

Elder Cultivator

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The obstacle course was followed by a written test. The main instructions had been answer as many as you can. Questions at the beginning were about cultivation and combat, but there were other questions on history and mathematics. Pete was happy to find that it covered questions about various trade skills and useful professions as well. There was no way anyone would complete the whole thing, but that wasn't the point. They were clearly looking for how people would be *useful*.

Pete did his best, answering farming, energy cultivation, and fighting questions for the most part. If he saw something simple as he browsed he would scribble down an answer, but at the back he found questions on formations. The first few were simple, but as he continued on he found himself taking longer and longer. He only got through about half of them. He thought his experience with formations was pretty good, but clearly there was a lot still left to learn.

They hadn't been told a specific time limit, but each of them were stopped in order, likely based on when they finished the obstacle course. It was only a few minutes difference all around, but it put some pressure on those who knew the end was coming. Pete exchanged looks with Oskar, who shrugged. It was hard to say how they did on the written portions. Nobody had really talked about those, or the tests in general.

Next came sparring. They were matched against other entrants. Oskar fought against another muscular man who was almost equally muscled- a rare sight. However, while their bodies seemed to be closely matched, Oskar's fighting experience pushed him ahead. He had learned an aggressive axe fighting style from Hoyt that constantly kept the enemy on the defensive, before finally his axe came to rest next to his opponent's neck. Pete marvelled at how well the formation was able to stop the attack, though he did see it was actively being watched over.

As for Pete himself, he ended up fighting the round young woman. Gerd, apparently. He wondered if he should have asked that or not. Either way, he supposed she would not like that descriptor much. Determined, maybe. Pete wasn't sure if his help was technically allowed, but she was participating in the rest of the test at least.

The time of rest seemed to have done her a great benefit, because she seemed nearly brimming with energy. Actually, everyone was quite full up. Pete had only experienced similar levels of natural energy suffusing the area in Misty Hill Palace and occasionally a lesser form when Catarina set up energy gathering formations. This was still more, and he'd filled up easily and without even really noticing.

It was sword against sword. A common choice of weapon, though spears had the advantage of reach. For cultivators fighting individual battles, what suited them was the most important. In Pete's case, he hadn't felt any particular draw to certain weapons, so he had gone with the same weapon as Catarina. He didn't wield it in the same way, preferring to rely more on his strength rather than her elegant technique.

As their swords began to clash, Pete quickly found himself on the back foot. Gerd clearly had some experience fighting, and he didn't quite know how to react. He kept himself secure in the battle by relying on his greater physical strength, which was still sufficient to overcome a certain amount of energy. He hadn't tempered his meridians yet. He was only at the third star, and while Anton had been able to achieve that for his first prime tempering, it was too difficult for Pete. He would be waiting until the fifth star and the second prime tempering. He couldn't tell what Gerd had tempered. It wasn't muscle, unless she had been positively infirm before she began to cultivate. Her energy wasn't so strong as to make him believe she had her meridians tempered. Bones? Marrow? Those effects were hard to see.

He learned something when he managed to slice along her upper arm. His attack was shallow as her skin resisted. That was one tempering then, but she still pulled back from the damage. Trained to fight, but not used to being injured. Meanwhile, Pete had fought for his life several times. He had to admit he was well defended for the most part, but against the bandits just past the Estary border he'd felt the danger. This was just a spar.

He didn't want to put down Gerd's determination, but that was even more reason to take what advantages he could. If he held back, it might be insulting. Pete began to take reckless tactics. He attacked with little regard for his own defense, counting on Gerd to defend herself rather than taking the openings. It worked often enough as she prioritized her own defense. Pete got to see exactly how she would defend against each strike, the precise position she held her guard. She seemed to have good training, but she lacked the adaptability learned in actual battle.

Pete feigned a slash towards her left side, but instead twisted his sword into a stab towards her heart. Her reaction was nearly quick enough but his sword stabbed into her chest before she could parry it. At least, that was what it would have done if the formation hadn't stopped his blade. He was counting on it. They'd said not to worry about injuring their opponents, and meant it.

A good fight, Pete said. He didn't feel great about beating someone a decade younger than him, but they were both third star. She'd probably been training a similar amount of time to him, maybe even longer. Though it seemed her actual exercise had been neglected. He wondered who taught her- or if she'd had to learn on her own. If it was the latter, then Pete could only say he was lucky to have excellent guidance.

Gerd was breathing heavily. It seemed she was finding it hard to accept that she'd lost. You- you clearly she had something she planned to say, but thought better of it. ... A good fight, she inclined her head.

Pete hoped that her losing the spar didn't mean she wouldn't be recruited. He'd assumed it was an exhibition of skill, but he actually didn't know. Then he was pulled away for several other tests- including a short segment where he tried to discern the effects of certain *actual* formations instead of just writing about it. He wasn't sure if that test was tailored to him specifically, but he didn't see anyone else in that area.

Then it was already dusk. He was quite pleased that, as the sun settled behind the mountain peak, he was declared to have passed. Not only that, he was apparently the best ranking, receiving as a prize several pills and instructions on how and when to best use them. In short- only when extra accumulation of energy is the limiting factor in advancing cultivation. Pete wasn't fully confident in his ability to judge that, but he knew Catarina and Anton could give him advice.

After the test he was taken to a little complex of four simple houses. Oskar was already there- and he'd even had time to get Patricia. The third neighbor was one of the other young men who was participating in the test. The fourth remained empty. Had only three passed? Three out of twelve was low, but then again the test could be repeated monthly. There could also be another complex that was filled out first.

Pete was out in his courtyard, messing around with the dirt making simple formations, when he sensed her. It was well after dark now, but Gerds exhausted form was dragging itself behind one of the older disciples. Good. She'd passed. Though she might need some help with certain kinds of training, since she seemed to be ignorant in some areas.

Anton eagerly awaited the results. He was quite pleased when Sterling came to him saying that both Pete and Oskar passed.

I can't believe you're at the twelfth star already, Sterling said. I was two stars ahead, now I'm three behind.

Anton smiled. Don't worry so much. It's not a race. I can provide some advice on Peak Body Tempering and thoughts on Spirit Building, if you want.

I might take you up on that, Sterling smiled softly. But those two quite interesting. Not what we normally see. I can see your influence on both of them. In the obstacle course Pete clearly thought it would be more difficult and reserved himself too much and then he helped someone over the last obstacle instead of just reaching the finish.

Good! Anton said, One should always be ready to help others.

I agree, Sterling said, And that's something we watch for. There's a reason the tests are the way they are.

About that, Anton said. What about those who arrive at fourth star? I was just able to walk right in, nobody even checking me over.

Well, Sterling said, That wasnt exactly true. You said Vincent was your sponsor. It could have been a lie, but wed prefer to get fourth star people into the Order as soon as possible. The second prime tempering isnt far for them, and the fact that they made it so far shows talent. Plus, it wasnt as if you were just roaming about unwatched.

The instructors? Anton asked, then nodded, But also Elder Daniela.

Thats correct, Sterling said.

Im not sure if thats the method Id use, Anton shrugged, But I can see why. Still wonder why you dont just raise up people at the first or second star. Or even just potentials. Anton held up a hand, I know, I know, that takes people, they might not all become true cultivators, bla bla bla. But you would have more people to teach if some of them stuck to it. I dont think it would be bad for Graotan to have more low level cultivators anyway. Anton was planning to talk to everyone he could about his ideas. Some of them needed refinement still, but if he never started then hed never get anywhere with his ideas. Besides, when people told him what was wrong with certain things he could smooth out that area, instead of waiting for months or years to realize it himself.

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The courtyard, once having seemed so large, was beginning to be insufficient for Antons uses. He noticed it especially when practicing archery, how its relative size had diminished. He barely even had time for his arrows to build up speed before he had to disintegrate them. Firing them up into the sky wasnt any better, since it was hard to test his accuracy that way. The wind whipping above the courtyard didnt help. He would need to petition to move to larger accommodations or at least closer to the proper archery ranges. It was still far to just run on over when he wanted a bit of practice.

His new bow was still a problem. He hadnt thought he would be able to suddenly put it to use at the twelfth star, but hed sort of expected *some* change. The swirls of wind in his courtyard couldnt distract him from his task. Create a string with energy. Then an arrow, and pull. His muscles strained and his energy tensed, and the only thing he got was sore fingertips.

Was the string too thin? It was made of his own energy, so it was able to cut through his defenses if he wasnt careful. Fortunately it didnt easily hurt him, but it dug into the tips of his fingers after some repetitions. And the string didnt move, unless he extended it. The bow bent not even a single millimeter. Still, it was an interesting way to train his abilities even if he couldnt shoot it. Forming shapes with pure energy other than arrows was something he didnt do as often. He could make pretty much any shape he wanted, but having them keep their form under stress was much harder.

A door clicked in the opposite corner courtyard. That was a problem that still needed dealing with. Anton sighed.

Life should have been good for Fuzz. Plentiful food, as much as he needed. He didnt need to hunt for it, but he *could* when he wanted to. He had a den to stay in, though he had to learn to clean off mud before he could do so. That was a useful exercise, shedding unwanted things from his paws and the rest of his body.

Outside of the den he had space to run, and so so many pack members. Hed tried to count them, but there were many dozens and he simply didnt have a way to count that high. He was growing stronger, both through his own efforts and the care of Catarina. In some places his body was still missing parts of him, where the moss had grown into him, but for the most part he was healthy. He could run on all of his legs over the vast stretches of pack territory- though usually he couldnt do so alone.

Everything should have been right, but *something* was wrong. And Fuzz was going to find out what. Anton was back. He was still the same. Hoyt was further away, but he seemed to be doing well. It was the third leader of their sub-pack that was a problem. The one closest to Fuzz, Catarina. She was not right, ever since they arrived.

