

Elder Cultivator

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Chapter 21

For the sake of contribution points, joining a group of strong disciples for The Hunt would probably be for the best. The only problem was, Anton wasn't sure if anyone would want him or if he would want to join them. What could he learn, being supported by those stronger than him? Would it be worth it even if he got extra equipment or cultivation materials? Anton truly didn't know, but forming a group with people he knew was something he would prefer. Only who did he know?

Elders didn't count. And, despite knowing many of them tangentially, he only really knew names and small details about most of them. Vincent was the one he knew the most, but again it didn't matter.

Who had he met? The list was quite small. He was introduced to the sect by a young man named Sterling, but they had no contact after that. He was acquainted with several people who attended Elder Kseniyas archery demonstrations, but they were ahead of him in cultivation. That left very few people. Only the others in his complex, and Hoyt. Perhaps one of them needed one more for a group. Anton couldn't be sure if they were even going to join The Hunt, but he could ask.

Despite living in the same complex as the three others, the first Anton encountered was Hoyt. After all, he woke up much earlier than the others. Hoyt was still working the same fields as Anton, and they met regularly at breakfast. Hoyt. Are you planning to join The Hunt?

I had considered it, Senior Anton. A stern look from Anton made him rephrase his sentence. ...Anton. However, I don't know many others. How about yourself? Do you plan to participate?

Anton nodded, I thought it would be a good experience. I've had little exposure to combat. Though I did hunt regular animals. I have a few others I was planning to ask as well, but if you wish to enter, I would be glad to fight with you.

Hoyt looked at Anton, then nodded. Of course, I'd be quite glad to join alongside you. Hopefully we can get enough for a full group.

Are there any from the same complex as you that would be a good fit? Anton asked.

Hoyt shook his head, Not really. I don't think they would be ready.

I have several more I can invite, I'm sure we can find at least a third.

Anton started in the counterclockwise direction from his own home. He wasn't sure about Velvet since she'd been related to the earlier trouble but it was best to be polite regardless. He knocked on her door first.

Good evening, Anton. She greeted him as he opened the door.

Good evening. I believe I previously overheard you talking about joining a group for The Hunt? He hadn't actually heard what it was for, but that was the most likely cause for forming a group at the moment.

She looked over Anton, That's right. We're nearly full, but we might have room for one more, if you want to join.

I appreciate the offer, but I have no desire to join a group with only one other person I know. I had thought to form a group with some acquaintances. One from the fields
Timothy

Velvet smiled politely, I wish you luck then. Perhaps we will see each other out there.

Anton nodded and excused himself. He was glad he was right. And she had clearly not liked the idea of joining up with Timothy. Anton could see why, in practical terms. Timothy was cultivating outside, clearly displaying the aura of the third star. Anton stopped to feel the vigor with which the young man was cultivating. He might not have the talent, but Anton could appreciate his drive. At a moment of rest, Anton knocked on his gate.

Who is it? Timothy asked as he came to the gate. Oh, Senior Anton.

Anton smiled, Just Anton is fine. Despite the respect of the title, I'd rather not be reminded that I'm old. It's not required by the Order, so I'd prefer if you just call me my name.

Of course Timothy seemed to twitch as he tried to say Anton's name. That made him smile.

Have you heard of The Hunt? Anton asked.

Absolutely, Timothy said, It's a big event. Unfortunately nobody would want to take someone of the third star with them.

I don't know about that. Would you like to join me?

Timothy's eyes grew wide, ...Really? But you're already at the sixth star. I'd just be dead weight.

Nonsense. Another teammate can always be useful. I was thinking of inviting Catarina as well. Do you know if shes already participating?

No. I mean she isnt, Timothy said. If you dont mind my cultivation level I would be glad to join. Catarina would probably like to as well. Im sure shed like you to ask, at least.

Anton nodded. I have already recruited another disciple by the name of Hoyt. A solid young man. So we have a minimal team regardless. However, having a fourth would be appreciated.

Catarina was outside cultivating though as soon as Anton approached the gate she stopped. He knocked, and she opened it a moment later. Yes, Senior Anton?

Anton sighed, I would prefer to just be called Anton, if you please. Why was everyone so insistent on that? Have you heard of The Hunt? I have been putting together a team to participate. I have already recruited one of my friends and Timothy. However, we would appreciate having a fourth.

Timothy is going with you? Catarina nodded. I would be glad to join Anton.

Excellent. I was thinking we should all gather together to learn what each of us can do, and how we can perform the best. Do you have any particular time constraints?

Catarina shook her head, I have nothing that requires a set time.

Excellent. I shall try to arrange a time that will work for everyone, perhaps in two days.

Of course. S- Anton. I have a question before you go.

What is it? Im glad to answer.

Werent you fourth star when we first met?

That is correct. Technically he had been third star when he first saw her, but they didnt really meet then. He just happened to take note of the pair of young cultivators. I have been quite happy with my overall rate of advancement, considering my age.

Catarina nodded. Okay. Thank you. Just let me know when were meeting.

Though Hoyt worked all day, it wasnt as if he *had* to. Neither of them were technically required to inform Elder Howland that they would not be present the next day, but it was courteous to do so. Since the other two didnt really have any scheduling requirements, they were able to meet up two days later after Anton started gathering everyone.

There were various sorts of training fields, and the particular one they were at required renting with contribution points. It wasn't just a field, but a sparring field that had a formation set up to limit damage two cultivators might do to each other. In addition to that, there was an elder on duty over several areas in case something went wrong and someone was seriously injured. It wasn't expensive, but it would cost something like ten points throughout the duration of the day, which meant beginning workers might only be able to afford to use it after a full day of work. More powerful formations for those at the final few stars of Body Tempering were more expensive, and Spirit Building was out of the question with Anton's available points. But they didn't need anything that could withstand so much.

Hoyt, meet Timothy and Catarina. Likewise, meet Hoyt.

Both sides properly introduced themselves, as well as feeling out the cultivation of the others. Currently, they had a third star, two fifth stars, and Anton's sixth. It wasn't the most impressive group the Order had, but that didn't matter. They just had to perform their best.

Why don't we go over our basic abilities? In case you did not guess from the fact that I always have a bow on me, I am an archer. In general, I make use of Spirit Arrows, Anton formed an arrow in his hand, Plus some other archery techniques. I have some movement and defensive skills for my own use, but nothing I imagine would be a benefit to the group. I am of course most useful if enemies stay at range, and would much prefer to kill things there. Though I am told that's not always simple with magical beasts. Anton looked to Hoyt.

Hoyt held up a large axe. He was a fit young man, but the size of his body didn't match the mass of the weapon. I wield the axe. I am capable of controlling a wide area and breaking through tough defenses.

Timothy was equipped with a full set of armor, including helmet and a shield. Anton didn't judge it to be cultivator grade, but it was still better than fortifying his own body. I use sword and shield, for the most part. I don't have much combat experience, but I've been practicing interception techniques.

Catarina had a sword at her side. However, she didn't bring it up at all, instead summarizing her abilities in a single word. Formations.

Hoyt's jaw dropped, and even Timothy looked somewhat surprised.

Anton stroked his chin. He didn't really know what formations were, but understood they were quite useful. The bandits had even managed to hide themselves from Elder Vincent for such a long time because they had the services of a formation master. Great. Let's get started then.

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According to the report, Anton explained, The most common beasts are merely larger versions of normal counterparts. Wolves, boars, snakes, great cats, and the like. Some bears, maybe. I won't assume everyone has experience hunting them, so we'll go over some of the basics.

As the oldest in the group, the connecting point between disparate people, and just the highest cultivation Anton took the role of leader for the training. He could also guarantee he had the most experience fighting wild animals, because even if the others had started the day they were born he still had several times their experience. Unless one of them had fought wild beasts every day for that same time, but the stories of cultivators raised by wolves or growing up in the wild were generally exaggerated.

Mostly, these creatures aren't threats alone. Even a large bear should be easily defeatable by Anton checked the information he had, A single fourth star cultivator. Though I would suggest not trying to directly let them hit you, since you'll waste energy you should still be alright. There are four of us, so even if one would have difficulty, together we can defeat whatever we encounter. Anton avoided calling out Timothy. It wasn't like he *chose* to have lower cultivation. He just wasn't there yet. The same cannot be said of magical beasts. Even alone, they can be a threat. They have more muscle and bodily power than normal animals, and the ability to use energy for attacks and defense. We will be staying out of the deeper areas where they will be common. Disciples with higher cultivations will be facing them.

Everyone nodded, and the training began. Three of the four had preferences for melee weapons, so the simplest arrangement was for them to stand in a line in front of Anton. Perfectly functional, but nothing special. However, if he stood in the line with them he would have less worries about hitting one of them, and could more quickly kill approaching enemies as he would be closer. They would still be able to intercept enemies as they approached, and he could quickly fall back- if necessary. Anton was still capable of defending himself up close, it simply wasn't his preferred method.

Lacking actual beasts to fight against- and with the forest being too dangerous to enter at the moment, leading to the call for The Hunt- they sparred with each other to get some experience fighting. Training techniques on your own just wasn't the same. Anton had a huge advantage if they started further apart, and even at a dozen paces which would only take a few moments to cover he could shoot several times before anyone got close. Though the training arena kept people from getting seriously hurt, everyone had to admit they would probably be dead if they actually took a direct hit. So people practiced dodging, and then Anton's time to have difficulty came. In melee he wasn't exactly helpless, but he only had a standard one handed axe that cost only a handful of contribution points to use along with a small but sturdy shield. He could have used something heavier, but he needed speed more than power. He didn't have the proper techniques to use his cultivation to his advantage, and his body held him back still, since the younger cultivators were starting from a better place and had likewise tempered their bodies.

