

Elder Cultivator

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Though he had been extremely polite about it, it was obvious that Lev *needed* the escort back to the Grasping Willows. Even with the support of his energy he walked quite unsteadily. It wasn't possible for cultivators to fully heal in a day, especially not without any miraculous medicines. Anton was quite willing to share what he had, but it wasn't exactly suited for the precise purpose of regrowing bits that had been replaced by parasitic mold.

It wasn't clear if Lev's right arm would ever work again, and everyone silently agreed not to bring it up as they traveled. It wasn't a long journey, but no day or meal was lacking in Lev's expressions of thanks.

I don't know how I can ever repay you all, Lev said. You saved my life.

I'd quite like to say, don't worry about it, but I do believe we could use whatever reward you could scrounge up. Anton sighed slightly and looked wistfully off into the distance. We experienced some difficulties that ended up with finances lost for nothing. We still have need of more funds in the near future, possibly more than anticipated. Anton's eyes settled on Pete and the others briefly.

I'm not rich, but I did promise that pay for my mission, Lev looked over the group. You're traveling away from Khonard? I assume the trouble was there.

Anton grunted. I made some miscalculations. Mishandled politics, overestimated myself.

You don't sound like you're from Ofrurg, though. Did you bet on yourself in an arena match? At least you're alive.

Something like that, Anton said.

Hmm Lev thought for a few moments, Elder Varela has some sway with people there. I don't know if I'm worth enough to get him to try to cancel debts, but if you need more time

That's not quite the problem, Anton said. No need to burden yourself with it.

You saved my life though. Lev continued to look over the group, Is it someone you know? Enslaved and fighting? Anton's expression told him enough. I'm sorry to hear that. If you failed to just buy them, they have to be a cultivator, right? That's harder to deal with. I can at least ask, though.

I doubt he will be let free, Anton said.

Well, no. Lev shook his head, Elder Varela doesnt have actual authority there. But he knows some people, and hes mid Spirit Building which gives him more weight there. Im honestly surprised someone would compete with you over a slave. People cant really control slaves at Spirit Building, so their upper end value in an arena Lev shook his head, I wouldnt have expected anyone to be willing to make an enemy of a Spirit Building cultivator over a single person.

He wasnt, when it started, Hoyt explained. Though that *woman* might have tried something regardless.

Oh. It was some time ago, then? Lev asked.

Two months. Just a bit less actually, Hoyt said.

A recent breakthrough? Lev once again twitched as his right arm didnt move how he wanted, so he merely bowed his head. Congratulations. I know it doesnt make up for a friend in danger, but it is still worthy of celebration.

I have not often been in the mood to celebrate as of late, Anton said.

I understand. So this woman. She is backed by one of the powerful clans?

Theres an understanding not to speak of it, Anton said.

Hmm. Someone young then? Who thought they might actually lose to you... Lev frowned.

She did lose, Catarina said. Then she threw a tantrum. Antons eyes sharpened as he looked at Catarina. Sorry.

Ah I believe Ive seen her, Lev said. I promise not to speak of it. Except the part where you have a friend you would like to survive. Ah! Theres our road. Lev smiled, Soon well be able to see the sect. He pulled out his sword with his left hand, The roads a bit unkempt, so

Beasts? Anton asked.

No no, nothing like that. Levs eyes moved back and forth across the road before stopping. There was about a minute of silent walking before he suddenly swung his sword at the air in front of him, slicing through the hanging branches of a nearby tree.

Should you be damaging the namesake of your sect like that? Hoyt asked. Those droopy vine-like trees are willows, right?

The Grasping Willow, even, Lev nodded. And we like visitors to reach our grounds. So we chop.

I see, said Anton, looking deeper into the woods away from the road. It quite makes sense. Not many birds here.

The smart ones stay away! Lev said, And the ones like that pigeon- he pointed with his blade. The pigeon flew towards the branch of one of the willows, brushing against the dangling branches. As it did so, the branch suddenly curled up, sticking to the pigeons wing and wrapping around its body. The bird flapped its wings and made a racket. See? Sometimes they even get grounded wildlife. Careless wolves and deer and stuff.

Eep! Catarina said. They eat wolves? She shifted her weight back and forth as she walked. How do they know?

These plants just eat everything. Including people, if theyre even more careless. We get some of our proper fighting style from ideas about them, and we also sort of just placed ourselves in the midst of them. Thus the name. Lev gestured, You can break off the branch if you dont panic. But mostly the trees use anything that bumps into their branches.

Oh. Fuzz is safe then.

Whos Fuzz? Hoyt asked.

Probably that wolf conspicuously placed in her pack, Anton said.

Catarina smiled awkwardly, Why would I- um, Catarina stuttered to defend herself.

Its a serious responsibility. Not just raising an animal, but a wild beast, Anton cautioned her. Cultivators have more ability to handle a bit of misbehavior, but make sure it doesnt harm others. If youre not sure if you can do whats necessary if things go wrong, its best to rid yourself of it now. Anton shook his head, But if you really want to try, youd better study up on beast taming. If you even have any spare time.

I have a little, Catarina said. I can do it.

Fine, Anton said. I trust you to be responsible about it. But I wanted to caution you.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. The willows were kept back further from the road close to the entrance of the sect. Lev waved to the guards at the gates as they approached. Hello! Im back!

