

Elder Cultivator

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The trip to his new house had Anton realizing how much he needed to be able to walk faster. Sterling was quite patient, walking at a speed he could go but watching how he moved Anton was aware he would generally go much faster. That was exemplified by those they passed going the other way- or those who passed *them* on the road. It seemed that despite his new vigor, Anton couldn't just ignore that he was an old man. He wasn't sure if he could keep up with so many young cultivators and walking was the least of his concerns.

By the time they arrived at Anton's new home, it was getting into the afternoon. To be honest, Anton almost missed it. Not because it was small, but because he thought the homes in the area wouldn't be for outer disciples. Each little complex in the area had four square buildings on the corners, connected by walls connecting them at the perimeter, and from the angle up the slope Anton could just make out that they had walls connecting in the middle.

Here it is, Sterling gestured. We try to make every plot for disciples of the same rank equivalent. Of course, with land parcels that's impossible but we can get close. The courtyard has enough room to grow a small patch of medicinal herbs if you have the interest, with room to cultivate and practice techniques. Other disciples will likely be assigned to the others after the selection today.

Anton nodded. It's actually quite a bit larger than I expected. The home itself was about the same size as the main house back in Dungannon, without some of the little additions they'd added over the decades. Frankly, he felt it was much too large for a single person but he wasn't going to complain. Thank you for your help, Sterling. I know I'm a slow old man, and I appreciate you not rushing me.

Sterling smiled, Don't worry. Patience is a virtue, and we'd rather have a thousand cultivators with good attitude and perseverance than ten thousand geniuses. Nothing good comes of talent without character. Sterling inclined his head, then pointed up the slope towards a larger building. That building there is the meal hall for this section. I'm still an outer disciple too, and I live on the other side of it. I'll probably see you there, at least in the mornings and evenings. Lunch is usually taken wherever you are working. With that, Sterling took his leave. Anton turned back to his new home- finding it sparsely but furnished but sufficient for any needs he had. He considered what he would do with the rest of the day.

In the end, Antons feet carried him all the way back to the central complex. It was too late to start any sort of job, but he could look at the job boards. Something that interested him more, however, was the technique library. He wasnt sure what things would be contained therein, but he knew they were quite useful. There was also the issue that Anton wasnt a fighter. Oh, hed speared a few wild boars in his day and his archery skills were quite decent for hunting, but hed never fought a *person*, and especially not a cultivator. If he was to avenge his family he needed to be able to fight. Quite frankly, he had little idea how cultivators fought and he didnt want to bother anyone with trying to learn from them until hed reached the limits of what he could study on his own. That might be a day, a week, or a few months. It was a complete unknown.

He did stop by the job board to confirm where he would go for work. At least for the moment he would be going with the most familiar option. They needed farmhands, and at the very least he wouldnt be completely lost there. Plants cultivators cared about would likely require special care, but he would at least know the basic principles. Checking his map, he determined the closest plots that were requesting new workers. A mere half hour from his new home, depending on how the terrain and roads lined up.

Libraries were not a place Anton often had reason to visit. Dungannon only had personal collections of books, and while Anton had a small collection spending money on books was a waste. Not that knowledge wasnt valuable, but hed learned everything he needed to from his father, or through practice. There werent any books about farming that would have things he didnt know. At least, not that he had ever seen.

Strangely enough, a cultivators library was much the same as any other though with a much more powerful energy flowing through the area. Anton wasnt sure what it was all for, but he imagined some of it was involved with keeping the books and scrolls held within safe. The woman inside couldnt be a guard at all hours of the day though Anton felt that while she was there, nothing could happen without her. She was a young woman, but he felt like she was at the peak of Spirit Building. It was hard to tell, but he felt at least twenty stars. Was she at the stage *beyond* that? He wasnt sure, with nothing to compare to and he wasnt sure if Spirit Building was another ten stars or not. Hed made that assumption, but he just now realized it might be wrong. Good day, honored librarian.

Youre new, the woman immediately remarked. It is good to see new faces. You can call me Librarian Mason, or Elder Mason if you prefer.

Pardon my words, Elder Mason, Anton inclined his head. I sensed your power, but I expected an elder to be well quite a bit older. She looked no older than any of his granddaughters, quite in the prime of her life.

Im sure you will find that cultivators are often quite a bit older than they look, however I am indeed still quite young. Librarian Mason smiled, Im certainly older than most of the new recruits, but there are occasionally exceptions like yourself. What sort of technique

are you interested in today? As a new outer disciple your selection will be limited for the sake of caution, but we have quite a wide breadth of available techniques.

I had thought I would browse Anton said, but as he looked over the many shelves- hundreds of them filled with books and scrolls of all sizes- he realized he would never find anything that way. Honestly, I have no idea what would be best but I am most familiar with archery, I think.

I see. May I ask what parts of your body you have refined? Some of the techniques will be better suited for you with the proper refinements. Librarian Mason stood, gesturing for him to follow.

Anton was a bit nervous about telling her what choices he'd made. What if he'd picked a bad path? Then again, he would eventually refine every part of his body so if that was the case, he would just have to wait longer. An elder would hopefully not judge his choices too harshly, and he didn't sense anyone else nearby to overhear, so he cautiously spoke. After the initial refining, I refined my meridians, then the organs in my torso and my head. I am currently refining my muscles.

Some techniques will be difficult before you finish refining your muscles and tendons, but proper breath control and eyesight will help greatly. You should be quite able to at least begin learning anything, however. Librarian Mason stopped, her long hair swishing past her waist. Here we are. She pulled two scrolls and a thin book off the shelves. These are the best techniques. Take a quick look.

Anton browsed through them. The scrolls were much less impressive than the Ninety-Nine Stars scroll, but they still had a mystical quality to them. The first one was titled Spirit Arrows. From a quick look, it was a method to make arrows out of the archers energy, requiring no physical arrow to nock. Normally energy would not so easily maintain its form away from a cultivator without something to keep it anchored. It seemed to have serious requirements for the amount of energy used, and having the meridians refined was required.

The second scroll was Hawk Eyes Archery. It contained multiple techniques related to each other. One was to focus energy on the eyes to improve the eyesight, and the others were techniques for controlling arrows so they could actually hit a target at a far distance. It didn't matter if a cultivator could see clearly a kilometer away if an arrow didn't stay on target. Wind was a factor, but also air resistance even without any particular currents seemed to be a factor. Of course, it required the cultivator to have the organs in their head refined.

The thin manual was less mystical in nature. It was called Thousand Arrows, and seemed to cover every technique for firing a bow faster. That covered bow style, how to hold each bow, how to nock arrows, quivers and then some actual special training techniques to improve draw speed and strength. It seemed that the latter would require muscle and tendon refinements to be used to their fullest.

Anton had trouble deciding which of them he liked the best. Having no need for arrows was interesting at least as an emergency it would have value. Eyesight was quite tempting as well. Thousand Arrows seemed interesting, but not something he was ready to study in depth yet.

You can study them at a desk, if you wish, or in your room, Librarian Masons voice stirred him out of his thoughts. We have additional copies of Hawk Eyes Archery and Thousand Arrows. You can keep Spirit Arrows for a month without issue. Beyond that, we may send a representative to retrieve it, if someone else asks for it. Librarian Mason held up a token with a stylized scroll on it. This is the token of a library worker. It is unlikely anyone else will pretend to be from the library but sometimes people make poor decisions.

Anton nodded. Thank you. I would like to borrow all three of these, then. He paused for a moment, then decided to ask his question. I am aware that the full Ninety-Nine Stars is not available for study until I have been a disciple for at least a year. However, I am curious about something. You seem to have twenty something stars have you passed beyond Spirit Building to the next stage?

Librarian Mason smiled. That sort of information is not what is kept secret. We just dont wish those we do not yet fully trust to cultivate a technique so closely associated with us. After Body Foundation, the next eighteen stars are the seven purifications and eleven orbits. It is only at the twenty-ninth star that one would step into Constellation Formation. So I am not yet at that point.

I appreciate the explanation, Anton said. He wasnt sure what the details of the purifications and orbits were, but properly judging which stage people were in seemed important. He knew there was a large leap in power upon reaching each stage- he could easily feel the difference between Body Foundation and Spirit Building. Now that he knew that Spirit Building lasted until the twenty-eighth star, he updated his thoughts of Librarian Mason from a slightly weak Constellation Formation cultivator to an exceptionally strong Spirit Building cultivator.

Chapter 12

It wasnt possible to learn a combat technique overnight, though Anton still put in his best effort. He was hindered by the fact that he didnt have a bow, so he could only practice some of the vision techniques from Hawk Eyes Archery and begin a basic attempt at Spirit Arrows. If he had a bow, he might have tried out a few things from Thousand Arrows, but to get a bow he needed to work and to work, he needed to rest.

Anton woke up before dawn. That was his regular time, and he was planning to get to regular work. First he needed some sustenance, so he found his way over to the dining hall nearest to him. The kitchens were just getting started, but Anton saw there were

some industrious workers there as well. He got a nice bowl of porridge and some toast. Perhaps because he hadn't eaten in the company of others in quite some time, he felt it was the best meal he'd had in months. Maybe half a year, if he was honest. Not the most filling, because Vincent had certainly filled him up, but the most ultimately satisfying.

There were few others awake in the early morning, and none who were interested in sitting next to an old man. That left Anton open to observe those around him. Unlike the impression he'd first gotten, he found that the disciples of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars weren't all quite what he thought. Those involved with testing like Sterling had all been sixth star or higher, but there were some fifth star and even a small handful of fourth star cultivators like Anton. The large dining hall was still mostly empty even with those people in it, seemingly able to support hundreds at the same time. However, Anton supposed that most of the third star cultivators would be young fellows just joining. Then in a few weeks they would reach the fourth star and begin to surpass him. He needed to do his best to at least keep up with some of them, or he'd never have his chance.

Anton finished his light meal. He was sure after a half day of labor he would be quite famished and ready for a heavier meal. He found himself already looking forward to what that might be as he headed towards the nearest fields. It was dawn when he arrived, and Anton found there were only a handful of others there with him. Are there not that many workers? Anton asked of the youth next to him.