Catarina and Hoyt were mostly matched but Timothy struggled with any combat. It wasn't that he was unskilled, but the difference of several levels of cultivation was hard to make up for. Battles were most balanced with Timothy and Anton versus the remaining two, though it mostly came down to whether they started at range or whether Catarina had time to set up. Her ability to fight was really just average, as far as cultivators went. But as she had simply stated, her specialty was formations. Not the sort where people were arranged in particular ways- though that was sometimes part of it- but the sort where *energy* was arranged in a particular way.

It was a difficult subject to learn, and Catarina admitted she was still a novice but a novice formation user was still a powerful force to reckon with. Given time, she could modify an area either through carving runes into surfaces or making them out of energy. Sometimes rearranging the area on a larger scale to affect the energy flow was involved as well, which was technically the case with the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. Their land was a large natural formation with some modifications that gathered natural energy and protected the borders, though it wasn't exactly pulling it from elsewhere. It more encouraged energy to form.

Catarina explained some specific things she could do. Here is a simple barrier. It uses energy more efficiently than most attackers can, so breaking through can exhaust people. It took her some time to set up every formation, but Anton could tell she wanted to actually have them visible even if they were temporary. Here, attuned people allies move more easily. Energy for others is sluggish. Catarinas movements made sense on the surface, tracing the outline of the area but the runes sometimes were placed in geometric patterns and sometimes in ways that Anton couldn't wrap his head around. Catarinas third and final formation finished and she disappeared. Except Anton could still feel her there, with his energy. She was just not visible. A few moments later, he felt the formation waver and break. This one is difficult. Maybe not useful. Catarina was sweating, despite the relatively slow movements she had been making. Controlling energy so precisely could be quite difficult, and the mental effort wasn't small either. Its supposed to hide energy too but I can't yet.

That's okay, Catarina! Its still great. Timothy was very encouraging of her. They were childhood friends, after all.

It is quite impressive, Anton said, It requires special talent and hard work. Anton thought he saw Catarina smile slightly at that.

Hoyt nodded, I tried learning it once. Then I realized I should stick to swinging heavy things around! Despite his attitude, Anton knew he didn't just swing wildly. He had actual skill, and a body that was intentionally tempered in specific ways.

Despite working hard throughout the day, Anton noticed that Timothy still cultivated late into the night. Anton himself was an old man who didn't sleep much, and since he wasn't

getting up early for farming when they trained, he found himself spending more time awake later. From what he remembered, while Timothy had been diligent in his cultivation, he hadn't generally been up so late. It wasn't polite to spy on others cultivating, but Anton was old enough he felt he'd earned a bit of nosiness.

Anton's senses told him that Timothy's cultivation was fine. It was progressing forward towards the next star, the refinement of his tendons going smoothly. But it certainly wasn't fast. Anton found his way around to Timothy's courtyard. With nothing particularly challenging happening in his cultivation, interrupting him wouldn't be a problem. When Timothy opened the gate to Anton's knock, he invited himself inside. You're up quite late, aren't you? How is the cultivation going?

Timothy shrugged, I'm hoping to reach the fourth star before the end of the month and The Hunt.

Anton nodded, Refining the tendons to support your muscles for quick movements or power, quite useful. I noticed you closely follow the prescribed tempering methods laid out in the Ninety-Nine Stars.

Of course, Timothy said, Precision is important.

Anton smiled, I agree. However, there is more to it than that. You were not raised as a cultivator, right? Did you work at a farm?

My father was a woodcutter, Timothy answered, Though I was often called to help out nearby farms as well.

Then you are aware of how working your muscles makes them grow stronger. That doesn't stop being the case when cultivation is involved. There is merely another avenue to do so. However, the first doesn't become useless. Anton stretched out his arm, displaying his wrist front and back. Pressing his hands together, he stretched his fingers and wrist in various ways. Some physical exertion lets the body absorb more natural energy. Let's try some exercises.

Timothy didn't say anything, merely following along with Anton. Anton hoped he hadn't overstepped his bounds, but the young man didn't seem to have the right insights to focus his training properly. Some gentle stretching and then more rapid movements for every part of the body left Anton feeling sore and aching more than usual. However, cultivation with energy would ease the pain.

Follow along with my technique, Anton said, There are some ways to make your energy flow more smoothly. Anton knew that Timothy hadn't refined his meridians yet, but that didn't mean he couldn't exert greater control. His power would be lower, but the way Anton folded energy into his tendons could be replicated. It wasn't something that could be taken from a cultivation manual, because mere words explaining would never be sufficient. In truth, Anton hadn't quite perfected the technique himself as he was

currently in the middle of cultivating his tendons, but it shared the same principles as the rest. Timothy didnt quite have it down by the end of the night, but Anton planned to return to guide him in the future. It wasnt just so he would be stronger to help the team, but Anton just wanted to leave the world somewhat better once he expired. Though that might not happen so naturally anymore there was a good chance of him getting himself killed within the next year. He couldnt just train forever and never avenge his family or look for any survivors who were taken as slaves.

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In less than two weeks, Timothy had reached the fourth star, finishing the tempering of his tendons. Anton still had quite a way to go but it was just time he required. Meanwhile, Timothy had spent a longer time at the third star because of his inefficient technique. He took well to the guidance of Anton, completing the final portion of the tempering without issue. Thank you for the instruction, team leader Anton. Timothy and the others no longer tried to call Anton senior, but he couldnt refuse team leader. It at least didnt make him feel old. He had hoped that they would be willing to be informal, but the large difference in age made them slightly uneasy still.

What do you plan for the next star? Anton asked.

It would be best to refine my meridians but-

Then that is what you shall do, Anton declared. Why would you not?

Well, prime refinements are more difficult. Meridians are the hardest to refine properly, and Im not sure I have enough experience Timothy looked down.

Dont worry about it and just ask when you have questions. It may be difficult, but this is an important time in your future. Catarina and Hoyt both had the fortitude to refine their meridians for a prime refinement. With my guidance you can do the same.

Didnt you refine your muscles for the fifth refinement, team leader Anton?

I did, Anton acknowledged, But that doesnt mean my meridians didnt also undergo a prime refinement. I am a bit old, though, so it may not be so obvious with my energy capacity.

Timothy frowned, But if muscles were fifth then meridians were

Second, of course. Anton understood that was a rarity, but it had worked out well for him. He was still alive, after all. Now then, heres what you need to do Anton had already finished the refinement of his meridians long before, and with his current additional experience he was quite capable of guiding Timothys cultivation. He wasnt going to magically reach the fifth star in just a couple weeks, but if Anton was able to properly

communicate the best techniques, he should be able to properly perform the tempering given time. He had enough determination, at least.

At one hundred years old, Anton felt that time moved extremely rapidly. Then he had become a cultivator, and time seemed to flow even faster still. A month of training at least a few times per week with the team he had put together for The Hunt passed in what felt like an instant. Nobody but Timothy made a breakthrough to a higher cultivation level, but that was expected. The rest of the group had advanced relatively recently, and it wasn't so easy for Anton to reach the next star in just a month. He felt like he was barely halfway maybe a bit over or under. Cultivation seemed to slow down quite significantly with each step.

The gathering for The Hunt was quite impressive. Not every disciple was participating, but Anton estimated at least one in five to ten. With how spread out they were over the land owned by the Order, there were rarely so many in one place. The Order had thousands of members around at any specific time, and hundreds were participating in The Hunt. Anton noticed many with badges of elders. At least a dozen. While that wasn't a huge portion of the order's total number of elders, it was quite significant. Anton noticed both Elder Vincent and Elder Kseniya. Vincent was greeting many people as they arrived, but Kseniya mostly watched. He wondered if anyone technically *knew* her, instead of just knowing who she was. He certainly couldn't consider himself acquainted.

Anton! Elder Vincent smiled as they approached. I'm glad to see you are doing well. Your cultivation has progressed one step further, even. Elder Vincent turned his smile to the rest of the team. I didn't have the pleasure of recruiting the rest of you. I'm Vincent.

Elder Vincent, they all inclined their heads, and Vincent and Anton shared a look. He certainly deserved the respect of the title more than Anton did that of senior, but it did seem rather formal.

We will be going over all of the updated information soon. The level of your team Elder Vincent nodded, An average of fifth star is quite excellent, considering the time you have cultivated. There will be many opportunities for you to be effective in the outer forest.

The coordinator for The Hunt was one of the older looking elders, a dark skinned man called Elder Anand. Anton only knew that he was from outside Graotan initially, before finding his position with the Order. Good day, everyone, Elder Anand spoke. Even with people scattered all about, his voice carried evenly to everyone. Despite the fact that we will be dealing with creatures from the forest, do remember that the deep forest is off limits. It is far too dangerous even for Spirit Building disciples. On that note, we have separated the area into several sections. The inner ring is appropriate for any Spirit Building disciples. The middle ring will mostly suit earlier Spirit Building and those near the peak of Body Tempering. Those below the seventh star are advised to stay in the

outer area. Of course, these areas are not absolute. Stronger beasts may move between zones, but the elders will be doing the best to limit how many dangerous ones reach further out. We cannot guarantee that large numbers of beasts won't travel in a pack, so make sure to remain with your teams for safety. And don't forget, despite the fact that you will be rewarded per beast slain this is a cooperative venture. If you see another team in need of assistance, please do so. And don't refuse help from others. It is better to remain alive than to get a few extra contribution points. Though we shouldn't have to remind most of you how to behave. Elder Anand explained what to look for that would delineate the different sections- different types of trees, the density of energy, landmarks, and the like. Before sending everyone off, each group was given a magic bag.