Lev! One of the guards said, We thought you'd be back a day or two ago. The burly man looked over him from head to toe, Well have to talk about what happened. And the rest of these?

They rescued me, Lev said. They're from

The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, Anton answered.

I thought so, Lev nodded. But I wasn't sure. I've heard good things about them. Though you probably hadn't heard of us.

Well-

Lev raised his good arm. Don't worry about it. We're a small sect. But I'd like to say we're one of the more upstanding ones in Ofrurg, though not the strongest. He looked to the guards, Can we enter?

If you vouch for them. The elders will be eager to see you, thought you might want to first visit the healer.

Lev shook his head, Don't think it'll change anything. At least it didn't reach my meridians.

You'll have to tell me what it is sometime.

I bet you'll hear all about it, Lev said. Some really nasty stuff over there.

They were waved through the gates. The guards still kept their eyes on the group as they walked around, but there wasn't much else to watch out for besides them.

As they walked through the Grasping Willows territory, Anton found many similarities with the Order. The buildings were more practical than extravagant, despite cultivators generally being more prone to excess because they could afford it. Small fields were tended to by disciples of the sect- or at least cultivators with the same energy signature as Lev and the guards. From their demeanor and the fact that they were allowed to cultivate Anton found it unlikely for them to be slaves, though of course the workers ranged from people happily contented with their labor to those just doing it to get whatever rewards were offered.

It's not far, Lev said. It was clear he was pushing himself somewhat, but this was their destination. I'll get you settled into some guest accommodations. I'll report back about my mission, and get you that reward. Plus Elder Varela, Lev shook his head. Well, I'm sure you all want a bit of a rest too.

Anton needed rest the least of any of them, but he didn't mind some time to sit and think. When he'd had enough thinking he began to cultivate. Lev was certainly genuine enough, and he felt no malice from any of the others in the sect. Feelings like that became more tangible after he'd begun cultivating, and Spirit Building especially opened him up to new gut feelings. He was cultivating Intuition, which was one of the stars that related to other people the most strongly, so he was confident in his assertions. If he happened to be extremely wrong, he would kill his way out with the others and write off Ofrurg for good. Still, he held onto the hope that there were at least *some* decent cultivators in the country, not too taken in with themselves that they forgot the humanity of others.

His mind returned to Devon. He couldn't do anything to save him right now, but he would find the chance. One month was too short, but a few months if Devon could hold out that long, Anton might be able to make the Potenza family reconsider. They would have already profited from him and if Anton could show he would continue growing stronger the family might choose to cut their losses- or rather, keep their profits. If they made the wrong choice, then he'd simply have to grow strong enough fast enough to save Devon anyway.

Then again, Devon might free himself somehow. Anton wouldn't bet on it- he was confident in his grandson's grit, but it would simply be harder to do from his side. Regardless, it was better to work on the problem from two sides rather than one. Anton wasn't going to let him down again. His eyes flashed as he breathed in smooth natural energy. It was still quite early to complete the eleventh star, but Anton had an internal race with Catarina and Hoyt. He wanted to see if he could get there before they completed both the ninth *and* tenth stars. He was well aware that higher tiers of cultivation weren't as quick, but he felt he could do at least that much. If not, at least he had a cultivation goal to aim for.

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It had to be admitted that having a good night's sleep in a secure location was much better for a full recovery than furtively watching for enemies while you rested in the middle of the forest. Anton could feel a clear difference in the quality and quantity of energy he was able to retain when he awoke. As always, the sun was barely in the sky.

The guest houses had a little courtyard with a nice willow of the non-grasping variety in the center providing atmosphere. Anton took the time to perform his morning exercises. Improvements to his body were very marginal since he completed the tenth star. The first seven stars of Spirit Building weren't targeted at the body at all, so he had to feel for himself what he could do to improve. In the past, he would have been more than content with his current body. It was noticeably better than when he was in his prime, at least in terms of what it could do but he knew it wasn't the peak of what a cultivator could have. It was still a bit *old* as well. Like a building having recently undergone renovations. It wasn't the same as a strong new structure despite additional supports holding it together.

Training his insight was harder because it wasn't just the repetition of a task, moving his body or circulating his energy a certain way. The energy circulation only went so far. Even fighting a shadow-enemy didn't always help him improve. The problem was, he already knew what his imaginary opponent would do. No matter how he tried, he rarely managed to make it do something unexpected that he could react to. But that didn't mean he felt as if he were stuck. Anton could feel his insight improving merely from exposure to people. There was more impact in the context of fighting, but observing the way people moved outside of combat wasn't useless to him either.

Around the time Catarina and Hoyt awoke, Lev came to see them. He also looked somewhat more hearty, though his right arm was bound up in a proper cast and restrained to his chest. He'd decided to try to keep it, then. Good. Anton was worried it might have to be amputated. Then again, it might just be a hopeful gesture.

Good morning to you all, Lev inclined his head. He held out a heavy pouch with one hand, Here is the sum total of the reward we can offer. The price of my mission, but also additional rewards from the sect for my life, and the information on a more serious concern in the area.