There are more, the young man replied, But they'll show up sometime after dawn. Elder Howland doesn't mind as long as they put in the work though those of us who show up at dawn usually get paid better. You're new here, I take it? I'm Hoyt. Hoyt extended his hand.

Everyone can tell, apparently, Anton received the hand and shook it, Anton.

Pleased to meet you, Senior Anton.

Just Anton is fine. We're both fourth star cultivators, outer disciples. If anything, I should call you Senior Hoyt, since you joined before me.

Hoyt grimaced, Please don't.

Elder Howland showed up not a few minutes later though Anton had the feeling that he'd been around the whole time. There weren't many places to hide in the untilled and currently empty fields, but somehow he'd almost appeared from nowhere. Anton had turned to see him as soon as he felt the fifteen star presence, but he was already close by that point.

Anton first became suspicious as he was handed a hoe. He was no stranger to tilling soil by hand, but as soon as the family farm had expanded enough he'd gotten an ox and a proper plough. There was no way that the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars didn't know

the utility of an ox, or couldnt afford one. It wasnt as if they were working on a small area, either.

He didnt complain, beginning to till the soil as instructed- though he didnt hear anything new. He swung his hoe, feeling like an eighty maybe even as young as *seventy* year old man as his hoe connected with soil, turning it. He recalled his children and grandchildren complaining about his overworking himself, but he only pushed himself as hard as he needed. Just enough to take care of the days work. As he swung his hoe, Anton circulated the Ninety-Nine Stars cultivation technique, feeding some of the surrounding natural energy into his muscles. Each swing into the dirt stirred up more natural energy and his suspicions intensified.

Some of the others in the area seemed to be focusing on their muscles, but werent cultivating at all. Anton felt Hoyt was doing the same thing as him. He couldnt blame the kid for having sloppy technique- Antons own near century of experience was something hard to match. At least Hoyt was clearly trying. Some didnt seem concerned about their technique, just trying to run out the clock. Anton put all of his muscle into the swings, working his arms and back, and even his legs. By the time lunch came, he was nearly exhausted.

Lunch was delivered to the work area, consisting of a selection of various things. Many disciples went straight for the meats, but Anton made sure to mix in vegetables. He had to admit that they were the best quality he had ever tasted. Something about the natural energy in the area, perhaps. After resting for lunch, he felt reinvigorated enough to continue exhausting himself until evening.

Hoyts legs carried him in the same direction as Anton. It appeared he lived in the same region, instead of coming from the other side of the fields like most of the other workers. There wasnt much to discuss about their day, but Anton brought up the one thing he thought was strange. Why do we not use plows? It would require many fewer workers to till the fields.

Hoyt shrugged, I cant say for sure. If you ask Elder Howland, he says something about animals disturbing the natural energy in the area. However, if you ask me well, I think youve stumbled onto this idea yourself. They just want to see how we work.

And whether we think to cultivate ourselves while we cultivate the land, Anton grinned. Are you from a farming background?

No, my father was a laborer in Edelhull. Still, I interacted with them enough to know what they were talking about. Cultivating the body isnt *exactly* like cultivating land, but they can clearly be done together. Just wait until we get to picking weeds from among the magic herbs. Theres so much natural energy there Hoyt shook his head, Well, its not possible to use it all, and some needs to be left for the plants. But its just as much as some of the nice training places that you have to pay for, and you get paid instead.

Hoyt lived more to the north of the dining hall, while Anton lived to the south, so they parted ways at the conclusion of dinner. As Anton was approaching, he noticed something. The other residences were now occupied. He should have expected that, but hed forgotten. Before heading to greet them, he moved into his courtyard, washing off the days dirt and grime with a few buckets of water from the pump there. It seemed extravagant for each courtyard to have its own pump, but then again cultivators seemed to value privacy.

Anton found his way to his first neighbor. He could tell that they werent immediately in the middle of cultivation, so he knocked on their door. A man perhaps in his late twenties answered the door. Yes, what is it? Am I being summoned for something?

Anton did his best to smile pleasantly. I just thought it would be good to introduce myself. I am Anton, one of your neighbors.

Oh, yes. The man looked him over, Im Hayden. Good to meet you. Though he said the words, his expression and the way he quickly closed the door belied the actual meaning of them.

His reception at the second neighbor was not particularly better. A young woman just at the border of adulthood responded to his knock. Anton took the initiative to introduce himself and his purpose for being there.

Oh. Hello. Im Velvet. The young woman bowed her head. Youre the old man who got to skip the test, right? Howd you do that?

Anton sighed, Those at the fourth star do not have to take the test.

I see, she nodded. So you spent all that time cultivating to the fourth star alone so you could join the sect. I suppose that makes sense.

While Velvet was slightly more pleasant than Hayden, her words clearly indicated she didnt think much of Anton. He hadnt even known he would skip the test by being fourth star. If hed known, he wasnt sure if he should have delayed slightly or not. Failing the test would have been disheartening.

Something Anton noticed from the first two neighbors was that they didnt cultivate the Ninety-Nine Stars. Well, they were just starting to show signs of it, but they seemed to be something similar to the third star in other techniques. Presumably they would be changing cultivation techniques, though perhaps they had access to something particularly impressive- though in that case they might have little use for the Order as a whole, even with its other resources.

His third and final neighbor was cultivating when he arrived. However, they stopped when he stood outside the door. Perhaps they sensed him, but regardless Anton took the chance to knock. Opening the door was a young woman who he recognized from the test. Good evening. I am Anton, the neighbor in the house counterclockwise one in the complex.

The young woman nodded. Catarina.

I dont mean to pry, but I believe I passed you in Edelhull. Did the young man you were with earlier get assigned to a different complex?

The young woman had little expression on her face as she spoke. No. Timothy is kind of an idiot. He failed the test.

Im sorry to hear that.

Dont be, Catarina said. Hell probably pass next month anyway. Catarina squinted her eyes at Anton. Werent you third star?

I managed to complete the fourth star just in time for the test. Or lack of it, apparently.

I see, Catarina nodded. Good evening, she inclined her head and closed the door. Though her words were straightforward, they seemed at least generally polite though unexpressive. Anton felt her return to cultivating again not a few moments later. So she *had* sensed him coming. She was third star as well, apparently having already been practicing the Ninety-Nine Stars, and he felt she would reach fourth star fairly quickly. Indeed, if shed somehow failed the test she would certainly be able to skip the one coming in another month.

Anton returned to his own home. Though hed been cultivating during the day, it wasnt quite the same while moving and while still. His muscles still ached from their exertion, and a bit of cultivating would help ease that. Then he had to put in a bit of practice for his archery techniques- or at least what he could do without a bow- before finally catching enough sleep for the next day.

Chapter 13

Sleeping, eating, working, and cultivating became Antons life. It wasnt so dissimilar from his previous life, except he had no family to share his successes with and no diversions except occasional conversations with Hoyt to comfort him. The novelty of cultivation and his need to grow stronger kept him going.

Though the thought of lessons from elders piqued his interest, none on the schedule had been interesting to him thus far. Sword and spear techniques werent something had a foundation with and he didnt feel as if he needed guidance in the core Ninety-Nine Stars cultivation technique. It wasnt that he wasnt willing to learn from others, but

he hadn't felt the limits without guidance in that area. There didn't seem to be any archery masters giving lessons, and learning about advanced movement techniques would be a waste of time if he didn't even know any *basic* movement techniques. He wasn't even sure how those worked, but he was busy just teaching his body to move at normal speed again.

He'd cut a third off of his travel times between his home and the dining hall and fields, perhaps half if he counted the better routes. He certainly wasn't fast, but he felt the progress. He might be slightly swifter once he finished muscle tempering and reached the fifth star, but his speed would still be limited by age. More than that, moving around strained more than just his muscles. Anton felt aches in his joints after a hard day of labor, and while cultivation helped him recover quickly his actions during one day were limited. Theoretically his joints would be refined along with his bones, so perhaps he would be served best to refine his bones next. That would delay some of the power he could achieve with archery, but he didn't exactly need to be concerned with that immediately. He didn't plan to immediately go hunt wild beasts, at least nothing more than a normal boar.

Anton stood in his courtyard at night, concentrating on the flow of his energy. The next day he was planning to visit the armory and determine if he had enough contribution points to exchange for a bow. He knew there were fancy cultivator weapons that were quite expensive, but a regular hunting bow wouldn't be so much. Then again, a couple weeks of farming couldn't be worth that much. Anton pushed those thoughts aside and concentrated on the technique written in Spirit Arrows.

He stood with one arm outstretched and one by his ear, as if he was holding a drawn bow. He relaxed his stance as if easing the tension on the string, concentrating on the space between his hands. Energy began to take shape and he moved his arms, elongating it into the shape of an arrow. The thin shape radiated a faint golden glow, but the head of the arrow was almost nonexistent and the fletching was shabby and indistinct. Anton held its form for a few seconds before letting it dissipate, with no way to attempt to fire it. He could propel it with his own energy, but every time he tried it immediately fell apart as he lost control of the energy binding the arrow together. Flinging it with his hand was slightly better, but it didn't have the power a bow had. It was little better than flinging a rock, maybe worse. Anton was pretty sure he could charge a rock with energy and do a pretty good bit of damage if he chucked it at someone's head.

Anton formed a few more arrows to familiarize himself with the technique before climbing onto the outer wall of the complex. His joints especially complained at that, but he ignored the pain as he had for the last several decades. It wasn't even as bad as simply walking around had been before he became a cultivator.

From atop the wall he focused on looking towards the other parts of the sect. To the north and a little west was the dining hall where he ate. He focused his energy on his eyes, performing the core of Hawk Eyes Archery. Where his eyes focused everything seemed to draw closer to him, until he could almost make out the features of the late

diners going in and out of the dining hall. The kitchens were open from dawn until midnight though most made use of it at somewhat regular meal times and then a crowd just before it closed.

Antons eyes swept east towards the fields he had been working in. The grains they had planted were growing quickly, much more quickly than he was used to anything growing even in its best season.