Anton was surprised they had enough for that- if there were three hundred participants, that meant at least fifty or seventy-five magic bags. That did explain why those disciples that worked with equipment refinement had been looking a bit haggard lately.

A magic bag was theoretically simple to use. It could open widely to store objects far beyond its actual capacity, and in this case it was meant for the corpses of beasts. Among other things it would preserve them for use and keep the forest from being littered with bodies. While scavengers would enjoy such a feast, it was best to minimize the amount to something reasonable. Besides, scavengers were already too plentiful with so many dangerous beasts growing wild.

Anton wished he had the chance to enter the forest before. He wasn't terribly worried about entering an unfamiliar forest, especially since he could always find his way back towards the center where the Order kept the main complex, but knowing the particular quirks of a forest was still good. Maybe he would have the chance later after the hunt, when things settled down. For the moment, they moved towards the outer part of the forest.

With experience hunting various creatures, it wasn't hard to find relatively larger versions of them. Anton barely even had to look to find tracks of a large boar and he could *hear* it soon enough. He almost thought it was a normal sized boar but then he realized that the trees it was next to were instead much larger than he thought. The perspective was difficult, but he motioned the group forward as quietly as they could go. Anton was out in front somewhat but just a few meters ahead. The boar hadn't noticed them yet, and he pulled on his string, forming a Spirit Arrow as he did so. He aimed lower, towards a front shoulder- and the heart.

Anton hadn't fired a Spirit Arrow at a living being not protected by the sect's defensive formations and he was quite surprised. The arrow flew with power he knew it possessed straight and true into the boar's heart, half its length in. It left behind a hole in the pig's side but the boar was also surprising. Its fat was also about twice as thick due to its size, and though the arrow had certainly punctured the heart it wasn't cleanly pierced through. And boars were known for being hard to take down.

It spun around towards Anton, charging towards him. Anton fired two more Spirit Arrows, though its movements and thick skin meant they only stuck more or less harmlessly into its shoulder. However, before it made it more than halfway to him its rapid movements caused it to bleed more quickly out of the hole in its side and it collapsed. Anton nodded. He could kill *one* alone, but he had the drop on it. Theoretically the beasts would also travel in groups, and he might not always spot his quarry first. It wasn't truly a hunt, but instead an extermination or a war.

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The group of four tracked down several more oversized beasts over the next few hours, with half of them being slain by Anton before reaching anyone. He let several get closer, injured, both to limit his energy usage and to give the others a chance to test their skills against the beasts. None of the other three had trouble taking down a beast alone. There was a slightly more eventful encounter with a pair of wolves- one of which snuck up from behind the group while they were focused on one in front- but Hoyt chopped straight through the neck of the creature as it attacked from the rear.

Anton scratched his chin after they placed the bodies in the magic bag they had been loaned. I'm not sure whether this is a large quantity of wild beasts or a small number. A normal forest might not sustain this sort of population but he shook his head. They were also traveling faster than he was used to, covering more area, ... it doesn't seem like a worrisome overflow, even as we are moving inward slightly. They said to expect more packs.

Hoyt nodded, I'd expect the elders knew what they were talking about. We just don't seem to be finding them.

Anton slung his bow over his shoulder. It wasn't good for long term carrying like that, but it left his hands free for a bit. Perhaps I might spot something. Though the forest was filled with familiar trees, the sizes were larger than he was used to. Fortunately, they also had larger handholds and footholds, once he could get up the trunk. He climbed his way to the top, glad he had reached so far in the body tempering process. To get the best angle he had to walk out on a branch, but it was easily able to hold his weight. Hawk Eyes Archery had techniques to enhance the eyes, and he focused on the most distance he could. There were actually several beasts in sight, though determining if they were regular animals or the larger ones was difficult. Even so, he found himself surprised that they hadn't run into more. It seemed the creatures had been avoiding them. It seems I must have missed some tracks. Strange, for how large these things are. Anton pointed into the distance, There appears to be a pack of wolves up ahead. Six or seven of them, maybe. I think we can cut off their movements. He looked down at the group, It's quite a bit more than one or two. Some of us will have to defend against several at a time. Though if it's more than two, the others can help them out quickly. Is that alright?

Should be easy, Catarina said. If we can get in front, I can set up a simple formation.

I should be able to handle two easily enough, Timothy agreed.

Hoyt also had no complaints, so Anton led the group in the direction he had determined the wolf pack would be going. They should come from the north there. There's enough cover here for us to hide. The wind is from the same direction they're in, so they won't smell us until maybe ten or twenty meters out. Anton wasn't sure how much size would change their sense of smell.

Catarina nodded, then took out her sword and chopped through a bush. She tossed a bundle of its leaves over to the side.

Were we supposed to use that as cover? Timothy asked.

It's fine, she said, Plenty left. Catarina started walking around, occasionally dragging her feet through the leaves. Anton watched her with interest. Some of what she did certainly involved her own energy, but some of it seemed random. How much longer? Catarina asked.

Maybe three or four minutes. Anton responded, Though they might have changed course.

Catarina nodded again, carefully laying a stick on the ground and moving behind the bushes with them. Don't shoot until they pass the stick.

The stick in question was merely ten meters away, a short sprint for either cultivators or beasts of any size. That was much closer than Anton was comfortable with starting to shoot, but Anton knew there should be a good reason for it and with the wolves approaching it was better to keep quiet instead of asking. Soon enough he could hear them moving through the brush, and he spotted them between the trees around the same time. The wolves moved closer and closer eight of them in total, one more than he had seen. The wolf in the lead was slightly larger, and while Anton expected it to notice them it moved past the aforementioned stick without reacting. He didn't know if he was supposed to wait for *all* of them to pass the stick, and he decided he couldn't wait. He drew his bow, Spirit Arrow flying with all the force he could muster towards the wolf. It managed to react sufficiently to redirect the arrow to its side instead of its chest, but it couldn't avoid being wounded. The wolf immediately sprang into action, leaping towards Anton after a short burst to build up speed. Thousand Arrows had methods to shoot quickly, and he managed to form the next Spirit Arrow and release it while still having time to jump to the side.

Everything else sprang into action at the same time, Timothy moving around to one side in an attempt to draw some of the wolves towards him, while Hoyt moved directly towards the pack with Catarina. Hoyt warded off two wolves with back and forth motion of his axe, looking for a good opening. Catarina sprang into action directly, slashing along the side of one of the wolves and continuing past, between that and another wolf. They tried to turn to snap at her, but they ended up running into each other instead.

There was no real damage from the collision, but it slowed them down sufficiently for her to be safely out of reach.

Three of the wolves focused in on Timothy, who was off by himself. He held his shield at the ready, keeping it towards one wolf circling around while another was in front of him. He did his best to keep a tree behind him as well. It wasn't possible to maintain that position forever, but when the wolf behind him sprang towards his leg, he was ready. He had a good enough sense of his surroundings to turn himself away, stepping back to the side as he slashed out with his sword. He only struck a glancing blow on the wolf, but with the aid of his energy he cut a gash into its side. His dodge also placed his shield mostly in the direction of the remaining wolves, so that they couldn't take advantage of the moment.

Anton was vaguely aware of everything else that was going on, but he was busy handling his own problem. He was facing just one wolf, but it was somewhat larger. However, if he let himself be intimidated by a single wolf, becoming a cultivator would have been for nothing. It wasn't a question of whether he could kill it, but how efficiently he could do so. Even with Thousand Arrows for speed, the distance was a bit too close to comfortably shoot his bow. Instead, Anton pulled out his hand axe while holding his bow in the other hand, swiping at the wolf to make it back away. Anton didn't want to draw out his fight too much, but the wolf was losing blood from two wounds. As he maneuvered around, the wolf slipped on a root- something Anton presumed was related to the effects of the formation Catarina had established- and Anton chopped forward, swinging his axe deep into the neck of the beast. It took some energy to pull it back out and Anton took a ready stance, but the wound was deep enough that the wolf collapsed a moment later.

Taking his bow back in both hands, Anton was able to begin opening fire on the remaining wolves, starting with those around Timothy who was the lowest cultivation- and against the most enemies. He interspersed physical arrows with uses of Spirit Arrows, because he didn't have enough energy to keep up an endless amount of Spirit Arrows. Standard arrows supported by his energy were good enough most of the time, and he needed to last the rest of the fight and preserve himself for future battles as well. His first shot stuck in the leg of one of the wolves, sending it limping back. Timothy took advantage of the opening to shove one wolf away with his shield and slash at the one he had wounded before, killing it. It was only a few moments before the other two were finished- and by that point Catarina and Hoyt had just finished killing the ones around them.

The group had a few wounds, and Anton noticed his gambeson had a gash down the front, even after being supported with energy. It seemed the somewhat enhanced beasts had sharper claws as well. The group took some time to bind their wounds, and to recover energy. Fatigue still built up, but half an hour later they were near peak condition and ready to move on. Anton once again climbed a tree to search for the best targets. There's another group over there. They seem to be fighting serpents. They seem to be holding their own but...