Anton graciously accepted. It was a significant total. The sect clearly valued their disciple or the information or both. Cultivators didn't have to be kind but inefficient or unwavering in logical decision-making. We were quite glad to provide our help.

Lev smiled, I do appreciate being alive. And not infested by that horrid moss. I spoke to Elder Varela, he said that he would like to meet you before deciding if he should offer you support. I can take you whenever you're free.

Of course. I'm quite free right now. He wishes to meet all of us or?

He also wishes to meet fellow cultivators Hoyt and Catarina, but he was especially interested in you, Senior Anton. Anton smiled. At least he was actually in the next stage of cultivation compared to Lev and slightly deserved the title now. Your disciples? are free to explore this area of the sect if they wish.

I shall let them know. Then we should not keep the Elder waiting.

The land of the Grasping Willows was quite pleasant, full of outdoor paths flanked by many trees between every building. It wasn't as practical as the Order's central complexes of buildings, though Anton was quite aware the Order had many natural areas available beyond the forest. There were small planters around the Order's buildings as well, but the Grasping Willows had a higher proportion of natural surroundings.

Instead of being led into an office or a sitting room, Lev brought the trio along some paths surrounded by bamboo and ominously looming willows to a large pagoda next to a lake. Long snow-white hair and an equally long beard trailed down towards the knees of the figure standing there, watching the lake. He turned towards the group, the trails of his hair and beard swaying in the breeze. So you are the ones who saved my favorite disciple. He laughed at Levs reaction, Oh come now, everybody knows people have favorites, and usually who those are. Its just old men like me who are confident enough to admit it.

Anton laughed, Its supposed to be a secret though.

Dont worry, we can have two or three and still keep some favorites secret, Elder Varela took stock of the group, spending the most time on Anton. Lev told me you ran into trouble in Khonard. Its not uncommon. Too many people there, bound to be some bad ones. And they tend to spoil everyone around them. He blew a puff of air from his mouth, fluttering his moustache. Too many sects with thought only for strength. Not that it was much different when I was young.

I paid little attention to cultivators in my youth, Anton admitted. A foolish mistake, but I think many others have too little care for the common folk.

Everyone neglects certain aspects of the world. It is merely how much they fail to see the larger picture that changes. Elder Varela shifted to look out over the lake again, Id say I see maybe half of what there is to see.

Anton frowned slightly, I feel like I might have to change my estimate down then, if you judge your own view of the world so.

Perhaps. Its not something I can say. I might even be wrong about myself. He remained quiet for a few moments, I had the chance to cultivate the Ninety-Nine Stars, you know? I know some of those who are now elders. We Grasping Willows are much smaller, but I felt more suited to this. Besides, something felt *off*, which I only learned about later. Youre at Spirit Building, so you should know he glanced at Catarina and Hoyt.

They either already know, or they *could*. Theyll be at Spirit Building soon enough either way, Anton smiled at them, I assume this is about the technique being incomplete?

It is, Elder Varela shook his head, which wiggled his hair and beard. I know as someone who hasnt even gotten close to the peak its a bit arrogant, but Id rather practice a developing technique like the Grasping Willow has rather than something known to be incomplete. Its silly, right? At my current age, I dont even know if anyone can really step beyond that point. But something inside of me said it wasnt right for me. How about yourself?

I cant say I had exposure to many cultivation techniques. This was the first I had access to but it absolutely is the right path for me. Anton wanted to declare he was determined

to reach the hundredth star, but it seemed a bit premature to announce to others. He would hold that in his heart for the moment.

Elder Varela remained in pleasant contemplation looking at the lake for a few minutes before he continued, Young Lev said that you only recently broke through to Spirit Building.

Yes. There was a conflict, so it was a bit rushed.

I thought so. Something private. Lev wouldnt speak of it.

I have reasons to keep the details private, Anton said. But my grandson is currently enslaved to fight as a cultivator in an arena.

A grandson. I suppose you lived apart?

No. I had not yet started cultivation at the time.

Elder Varela raised a very bushy eyebrow, A late start? Interesting. It is quite rude to doubt the words of a guest, but I find it quite hard to believe. However, Im quite a believer in coming to know ones opponent through combat. I would not force anything upon a savior of one of our disciples, but a spar can do some good for both of us, I might think. We have a training field with proper safeguards in place, though Id like to think I have better control than to require that. Elder Varelas eye sparkled as he looked at Anton.

Since Elder Varela was in the middle of Spirit Building, there was no question that he could defeat Anton quickly if he showed no restraint. Anton was quite aware that he had some talent, but he didnt have enough experience comparing cultivators to make up for such a large difference. Elder Varela would be the equivalent of at least the seventeenth star while he was still at the tenth, though his exact level was hard to judge compared to the Ninety-Nine Stars. I would not mind, as I am also certain I could learn something from the experience. If it has any chance to help Devon, even more so.

We shall see, Elder Varela said. I can promise to send word I would prefer your grandson remain in good health, but depending on what I might learn about you I may offer more. Catarina tugged on Antons sleeve and whispered to him. I might suggest learning techniques to speak to a single person, young formation expert. But we would not mind you inspecting the sparring fields formations. Catarina blushed, but that didnt change her resolve to check for traps of some sort.

