked to counter anything of the sort in the future, and there were still insights she could glean from it. She just wished there weren't detailed drawings of shriveled corpses involved. She'd seen death before, but it was unpleasant how dispassionate the drawings were.

She had to admit that Everheart was an unmatched genius in the category of formations. Just being in the *tomb* had let her know that. She wasn't a formation master yet, but when she compared the masters from the Order and Everheart, she could see a significant gap. Though with an even larger rift between them and herself, she understood her own position. She had no doubt she was talented and full of potential, but most of it was yet unrealized. Just a few years of cultivation training was still small, though Catarina wondered if she could measure up to Everheart's standards.

He'd anticipated Essence Collection cultivators with just five years of training. Presumably they would have just placed their foot in that category, but she wondered if that was a reasonable standard in the past. Then again, Everheart wasn't known for being reasonable. Even with her talent Catarina doubted she could achieve the remaining twelve stars in less than two and a half years. That was about one per two months, which only was reasonable in Body Tempering. Granted, she'd gotten more than a full star in a single month in the tomb, but that was an exception. That wasn't a pace that could be maintained- even with Anton's help. He'd been able to help her with some insights with the reward he'd received, but she doubted it would catapult her growth so significantly.

She shook her head. It really wasn't fair to compare herself to theoretical geniuses who might have not even existed in prior generations. Especially since some of them had probably ravaged the lands and torn up the resources that now had to be carefully maintained in current generations. There were still wild lands to explore, but over the past several hundred years those were shrinking in number. It wasn't as if places suddenly became unsettled and started having natural treasures, and humanity was constantly expanding into formerly dangerous territories as they became at least *somewhat* safe.

While the gathered insights and technique development over the last centuries wasn't meaningless, the way people in the old stories gulped down unique fruits and dined on thousand year old beasts, if they were even *half* true, indicated an amount of resources she couldn't compare to. Though with Everheart's rewards she could maintain a similar lifestyle for a few months, perhaps, it wouldn't be the same as the extreme training facilities he'd had.

As for powering the facilities by drawing on the future she believed it was *something* like that, but had no idea how it would be accomplished. Likely it was something that required Life Transformation level insights and power to even begin thinking about. That was still decades away, even if she continued without major roadblocks. Somehow, she still felt very small even though she was technically in the upper half of the population of the disciples of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars.

Anton had the location of another location Everheart had set up. He wanted to immediately run off to go check it out and find the promised notes, but he needed to take some time to stabilize his cultivation. Forcing all of that training into a month likely hadn't harmed him, but he had so many things to do. Training alone, with others, with the Vessel of Insights and with Elder Kseniya.

She'd come to him and declared they would be training. It wasn't a question or a command, just a statement of fact that she hadn't doubted. She'd been right, of course. Personal instruction from her was priceless, and she'd simply volunteered it.

It was still difficult to interpret though. She had the skills, but her capacity to transfer them was somewhat limited. Perhaps that was because of her high insights, but some of it was her personality. In this case, though, Anton could feel her sincere attempts to relay information properly.

Focus yourself. Gather your energy, your *self*, and place it into the Spirit Arrow. Then let it fly. Elder Kseniya demonstrated, her shot arcing through the air over the horizon- where Anton was certain if he went to check he would see she had struck the bullseye on a target placed there.

He found he likely wasn't ready for Horizon Shot. He could maintain an arrow with the proper speed or for the proper duration, but with the great distance involved it was too much for him to do both. He still improved his ability to become one with his arrows, but he could only be accurate at a few hundred meters- and the furthest distance he could shoot without regard for accuracy was barely more than a kilometer. Much further than he could have achieved before he became a cultivator, but far insufficient for shooting over the horizon.

As for the stated purpose of learning the technique, Elder Kseniya said it quite plainly. If your opponents can't even sense you before they die, you are safe and can conserve energy that would have been spent on an extended battle. In short, if an assassination worked, it was easy. That ugly hearted man wouldn't see it coming. I almost shot him for you, but we aren't ready. Plus, I thought you'd like to do it yourself.

Anton was surprised how talkative Elder Kseniya had become. Perhaps she just took time to warm up to people- though Marcio had known her for longer, technically, and found her still quite distant. Anton *did* have many years of experience to count on, even if some of it wasn't useful at the level cultivators operated on. Or maybe it was just that he was able to follow along with her well enough.

