

Elder Cultivator

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The elder escorted Anton to the top of the mountain. Not the central area where all of the facilities were located- that was closer to the starting point of the journey. Anton was quite confident that just a year before he wouldn't have been able to make the full trip to the top. Traipsing through the forest for a hunt was one thing- and he really probably shouldn't have been doing that- but climbing a mountain, even with proper paths and stairs, was quite a bit harder. Anton had only heard about the air thinning at the top of a mountain, and had never experienced it before. If his lungs and heart had not been tempered, he wasn't sure how far he could have gone. Perhaps the elder escorting him could have carried him, but it was embarrassing enough to accept that in an emergency situation. If he couldn't at least traverse the mountain on his own merits, he wasn't sure he deserved to meet with a Grand Elder. He wasn't certain about that regardless, but Anton wasn't the one responsible for that decision.

The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars had many elders, including a collection of ninety elders on the council that formed the backbone of their strength, along with nine Grand Elders. Anton would have thought that was far too many elders to include in any sort of council, but numbers had meaning in cultivation. For the most part, the Grand Elders would handle important decisions among their smaller number, with the advice and information of ten elders serving directly below them.

Anton looked down the mountain behind him, at the land blanketed by sunset. He had no idea how many steps he'd taken, but it didn't seem to be a specific count. A thousand, nine thousand... The steps seemed instead practically placed when necessary. The thin air around Anton was offset by greater concentrations of natural energy. However, despite or perhaps because of the density of the energy Anton found it quite difficult to draw it in. The lower areas of the sect were much more optimal, at least at his level. He also found his ability to use energy weakened from his previous exertions.

Just a small way further in front of Anton were a number of structures. The one he was being led toward was a large dome with a curious protrusion out of the top. Inside was one massive and dark room, nearly empty except for what Anton now realized was a massive spyglass and a single old man sitting next to it. Anton couldn't see his eyes, but a glimpse of one gnarled hand indicated that this was likely the one who had appeared in the sky to save Thuston.

Anton felt a slight tingling all over himself, and then the figure turned slowly. The eye was clearly the same. Its intensity was unforgettable. However, it appeared Grand Elder Vandale had only the single eye. At least, he kept his other eyelid closed, and Anton didn't see the shape of an eyeball pressing against it. Anton Krantz. Grand Elder Vandale's voice was raspy and almost weak but when it struck Anton's ears he couldn't

help but listen intently. To my senses and my eye you are almost two different people. My eye sees before me an old man who has lived many hard years, enduring many hardships. Yet my senses tell me there is a newly growing cultivator.

Anton waited a moment, then supposed a reply would be in order. I never had the opportunity to become a cultivator while younger though I don't know if I would have taken it, regardless.

Grand Elder Vandale nodded. Perhaps the far corners of Graotan have been overlooked though we have certainly taken more care in recent years. He paused for a moment, Young Vincent told me of what happened in your region. He thought he could handle it alone and with it being so far from our center of power, we let the problem continue for far too long. Relationships with Ofrurg have always been touchy... he shook his head sadly.

Anton still wasn't sure why he had been called to see Grand Elder Vandale. Was it for a sort of apology on behalf of the sect? While Anton certainly was still bitter about what happened, he could never find it in himself to blame others for actions that weren't theirs. Elder Vincent was trying to hunt them down for years. Apparently, only a formation master would have helped.

We have far too few of those, Grand Elder Vandale clicked his tongue. Come, let me show you something. He walked over to the base of the large spyglass. This is a telescope. It is much like a spyglass, but made for much further viewing. Stars are an almost unfathomable distance away. He placed his eye against a small segment on the side of the telescope, then turned a crank which rotated the telescope- and the whole dome- just slightly. Another one adjusted the angle vertically a small amount. Look at this. What do you see?

Anton stepped forward and did so. It took a moment for his eye to focus, but he saw that it was now fully nighttime. He could see a cluster of stars, lustrous against the black sky. A group of stars. They're quite a sight to behold like this. Anton had certainly taken pleasure from looking at the stars, but they were so much more clear through a telescope.

Grand Elder Vandale made a sound like a dry cough that Anton took a moment to realize was a chuckle. Certainly, they would appear to be a group. Though studious observations have told us that they are quite far removed from each other. Anton turned to look at the Grand Elder. The Ninety-Nine Stars has little tangible connection to actual stars in the sky, but in my case I find that the observation suits my style of cultivation. Anything in the world can give insights, if viewed in the right way at the right time. He retook his position from Anton, moving the telescope once more. Here. This is a nebula. A collection of mere dust, similarly unfathomable in size like anything beyond our home here. Yet see how it sparkles.

Anton enjoyed looking at everything Grand Elder Vandale showed him. It was a relaxing time, and it continued well into the night. However, he wasn't sure as to the purpose of him being called. There weren't many things that had been said. If the sort of apology wasn't it, then perhaps it was that he should seek insights from the world? Certainly, he shouldn't take any of the words of a Grand Elder casually.

It was very late into the night when Grand Elder Vandale sighed. I should not keep you forever. You have been quite patient with me. You must have questions. About me, the sect, cultivation feel free to ask any of them.

Anton nodded. He had questions but he wasn't sure if any of them were *good*

questions. He might as well start off with something straightforward. How does one grow in cultivation quickly? How can someone reach the same level as you? Anton couldn't feel the exact strength of Grand Elder Vandale. He wasn't hiding it, but Anton just wasn't prepared to sense it. It was like looking into the sun. From what he knew, however, any of the Grand Elders were likely in Galaxy Construction- and perhaps near the peak of known cultivation.

Two questions that almost sound like they might have the same answer, Grand Elder Vandale showed a smile that had many missing and crooked teeth. I can't answer the former. Honestly, I don't know. It took me hundreds of years to reach this point. That hardly seems quick. I suppose that might answer the second question as well but that's not a very *helpful* answer, is it? I would have to say dedicate yourself to cultivation, but don't forget why you wish to grow. If you cultivate for temporal reasons, your growth will likewise be impermanent. Though it is possible to merely have a change in focus. If I cultivated it would be for the Order.

... do you not cultivate?

Grand Elder Vandale shook his head, I find myself unable to take the next step. Cultivation is quite difficult on this old body though I'm sure you have some idea of that. Cultivation can maintain and restore youth, but only if you make progress rapidly enough. Since I've hit the limit of both cultivation and age I merely continue living out of duty. I can't do much but defend the sect anymore.

Anton sensed something more from him when he said that. While Anton could certainly feel power from him, it was not just hard to pin down but almost muted beneath the surface. With a day of rest- not counting the trip back to the sect and up the mountain- Anton had recovered somewhat from his fatigue. He had been able to fill himself full of natural energy once more. However, Grand Elder Vandale seemed as if he were almost empty- just a bright shell around an empty core. If Anton were to compare himself, he was like a bucket. Filling it up was not difficult, but filling up a great lake or a sea like the Grand Elder was much harder. Energy that was merely several times denser would be insufficient for rapid recovery. As for the difficulty of using energy at a far distance,

Anton could only imagine. Are there any insights you can give me for once I step past Body Tempering?

I could. And I will, if you later have need of them. But first, you should think about the purifications yourself.

Anton half grinned, That will be at least eight months from now.

Why not sooner? Ah. A dry chuckle once more, I forgot. Here. Grand Elder Vandale pulled out a scroll. The full Ninety-Nine Stars, continuing past Body Tempering. Anton looked at him for confirmation before cautiously taking it. What, are you worried about that rule? The one year thing it doesnt mean anything for you. There are many exceptions made. It is just the baseline until we determine whether we want someone to be able to continue cultivating the Ninety-Nine Stars. Its not like we would deny someone the continuation of the technique after they reached the peak of Body Tempering, if they are a decent person.

Anton thought for a moment, then nodded. Good. I was actually a bit worried.

Youve been here four months. At your rate of progression, I can see why youd be concerned about reaching the end of Body Tempering with nowhere to go. Grand Elder Vandale breathed out slowly. I must be off. Do not hesitate to return if you have questions only I can answer. Though you need not walk all the way up here for much, since the other elders can answer most things just as well.

Anton bowed before turning to leave. He really didnt have any proper questions to ask, and he was eager to take a look at the full version of the Ninety-Nine Stars. Just completing Body Tempering would merely get him to the weakest point he could truly think about revenge.

Chapter 32

For basically as long as he could remember, waking up with the dawn had been part of Antons life. That hadnt changed with becoming a cultivator, but when Anton awoke the sun was high in the sky. Resting for the night in Thuston hadnt been enough to fully recover, and then hiking up the mountain, staying up late into the night looking at the stars, the hike back down and he hadnt thought a little bit of cultivating would be a problem. Instead, it wiped him out.

It didnt actually matter that he awoke late, because he hadnt planned to work in the fields or anything else that would constrain his time. The Hunt was still supposed to be continuing, if things hadnt gone the way they did.

He had been able to fill his dantian with natural energy, but it was work. His body grew tired, and that included his meridians and dantian. Perhaps he had really needed the rest. The cuts along his arm and elsewhere didnt help either. Hed applied salves and

bandages, but the healing process had only just started. He'd lost blood, and while walking back to the sect had been fine he only now realized how weak he had been.

Once he finished Body Refinement, perhaps the problems wouldn't be so pronounced. Refining his skin wouldn't just make it more durable, it would heal more quickly along with his flesh. Refining his marrow would also allow for recovering blood more quickly, among other benefits.

Anton stretched, arms up above his head. Before he did any of that, he needed to finish refining his tendons. Some archery practice and some movement techniques would be a good start. Despite his fatigue, everything felt just a bit smoother. As Anton imagined a foe, he formed a Spirit Arrow at the same time as he determined where it would go. He hadn't previously been waiting to draw the arrow, but this way it formed at the earliest opportunity but not *too* early. Holding a Spirit Arrow in its shape took some amount of effort and while over a single shot it didn't matter, over a hundred any inefficiencies could add up. Anton now had practical experience avoiding attacks as well. Sparring had been something, but facing actual danger to his life was much more effective. Being reminded of his mortality was also good motivation.