We should go help, Timothy said. Even if they are doing well, the tides of battle can change.

Catarina nodded. Elders said so.

Hoyt smiled, Its not like they can complain if we dont intend to take the proof of the kill.

Anton quickly climbed down. Around this way should be the fastest. We should probably hurry just in case.

Chapter 25

When cultivators wanted to move quickly, they could do so more than Anton had imagined. Anton knew he wasnt anywhere near the speed of Elder Daniela, and he didnt have the *smoothness* of Elder Vincent, but he dashed through the forest without feeling as if he were going too fast to pick his footing. Though he was sure they used some unnecessary amounts of energy to move, energy propelled him and the rest forward in addition to the power of their legs. Three of them had completed the tempering of their muscles, and while Catarina was only halfway through that process she wasnt any slower than Timothy, who had less energy to call upon having not finished the tempering of his meridians.

It wasnt long before they were close to their intended target. Other disciples of the Order of Ninety-Nine stars were fighting a mass of swarming snakes, three of them fighting hard to protect two injured members. It seemed they had made the right choice to come assist them. The snakes were of all different sizes, though none of them small, as well as having a variety of colors varying through brown, red, yellow, black some striped and some spotted. These were the so-called rainbow serpents, and each different combination had a different sort of venom. Determining which was the worst was nearly impossible, but it was simply best to avoid all of them.

Anton would have liked to open up with a volley of arrows towards some of the closest serpents to the other group, but while he was confident in his ability to only hit the targets he was aiming at, he didnt want to startle anyone and distract them or cause them to think he was attacking them. He took shots at some of the smaller snakes, ones the size of grown adults if he were to compare to the few venomous snakes around Dungannon.

Enough serpents were slithering towards the group that the three defending couldnt prevent some from slipping past, which the two injured members had to defeat on their own. The entire group was low on energy, but they took heart at the arrival of support.

Timothy waded into the sea of snakes, his shield of little use against snakes biting at his legs but he had armored greaves and energy to protect him. He stomped on snakes with his boots and slashed with his sword to slice several at a time. His shield did

see *some* use as some of the snakes launched themselves at him, springing through the air.

Catarina moved around the outside of the pack where numbers were thinner, slicing into any snakes she could reach and drawing attention away from the center. Anton wasn't sure if there was some more profound meaning to the way she weaved back and forth, but he'd seen how her rearrangement of their battle site with the wolves had caused them to stumble when they should not have. There was some sort of energy flow on a level he couldn't really discern.

Hoyt had the hardest time with all of the small snakes, so instead of trying to slice through them one at a time when they chomped at him or even in bundles, he jumped forward deeper towards the larger ones. Anton saw him chop through a snake as big around as his forearm with a sickening slicing sound. He knew from attempting to kill some of them that their scales weren't so easy to penetrate. On that note, now that the other disciples wouldn't be completely surprised by his arrows he fired an arrow right into the middle, past Hoyt's shoulder and right in front of the nose of one of the other disciples, before it caught a springing red-brown snake in the eye as it attacked the rear of one of the injured disciples.

With the rainbow serpents being set upon from the outside, the sea of snakes started dwindling in number. There was a particularly large one that sprang towards Hoyt, and he chopped it out of the air with his axe. Surprisingly it resisted the blade and the energy augmenting it, at least enough not to be cleaved in two. However, when it struck again Catarina had arrived to stab her sword into its open mouth, slicing it from the inside.

Despite moving forward at a reasonable pace Anton was still ten meters or so away from the rest when the tide of serpents began dissipating. He never intended to leave all of the danger to them, but there was no point in risking himself when he was most effective at a distance. The ability to attack unrestrained helped more than distracting a few snakes would have, anyway. Anton continued to pick off escaping snakes, to prevent them from having enough numbers to trouble others.

Eventually, everything settled down. Thank you for the help, the other disciples inclined their heads. I don't know if we would have made it without you.

Just because the battle was over, however, didn't mean their troubles ended. All of the members of the other group had been bitten at least once- those they were sheltering had suffered several bites early in the battle. Hoyt had taken some bites as well, and though the actual wounds were almost entirely mitigated by his defensive energy, the serpents merely had to piece the skin to inject venom.

There were no universal antivenoms, even in the hands of the Order of the Ninety-Nine Stars, but there were medicines that could support a cultivator in removing the poison themselves. The process of removing poison involved circulating energy throughout the

meridians around the body. Refinements to marrow which produced blood could fortify a cultivator, and the organs in the torso could help remove poison. Supporting that with active energy and entrapping the venom and carrying it out of the body could speed up the process.

Anton himself needed to recover his energy, and he sat down in a meditative position, breathing in the air full of natural energy and letting it flow into him from both the inside and outside, through his lungs and in through his skin. As he was halfway through one circulation of energy to relieve some of the fatigue throughout his body, his eyes shot open, his hand grasping in front of him. His fingers curled around a snake- a small one, no bigger around than a finger and less than a meter in length. However, Anton held onto it with all of his might. He was concerned but not entirely surprised that it didn't get crushed in his grip immediately. He focused more energy into his hand to overcome the energy of the smaller snake. The snake thrashed about, swinging its tail into him, the tip of it carrying bursts of energy as well. Fortunately, though it was a magical beast capable of cultivating it appeared to be a young one. It had hidden among the masses of other snakes, waiting in ambush for people to relax. But with another powerful squeeze from his tempered muscles, the snake's neck snapped and it went limp. Anton looked down at his arms which would now have bruises from the tail. A gentle reminder not to let his guard down. He felt around the area for more energy, or snakes hidden among the bodies. Fortunately, that seemed to be the only one. Anton stowed the body in the magic bag that had been provided. Regardless of what they did with the rest, it would be hard to argue that their group shouldn't have that.

When Anton and the rest had recovered, they all gathered together. Will you be alright? Anton asked. The faces of the injured cultivators were a bit less pale at least.

They nodded. We will not be able to stay any longer but if we head out of the area directly we should not run into any more trouble.

Then we shall leave you to it, Anton nodded.

Wait, their leader said. You should take the bodies. We wouldn't have survived without you.

Anton understood how important contribution points could be, and though he had to look out for his own group, these others similarly needed the points. An even split would not be unfair. We could not take everything from fellow disciples. The group had already decided that would be their preferred policy whether they received aid from others or helped them- though they wouldn't demand anything.

An exactly even split wouldn't be possible, with all different sized and quality of snakes but they did the best they could. Neither side was much concerned with exactness in any case. After gathering everything and watching the other group depart towards the outer forest, Anton turned to the other three with him. I do not think we would be

advised to go deeper. If we were the ones to be initially set upon by that group, I am unsure if we would have fared better.

Agreed, Hoyt said. Though I dont entirely agree with the assessment, further in would be too much risk.

I hate snakes, Timothy said. Though uh, I dont suppose that matters. I agree with staying at this depth. I can handle myself against something like this, but much more

I like snakes, Catarina said. When they dont try to kill me. She looked wistfully off in the distance. I want to study the barrier.

The Order controlled a large area, and though they didnt encapsulate the whole forest in the barrier, it protected the side of the forest from beasts heading towards populated areas. Anton wasnt sure exactly how it worked, but it at least lessened the amount it happened.

Couldnt you have studied the barrier outside of a monster infested forest? Timothy asked.

Catarina shook her head. It should be different deeper into the forest. Cant have monsters wandering out of the forest to nearby areas.

Fine with me, Hoyt said. Its either that direction or the other, right?

Very well, Anton said. Well head in that direction, towards the edge of the Orders controlled area.

Chapter 26

The first thing Anton noticed was a bird in front of them. Nothing was particularly strange about the bird itself except it was larger than he would expect. In addition to that, it remained in the air with its wings out, not flapping. Wait, Anton held his hand out to the side, the rest stopping behind him. Anton focused his eyes, and even with the highest level of Hawks Eyes he could produce, he could only just barely see thin strings between the trees in front of them, wrapped around the bird.

Whats going on? Timothy asked.

Spiders. Diamondsilk spiders, to be specific. Anton was glad hed researched the various dangers in the area before The Hunt began. He wouldnt have imagined the sort of danger before them. Normal spiders had webs that could be difficult to see- though perhaps not with the eyes of a cultivator. For its size, spider silk was normally as strong as steel. However, to have something capable of catching a large bird the webs would have to be much thicker- and thus more visible. Except in the case of diamondsilk spiders, where the webs were well, extremely durable while thin if nothing else.

Diamond was perhaps a bad comparison, except visually. We have to be careful moving around. Only follow directly behind me. Anton looked around, seeing they had already found themselves inside the area of other webs. They were lucky not to have run into any, but now they had to be careful leaving the area. Attempting to gather the webs was a possibility, since Diamondsilk was many times stronger than normal spider silk and quite valuable. However, that came with its own dangers. It was possible to get tangled in the webs or exhaust too much energy taking them down and then facing the spiders who produced the webs. They were actually quite small and nearly invisible themselves, though they came in large numbers to devour the choice parts of prey much larger than themselves.

Anton first looked directly behind them. They could retreat that way, but he could see more webs on either side of them which would prevent them from easily going around the area. On the other hand, he could see a way to go deeper and hopefully through the area. He explained the options to the group.

Hoyt shrugged, Either way is fine with me, he turned his head around, Cant see any of these webs though.

The flow of energy is different around here, Catarina commented. Id prefer to go through.

Timothy scratched his head, I can barely even see the bird from here. Just let me know where to step.