The problem was with the other two packmates that live in adjacent dens. One of them Catarina never visited. Fuzz thought he smelled a faint bit of animosity there, but it was so subtle he also thought he could be wrong. But the other male, that was a problem. Catarina said he was a friend. Like he was part of their sub-pack, training and living together. However, he retreated whenever Fuzz tried to visit. Not only that, this Timothy wouldnt even stay outside when Catarina or Anton were training. Fuzz thought he was concerned about distracting them at first, but instead of deference his movements smelled of something else. Timidity, maybe. The scent of humans was still hard to puzzle out sometimes.

The biggest problem was that Timothy didnt exhibit any of the expected features of a friend. Fuzz had come to believe they should eat together, travel together, hunt together, train together, *be* together. That was what a pack was. But they *werent* together. Catarina and Timothy had spoken when they returned, and very little since. Several times Catarina had gone over and there had been no response from the door, though both Timothy and his energy smelled like they were there. Strange.

Was he trapped inside? Certainly doors were difficult to open at first, but every human hed met had operated them with ease. Besides, hed seen him do it. Grr. It was just so *frustrating*.

A warm hand rubbed his head. There there, Fuzz. Its okay. Timothy is a friend. Hes just training out in the yard.

The more she said it, the less Fuzz believed it. What could he do about it? He couldn't speak, and didn't know what to say anyway. What needed to happen? After a moment of thought, Fuzz unbarred the door he was sitting in front of, the one that led to the courtyard. Sliding the bar was easy, pulling it required manipulating energy or a more difficult paw placement. So he pulled with a bit of energy, then stepped into the yard.

Now he had to be fast. His paws tore up dirt as he moved, then just the right distance from the wall he *leaped*, muscle and energy pushing him high over the wall. Timothy was surprised. Of course he was. Fuzz hadn't done it since the first time when Catarina scolded him. Anton didn't care if he visited, but Catarina wanted him to use a gate. Even though it was slower. But this time he had to be fast.

Dirt and rocks scattered in a cloud as he landed, startling Timothy. But he was a cultivator, already standing in a defensive position when Fuzz landed. The screen of dust was the only thing that let Fuzz grab onto his shoulder, and even so he barely succeeded. His teeth held on tight, never with the intent to do injury but Timothy's defensive energy would have held regardless. He was merely a small bit weaker than the three pack leaders.

Fuzz pulled. It was already an awkward angle, standing on his hind legs, but he was unable to get any traction. Timothy elbowed him to try to make him let go, but Fuzz would have none of it. He reinforced his body to take the blow. His teeth hurt as they barely held, but he reinforced that area also, without making his teeth *sharper*. He couldn't pull Timothy along the ground, his footing was too good. Fuzz decided to let go, falling to the ground.

Then his mouth closed around Timothy's ankle. He got kicked in the side, but Fuzz almost found it amusing. It was a bit more than he would have expected for simple roughhousing, but he could tell Timothy was not using his full power. Not yet. So he had to hurry.

Fuzz leaped, nearly straight up. If he couldn't drag Timothy along the ground, he would carry him through the air. The ankle came with him, not able to drag against anything, and Timothy dangled head down as they rose. Then his ankle was once more below them as they descended. Fuzz made sure his paws touched the ground first so he could jump at a better angle, with Timothy flailing as they slid smoothly over the fence, only catching on it once and bumping his head. But he had defensive energy so it was fine.

Fuzz! Catarina chastised him. Stop that!

Fuzz stopped. He wasn't planning to jump over the wall again anyway. He didn't let go of Timothy though, even though he whined and complained. He didn't get to order Fuzz around unless he acted like a pack member.

For some reason, Catarina was unreasonably upset at Fuzz for jumping over the wall. He couldn't quite get what she was saying because she was having trouble speaking

properly. Humans didnt speak so well when they were upset, and it was already hard to understand them. Then Anton came over the wall, and she didnt get mad at him at all! What an unfair double standard.

Fuzz dropped Timothys ankle and pushed him with his nose towards Catarina and Anton. They were supposed to be friends and spend time together, but they hadnt even gotten close enough to get their scent on each other since they came to the big pack. Completely unacceptable.

I think I get it, Anton said as he pulled Timothy to his feet.

Yes! Good! The old one was a wise pack leader. But they didnt immediately start to familiarize themselves with each other again. Fuzz ran around and rubbed up against all of them so they would remember how to do it, but they didnt quite seem to get it. They were talking, though. That was good. The scents of their energies mingled slightly, at least, though Fuzz really thought they should touch more. Would he have to be the one to do all the work?

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Everyone- Timothy, Catarina, Fuzz, and Anton- was gathered together in Catarinas courtyard. Anton hadnt been planning to do things in such a drastic fashion, but he had to admit that Fuzz really helped kick off the process. Good to see you, Timothy. Fuzz isnt capable of verbalizing, but perhaps I can help. Even Fuzz can tell you guys are acting strange, and hes never seen the two of you together to be *normal*.

Well, I, uh Timothy was still quite off put from being pulled by a wolf and thrust into an uncomfortable situation.

Catarina wasnt much more equipped to handle a sudden confrontation. She had been focused on Fuzz surface actions rather than the implications. We dont have to- theres nothing to really She didnt manage a full, coherent sentence.

A hundred years of experience makes some interactions painfully obvious, Anton said. Now, I fully understand that with the passage of time people might drift apart. But a simple half of a year shouldnt end up with two people who are friends their whole lives not talking to each other. There are clearly thoughts that need to be communicated here. And while I admit to personal bias, I think the one who needs to express themselves first is *you* Timothy. Anton threw around the full power of Voice. It couldnt make anyone do anything they truly didnt want to do, but a commanding tone was a very useful tool to have. Being open and honest wont be easy, but it will be quite better later. So. Why are you reluctant to speak to your best friend in the whole world? Anton could think of several options. They could range from trivial and laughable- but still very *real*- to some things that would be painful. That depended on what hed done or *thought* hed done. We can wait for you to form your thoughts. That was half a

reminder to Catarina. He put a hand on her shoulder to comfort her, among other things.

Timothy clearly wanted to run away. Not that he was *afraid* of either of them, but emotional conflicts were harder to face than just a big scary monster that might try to kill you. With the latter you either won or you lost. There might be injuries, but physical pain only hurt so much.

It was clear that Timothy couldn't really run away, if he wasn't allowed to, but nobody was physically stopping him. Fuzz had managed to move him around with the element of surprise, but it would take Anton or Catarina to truly stop him. Anton had positioned them out of the way of his physical retreat- though of course he could just jump over a wall so the courtyards themselves were basically meaningless for blocking him.

Finally, Timothy put together a sentence. I just thought you would hate me. For abandoning you.

...What? Catarina sounded genuinely confused.

Anton nodded. He thought it was something like that. But he wanted to let them talk about it before trying to insert his own potential explanations.

You went on that whole journey, Timothy said. Faced so much danger. I could have helped. But I wasn't there for you. His face indicated there was more left unsaid.

It's alright, Catarina said. We didn't need you. Anton could see Timothy's heart break. Catarina caught it a moment later. I-its not that we couldn't have used your help. Or want you there. Its just we made it back. No injuries that couldn't recover.

... I still should have been with you.

Then why weren't you?

I Timothy didn't seem able to find the words. Anton supposed he should help.

He had prior commitments, Anton explained. Though it had come up long before, Anton remembered. He left out the unhelpful and extraneous details he knew about. Our departure was not known about well in advance. I was perhaps a bit overeager to go, instead of waiting patiently for another companion. It would have been impossible to say if things would ultimately have gone better had they waited. Many encounters would have happened differently, or not at all. They might have been too late for some things, though another companion might also have allowed them to move with less caution and more speed. But even though they'd only been separated for several months, as planned, that was still a significant time for two young folk with barely twenty years to their name. He'd focused too much on those potential people he planned to save, and

not enough on those people who were close to him. I am quite sure we would have benefitted from your presence.

Timothys head still hung. You wouldnt need me. Youre both so strong. Im not even at peak Body Tempering yet.

Anton cracked his knuckles, grinning wildly. We can fix that.

I dont care about that, Catarina said. It doesnt matter if youre weak or strong. Youre my friend. Though I have to say, its harder to grow strong alone. Id be way weaker if not for Grandpa Antons advice.

The discussion was over shortly. A trivial argument to solve, though Anton might have some questions for Timothy in private. But though the solution was simple, the problems it could have caused if left alone were very meaningful. Anton remembered Timothys ambition to be stronger than Catarina, and though he must have worked hard alone he just didnt have the right opportunities. When she returned with such strength, it was likely a significant blow to him. Anton was quite certain he was brushing up against finishing the tenth star and just couldnt reach it.

It might have been more difficult to work through if the problems stemmed from *not* caring instead of caring too much. Anton doubted that things would be fully resolved with just what they had done, but the distance that had formed between the two friends could be patched.

As they eventually went their separate ways, Anton looked towards the fourth courtyard. There was one more member of their little community, and he felt they needed to have a talk. Probably should have been done months before, but he was more confident in his assertions now.

An unexpected knock on the door startled Velvet. She hadnt even noticed him walking around. That was concerning, because Anton Krantz was *extremely* easy to notice. The aura of Spirit Building poured off him quite clearly. Velvet wondered what he wanted. The easiest way to find out was to just walk over to the door. Senior Anton, please do come in. Hed dropped by to say hello after he first returned- though not before he broke through to the twelfth star. He hadnt stayed for more than a moment there, and she was hoping for more now.