After some time spent in cultivation, Anton pulled out the scroll of the Ninety-Nine Stars. Not just the first section, but the full technique given to him by Grand Elder Vandale. He reviewed the Body Tempering section, just to make sure it wasn't any different. He didn't expect that to be the case, but it wasn't as if all copies of everything were exactly the same. People made mistakes or abbreviations or extra notes. Anton didn't see any substantial differences, though the language was less elementary. Anton had learned to read well, more than just enough to get by, but that didn't mean he spent a lot of time reading books with flowery language and certainly not cultivation before recently. It hadn't even been suggested that it would be useful for farmers. It was for warriors. Though he knew better now.

The next section covered the segment of cultivation the Ninety-Nine Stars called Spirit Building. It was similar in nature to Body Refining, but of course tempering the spirit instead of the body. The next seven stars were the seven purifications, a much more abstract process where various facets of the spirit were tempered. Only one aspect could receive the prime tempering, though just like Body Tempering that didn't mean the others couldn't catch up given time. For a practical point of comparison, Anton considered a few of the elders he had seen in action. Mental Vision was strongly displayed by Elder Kseniya, and perhaps was a requirement for One Step Ahead. On the other hand, Grand Elder Vandale seemed to embody more of Spiritual Connection, with the way he interacted with the stars. Those were the most prominently displayed facets of those two, though he couldn't be sure if they actually had those as prime refinements. Vandale in particular Anton had only interacted with for a short time, so Anton's judgement might mean nothing.

The eleven orbits following the seven purifications were simply a revisiting of the various facets of body tempering and strengthening the connection between the body and spirit.

On an individual level they were nothing special, but the whole process was important. The prime refinement was merely the completion of the task. Important, but not a decision that had to be made.

Beyond that was what the Ninety-Nine Stars called Constellation Formation. It was even more abstract than the previous level, and Anton could tell he wasn't ready to truly dive into it yet. Maybe never. He wasn't sure if he could ever reach that far. Even if he could, he had to do more than just cultivate before then. Participating in The Hunt had been good not just for himself but because of protecting Thuston. Anton knew there were more dangers in the world, and there was also everything he still had to do. He found himself growing impatient with himself, which seemed like it would lead to harm. More than just getting in over his head in a battle.

He needed to properly prepare himself for the future. Among other things that meant continuing with his cultivation. Since he couldn't be sure how long he would live even if he didn't throw himself into danger, he also wanted to actually do things to leave the world a better place while he had the chance.

Timothy breathed out heavily, swirling a small bit of excess natural energy he hadn't absorbed around himself. I was so close. I almost caught up to her. He looked to Anton, I wish I could keep you around all the time. Your advice is very helpful, Anton.

Anton grinned. Enjoy it while it lasts. Though I'm still planning to stay around for a while.

Oh, yes. I just meant we're planning to return to Carran for a while. So I'll probably be away for a couple months.

Carran, Anton nodded, Your hometown. I'm sure they'd be happy to see your progress, and it might even help your cultivation to return. Anton returned the topic to where it had been, On that note, why are you concerned that Catarina reached sixth star before you reached fifth?

Timothy sighed, I wanted to catch up to her, at least for a bit. To be as strong as her again. I just want to keep up.

So you want to be as strong as Catarina? Anton asked. Don't be embarrassed. It's quite understandable. However to summarize the words of someone even older and wiser than myself think about why you wish to grow. Why you want to be as strong as her.

Timothy looked over towards the adjacent courtyard, which was currently empty. I want to

Protect her? Impress her? Anton grinned, Maybe you dont even know yet. Whether you want to keep your friend safe or show off your ability I think you might have the wrong focus on your cultivation. Tell me, do you want to match her or be stronger than her?

Timothy shook his head, Im not sure I can do either.

There is the core of the problem. Its not so easy to fix. Anton thought for a few moments, Ill say this. I know you cant just suddenly become confident in your own abilities. That is a process that takes time. But it might do you good to reframe the way you look at your own strength. Whether you work for yourself or for someone elses sake ultimately Im not sure it matters. It can even be both. The important part is that you- Anton poked his finger into Timothys chest, You, Timothy, want to be stronger. As strong as you can be. It doesnt matter what anyone elses cultivation level is. So youre slightly more than a full star behind. Thats not an impossible gap. You almost did it but lost focus on the fact that no matter what you intend to do with it, your cultivation is part of *you*. Anton shook his head, Like I said though, its not so easy. Dont forget, she even used one of her tempering pills to break through to the fifth star. Prime ones arent so easy. You have contribution points still.

Thats right. Actually Timothy scratched the back of his head. I thought with your guidance maybe I didnt need it.

You dont. But it will save you time. Anton had learned enough about those sorts of medicines to know that limited use of them was fine.

Timothy looked towards his home. Actually, she gave me one before we started training for The Hunt. I just thought it was out of pity.

Anton laughed, I doubt she has any pity in her. But you should know her better than me.

Right. Timothy nodded. Tempering the meridians is important. I shouldnt be stubborn about it.

Anton left Timothy alone as he returned to cultivating. If Timothy took that pill, he could form the fifth star pretty much immediately. Anton had studied the pill Catarina gave to him. They were high quality, radiating energy similar to those costing a thousand contribution points in the rewards hall at least. The prizes for the entrance exams were certainly excellent. If she had used one herself and given one to him then the last went to Timothy. Anton wondered if he should return his. Of course, practically he could not. It would make her think he didnt appreciate it. But he didnt need pity or help keeping up, not yet at least. At the rate things were going he should be fine until the tenth star. He wasnt sure how much more difficult that might be. Perhaps he would reach his limits there.

But Anton wasnt likely to get more opportunities for so many contribution points before then, so if he didnt want to spend the majority of his points on medicines, he should plan

to use it at that point. And, there was something else. He wasn't certain, but he supposed that having received it as a gift would make it more effective. Not in any practical way, but cultivation was a mental process. If nothing else he could tell Catarina he used it to form the tenth star. He just had the next couple to complete first. If he could manage that.

Chapter 33

The outer parts of the forest were much more pleasant when wild beasts didn't attack every few minutes. Anton led the group back into the forest, not because he expected to need assistance in battle but because there was still one profitable venture to handle before Timothy and Catarina went to visit home. It had been forgotten on their return trip from Thuston, both because everyone was exhausted and they didn't return through the forest.

There it is, Anton announced.

I still don't see anything, Timothy said.

The spiders seem to have moved back, Anton commented as he saw nearly-clear creatures on similarly concealed strands of spider silk. It seems they were more disturbed out of their natural habitat than part of the beast horde.

If the spiders are back do we just leave? Timothy asked. I know they're not *that* dangerous individually but

I believe Catarina has prepared something, Anton looked to her. If you please.

Catarina nodded. If you could direct me, I'm not exactly certain of the location of the webs. Hoyt and Timothy had little else to do but wait while Catarina and Anton moved about the area, Anton helping her avoid webs while she set up a formation. I can see them when they skitter through the light, Catarina said. I think we have finished. They should be repelled from this area.

Anton nodded. I don't see any remaining in this section. They had cordoned off about half of the group of webs. Diamondsilk spiders were more communal than other spiders- with many living together peacefully. It helped that they were able to catch prey such as birds many times larger than themselves while they remained individually small with only moderate food needs. From Anton's research they did require a larger amount of food to produce their webs, but if they left some behind the colony of spiders should be alright. The cultivators had actually been hoping the group had migrated- since animals often learned which section they inhabited- but at least this way they could get some of the webs without driving the group to death or provoking their wrath. Anton took the first of many spindles out of his pack and found where one strand attached to a tree, sticking it to the roller and beginning the motion. Timothy, start with this.

They didnt exactly have to be *gentle* with the roller. It wasnt called diamondsilk for nothing. However, there were good reasons to roll at a measured pace. Strands crossed each other, and if the whole web was just pulled into one bundle around a spindle it was less usable than if it were properly rolled. Of course, with many of them unable to really make out what they were working with it still happened. They were all amateurs in the field regardless of other talents. Still, it was good to try to do it themselves rather than hiring someone else.

Everyone twisting a spindle could feel the tension, even if they couldnt see the thread until it started to form multiple layers around the spindle. It wasnt *completely* invisible, and the repeated distortion of light through its strands allowed it to gradually become more visible on the spindles. Anton continued to pick his way around, starting spindles and picking out crossing strands. He really missed having a magic bag. Unfortunately, they werent cheap. Five thousand contribution points might actually be obtainable in a reasonable time. But at the moment it was just a convenience instead of a necessity.

Anton stepped over to one side of their cleared area. The spiders seem to be returning. Despite their exceptional nature, diamondsilk spiders werent magical beasts able to use energy. Thus, forming a small barrier to keep them away was simple. Even with dozens of them, their combined force was less than a child pushing against him with one hand. Anton held up the temporary barrier while he looked to Catarina.

The formation changed Catarina said. She looked around. I forgot. We changed the flow of energy by removing the webs.

Anton shrugged, I cant really tell any difference. But Ill leave the judgement to you.

Catarina moved about, fixing the formation, and the spiders pulled away again. Now we can finish.

Diamondsilk could easily be exchanged for contribution points- even if the Order raised some spiders, they really needed a lot of space and the right conditions which were mostly in the forest. It was also tricky work that required someone with refined eyes to watch for spiders attempting to leave containment.

However, nobody was really hurting for contribution points at the moment. Each had received an equal share of contribution points for The Hunt- even if Hoyt wasnt physically present in Thuston he was certainly responsible for some of the success in the villages survival. Making something practical out of it would in turn cost some contribution points, but much less since they could provide the materials.