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Everything should be fine, Catarina declared from the arena that was surrounded by a ring of drooping trees. The formation is in good shape. That was also her polite way of saying that it didnt have any strange functionality. Though Anton understood her

concern, she neednt have bothered. Elder Varela was powerful enough to do whatever he wanted regardless. While the world had rotten apples like Tonina, Anton refused to believe that the world was so bad he would be killed for absolutely no reason. If it was, maybe he should just die. But he understood Catarinas concerns. Catarina might feel a bit overprotective here, but outside of friendly territory she was a great asset.

Elder Varelas droopy beard and long hair swayed in the wind as he stood across from Anton. Here we begin a spar to know each other. Begin whenever you are ready.

With the difference between early Spirit Building- not even the first full star- and mid Spirit Building, Anton had no reason to hold back. It would simply be impolite. His hands rapidly moved, Spirit Arrow forming and flying as he did so. Elder Varela merely held his ground without taking a step. Then Antons Spirit Arrow was swatted away- not by a hand, but by the old mans beard. A second arrow was already on the way, but it met the same fate.

Anton hadnt been sure what he expected, but it wasnt that. Even so, Anton could feel the way energy twined itself in and around the beard and hair Elder Varela had. It was clearly practiced, not an improvised technique to make fun of him. The length of each allowed for a long, flexible limb that could block attacks from any angle. Counting beard and hair, at least two at a time.

A flurry of arrows going at different speeds curved across the arena. They arrived in pairs and triplets, but all were deflected without even getting close to an actual hit. However, Anton began to pick up on the finer details of how things moved. Ten arrows, twenty, thirty, forty. One hundred. Elder Varela kept his feet firmly planted. Anton was forcing him into harder deflection angles, where his attacks would force Elder Varela to expend more of his own energy. One hundred and fifty. A cluster of four arrows flew in from different angles, all accelerating at the end of their movement. Elder Varelas hair flicked to deflect one from the rear. His beard split into two strands that batted away another two arrows. The fourth he dodged. However, that was the first time Anton forced him to take a step. Another fifty arrows. Even being in early Spirit Building greatly increased Antons ability to store and control energy. After two hundred shots, Elder Varela was no longer able to stand still and occasionally dodge. However, his energy was brimming and Antons was two-thirds depleted.

A fine display, Elder Varela said. But how are you on the defensive?

The man was quick, his energy propelling him towards Anton in mere moments. Anton fired several arrows as he moved, but they didnt find their mark. He held his bow in one hand and retrieved a handaxe. He might not be able to do anything to Elder Varela, but he at least wanted to defend himself. Elder Varelas beard was like a third arm reaching out to strike at Anton as the Elder finally made use of his hands. Anton treated it as fighting multiple opponents. He did his best to predict the moves which clearly had the energy held back to levels he could handle. He could handle them, indeed, but he still found himself getting struck in the shoulder or receiving a scrape along his cheek as he

dodged, parried, and chopped with his axe. Then the Elders hair got involved. It was a strange dance as Anton flipped about with as much agility as he could muster, avoiding the twisting and grasping hair as well as the striking hands and occasionally feet.

Then hair twisted around his arm, grabbing it. A palm struck his chest, shattering his defensive energy as he tried to pull away. Then it was over. His ribs were a bit sore like hed let someone slap him, but that was all. Elder Varela held the smile hed had throughout, I must say, I learned quite a bit. How much closer did you get to the next step, hmm?

Anton grinned in return, Im not far now, actually.

Wonderful! I wish I could say the same for myself, but I aged this way while a cultivator. Im a few decades older than you, but Ive cultivated most of my life. As for you you started recently. *Very recently.*

You could say that, Anton confirmed.

I can send a confident message, then. Its almost a shame the Order wont throw their weight around. Too cautious, I think. But for the most part, theyre a whole country away. For me, Khonard is just down the road. Ill gladly send a message to tell the Potenzas to be careful with Devon. Because I can guarantee theyll regret it if they dont.

I appreciate your support, Anton said. It wasnt my intention when I came here, but I will gladly accept.

Maybe it should have been, Elder Varela said.

What do you mean? Anton asked.

Youre the type who relies too much on yourself. I see you have some trusted allies as well, but you still want to deal with problems within your group. Elder Varela looked between Anton and the others. Does your Order know youre in Spirit Building?

Ive been on the road so not yet.

When you return, you should push them to action. The Order of Ninety-Nine Stars is full of good intentions and inaction. Too much concerned with the affairs of Graotan, and not enough with the world. I havent heard of them crushing an evil sect in decades, which used to happen on the regular. So tell them to act. Elder Varela shrugged, Or at least, ask why things are so. I cant claim to know the internal affairs of your sect better than you, but thats what I see. Elder Varela stroked his beard and turned away, Now how to begin that letter Remember that favour, Grigo? No, thats awful. Greetings and warnings, not much better. How would you like to be on the right side of history? Hmm, I like that one. Elder Varela chuckled to himself as he walked away.

I think that went well, Lev came forward from where he had watched the spar. I didnt get to see you fight when you saved me. Youre more than what I imagined.