Thank you, Anton smiled pleasantly. I would love to. Was he younger? If nothing else his wrinkles were less pronounced- though tempering his skin would do that. If she recalled correctly, he hadnt finished that before leaving on his journey. Though nothing about his particular movements were threatening, Velvet herself was merely at the eighth star. He had four more, and it wasnt *just* four but also a prime tempering and stepping into the next stage. He could kill her in an instant, though she thought shed

avoided giving him any reason to do so. I thought that I should get to know my final neighbor better. You went on an expedition while we were gone, correct? With Timothy? I'd love to hear about it.

Velvet took a deep breath. She didn't want to screw something up. She didn't fully comprehend how Anton Krantz was now four stars ahead of her instead of one, but she felt the opportunity he represented. I'd be glad to! The team I was working with needed another competent defender, and he was the first I thought of. It had been a bit concerning when he stagnated at the ninth star, but he was still ahead of her so she hadn't been *too* worried. We journeyed west, into Ambati. A bit north as well, into the jungled section. She spoke about the mission, making sure to give Timothy proper praise. Anton listened intently, occasionally prompting her with questions. ... we made it back alright, but perhaps I should have invited *you* as well, Senior Anton.

I would have been forced to decline. I had my own plans to take care of.

So I noticed! Velvet smiled. A quite successful training journey, I can tell. I'd love to hear about how you advanced so quickly.

It's quite simple really, Anton explained, Just put yourself in situations you must grow stronger, and you will. Or you suffer the consequences.

Velvet grimaced. That wasn't really the answer she was looking for. There had to be some trick to his growth. I'm sure that someone as wise as you was never in any true danger.

Something on Anton's face shifted, though she couldn't tell what it meant. There are more precious things beyond just one's wealth and life. He looked at her, as if trying to see through her. He folded his hands in front of him, and she was suddenly very uncomfortable as the atmosphere shifted. So why did you *really* invite Timothy?

I don't know what you mean. Everything she said was true. He was strong, growing stronger rapidly. A perfect fit for the team.

Understandable, Anton said. But odd. I can see why you wouldn't invite an old man along. Why not Catarina as well?

Well, there was the incident. I'm sure you remember that. Velvet dropped her eyes. She really didn't want to remember that. She could have died. That was also part of why she hadn't approached Anton. That *danger*.

I see, Anton nodded. So instead you chose to attempt to manipulate her best friend instead.

How was it so cold? Velvet knew the answer to that, but the way she was sweating and getting the chills at the same time was extremely uncomfortable. I just asked him to come along, she said sweetly. Its not like we gave him a bad cut or anything Timothy had potential. She really didnt want to make an enemy of someone like that. Unfortunately, before shed really understood anything shed already done that with Catarina. Then she had been completely blindsided by Anton. Was he even human? How did he get so strong so fast?

She was shocked back to focus when Anton spoke. I understand. The words were powerful, yet frightening. People dont just become cultivators on a whim. They want something. Power. Safety. Stability. Though the latter two rarely end up working out in the long run. Anton's eyes nearly stabbed into her. I understand wanting to be in control of your life. But *do* consider how you go about it. Anton stood up. Remember that were in the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, and what that represents. He turned towards the door. Now if youll excuse me, I have business to attend to. Im afraid any talk about my trip will have to wait for later. Dont be hesitant to drop by if you have any questions about that, or anything really. Ill do my best to make sure you understand. And you dont even have to listen over the wall.

Velvet watched him go, closing the door behind himself. He didnt know everything. He didnt really know *her*. But he certainly wasnt blind, or deaf. And he was far too strong to mess around with. Velvet sighed. She just wished she had *whatever it was* that he had. But hed made it very clear that his secrets wouldnt be easy to get.

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Advancing in cultivation was a mix between control of energy and mastery of particular aspects of cultivation. For Body Tempering, it was fairly clear what was being tempered, though specifics changed from person to person. In Spirit Building, things were more abstract. Anton could easily tell they were still very real, but even less specific than muscles. He had definitely tempered some of his muscles more than others, but hed still completed the tempering of his muscles without issue. He honestly doubted that muscles on his face were of much use even if properly tempered.

The best part about the Ninety-Nine Stars was that while the choice of what to cultivate- especially for prime temperings- was quite open, it never fully put aside other aspects. His choices in Body Tempering still significantly influenced his current self, but as his cultivation grew he could continually smooth out any weaknesses he had. So instead of focusing too hard on exactly what he should cultivate in Spirit Building and the single prime tempering of the Seven Purifications, he just let himself continue to grow.

Having already cultivated Voice, he found it easier to organize his thoughts on what he wanted. Going for whatever seemed most useful in the immediate future was perfectly reasonable. He could reserve things that were ultimately important but not urgent for later.

Insight for reading enemies. He knew he would have to fight, and that wouldn't suddenly stop happening in the future. Even outside of combat he was able to use it to great effect. Voice was his inner voice and thoughts, while his outer voice allowed him to influence others. It wasn't anything so powerful as mind control, but he didn't want to deal with the problems inherent in that field anyway. It was simply useful.

Emotion was next. While he found himself relatively stable at the moment, in personal situations he would be able to make better decisions if he could properly manage his emotions. That didn't mean suppressing or ignoring them. Some sects managed their emotions in different ways- even to the extremes of letting certain emotions take them over or completely cutting themselves off. The Order preferred a more nourishing approach wherein the effects of emotions on decision making could be tempered as necessary. Anger or impatience would be managed such that improper snap decisions were prevented, while proper training would still allow appropriate responses in the same time frame.

Another aspect of Emotion was its effect on cultivation as a whole. It could be juxtaposed with Spiritual Connection as they related to different aspects of energy control. Spiritual Connection had much to do with reading the flow of energy, absorbing it, and controlling it outside the body. Extremely useful, but Emotion had effects on internal use of energy to grow cultivation.

It was a close choice between the two of them, with Emotion barely coming out ahead. In truth, it barely mattered. Not because the details of his cultivation weren't important, but because in a few months he would be advancing to the other one either way. Each had useful immediate benefits, so he finally just made the choice.

After a week of training, he felt like it was the right one. This was one area his advanced age absolutely helped instead of hindering him. While those undergoing puberty experienced many emotions, a majority of those emotions were ultimately shallow. Anton had lived a full life, to the point he had experienced basically anything life had to offer, highs and lows of all sorts. Though the lowest lows came at the destruction of Dungannon, just prior to which he would have been perfectly happy to die peacefully and finish his life. Now, he absolutely wouldn't let go of his hold on life.

The management of the technique library was primarily under the care of Elder Bristol Mason. Even with thousands of members in the order, she rarely got more than ten or twenty people per day at the technique library. An individual might ask for help finding a handful of techniques at once then study them each for a month or more before returning. A few seemed interested in studying absolutely everything they could, which she hoped was beneficial to their cultivation instead of confusing.

For the most part Anton Krantz fell into the former category. He'd studied a small handful of techniques over his year and some with the Order. After he returned from a journey

he perused a few more, archery techniques and movement for the most part. Standard fare. Then he'd begun asking about Everheart, and forbidden techniques.

What makes a technique forbidden, anyway? By the Order's standards?

Elder Mason might not entertain the questions from a young disciple, but Anton hadn't even brought up the idea of *seeing* any of them. It seemed to be pure intellectual curiosity. Same things as most, really. Danger to the cultivator or to society.

Anton nodded. I had a chance to see one of Everheart's techniques. Candle Wax. A clear danger to the user, and the scroll laid it out quite clearly. Burning one's life like a candle for temporary bursts of power. The way the description said not to seek out forbidden techniques Everheart seemed to be *trying* to make people curious about more.

Elder Mason smiled. Yes. That was his way. He was quite fond of creating techniques that were forbidden, though he had his own standards. Nothing that was exceptionally cruel to others. Of course, half of his techniques were forbidden just because they were intentionally made to counter some of the prominent sects in his time. He was on passable terms with the Order so we don't believe he created anything specifically to spite the Order, but he was fond of ways to disrupt cultivators' internal cultivation methods. None of that is technically forbidden here, but if we found something specifically aimed at countering the Ninety-Nine Stars, it would probably get that treatment anyway.

Everyone has limits, Anton agreed. I'd certainly be happy to get rid of any anti-archery techniques.

I suppose we can't lend you any of the distance closing techniques then, Elder Mason grinned.

... Actually I should probably study those.

It could be worthwhile. They're basically just specific movement techniques focused on catching up with people and sticking with them.

Anton nodded. One last question. Do you ever recommend forbidden techniques to people?

Your question presupposes that we keep forbidden techniques on hand.

Of course you do, Anton said. Every technique is dangerous in some fashion. I could twist my ankle or break a leg if I messed up a movement technique. There have to be things besides life-burning, soul stealing, or consciousness overriding techniques that are simply too dangerous for general practice. Even the full version of the Ninety-Nine Stars isn't freely available to everyone.

You're right about that. We have different levels of availability. Even some truly abhorrent techniques kept to research counters.

Anton nodded. Speaking of counters, can I see some of those distance closing techniques?

He didn't continue to bring up the topic later, but Elder Briston knew he was still interested. Everheart was still corrupting people with his enthusiasm to this very day, it seemed. Though chastising Anton for his curiosity would be hypocritical. Everheart had so many good ideas. Or at least *interesting* ideas.

Less than a month since Timothy started talking to people again, Velvet felt him break through to the tenth star. It was so frustrating. She'd tried to watch him train, but there was nothing special about any of it. Some of it was even stupid. Running hundreds of laps around their compound had to be some sort of distraction so she would stop paying attention. Whatever he'd done with Anton when they went off together had to be the key to his continued growth, but Velvet didn't have the confidence to stealthily follow behind Anton.

She'd tried it once. The way he turned around and looked straight into her eyes from a couple hundred meters away had shown her how impossible that was. Just a quick turn, a look, and then he continued walking as if she didn't exist. As if she was nothing. Maybe that was true. He didn't even look *angry*. Just nothing, as if there was no connection between them. Or her and the others.