Anton nodded. Well try going through then.

He was very careful with the movements he made, because while the webs couldnt be placed just *anywhere*- they had to string between two trees- they were even harder to see without the right light. He moved his head around to get different angles, keeping his eyes enhanced. Fortunately he only needed to track still targets, so it was less strain on his energy reserves than it would be in combat.

They picked their way through the forest one step at a time. Careful of this one here, gotta duck below it. Watch your left foot. Anton scraped the dirt with his boot to show the edge of where they could move. As they moved further, concern grew on Antons face. Hmm.

Whats wrong? Hoyt asked.

I havent spotted a single Diamondsilk spider yet. The book indicated they would be easier to see than the webs, if I looked in the right place. Anton glanced down at his boots and legs, but still saw nothing. There was also nothing hanging off of the webs. He should see transparent spiders, and the library had high quality images of them. He stayed on guard as they continued forward, but eventually the webs thinned and

stopped. Thats the end. We could attempt to gather some webs, but we dont have the tools. All wed end up with is sticky, tangled bodies in the magic bag.

We can come back after The Hunt, Catarina suggested, It can be quite useful.

Right. Anton nodded, but couldnt help but think about the missing spiders. It was unfortunate to miss such a good opportunity, but he couldnt help but think it was a trap of some sort.

There were no other obstructions to their path on the way to the barrier, and they only ran into a few lone beasts which were quickly defeated, along with some regular sized boars and wolves which they left alone. It wasnt as if they planned to exterminate the population.

This should be the right place, Anton waved his hand. He could generally sense something in front of them, a flow of energy, but not much beyond that.

Catarina nodded. She stepped forward, tracing her fingers in the air. As she did, a shimmering barrier- quite like a web but less regular in arrangement and not from a central point- became visible in front of them. Catarina stared at it, enraptured.

How long is this going to take? Timothy asked.

A while, she responded.

With that, Anton looked for a nice tree to take watch in. It would be better not to be stumbled upon by a pack of beasts. They should only be able to come from what was more or less a semicircle behind them, so it was easier than focusing on every direction. It was good to take a rest, as they had already spent a long day fighting and moving. Actually stopping for more than just the time to recover energy would do them good, though Catarina wasnt actually resting.

I dont see anything, Anton said.

Thats good, right? Hoyt questioned. Your tone doesnt make it sound good.

Something is wrong. There are far, far too few beasts nearby. What does that mean Anton pondered from where he was sitting in a tree. What is that? Anton narrowed his eyes as he looked at the horizon.

The barrier is broken, Catarina declared.

What? Hoyt asked.

Both Anton and Catarina spoke at the same time. The beasts can get through this section. and Theres a large group coming.

Normal people could sometimes parse two people talking at once, and cultivators brains were better at keeping track of multiple things. Timothy was the first to react, Are they coming towards us?

Yes, Anton said.

We should get out of here Hoyt said.

Thuston, Catarina said looking at a map.

What? Anton asked, jumping down next to her.

She pointed to the map. Here we are. Heres Thuston. So we can tell the elders where the barrier is broken.

Anton looked in front of them, his eyes just catching sight of the town in front of them, the tallest buildings just barely visible on the horizon. I have to protect them, Anton said. The rest of you should be able to move along the barrier to the south into safe territory.

What? Hoyt tilted his head, Oh. I see. Nah. Im going too. The Order is responsible for protecting people, isnt it?

Im coming too, Catarina said.

Right, Timothy nodded. I cant just leave them.

Anton nodded. I understand. I wont refuse your help. However, someone should go. We need to inform the elders. I dont know if we can defeat what I saw. It might not have been everything.

I can set up a formation that will help, Catarina said.

I want to fight, Hoyt said.

Everyone turned to look at Timothy. What? I might be the weakest, but if were just holding out against a large number of enemies I should be very helpful too.

Hoyt sighed, Ah. Youre right. And I can run faster. He shook his head, Cant waste any time arguing. Good luck. With that, Hoyt broke into a sprint along the edge of the barrier.

Well have maybe half an hour, Anton said, Maybe a bit less. If the beasts go into the surrounding area we cant do much to stop them. But at least we can protect one town.

Catarina nodded. Lets go.

There were no dangers on the way to Thuston, not that it would be expected. They should have previously been contained by the barrier, and normal animals would avoid humans if they were smart. Thuston itself was a town of a few hundred. The group got a few looks from people as they headed toward the center. There, Anton empowered his voice with some energy. People of Thuston. We are disciples of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars. We spotted a large number of beasts heading in this direction. We will do our best to protect you from them, but we cannot guarantee anything.

Theyre coming for our town? one man asked.

Anton shook his head. We dont know for sure. They may spread out and leave it alone. But there are not enough of us here to stop them if they go everywhere. If you flee the village, they might follow you, but if you dont the village may be overrun.

But youll protect us? a woman asked.

To the best of our abilities. We cant guarantee safety for any of you.

Can we fight too? One of the men asked. How many are there?

I cant count the numbers. You can fight but only defend yourselves from those that get past us. Anton looked around, Who wants to help with something else? You three- he pointed at several strong looking men, Help her rearrange things. She knows how to set up formations.

There were whispers among the crowd about that. It seemed they had only slightly more knowledge about formations than Anton himself had known at the beginning of the year. In short, they just knew it was something powerful and rare- and connected to the barrier around the nearby forest. Anton had expected the village to panic, but instead of doing so they easily listened to his instructions. Very few chose to flee and take their lives into their own hands, instead most of them preferring to stay to fight with the cultivators. Anton hoped he hadnt led them to their doom by providing that option but he also understood that if they didnt stay to defend their homes, they might have nothing left. Normal animals might not destroy homes, but he couldnt say the same would be true of a large pack of beasts. He hadnt been able to see clearly, but they were more like a stampede than a pack of wolves and it had been more than just one sort of creature. Anton gripped his bow tightly. It was time to put his cultivation to a practical use.

Chapter 27

The name of the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars carried great weight in all of Graotan, but especially nearby. Anton was surprised it was so easy to get the villagers of Thuston to believe them with nothing but their word. Then again, the consequences of potentially ignoring the situation were unfathomable. If for some reason the horde of beasts didnt come to Thuston or never existed at all, they would merely lose part of a day. Anton

knew he would have been gladly willing to sacrifice time to defend his home and family but he never had the chance.

...Anton. I need assistance. Catarina stood nearby. The formation will require more energy to start functioning.

Anton nodded. Unlike when she had moved around a few sticks and sliced through branches, the current setup in the village was more complex. It also took a lot more work to put together. It would be better if we could break down some walls. Catarina seemed disappointed that she couldn't quite set things up the way she thought they should go, but Anton contributing energy where she asked helped quite a bit. He could *feel* it more this time. He still had no idea how it worked, but that was why people trained hard to be a formation master, if they had the aptitude. If they had more time, Catarina might have been able to do more but she would reach the limits of her own energy and Anton's soon enough.

The villagers had called in all of the nearby field workers, gathering everyone who wished to stay and fight. Some had weapons, swords, bows, and the like. Others took any sort of sharp implements they had lying around. Pitchforks were a thousand times better than fighting barehanded, even if they weren't optimal weapons. One thing that Thuston had different from Dungannon is that a handful of the villagers had trained in cultivation. Only to the first or second star- but with the Ninety-Nine Stars readily available, nearly everyone gave cultivation a try. Anyone who reached the third star would have already gone to join the Order, but any amount of cultivation at all could greatly increase combat capabilities.

At the edge of town Anton stood atop a grain silo. It was the highest point around and gave him a good view of the approaching beasts. He had a look of concern on his face because they were right, and the beasts were headed for Thuston instead of merely spreading out. He couldn't be sure that a few hadn't trailed off, but the numbers of the various creatures were still high. Hundreds maybe more, since there were creatures of all different sizes grouped together in a way that was impossible to count.

The movements of the beasts were highly unnatural. Wolves kept pace with snakes and boars, bears walked underneath circling eagles the only thing that reassured Anton was that there were very few signatures of magical beasts among the group. However, *few* magical beasts was not none. He was glad the villagers hadn't chosen to flee, because three of them couldn't handle so many beasts and they wouldn't be able to outrun the tide. It wasn't *fast*, but Anton saw no signs of it slowing. I've spotted them on the horizon! It will only be a few minutes before they arrive.

Timothy stood at the main entrance to the village below, flanked on either side by barrels and crates mostly at least half full, providing a partial barrier to the village between two buildings. Catarina stood nearby, ready to move wherever necessary to deal with beasts that didn't attack from the front. The formation should apparently encourage them to move as she intended, but nothing was perfect. Anton, of course,

would also be able to move around if necessary. He was surprised at how little he was worried about getting down from the top of a silo, as he wouldn't have been able to even make the attempt a year before. He'd changed so much.

Anton looked to the sky. The most troublesome beasts would be those that flew. While they could be attacked when they came down to claw at people, they had sharp talons that could pierce flesh or stab through an eye.

A moving target at a few hundred meters was about the maximum range for Anton. He could do a bit more, but additional distance took a disproportionate amount of energy, as his control wavered so far from himself. That was doubly so with Spirit Arrows, though his control was more precise with them out to a more conservative two hundred meters.