Anton shrugged, He went easy on me. Still quite a big gap to overcome. I should learn how to fight people multiple levels higher than me

Hoyt clapped Anton on the shoulder, If anyone can do it, Id say its you. I like his advice about the Order, as well. The elders are mostly just sitting around maintaining the status quo. Thats what happens without a sect head, I suppose.

Theres supposed to be a sect head? Anton asked. I hadnt heard about it. Can none of the elders agree on one?

Hoyt shrugged, Oh, they agreed. Its just the agreement was that none of them were qualified. That was decades ago. The latest news about it, really. So its quite natural to assume just the council of nine and ninety-nine were all there is.

What qualifies someone to be sect head? Grand Elder Vandale is at the Ninety-Ninth Star. If he isnt qualified... Anton puzzled over it.

Its not just about being strongest. Though a certain level of cultivation is important, leadership ability, ambition, many things are considered. Hoyt shook his head, The elders recognized their own shortcomings, but now its likely theyll only consider the next generation.

Well have to keep our eyes open, then, Anton said. Maybe someone like Vincent. Recruiting is important, but I understand that more is necessary. But we should be moving on soon. Anton waved to Catarina, Pete, and the others, How was the spar? Did you learn anything?

Pete came forward, It was quite hard to follow. But I found myself inspired regardless. I hadnt imagined that level of power. The- Pete bit his lip and furrowed his brow, The bandit leader was strong, quick, but he only fought those not his equal.

I learned a lot! Catarina said, The flow of energy from you and Elder Varela, Catarinas mind drifted away as she recalled it.

And you, Hoyt? Anton asked.

Im about ready to break through to the tenth star, actually. You think theyll allow us into some high energy density areas?

We can always ask, Anton said. We dont need to occupy them long. Anton also replayed the spar in his mind. More than natural energy, the beginnings of Spirit Building felt more like he had to find the right state of mind. His mind was all over the place with worry sometimes, but constant training kept him focused. Constant progress

was important. There was so much to do. Wrongs to right, mistakes to make up for. Anton honestly still didnt know if he was going too slow or too fast. All he knew was that he couldnt stop.

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The moment hed had a chance to get away from the mining business and had another way to support his wife Oskar Tanzer had taken it. It was rough work, especially when people didnt care for your survival. Ironically as a slave Oskar almost felt *more* valued than he had working as a miner in Graotan. But he also felt more likely to die. It was only through hard work, some luck, and watching the backs of the others that hed made it so far.

The mines werent for iron or coal or anything of the sort. Not exactly gems, either, though the magic rocks they dug up had a certain sparkle to them. Energy stones, they said. The mines were well braced and solid. They even had a decent flow of air down below. Explosive dust didnt seem to be a problem. But the thing that might kill them was the very thing they were looking for.

Oskar felt it, when he first set foot in the mine. An itching on his skin he couldnt ignore. When he breathed it into his lungs it burned like tobacco. Unpleasant but somewhat addictive. Deeper into the mine, the feeling was stronger. It started pressing down like a heavy weight of water. Oskar knew it existed, but he didnt really know what it was until he put his hands on the first stone. It burned with energy, like picking up a hot coal. But it was the same sort of thing that filled the air.

This was something for cultivators. Though it burned in his hand, Oskar immediately coveted the stone. It had value. More than him, almost. Except for one thing. He was part of a new group. Two dozen new workers all at once. In the first week, half of them had broken, including two others from Dungannon. Some of those who were broken died, but the others werent necessarily more lucky. They were sick and pale, faces twisted in silent agony. After a day they were taken away by the taskmasters to never return. Oskar wasnt sure if they survived and were made to do other work, or would just die.

He felt it himself. The crushing weight of the air, the way it burrowed into his skin and his lungs. It was a place with energy stones, and Oskar new cultivators used them. If they were the same, then the air was full of energy. But what could he *do*

with it?

Oskar had known he was going to break. He was just a bit slower to collapse than the others. He could barely breathe now even when he was out of the mines, eating or sleeping. It was trying to find its way inside. Once it did, he would die.

So he let it. Better to die quickly than slowly, he thought. He was deep in the mines when he let it in. He pulled it in through his lungs and let it pierce through his skin into his body. Somebody would have to carry him out. He hadn't thought of that, and as pain shot into his limbs he mutely apologized to them.

With each swing of his pick, the energy pierced deeper and deeper into him, like a million needles. His fatigued muscles continued to swing the pick, waiting for him to die. He wanted it to be quick, but when he let it inside it was so *slow*. It pierced into him like needles, but it was also like molasses flowing through his veins. Goopy, liquidy, and sticky. He pushed it around a little bit. He didn't really think about how, but it had a way it wanted to flow once he gave it momentum. So he let it.

Oskar barely managed to pull himself out of the mines at the end of the day. He knew he'd messed up. He hadn't died quickly, so he was going to be bedridden until they took him away to die. The looks of silent agony those who were broken had disturbed him. But even so, he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, it was before the sun. The mines didn't rely on day and night, so they did their best to eke out as much work as they could from each slave. It was time to wake up and Oskar knew he wasn't broken. He felt almost good. Strong. Like he'd gotten an extra day's rest, but there was no way that had happened.

Before even entering the mine, Oskar felt the energy inside him. It was there already, but much more comfortable than before. He felt it move around as he took each step and moved his body. He nudged it slightly, encouraging it. He wasn't sure if it was like poking a snake, but he wasn't dead yet.