He was right. Timothy might have grown slightly closer to her during the course of the mission in Ambati, but that all faded away afterwards. He talked more about Catarina and Anton than her even while they were on the mission. Then he'd sort of fallen apart when they were back, worrying about them. Somehow that got worse when they returned. Velvet thought that Catarina had done something like declare she found a lover on her journey, but apparently she'd just spoken about what they did. Then Timothy regretted not helping, even though he couldn't have known anything.

It was stupid. Why did he even care? Maybe he just regretted missing out on whatever secret training methods Anton had. That had to be it. Even though he wasn't exactly performing poorly, the entire trio that went on that journey returned at Spirit Building.

Her curiosity got the better of her. He'd said something she might be able to use. A knock on Anton's door. Of course, he was almost there to answer it by the time she knocked. He knew she was coming. Hello, Senior Anton.

That smile. It had to be hiding something. But what was it? How could she get his secrets? Velvet. Welcome! Do come in.

He brought her tea. Nothing special about it, but she wasn't going to complain either. She engaged in some smalltalk, then she got to her true purpose. Earlier, you said you'd explain anything I didn't understand.

I did. At least he didn't deny it. The fact that his expression didn't change made her wonder if he was surprised or not. It was so difficult to tell.

Then tell me how you and the others got so strong so fast.

Certainly. Just tell me where you're experiencing problems with your cultivation.

Velvet took a sip of tea. So that was how it was going to be. He wanted to scope out her weaknesses. But could she get enough useful information out of him without giving everything away? She decided to try. I'm currently trying to temper my bones, but sometimes it gets extremely painful. It's keeping me from progressing.

I see, Anton said. He appeared to take a moment to think. Painful how?

She wasn't going to give away her weak points that easily. It's hard to describe. Sometimes it was a burning fire. Sometimes it was as if she was a creaking tower about to snap. A brick at the bottom of a pile crushed under the weight of those above. It just sort of hurts.

In that case, Anton explained. I have a few helpful training tips.

That was something, at least. Hopefully they would help until she got to the real secrets.

Chapter 95

It wasn't hard to spot Velvet sneaking around. She was better at it than Anton generally expected of people, but having an advantage of four steps of cultivation was a gap that was hard to close. Anton particularly cared about spotting opponents from afar, and he'd been expecting her. When he looked at her, she shrunk away like a startled mouse.

That girl had problems. He didn't know what they were, or if he should even try to solve them. Doing nothing was definitely the wrong option, though. If he left her alone she would be a danger to others or to herself, perhaps both.

He didn't appreciate her manipulative methods, but it seemed to be the only way she knew to interact with people. It was like she couldn't even believe the things he said directly to her. So he would watch over her. He really hoped he could coax her into a person more fitting for the Order, because if not she would be a danger. He wondered if the Order knew. Probably- but he wasn't just going to *assume* that. Nobody was perfect. He'd have to talk to Elder Daniela, and explain what he planned to do. But for the moment, he had a promise to fulfill.

Anton sat with Velvet in her courtyard and folded his fingers in front of him. He should probably start slowly. Tempering your body isn't just about dumping natural energy into it. That can work, but the more you understand the better you will do. You said training your bones hurts? Velvet nodded. There are several possibilities. You are likely trying to go too fast, too strong. Something that will certainly help is understanding your body and moving it. Anton wiggled his fingers and made weird motions with his joined hands. The hands are the easiest place to just *feel* a lot of bones. Almost a quarter of the whole number of bones are in them together. You understand?

Mmn. Velvet had folded her hands together as well, but she was unenthusiastic about the process. I know how many bones people have already

It was difficult to teach someone who didn't *want* to be taught. She wanted his *secrets* to advancing in cultivation. But there weren't any secrets. Hard work, a bit of luck, and then working with other people to understand the process. He might also include cultivating like a madman uncaring about your life, but he wouldn't recommend that one for the long term. Otherwise he would have just suggested she push through the pain. There was a decent chance that would allow her to complete the ninth star- if she didn't explode her bones.

Watch the flow of my energy carefully. Anton pressed his fingers together, tip to tip. He coaxed a strand of energy to flow up his right hand, along the right edge towards his pinky. He made sure it carefully weaved its way through the bone itself, then into his other pinky and down the other side to his wrist. Then up his left ring finger and down, flowing back and forth through all the bones in his hand, ending behind his left thumb. The process did very little for him- his bones were near the limits of what they could reach until the second half of Spirit Building. Pay attention to each bone, and do it yourself. I will watch and guide you.

Velvet looked at him suspiciously- in short, with the same look he'd seen from her almost all the time since he'd returned. Still, she slowly repeated his same process. It didn't seem to be a lack of control that was holding her back, but rather what she did with it. She was nearly forcing the energy into her bones after they reached their limit, like packing a bag too full. Of course it hurt. Her face was strained, though she clearly tried to hide that. The process took her a lot longer, and she was sweating by the end of it.

Good energy control. The girl hadn't properly followed his instructions, but she seemed in desperate need of reinforcement. Now, with all that energy in your hands you need to move them. Anton showed some methods of stretching his hands. If you can do it while circulating even better, but for now we'll settle for one at a time. Moving your fingers doesn't directly affect your bones, but it will help. If you are careful, some light pressure on individual bones- Anton squeezed one finger, -can help the process. Start small, because if you push too far you just get broken bones. Trust me, it hurts.

Velvet didnt have any questions, just silently following his lead. That was a problem, because she clearly didnt fully understand what he was doing. She just wouldnt ask. Anton shook his head. He wouldnt expect any real change in a single day. On that note, he made sure to remind her that the exercises he was teaching her also wouldnt have immediate results. Hopefully she would be patient enough to wait a full week to see how it affected her.

After he finished that lesson, he had another handful who might need his help. Anton didnt mind spending time teaching others because he learned quite a bit for himself- and he cared about them. Pete and Oskar both passed the test and could use some guidance. Patricia was able to live with Oskar, and she was also was interested in continuing to learn cultivation. Maybe the others living in the same area as them would join for lessons. Of course there was also Hoyt, Catarina, and Timothy. Timothy was pushing himself to catch back up, doing a good job of overcoming his feelings of inadequacy. Hed have a hard time overcoming Catarina since she wasnt the sort to slack off in training and had talent, but he could at least reach close enough to be a relevant factor in battle.

Sometimes, curiosity overcame patience. Anton brought the bone bow to Elder Evan, who ran the armory. He was quite capable of appraising it, and he gave basically the same answer as Elder Byrne of the Misty Hill Palace, including close pricing. I honestly cant say if its a good *bow*, he said, But the materials and work are excellent. Im certain Elder Kseniya could judge its actual practicality better.

Anton nodded. Hed thought that as well, but he just wanted to see if Evan had any insights before that. Despite Elder Byrnes general warning, he wasnt concerned about anyone snatching it away from him. The Order was a bit creaky and stiff in its age, but it still *tried* to follow righteous standards. And frankly, Elder Kseniya had to have a better bow.

There were a number of residences for elders in the same area as the rewards hall, the armory, and the majority of the training fields. Most business was handled in that area. However, many elders and disciples lived further up the mountain. Anton had the opportunity to do so now, but he wasnt concerned about the amount of difference in energy at the moment. Where he was remained sufficient. Anton was certain that more powerful elders like Kseniya and any of the Grand Elders most certainly needed the increased density.

He found the atmosphere much less oppressive now that he was in Spirit Building, though Elder Kseniyas residence wasnt at the peak like the observatory where hed met Grand Elder Vandale. He confidently knocked on her door. Doubtless she felt him coming, but whether she would come to her door was a different question entirely.

Yes? Who is it? Before Anton could respond, the door was quickly pulled open. Ah. I have not seen you at an archery demonstration in some time. She recognized him- and his absence. Anton was surprised at that. Then again, she seemed the sort to either completely ignore everyone she didn't know, or memorize them all. So it was probably nothing special with him in particular. Looking for private lessons?

Not at this time, Elder Kseniya Anton said. Though I suppose this is something of a related request. I am Anton Krantz, by the way. He bowed. I have recently come across a strange bow, and while Elder Evan was able to identify its properties he was unable to determine its efficacy as a bow. I know your time is valuable, but if you could take a look at it- he wasn't able to finish his sentence before the bow was in her hands. A bit rude, but he hadn't really expected anything else from her.

Come, she said. She nearly disappeared from his sight as she moved through her house. Anton was barely able to close the door behind him and follow her into the back yard. A courtyard much bigger than his, and significantly longer in length compared to its width. There were formations set up, concentrating on several types of archery targets- the standard sort of block but not made out of straw, hanging targets, and some in the shape of a torso and head. She was looking at the bow curiously, and Anton was about to try to explain when she formed a string. Then immediately after that, a Spirit Arrow as she held the bow up in a proper stance.

It was the first time he'd seen the bow bend even a little bit, but it almost seemed to have no resistance in Elder Kseniya's hand. There was a horrible sound that nearly toppled Anton off his feet as she released her grip and the string snapped, but not before it propelled the arrow forward. The arrow itself moved far quicker than Anton had anticipated, even having seen Elder Kseniya shoot before. She didn't remain idle, moving to different positions and continuously firing arrows, her subsequent string holding strong. The sound of the bow twanging was sharp and echoed throughout the large courtyard. It was a good sound. After just a minute or so, Elder Kseniya was holding the bow in front of Anton. He held out his hand to take it, and she dropped it into his palm. I hate it.

Yes? Um

Too hard to draw. Time between shots is high. Anton hadn't really noticed a significant drop in her speed, but he could see that. Power is reasonable. But forming a proper string splits the attention between that, bending the bow, and the arrow. Coating standard arrows in energy would barely help.