The very first fields he had worked in now needed weeding. As much as the abundant natural energy allowed the grains to grow tall and strong in just a pair of weeks it also helped undesired plants to grow. Anton found himself with thick leather gloves, pulling up plants with five centimeter thorns on them. Those were much more rare, but there were little things that would take nutrients as well. Stooping down to pull them out was hard on his back, but for the little things Anton found a decent way to avoid that.

One of his boots stood next to a small weed. Anton circulated his energy through himself and down towards his foot, then through the boot and out into the soil around the tiny weed. With a little yank, he pulled it out and then carried it up alongside his leg until it was resting at his waist, where he would grab it with his hand and throw it into the basket with the rest of the weeds to be disposed of. Controlling energy that wasnt immediately touching him was difficult. While Spirit Arrows retained form away from him, that was an application to keep them in a shape rather than actually control the energy once it was further. If he needed to reach, he could stretch his energy a few hands away from his body if he needed to, but it got several times more difficult. Moving himself closer was the best option for the moment.

Anton turned in his basket at the end of the day and headed towards the central complex, where the rewards hall and the attached armory were.

Anton wasnt sure how much the contribution points hed gotten over the two weeks of work were worth, but he could compare to how much he might have earned at other jobs. Working in the fields was slightly more than other unskilled labor, but several times less than a qualified apprentice for the pill refiners or smiths. Hunting wild beasts seemed to pay more than any of that, though it was less consistent and of course somewhat dangerous.

Anton once again found Elder Lois at the rewards hall, though he was aware she wasnt always there. She had to spend time cultivating on her own, or she would never advance. He just hadnt been to visit the rewards hall much. Anton inclined his head. Elder Lois, Ive come to check how many contribution points I might need to get a bow.

Very well, she looked at a ledger in front of her, flipping its pages rapidly. You're Anton Krantz, correct? she didn't wait for a response, instead waving her hand and doing something with energy that made his token resonate. She scribbled a number on a piece of paper. Not bad for two weeks, though it won't get you too far in the armory. Evan can show you around.

Anton took the piece of paper, which read 242. The base rate for contribution points was a single point per hour of labor, though clearly Anton had received more than that. Skilled farming should have been one and a third, if he recalled correctly. He'd worked fairly long days, but certainly not thirteen hours per day every day. He wasn't going to complain about any extra, though.

The armory was just adjacent to the rewards hall. Anton immediately saw a man of indeterminate age. He was having much more difficulty determining actual age with so many cultivators around. Anton smiled politely, Elder Evan, I was hoping to receive information on the prices of weapons bows specifically. I know it might take me some time to earn enough for one but I need to know what I'm working towards.

Of course, Evan smiled. It's good to have aspirations. Follow me. Evan took Anton past several doors behind which Anton could feel powerful energy radiating off of not just the room but the things inside. One of them was labeled simply, 100,000. If that was how many contribution points things in that room cost he would have to work for 10 years to have a chance to get anything in there. As they walked along to other rooms Anton saw not everything was completely sealed off but instead he was able to see what was inside some of them. There were swords and shields, suits of armor made out of both heavy metal and thin almost clothlike garments that radiated power. He even saw a few bows as they turned through twisting corridors.

Evan stopped next to a door labeled 5,000. This is the standard level of equipment, Evan gestured Anton to follow him inside the room. Go ahead and touch. Nothing here is so fragile as to fall apart under your fingers.

Anton was able to control himself well enough that it wouldn't have been a problem to restrain himself, but upon being given permission he placed his hand on a suit of armor, feeling the energy directly with his skin. He had no idea how he would even think about breaking through it. There were swords so sharp he almost cut himself without touching one. It might have been his imagination, but his hand was five centimeters away from a blade when he felt the sharpness. He decided not to test whether it was real or imagined. There was a nearby bow, after all.

The string is there, next to it. Evan pointed to a strange orange string that was unlike anything Anton had seen used before. It wasn't any sort of animal tendon or anything he recognized. It felt slightly warm to the touch. Go ahead and give it a try.

Anton attempted to string the bow but he couldn't even get it to flex. He'd been strong when he was younger, and now he was recovering much of that strength with his

muscle tempering but it was clearly insufficient. How strong were cultivators really, if he couldnt even string a bow they would use?

Fire snake spine and wyvern horn make up quite a powerful combination but at the fourth star a more appropriate bow could be found more cheaply. Evan smiled, and waved Anton onward. After a few more twists and turns they ended up at a door labeled, 100. Everything in here is made by apprentice refiners. Only when they turn out something appropriate, of course. Subpar equipment is destroyed and the materials reused, where possible. We sell off most of it, but we do like to keep around a handful. I do believe there was a bow ah, here we go. Evan pulled out a smooth black bow and a similarly black string. Nightwood and black steel. Springy yet powerful. Go on.

Anton reached for the bow and string. He was able to bend the bow, though it took all of his strength. More than that, he had to incorporate energy to get it the last centimeter to hook the metallic string onto it. Anton pulled back the string, almost subconsciously using Spirit Arrows. His bare fingers protested at the harsh material of the string, but the amount of give was just right and as he let the string go he felt the power perhaps a bit too directly as it came to impact his forearm. It drew a line of blood, and he knew he would need some accessories if he was even going to think about using the bow. At least, until he had tempered his skin. That had seemed like the most useless on the list but he realized everything had its place. Is this really a hundred contribution points? Id love to have it. Anton paused, Ah but it could be quite a bit more. It seemed unlikely everything in the room was priced exactly the same, right?

Elder Evan smiled, Correct. That one is actually five hundred contribution points.

Anton sighed. That would take another two weeks- assuming he worked slightly more and even got as many extra points as he had so far. I suppose its something to keep working for.

Dont have enough? Evan asked. Ill tell you what come out back to the practice field with me. You can at least try firing it for real. It will give you something to look forward to.

Not wanting to let go of the bow, Anton began to follow him. I appreciate it.

Chapter 14

Twists and turns led through various corridors, Evan leading the way for Anton to reach the practice fields attached to the armory. Evan produced a quiver of arrows, though Anton hadnt seen him pick one up. Youll need these. Heres the archery range. To make this somewhat interesting, Ill give you a challenge. If you hit thirty points, Ill give you a prize. Evan smiled, a mirthful yet mysterious expression on his face.

Whats the scoring? Anton asked.

Quite simple. One point or two.

Anton looked at the archery target ahead of him, a hundred meters away. That was further than he normally shoot, but then again that was before he was a cultivator. Besides, the target wasn't moving. Hopefully, it would stay that way. There were five rings on it. Maybe the center rings were worth two points? If I lose?

Evan shrugged, Nothing special happens. You help me clean up the arrows and get back to your business.

Then challenge accepted. Anton pulled an arrow from the quiver, looking it over. It was good, without any warped wood and the fletching was even. He pulled back the bow, feeling the strain on his arms, but it was a good strain. The first arrow went high. It was his first time firing the bow, after all, and his strength had changed so much since his last attempt. But with two points available per shot, he could afford to miss a point.

The second arrow Anton was ready for the power and speed of the bow, and he didn't have to compensate as much for gravity. The arrow flew through the air, sticking in the outer ring of the target, just below the top. Perhaps he was still a little high, but it hit.

One point, Evan said.

Anton was beginning to get used to the bow. He pulled back the arrow to his ear, breathing carefully and then holding his breath at the moment of release. The arrow cut through the air, hitting the second ring from the edge. It was a little bit off to the right because of some wind, but not worryingly so.

Another point. That's two so far, Evan recounted. Seventeen arrows to go.

That was a reminder that some of his arrows had to hit two points. Apparently the outer two rings weren't good enough, but he wouldn't have expected it. The next few arrows hit the second ring, the third ring one point each. Anton was getting a handle on the bow, and a sense for the wind. Fourth ring. One point. He'd fired six arrows for five points. It seemed only the bullseye would net him two points. He needed most of the thirteen arrows to hit the bullseye to defeat this challenge. He wasn't sure what he would get but he wanted the satisfaction of doing well.

Anton took a deep breath. He didn't need to hurry. He focused his mind on the target, and he let his energy flow over the arrow. He hadn't practiced those techniques on real arrows, but he could theoretically redirect it in flight. Maybe not much but his arrow flew straight, arcing up and down slightly before striking the bullseye.

One point, Evan declared. Anton looked at him. If a bullseye wasn't worth two points, how could anything be? The arrow was almost exactly in the center as well. Was it a trick, an impossible challenge? That didn't seem quite right. Anton followed Evan's eyes. He was looking at the target but at that angle

Anton moved to the side. Behind the target was another, a full two hundred meters away. He had assumed it was for someone else, but upon thinking about it that was foolish. It was directly in line with the other target, so if the first archer missed the second would get it right in the back of the head. Or they might, at least. Anton sighed. Was this the standard cultivators were held to? He should have asked about the details of the points, but then again he needed to get used to the bow. At least he got points.

Anton drew the next arrow. This one too would inevitably be a sacrifice to practice. After that, all he had to do was hit the second target with every single arrow and if it was worth two points he could match the challenge score. All that was demanded of him was a step short of perfection. Anton released his sacrificial arrow. It almost seemed as if it would hit, sailing cleanly over the first target and towards the second but the wind shifted during its flight and it went wide. It was hard to account for changes in the wind. He needed to put more power so the arrow flew more quickly and some energy to pull it back on target.

The muscles and tendons in his hands were already straining, along with his upper back. If he'd tried to do any of this before becoming a cultivator he would have wrecked himself, except perhaps when he was near his prime. Even now, he was sweating after less than ten arrows.

From that point on, only perfection would do. The ninth arrow flew, piercing through the winds and puncturing the second target. Just the outer ring but

Two points, Evan had a clear smile on his face, though Anton couldn't focus on that.

Everything but Anton and the two targets disappeared. He didn't even think about *why* he wanted to succeed or even what it meant. He just had to hit the target. Outer ring. Second. Second. Third ring. Third again. Fourth Ring. Fourth ring. Third ring. Anton's concentration slipped. Second ring. He refocused his mind.