Even with giant webs and a large number of them, the amount of material they had was limited. Each strand was extremely thin, so weaving it into clothing wasnt really possible. At most, they could make a full undershirt for one of them. However, while it

would certainly be valuable to do so, the actual practical effect wouldnt be as much as splitting it. Diamondsilk could be woven into other thread to greatly increase its strength-enough that everyone could get a full undershirt that would protect against cuts and stabs. Since it was flexible and thin cloth, it would do little against bludgeoning impacts but it could be worn under anything else without discomfort. Personally, Anton thought full diamondsilk garments would be a bit uncomfortable. Not physically, but mentally. It was almost completely invisible, after all. Certainly not something that could be worn as anything but an additional layer.

The decision to have defensive undershirts made would slightly delay the departure of Catarina and Timothy, but they didnt have a strict schedule they were adhering to regardless. It was unlikely they would need the additional protection on that journey, but everyone was eagerly looking forward to some tangible fruits of their labor.

Anton stretched. He felt like a cat, though the way they distorted themselves he knew he was at best only *slightly* catlike. He still had a spine and all that. Sometimes, he wasnt sure that cats did. He could feel his tendons reaching the peak of the refinement process. Each additional step towards refining his body took more work, but Anton found the whole process invigorating. Though he might traditionally stay statically in place for the formation of a star, that was merely for purposes of concentration. He found he was experienced enough in cultivation that he could do so while moving, though of course the effect might vary greatly. In battle would be quite impossible, but a nice bit of moving around his courtyard was easy enough. Even for a breakthrough it felt appropriate to make use of his body. He pulled on his bowstring, with no arrows, just feeling the strain on his tendons as he did so.

He had no idea how strong he needed to be. Spirit Building at the very least, but he didnt *need* to stop there if he could go further. The world just didnt have the problems of Dungannon to deal with, but others like those bandits and dangerous beasts. It even could use more everyday people who knew a bit of cultivation in their work, further from centers of cultivation like the Order.

It wasnt clear if making himself and the world better was a proper reason to cultivate. It seemed a bit too broadbut it was certainly better than just revenge. The bowstring twanged as Antons fingers let it go. Revenge was certainly still on the table. However, he had to balance between practically being able to accomplish that revenge and spending too much time. It had been nearly eight months since the destruction of Dungannon and the beginning of his cultivation. Anton knew cultivators worked in longer timespans than the rest of humanity, but it felt so long. When hed been living happily and working? Eight months was almost nothing. Every year birthdays of great-grandchildren had surprised him. Now, he never truly relaxed. At most, he distracted himself for a time.

His grip tightened on the bow. He pulled back, almost as if he was trying to break his bow or his arm or snap his tendons. That wasn't quite the case. If he truly injured himself he wasn't sure if he could recover even with good medicines and the aid of natural energy. However, he had to push himself. Anton was beginning to understand that his speed of cultivation was unexpected for his age, and perhaps even faster than some of the younger generations. He couldn't say it was easy, though he had to admit it was more smooth than he'd anticipated but he always had to push himself. If he slowed down now he felt he would never accomplish anything. Complacency would be the end. And yet he needed patience.

His arm strained, muscle and bone and especially tendons. He switched sides, though he would never have reason to shoot left handed. He stretched his body to the limit as he forced energy into it. Just a bit more patience. As he felt the pressure peak inside of him, it finally collapsed into the seventh star. He breathed out slowly. He wasn't sure if he would have the proper mental and spiritual fortitude for Spirit Building. He might destroy himself. Perhaps he needed to take some of his own advice and revisit his home. How different would it seem, not even a year later?

Chapter 34

Sometimes, an old man just had to be a little bit selfish. He knew what he needed to do, but he just couldn't face it yet. So when he was invited by Timothy and Catarina to come to their village of Carran, he gladly accepted. Hoyt was invited as well, but he had other plans to attend to.

Anton had little to do to prepare. He stocked up on necessary supplies such as arrows and some emergency rations just in case. He exchanged some contribution points for money- he was almost surprised at how much he could have, but he had fought more beasts than he would hunt in a year so it was actually quite reasonable. It was slightly disconcerting to think his bow might cost as much as a barn but then again, it was comparing a barn made out of mundane wood to something of special materials, even if it was much smaller.

A horse might travel further in a day than a man on foot, though their true speed advantage was in short bursts. Cultivators, however, could sustain a speed faster than a horse while walking. Of course, there were special breeds and magical beasts who were even faster but those were quite a bit more expensive. The official recommendation for members of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars was to walk, if speed was not required.. Anton hadn't known about it, but it made sense. Walking served the dual purpose of training the body of the cultivator and allowing the citizens of Graotan to see them. While they didn't necessarily show the symbol of the Order, people could still recognize them. For their current group, it was only an academic choice regardless. Nobody wanted to spend their entire stock of contribution points on a creature only marginally faster than their current speed, something they would soon outclass.

Im going to show everyone how strong I am when I get back, Timothy declared, hands behind his head as he walked confidently. How about you, Catarina?

Mmn. Just want to see family.

I thought so. Youre not really the type to show off Timothy nodded to himself, Still, we can be proud. We both joined the Order, and weve grown even stronger in the last few months.

Yes, Catarina replied, But we are still weak.

I dont know if thats fair to say. Were not weak everything else is just too strong. Besides, were at least strong enough to protect Carran.

Antons face grew stern, Dont rest on your laurels so easily. Magical beasts might not live in the area, but not all cultivators are upright and honest, and they wont care how long youve cultivated or if you have at all. The tone of his voice was cold, and soured the discussion for the rest of the day. Not that Catarina would have contributed much anyway.

When there was no conversation the next morning, Anton offered an apology. I did not mean to be so harsh with my words yesterday. The two of you have done quite well with your devotion to cultivation. Im sure your friends and family will be proud of you. He paused, But I dont know if it can ever be truly said that you are strong enough. Hed thought he was strong. Old as he was, it was hard for anyone to say he wasnt strong, or at least tough. But he hadnt even been present to do anything- and if he had, he knew he would have had no effect.

Catarina looked over at him, Where are you from?

Dungannon, Anton replied. Near Alcombey.

Oh, Timothy said. Thats almost in Ofrurg.

Anton hadnt thought of it that way, but it was indeed closer to Ofrurg than any of the major parts of Graotan, despite the official borders. He hadnt thought well of it before, but had little interaction with anyone from the area, even when he visited Alcombey. Now that he knew more, it was one of the places in the world hed least like to visit and he was absolutely going to go there in the future. The near future.

Do you want to talk about what happened? Catarina asked.

...No. Anton breathed out heavily. Not yet. It wasnt just that they were young. Maybe they would understand but speaking about it was hard. Even with Vincent, who already

knew everything. If only Vincent could just go into Ofrurg and just tear it apart but of course Graotan wasnt the only place with cultivators.

The tone of the conversation eventually lightened up, talking about the things theyd done at home, how the upcoming winter might affect things, and the like. Anton did his best not to bring things down. Not just for the two younger folk, but because dwelling on what he couldnt do at this very moment would just hurt him more.

Having not been away from the Orders lands in the four and a half months hed been here, Anton wasnt sure how cultivating would go in areas of lower density natural energy. He wondered if his continued speed was just boosted by the greater availability of energy. Now that he was away from the area, he could confirm it had an effect- but his increased learning was also important. He had tempered his meridians before he even took a step on the Orders lands, and though he continued to develop them as he could, their overall quality was similar enough. Yet he could gather and more smoothly manipulate energy. Storing more was just a given, since the stars in the Dantian were able to do so, but just having the experience cultivating made Anton certain he could do it again faster. Of course, if his cultivation actually reset to the beginning his body would probably just give out. Not that it was a possibility. Certainly not more likely or easy than being killed by something.

Anton didnt really expect trouble in the midst of Graotan where the population was high and other disciples of the Order traveled and patrolled. Even so, he was relieved when the journey actually went smoothly. Carran was just a few days away- at their current walking speed- still quite near the Order on the whole scale of things but nothing was ever perfectly safe. He just couldnt help but think about what might go wrong. Wild beasts from the forests and bandits were of course the strongest in his mind.

There it is, Timothy declared. Theyd been walking past farms for quite some time, and that hadnt actually changed. Id recognize that roofline anywhere.

Pretty sure they changed it, Catarina countered. That one is new.

Anton looked ahead at the town. People were moving about doing everyday business. Someone in particular caught his eye. Catarina. Does your mother look like you?

Yes. Quite. So I am told.

It appears she is at the market, then. Anton found the more he used Hawk Eyes to see, the better his eyes became even when he wasnt focusing his energy. They still werent the best theyd been, but when he focused picking out faces on the horizon wasnt too difficult. Especially somewhat familiar ones. As he approached closer, the difference in faces was obvious but not too much. Just a couple small decades of age.

Catarina waved as her mother spotted her. Mom! That one energetic word was perhaps the most enthusiastic Anton had ever seen Catarina. Im back to visit.

So I see. Though you only sent a letter when you got into the Order and Timothy didnt even remember to inform his father, she looked at him, placing her hand on her hips but her smile belied the posture. Welcome back you two. Im Flora Riley. A pleasure to meet you. And you are?

Anton Krantz, he inclined his head, watching her face for signs of recognition. He had an idea but perhaps it was wrong. Im another disciple of the Order. We share a complex where we live, and I fought together along with these two.

Fought? Catarinas mother paled slightly and turned to her.

Catarina nodded. You know cultivators often have to fight. We protected a village.

Well I- she stopped whatever she was going to say. Im glad you are alright. She inclined her head to Anton, Thank you for taking care of them. Do you have a place to stay?