Oh. Thank you for your assessment. Do I-

You won't be able to use it with puny arms like that, Elder Kseniya declared. Even at early Essence Collection, that darkwood bow you have would do better.

Anton blinked. He didnt even have the bow *with* him. But then again, of course she remembered his bow. Hed never even seen her glance at any of the disciples who watched her demonstrations, but she probably knew their bows better than their faces. What if you pulled the bow with pure strength? Anton asked.

Elder Kseniya looked straight into his eyes and poked his bicep. Despite how it looked, she confidently declared, Dont even think about it with those twig arms. And your back muscles she shook her head. Youd tear yourself apart.

How do I train-

Shoot more arrows, she said. Maybe that will help.

Okay. Anton just looked at her. He hadnt really expected anything different, but it was still strange. Especially being treated like a skinny little kid, when he was none of those. Do I owe you-

Dont need anything. She waved him away. Now shoo. I have someone coming for lessons. Unless you want to?

Not right now, Anton said. I need to think first.

As he was walking down the road, he saw a familiar face. Marcio? Anton asked. Marcio Armani?

You Anton Krantz, right? the young man nodded. Anton noticed that he had gone from seventh to twelfth star since they first met. Are you taking lessons from Elder Kseniya too? Because if you are, Id really like you to explain to me instead. Her teaching skills are he shook his head.

Some people are suited for different things, Anton grinned. I was just asking about this bow, actually. But perhaps we could meet up and talk archery. Ive learned some useful tricks, with some practical experience.

That would be great. Marcio paused. Youre twelfth star now?

As of the last couple weeks, Anton nodded. You look close to thirteenth now, correct?

...yeah, Marcio shrugged, Ive made some pretty good progress. Some of your advice really helped, actually.

Thats great! Anton said. I dont know too many archers. Dont talk much with the other students, and Elder Kseniya

Is Elder Kseniya, Marcio nodded. Speaking of which, I should hurry. She doesnt much tolerate lateness.

Chapter 96

The journey up to the very peak of the mountain was hardly laborious at all, now that Anton was returning much stronger. The amount of natural energy was still unpleasant, but no more than that. It was like dealing with weather a bit too hot or too cold, though his body didnt really know how to react.

Arranging for a meeting with Grand Elder Vandale was quite easy. Or rather, the man was completely booked for the majority of the day and devoted the night to watching the stars. Presumably he slept some, but Anton knew how little some could be. He wasnt much of a sleeper himself, and Vandale was several times his age.

When Anton requested to visit, the response he received was that he could come at any time during the first four hours of the night- and it was an open invitation. Seeing no reason to delay, he was going the first night after he asked. He was quite aware that it was an honor to meet with a Grand Elder, but though theyd barely interacted he felt quite comfortable. It was like meeting an eccentric acquaintance, one he wouldnt mind having as a friend.

It was from quite a distance that he first felt Vandale. The man made no effort to hide himself, shining like a bright star atop the hill. In return, he found he had already been noticed. The way the energy danced over him it was clear it was keeping track of him. Hed only sensed a brief sweep the first time, though that may have truly been all there was.

The natural energy in the area wasnt a problem for Anton, but he found it quite difficult to continue walking towards Vandale. He wanted to flee, recognizing a source of danger. But he knew better. There was no danger to him- not any different than there would be anywhere else around the Order. It still took quite the effort to actually enter the building. Im glad to see you are in good form, Grand Elder Vandale, Anton greeted him.

Vandale turned, a nearly toothless smile on his face. His one eye pierced into Anton, once more judging him. You present the same paradox as before. But now that Ive personally felt your growth. Tell me, now that youve had time to consider. Why do you cultivate?

To get revenge for Dungannon, Anton said. To return those who were stolen away. That motivation is a sufficient for me to travel through Spirit Building. Vandale showed some disappointment, but Anton was not yet finished, After that, my target is more nebulous. You said that you would cultivate for the Order. Being who I am, that would not suit me. The Order is good. But I am not so attached that I would use it as motivation. But, Anton let the word linger in the air, I certainly wont be done with cultivation after I complete my short term goals. Unless I die on the path, I have more to do. Having traveled through Ofrurg, my horizons broadened. I grew up in a peaceful village, and for a time it was my deepest desire to return to that. But its already too late for me. Anton smiled, I could

never be content, whittling away my time in a village. Not when I could do so much more. I liberated more than thirty slaves from Ofrurg. Yet its basically nothing. Do you know how many slaves they have?

Besides too many? Vandale shook his head, No. But I can guess. They have a population of tens of millions, and a not insignificant portion of that is composed of slaves.

At least one in ten, though most people dont seem to interact much with slaves. They are generally owned by more wealthy individuals in numbers surpassing the rest of the country by far. Anton shook his head, They work them hard to undercut the common laborers and buy more slaves. It is both effective and terrible. So Im going to free all of the slaves.

Every slave in Ofrurg, huh? Vandale touched a wrinkled hand to his lips. Ambitious.

Ofrurg first, then everywhere else, Anton declared. I might hit a limit, or reach the end of my lifespan, or die trying. But I see no reason to give up short of that.

Youll upset many people with ideas like that.

Then Ill kill them, Anton said. Id prefer to have the Order on my side for that. I understand why you wouldnt want to try to take on the world, but you think too much like cultivators. Things seem stable, and you dont want the world to get worse.

Stability Vandale nodded. Its not so easy to give it up. Look at me, a guardian who doesnt leave his post, the very symbol of stability. Vandale gestured to himself, especially his missing eye and otherwise decrepit form. Id quite like for a powerful young generation to replace me and keep the stability.

You should know that wont happen. Not just like that. The world is always changing. I lived a full life, not as a cultivator but just as a man. I understand the desire for things to stay the same. But I also understand that it cant happen. Fifty years ago, the Krantz farm was big enough. My children could help me work it and we would be quite content. But grandchildren would come into the picture eventually. Children and grandchildren alike moved away to seek their own lives, despite the option for stability. And I knew I couldnt just leave the farm as it was. Staying just as things were was meaningless. *Precisely*

because of those younger generations. Not everyone can accept just doing the same thing. And even if all of Graotan decided they want to keep things as they are, were not the ultimate deciding factor. Everyone else is, and that mostly means cultivators. Non-cultivators hardly get to decide anything. In that way, theyre almost slaves.

I Vandale paused. Is it not a good life, here in Graotan? With unfortunate exceptions, the people are safe and prosperous.

Yes, but they could be more so. Both more safe, and more prosperous.

We dont have the ability, Vandale said. Whenever weve tried, we merely overwork ourselves and leave weaknesses.

But you dont have to, Anton said. The problem is not the efforts of the Order, really. It is, as I said, that the common folk are non-cultivators. If everyone in Dungannon had even been at the first or second star, things would have gone quite differently. Youve heard, Im sure, about the slaves I freed.

Yes. A remarkable achievement, that they have all surpassed the first star in just a few months.

Im not sure if it is, Anton said. It was really quite simple to guide them. If a bit more time was taken, most could do it if they knew how. Anton organized his thoughts. The thing is, the strength and prosperity of every common person would be so much more with just the beginnings of cultivation. They just need to be taught. And it doesnt have to be just by me. If one of moderate talent achieved late Body Tempering, with proper training they could do the same. It might take decades to really spread, but I think its worth trying.

I see. At least you acknowledge the time taken. I dont know if I believe your words fully, but decades is actually not so long. I might even be able to watch much of this attempt myself.

The admission that Vandale had just low decades to live was concerning, but Anton knew he was already several centuries old. There was nothing unexpected there. In fact, when he was drained from rescuing Thuston, Vandale had felt like he might only have years instead of decades. Id like to try it, and Id like the Orders permission and assistance.

I do not think it would hurt. Some of the others might not like the idea so much, however. It is likely you will need to show results with just your personal effort. Though I would caution you, do not forget your own cultivation.

Anton smiled, Dont worry. In fact, I think this would help me grow faster. Theres quite a lot to learn from people stumbling around at the beginning of cultivation.

Good to hear. Now then you remember what I pointed out last time? Vandale had already moved over next to the telescope. You can get a different angle on some things. Come and see.

With that, the topic moved to the stars- and that included the other planets in the system. If one considered the planets stars, which was often the case, then a system was actually somewhat analogous to Spirit Building. Anton liked that thought, that hed

stepped beyond the beginning but wasn't yet truly far from home compared to the vastness of where he might reach. It was intimidating, but comforting at the same time.

Chapter 97

Simply living for a long time didn't make one peaceful and tolerant. Anton had known quite a few old grumps in his time, and they could be downright miserable fellows hanging onto life out of pure spite. Anton had chosen to become tolerant of others, especially youths who didn't know any better but he wasn't a saint. It was still possible to get on his nerves, and he was getting *far* too much practice in the area of tempering his emotions with Velvet.

Most of the time, she was a quiet and obedient learner. She was more than tolerable at those points, eagerly soaking up his advice and flourishing like a previously water-starved plant. For those who wanted to learn, Anton had the patience to explain something many times, trying different methods until something stuck. Velvet clearly wanted to learn, to grow stronger but she had problems. Problems with people, and problems with trust.

Why won't you tell me how to complete body tempering? Velvet complained. As if it was something easy. He knew how to do it, but he didn't know what she was having trouble with. She wouldn't explain it. She didn't like him watching as she cultivated, as if he was trying to steal her secrets. It was true that he would learn things about her, her weaknesses, from doing so- but it was also the only way he could help her grow strong.

Things that may be obvious to me might not be obvious to you. I can't help without knowing where you struggle. For the moment, Anton wanted to avoid a direct confrontation. Raising his voice at her wouldn't help, and she was slowly growing more comfortable around him. It was a shame that her current lack of progress was hurting the trust they were building.