He put all of himself into the next arrow, not concerning himself with the distance or the changes in the wind. Before it hit, he *knew* the arrow would be a bullseye. It sunk deep into the target, and Anton momentarily celebrated. But then he saw it was just on the edge of the bullseye. It might count, but it wasn't quite as he had envisioned. Anton visibly deflated.

Twenty-eight points. One to go.

Evans voice returned Anton to his own body. He had one arrow left. There was that challenge to complete. It had to hit the target, but he'd done that so many times already. It would be easy. He pulled back the bow, his tired arm straining. The arrow flew over the first target towards the second and stuck point first into the grass in front of it. Anton slowly let out his breath. He'd lost focus. He could have done it but he was careless. It was worse than not even being able to do it.

Twenty-eight points total, and no more arrows, Evan shook his head.

Anton nodded. I understand. I just have one question. If I destroy the targets do I get in trouble?

Evan smiled. Going to take out your frustrations on them? If you do, youre responsible for the clean up and setting up the new ones.

Anton nodded. He could deal with that. Instead of moving towards the targets, however, he lifted his tired arm once more. Sweat dripped down his body as he gathered his remaining energy, breathing in more of the abundant natural energy around him. As he pulled back on the string he formed an arrow. It was the first time hed done it with an actual bow, but it felt quite a bit more natural. He felt himself straining to hold it, but as he felt the wind lapse momentarily he released. The string and his own energy propelled his arrow straight forward, puncturing through the top of the first straw target without even slowing. It continued on its path, barely affected by gravity, flying the next hundred meters towards the second target where it pierced through the bullseye before fading away. Anton sighed in satisfaction. Alright. I feel much better now.

Evan nodded. Good. Also, thats three points. So you win the challenge. In recognition of your archery skills, I will allow you to borrow that bow for a month with no charge. At the end of the month you can purchase it if you wish to, otherwise you must return it to the armory.

Anton was barely listening, but he eventually processed Evans words. He really did need a bow to practice with but I ran out of arrows, though. That one was extra.

So? Evan shrugged, I would say initial mastery of Spirit Arrows demonstrates more archery potential than just hitting a damn target a few times. Just take the stupid bow.

Anton took a step back and bowed, Right, of course. Sorry, Elder Evan. I will gladly accept your generosity. And I will earn the contribution points to purchase it, you can be sure of that.

Yes yes, Evan waved his hand. But you do still have to replace those targets. Otherwise someone will find themselves quite disappointed with the quality of the practice range.

Chapter 15

Over the next week Antons schedule remained much the same, except his archery practice was much more effective with an actual bow. Practicing on targets let him understand how much of a difference there was between using energy and not. Without energy, he was just a very strong old man, equivalent to a moderately strong adult male. He would just be able to reach full draw on a good hunting bow, and seemed as if he barely tapped the potential of the bow he was borrowing from the armory. Despite all

the body tempering greeting affecting his abilities, Anton was behind himself when he was young. However, the inclusion of energy was significant.

Anton also borrowed a quiver of practice arrows, and while they might stick a centimeter or so into a target they certainly couldnt fly *through* one. It wasnt just a difference with using Spirit Arrows either, though it was hard to test because he subconsciously propelled those arrows with his own energy. How could he *not*? Anton doubted that he could shoot through much besides a straw target, but it could still be quite lethal for a wild boar or deer. He might get a half arrows depth in one, which would take it down much more quickly- and that was ignoring the accuracy benefits. Hawk Eyes Archery allowed him to focus in on a single point, and Thousand Arrows contained many techniques on redirecting arrows with energy, how to do it efficiently and without sending arrows spinning wildly. It was easy to just direct the tip and have it veer off course, but gently coaxing it along the right path was less energy intensive and much more useful.

Though he didnt see much of those sharing the complex with him, he often felt the other three cultivating late into the night. That was the sort of atmosphere that the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars promoted, and it felt like a waste to not spend all his time doing so. With such abundant natural energy it was easy. That said, Anton felt the difficulty of later stages. Hed thought he would form the fifth star within a month in his current environment, but it was looking like it would take at least another week or two. He felt himself slowing down. If that happened, how could he ever catch up with the bandits?

One particular night, Anton felt Catarina was cultivating particularly powerfully. He almost felt himself being pulled towards her with the rest of the natural energy in the area, though it was just a slight pressure. Then there was an intense buildup of energy from her, and a few short minutes later she had condensed the fourth star inside herself. No wonder she hadnt been worried about whether she waited a month or not to take the test. The next one was still some days away, and even with just the energy from outside the Orders grounds she would have made it before the next test. Then she wouldnt have needed to take a test at all. Perhaps her friend would do the same.

Antons ears twitched. His hearing hadnt faded as much as his eyesight, and after tempering the organs in his head he found he probably heard better than he had at his best. The two others were conversing with each other, probably in Haydens courtyard. They seemed to do so often, and Anton wished he had anything in common with the others to converse about. He couldnt hear much of their conversation, and honestly what he *did* overhear was an accident.

... go over?...

... tempering pills

Doesnt deserve them

People muttering about others behind their backs was a human condition. Gossip was everywhere in Dungannon, and some people just didnt mesh with others. Talking was fine, but Anton felt a stirring of energy from them as they spoke. Haydens courtyard was diagonally across from his, with Catarinas being in between them in the clockwise direction from Anton. Anton silently listened as the two left the gate of the courtyard and walked towards hers. The gates were on the second wall of each courtyard, when going clockwise. Soon, the pair knocked on the gate. Catarina? Haydens voice carried over the walls. Anton shuffled slightly closer to the wall.

Yes? Catarina called back.

May we come in? Velvet asked.

Im cultivating, Catarina answered coldly though Antons few interactions with her indicated that was just how she was.

We know, Hayden said. Listen we know you got three tempering pills from your place in the test. Now that youve used one to break through to the fourth star, you should share the others with us.

His words were technically polite and calm but just in case Anton bounced on his toes slightly. He wanted to be ready to spring up the wall if he was needed. Perhaps he was being paranoid, but if nothing happened nobody would know anything except perhaps that he was being a little bit nosy.

If you were supposed to have them, the sect would have given them to you. Anton felt Catarina stand up from the way her energy shifted position, though she felt somewhat drained after her breakthrough. If you want some, you can make a request at the rewards hall.

Hayden answered again, Your results were already so good why did they have to give *you* a bigger advantage? The gates were able to be locked from the inside, but there was little point to it except to prevent casual intrusion. It seemed Catarina hadnt bothered as her gate swung open, and Anton chose that moment to pull himself atop the wall between his courtyard and Catarinas.

Anton stood atop the wall, his bow in hand. I dont believe she gave you permission to enter her courtyard. If you attempt to forcibly enter Im going to have to assume you possess ill intent. Antons eyes scanned the situation. Catarina had her hand on the sword at her waist, a commonly used weapon among cultivators. Hayden had a sword, which Anton estimated to be lower quality, though he wasnt qualified to guarantee that. As he focused energy on his eyes, they flicked over to the horizon uphill. Someone was there, quite a distance away. Were they watching or?

Hayden scoffed. Dont interfere old man. Just sit there in your courtyard and quietly cultivate until you die of old age.

He stepped forward, reaching for his sword and Anton followed through on his threat. In one smooth motion he formed a Spirit Arrow on his string, pulled it back, and released. Hayden had already begun to form his energy around himself to be ready for combat but even so Antons arrow pierced deep into his chest. With the short distance between them, he had little time to dodge and despite the warning clearly hadnt been prepared for an attack. Blood spurted out of his mouth and he fell to his knees.

Velvet hadnt entered the courtyard and stepped away, her hands up. I just thought we would ask. I didnt think he would

The cultivator watching from uphill moved with such speed that Anton barely had time to react. Hed only looked away for a few seconds, but when he felt their energy approaching his eyes flicked back. He only had a moment to see a blurry figure before an old woman was standing on the wall next to him, and before he could react his bow was removed from his hand and his arms were twisted behind his back.

Whats happening here? the woman next to him once again updated Antons impression of how strong cultivators might be. Her skin was wrinkled and he was *certain* she was actually older than himself. She had certainly surpassed Spirit Building and must have been in Constellation Formation. Thirty stars, at least. It was hard to tell because the power was so overwhelming.

Anton answered first. This young man was planning to rob Catarinas rewards for her place in the entry test. When his plans became clear, I warned him not to enter but he did anyway. Somehow without him noticing, Antons arms had become shackled. He tumbled forward off the wall as the elder let go of him, but he managed to twist to land on his feet. As he did so, he shattered an ankle. Hed attempted to summon energy to reinforce himself, but he hadnt been able to.

The elder was already next to Hayden, who had blood pouring out of his chest. Spirit Arrows didnt leave anything behind to block the wounds. Anton felt her do something, presumably to stop the bleeding. Everyones coming with me to explain.

Anton attempted to get to his feet to comply with her request, but he felt himself suddenly moving. The unknown elder in front of him had wrapped all of those present in energy and was moving once more with blinding speed. It was only a few minutes later that Anton found himself in a cell.

Vincent hummed to himself as he approached the Orders front gate. Hed finally figured out why he couldnt track down those bandits, and with the improved information hed managed to hire a formation expert to locate one of their camps. It was expensive, but hed managed to take out some of their lower ranking members. Their leader and the formation expert werent present, but he was in a good mood. Finally hed made

progress. He was planning to collect someone from the Order to save on expenses, and then he would return to tracking them down.

Elder Vincent! One of the guards at the gates bowed as he approached. It is good to see you again.

Jacob! Vincent waved, Glad to see you have been cultivating well.

Thank you, Elder. I have a message for you from Elder Daniela Selby. Jacob handed over a sealed note.

Vincent read the message. It wasn't long, but it immediately put him out of his good mood. One of his recruits had been involved in an internal incident, and he was needed to provide context to determine if the disciple would be a danger. The fact that he was being asked for indicated it wasn't a clear case, but it was disappointing for his students to get involved in conflict. Then again, it was also inevitable with how many he recruited.

Elder Daniela had been around longer than Vincent himself, though Vincent was catching up to her in cultivation. His relative youth was an advantage there. Before even dropping by his own chambers he went to see her.

Elder Daniela, Vincent inclined his head.