Catarina spoke up before Anton could, I was hoping he could stay in the spare room. Hes guiding Timothy with cultivation, so if he only had to go next door instead of walking out of town, it would be more convenient. Catarina was slightly more verbose with her mother, though she still didnt seem talkative. Maybe she simply needed to explain everything or she just wasnt that comfortable around Anton yet.

Of course he can stay. Any of your friends are welcome. Floras eyes sparkled slightly and she looked at Timothy, And Im sure some people will be glad you didnt bring home a young man. Timothy swallowed slightly, but didnt say anything.

The three of them helped Flora carry her shopping back with her- though any one of them could carry far more than she wanted to purchase. Timothy made sure to stop by his home next door when they passed. Anton just enjoyed interacting with a city where nothing was going wrong. Nobody needed saving from a flood or bandits or wild beasts. And he would do his utmost to make sure it stayed that way- as well as every village in Graotan.

Chapter 35

There was a pleasant meal with Catarinas parents and Timothys father, as well as of course the young cultivators themselves. It was better than the cafeteria, though not by much. The Order had exceptional cooks and fresh food as well, but there was something about smaller scale home cooking that was just more satisfying. Maybe it was just the company. Anton certainly appreciated it.

The conversation mostly consisted of catching up with what had been happening with Timothy and Catarina. A few months was a long time for them, and theyd developed significantly.

Kellan Weston, Timothys father, sighed. I do miss having you around to help out. Those cultivator muscles can do a lot of work. I had to hire a replacement.

Im even stronger now, Timothy flexed.

Anton nodded, but didnt have much to add to the conversation. Nobody needed an old man going off on stories about himself, and he wasnt really in a mood to share them regardless. Eventually, however, Flora Riley asked about him. So what about you, Mister Krantz? Whats your story?

A vague enough question that he had an answer. I was mostly a farmer my whole life. Grew up in Dungannon, far to the east. I got into cultivating very late in my life.

Catarinas father nodded in sympathy, Its quite difficult, isnt it? When the members of the Order came by, Catarina and Timothy were tested to have some potential. I tried some of the steps to begin cultivating Jasper shook his head, But its harder to get into when you arent young. He avoided mentioning how much older Anton was. At least twice his age, even if Anton looked a bit less wrinkly lately. I understand the benefits, but pushing myself that hard just didnt seem like it would pay off.

Yes Anton replied, You need sufficient motivation to truly begin.

There were a few moments of awkward silence before Flora spoke up, So, you said you lived out to the east my mother used to live out there. Didnt like the small country life and moved to Edelhull. Though I ended up out here anyway, she smiled at Jasper.

Anton nodded, Its not for everyone. Some like the hustle and bustle of cities. Sowing fields, raising animals, hunting all suited me just fine.

Kellan commented, Cultivation must be a nice change for you. I know its work, but you dont have to move your body so much. He saw the twisted grin on Timothys face, What?

Im pretty sure he moves now more than ever, Timothy said. He climbed up a silo to shoot arrows at giant eagles attacking Thuston. And his bow Timothy shook his head. Its not something non-cultivators can use.

The rest of dinner continued uneventfully, and then it was getting late.

Before Anton had time to settle into the spare room, Catarina was inside shuffling things about. That included pushing the bed to a different corner. Anton just watched, since she requested no help. Besides, she didn't need any. She'd gone through the full tempering of her muscles for the sixth star. Anton had offered guidance if she wanted it, but she politely declined. However, the sounds Anton heard from her courtyard indicated she took up the active style of body cultivation he thought was most beneficial. She might not have tilled rows of soil, but she worked her body without relying solely on energy. Her muscles would be a bit weaker than those who had done a prime tempering of muscles, but her fighting style worked well enough without. The added power she now had would still ultimately be useful, just not critical to her success.

Catarina fiddled with the slats for the window and turned a small standing closet. None of the features of the room were more usable in their current positions, but she stood up proudly. Done.

With what, exactly? Anton asked.

An energy gathering formation, She shrugged, As much as I can, anyway. Mom made me put the rest of the house back. My room is also set up.

Anton nodded. He could feel the concentrations of natural energy increasing, though he couldn't pick out the exact details that supported that. It wasn't anywhere near what was around the Order, even in Edelhull, but it was at least a step or two above where it had been which was a similar concentration to Dungannon. Certainly not weak, but not particularly powerful either. I appreciate it. I couldn't have done it myself. He'd looked into formations after seeing their utility, but he just couldn't wrap his head around the details. If he wanted to learn, he'd need to devote months at least to develop his thought process, just to start learning. He certainly couldn't afford that now, though perhaps if he later found himself with time he shook his head. That was quite unlikely. He was glad for Catarina that she was naturally suited for the learning required.

She left the room to him, and he started browsing the Ninety-Nine Stars again. There was one particular oddity in the technique. It wasn't as if it was kept secret, but there was something missing. The final step for the hundredth star- because it was supposed to reach the hundredth star. That was the summation of the first nine primes, which meant in actuality Ninety-Nine Stars was incomplete. But so far, nobody had reached the hundredth star, as far as was known. The equivalent cultivation level for other techniques was also in the realm of mystery, though it was possible there were some cultivators in far-off countries that had accomplished it and remained existent. Anton wasn't sure if cultivators exploding or transcending to other planes was correct- though the former was certainly possible. The latter was quite hard to test especially since he was still ninety-three stars short.

Anton focused his energy inside of himself, taking advantage of the increased density in the surroundings. While he would normally move around while cultivating, the exact circumstances didn't allow for much motion without creating noise that might wake

others. Besides, tempering the marrow didnt have much he could physically make it do, short of something like cutting himself to try to force it to replace his blood. Perhaps getting his blood flowing faster would suffice, but he would save that for when he could be outside.

In the morning, Anton awoke as the roosters began to stir. Though he was on a smaller farm than what hed developed over generations, there were still familiar sounds of the world waking up that it made. Anton pulled himself out of bed and went outside to see the chickens. Hello there, little ones. Feed will be coming for you soon, Im sure. He would have done it himself, as thanks for staying, but he didnt know where it was and of course using other peoples things without permission wasnt something that would be taken well.

He heard footsteps coming outside not long after. Oh. Mister Krantz. Jasper Riley was carrying a bucket of feed, Did they wake you?

Would have been up anyway, Anton smiled, I was a farmer, remember? Need help with anything?

We couldnt possibly ask you to do anything. Youre a guest, Jasper replied.

And Im old. So what? Id rather not sit around and rot. Antons eyes scanned the area. Could fix that fence, or weed a few rows, help fill that firewood shed theres always work to be done, isnt there?

Jasper sighed, Well, if you insist

Anton took the chance to do every single thing hed spotted. It wasnt that the farm was poorly run, but it was a bit much for two people to handle. And things would forever crop up even if they hired some help. That was just how things were.

Timothy and his father passed by early as well, heading off with a third strong man into the woods not far off behind the few nearby houses- the Rileys, the Westons, and two neighbors he didnt know.

Jasper watched Anton, clearly worried he would overwork himself but Anton hadnt yet done anything that would have strained him much even before cultivating had made him feel forty years younger. Im impressed. You really know what youre doing. Thats experience for you.

A hundred years of it minus maybe five while I wasnt walking around. Anton grinned, Though I wouldnt say that I was very helpful for a few years after that, either. Still needed someone following me around so I didnt tip over the feed bucket.

A hundred Jasper shook his head, You sure dont look it. Not that youre exactly a spring chicken, but

Most my age are six feet under, right? Anton nodded. As long as he didnt think about anyone specific, the morbid humor of age amused him. I was thinking Id hunt something, boar or deer or some such. Who has the hunting rights around here?

Its mostly open to anyone. Though you might ask some of the hunters about the populations. They live over thataway. I recall hearing deer were populous. Flora would be glad to have some venison to work with. Jasper nodded. Her mother, Ashlyn, that was the only thing she liked about country life. Fresh venison.

Anton almost flung the hoe in his hand away, but managed to keep his grip and gently hang it by his side. Ashlyn he turned to Jasper. I assume she looks much the same as Flora, like Catarina?

Grandmother to granddaughter share similar looks, yes. Why?

Anton did his best to keep his voice steady. Was she called Ashlyn Krantz?

Krantz? He shook his head, No, shes Ashlyn Bognar. Though Jasper squinted his eyes at Anton. It could have been. Floras brother almost looks like you.

Anton had to breathe deeply so that he wouldnt snap the hoe in his grip. Maybe his impression when hed first seen Catarina hadnt just been random thoughts. Not every single one of his grandchildren had stayed in Dungannon. Ashlyn was one of the oldest. Having two more generations after her wasnt so crazy. The Krantz family had lost contact with those who had moved away for various reasons, and while he hadnt exactly forgotten their existence they hadnt really registered as family. Living and safe elsewhere in the world. I think we should speak with Flora. It could just be the same name, but we need to find out one way or the other.

Jasper nodded and followed him towards the house.

Chapter 36

It was easy enough to find Flora inside, patching up a pair of work pants. Jasper hesitated a moment, clearly unsure how to broach the subject. Your mother she was from out east, right? Did she ever talk about where specifically?

Floras fingers continued to stitch without slowing, She probably mentioned it once or twice, when I was little. Mostly to mention how much she liked being in Edelhull. She looked up at the two of them, Whats so important that it made the two of you come in from the fields? Still covered in dirt, even.

Anton looked down at the path of dirt behind them. He was usually more careful about things like that, since keeping the house tidy was hard enough without actual mud and chunks of dirt. However, it was easy enough to wave his hand and push it all away with some energy. It took quite a bit less than the power required to kill a giant boar, though it took a couple passes to get everything. Sorry about that. Its probably not urgent but Id really be interested. Or if she mentioned her parents at all.