Horizon Shot isn't much good if you're shooting random people, Elder Kseniya remarked. So you need to be able to sense people that far. It's easiest to lock onto one person, but if you can manage it in other ways you'll be unstoppable. I'd recommend studying Eyes of the Dragon and some other techniques. It's a whole different way of controlling your energy and developing your eyes. Elder Kseniya nodded, Actually, it's best to learn this soon- the second half of System Gathering focuses on the body once more. That's the best time.

Anton had to agree, both because of her experience and the logic behind her statements. Of course, that didn't mean starting to train the techniques with her guidance was simple. The Vessel of Insights wouldn't do him any good either- Elder Kseniya wasn't having any new insights, but just spouting old ones that worked for her. Anton pushed his way through the unnecessary bits to interpret her thoughts as best he could, holding onto them in memory and later physical notes for when they would be most useful. Path to One Hundred Stars was starting to become a rather burdensome collection of journals. He would have to pare it down to the important parts, if it ever amounted to anything that he felt worth sharing as a whole. And the name was still under review, of course.

Chapter 140

One continual benefit Anton found of an ever-improving cultivation was the time it took to travel around the country diminished. The Orders headquarters and the settlement in Windrip were about half of the country apart, and what would have taken him two weeks of travel was now down to a handful of days, depending on how much Anton wished to exert himself.

Windrip didnt need him anymore, but he still liked to check up on it. The community there was both amazing and yet quite *normal*. Nothing was different from any other small town except the efficiency with which people worked, empowered by Body Tempering.

Anton passed between the fields, now completely certain about the increasing amounts of local natural energy. It couldnt compare to any of the sects hed been to, but the lowliest sects had at least decades of history. This was just a small community building up from practically nothing. While most cultivation sects would pick a place with already high natural energy to then build up, building up from a lower level seemed possible. Yet ultimately it only made a small difference- most people would never advance further than a few stars in their first years and even in the Order half of their members were still in Body Tempering.

That was the most important thing. The Order itself was very powerful, but its members numbered in the thousands. Here, there were already hundreds of low level cultivators. Without extra resources or powerful natural energy they might not go much further, but they were already as a group capable of resisting attacks on the level of what had happened to Dungannon. Anton understood that most people wouldnt be quite so motivated to grow their strength in that way, but if this process took place over a decade instead of a couple years it would still transform the way of life in Graotan. Cultivation could allow the common folk prosperity and safety together.

Though he had no intention to cause a stir, it was basically inevitable that when Anton came to observe the people of the area around Windrip practicing cultivation. He stood out like a sore thumb with a cultivation in mid Spirit Building instead of early Body Tempering. More importantly, many of those who were cultivating did so according to Anton's teachings- while they worked and made use of their bodies. Even those who focused more on mental tasks still had benefits to gain from Body Tempering beyond general health. Tempering the organs in the head allowed for clarity of mind and senses.

Rather quickly Anton found himself providing guidance to everyone he could. While they would eventually manage on their own, Anton knew that proper guidance would help deal with current problems while still making sure they had the proper experience for the future.

Some cultivators felt that sharing insights would stymie the growth of others, but Anton felt that it was simply when there were insufficient explanations. He had people put into practice what he told them, and just like any profession knowing what to do and how to do it was always beneficial. People apprenticing under grandmasters didnt become incapable of growing on their own, unless those same grandmasters kept secret the *important* parts.

Strict improvements in cultivation were certainly beneficial to the people in the area, but Anton knew they needed proper motivation. More than just wanting to be good at their jobs, or strong. That would carry people for some distance, but when things got difficult they would just give up. Many people stopped after the first star, unwilling to push through to the second star and first prime tempering.

As long as they made that choice intentionally, deciding what they had done was enough or their skill was insufficient, Anton didn't mind. However, except for the rarest people who were almost entirely incapable of cultivating he expected more than a single star to be reachable. He just had to draw out the proper motivation.