It was the next day when he was certain something was odd. He'd allowed more energy deep in the mines into his body, and yet he wasn't dead. He also felt something as he passed the guards. He simply hadn't been able to comprehend it before, but they had *much*

more energy inside of them. They were cultivators. The same type as those who had attacked Dungannon and taken him and his wife away. Oskar wasn't sure where she was. He couldn't do anything about it right now except not die, and hope he might see her again.

But Oskar also understood that *he* might be a cultivator. And while it seemed to be helping him survive, he couldn't be found out. He needed to hide it, somehow. It wasn't really all that much compared to the deep mines, so he buried what he had inside of himself. It sunk into his muscles and bones, and every day when he left the mine he walked out empty.

Some of the others were struggling. Oskar understood. Their bodies weren't strong enough, and he knew the others didn't know how to handle the energy. They just withstood it.

The taskmasters and guards didnt follow them down into the mines. They just wanted to make sure there were a certain number of stones mined, and didnt care about anything else. One a day, even one the size of his pinky nail, was sufficient to keep them happy. One day, Oskar saw that one of the others hadnt found anything. Again. He might not survive that.

When the others werent looking, Oskar dropped a stone in front of Ebbe. He was another from Dungannon, but they barely knew each other. Even so he couldnt just leave him. The man already had whip marks from the day before. How was he even supposed to work?

Oskar had been lucky so far. Hed managed to bring an energy stone of some size regularly. He could feel them, so he knew where to dig and he put in the work. But he didnt have a second one, and Ebbe had needed it. So he felt the sting of the taskmasters whips for the first time. It was painful, and he allowed himself to cry out in pain. They liked that, knowing it hurt. It was better not to let them know how much less it was than he thought it would be. His body resisted each blow, not fully but he could feel how it had changed.

The next day, Oskar worked next to Ebbe. Nobody would hear quiet words among the ringing of picks. Ebbe. Can you feel the energy? Itching. Burning. Pressing down on you?

Ebbe nodded. I can. I dont know how much longer I can resist.

Im going to tell you something crazy, Oskar said. Let it in.

Ebbe certainly looked at him like he was crazy. Oskar did his best to explain, including how he removed the leftover traces of energy. His back and shoulders burned as he continued to work, going at just the right pace to find what he needed without giving up too much. If he could have just one stone per day, he wouldnt get *more*. But if he stopped working at any point, he might get in trouble. Ebbe also worked next to him, though he slowed down as he let the energy in. That night, Ebbe walked out looking almost dead. He handed over a small energy stone and barely managed to eat before collapsing in his bed. But the next day, he felt better. Not quite rejuvenated, but the energy wasnt quite so oppressive

Oskar looked out for other opportunities. One came quite by accident, when there was a collapse. There hadnt been any major collapses so far, but Oskar had seen them before. He just happened to be looking over at the right time to fling himself over another worker he didnt know, pushing them both away from the collapsing rocks as much as he could. It wasnt a full collapse. They should be able to clear away the rubble, but that time wouldnt be spent mining. Unless they were lucky and found energy stones, Oskar knew what was coming. But that was okay. It let him talk to the man in secret. Bernhard, he found out. So it was that another joined their little group. Oskar wanted to do more than just make everyone self sufficient. They should work together. They might

seem like they were competing for the energy stones, but that wasn't the case. There were enough for all of them to find especially if they knew how to look. Oskar wondered why the cultivators weren't doing it, except for the difficulty. They should be stronger and faster than him. Then again, all they had to do was stand around all day and give them food while they received something of great value in return.

Chapter 65

The basic level of cultivation Oskar had managed to achieve allowed him and others to resist the oppressive energy down in the mines. It also empowered their bodies to be stronger and more enduring. At first it wasn't much, but along with coordinating the workers it soon allowed them to complete their work in a shorter timespan. If they were working a normal job, their efficiency might be praised.

What's this? one of the taskmasters held up an energy stone. Every slave was inspected upon leaving for the day, to make sure they weren't smuggling out anything. Not that they could go anywhere even if they stole something.

An energy stone, sir, Oskar kept his voice polite and his head down. Was I mistaken?

No. But it's so small. It was on the smaller end of those Oskar had brought in, but by no means the smallest. You look quite relaxed. Found it early in the day, did you, then decided you didn't have to work?

No sir. I pace myself throughout the day- but Oskar's explanation didn't matter. He knew that.

The sting of the whip was *sharp*. They wanted it to be painful, and it was. It didn't matter that his skin was now more durable than it had been before, because they didn't stop until he bled. Let this be a message to you all, the taskmaster said to the gathered slaves who had been forced to watch. Just because you get a bit lucky does not mean you can be lazy. We expect hard work from all of you. From now on we will be monitoring your work more closely.

The early times after the taskmasters began taking shifts inside the mine were difficult. It wasn't that nobody could do the work- they were all purchased because they were strong and the simple cultivation had overcome their fatigue. It was coordinating things so they did just the right amount of work.

Under the watchful eye of a taskmaster, it was harder to slip small stones from person to person so that nobody came out empty handed. Oskar found it fortunate that he had been the one punished. His back didn't agree with him, but it did quite well to unite the other slaves with him.

