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Chapter Ten / Watching

As the family walked, they looked for signs of moisture: a plant that was green, a line of plants or a cluster was better, a dark depression in the otherwise dessicated ground. The small pools and trickles of water in what had once been rivers became harder to find as the plain stretched on before them, the mountains seemingly moving further away each night.

They learned to dig down, to find the taproot and follow it until they reached moister soil, and use the damp soil to cool their skin, to provide protection from the hot sun.

The grandmother carried the infant less often now, and the infant cried fitfully at intervals, but slept most of the time instead of looking around with bright, curious eyes.

The mother's breasts were empty, and there was little to give the infant to eat but strips of dried meat and a bit of grain soaked in what little water they could find.

The father watched carefully behind them, keeping track of the scavengers that hovered always just out of hearing, but not out of sight. He was sure they were waiting for more carcasses. He caught a stray bird on occasion, and once or twice a nest of small ground animals when they were digging for water.

But hunting was inefficient, and so they walked on and on and on, resting in the shade of the riverbank that they were following when the sun was high in the sky, and watching the skies for clouds.

But there were no clouds. At night, the stars sparkled brightly overhead, no haze or smoke to obscure their light, and the moon seemed to be closer to the land. Even at new moon, when the shadow was all that fell its presence hovered heavily overhead.

The mother, father, grandmother and eldest took turns watching at night, alternating pairs to keep each other company. And they told stories as they watched, quietly, hopefully, sadly.

The father's stories were of farming and of crafting.

I was very young when my parents took me to a distant town to apprentice with an uncle in woodwork. He was very old, the youngest brother of my father's grandfather, and known across the plain as far as the mountains as a man of integrity and strength. The wealthiest, most powerful families looked to him to build their carriages and in his workshop apprentices like me were taught to make the finest joints and hidden compartments that were the hallmark of his work. I was

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soon picked as the biscuit cutter for joints, and spent every morning fashioning the oblong pins for strong, hidden joints.

Every afternoon, I had chores and book learning, but when I was done I could watch my uncle work until suppertime. This was a special favor to my father's father who had taken an interest in me and spoken up.

The old man would quiz me on the tools he used, how they were used, how they were constructed, how to tell a good tool from a bad tool and how to make do when the tool you needed wasn't available. He would have me take a scrap of wood and try new tools while he watched.

Under his tutelage I learned to identify woods by smell as well as sight, by the texture of the grain when I ran my hand over it. The eyes, he used to say, can be fooled, but the nose and the hand are more intelligent.

I learned to see the flaws in a piece of wood and use the flaws to my advantage rather than merely getting a different piece of wood.

I learned to shape the wood by bending as well as cutting, by binding and gluing instead of nailing, by following its natural patterns. All this took time, but the final pieces were strong and durable.

I learned to listen to customers with my heart, to understand what they wanted and to fill that need first and the practical need second. Most of the time, customers were taking care of their families; they needed lasting, strong work, but they also wanted beauty though they wouldn't say so. My uncle had built a reputation on doing more than the minimum and adding a flourish or detail to make each item, even a simple spoon, unique and wonderful.

I learned to inlay the wood with pieces from other projects to highlight a corner or an edge. I found that I could do the same with chips of shell or stone, and finally with bits of wire. My uncle, amazed that I had found a way to do this that was durable, set me higher than the other apprentices within a couple years in a corner of the workshop doing finish work.

But then I became responsible to teach, and that changed my world as surely as moving to be an apprentice had.

My first student was an apprentice several years older than me, and had yet to learn to be subtle with his tools. His attempts at simple inlays were clumsy and crude, and miters and other delicate cuts were beyond him.

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He resented my position over him, and at first he refused to accept my guidance. Exasperated, I went to my uncle and complained about the older student's lack of respect for my knowledge.

Patience, said the old man. With some you need to show them, slowly and quietly, and let them try again and again to match your work.

I went back the next day and greeted the apprentice with an apology. I said, "I didn't know how to teach you, but I have an idea if you are willing to try again." He was willing, for mastering the simple inlay was required before leaving the workshop as journeyman.

So I started, asking him to watch me for two days and to ask any questions he had at the end of the second day.