Did she mention them? Certainly. But I only remember hearing about them as grandma and grandpa. Flora thought for a few moments. I think I have some old letters from her. They might have names. I could dig them out this evening. Its a bit of a trip to Edelhull just to ask her, of course. She looked at the two of them with suspicion. What is this about?

Jasper sighed. Maybe nothing at all. Id rather not mention it if so.

Alright. Its been some time since I read the letters anyway. Reminds me that maybe we should write or visit sometime. You know shell never come out here.

Jasper grinned, Why do you think I like to stay here?

Oh hush, shes not that bad. I might remind you of *someone elses* mother. Shes not even so far away. Im sure shed be glad to visit.

You wouldnt do that to either of us, Jasper recoiled. Youre right though. We should keep in touch with Ashlyn more. He nodded, I think wed like to see those letters, if you can scrounge them up. Until then, theres work to do.

There was something different about the soil on the Rileys farm compared to at the Order. Anton would say the quality of soil was high in both places, but it was actually easier to work the soil away from the Order. He hadnt noticed because hed been cultivating for several months before arriving at the Order. The soil there was thick and heavy. Quite full of nutrients for plants, he was sure, and the abundant natural energy helped as well but it was harder to work than normal soil. Now that he had something to compare to in recent memory, he was certain. That also made it easier to work quickly.

It wasnt necessary for him to hoe a field by hand- they had oxen and ploughs for that, and it wasnt the right season anyway. However, he still had to dig out stubborn weeds with deep roots. Some of them would break away at the surface, but if he left them theyd merely grow back. He could dig with a shovel or with his hands though wrapping the whole thing in energy and tugging also did the job.

Jasper had some questions, Can anyone do that, with a bit of cultivation? Move like that and pull up the plants by barely touching them?

Anton considered for a moment, You have to develop one thing at a time. However, this is all at an easily achievable level. The first star is a full tempering of the body. That wont do much for your ability to pull out whole weeds, but even a basic control of energy should be sufficient with a little effort. Anton looked at Jasper, You attempted cultivating before, correct? What stopped you?

Jasper shook his head. Couldnt sense the energy, really. I wasnt able to gather it or *do* anything with it.

Lets take a quick break, Anton gestured over into the shade. Have a seat. Jasper did so. Close your eyes. Try to feel the natural energy. Its the air around you, the breeze Anton gathered a bit of energy and washed it over him, Its just everywhere.

I think I feel it. Just a little.

Grab onto it. You cant grasp it in your hand, but you can breathe it into your lungs. From there, it flows around your body. Anton traced a line of energy along his skin, guiding the path as he felt Jasper begin to circulate it, Through your whole body. Then dont forget to breathe out. Anton smiled, Now that youve done it, you can do it again. But heres the secret. You dont have to sit still. Look here, Anton waited for Jasper to open his eyes. He swirled his arms around and swung a hoe in front of him. You breathe while working. The energy will be more content to settle into a moving body. Just like the air in your lungs is used up faster when you work. It will take a bit of effort to move your body at the same time, but if you spend a month getting this down even by next year it will pay off. Anton snapped his fingers. Oh, I imagine your daughter took the cultivation manual with her, correct? The Order doesn't have so many they can just hand out one to each person.

Thats right, Jasper confirmed. Though I had plenty of access to it before. I just couldnt make use of it.

Not everyone learns by reading. Anton nodded. I happen to have an extra I can leave with you. After Grand Elder Vandale had given him the full technique, he hadnt found a chance to return the body tempering technique. It was allowed to be freely distributed, so the Order wouldnt be concerned if he gave it away. They would just be handing it out to someone else eventually. He might as well pick someone specific.

Oh, thank you. Jasper nodded. Do you think I can really learn? Catarina picked it up so easily and I had so little success...

Of course you can. Your wife too, though I imagine shell be slightly different. As for making it beyond the beginning perhaps not. Anton was fairly certain anyone could complete the first full body tempering. Then came the second star, a prime tempering. The easiest one, but also the hardest since the cultivator would still be inexperienced. Then the third star just showed they could continue beyond that, which was sufficient for the Order to be willing to recruit them after a test. And apparently, the fourth star was

sufficient that they didnt care about tests. Anton supposed he *had* been able to contribute sufficiently to work in the fields at just the fourth star. Though he didnt know if the Order actually *profited* from that work. Some of the early work of their disciples probably cost them more than it was worth- except for the training it provided.

As she promised, Flora dug out some old letters that evening. I dont think theres anything too personal in here she was never much for spilling her feelings in a letter. Anton can help us look through for names. Flora clearly trusted her husbands silence, but Anton could tell she was curious as to *why* they were doing what they were. Maybe it didnt need to be kept secret, but Anton also didnt want to cause excitement for no reason. Perhaps not everyone would *want* to discover new old relatives, either.

Catarina was present as well. It wasnt possible to keep a secret in such a small household, not that they tried. Why are we looking for names? she asked. Do you know grandma?

Anton smiled as she cut right to the idea. Perhaps. That was all he was willing to say for the moment. If he was wrong he would be rather embarrassed. Though he couldnt say how things would go if he was

right.

There were only a few dozen letters. Anton found it easy to scan through them for names extremely quickly. Especially since he knew what names he wanted to see. The handwriting wasnt as orderly as most cultivation techniques, but it also wasnt filled with difficult language or complicated concepts.

Your father and I have been looking to expand the factorage. Its much more pleasant to handle selling rather than producing all the goods

Letters of that sort dominated. Anton couldnt say the hand was familiar, but it would have been many decades since hed seen it and at least a few decades of development after the last time when they would have been written.

William? Jasper asked.

No, not what Im looking for.

Catarina also found a name, Barrett?

Thats not it either Anton shook his head. There are a number Im looking for.

Flora found something that sparked his interest. Cora?

Thats a name I recognize what does it say?

Lets see here Cora came to the factorage today. Her vegetables are good quality, but a bit too expensive. I dont see much else.

Anton sighed, That doesnt sound right. Im looking for people she would have known from before. There could be a lot of things, but Miles and Leslie are the best connection. They were nearly done with the letters when Antons eyes finally found a name. It even had the right context. ...your grandpa Miles used to eat so many potatoes, I had no trouble discerning the quality of the batch at all. We wont be buying from that farm again.

Just as Anton was about to say something, Catarina held up her letter. This mentions a Leslie. Ahem. My mother, Leslie, gave me this recipe for potato soup, but honestly it has far too much-

Celery, Anton said. She always complained about that.

Catarina paused, looking at the letter. Yes. Celery. Did you read this one?

Anton shook his head. No. But Ashlyn always said the potato soup had too much celery. Every time.

Flora eyed Anton. You certainly sound like you knew her well enough. She seemed to have gathered some idea of what was going on. Are you perhaps an uncle of hers?

Anton grinned, I am flattered you think me so youthful. But Ashlyn properly referred to me as grandpa.

Grandpa, Catarina muttered. Even grandma had a grandpa?

Anton thought that part was quite obvious. He was rather more excited about discovering another generation he hadnt known existed. It was a bit strange to have a great-great grandchild older than merely his great-grandchildren, but over a handful of generations it wasnt that odd. You two look quite like her and she was quite like Janina.

Catarinas thoughts were clearly still processing things for a moment, then her mouth rounded and her eyes grew wide.

Chapter 37

Feet fell rapidly on the dirt path. Anton ran at a quick pace, Timothy trailing along behind, panting. Why are we... running... up the hill again?

Did you not hear what I discovered yesterday? I thought it was quite obvious.

Timothy took deep breaths to get enough to speak. You said that you are Catarinas great great grandpa right? He shook his head, I still dont get why that means I have to run up a hill.

Anton clicked his tongue. Typical. Im sure youll figure it out.

It didnt take long for them to reach the top of the highest hill in the area. Even a non-cultivator could have done so fairly quickly, and both of them had tempered muscles and meridians. Anton had the organs in his torso tempered, so he was less out of breath at the end than he would have been. There were more improvements to be made after the tempering, though that was the biggest moment of progress. It wasnt that Anton wasnt breathing hard at the end, but he handled it better than Timothy.

Now sword out. Anton pointed, though there wasnt anything in that particular direction. One hundred swings! At the same time, he pulled out his bow and began firing Spirit Arrows. He let them unravel not far away so that he wouldnt accidentally hit something in the trees. There was nothing complicated to what he did, just repetitive shooting at a regular pace.

For his part, Timothy had exhausted his questions. He just accepted that Anton thought this training method would pay off for some reason. He just shook his head and kept swinging. Technically sometimes he stabbed, but he was pretty sure that counted. His arm was tired by the end, because Antons pace didnt give him a moment to recover.

Good. Now, swap arms.

Im right handed though.

I am aware, Anton said. And maybe youll never injure your right arm. But that doesnt mean you should leave your left untrained. Anton also switched his stance with the bow. It would require very specific injuries for him to not be able to fire the bow with his right hand pulling the string but still able to grip the shaft, but he began to fire arrows regardless.

When Timothy had finished each swing with his weapon and shield swapped, he found his balance was quite different on that side. It probably wouldnt matter since the situation shouldnt arise, but it was weird to be so asymmetrical. He thought he might have a moment to rest after completing the exercises, but instead Anton thrust them both back down the hill where they repeated the attacks another hundred times per arm.

Anton wiped his brow. I think it is time for a short break. He took a deep breath, Feel the energy flow through your meridians into your body, how it replenishes you. Timothy was briefly worried that would be the whole break, but the two of them remained standing and pulling in the natural energy. They stood a reasonable distance apart so as not to interfere with each other too much.

Once he was actually feeling recovered, Timothy had the bravery to ask another question. So, why isnt Catarina doing this with us?

You think this training would be good for her? Anton shook his head. It might be, though she has her own methods that work. Perhaps we should have her join us for the next round.

Timothy groaned.