As the beasts came within range, Anton picked a target. There were so many it hardly mattered, but he supposed some early casualties might discourage them. He didn't have a good angle for a kill shot on most of the creatures, but he pulled back his bow. It no longer seemed as if the heavy draw weight of it were so much more than a normal bow, after he'd finished muscle tempering and continued practicing with the bow. The black steel string had the proper springiness he would expect of a traditional string, and the bow bent back in a curve as he pulled back, his arm and back muscles tensing but only holding for a moment before release.

The arrow- a real arrow with his energy enhancing it- flew straight and true towards the shoulder of a large bear, sinking in half of its length. If it had been any normal bear it would have likely gone down in an instant, but it continued hobbling forward for a dozen meters. By that point, Anton had fired three more arrows at the beasts on the ground and was changing his target to the air, having staggered the front ranks of the beasts as much as he practically could.

Shooting up into the air, the weight of an arrow was more significant. Spirit Arrows were able to overcome that barrier, with only a small arc at most and the ability to fly more quickly with less drag. His first target was an eagle, its wingspan at least as wide as a man was tall. His arrow flew towards it, and as the bird curved in flight to avoid the attack the arrow changed trajectory slightly as well. He only managed to pierce through a wing instead of the chest, but that was sufficient to bring it down. As it spiralled downward into the ground he knew it wouldn't be moving about after it hit.

The villagers with bows were further back and could shoot less distance, but soon the beasts were close enough for them to open fire. A dozen arrows flew in a small volley into the crowd of animals of various sorts, and while the effects weren't immediately obvious, more bodies were trailing behind the end of the swarm.

Anton continued to fire at the flying beasts, preparing himself to move. Though the silo wasn't a large platform to stand on, with Swan Steps he thought he could dodge around past a bird or two. If he couldn't, he could at least manage his fall to the ground below.

He knew he was a target with his position but that was the whole point. He couldn't allow the villagers of Thuston to suffer when he had the power to fight.

Timothy nervously held his position in front of the village. He saw how many beasts were rushing towards them, but he kept his confidence high. Individually, most of them weren't a threat. He could kill one with a single stab of his sword. If only he had the luxury of fighting just one at a time. Behind him stood other villagers, and more were preparing for beasts to sneak around the sides, away from the main street.

A wildcat was the first thing to break away from the pack and charge. Timothy held his sword and shield at the ready, impaling the creature as it leaped and catching its paw with his shield. His body rocked backwards from the momentum of the attack, and it took him a moment to free his sword. By that point, a wolf had slipped past him and he found himself facing a snake and a bear. He swiped at the bear before it got close, his sword cutting along its nose and sending it reeling away. The snake he batted away with his shield, flinging it into the stacked pile next to him. The tide of beasts began to crash into the barrier, attempting to knock it over and starting to climb over it.

There was no way it would have held together without the effect of the formation fortifying the village. Even so, it was clear it wouldn't last long. Timothy gathered his own energy, carefully breathing in to draw more natural energy from the world as he did so. After he'd begun to temper his meridians with the guidance of Anton, he'd felt his ability to control energy increase immensely. He stabilized himself against the ground while at the same time using the force of the approaching tide to push back against them.

He never took more than a step away from his position even as he began to be surrounded. This is what cultivators were supposed to do. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars protected people, and he was one of their disciples. He found himself in a trance of slicing and stabbing, unable to *think* about his next moves and merely performing them. His mind numbed the pain when his armor was dented or torn through, when his bones cracked from the impact of large beasts and when blood began to flow from his body.

Timothy knew he absolutely couldn't stop everything from passing him, but he did his very best. He was already the weakest member of the team, probably included because he lived in the same complex as Anton- or because Catarina asked. Even with Anton's personal guidance he was a full star behind the next two members. He knew he could never keep up with Catarina, but he also didn't want to disappoint her. Or himself.

He continued to hold his position until the tide started thinning but while he might have liked to sigh in relief he knew things weren't over. A few magical beasts were among the remaining half of the creatures, and he was starting to slow down. He really hoped backup would arrive soon though he knew Hoyt had quite a distance to run to find any help, and the return trip might take just as long. Timothy almost didn't believe his eyes

when he saw the bear rear up in front of him, seemingly as big as either of the buildings that stood on either side of him. Unless support was already on the horizon, he couldn't count on any help beyond what they had. He grit his teeth to prepare to face the beast.

Chapter 28

Up on its hind legs, the bear in front of Timothy looked to be at least five meters tall, and maybe half as wide. It had bark brown fur and limbs as thick around as his torso for their entire length. When it plopped back onto its front legs the ground trembled for a moment. This was the sort of thing that could wipe out Thuston all on its own. A nebulous energy surrounded it, and though its size was likely a bigger factor the energy couldn't be ignored. If Timothy was careless, he might find his attacks not being as effective as he intended at a critical moment, or not defending himself adequately because he didn't consider the augmentation energy could provide to a magical beast.

It was fortunate that the bear's arrival sent most of the nearby beasts scattering away as it charged. Timothy was hoping to get some support from Anton up above, but a quick glance showed the old man was dealing with his own troubles, large taloned birds attacking him atop the silo. At least there were villagers available to support him, though Timothy didn't want to risk their lives if possible. He would have to bear the brunt of the danger.

The great bear charged forward almost ponderously. It almost looked like it was moving through molasses except for the fact that it was rapidly growing closer. Each giant step it took was several meters of distance despite the small number of actual paces. A moment later it arrived in front of the wall that had been set up, sweeping a great paw and shattering the crates and barrels into pieces. Timothy blocked the splinters flying towards his face as he tried to figure out how to fight the creature.

The only thing he knew for sure is he couldn't let it get into the village. Without thinking, his legs carried him forward towards the bear. He ducked under its other paw which was sweeping back across the same area, swinging his sword outward as he circled around the beast. He thought he had a pretty good hit, but as his sword raked along the bear's fur he realized he probably didn't even get through to the flesh.

At least he succeeded in drawing its attention. It quickly turned and swept down towards him with its paws. The speed at which it moved was deceptive because of its size. Timothy wanted to keep circling around the creature, but through the bear's legs he saw villagers approaching it from behind. If he dodged around it, he'd lead it to attack them.

Timothy thrust his sword in its lower belly, piercing through the fur into the fat, and when it flattened itself to try to crush him he dove away. A dozen weapons stabbed into the creature's rear, though without the power of a fourth star cultivator their effects were limited. Timothy moved back in towards the creature's lowered face, slashing across its nose. In return, the bear swiped at him. Though he dodged away, five gashes were torn across his chest from the creature's claws, as if he had no armor at all. Of course,

without the armor and his energy he would instead have half of his chest torn away. Timothy knew he was riding the line, but he had managed to keep its focus on him.

He stepped forward in a feint, pulling away as the creature swiped back in the other direction. He swung his sword between the claws, hoping to slice through the forearm lengthwise but instead settling for a bleeding gash. With every move it was stabbed in the rear, but it focused its gaze on him as the target in front.

Timothy attempted another feint, but in his peripheral vision he caught the movement of both paws at once, slightly offset. The beast was stepping forward as well, so if he retreated he would be caught and torn apart regardless. That left him with the only option to move forward. It was terrifying to get closer to the massive beast, but he gathered his energy and thrust his sword deep into its belly. Deep enough he couldn't pull it out, and he didn't roll away fast enough when it flopped down on him.

It was close. It was just a single foot that didn't make it out. The softness of the creature's fur and flesh meant his foot wasn't completely crushed, but it was definitely broken. Timothy yanked his foot out from under the creature. He could stand on it, but he certainly couldn't dodge well.

While turning its ponderous mass to face him, the bear twisted its upper body and neck so it could bite at him. The jaws were large enough to fit him entirely inside, widthwise at least. Timothy had to think fast, unstrapping his shield and throwing it at the bear's nose where he had previously cut. It wasn't real damage, but the creature flinched in pain. That allowed him just a single moment to grab fistfuls of fur around its upper jaw and pull himself upward. He flipped himself over and found himself astride the bear's snout, his legs barely able to split wide enough to fit around. He'd ridden a horse in the past, back in his hometown of Carran. He squeezed with his thighs and with nothing else he could do he punched out with a gauntleted fist towards the creature's eye. It closed a massive eyelid and his fist rebounded, but he reached out towards with both hands, tearing at the eyelid where it closed together.

It was like trying to tear apart a canvas tent, except even more difficult. His tempered muscles and energy were barely enough but he revealed a few centimeters of bare eyeball. He stabbed out with his fingers and as much energy as he could, piercing into it as a paw batted him away.

One claw tore into his shoulder, but he was mostly hit by the pad. Even so, it felt like everything broke as he slammed through a nearby wall and into the floor. So much for protecting the structures, he could barely even protect himself. If he hadn't tempered his bones, would he just be a pile of mush?

Somehow he managed to sit up, and looked straight into the eye of the bear. The one he'd pierced was closed and bleeding but was it enough blood? He couldn't say. The creature likely had enough to fill an entire well. If only he could stand up...

Though only a small portion of the beasts moved around to alternate entrances to the village, they were the more clever ones. Catarina found herself fully occupied scurrying around fending off the strongest beasts. She was barely able to keep up. It almost seemed like her formation wasn't working, but she knew what the real issue was. She just wasn't strong enough. She said she knew formations and she did. Like a young child might know how to speak. She could do it but she was certainly no master yet. She'd barely been able to understand the barrier around the forest, just enough to know it was broken. Covering an entire village in enhancements was difficult. And it might not be enough.

All around her Catarina saw villagers injured by the beasts she couldn't reach in time. They were fighting, slaying the creatures as well but none of them were really prepared for what they were facing. Maybe they should have just told them to abandon everything. They could have at least saved their lives.