For the moment, he could only give her advice on each aspect of body tempering, to cover whatever she was missing. It could just be that she was not willing to give it the proper amount of time. From what Anton knew it wouldn't be strange to take a year to form the tenth star. That would be quite an acceptable speed, though not *good*

. A few months was well within reason, especially considering there was no pressure from danger. Sparring was all well and good, but actual battles allowed cultivators to grow much more. But Anton wasn't going to suggest she throw herself into mortal peril just to save a month or two. While her technical skills were fine and her strength sufficient, Anton didn't feel that would be helpful at the moment. If she would only work with him. Fortunately, he found his other students to be much more pleasing to work with.

Pete, Oskar, and Patricia all had experience training with Anton. Throwing in a couple others wasn't a problem. They had a nice group of seven, not counting Anton himself. Catarina, Timothy, Hoyt, plus the two others who shared the complex with the first group. Velvet was invited but she was very *personal*. In short, unwilling to train in front of others.

Their training group might have appeared a bit odd, with cultivation ranging from second star to twelfth, but there were many things they could do together. Though bodily improvements in the first half of Spirit Building were extremely marginal, Anton still felt it fulfilling to go through the full range of exercises. Running was quite satisfying purely for the feeling of the world flying past, and repeated exercises with weapons or through a form of work bred familiarity. Anton even practiced with his new bow. He hadn't made it bend an inch yet, but he was getting better at forming a string. His muscles strained against the bow, tiring him out quickly, but something felt off about the whole thing. He wasn't sure what he was doing wrong, because Elder Kseniyas form had been the same as his. Maybe it really was useless.

Anton's eyes brushed over Velvet. She was getting better at concealing herself. An area she was quite talented in, though he wasn't sure if he wanted to encourage it. He hoped she would see his lessons to others and understand. His lessons to others, and what they could teach him.

Gerd was a round little thing. She looked to not have worked a day in her life before she began cultivating, but she gleefully followed his training advice. She wasn't able to run far, so she would run until she collapsed. At first Anton had been hesitant to throw her into things too quickly, but she always asked for another exercise.

Work your arms next, he said, demonstrating a series of exercises. There was something about that it was almost a proper technique, but not viable for combat. The Ninety-Nine Stars emphasized the energy side of body tempering but didn't neglect proper exercise. As far as he had seen, however, a comprehensive technique covering each part of body tempering wasn't available. Or whatever it might be called. Everyone had their own style, which made sense given different weapons and the like, but there were core parts that everyone could benefit from. When Gerd had finished working her arms until they couldn't move, Anton set her onto the next task. Sometimes she had to be carried back to her home at the end of the day, but that was fine with Anton.

Another new recruit was Malcom Cruse. He had practiced a different technique than the Ninety-Nine stars to the equivalent of the third star. The technique itself wasn't very good, which was actually more impressive that he achieved the progress he did within a full year. Anton was helping him get his body and soul used to the Ninety-Nine Stars cultivation method, because it was just better. Provided strong, durable energy for the user to do as they pleased. While certain techniques did better if a cultivator had an elemental attribute or the like tied to their cultivation, it wasn't required. It seemed the Ninety-Nine Stars would be able to incorporate other styles if it needed to, though Anton

had no experience with that. Hed browsed some of the cultivation techniques the library kept for reference, but didnt find anything particularly inspiring.

Even while training was going well, Anton still felt something telling him that he was too slow. What was he doing? He felt like he was doing nothing. He should be in Ofrurg, buying peoples freedom or killing to achieve the same result. Thinking about what they might do brought anger upon him. He let it pass with the help of time, because while he could indeed focus on one emotion and grow more powerful quickly, a proper balance would be better.

Anton wasnt using time for *nothing*. He was training, of course, but there was more than that. He was talking to others in the Order. But he also kept in correspondence with Ofrurg. Specifically, Elder Varela and the Ears of the Fox. There were some things he couldnt even mention in case the letters were intercepted and read, but he was merely talking about legal methods of accomplishing his goals. The Ears of the Fox were happy to provide information if he paid for it- and promissory notes from the Order wouldnt matter if they were stolen. There was only so much he could ask, but they knew about *everything*. Even events long in the past, and he managed to get some ideas.

Elder Varela kept him informed about Devon, though the Grasping Willows were more than a few days from Khonard. Either Varelas influence or their own good sense had kept Devon alive so far, though he did fight regular battles. Anton was working on a plan for the right time to try to get Devon back. Preferably without getting himself into any stupid fights or spending money *again*, but he wouldnt be returning empty handed again. But coordinating what he wanted was taking some time, and he wanted to be at the thirteenth star before returning. Just so it was very clear his advancement wasnt some sort of fluke.

Through the Ears, Anton knew Annelie was still alive. In fact, information about her was public enough that he got free information that she was a proper disciple of the sect. The exact details werent given, but she was generally safe. Even so, Anton's studies into the Frostmirror sect indicated it was a competitive environment, and not *entirely* safe. They were very protective against external threats, but internal conflicts could happen. More so to those who were talented, and Annelie had at least some amount of talent. Otherwise the information on her wouldnt be so expensive. He had plans to purchase it when he returned to Ofrurg.

The most interesting thing that was still a budding sprout was freeing slaves without violence, threats, or money. Or at least without paying their owners. If it could be proven that someone had been improperly enslaved, they could be freed. Sadly, the burden of proof was high- enough that Anton suspected it was only there to prevent sect disciples or others of importance from suffering the fate of enslavement. Still, the Ears of the Fox got Anton in contact with a woman who specialized in the area of slavery law. Kohar Tolvaj was her name, and she might be able to help Anton- and while her services

would have a cost, from afar he felt she actually wanted to do the right thing. It just took time and resources. Hed have to meet her in person to know for sure, but if he could use Ofrurgs own laws against them he honestly didnt mind spending more money as long as it stayed out of certain hands.

Chapter 98

It was hopeless to sneak around everywhere and presume she would never be discovered. Anton would always pick her out and some of the elders had to have found her. But maybe his concentration would lapse and she would figure out what the secret was. The strange thing was that even though she spent all her time watching, they never did anything even close to secret. There was a whole lot of running around, and strangely enough *working*. Working fields by hand and even dealing with strange and exotic plants. That was something only Hoyt and Anton did much of, but she couldnt see how it would help. They didnt even cultivate any plant-related techniques.

Those in Spirit Building certainly spent *less* time training their bodies, but Anton kept stubbornly trying to shoot a bow that didnt seem to bend. Velvet didnt know what the point was. If he couldnt do it, he couldnt do it. Everyone cultivated, of course, using the natural energy in the area to improve themselves. But the Spirit Building cultivators also spent a lot of time sparring and a strangely equal amount *socializing*. Mostly with each other instead of the rest of the Order as a whole, but it was still strange how they continued to grow strong so quickly.

Maybe it was all a trick. However, Velvet didnt believe theyd give up several weeks of cultivation time just to throw her off. Not when they could just remove her. Anton had never told her to stop skulking about, and she wanted to know what it *meant*.

She briefly considered trying to bribe him. A foolish idea. Even performing menial labor he must have more contribution points than she could imagine, given the speed at which he worked. And he had gone on grand adventures, obtaining enchanted items. Her own mission to the jungle of Ambati had no way to match that. Yet she wasnt strong enough to take something riskier.

Everyone was pulling away. Timothy had surpassed the tenth star and was properly stepping into spirit building. Catarina and Hoyt were on their way to the twelfth star, Anton clearly making progress toward the thirteenth. Even the new recruits were advancing faster than Velvet ever had.

Finally, Velvet understood. If only she had been able to come to some other conclusion, it might help but instead she knew. It didnt matter if she was told the secret, if it was openly practiced in front of her. She couldnt do it. Anton knew that, but he wasted time with her anyway, giving false hope. It didnt make any sense. And she knew it never would.

Anton's eyes tracked the horizon. There was a disturbing lack of a certain skulking figure. She'd certainly been improving her stealth abilities, but not so quickly. For one thing, Anton was constantly improving his Hawk Eyes technique, and he had other techniques for various senses. No, she wasn't suddenly successfully hiding. She just wasn't around.

He hadn't felt her cultivating when he left the complex. In fact, she hadn't cultivated one bit in the last few days to the best of his knowledge. Perhaps her paranoia had reached a peak, and she would only do it when he was not around. He'd have to check.

But first, he had to replant this Screaming Root Bush. It was currently in a pot, and while it would benefit greatly from being planted in proper soil it didn't understand that. It wasn't a plant that *thought* in any sense of the word. It just resisted being unearthed, and created a horrible noise as it did so. The roots gripped onto the pot until Anton started to dismantle the vessel bit by bit. He protected his ears from the screaming noise with energy, a difficult task given the way it constantly shifted. It was good practice though. Dismantling the pot without harming the plant was also a useful exercise. Anton didn't know what sort of strange medicine this plant would eventually be, but it was quite a difficult one to raise.

He created a bubble of energy around the roots as he shoved the plant into the soil where a hole had been dug. If it stuck its roots into the soil too high, it would be improperly buried- harming itself and anyone who walked nearby without protecting their ears. He held the roots still as he buried it up to the green leaves above it, pushing a pile of dirt with his free arm. Then he let it do as it would, which was to instinctively jab its roots into the soil all around it, greedily pulling in nutrients. It also needed to be watered immediately. That was a simple task merely involving pouring out a bucket, and then another when the ground immediately dried after the first. Then the soil remained slightly wet, and the thing settled down.

That was enough for today. He enjoyed caring for exotic plants, and found it quite helpful to his cultivation, but there were other things to attend to. He said his goodbyes to Elder Howland, whose cultivation seemed to have improved from the fifteenth star to the sixteenth. The seventeenth would be another prime tempering, but the farming elder was throwing himself forward with vigor. Just as it should be! Maybe his individual cultivation wouldn't do much for the land, but it would be better than him not advancing.