Elder Vincent you know there's no need to be so formal. The old woman sighed, A few weeks back, there was an incident with a student recruited by you. I don't expect you to remember each and every one, but with less than a month of him being in the sect we didn't have time to judge his character. He nearly killed another disciple- a now-former disciple who was in the wrong, but who would have certainly died if I weren't nearby. This particular disciple might have lapsed from your memory by now. An old one that came in at fourth star.

I can't promise I know each and every one in detail, but I'll try to remember. What's his name?

Anton Krantz.

Vincent blinked. Sorry, I don't Anton Krantz, you said?

That's right, do you not remember him?

Vincent frowned and muttered to himself, Was there a second one? That could have been decades ago he shook his head. I certainly remember someone by that name, but I doubt it's him. Perhaps we should go see him.

Elder Daniela nodded, Good. Hes been cultivating furiously even in confinement and he was apparently a good worker. If hes likely to be trouble again in the future we might as well expel him quickly, otherwise hes served sufficient time.

What exactly happened?

One of the new disciples tried to rob another of their resources. He shot him in the heart with a Spirit Arrow. If he hadnt been so straightforwardly deadly in his approach he likely wouldnt be imprisoned still.

The cells of the Order were blissfully unused for the most part. There were two disciples in opposite cells who had clearly had too much to drink the night before, but as they walked towards the somewhat more secure rear cells Vincent only sensed one source of energy. Someone new, though he didnt always stay around potential recruits long enough to get a feel for their particular energy patterns. This one felt fairly decent, almost as if he were forming the fifth star. Vincent and Daniela just exchanged looks as they approached, stopping outside the cell. Vincent stood there watching silently as he felt the fifth star completely form inside Anton.

So Elder Daniela said as Antons energy settled down. Do you recognize him?

What? Vincent turned towards her. Oh yes. How could I not? I saw him less than six months ago.

Elder Daniela smiled, And you said your memory was decent. Shouldnt he have been someone you visited regularly, if you just saw him then?

Technically yes. But the thing is six months ago was when I gave him the manual. Vincent folded his arms. He hadnt touched cultivation before then.

An amusing joke, Elder Daniela laughed mirthlessly. But hows his temperament? Can we expect more trouble from him?

From him? Vincent raised an eyebrow. Not if nobodys acting like bandits. He was quite a stable family man once. Vincent paused, But I was dead serious about what I said. How the hell is he fifth star now?

Chapter 16

Energy flowed satisfyingly smoothly through Antons meridians. His dantian was now occupied by five rotating stars, each representing changes to his body. The first star was the initial refinement to his entire person. Second had been his meridians, followed by the organs in his torso, the organs in his head, and finally his muscles. Some of it was just making up for abilities his body no longer had, but with the addition of energy to support him he found himself quite a bit more capable. If only he werent imprisoned.

Antons mind slowly returned to its focus outside of himself after his breakthrough. Surprisingly, there were two people standing outside his cell, watching him. He got to his feet, ignoring how some of his joints ached as he did. It was still much less than he had experienced a few months prior. Elder Daniela, he inclined his head politely. He turned his head so the light settled properly on the other person. Vincent! I mean Elder Vincent.

Everyone just calls me Vincent. No need to change your form of address, Anton. Vincents eyes scanned over Anton. You look about twenty years younger.

Anton grinned slightly, I feel it too. Unfortunately I'm sure you know I've run into a bit of trouble.

What have you been doing since we last met?

I assure you I was behaving quite excellently until just recently.

I don't care about this, right now. Vincent waved his hand. You just formed the fifth star. How did that happen?

Anton shook his head. I cultivated? I'm not sure quite what you mean. Forming the first star took me a month and a half. I nearly died, I think. During that time I did little else but cultivate and bury the villagers of Dungannon. Vincent nodded in acknowledgement and gestured for him to continue. I found cultivating to be quite difficult, my meridians strained so I chose to refine those next. Next I refined my torso, to keep all these old organs going. That was somewhere around three months. Anton nodded to himself, recalling the events. You had mentioned joining the sect at the third star, so I began the journey. On the road I began to refine the organs in my head, since my eyesight was still quite awful. It was a slow process, and I only broke through to the fourth star just outside the sect, taking advantage of the abundant natural energy that spread out to the surrounding areas. Then I spent some months here in the sect cultivating my muscles and the fifth star.

That's it? Vincent asked. You just cultivated? Didn't stumble across any potent herbs?

Around Dungannon or along the road? Anton grinned, Not at all.

I understand. So, what about the trouble that landed you in here? Vincent asked.

Anton shrugged, What can I say that I have not already told? I realize I was excessive in my actions, but I stand by the principle. I don't believe sect members should attempt to take from each other. If you wish, I can make a formal apology to Hayden for attempting to kill him.

You can't, actually, Elder Daniela interjected. He's no longer a part of the sect. You're right about his actions being inappropriate. However, even when the cause is right it's best not to do things that can't be taken back. Especially if there might be some

misunderstanding. Elder Daniela looked to Vincent and gestured behind her hand. In turn, Vincent nodded and waved his hand towards the door. Since your actions were justified and Haydens death was prevented, it has been deemed that you have spent sufficient time here as punishment. As long as you swear to be more thoughtful in your future actions, you can return to your residence immediately.

She pulled out a key and began unlocking the cell immediately. Anton found himself watching the way the energy gathered around the key and twisted in the lock, finding a sense of oppression from the bars disappearing. Then he remembered what had been said. Of course. I swear to be more careful if future conflict arises with fellow disciples.

Vincent smiled, We shall have to continue catching up later. Good luck with your cultivation. With a nod, Vincent walked ahead of the other two as Elder Daniela escorted Anton out.

Elder Vincent and Elder Daniela met up later, on their way to meet with others. Was it really just six months? Elder Daniela shook her head. It took me longer than that to reach fifth star.

Not quite so much for me, Vincent commented. But I wasnt a hundred years old yet.

I cant believe the tests didnt notice anything

He skipped the test, remember? Fourth star. We dont usually expect someone to go from third to fourth in the time it takes to travel here and they might be more informed. Vincent shook his head, I gave him a bare minimum of information because I didnt expect that much. It explains why I couldnt find him as I passed back through Dungannon, however.

What do we do? Elder Daniela frowned. He could have certainly won extra resources in the tests. Should we give him a chance?

Vincent shook his head. Its too late for that now. Besides, he clearly hasnt needed anything. As for what we do Im not sure we have to *do* anything. Perhaps coax him into attending some lessons, but otherwise I dont imagine there is anything required from us at the moment. Though we should certainly bring him up at the meeting. Everyones always looking for young geniuses. Nobody thought to look for an old one. If he makes it to Spirit Building at the same rate itll be quite something to see.

While the conditions in the cell had been comfortable enough, Anton was quite pleased to be unconstrained. Cultivating for a few weeks without moving his body more than a small distance was not the optimal situation, though the natural energy had been

abundant enough. Despite its simplicity, he was glad to be back in his own little courtyard. He spent some time practicing his techniques, though he realized he did not have a bow. However, the quality of Spirit Arrows he could make had gone up, their duration quite more enduring as he was able to condense his energy further. When he was tired enough, he returned to his own bed. While the quality of the physical object itself was not much different, it was significantly more restful.

Anton found himself arriving at breakfast earlier than normal, though he'd left at the same time. His legs carried him faster, with less complaining. *Less complaining didn't mean none*

, but it wasn't the muscles crying out. Unlike many others of advanced age, he didn't have particularly bad knees. That said, not particularly bad did not mean good. Would he refine the area along with his bones? It had some overlap with both bones and tendons. He had to pick *something* next, so it might as well be one of those.

Breakfast was quick enough, though Anton found his appetite increased. Quite a bit, compared to how he had been half a year ago. He was like a teenager again, though perhaps his hunger was amplified by the amount all the actual teenagers and other young disciples were eating. Nothing extraordinary, for the most part, but he could see why the sect wanted to maintain their own fields for both grains and magical herbs.

Even with more time spent at breakfast, he was even earlier to the fields where he planned to be working. Elder Howland was already in the area. Good morning, Elder.

Anton. Elder Howland inclined his head. Good to see you back. I thought perhaps you would not return after your breakthrough.

Anton smiled, I was just occupied for a time.

I heard the general idea. I knew a reliable person like you was always going to be out and about soon enough. Now then, might as well get started.

With a powerful swing, Anton began to hoe a new field. Even with his body being stronger and the use of natural energy, he found it was still less effective than using an animal to till the soil. However, it wasn't as if the sect didn't know what it was doing. Anton just wondered if the other disciples understood. As he moved, he gathered energy from the world around him, breathing it in, circulating it from his dantian through his meridians and into his bones. Not too deep at first. In fact, refining the marrow was another star in itself. However, he directed the energy to support his body. It wasn't going to be a short process, but he had to start at some point.

When he returned to the compound which his home was a part of, Anton sensed a new person where Hayden had lived. He thought it would be good to introduce himself. He knocked on the gate, since the new disciple was outside in his courtyard, and not in a critical point of cultivation. Hello? a young man opened the gate to the outside and looked at Anton. He seemed familiar.

Good evening, Anton inclined his head. I am Anton Krantz. I have not been around recently, but I live in the opposite corner there.

Anton? The young man inclined his head in return. Im Timothy. Catarina mentioned you. He looked over his shoulder towards Catarinas courtyard then leaned in. She probably wont mention it, but she really appreciated your help. She was worried about what happened to you. Timothy looked Anton up and down. Fifth star. That would explain it.

Well, Anton bowed and took a step back. I was merely here to introduce myself. Dont hesitate to drop by if you wish to consult on anything, though Im not sure if I can help much in matters of cultivation.

Good to meet you, Senior Krantz, Timothy inclined his head. The form of address was unfamiliar, though certainly apt since Anton was both older and of a higher cultivation.

Anton moved around to Catarinas courtyard, knocking as well. It didnt take her long to open the gate. ...Hello.

Good evening, miss Riley. I just wished to say I have returned.

She nodded her head. Okay. I- she started to speak, but didnt continue. After a handful of seconds, Anton supposed she would probably not continue.