Anton himself cultivated to be strong. Strong for himself, strong for family, the former villagers of Dungannon, and now for more than just that. He didn't necessarily care about the Order itself, but both disciples and elders were people he cared about. If conflicts came- *when*

they came- he wanted to be able to help. And of course he still had some people to kill. Anton wasn't going to bet that the Heavenly Lion Sect wouldn't attempt some form of retaliation, and it's not like he would find Van Hassel walking around Graotan where he would be easy to kill. For one thing, he was already a wanted criminal so if *anyone* found him it was likely someone would get to him before Anton, at least within the borders of Graotan.

One young man wanted to impress girls. That was a fleeting motivation for cultivation, but if there ended up being a *specific* girl his motivations could shift. Being strong enough to work hard to care for a family and protect them were powerful motivations.

Not everyone's motivations were for others, though Anton resonated most strongly with those. Some cared only about themselves. That wasn't necessarily as bad as it sounded. Caring only for yourself didn't necessarily equate to a willingness to harm others wantonly for your own benefit.

There was a particular woman who, during his conversations with her, Anton determined simply had no one she felt close to. Yet she didn't seem to desire any close friends, but was happy with just living her life. Cultivating to improve her work wasn't a good motivating factor for her, either. What worked for her was actually the benefits to lifespan with the *efficiency* of her work only motivating her as far as it meant she could spend more time not providing for her physical needs. She enjoyed just spending time by a stream, watching it flow and listening to the trickling sounds. In the end, that became her primary cultivation spot, and she focused on a relaxed and long-term cultivation path.

Some people wanted to cultivate to use their strength to control others. They were usually the sort who already sought out cultivation independently. With everyone else around them cultivating their own efforts provided little benefit in relative strength- and the Order wouldn't tolerate anyone misusing cultivation if things went too far. Preferably

each town or city would be able to police itself, but general cultivation wasn't so widespread that it would be feasible for everywhere. But Anton didn't intend for things to remain that way.

Anton's more relaxed rate of cultivation wasn't exactly slow, but he still found that Catarina and Hoyt caught up to him in cultivation at the seventeenth star. They hadn't been that far apart to begin with, and though Anton felt he rather smoothly completed his prime tempering of Earthly Connection, the next part of the Ninety-Nine Stars was harder for him. With some of his age having come back, tempering his body became more difficult. The eleven stars from eighteen to twenty-eight once more focused on the body.

The eighteenth star, twenty-third star, and prime tempering at the twenty-eighth star would all be focused on the connection between the body and spirit. There were the inherent connections, of course. A body did not function without a spirit. However, that connection could be strengthened. In practical terms, it allowed the body to be automatically fortified by natural energy rather than requiring active focus on how energy interacted with the body. When done properly, additional energy would be drawn in by the body itself and allocated to various parts of the body while still allowing the cultivator to handle and store the expected amount of energy in their dantian for the typical active uses. The remaining eight stars would be a retreading of the various body tempering stages with regards to how they individually connected to the spirit.

Though he by no means found himself at a dead end, Anton felt his progress had slowed. He sought advice from the elders, but in general they had been training that section of Spirit Building while young, and either surpassed it or stagnated. Elder Howland was the only one who Anton was able to view as a contemporary in that regard. The elder in charge of farming had not even completed the Seven Purifications, but a dam in his cultivation had broken during his conversations with Anton. He was actually slightly younger than Anton, but still experienced some of the effects of age on the latter part of Spirit Building. Together the two of them were exchanging insights- but it seemed it would just take them a bit longer.

With his personal cultivation in a less than inspiring state, Anton was motivated to pursue different goals. His final revenge was still off the table for the moment, unless he was willing to devote months or a year to tracking Van Hassel down himself, and even with his allies at his back he was wary of that conflict still. In fact, it was partly *because* of his allies that Anton wished to delay it. There was a reasonable chance that some of them might die in the conflict unless they were so fortunate as to get Van Hassel and Slusser alone without anyone else around and without any formations set up.

Everheart had drawn a map for Anton that should lead to notes on general cultivation improvement. It wasn't a surprise that the man had the same thought, because it seemed he was extremely prolific in his efforts. He'd been extremely powerful and lived a long time, but the fact that one of his projections had knowledge of this location indicated it might be more than just casual notes. If it didn't kill him, Anton knew it would be beneficial regardless of the helpfulness of those particular notes. The death part might still happen, but the notes from Everheart indicated it was only minimally trapped, at least if he followed certain protocols.