Anton stood uphill from the little complex he lived in, close to where Elder Daniela had once stood, watching. She was probably around somewhere, doing the same. Anton couldn't see any signs of Velvet in her courtyard. It was rude to look, but he felt the need to guide the foolish little girl onto the right path and for that he needed to find her.

His movements weren't nearly so swift as Elder Daniela. It took him a whole minute to traverse the distance to the complex instead of merely a handful of seconds. That wasn't surprising, considering she had thrice as many stars as he did. That put her a good few

steps into Constellation Formation, though thirty-six stars was still far short of ninety-nine.

As he approached, he was able to pick up Velvets energy. It was jumbled and chaotic. For a moment Anton was worried shed made a mistake in her cultivation, but she wasnt *doing* anything with that energy. Which was good, because if it was circulated through her meridians and dantian in its current state she would certainly harm herself.

Anton knocked on her door. He waited a few moments, then knocked louder. The third time, he amplified the sound and his own voice. Velvet? Are you alright?

The answer was clearly no, but she didnt give it. As far as he could tell, she didnt even shift from her position. He could hear her muttering to herself, but the door and the distance were too much to make anything out.

Velvet? If you want to be left alone I need a response. Otherwise I will assume you need help, and will enter. Nothing indicated he had been heard. Im coming in. It was rude, and probably against some rules, but he opened the door. It hadnt even been locked, though he wouldnt have let that stop him.

It only took him a few seconds to navigate to her. She was lying on her back in the middle of a hallway, staring up at the ceiling and muttering to herself. Never figure it out he heard, Not good enough

Anton frowned. This isnt what he wanted at all, but he had the feeling it was his fault. Apparently her mind was so averse to the thought of trusting people that instead she had wholly misinterpreted his actions even when the answer was blatantly obvious.

She didnt react as he walked over next to her, waving his hand in front of her face. She just blankly looked up at the ceiling. That wasnt good. She needed help, but Anton didnt know how. He didnt think *he* could provide anything, but he also didnt believe anyone else would do much good. He thought theyd been building up some small level of understanding between them, and someone unknown would not provide any help even if they had the proper expertise.

Or he could be wrong. But he knew he was going to try to help her on his own. That was what every part of him said was the right thing to do. It was his fault, even if not his intention. A fragile girl lay broken on the floor.

He let the words come to him on their own. Its okay, he said. Youre good enough. You made it this far. He avoided saying something like on her own, though doubtless that was close to correct, despite his attempts at advice.

She didnt visibly respond to his words, but she continued to mutter to herself. Dont understand. Whats the point? Running and talking and fighting

He didnt think she could hear his answers, but maybe on some deeper level he would. So he did his best. Training with others helps, he explained. They can point out your flaws, and help you. You can do the same for them.

She repeated her thoughts, her questions. Her mind wandered randomly through ideas of insufficiency and lack of understanding. Anton continued to support her, the foolish girl, to the best of his ability.

Cultivators were tougher than the rest, but as the sun fell, rose, and fell again Anton heard her voice rasp more and more. His own throat was dry as well. He could go get water. It would only take a moment, and he would be back. Yet somehow he felt if he left her side he wouldnt get another chance.

... cant trust anyone Those exact words, and things like them, were far too common in Velvets mutterings.

Anton had little he could do to respond. You have to. It doesnt have to be me. But humans cant survive alone.

Sometimes, he almost thought she heard him. But he could never get a consistent response of any sort out of her. She didnt turn her eyes towards him and didnt react when he was in front of her.

But he waited, sitting next to her, trying to help somehow. Maybe he wasnt qualified. Maybe the Order had some solution for this, and he was just wasting his time, endangering her. But he couldnt leave now.

He wasnt sure how long it had been. More than a full day, probably two or three. It was then that something happened. It didnt seem like much, but as he waved his hand in front of her she reached up and grabbed his wrinkled wrist. She squeezed with the full power of the ninth star of Body Tempering. The bones in his wrist were close to snapping after just a moment, but he couldnt resist with energy. That could hurt her. He didnt try to dislodge her grip as her eyes finally closed. The grip only seemed to tighten after that, and Anton grit his teeth. The second full body tempering had barely been enough to make his old bones sturdy enough to resist, and it wasnt going to last forever. But what was a broken and squashed wrist anyway? As long as it wasnt *too* bad, he could recover it eventually. That hardly mattered. He *did* hope she would tire soon, but her grip seemed more likely to break her own fingers than give up.

Chapter 99

Sometimes, dreams were bad. Most of the time, really. Nightmares could be anything you could imagine, things you didnt *know* you could imagine. Or just worse versions of what had already happened. Memories of loss, hunger, solitude all of those quite frequently graced Velvets dreams.

This one involved her father. Usually those weren't good dreams. However, this one sparked a particular memory. She hadn't been old enough to remember details, but she knew he'd come to tell her stories before bed. Stories of princes and princesses and cultivators and magic, where everything always had a happy ending.

Normally Velvet's mind would wander to later in her life, when she was lying in her bed at night with no one to tuck her in- or later when a hard bed seemed like a luxury. This dream didn't go there. Instead, her father read her stories and held her hand as she fell asleep. Her mother came in and kissed her forehead too. Then she fell asleep.

It was strange to feel *comfortable* when waking up. Velvet knew her bed was technically nice, but it never felt like it. The air was always too warm or too cold. Sometimes she kicked off the sheets or fell onto the floor. But this time was *comfortable*. Memories of the dream she'd been having quickly faded. It was something nice though.

The weirdest part was when she realized she wasn't on her bed. When her eyes opened, she only saw the ceiling. Wasn't this one of her hallways? She turned her head, following the line of her arm to what she was holding on to. Someone's wrist? She quickly let go.

Good morning, young lady. Did you sleep well?

Her immediate thought was to answer yes. Instead, she chose to take a better stock of her situation. She felt comfortable, but she'd definitely been sleeping on the hard floor. Her fingers were pale- how hard had she been gripping?

Anton sat next to her, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Velvet wasn't willing to answer the question, so she asked one of her own. Why am I here? As she spoke, she found her throat was dry, her lips cracked. How had she felt comfort like *that*?

A good question. Not where I'd recommend people take a nap, but to each their own. Anton stood, reaching out a hand to help her up.

She took it. Or she tried to, but the fingers in her right hand wouldn't move properly. She switched hands and let herself be pulled up at a strange angle. There was something she vaguely remembered stumbling back home. Why are *you* here?

Anton smiled. It almost seemed sincere. I noticed a distinct lack of your presence, so I came to check up on you. You didn't respond so I quite rudely let myself in.

That didn't actually bother her as much as she thought it would. She tried to remember. She'd come back because she figured it out. She wasn't being taught because she couldn't learn. *You're good enough.* A voice echoed in her mind. It wasn't hers.

This wasn't right. What had he *done*?

You have to trust someone.

A stupid thought. Why would Anton have to mess with her head? She did that enough on her own. And he was almost nice to her.

I- she tried to speak, but her throat cracked.

Perhaps you should get something to drink. We can talk later, if you wish.

She nodded. Her body felt bad, but everything else was fine. Okay. That was all she said.

Anton inclined his head and turned around. Something was weird about that. He held one hand behind him the whole time, out of her view. Was he taking something?

But she didn't have anything of value. She shook her head. Everything was so fuzzy. She needed that water. And food, apparently. She could hear her stomach rumbling along with Anton's as he stepped out the door.

As he carefully inspected his wrist, Anton found it wasn't that bad. Oh, it was broken all right. Shattered, even. But there was no internal bleeding to worry about. He just had to coax it back into shape and let it heal up.

Tiny strands of his energy latched onto each piece of bone, shifting it around. He should stop by the central area later to pick up a bone healing pill. He'd not had use for medicine's wish such specific function, but this was exactly the sort of thing they were for.

He circulated his energy through the area, very carefully. It was a soothing feeling, reducing the heat and pain. He carefully coaxed each part, reminding it where it belonged. Then there was a knock on his door.

Well. Velvet was rather swifter than normal. Hopefully that was a good thing. He put on his best face and opened the door with his good hand, keeping the other behind his back. Good morning once more.

Velvet looked at him for a moment. ...Are you okay?

That was something she'd never asked before. Did he really look that bad? Actually, he supposed that was true. Just a few days with little sleep. Nothing to worry about. Of course, there was a big difference between *little* sleep and *no* sleep, but he didn't mention that. Would you like to come in?

Velvet nodded, and he led her to the sitting room. It was not really used that much, since most of Anton's activities took place outside. He brought them each cups, along with pitchers of water juice. He was quite certain she couldn't have recovered from her dehydration yet, because he certainly hadn't. He also set out food- simple bread and cheese.

She nibbled on the bread and cheese he'd set out. She looked like she should be taking big bites, but he supposed she was keeping busy and trying to find excuses not to talk. Anton matched her, sipping from his cup and munching food. He slowly circulated his energy, as he usually did when not engaged in anything else.

Then they ran out of food, an entire loaf and a wedge of cheese devoured in fifteen minutes. The pitchers were both drained as well. Should I get some more? Anton asked.

I- um he could tell she certainly wanted to say yes. But also that she wanted to say something. I actually can you I'm ready to let you see me cultivate. So you can help. She took a deep breath. Everyone else does it. And they're making so much progress. She clearly had more to say, so Anton waited patiently. I don't I mean she bit her lip. I'm sorry. I've not been helpful, even though you were trying. I just thought nobody would so easily reveal important secrets.

She apologized. Good. Even without a verbal apology, he'd felt it but the words were important. Very well. When do you want to start?