I am glad to see you are well. Your cultivation is progressing nicely towards the next star. I hope the incident didnt result in further trouble for you, Anton smiled.

No, it I am fine. Catarina nodded, I am welcome back. With that, she ungracefully shut the gate. Anton smiled. Kids could be so shy. Well, with a few decades of experience anyone might get better at conversation. Though he wasnt sure if anyone at the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars would actually get much practice in conversation. It didnt seem to be a favored pastime of cultivators.

Chapter 17

After two more weeks of work, Anton was ready to check his contribution points. The bow he had borrowed from the armory had been taken away when he was arrested. He hoped it hadnt been purchased and that he was still *allowed* to make such purchases. Then again, there hadnt been any talk of ongoing punishments. If it wasnt necessary for proper training, Anton might have put off getting a weapon just to make the elders feel

more assured. Then again, as long as he had it for a time and didnt mishandle it, they could also be assured he wouldnt do anything worrying. It wasnt that Anton wouldnt be willing to redo what he did, but if a similar situation came up he would be less likely to attempt a lethal shot. Attempting to kill fellow disciples was rightfully frowned upon. And he likely didnt need to do anything, since an Elder had been watching. He just hadnt thought they would arrive so quickly.

The walk to the central area was still the same length, but Anton arrived more quickly. He could see how they actually functioned with sections so spread out. Most people just moved quickly. Anton found his way to the rewards hall.

Elder Lois, Anton inclined his head. I would like to check my contribution points. Hed worked extra hours the last two weeks just to make sure he would have enough. Assuming he got similar rates to what he had before, at least.

Of course. You are she took a moment to find his name, Anton Krantz, correct? she held out her hand.

Oh! My token. Antons identity token was with him at all times, but he rarely thought about it. Especially during his two weeks in a cell. He also had little use for it while farming.

Elder Lois smiled, activating the token with her energy and making it glow. Since she recognized him it probably wasnt necessary, but she followed the protocol regardless. She handed him his paper with the number. That too radiated energy. It would likely be hard to fake and Anton had no interest in that. Elder Evan mentioned awaiting your return some time ago.

Let us hope I was not too slow, Anton shook his head. I was indisposed for two weeks. Elder Lois just smiled in response as Anton made his way towards the armory.

626, the paper read. He probably hadnt needed to work so many extra hours, then, but what was he going to do sleep? He already did enough of that. He could cultivate the Ninety-Nine stars while farming, and without a bow time spent training archery was inefficient. He would likely reduce his hours farming somewhat after the current point, though he could always use more contribution points.

Elder Evan still *looked*

younger than him, but potentially wasnt. Good day, Elder Evan, Anton inclined his head.

Anton. Congratulations on your breakthrough. Elder Evan smiled, I had expected you here earlier.

I had some reasons I couldnt come sooner. I suppose I am too late?

Elder Evan reached into a bag by his waist- one that looked to barely be able to hold a handful of apples and certainly not a full length bow- and pulled out the very bow Anton had looked at before, and then the string. No one else acquired it. I assume you have the five hundred contribution points? Anton held out the slip of paper, which had his name, the date, and the number of contribution points. Elder Evan took it, holding a token similar to Antons identity token over it. When he handed it back it said 126. He likewise handed over the bow. Do take good care of it. Practice well, and all that. I might suggest attending lectures from the various elders or some of the senior disciples. If there are any you find particular insight from, you might also spend some of those contribution points on personal lessons. Learning from others can be much faster than studying on your own, even if you have the talent. Cultivation is all about time.

Anton nodded. If he could save a dozen hours cultivating a technique, he could work that dozen hours to earn more contribution points. Plus, there were also free lectures. He hadnt felt the need so far, but hed only just come to the Order a couple months prior with two weeks of that in a cell- though he didnt find those two weeks were wasted. I appreciate the suggestion. Are there any good archery masters?

Elder Evan laughed. Are there? If archery masters are mentioned in the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, the only proper answer is Elder Kseniya. She developed Spirit Arrows.

Antons eyes widened slightly. He knew that techniques were all made by *someone*, but the way everyone acted everything in cultivation was said to be ancient techniques and the like. But of course there would be people from the Order who had new innovations, and Spirit Arrows seemed quite special, though Anton couldnt claim to have a deep understanding of the full limits of cultivation. Does she lecture?

Something like that, at least. You should check the schedule.

Anton nodded. Of course.

It wasnt far to the lecture halls, where a young looking woman sat behind a desk. Excuse me Anton was fortunate to catch sight of her badge and her cultivation level before making a terrible mistake, Senior disciple? He was so used to everyone being an elder that hed been about to say it.

Brita, she inclined her head to him. He could tell she was in Spirit Building, perhaps the thirteenth star. Her young age was probably exactly correct. Somewhere in her actual twenties, he thought. How can I help you?

I was wondering when Elder Kseniyas next public lecture was.

One moment, Brita flipped through a dozen pages in an instant. Anton considered that he should learn to do that. It seemed quite useful. Perhaps that ability came naturally

with cultivation, to some extent. At the end of the month. One and a half weeks from now, in the afternoon.

Thank you. Anton almost left, but he supposed he didnt have to think about just one thing. Are there any upcoming lectures? he gestured inside.

Brita didnt even need to check the list. Advanced formations in half an hour. An hour until sword techniques oh! Elder Vincent just started a cultivation basics lecture five minutes ago. You can likely still catch most of it.

Which way to Elder Vincents? Brita pointed to her left, and Anton headed down the hallway- and soon he was able to find the rest of his way from Elder Vincents voice and energy.

Anton stepped through an open doorway into a large semicircular hall. There were rows of seats in tiers so that everyone could get a view of the lecturer- and the hall was packed full. There were only a few seats in the very back.

...in early cultivation is important, Elder Vincents voice carried easily throughout the room without the use of energy. For the Ninety-Nine Stars, the most critical parts of the first ten stars, Body Foundation, are the second and fifth stars.

Well. Anton had already passed that point. He hoped he hadnt made terrible decisions.

The first and tenth, of course, refine the whole body. But the second and fifth are important because of the basis of the Ninety-Nine Stars. Cultivation seeks the truths of the universe though whether those truths are properly understood can greatly influence the effectiveness. Thus, great care must be taken to learn from those who come before. As for the basis of the Ninety-Nine Stars nine is a symbol of completeness and power. In addition to that are the prime numbers. Thus, the Ninety-Nine Stars are the summation of the first nine primes.

It was only a moment later when a young man in the crowd raised his hand.

Elder Vincent smiled, I believe I might anticipate your question. Let me guess. Dont the first nine primes sum to one hundred? Elder Vincent looked at the student, who lowered his hand and nodded. A good question. That is, quite simply the limit. Neither the founder nor any who have come after managed to form the hundredth star. People have already been known to call those in the fourth tier of cultivation deities what would we call someone who has surpassed a deity? Elder Vincent shrugged. Though naming perhaps isnt that important. Claiming to be a deity, though, is a bit much. Our Galaxy Construction cultivators say the same. But, back to the question. Surpassing the final known tier of cultivation is a goal for many. Some say it is impossible. Those who try either die or disappear either through transcending to a higher plane, or destroying themselves so thoroughly theres nothing left theres no way to know. But ninety nine stars seems to be the limit for now.

Anton found that answer satisfactory. Even if the hundredth star couldnt be reached, a technique that was good enough to reach the peak of cultivation was quite something. Though of course, just because the technique was capable of reaching that peak didnt mean *he* could. He was already old. He just needed to surpass the Body Tempering stage to avenge his family.

But! Victor declared loudly, The second and fifth stars the first prime and the first and second added together. What you choose to temper at those points sets you up for the future. It isnt that you cant later achieve the same level of tempering in such a category, but you are set up for an early boost. That is why most of us refine the meridians at the fifth star. The same young man raised his hand, and Vincent pointed to him. Yes? What is your question?

Why not refine the meridians at the second star? They affect all of cultivation. If we knew this before entering the Order at three stars, could we not be more successful?

Certainly, Vincent said. Or you could be dead. Trying to force things ends up that way. Tempering the body is not equally easy. Tempering the meridians is the hardest, and thus requires experience. Though sometimes people try it and die. Vincents eyes looked straight at Anton. Except rarities.

Anton had to admit that he had found it quite dangerous. It almost spiralled out of control and killed him. Then again, that was his entire experience with cultivation up to that point.

Vincent continued, The prime temperings are especially difficult, but also more effective. However, if one steadily cultivates past Body Foundation, they can eventually smooth out the road before them. So no matter what decisions you have made up to this point, there is no permanent harm done. Take advantage of whatever strengths you have obtained for yourself while you are young.

Chapter 18

Another week and a half out of five thousand went by in the blink of an eye. Work started early and lasted until the evening, then practicing archery techniques until he was sufficiently tired to sleep, all interspersed with meals and occasional lectures. Anton learned quite a bit, including how to properly balance his environment while cultivating. It wasnt as important as having abundant natural energy around, but it was still a factor. That included taking care of his mental state. Anton wasnt sure if his mind was exactly *serene* with constant thoughts of revenge, but what was he going to do about it? Focus was necessary to overcome it.

The most useful after the tips Vincent gave for cultivation was sparring practice. He was still a beginner in cultivation, so when he found himself struggling with unarmed combat he didnt feel bad. He had gotten in a few scraps in his days, but had no formal training. His muscles were decently strong, but the rest of his body just wasnt up to par. All of the

others seemed to have begun lessons before him as well, but Anton didnt like making excuses. He might only rarely need to fight unarmed, but he should at least put in the effort to cover the basics.

The anticipated lecture with Elder Kseniya arrived in due time. When Anton arrived at the training field only to find it sparsely attended by merely a dozen others, he asked one of the nearest disciples, Is this the right place for Elder Kseniyas lecture?

The young woman nearest to him shrugged, Lectures have words. But this is the place. Its surprisingly empty.

Elder Kseniya is the best archer in the Order, The young woman looked around before finally whispering, ...but shes not the best teacher.