Everyone worked at a believable pace- slightly harder when the taskmaster came into view. Together, they increased the output of energy stones slightly. *Very* slightly. Oskar didnt want to overtax anyone, and he also didnt want to give the taskmasters too many ideas. They still had no involvement in the mining itself- the miners chose where to go and how to get there. Old branches in the mines had already been dug out, and sometimes offshoots of them were good- and sometimes not.

The only thing that Oskar was content with was the quality of the tools. The picks were strong and durable, able to break through stone as well as a man could swing it. At least whoever was running the mines understood that decent tools and sufficient quantities of food were required for the mines to be functional. The taskmasters also seemed happy that they werent having to replace any of the miners.

Most of the time Oskar worked alone. He was most capable of sensing where the energy stones would be within the rocks, and he could often gather some extra. He also didnt mind squirreling some away in piles of rubble and mine tailings. Anything that wouldnt be taken away up to the surface was usable- and the taskmasters didnt like to go deeper into the mines. When he came out with whatever they deemed sufficient, they didnt care.

If it wasnt being forced upon him, he might have found it almost fulfilling. There was a nice rhythm to be had. Swing a pick, pry at the rock, pull back, swing again. Using his body while letting the energy flow into him made him stronger than hed ever been before. The work was still quite unpleasant and Oskar found himself often working harder than the others- who he helped coordinate to not exhaust themselves *while appearing*

as if they couldnt work any harder.

He just couldnt help but put the group first. When there were collapses and injuries, the same amount of output was still expected. It was unreasonable, and everyone knew that. Oskar was tempted to fill everyones pockets during such days, but he only brought just enough to keep the taskmasters wrath to a minimum. That led to whippings for himself and others, but if they produced just as much in times of trouble, their deception would be noticed.

Working with others had a nice sound to it. Clank. Clank. Clank. Alone, it was much less pleasant. Swing, clank, pry, pull, swing, clank. Swing, clank, pry, pull, swing, swoosh. Oskar went to pick up his lamp. Something was strange. As the rays of light pierced through the hole, he wondered if he had come across an unknown tunnel. But he knew them pretty well, and he had no idea of any in that direction. Plus, he felt something that had drawn him that way. An energy stone. So he kept swinging.

Eventually he opened up a hole big enough for him to move into. His lamp revealed he'd cut an angle into a cylindrical room. He was basically along one edge and had to turn almost ninety degrees to see the center. It was immediately clear he wasn't looking at an energy stone. Atop a perfectly smooth pedestal was a rolled scroll.

As he stepped into the room, Oskar noticed the floor and walls- and even the ceiling- were also perfectly smooth. No dust except what he brought in with him, and no other visible entrances. Just the scroll in the center of a clearly constructed room. Oskar stepped forward cautiously. He knew cultivators could be protective of their secrets, hiding and defending them but he didn't feel any danger. He was unsure if that meant he was just unprepared for what he might face, or if it was safe. He tossed a rock further into the room. It clattered on the ground, touching the pillar. Nothing happened. Presumably if anything were going to kill him, it would have done so when he broke into the room.

He stepped closer. Closer. However, while he wanted to reach out and touch it, caution got the better of him. If this was something for cultivators, could he use or understand it? No matter how miraculous it might be, he knew it was dangerous. Oskar decided to be cautious. He could study it later. As soon as he resolved himself to that, he let out the breath he had held in and began to turn around.

The air from his lips brushed against the scroll, and his head snapped back to face the pedestal, almost against his will. The scroll rose up and unfurled, the writing upon it glowing. Oskar wasn't even quite sure if he read the language it was written in, but the words were still clear to him.

What makes a technique forbidden? It is danger. Danger to the cultivator, or to others. Forbidden techniques might merely be that which can threaten those in power. In such a case, it is not for the good of the practitioners that it is forbidden, but for the good of those who forbid it. If possible, such techniques are destroyed by those in power.

Then there is another type. Techniques that are forbidden for the sake of the user. They bring danger to the practitioner either because they are flawed or incomplete, or by the mere nature of their completeness. Such techniques are declared forbidden by their creators or those who do not fully understand them. Sometimes proper skill can avoid the side effects. In such a case, forbidden techniques are reserved for the genius or the intellectual. Even dangerous techniques can be studied for insight into cultivation itself.

The technique before you falls into both categories. If those in power found out I, Everheart, created such techniques they would kill me and destroy them. Perhaps they will. But I refuse to accept that my efforts will be lost.

What you see before you is but a single copy out of many, containing half a technique. That is the only concession I am willing to make. I have not practiced this technique beyond what it took to develop, but I can guarantee its efficacy. But I propose that it is more useful as a scholarly study rather than something to be used. Forbidden, but

merely to practice. The full technique has a certain dangerous appeal, so only those willing to take the risk after fully comprehending the first half should search for it.

But please, study and comprehend. Safely. Cautiously. Learn what you can and apply what you should to your own techniques. But for the sake of actually using it, I shall dub this technique as forbidden, even by my own standards.

P.S. Forgive my naming conventions. I do not pick the most flashy name merely that I feel most appropriate.