Right now? she said cautiously.

... how about we eat a little bit more first? Anton knew he was still old and wrinkly, but at least his *stomach* felt like he was a young man again.

... yes please.

It turned out Velvet had been doing everything wrong. Well, not *everything*. But it sure felt like it. Whenever she described areas she was having trouble, Anton had her demonstrate and then at least two or three different pieces of advice. He even had a whole notebook he consulted- but she could see his handwriting in it. How had he gotten so much experience? She figured that out when he added more notes to it.

I haven't come across that exact problem before, Anton said. But it might be that your meridians are better suited to a certain pattern of circulation.

He explained what he meant. For that, he talked about how blood flowed through the body. The exact layout didn't match the meridians, but it was the best analog. Most importantly was how blood returned to the heart and lungs, and valves. Velvet's

meridians always *felt* like hollow tubes, but as she tried different directions of circulation for each branch of meridians going away from her dantian, she felt a strong difference. She hadn't really thought about it, but now she could tell that one way was *wrong*. The cultivation technique had just said which meridians to circulate through in order, but not which *direction*.

And Anton said he hadn't found a difference.

... Does that make me weird? Velvet asked.

His response came fairly quickly. Human bodies are all different. Height and hair and skin are all obviously visible, but there's much more inside that nobody really interacts with. Meridians should be no different.

... You didn't say I'm *not* weird, Velvet muttered.

One of my toes is longer, Anton said.

What?

As an answer, Anton removed his shoes, placing his feet on the table. They were old and wrinkly and gnarled, but they were actually quite clean. See these two? Anton pressed his feet together. The fourth toe on the left is quite a bit longer, isn't it?

...Weird.

That's right! Anton said. It is a bit weird. Did you notice Pete is left handed? Makes quite a difference in a spar.

Yeah. Velvet knew that Anton was just trying to make her feel normal but it worked. What about muscle? I'm not sure I did everything right there

She was working on the tenth star, which was the second full body tempering. She had so many mistakes to make up for, but strangely enough just *asking* about it got her answers. She just hoped Anton didn't suddenly leave.

Chapter 100

It wasn't possible for Anton to reach a concrete conclusion based solely on less than a year and a few dozen people, but he certainly felt vindicated in his ideas. There were many different ways for people to struggle in cultivation at Body Tempering. Anton had no doubt that the difficulties only increased at higher levels of cultivation, but he only had his limited experience with early Spirit Building, plus a few others. So far, they'd done well enough- though Hoyt's experience training Insight was quite different from Anton. Of the seven purifications, that was the only current overlap in training that had

been made. Timothy was working on properly entering Spirit Building, with yet a different first choice than the others.

For the moment, Anton was content with the portion of his writings concerning Body Tempering. Path to One Hundred Stars certainly wasn't in any place he could show it to others- and absolutely not with that name- but he was able to consult it where his memory failed. Thankfully, that was rare. Cultivation had been quite good for him, and he found his thoughts quite clear and his recall excellent. Anton had been fortunate not to suffer from the maladies of the mind that plagued many of advanced age.

As he thought about his students, Anton knew that nothing he was able to write would fully cover every situation. Every single person had their own particular experiences that shaped how they cultivated, and things didn't exactly work the same for everyone.

Take Gerd for example. She was, by all initial impressions, unsuited to be a cultivator. Her physical fitness was insufficient in all manners. Anton had wondered how she had passed the examinations, and while many of the specific results were secret he'd still been able to learn the most important part. Determination. She hadn't given up, even when she could go no further. She likely still would have failed at the beginning if Pete hadn't helped her, but being a sympathetic figure that others wanted to see succeed was a positive trait.

It was clear that she'd had no formal instruction on cultivation of any sort, and some other basic concepts that Anton found amusing. She'd struggled through the first star which at least made her body closer to the power of an average person. Following that, she had tempered her skin- opting for an inside-out approach. With no real grasp of the prime temperings- something Anton thought should be outlined more clearly in the explanation of the basic technique- she'd of course found that quite difficult. Her third star had been marrow- because that was about as far on the other end as she could get. She had thought to try tempering her meridians, but it was unsurprisingly difficult.

Then she'd begun training. Anton recalled her transformation with fondness.

Pete had invited Gerd to train with him and Anton because that was what he was used to. Since Anton bought his freedom, he hadn't trained with any fewer than a half dozen at a time. He also wanted her and Malcom to succeed, because even if they'd only known each other briefly they were still sectmates.

Gerd was hesitant, and after thinking about it for a moment Pete could see why.

I may have left out important information, Pete said. Telling you he'd only been cultivating for a year and a half was supposed to inspire confidence. It's true that his length of experience with cultivation isn't long, but he has great wisdom. His teachings

are what allowed myself and Oskar to reach the third star in relatively quick fashion. Hes also taught many others.

There were a few moments where Gerd considered Petes thoughts, I suppose I shouldnt refuse an offer of help. I cant say I wont need it. The first thing Anton had them do was work the fields with Elder Howland. Gerd was clearly reluctant to do so. May I ask why? Gerd asked. I thought you were going to teach us about cultivating energy?

Why? Anton asked. Because you are in Body Tempering. Combining the exercise of your muscles and the circulation of energy increases the effectiveness of both. And, Anton held up his bow, You can get contribution points and do a useful task at the same time.

Gerd looked confused for a moment. Pete thought the explanation was quite simple, but her following comments indicated that wasnt the problem. Really? she asked. How come nobody told me that?

Anton just shrugged, Ive had the same question. Though the cultivation guide does indicate that, mentioning how you can temper your body beyond its normal limits.

Working in the field was routine for Pete. Gerd was much slower. However, she did a good job of emulating Antons form and Pete was able to help her with smaller adjustments while Anton was busy elsewhere. Be careful not to bend too much, or youll put out your back. You have to work it *some*, but not too much.

Gerd just nodded silently, breathing hard. She didnt work as fast as anyone else, but she kept going. Actually, Pete found that to be a bit problematic.

Its time to stop for the day, Pete said as the sun was going down. Most of the others were already gone- Anton included, though not because he was lacking in work ethic. He just wanted to leave something for the rest of them.

But Im not Gerd breathed heavily, but steadily. Im not done. Look, she gestured to the untilled soil nearby.

That can wait until tomorrow. Its not like this has to all be done today.

... oh, Gerd nodded. I thought we had to finish an entire section.

While it was true that most people had, she clearly wasnt in any condition to go any further. It doesnt have to be. Thats just an easy cutoff for experienced workers. Pete could include himself in that group, though he didnt mention that hed been able to cover more than one area. The general size of a plot was just what was expected of the average just-recruited disciple in a day. We should go eat. Well need the energy for tomorrow.

The walk to the nearest mess hall was quite a long one, not because it was all that far but because Gerd could barely drag her feet there. However, once Pete got food for them Gerd began to eat at a measured pace.

She definitely had manners trained into her. Pete even found himself being more careful about how he scarfed down his food as he watched her take precise bites, though she didn't give him any judgemental looks. In fact, she was quite concentrated on her food. Until she was staring at an empty plate, forlornly.

Still hungry? Pete asked, We did a lot of work today. I can grab us seconds.

...Yes please.

Pete happily went and got them more food. There were no limits to how much disciples were allowed to take- as long as they didn't waste it. Food scraps were turned into compost for the fields, but it was still inefficient to throw out a plateful of food.

As he returned with the second round, Pete wondered if he shouldn't have asked. She was *quite* round, and excess weight was detrimental to cultivators. Then again, she'd worked hard all day and needed to eat. If she was hungry, that was fine. It wasn't Pete's job to tell her to go hungry just because it would make things a little bit easier in the future. With all the work she was doing, she would naturally reach a healthier weight.

The next day Gerd was once again energetic working in the fields- though she made only slightly more progress in the field, still completing less than one section. The third day, she had a question for Pete. Am I or my arms supposed to hurt?

Your arms hurt? Pete asked. How bad is it? Where? He hoped she hadn't damaged them with misaligned energy. That could be extremely dangerous.

Gerd pointed to various points on her body, especially her upper arms and back. It all started the day of the test. After the obstacle course. Gerd looked down as she talked about that. My legs hurt then too, but that went away yesterday.

So it's your muscles that hurt? Pete asked.

I believe so, Gerd acknowledged. It does match the areas that Senior Anton talked about cultivating.

Is it more than normal exercise? Pete continued his questioning, If it's *really* painful you need to stop before you tear something.

Gerd frowned. It *does* hurt, like my arm is tearing. But, I don't know what normal exercise feels like.

... Pete tried to not look too upset at that. Gerd was a nice, hardworking young woman. The fact that shed likely been pampered during her upbringing was clear from her body shape, since abundant food wasnt so readily available outside of the Order. She didnt know that he had been a slave, forced to work overly long hours merely for survival. It is hard to compare pain with others, Pete said. However, the pain in your legs from the first day that has recovered is a good starting point.

Oh. Gerd nodded. Then, more than normal.

More than that, but not terribly painful?

Gerd shook her head. No. I just sometimes become unable to move. Like with the ropes. I dont know why.

Thats muscle fatigue, Pete explained. Internally, he was shaking his head. He had no idea why she had become a cultivator, but at least it had given Pete the opportunity to fill her up with some common sense. Its not good to keep pushing beyond that, or you can hurt yourself. Careful circulation of energy can help you recover. Thats especially true during the evenings before you go to sleep. If you can, its best not to collapse into bed right away. Pete liked having the luxury of *choosing* if he threw himself into bed exhausted, though two years before he would have thought the idea laughable.

Gerd had some other questions in the coming days, but Anton was better equipped to answer those. Still, she came to Pete first. He didnt mind that at all, because being relied on was a good feeling. Even if the person who relied on you was a bit distant from what hed come to know as reality.