Anton nodded. That often tended to be the case. Eccentric masters of one thing or another often had trouble communicating. It was certainly not impossible to be a skilled teacher and a master of something, but the skills didnt necessarily go together. Still, he might be able to learn something.

He almost didnt notice when she showed up. Anton had been conditioned into the idea that elders would look younger than they were, so when a truly ancient woman with baggy skin and thin limbs stood in front of them, he almost didnt think it was her. However, as he sensed her energy he knew it had to be her. He couldnt sense exactly, but she was at a great number of stars. Perhaps fifty or more? That would place her in the final tier of cultivation, the stage that was referred to as Galaxy Construction in the Ninety-Nine Stars method.

She said nothing, merely pulling out a bow from a magic bag- like Elder Evan had. The bow appeared quite plain- merely some sort of dark varnished wood and a string that seemed no different from many others. She had no quiver on her back, but that wasnt a surprise. Without even saying a word to those watching, her movement started.

Antons eyes barely tracked the movement of her hand grabbing the string, the forming of a Spirit Arrow and the pulling of the string, and the arrow was out of his vision as if it completely disappeared. Then Elder Kseniya disappeared as well. However, Anton still sensed her- and his eyes snapped to her location, far from where Anton thought it should have been possible to move.

Even with his eyes already having been tempered, Anton was barely able to follow her movements. Activating the vision techniques from Hawk Eyes allowed him to not *completely* lose sight of her, but he was barely able to make out her specific movements even still. She drew and shot the bow, then moved to a seemingly random place to fire again in another similarly random direction. Antons eyes occasionally followed the spirit arrows, realizing that he was half right. They *did* disappear, but their trajectory through the air up to the point where they vanished has also simply been too

fast for him to see. Each of the Spirit Arrows destroyed itself at a specific point, though the distance wasn't always the same. Anton supposed that was the only way she wasn't going to put holes in everything around them including the walls of the training areas and perhaps several buildings over. He was absolutely certain she would have, if the arrows didn't collapse into themselves.

Anton watched in a trance, trying to catch *something* from what was happening. He felt like he was on the verge of understanding, but he wasn't sure *what* he might learn. Then Elder Kseniya stopped. Anton reached down and found his chest was damp. He was sweating from just watching. He was almost entirely drained of energy just to catch a glimpse of what was going on. The others were in a similar boat, except a pair who grumbled to each other, ... didn't teach anything. Just showed off and left.

Technically Anton agreed that she didn't teach anything but the chance to see something like that was still good for his developing skills. Many years of hunting and some competitions were nothing compared to her experience with the bow but how could he make use of it?

Every time he formed a Spirit Arrow, Anton pictured those made by Elder Kseniya. They were thinner, not because they contained less power but because it was even more concentrated. He had barely been able to sense how it worked with the immense power involved, but he tried some things he thought were involved. Had she started the formation at the tip? No. Though he couldn't be sure, since they seemed to appear instantly. He tried starting with the arrowhead, in the middle, and from the end with the fletching. The middle was the worst, since if he was misaligned it could scrape up against the bow at the front or slip past the string in the back. Fortunately the bow had enough durability to ignore such incidental energy.

Anton tried to imagine what her movements were for. He couldn't possibly move as she did, especially with his joints though perhaps hers weren't any better at whatever age she was. He would have to work on his flexibility. At the very least, moving around was a good idea. Anton didn't exactly dash around, but he started incorporating movement and turning into his practice. He didn't have targets and didn't want to destroy the walls, so he just made the arrows dissipate. He wasn't confident in doing that while they were in motion, so he made sure to practice on his actual target for actual practice firing.

The other residents of the complex did their own cultivation at different times, though there was never really a time when *nobody* was cultivating unless the complex was empty or they were all asleep. On a particular evening another two weeks later, Catarina was cultivating in her own courtyard. Anton felt she was at a particularly crucial moment, so he decided to take a break so as to avoid disturbing her with his energy fluctuations. She was at the peak of the fourth star and if he guessed correctly she planned to break through to the fifth. The feeling of her cultivation let Anton know she was finishing the refinement of her meridians- a solid choice, apparently. Much less

foolish than doing it too early, but Anton supposed he couldn't be blamed for his thoughts. He really should have been more cautious, though.

As Catarina pushed herself to the edge, Anton sensed a sudden boost of energy from her. It didn't feel like a danger, and indeed it only took a moment for the energy to settle down and come under her control. A short time later, the scene settled down and Anton knew she had reached the fifth star. Since it wouldn't be a problem to interrupt her anymore, Anton was about to go back to training archery. However, she stepped out of her gate and he was curious where she was going to go. Spying on his neighbors wasn't proper but he would have had to intentionally ignore her to not know where she was. Besides, she was coming towards his gate.

A moment later, she knocked. ...Anton?

He made his way over to the gate and opened it. Catarina, come on in, he gestured.

She shook her head. Not necessary. Here. She held out her hand, and Anton instinctively reached out to take what she dropped. A small round pellet.

She was halfway turned around when Anton called after her. Wait! Isn't this your last tempering pill? Anton was quite certain that she had just used one.

No. I have one more left.

He still didn't let her leave, Why give it to me?

... For the help. Before. Save it for breaking through to sixth star.

Now that he'd gotten her to admit why, he wasn't going to refuse. He sensed she was telling the truth about having another. It seemed likely she hadn't actually used one for the fourth star. I will graciously accept, Anton said as she was already stepping out of sight back towards her dwelling. He slowly closed the gate behind her and smiled. He *would* save the pill for a breakthrough. Though if she needed it before he used it, he would gladly give it to her. Better to foster someone younger who had their whole life ahead of them rather than an old man.

Chapter 19

Elder Kseniyas demonstrations were not regularly scheduled. The second one after Anton heard of her was another three weeks after the first, though it wasn't scheduled until three days in advance and Anton only heard about it by coincidence. Anton arrived a bit early, since Elder Kseniya didn't seem the sort to delay upon arriving. It wasn't exactly a short demonstration the first time, but he had the feeling that watching the whole thing would give him the best insights.

The training field the demonstration was in did have actual targets, and Anton found a young man at the seventh star training there. It was not surprising to find him forming a spirit arrow, firing one after the next into a target though with deliberate speed rather than haste. Anton watched, feeling the young mans energy as he shot. Obviously he wasnt much compared to Elder Kseniya, but Anton wouldnt expect that. His arrows were accurate enough, but they didnt puncture very deep into the targets. At least, not as much as they should have with energy involved. Anton approached closer, Young man interested in advice from an old man a full two stars weaker than you?

The young man shrugged, Why not? Ill hear it at least.

Anton nodded. He had gotten in the habit of bringing his bow with him, since most disciples carried a weapon with them around the Order, and he quickly strung it. Theoretically, even black steel strings had to wear out eventually if it was left strung. Anton held up his fingers, creating a spirit arrow where the young man could see. I didnt see any particular flaws in your creation, but your power seemed to suffer. That bow seems decent enough Anton turned to the side and pulled back the arrow, sending it flying towards the target. His energy catapulted it forward through the target. Good, at least he had something to demonstrate that he knew what he was talking about. The problem is that youre trying too hard to hit accurately.

The young man squinted, But if I dont hit I cant kill anything.

Im not saying you shouldnt be accurate. Im just saying you shouldnt put so much effort into it. Youre stabilizing the arrow with your energy. Anton held up another spirit arrow, Thats what the fletching is for. If it didnt have a purpose, wed merely form something like needles, Anton let the fletching fade away. But the fletching lets it stay aligned on its own. That energy is best used to propel the whole thing forward. Dont worry if it spins, thats fine as well.

The young man nodded. I see. Anton stepped away from the target, letting him have a straight shot. He frowned in concentration, forming an arrow and releasing it. The arrow arrived off target, but Anton knew he just needed to get used to how it behaved. Either way, it punctured most of the way through. It wasnt so inaccurate as to be a problem on any decently sized opponent, just a couple rings from the bullseye. The young man seemed to be focused on the task, so Anton just watched as he continued. Soon enough the others arrived- several new faces, and a half dozen repeats. Anton noticed the returning disciples were all higher stars than himself, but why would they not be? He was still quite new to cultivation.

Elder Kseniyas arrival was obvious, from her energy but nothing else. She wasnt hiding it, so the fact that she made no sound and had little visual presence as she arrived didnt make a difference. Anyone would notice if they were suddenly next to a raging fire.

Everyone cleared out of the area as she approached, standing over to the side and watching. Anton decided not to try to focus on the little details this time, something he

couldnt even really make out as she fired arrows almost without him seeing her move and then she herself changed locations. If he couldnt pick out fine details, he needed to follow the flow. Was it just a demonstration of how fast she could move and shoot, or was there something more?

The first arrow flew out, disappearing as it reached a point somewhere in front of her. At that point, Elder Kseniya had moved a quarter circle around the general area. Her second arrow fired at another spot entirely. As far as Anton could tell, she never aimed at the same point- though her arrows might pass through a similar target sized area, they never *stopped* in the same area as a previous one.

Anton noticed something else. She wasnt just running around and shooting. Her movements werent so straightforward. She had great speed, but she didnt move straight from point to point. She changed direction unpredictably, tilting her body as she moved and occasionally pulling back steps. It was as if she was avoiding enemy attacks. Antons brain was overloaded with information but if he presumed she was shooting and hitting an imaginary foe, it would explain why they didnt remain in place. His suspicions were confirmed when she ducked under an attack, and instead of firing her bow stabbed out with her hand a spirit arrow existing for only the briefest of moments. Anton couldnt say he followed all of her movements, but at least he understood what was happening. It could have just been his imagination but he thought that sometimes she missed. That is to say, the arrows had a point of maximum power. Usually, they disappeared- indicating a hit- very close to the peak of their power. Sometimes, they continued onward fading out of existence rather than being directly dispersed. But perhaps that was just Anton reading into things too much. By the time the demonstration was over, Anton was exhausted both his brain and his reserves of energy just to keep track of *anything* that was happening.

Anton couldnt say he found Elder Kseniyas demonstration to be a good lesson but he still learned some things about what she considered important. Constant movement made sense. He needed to be able to hit an opponent while both of them were moving. Predicting the opponents movements was theoretically part of that, though Anton hadnt been able to track the movements of her opponent to know that was the case.