This particular location was in Ambati, and while Anton was still considering if it was the proper time to make a trip, he received a petition for assistance from Ayotunde. Personally, Anton found it far too formal of a request- but that made him take it more seriously. It seemed Ayotunde was embroiled in conflicts among clans in the region he was now residing in, with some of his family. Simply leaving wasn't possible, so he was connecting with anyone who he thought might be sympathetic to his cause.

He was right to send letters to the Order. Just because he had been a mercenary didn't mean that Anton and the others didn't consider him more than just a temporary ally. He'd been prepared to help them even when dealing with the circumstances involved with basically fleeing Ofrurg. He had even posted a formal request to the Order, but it was basically unnecessary. Hoyt and Timothy separately came to Anton and brought it up. Catarina had been deeply embroiled in her studies so hadn't noticed. As for Velvet, she was surprised when she heard about it. She hadn't even thought to check for mail, having no acquaintances she expected correspondence from. She appeared quite touched that someone would specifically ask *her* for help.

There was only a single point of contention with the whole thing. It wasn't that the section of Ambati where Ayotunde needed help wasn't particularly close to Anton's desired destination. That project could wait, if it needed to. No, it was something more.

So, were going to go help Ayotunde, right? Alva asked.

Anton saw where she was going. His first thought was to say *We aren't going anywhere*. But it was hard to refuse her. He had practiced archery with her- more than just shooting at targets, but sparring. While her cultivation in mid Body Tempering was far insufficient to challenge him, it was hard to say she wasn't capable enough to help in a battle. She knew Ayotunde as well, so refusing her the opportunity to help him seemed disingenuous- even if she hadn't specifically received her own request for aid. You want to come with us? If so, you'd better be *certain*. If you are relying on me to protect you have no doubt that I will do so to the best of my ability. But know what the consequences of that would be. If you are unable to take care of yourself properly, it will endanger myself and the others.

I can protect myself, Alva insisted. And if it's dangerous, I can run away. Even you can't outrun Fuzz.

Anton had to concede that point. The wolf was very fast, and capable of carrying Alva at that same speed. Let me just show you something, then. If you need to flee to safety, you must make sure you're actually out of the area of combat. Anton took Alva outside- their courtyards were far too small for what he wanted. He held in his hands a new bow. The bone bow was still beyond him, but the one that had merely cost him five hundred contribution points was starting to limit his abilities. The bow he held in his hands was fairly plain in design, but it was made of a green wood and blood red string. It was nearly as tall as himself, being just short of the size certain longbows might reach for the sake of retaining some mobility. How far can you shoot? he asked Alva.

A hundred meters, she proudly declared.

Is that so? Anton shot an arrow across the empty fields to that precise distance, exploding his Spirit Arrow at the end to intentionally create a round impression in the ground. Hit that spot, if you would.

Alva formed her own Spirit Arrow. It wasn't as sharp or as steady as Anton's, but it was more than decent. Her arrow flew towards his target, hitting the ground several meters in front of it. Wait, I can do better! she shot another arrow and got closer, shooting slightly past it. See?

That's good, Anton said honestly. But you need a little bit more accuracy to declare that you can shoot at that range. But don't forget that stronger cultivators can affect areas even further. Anton strung an arrow, letting it fly before shooting another to follow it. Two hundred and fifty meters was not his full limit, but for the effect he wanted it was the best distance. Alva could see each arrow sequentially hit the same point, digging a deep line into the dirt. A hundred meters might be a good range for you, but you could face someone who could throw a boulder a hundred and fifty, or shoot arrows three hundred. Keep vigilant until you are more than certain you are safe.

Alva nodded. That's pretty cool. When can I do that?

I can try to teach you now, but honestly I'm not even close to mastering this technique. You know Elder Kseniya? She can shoot over the horizon.

Alva's eyes widened. No way. That has to be an exaggeration, right? Like saying you were a thousand years old.

It's not. Though if we were to encounter a Life Transformation cultivator who wished to harm us, it wouldn't matter. Fuzz wouldn't be able to outrun even the slowest of them casually strolling. Anton shook his head, But do be careful about how far you think is safe. And think about if you can handle attacks like this, at least a little bit. If you decide you still want to join us I won't prevent you. But you have to be careful.

Alva nodded and began to think seriously. Anton hoped she would choose not to come, but it was the sort of hope one had for the impossible to happen.