Carefully, I set a piece of fine-grained wood in a vise and scribed a pair of lines where I would put an inlay of darker wood. He watched and did not comment.

Gently, I used a sharp knife to follow the lines I had made, then a very thin chisel to gently pry out the wood between the lines. I checked the depth with a gauge, making sure the line would be the same depth from edge to edge.

The apprentice watched, and did not comment.

I pulled a thin piece of darker wood from a basket at my side, and commenting that I had kept it until I had a use for it, I began to measure it for the inlay. Using calipers and a plane I very slowly shaved away wood until I was satisfied it was the right width. With my gauge I scribed a line for the depth, and then cut the strip to size.

I applied a small amount of glue to the strip, covered it with a piece of soft hide and with a soft mallet tapped it into place.

Quickly, I wiped the surface clean with a damp rag and tapped again gently, repeating this several times until no more glue emerged.

As the sun was going down, I set the piece aside and looked at the apprentice. With no words, he tipped his hat to me and went to supper.

The second day, I cut the ends of the inlay even with the side of the box and began to sand. I used the finest paper available, and with almost no pressure ran it up and down the inlay until I could feel its raised edge no more.

I worked steadily then, assembling the box with care more than speed. By the end of the day, I had sanded, waxed and polished the box and set it on the bench by the

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door for my uncle's approval. I turned to the apprentice and asked if he had any questions.

We spent the time until supper talking about what he had seen, how I made my decisions about where to make cuts and which woods worked together. I explained that using many tools to measure while working, many times, saved time in the end because I did not have to restart my work.

He asked if my uncle had taught me these skills. I told him how I watched the old man work and that he taught me in the same way as other apprentices learned, but that I had spent my evenings practicing most nights instead of playing games and telling stories with the other apprentices. I wanted to be like the old man, to make my family proud and to carry on the tradition.

I asked the older apprentice why he had chosen to come to this workshop. He shrugged, and said it seemed as good as any other. I asked about his family, and he said they were from the town, butchers and ragmen mostly. But as the youngest in his family he wouldn't have inherited anything to help set him up with his own shop. And being a ragman was not to his liking. So his father asked if he could apprentice here, for a fee and my uncle had reluctantly agreed as he rarely accepted paying students.

He had been in the workshop for several years, growing older and yet not making much progress once he learned to shape simple kitchen utensils and slatted boxes. He was about to leave the workshop when my uncle asked if he wanted to learn how to improve. It was his final chance.

The third day, I asked the apprentice to tell me what he remembered of the steps he had seen. Then I had him draw in the sawdust how he would go about making an inlay.

I checked his tools, realized his gauge and scribe was warped, and sent a young apprentice to fetch a better one. Then I had him pick out a piece of wood from my supply.

He balked, saying that the wood was too fine to practice on, but I insisted. It was important for him to take the work seriously from the beginning I said, so that he would work carefully from the first moment. He would use the wood or take his leave.

He sat for a long time, holding the wood in his hands, feeling its weight, checking the grain.

He squared it up, planed it smooth, and began. Scribing, cutting, chiseling. It took him more than two days to do what I had done in a morning. Then picking out a

piece of wood for an accent. By the end of the fourth day he had finished the inlay on the wood and presented it to me for approval.

I looked at the work with a critical eye. Slow to praise, like my uncle, I thought to myself. I held the board level with my eye and ran my finger along the inlay. I reached instinctively for my most delicate sanding cloth, and handed it to him.

“It’s even, and the depth is well measured on both sides. Feel along the inlay, though, with you fingers. Gently... so. Do you feel the raised parts?

“Use the softest sanding cloth and like a breath of air polish it until you can’t feel the inlay with your finger.”

Slowly, he worked, and I watched, until he was satisfied it would pass my approval. He handed it back to me and I checked once more.

I was satisfied the inlay would meet even my uncle’s approval, and told the apprentice. He beamed. Then I told him he would start making the rest of the box for this piece in the morning.

His face fell.

“I haven’t ever made a fancy box yet,” he explained.

With a smile, I assured him he could watch me make a box before he tried it on his own.

We put our work away and went to supper.

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