Catarina first noticed a new threat by sensing its energy. A magical beast- her eyes flickered to it and saw a large, black furred cat. The panther had led at least a dozen mismatched beasts into the village.

As if they had agreed upon a match, both Catarina and the panther moved towards each other. She darted past it, slashing with her sword. She thought she would avoid its swiping claws, but she felt traces of blood on her upper arm and then the pain a moment later. It was fast. Too fast, and much too strong to face alone. Catarina changed her tactics. She moved at a different angle, focusing more on her defense as she passed the creature back and forth. Her sword might not even find purchase with each pass, but the same was true for the panther.

However, Catarina was consuming her energy rapidly and the panther mostly relied on its body. Catarina had five stars of body tempering, but muscle wasn't one of them she needed energy to swiftly kill creatures as well as to defend herself.

The pair continued to pass each other seemingly at random, but Catarina was leading the panther towards a particular point. She was glad to see that none of the villagers were along the path to be collateral damage. There was a fountain at the center of the village, and Catarina leapt up to stand atop it.

The panther wriggled, preparing to pounce but Catarina didn't move. She was concentrating on gathering energy, what she had inside of herself and everything swirling about the village. This was the central point of the formation she'd set up, and the best point for her to empower herself.

The panther leaped, jaws open and claws ready to latch onto her, as if having her head crushed in the jaws wouldn't be enough. Catarina could dodge, but she wouldn't keep control of the energy if she did so. She thrust her sword in front of her, right into the

open jaw, through the roof of the mouth, and into the creatures brain. Her sword, her arm, the fountain and everything around trembled as the energy of the formation collided with the creature, stopping its momentum and killing it. Her entire arm suffered cuts and she knew there was internal damage. Her meridians were strained, and the fountain was cracked but she pulled her sword out of the creatures mouth. She looked around but wasn't ready to see another creature, a wolf half again bigger than the panther. Another magical beast. What had they gotten themselves into?

Chapter 29

The sound of hurried boots crunching leaves, sticks, and undergrowth filled the forest, along with the sound of heavy paws. Hoyt breathed deeply, trying to maintain a steady rhythm as his lungs burned. Running with wolves nipping at his heels wasn't something he enjoyed, but at least they motivated him to go even faster.

Honestly, Hoyt would have enjoyed the whole thing except for the danger to himself and to those he was trying to save. Pushing his body to the limits for cultivation was a wonderful feeling at least later, when he was recovering. In the moment, the burning lungs and muscle pain were the worst part. Hoyt couldn't say he enjoyed the way he was draining his reserves of energy, either. There was only so much natural energy he could take in, and it wasn't keeping up.

He ignored the wolves behind him, since looking back would merely cause him to trip up as he moved forward. They were loud enough he knew they were at least several paces back. As long as nothing slowed him down

But of course, the forest wouldn't let things be so easy. A giant boar spotted him, not that he expected to pass unseen. However, as with most of the creatures in the forest it was aggressive. It charged straight for him from the front, with wolves behind.

With just a few moments to consider if he could afford the time to dodge around it, especially with the wolves being spread out on either side behind him, he chose a more direct option. He couldn't be sure it would work until he tried it. Cultivators were probably supposed to make better decisions than normal people, but Hoyt knew they really just made decisions with the power to recover from mistakes as long as such mistakes weren't too big.

He continued to run at the boar that was as tall as himself head on. Twenty paces. Ten paces. Five paces, and the boar had lowered its head. The tusks were long enough to impale him from below his ribcage up into his jaw. Hoyt put on a small burst of speed, putting himself one step ahead of where he would have been, then jumped. Not high but enough to get a foot on top of the boar's snout as it flipped its head up.

His head crashed through the branches above as he tumbled through the air. Hoyt knew he was keeping forward momentum for the most part, but he tried to orient himself for his landing. During his relatively effortless handful of seconds in the air while he was

upside down he thought he saw a pile composed of the boar and wolves. While the creatures of the forest seemed more interested in attacking humans for the most part, a direct collision seemed likely to turn into a proper conflict.

A few moments before he hit the ground, crashing through more branches, Hoyt managed to right himself. When he hit the ground he rolled, wrapping his energy around himself as he turned into a ball. He only intended to roll once, but he flipped at least a dozen times. His axe caught on something and the strap tore off, but he sprang back to his feet and kept moving. He could get it later- or replace it. People couldn't be replaced. Especially not people like Anton. The others were fine as well but that old man was something special. Not just his cultivation talent, either.

He kept sprinting.

Hoyt was pretty sure that the fact that he could barely see now wasn't a good sign. His vision narrowed to a small tunnel in front of him. His lungs were just *numb* and he was pretty sure he was slowing down and that some of the muscles in his legs just didn't work. It was hard to tell if he was still moving, with the change in perspective. His legs kept trying to move even as a hand rested on his shoulder.

Need help?

The voice seemed familiar for some reason. The face was indiscernible. ...Thuston Hoyt managed to choke down a lungful of air, Anton Did he even have lungs? He wasn't sure anymore. ...beast swarm He was pretty sure he was supposed to say more words. And be standing vertically.

Why was he on his side? The trees were moving at least. But as they thinned and Hoyt's brain managed to regain a semblance of understanding, he realized they were going the wrong way. This was out of the forest, completely in the opposite direction of Anton and the others. Thuston was about as far away from the center of the Orders territory as anything could get, except the deep forest.

No other way Hoyt muttered. Thus ton

Birds- even large birds- were easy to kill if he could hit them. The first few had been simple. Anton tracked their movements and got an arrow through them easily enough. Body or wings didn't matter. Either way they fell, and the ground wouldn't be kind to them. However, after his first few shots the raptors started to recognize their own mortality. They had the ability to turn rapidly, even diving or rising swiftly if they needed to. He could only redirect his arrows a certain amount, and there were too many to focus on taking down just one.

Everything was more difficult when they reached him in his position atop the silo, slashing at him with claws and beaks. He got some practical experience dodging in a tight space. He knew he could just drop down, and perhaps that would be safest for himself. He could continue to pick off the raptors as they attacked the villagers, keeping himself safe at the cost of the people of Thuston.

But of course, he couldn't. While it wasn't *his* village, they were still people. They were farmers and smiths and grocers and weavers *people*. They didn't deserve to die. Especially not for an old man. His thoughts flickered to the thought of some of the villagers of Dungannon and his family in slavery. He wanted to save them too, but he wasn't strong enough. He just couldn't let himself choose something more dear to himself over present, actual lives he could save. And nothing said he couldn't do both. He just had to live.

Blood trickled down his cheek. Giant raptor talons were sharp enough to tear through his energy with seemingly little effort. He could focus on a single area to protect it, but that would leave the rest of his body open. Then a little cut like that would become a spike sticking through his head or shoulder.

The most important thing for Anton was predicting the enemies movements. One Step Ahead he honestly didn't know how anyone was supposed to comprehend what it was saying. Grasping what your enemy- or possibly *enemies*- would do in the future wasn't so easy. But Anton was certain that at least Elder Kseniya knew how to do it. In her demonstrations, she most certainly fought unseen opponents. More than just one, Anton had realized after some consideration. He'd attempted to do the same and just maybe that practice let him keep his footing while avoiding *most* of the danger. He couldn't say he even had the first level of understanding of One Step Ahead, but he felt a certain tingling sensation of progress.

Another thing Elder Kseniya had done came to mind. He didn't always have time to draw his bow, but Spirit Arrows were merely sharp stabbing implements made of energy. They did well enough when not propelled by the bow, and he didn't have to let them disperse. He stabbed at one of the raptors- probably an eagle but he didn't have time to observe so closely for details- forcing it to swerve away. Then he fired the same arrow at another just a handful of meters away, using a partial draw with less power but sufficient speed.

A dozen large birds dwindled to a half dozen, three, two but one remained. It had actually been hanging further back, circling around and watching Anton. It radiated energy, indicating it was a magical beast. As it flew towards him, Anton could see it gained speed from more than just the flapping of its wings. Waves of winds flattened plants down below as it moved. He just barely moved out of the way of talons trying to impale his head.

Anton returned to the center of the silo so he could dodge in every direction. He managed to fire a single arrow at the beast as it turned around, but it came back at him

just as swiftly. His arrow deflected off a wing- the first time he hadn't pierced into one- and he found himself having to fall to his back to get under the bird. Shooting from a prone position wasn't optimal at all, but that forced it to swerve on its return and gave him time to stand. However, it was clear to Anton that he was becoming fatigued, and the magical beast was merely growing more used to his movements. Unless it was distracted, he doubted he could get a solid hit on it and anything less wouldn't penetrate through its defensive energy and surprisingly durable feathers. The beast swooped around, and Anton felt it focusing itself for a powerful attack.

Birds did have some weaknesses, though. Even at the creature's size, it probably wasn't any heavier than Anton. He might not be able to dodge it, but the actual force behind its blows, as long as he avoided the talons he could withstand it. And if he was making that choice, he was glad he'd studied Golden Armor. It wasn't anything particularly profound, but having a proper method to solidify his energy into a stronger defensive layer was quite useful. He just had to be resolved to take a hit, and to expend the energy for the technique.

Anton readied his bow as the bird flew towards him, talons outstretched. Was it a hawk? This one might have been. Either way, Hawk Eyes let him focus on its movements regardless of whether or not it shared a name. Along with that, splitting his attention between Spirit Arrows and Golden Armor was too much so he drew one of his few remaining physical arrows. It would still be enhanced sufficiently with his own energy.