Though he should probably be sleeping, Anton couldnt help but write his thoughts on his training. It wasnt some profound technique or expert advice. It was just his only way to make sure what he learned lasted beyond himself. But while he wasnt sure how long he would live or how long after that his words might last, he supposed he might as well aim high. This was his path to the peak of Ninety-Nine Stars.

Anton was startled by a knock on his door. He should have been able to sense Catarina coming, but he was preoccupied with his thoughts. Yes? Come in.

She stepped inside and inclined her head. Grandpa Anton. Shed gotten him with that one earlier. Something about the younger of cultivators strived for formality, calling him Senior Anton and the like, despite the fact that he wasnt particularly higher in cultivation than any of them. For the sake of brevity, Catarina left off two greats but he couldnt refuse her addressing him in that way. Catarina was usually serious, but her face was exceptionally so. Can I ask you some questions about you?

He had some idea where that was going, but he couldnt reasonably refuse. Saying it wasnt her business might have been partially true before, but now could he actually *be* family with these people if he didnt let them try to act like family? Go ahead.

She sat down on the bed, looking towards where he sat at the little desk. Why are you a cultivator? Whats going on with the rest of our family?

She cut right to it but Anton thought that was probably for the best, instead of both of them evading the subject for a while. As you might have guessed, those are practically the same answer. It took Anton a while to continue, but Catarina waited patiently. I was born and raised in the village of Dungannon. I have so many stories about everyone there. Perhaps someday I can write it down, if I have the chance. Though it will be of little interest to most. Anton shook his head. There I met Janina. We had children, those children had more of their own Anton smiled in remembrance. Some didnt choose to stay, but with those who did we continued to grow the farm. My parents passed away, many decades ago. It hurt for a time, but that faded like all others. You know it is coming, eventually. The same happened with Janina. I was supposed to be next.

Catarina waited patiently, but knew he needed some prompting as he was lost in memory. What happened?

Bandits. A group of cultivators from Ofrurg. Wild and destructive. Anton grit his teeth as he spoke, Elder Vincent tried to track them down, but he could never head them off. He couldn't track them to their camps, and they grew increasingly bold. In the deep of winter I was out on a hunt. I barely managed to find a deer, and the return trip was so slow and I only came back to death and destruction. Unnecessary slaughter.

Catarina's face fell. So everyone is dead?

Anton shook his head. Not everyone. At least, they weren't killed there. Ofrurg has a legalized slave trade and they don't much care about where they come from, as long as it doesn't disrupt anyone important there. Anton took a deep breath, Elder Vincent is the type who would chase them across borders if not for the consequences of doing so. They realized we found their camp. He said they scattered. He killed some of them but couldn't get them all. Some might never be found, though the leader is a Spirit Building cultivator. Not quite as many of those to look for. And there was also a formation master, hiding them.

The Order can't send people in to force them out of hiding?

Can they? Should they? Anton shook his head. You saw what happened in Thuston. Grand Elder Vandale wiped out hundreds of beasts from a distance. If the Order sends elders in to avenge some country villagers, what does that accomplish? Dead cultivators. Dead cultivators in Ofrurg, and dead members of the Order. Perhaps someone can track down bandits on an individual level. If there is no disturbance on a large scale I wouldn't expect those of great power to get involved directly. If they do, more common folk will die as a side effect.

But wouldn't Ofrurg want bandits dealt with?

Anton smiled bitterly. Catarina was a smart enough girl, skilled in cultivation but she was still young. I already said they don't care where slaves come from. And of course they don't cause any trouble *inside* Ofrurg. More importantly Spirit Building cultivators don't just pop out of the ground. Potatoes barely do that, and that takes work. The chance of them being connected to a sect, formally or informally, is rather high. Anton nodded. I'd love to be able to go in there, kill them all, free everyone taken away. And I will try. But it's not so easy.

Couldn't they just send someone a little bit stronger, not an elder but a disciple in late Spirit Building?

Who? And why? Anton shook his head. Nobody knows who they are looking to save, and assassinating people in another country is too much of a risk for a mission. The Order has already increased security on the border. Perhaps that should have been

sooner, but what has been done cannot be undone. Anton stood up and stretched, The job requires someone who can able to risk their life, in such a way that it can pay off.

... I can go with you.

Anton smiled, I appreciate the offer. But this isnt like Thuston. Disaster cant be prevented, it has already happened. You shouldnt risk your life for people you never knew or an old man youve known for a few months. You have too much value to risk yourself for it. Grow stronger, so you can protect more people in the future. I wont tell you to ignore any trouble you can see but dont risk yourself for an old man who is about to die anyway. Ill be able to use what I have to save some people. Ill try to save everyone, to right every wrong but we both know that cant happen.

... I wont let you go alone.

Anton sighed, Well talk about it more later. Regardless, Im not yet strong enough. I need more training and that means so do you. Ill see you in the morning.

Chapter 38

There was some actual consideration in Antons mind to leave that night, but he knew if he did Catarina would probably blindly follow him. Perhaps if she didnt find him she would run off to Ofrurg alone. Hed like to think her more rational than that, but having been a human for a full century he could say people werent like that. She wanted to help him, and he wanted her to live and neither of them would be able to convince the other. Anton hated to let time pass now that hed made up his mind, but he knew there was good he could do currently. Jasper did well with Antons cultivation recommendations, and though Flora did somewhat less of the heavy manual labor, she was giving it a try as well. He should at least do his best making sure that those he knew could take better care of themselves before he left and of course there was the problem with leaving Catarina behind. He had to figure that one out still.

On much more mundane problems, Anton found trouble with his writing. It was no trouble at all to write down his observations during cultivation. What was good for the vigorous sort like himself and Timothy werent necessarily right for Catarina, though he did his best to share his experiences. He learned some from her and Timothy in return. Mostly little things, but every experience was important. But that wasnt where he had trouble.

Anton didnt think that any of the methods laid out in the Ninety-Nine Stars were *wrong*. Just incomplete. Of course, his notes would have holes in experience he couldnt cover as well but if someday someone found his writing and used it as a supplement to bring them another step further in cultivation, that would be good enough. Anton wasnt concerned about it being the most important document ever written. Really, an old man just starting cultivating could only do so much. But there was one thing.

If others were to read it, it should have a name. Antons Journal of Cultivation was *bad*. It was for others to read to begin with, so was it really a journal? Hed written down a name. Path to Ninety-Nine Stars. It was the sort of thing hed expect to find in the library, but something seemed to be missing. More than just ninety-two of the stars, of course.

Anton stood and stretched. He very much appreciated the fact that his body could do that without *yelling* at him to stop. It just whimpered a bit. His cultivation was going well. The change in scenery provided benefits that mere density of natural energy couldnt make up for. He wasnt sure if he wanted to spend a full two months away from the sect, but that had never been a hard timeline for the stay regardless. Timothy and Catarina just wanted to show their parents their progress and now their parents were beginning cultivators as well.

A sword wreathed in copious amounts of energy sliced through the air towards Antons head. The only thing he had to block it was his own arms and of course the cloth armor covering them. It was quite durable, though nothing compared to the partially diamondsilk shirt on his chest.

Antons arms rose up to meet the sword, his energy condensing until it could be seen not just as cultivators envisioned energy but in a way the naked eye would see the yellow shine. Golden, if one were to get fancy with the name. Anton staggered back under the force of Timothys blow, but Timothy himself was staggered as well. Anton couldnt expect a *real* opponent to just straightforwardly hit his defenses, but he had to test how much they could actually withstand. Anton looked at his forearms, one of which was dripping blood. Slightly less than that, then. Maybe it was the way he angled the energy. Though of course Timothys power wasnt something he could ignore. Muscles trained by chopping down trees with his father worked together with his energy to become powerful attacks, even if he wasnt using an axe.

Sorry, Timothy said. You said to go all out.

I absolutely did, Anton nodded. I merely couldnt withstand your attack. Which gives me more reasons to not try. The momentum of the attacker is a hard advantage to overcome.

... youre dripping blood all over. Arent you going to?

Itll stop on its own, Anton said. Its only a trickle.

... Youre tempering your marrow, right?

Thats right, Anton grinned. Might as well take the chance while its working hard. The bleeding really wasnt as bad as it looked. Tempering his skin would come last, and that would also enhance the upper layers of his flesh. He wouldnt be able to take a blade

without energy, but at least he'd be able to ignore pricking bushes. Energy flowed deep into his bones, supporting the marrow in its work. The cut stopped bleeding within a few minutes, but Catarina still looked a bit nervous where she stood on the side.

... try me next. Catarina pointed. I mean that. A semi visible barrier had been formed off to her side. It was a formation created by her own energy, but it would sustain itself on the natural energy of the area without her input, at least for some time. More powerful ones would require larger areas or more permanent physical fixtures, but spending money on special materials wasn't really as good for training as seeing what she could sustain otherwise.

Timothy readied his sword. He was only using it in one hand, but being able to attack unrestrained still had great power. Step back. Obviously in combat situations Catarina would want to stand behind a barrier- or have something she intended to protect behind it- but there was no need to risk that in training. If Anton was able to form Golden Armor away from his body, he might have done that. However, it wasn't within his current capabilities.

Anton approved of the angle of the swing into the barrier. Timothy's sword struck a resounding blow on an edge but the power merely wasn't enough. His sword rebounded and the barrier held. It wasn't undamaged, but his attack hadn't broken through in any significant manner. Timothy looked to Catarina, who nodded. Keep going.

Timothy continued to swing at the barrier. Catarina directed some of her own energy to keep it standing, which half negated the point of it being a barrier formation and not her own defensive energy but it looked like they were having fun competing. Eventually the barrier gave out- but that was inevitable. The power levels were similar enough, so a proper offense would always win against defense without retaliation. But they were just testing the limits.