Trying to replicate a similar situation himself stretched the limits of his capabilities, not least of which was his body complaining to him for pushing it so hard. However, he didnt feel as if he was *hurting* himself. Tempering his body with energy was allowing him to grow stronger, and though it might be painful in the short term, he found his overall bodily health increasing. Even if his joints burned after every practice session, and his bones creaked.

One major issue Anton ran into was imagining an opponent. He hadnt exactly been in many fights. Hunting animals usually was done from stealth. If a boar was charging at him, he didnt use a complex series of movements. He shot it, and tried to figure out how

to put a tree between them. For a combat on the level of cultivators, he really didn't know what to expect. The only images he had in his mind were Elder Kseniya and her invisible opponent. When he tried to imagine fighting them he died. Rapidly and continuously. His arrows got nowhere near the targets he set in mind, even though he himself had chosen their movement patterns.

Anton shook his head. That wouldn't do any good. He needed some practical experience or to pick a weaker opponent. The only other person he'd really seen move was Vincent. He wasn't even trying to go fast most of the time, but his movements were strange and hard to follow. Anton imagined shooting at someone who moved like Vincent casually. It was difficult, but he managed some hits. But that wasn't the speed Elder Vincent could move at. That was him strolling around. In his head, he pictured being carried through the forest at then-unbelievable speeds, to return to the bandit camp. Even if that version of Elder Vincent wasn't trying to dodge him, Anton couldn't manage a hit on something that speed. On a related note, Anton found himself very glad that the walls of the courtyard were fortified to resist damage. He might still need to be more careful, but at least he wasn't punching holes in them. He couldn't do everything necessary to move and aim and shoot with proper power *and* consistently disperse his energy exactly when he wanted to.

Anton sighed. And here he was thinking he would take out cultivator bandits. Bandits who had years or decades of experience on him, who fought and killed for their livelihood. There was no way he could get revenge like that. Elder Vincent had managed to track down some of them- but they had apparently gone far enough into Ofrurg that he couldn't track them down while still fulfilling other responsibilities for the Order. Anton would have liked to hear they were all dead but he also wanted to kill them himself. To do that, he needed to fight something. Disciples were able to spar, at least. There were also magical beasts to hunt down. He wasn't sure if he was ready, but he could use the contribution points. Tempering his body while farming was good for the moment, but after the sixth and seventh star he would merely be working at the same time. His bones and tendons would be physically worked, but he wasn't sure about marrow and skin. Speaking of which, before he got into battles with wild beasts, he should have some better idea of how to defend himself with energy. He wouldn't want to fail to avoid an attack only to find himself impaled or just simply have his body shatter to bits. He was working on part of that with the tempering of his bones, but Anton was absolutely certain he could easily break his own body with his energy. On that note, he found himself holding back so as not to *actually* hurt himself. At least he had some ideas in mind for what to study next.

Chapter 20

The technique library was a place Anton had only visited once before. He should have visited twice, but during the time he would have been returning his borrowed technique scrolls he was incarcerated. He might still need to look over Hawk Eyes Archery and Thousand Arrows later, but he was fairly certain he'd learned all he could from them at the moment. Spirit Arrows likely had more he could learn as well, but beyond the level

of just creating an arrow he wasn't sure if he didn't just need more practice to use it to its full capacity. Elder Mason, Anton inclined his head as he arrived. Im sorry these were a bit late. Elder Mason was one of the ones Anton was *sure* was younger than himself, but not necessarily that much. Still, her long hair and youthful skin could have easily tricked him into believing she was merely in her twenties.

Elder Mason shrugged, If it was a real problem, we would have sent people to collect them. She looked at each scroll as she took them. Sorry, your badge? Anton held it out. Oh! Anton Krantz. Sorry, but so many people come through and you've only been here once. Im not as good as some of the others are at remembering names. She marked a ledger with a quill pen- and a little bit of energy. Now then, since you returned I presume you want to check out something else? More archery techniques, perhaps?

I might take a look at them, Anton said, But I wanted to diversify a bit. Something defensive, and maybe for movement.

Aha! Elder Mason smiled. Planning to join The Hunt?

No? Maybe. I don't believe Ive heard of it. Anton started following after Elder Mason as she walked along the shelves.

That's right, it was announced nearly two months ago so the excitement died down some. It'll pick back up soon since it's just a month away. Elder Mason pulled a few scrolls off the shelves, Take a look to see if any of these suit you. As Anton took them, Elder Mason continued her earlier line of thought, The Hunt is exactly what it sounds like more or less. An organized event by the sect to thin the numbers of magical beasts in the deep forest. There are certain points not to be crossed while still in Body Tempering, but it's a group event. Good for getting to know other disciples, and for contribution points.

I had been considering some hunting, Anton said. Steel skin tempered skin was recommended. That wasn't high on his priority list. He would prefer something energy based. Golden Armor was in that vein, but its defenses were a bit *static* for his tastes. Though he could understand the appeal of solidifying your energy and letting it act as actual armor. He had trouble unfurling the third one. Ponderous Field was certainly interesting, spreading out energy to slow anything around- weapons and people alike. The most interesting thing was that there was another scroll wrapped inside that one. One Step Ahead was a combined movement and defensive technique technically.

Oh. That's where that went. Elder Mason sighed, This is why only the caretakers are supposed to shelve things.

Is this long past due for someone? Anton could barely believe what the technique wanted from its user. Predict the exact movements of the enemy so that you wouldn't be somewhere they *could* attack, while at the same time moving yourself to the optimal

location to attack them. *For use with archery*, it said. He certainly couldnt see it working with anything in melee, because youd always be inside your opponents reach.

No. But *some* elders write techniques and just toss them on the shelves, assuming well know where they are. Even though we never registered them. From the tone of her voice, Anton supposed that *some* elders were *one specific* elder.

Who wrote this one, then? It doesnt say.

If youd seen more of hers, youd know. The straightforward yet impossible to keep up with descriptions become the obvious thing. And the fact that theres no name. Its Elder Kseniya.

Anton frowned, Spirit Arrows wasnt so directly obtuse?

Oh, Elder Mason laughed, Thats the version for people who want to actually learn, instead of just stare at a page. One of the other elders clarified it.

Anton nodded, idly going over One Step Ahead. Synchronize yourself with your opponent. Take one step before them. Never two. He shook his head. There *were* diagrams for how to circulate energy through the meridians to achieve presumably the desired results. But he couldnt say for sure. Any movement techniques for people with bad joints? Anton asked.

Specifically that? I dont think so. But there are some focusing on smooth movements rather than jerk reactions.

Anton picked out one called Swan Steps. He wasnt sure if he had ever seen a swan, but based on watching other waterfowl he was pretty sure they didnt do a lot of graceful walking. More of a waddle. But the technique seemed decent enough. How many techniques can I bring with me? Anton asked.

The answer is dont get greedy.

I would like Golden Armor and Swan Steps. Anton paused for a moment, Im also interested in looking at One Step Ahead and the original Spirit Arrows.

Elder Mason shrugged, Its your time. If you can actually make sense of those two, its not a problem. Though I need to at least properly register One Step Ahead.

Golden Armor was extremely simple, though it required sufficient energy to use it. Set aside an amount of energy, convert it into a solid form around the body, and lock it in place. From that point it would last quite some time as long as nothing was actively breaking through. The downsides was that it wasnt possible to focus the armor against

a big hit, though it did its best to disperse any damage across the body. On the other hand, since he couldn't do it, he didn't have to redirect his defenses while at the same time trying to coordinate his own attacks. Anton thought the best solution was to never get attacked at all, but apparently magical beasts had a number of ranged attacks at their disposal as well- from throwing things to attacks involving energy. The energy was what made them so dangerous. They weren't exactly cultivators, but absorbing large amounts of natural energy not only fortified their bodies but occasionally allowed them to perform basic techniques. They were generally more powerful than a human, as well- though still of animal intelligence.

Anton found that Swan Steps, while having very little to do with any sort of actual waterfowl, was quite useful. Especially for him, since it was easier on his joints as he moved around but still let him move quickly and change direction when needed. That involved more energy usage than his body, but it also allowed him more options.

The other two he only had a *feeling* would be useful. Between studying them and Elder Kseniya herself, he might learn something. Or maybe he was overestimating himself.

Anton had one thing he needed to do besides cultivating. Since The Hunt was a group event, he needed a group. That could be between three and six people, but he had to actually ask people. But before he did that

Anton circulated his energy through his meridians. He let the energy seep into his bones, seeking out areas where he was less developed. He paid special attention to his joints, and though he knew they wouldn't be completely better after the refinement at least they would hold up until the second full body refinement. After that well, he was already being ambitious thinking about the tenth star.

With one more pass through his body, his bones were brimming with energy. Yet he continued according to the prescribed techniques. He pulled in energy from all around him, grateful for how much natural energy was everywhere in the territory of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. It was enough that even an old man like himself could cultivate at a decent speed.

Anton knew that the more energy he pulled into his bones the better the final refinement would be. While he could continue to temper them later it was optimal to do it as well as possible during this first and best opportunity. The energy started making his bones hurt. But at the moment, it was only the ache of a cold winter day. Soon it elevated to the point of feeling like he had broken a bone, except all over his body. He'd had the experience of a broken bone several times when he was younger, and as he grew older it took longer to recover from such injuries. However, his bones *were* broken. They had already undergone the first tempering, and had been gradually gaining strength as he cultivated the sixth star. They could withstand more, he was certain. He hadn't been wrong about that so far, and he wasn't going to doubt himself now. More more until he was more worried about the energy exploding on its own regardless of the structural

integrity of his bones. The physical pain just filled him with determination as he pushed forward.

Finally, there was an explosion, but an intentional one. It focused all the energy inward, condensing it into yet another star floating around inside of him. The sixth star. Sadly, it wasn't that much of an accomplishment. Technically, the fifth star was harder, as one of the primes. He hadn't known that at the time, but it explained how things were working for him. The next couple wouldn't be so bad, but the tenth well, he had other things to worry about first. Like whether or not he could actually fight.