The arrow flew towards the great hawk, sticking a finger length into its chest. That might have been enough for the lesser beasts, but the hawk continued its motion unperturbed. Anton watched as talons came straight for him. At the very last moment, he tilted his body and bow at a strange angle. Talons scraped along his arm, leaving a bloody gash even with a glance along his Golden Armor protected limb.

Anton raised his arm, the bow and string around the leg as he lifted as high as he could, catching the leg. The momentum of the creature yanked him off of his feet- and the silo- but he grabbed a wing with his other hand. Then he was spinning, down towards the ground. He repositioned himself to land atop the great bird with all of his weight, rolling away almost nimbly after they impacted. The great bird wasn't quite dead, but the hollow bones of an avian couldn't survive such a feat even if the particular one in question was a magical beast. Anton's own tempered bones were barely holding on after the impact. And while the bird would never fly again, Anton found himself just barely able to walk, his energy exhausted. And there were more beasts to combat. Even a few normal wolves would be able to bring him down.

Even as he began to wish he had begun cultivating sooner, and not wrapped up Timothy and Catarina into a suicidal mission his eyes drifted towards the sky. For some reason, he felt like he saw a giant eye staring down at him. Anton wasn't sure if he believed in gods of any sort and he certainly didn't think cultivators would truly become gods, as some believed but the eye made him reconsider the possibility. A moment later, the sky darkened and all of the energy in the area was pulled away in a great

swirling vortex. Something truly unfathomable at Anton's current cultivation level was happening and he couldn't afford to miss a single moment.

Chapter 30

The force of the flowing energy nearly pulled Anton off his feet. While he was certainly unsteady at the moment, the fact that merely gathering energy had that effect left him in awe. As the sky continued to darken, the lone eye he'd spotted grew clear and bright. Along with the eye was a wrinkled hand, more folded skin and gnarls than even Anton had ever had.

All of the energy in the area around Thuston gathered into that hand. Anton knew he shouldn't be stopping to stare at it, but the beast swarm had paused as well. Perhaps they *couldn't* do anything else.

Though Anton was quite certain it was merely early evening, stars bloomed in the sky. However, as the great hand in the sky closed, the stars started to fall. His head turned as he watched the first star streak from the sky, striking a great bear, leaving behind only a flaming crater and no discernable remains of the creature. However, despite the power of the falling star the building immediately adjacent didn't even get singed.

Smaller stars rained down on other beasts, sometimes merely piercing through beasts like flaming spears. Those were especially common inside the village, where the powerful concentrations of energy brushed past the villagers of Thuston without harming a single one.

Soon enough, the great eye and hand turned more stars plummeting into the forest, though leaving behind no fire.

As the last of the stars in the sky fell, the sky began to return to the dull red sky of sunset. The hand and eye faded from existence, but Anton couldn't help but think that right before they disappeared the eye turned back and focused directly on him, just for a moment.

Unsure what to do, Anton half walked half hobbled into Thuston. Timothy crawled out of a hole in the side of a building and joined him. The villagers of Thuston were all talking with each other about what happened. Upon seeing Anton and Timothy, they asked them.

I can't say I know for sure, Anton said. Though I would expect a grand elder got involved. Timothy didn't know either, and he kept looking over his shoulder into the sky.

There were dead beasts around the streets of Thuston, and while there were a few injured villagers, and some dead, along with a few destroyed buildings Anton was still willing to declare the battle a victory. He just wasn't sure if he had an important impact on it, if everything was finished off by someone not even present. But instead of feeling

discouraged, Anton supposed he should be thinking about reaching that level of power. Cultivation was so much more than just what he had seen and experienced so far.

After finding Catarina to determine she was alright- injured just like the other two, but nothing fatal- Anton requested the villagers for a place to rest. Cultivators *could* recover pretty much anywhere, but a proper room and comfort could help immensely.

Natural energy was just beginning to flow back into the area after having been entirely used up. It wasn't an issue, since Anton found himself only able to handle just a little. His meridians ached from overuse, but he didn't exactly have the luxury to hold back in a battle. He spent several hours circulating energy throughout his body. He found that his tendons- the next target of his tempering- had progressed quite significantly. Though they were sore now, he was likely only a week or two from completing the tempering and the seventh star. At least the desperate battle had been good for *something*.

Anton was disturbed from his cultivation by a smell. Not a bad one, but the pleasant smell of food. Upon stepping outside his borrowed room, he found the center of town was filled with a large number of bonfires and roasting meat.

The villagers waved him over. You're finally out! This feast is in honor of you, and the survival of our village!

Among the food was a large amount of boar and surprisingly large drumsticks of avian meat. Anton smiled. His mind returned to celebrations in the past. He pushed away thoughts of those no longer with him, and instead focused on the happy feelings. Timothy seemed to be enjoying the festivities already, while it seemed that Catarina had hidden away with a plate of food.

The feasting and celebration lasted well into the night, but eventually the time came for sleep, and then the morning. Just because the beast swarm had been defeated didn't mean everything was resolved. There were still many bodies of beasts- despite many being destroyed or consumed- and while Anton and the others filled the magic bag there were many more. Tanners and butchers had already gone to work dismantling beasts, and the villagers had sent people to nearby villages and to the Order for help. Those sent to the Order wouldn't have arrived just yet, but Thuston knew the Order would pay them for the materials and help remove the corpses before they started rotting.

Thinking of the Order, Anton found the others. I am going to go secure the hole in the barrier. Just in case He knew he wasn't fully recovered yet, and both Timothy and Catarina were the same. Hoyt had probably reached the Order the evening before. It seemed unlikely a Grand Elder would have gotten involved by random chance. Unless there were some other powerful cultivator in the area who just happened to help, but that seemed completely improbable. Besides, that cultivation power had radiated the aura of the Ninety-Nine Stars, in addition to the dramatic method of their attacks.

Anton didnt want to bring his young companions into more danger, but he also couldnt refuse to let them come with him. Besides, he might need their help. At the end of their almost leisurely hike back to the barrier, Antons concerns of danger were immediately assuaged.

Anton! Elder Vincent waved. Its good to see you made it. I was just providing some support as these fine fellows repaired the barrier, he gestured behind him. Vincent nodded to Timothy and Catarina, Your companion Hoyt nearly ran himself to death to warn us what was happening. A dangerous situation you got into.

Anton nodded. Yes Im not sure we handled it the right way.

Did the defense of the village go poorly? Vincent asked. I heard the situation had been resolved but

Some of the villagers were injured, and others died. I wonder if we could have drawn the beasts away, or if we should have abandoned the village Anton bit his lip.

Vincent gave him a pat on the shoulder. Dont worry, you made the right choice. A beast swarm like that wasnt running on just instinct. They were seeking out people. You might not have been able to draw them away from the village, and if they fled they would merely have been caught without a defensible position, and likely without their homes. Magical beasts can be incredibly destructive.

Vincent! one of the elders at the barrier called.

I have to finish here, Vincent waved. Oh, The Hunt is officially over. It seemed we made a mistake with our estimations of the danger, and this break in the barrier he shook his head. Get back to the Order and get your well deserved rewards.

Elder Lois was not alone in handling the rewards hall at the current moment. After all, The Hunt brought many people to collect rewards. The contents of the magic bags were actually sorted by the equipment refinement department, but they sent a report on the value to the rewards hall, where the points would be logged. There was a bit of a line, but almost everyone was in good spirits.

Even though the points would be split in four, a full magic bag had to be worth quite a few contribution points. The villagers of Thuston wanted to give them more, but they had participated in the battle as well and deserved some recompense. Anton and the others had taken the most valuable remains of the magical beasts, where they still had structure.

Anton ended up being attended to by Elder Lois herself. Hello again! she said as Anton handed over his token. Lets see here with the information from the refinement

department and the other rewards your portion of the total should be this. She held out a sheet for him to see. The number 2308 was on the paper. Your team also received some commendations, which are more than just a nice word.

Is that number right? I thought my share of the materials would only be half that, at most. Anton was concerned the others might have given him a larger share because of his higher cultivation level, even though they needed the contribution points as well.

Elder Lois smiled, The additional points are for valorous actions. The Order absolutely rewards defending villages. That includes all forms, such as your friend who ran to retrieve assistance.

Anton nodded. Good. Thank you. He had no idea what he would do with so many contribution points. He didn't need a new bow- he doubted he would find one significantly better within that range. Perhaps some armor. He had heard there were exceptional armors available, light like clothing but able to defend like steel. He had used armor along a similar vein- though the more mundane sort, enough that it had protected him from dying at least. Now that he had been through some battles and could afford it, the thought of something better was quite appealing. He understood that he was quite mortal even after cultivating, and he had things he wanted to live for still.

Since money was burning a hole in the pocket was a poor reason to spend, Anton decided to wait until another day and give some proper thought to it. Perhaps there was something he needed more but wouldn't consider right away. Besides, he still wanted to rest more.

When he arrived back at the complex where he lived, he was surprised to find an unknown elder waiting for him. The elder bowed his head. Anton Krantz. Grand Elder Vandale has requested to meet with you, at your earliest convenience.

Anton understood what that meant. It meant *now*. Sure, he could make an elder wait around for a while to escort him to see someone important but he had no intent to be petty. Especially not if he was right in his estimation that this Grand Elder was the eye and hand in the sky.