Catarina smiled, Good! I was able to keep it up for a while, but you still managed to break through. She turned to Anton, Now you try. Catarina began setting up the barrier before Anton could protest.

I'm afraid I don't have quite the sort of power required to break through. My arrows don't exactly have a lot of weight. It was why people didn't shoot arrows at walls in a siege. It simply wasn't what they were intended for. Anton didn't see it as a weakness in archery, since an immobile opponent simply defending while you were far away it wasn't hard to just wait until they showed an opening.

Catarina frowned. You can't do it? That's too bad. I heard you were a good archer.

What, are you trying to ignite my competitive spirit so I'll make a fool of myself? Anton grinned, Because I absolutely will. Finish setting that up. Then everyone back away, because the arrows might deflect a bit.

Flora and Jasper watched from a further distance. Neither she nor Jasper were ready to compete in such a way with the others. They did have some spare time to train cultivation, though, because the others provided so much help with the farm. Catarina even set up some permanent- if weak- formations to keep foxes and the like away from the hens.

Alright, its ready. Im sure you can do it, Catarina said.

Anton took a good look at the barrier mostly to make sure it wasnt any weaker than before. He didnt want pity taken on him. It seemed Catarina knew her grandmas grandpa well enough, because it was possibly even a bit stronger. Not that it mattered, if he couldnt break it regardless. Anton took a few shots, shooting only Spirit Arrows because the energy would only deflect a few meters before he could have it dissipate. A real arrow *might* be dangerous to onlookers, and honestly just had trade offs in terms of power. Maybe if he had any with special materials it might be different, but he mostly had standard iron heads.

The way the arrows deflected off of the barrier without even making it tremble let Anton confirm his thoughts. He just didnt have the power to match Timothy though did he have to? The young man struck the barrier with great force many times before it shattered. But if he wanted something practical, shattering it wasnt necessary.

Anton relaxed, then reset his stance. He wanted to get the most power possible. He readied his arms, then pulled as he formed a Spirit Arrow, muscles in his back straining more than his arms, though his whole upper body was involved. He wouldnt have the luxury to prepare himself normally, but he could add a bit of extra power. As he did so, he condensed the Spirit Arrow until it was even thinner. Elder Kseniyas arrows were extremely thin as well. They didnt need to chop off an arm. They just needed to *pierce*.

At that thought, Anton released the arrow. It was a moment of concentration similar to when hed had the contest with Elder Evan, just to borrow the bow he now held. It wasnt a state he could force, and sometimes it just happened. The arrow flew forward, and he felt like he was moving with it. Forward into the barrier. He jerked, and the arrow almost shattered and then it pierced through. It almost felt blasphemous to dissolve the arrow a dozen meters on, but Anton wasnt sure how far it would keep flying if he let it. The hole in the barrier, half the area of a normal arrowhead, closed up almost instantly. However, Anton smiled. That was a result he could absolutely accept. Now if only enemies would stand still and let him take his time shooting them, he would be confident in defeating almost anything or anyone.

Chapter 39

Though there had been a nebulous plan to stay in Carran for two months, that plan changed. For cultivators early in their growth two months was a rather long time, if they had the talent. Anton noticed that Catarinas parents and Timothys father didnt seem to be on track to complete the first star in the same time period as himself. However, they

had other responsibilities to attend to besides madly cultivating to block out the world. Anton also understood that people had different aptitudes. Perhaps they could learn to be better at something, but the starting point of everyone was different. He had found that cultivation suited him quite well from his first experiences with it.

It was after one month that the group returned to the Orders lands. Cultivating didnt *only* require dense natural energy to absorb, but for breakthroughs and the like it was quite necessary. Nobody was on the verge of the next level, but their various experiences were helping with rapid growth and that the largest necessity was merely energy. Anton found that guiding others was useful for himself, as well. It made him think about why he did things a certain way, and if it was actually correct or just a habit hed formed. He was pleased that many times it was the former, but not always. That let him fix problem with his own cultivation, and he took notes in Path to Ninety-Nine Stars.

Anton found himself unable to rest for a single moment. Most of the past year hed been active, but now he found himself especially motivated. He had more family. It wasnt that he had forgotten the others who still lived- he kept every name in memory- but instead discovering Catarinas connection to him imbued him with a sense of hope and vigor. It reminded him his task wasnt just to grow stronger, but to do so for a reason. Of course, he *knew* that. Knowing something and *feeling* it were not as closely tied as people liked to think. He had already considered the task impossible, such that he almost forgot saving villagers of Dungannon or what remained of his family was actually something that could truly happen.

It would have been nice to say that the connection to new family had a direct connection to refining his marrow, but it didnt. That was just his body, and he cultivated furiously to refine it. Perhaps every bit of natural energy he absorbed was just a bit more pure or perhaps it just felt that way. Regardless, he spent several weeks cultivating and seeking information from the Order.

The Orders policy on information exchange was quite simple. Disciples in good standing were able to obtain information the Order had without charge, though some sensitive information required a request. If the information wasnt available, it was possible to pay to have it obtained. After all, that would require someone to go on a mission and could not be done without charge.

There were always exceptions but the information Anton sought wasnt secret, and if he needed a reason to request it he could easily provide it. Vincent would also tell him anything he needed, but some of that information would come from the same place. For example, Vincent had never seen the leader of the bandits. In Vincents own words. If I had seen him and known who he was, he would be dead.

But just because Vincent hadnt seen him didnt mean nobody had. Nobody was perfect, including cultivators. Survivors of villages that had been attacked by the bandits could identify some of the bandits. With descriptions and other information, scouts in Ofurg had learned more. The best candidate for the leader of the bandits was a man named

Maximillian Van Hassel. Likewise, it was presumed that the formation master was Nirmal Slusser- though information about his actual ability with formations wasn't readily available. The information the Order possessed wasn't completely certain, but they had been involved with the sale of slaves at various key times. Anton looked over all the information the Order had obtained on them. Their current locations were unknown, but he wouldn't be able to fight them at his current strength regardless. Still, there was more he could accomplish before that point, if he went about it the right way.

The council of Grand Elders rarely met. It was an unnecessary waste of time, unless there was something important. Vincent wasn't a Grand Elder, but he was called to speak. He didn't know much about the council meetings in the past, but he knew they very rarely met on matters concerning a single disciple. Even when appointing a new elder, the council of elders only needed the input of a single Grand Elder. Had they ever met concerning a Body Tempering disciple? Vincent was sure if they had, it wasn't an old man.

Grand Elder Bohdana Matousek wasn't nearly so old in appearance as Grand Elder Vandale, though Vincent knew there were merely a few decades between them. She waved her hand towards Vandale. Grand Elder Vandale, why don't you explain what you called us here for?

Of course. Grand Elder Vandale inclined his head. I'm sure you all want to know. As many of you will have heard from the elders serving under you, we have a rather strange new disciple. Normally, it is not the business of Grand Elders if a new disciple burns their way through Body Tempering with ease. But the circumstances of this one are different. Elder Vincent, if you could explain when you met Anton Krantz.

Of course, Vincent moved to stand in front of the Grand Elders. Of all of those he had recruited, none of them were on the list. Even the youngest was older than himself. Even so, he carried a measure of respect among them. I was not searching for disciples when I first met Anton Krantz. If I had been I wouldn't have even considered him. It was a decade ago, when the bandits in the far eastern part of Graotan were first beginning to test the waters. I came across Anton Krantz out in the forest, when he was ninety years old.

One of the other Grand Elders- Kunibert- frowned. Did I not hear that he has achieved the seventh star only recently? That's certainly an anomaly for an old man, but a decade to go so far am I missing something?

Vincent inclined his head. Indeed, there is more to be said. As I said, I was not searching for disciples. He impressed me with his vigor for one of his age, and I found him pleasant to interact with, but that was all at our first meeting. I remained in the area off and on again for a decade as the bandits grew more bold. They finally destroyed his village. I arrived too late, only to find him dazedly wandering the remains. He had been

out on a hunt in midwinter, and hadn't been present during the attack. He had spotted their camp- and he led me to it. It was then I determined that they had a formation master keeping it hidden. Perhaps I was late in that realization, but that is not the important detail at this moment. Anton still had fire inside him, though he was close to being a sputtering torch. I gave him the Ninety-Nine Stars out of pity, so that he could die in an attempt to avenge his family and village. After that I set about to track down what information I could on the bandits. I merely found a few of their scraps and some potential candidates before I returned to the sect four months later. He was in a small bit of trouble for a conflict with another disciple and was at that very moment breaking through to the Fifth Star.

Grand Elder Bohdana widened her eyes. He reached the fifth star in four months? Its not unheard of but for someone of advanced age who just took up cultivating, its nearly unbelievable.

But his pace has not slowed afterwards, Grand Elder Vandale waved Vincent to seat himself. Three months after that he reached the seventh star, which is where he currently is. He has been seeking information on the bandits, and clearly intends to seek them out. I-

There was a knock on the council door as a messenger stepped in. Message for Grand Elder Vandale. She hurried forward and slipped him a note.

Grand Elder Vandale looked at the note in front of him, taking a moment to read it. Oh. I see. There is some new information. Apparently, he has just achieved the eighth star half an hour ago.

Vincent muttered to himself, That man sure has a sense of timing

Regardless, Vandale coughed slightly, his voice slightly weak. It is clear his rate of advancement is top tier. Few can match him. But one might wonder if he was not a century old when he began to cultivate, what might that mean? He looked over the rest of the council, letting them think for a moment. But about why I called you here. Merely informing you of his existence would be sufficient but we may have to do something. He is almost certainly going to head to Ofrurg soon. Though it is not completely lawless, it is not safe either. When one specifically is looking for trouble it could lead to disaster. So what do we do? I doubt any of us here would have the audacity to tell him not to risk his life for those he cares about. Yet if we hold him back, perhaps his cultivation will expire. Even those who are young and healthy do not cultivate well when restrained. I have hopes for his future, but I don't know if he will have one. So what do we do?

Bohdana shook her head. I think we should do nothing. I will admit hes an enticing disciple, but if he cannot judge danger for himself his future will go nowhere. Restraining his actions would almost certainly negate whatever future he has. But assisting him may do so just as much. I would also prefer not to show too much favoritism to any new

disciples- and he *is* new, still. Then there is the potential of war, if we settle the matter for him. We already considered that specific course of action.

Kunibert once again spoke up, Could we not at least send a discreet guardian? Or assist him with a team? I am already unsettled at how long those bandits have lived with minimal reprisals from our side.

Grand Elder McAlister took her turn next. I agree with Bohdana, though it may seem heartless at first. We should not interfere. Of course, if he recruits others to go with him on his own that is also allowed. And though we might think of those who advance quickly as young and rash, he is at least experienced with the world.

Grand Elder Vandale sighed, Justice will be done, one way or another. I sincerely hope he is the vessel that will bring it. While I am also concerned for his well being in addition to fast advancement, his actual performance so far has been exemplary. His mastery of Spirit Arrows is beyond what we would expect at Body Tempering. But, though I would like to say I have full confidence in him a single person is merely that. I suggest we provide a simple guardian in the middle of Spirit Building. That should not interfere with his development too much, or cause untoward amounts of trouble with Ofurg.

Vincent watched and waited as the Grand Elders discussed. He had no idea what the final result would be. He also had his own ideas on what should be done, though the only thing Vincent could be sure about was that whatever happened with Anton would surprise him. Hopefully, those surprises would continue to be good.

Chapter 40

In front of Anton sat a list. It was as accurate as he could make it but it was possible he missed something or other. His memory wasn't perfect to begin with, and at the time he could have been most precise, he wasn't in a state to do anything to any level of accuracy. This was the list of those who were still alive potentially.

None of his children were on the list, but that was understandable. They were old, like himself, and that meant they had little value as slaves. While the bandits had been somewhat unpredictable in their actions, taking everything of value was certainly consistent. That included people. Dungannon had not been large- a few hundred people- but Anton had buried most of them. Their faces, at least, he could picture in his mind if not their names. Some had not been in a state he could recognize. At least fifty people had the potential to be alive.

Of those people, however, he only had information on a dozen. Some didn't stand out enough to have information remembered about them when they were sold. Most went to mines or farms. Hard slave labor wasn't good for anyone, but they could certainly survive since most were young and healthy. One went to a fighting arena. Devon was one of Anton's younger grandsons, the son of his youngest daughter. The chances of him being alive were much more slim than anyone else.

Then there was Annelie. Anton had avoided learning about her fate in particular until he felt he had at least a little bit of strength. Her fate was known to a certain point. She had been sold to the Frostmirror sect. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars was a righteous group and the Frostmirror sect was not. The only thing to say for them was that they also weren't a demonic sect. But with the extravagant price they paid for her, Anton could hope they found some value in her being alive instead of otherwise.

Anton had exchanged contribution points for money, enough that he could buy the others he knew the locations of at a fair price, and even some extra. He detested the idea of supporting the slave trade with his money, but it was either that or fight an entire nation and their cultivators himself. That wasn't something he could do yet. He considered for a moment. Somehow, his mind hadn't had the doubt he expected. Was that what the problem was? He filed the thought away for later.

Though he could buy the freedom of a handful of people with what he currently had, Annelie's price paid by the Frostmirror sect had been more than Anton had ever seen. More than the price the family farm had been worth plus every contribution point he'd gained exchanged for money. There was some sort of test for cultivation aptitude, and Annelie had something special in that area. Specific details hadn't been obtained. Whether or not the particular thing found would be ultimately to her benefit remained to be seen. Anton had not personally experienced cultivators outside of the Order- except the effects of the bandit leader Kunibert and the rest- but he'd heard tales. Even accounting for exaggerations, it was clear that at least occasionally cultivation and cultivation aptitude were stolen by others. The actual effects for those attempting to take it weren't always as beneficial as they might hope, but for the victim it was always death- or something that might as well be death. If the Frostmirror sect had such intentions when they purchased her Anton shook his head. He couldn't do anything about it now regardless. But he might be able to learn more if she was still alive.

He was ready to take a trip to Ofrurg. Perhaps he might save a few of those from Dungannon or track down some of the bandits he had basic information on. He might also acquire more information himself. The only problem was how to deal with Catarina. He didn't want to bring her with him but he couldn't *not*

bring her. As in, he was physically incapable of not bringing her. If he left without her she would just follow him. He considered a few options, but none of them made sense. If he just left without saying anything, she would almost certainly go to Ofrurg presuming that to be his target. Even if he could convince her he was just going on a mission to a specific place, when he didn't return she would know. And he had no logical reason not to invite her. She was capable. Certainly, she was one star behind him but that wasn't so much as to hold him back in battle, and having additional hands would in fact be quite helpful.

Logic wasn't everything. Wanting to protect family was quite a paradox, because Catarina also wanted to protect her grandpa. And though she wasn't very vocal about

her choices most of the time, she was quietly stubborn. Anton wasn't sure what to do. Perhaps some cultivation would clear his head.

Northern creeper was a completely innocuous name for the spike covered vine Anton found himself dealing with. Its seeds were pods with sharp thorns going in every direction, and they had to be planted carefully by hand. It wasn't hard physical labor that was required but instead a certain level of energy defenses. Because while it was just a truly awful plant, its fruit could produce a potent medicine for cultivation. It was one of the main ingredients in tempering pills like the kind Catarina had given to Anton. That was quite understandable, considering the way it sucked up natural energy around it.

As Anton carefully put his arm deep into the plant where he might prune away some dead leaves, he cut a gash along his arm. While tempering his meridians had allowed him to handle larger amounts of energy, that wasn't enough to just ignore the thorns. After all, it wasn't an everyday plant. It absorbed natural energy from the world and through its thorns in particular. Thus, his defenses were only half as effective at best. Hoyt had also moved on to the same work with Anton. Farming normal plants or even special herbs was just too easy, and hardly worth their time. It provided some contribution points, but this was worth more because of the increased difficulty and value.

Hoyt had one advantage Anton did not. He had already completed the tempering of his skin. Though he was a step behind Catarina at the moment, he was almost at the seventh star. Anton watched as the spikes slid along his skin without piercing through unless Hoyt was careless.

As he carefully maneuvered his own arm, it came out bloody. He could wear armor, but patching it would take all the extra contribution points he would earn. Besides, the only thing left to temper was his skin anyway. While it wasn't a pleasant process, it was actually quite beneficial to add this into his cultivation routine. His practice and some discussions with Hoyt were giving him some initial success in the area. Anton didn't plan to remain in the Order for the months it would take to finish the tempering of his skin, but at least beginning the process in an optimal environment would help him later.

Hoyt, meanwhile, needed advice on tempering his internal organs, starting with his torso. He was young and strong, so he hadn't found it a necessity to take care of them earlier. Anton envied that youth, but of course he provided the best advice he could. Among other things, it involved a lot of running. That took care of the lungs and heart, at least. He wished he knew that such an active style might be helpful when he first began cultivating, though he would have barely been able to make use of it. His body had been in a better state than his mind but only barely.

Sometimes, one merely had to let themselves get stabbed with a thousand needles to clear their mind. Anton wasn't sure if that actually helped, but he at least arrived at a reasonable idea. Both he and Catarina were sensible adults, and they could talk about things. And, if he didn't get what he wanted and she insisted on coming with him that would just give him more reason to be cautious.

Anton invited Catarina over. His living space was still mostly bare, but he had a sitting room with some chairs and a table, at least. Come. Sit.

Catarina did so quite obediently. However, she didn't wait for him to continue. Are we finally going to Ofrurg? she asked.

Anton sighed. Don't be so eager to run into trouble. There will not be anything glorious or fun to be had there. Just salvaging remnants of old memories. I hope to do what I can for a few people and end the lives of a few others. Anton shook his head. I don't want you to come with me. It's too dangerous.

I know, Catarina said. That is why I can't let you go alone.

Im just an old man. If I die doing this the world doesn't lose much. You, however, have so much life and potential ahead of you.

Catarina frowned, People aren't worth just what they can do and become. It's also what they have done. You still mean something, for your past. And if we're bringing up potential are you not improving in cultivation? I know you are, and fast. I can barely keep up.

I don't know how much longer I can last, Anton said. Can I even reach Spirit Building?

Can't you? Catarina asked. I know cultivating extends your lifespan. Even if it doesn't help as much for you it's not like you'll die of old age in just a year or two. Not with a whole eight stars already. Catarina stood up and leaned closer, You've already outlived one of my other grandpas. You're not just going to fall apart.

Anton didn't have much else to say, but he wasn't going to stop trying. You don't know any of those I plan to save. Don't risk yourself for them.

So? Catarina said, I didn't know anyone in Thuston. Neither did you. We still wanted to protect them from the beasts. And if you're planning to save some family aren't they my family too, grandpa? Just because I haven't met them yet

Anton sighed again. If you aren't going to listen to me, then maybe consider how your father and mother would feel if you died.

Maybe *you* should. Catarina was certainly a lot more comfortable talking with him lately. She had quite a few things to say, apparently. I know you can't just wait around to be

strong enough to do everything you want. But you dont have to do it alone. If you still think its too dangerous maybe that should stop you.

Anton locked eyes with her. How did she get so stubborn? Maybe she inherited that trait from her parents. Or her grandparents. Or her great-great-grandfather. If that was the case maybe he should invite some others along as well. Timothy should be easy to convince, though Anton wasnt sure if Hoyt would have any reason to join. Were there any others he trusted? He hadnt really developed his social circle much. Too much training. Or maybe not enough.