The warning burned itself into Oskars mind. In a way, it was more of an explanation. If the writer- Everheart?- were to be believed, there was no danger in studying the technique. But as the scroll floated open in front of him, Oskar merely read the name of the technique then tore his eyes away. He stepped away, and heard the scroll settle back into place. His eyes rested on it sitting on the pedestal. Candle Wax. A curious name. But Oskar knew he wasnt ready to think about forbidden techniques. There were other things to deal with first, like survival. He resolved to bury the passageway in rubble, so that others might not stumble onto it either. Best to leave what is forbidden alone.

Chapter 66

The Grasping Willows were generous enough to allow usage of areas specifically made for breakthroughs. The highest energy density areas also had formations to gather it even further, though there were limits to what cultivators at certain levels could handle. Catarina and Hoyt were able to complete the tenth star, putting them just one step from Spirit Building. Anton also made use of training areas, but while he was able to push himself right to the edge of the eleventh star, he wasnt quite ready. He wasnt sure what he was missing, but he knew he shouldnt try to push himself further. Though he might indeed form the eleventh star something would be insufficient about it if he forced it, Anton was certain.

Eventually the time came to depart and they prepared to say goodbye to Lev and Elder Varela, in addition to a few acquaintances theyd made. While it was a nice enough place even with the presence of the namesake trees that could be somewhat cantankerous, they couldnt stay forever. If they were going to stay *anywhere* forever it would be the Order, but Anton was still quite aware of what they had left to do. He had a list. He was happy that he had been able to mark several people as rescued, but there was more to do. There had previously been an entire page devoted to Devon, though hed burned it. There was no sense to be made of anything hed put there. Currently in possession of the Potenza clan in Khonard was the useful information he had. Anything beyond that was just speculation and led to depressing thoughts, except a recent note. Received helpful influence from Elder Varela of the Grasping Willows.

Thank you once again, Anton said to Elder Varela.

The bearded man inclined his head in return. You as well. We couldnt possibly replace Lev. As for what I did, I cant say how long it will hold. The actual results are up to you. But I believe you have the necessary potential.

Potential Anton shook his head, Many people and things have potential that is never realized.

I wouldnt start doubting yourself now, Elder Varela said. Just look at *me*. I might be stronger than you, but for how long?

Its hard to say, Anton answered. I do not expect the next decade to be uneventful.

It wont be, Hoyt said.

Lev bowed with his one arm, I will not forget all of you. I cant fully pay you back yet, but I will.

Its not necessary to do any more, Anton said. But if you find an opportunity to help others in the future, if it is within your power that would be the best way to pay us back.

I can do that, Lev said, But I can at least save your life or something. Or maybe fight alongside you.

Anton didnt want to give away too much, so he merely nodded. If we have need of you, well seek you out.

I mean it! Lev said. Im not done cultivating just because of *this*

, he gestured to his missing arm. I might not stand up to someone equal to me in power, but I just have to get stronger than them.

Thats the spirit, Elder Varela smiled. But we should really let them be on their way. They seem quite keen to continue their journey.

Everything with Devon had been a mess. If there was one thing that Anton learned from that, it was that even after a year a single day might still matter. He wasnt going to rush either of the others in the training opportunities with the Grasping Willows, but he could push the group to move faster. Pete, James, Steven, and the other two from Dungannon were making more progress in Body Tempering. None of them were at the second star yet, but all had completed the first. They were relatively young men in good health, and picking up the pace was a reasonable form of training. Anton was aware of a half-dozen people who needed freeing from around the area. The latest information he had wasnt recent, however.

Though Sarton was the largest city in the area, it was overall rather rural. Though he found it small now, it was about the size of Alcombey- the largest city hed interacted with for most of his life. It was shocking how quickly perspectives could change.

The packed dirt road they were traversing had deep grooves from overloaded wagons coming from various origins. Their particular destination was one that had lighter output, but that didnt make Anton less worried. Do you think were too late? Anton asked.

No point thinking about it now, Hoyt said. Could you even have made it here six months ago? Besides, I can tell that people from Dungannon are tough, he gestured to Pete and the others.

Thats right, Pete said. I knew some of these fellows enough to know they wouldnt give up. If they didnt make it, it simply couldnt be done.

Catarina sighed, I cant believe theyre forcing normal people to mine energy stones. What are they thinking?

Hoyt chose to answer that, Probably that they want to get every scrap of value out of what they own. They dont trust cultivators because they think theyll act like them- and they know *theyd* steal from the mines, so everyone else would too. If people cant cultivate or leave, what can they do? Even if someone hides a spirit stone for a while, they cant use it.

Mmm Catarina voiced her displeasure, How terrible.

I agree, Hoyt said, But this is Ofrurg. They chose to be like this. Well, cultivators took over and chose for it to be like this. Nobody with enough wealth or power cares, so this is how it ends up.

And the Order just lets it happen, Anton said. Maybe they *have to*. But

The problem with the Order is trying to balance goodness and stability, Hoyt shook his head, They sort of reached the limit of what that can do. The last couple generations have been somewhat, Hoyt pursed his lips, trying to think of the right words, *Low in talent*

, lets say. Sure, there are a few with talent but not that many. It used to be that the elders on the Council were all Essence Collection. Though that was a century ago.

What happened to them? Pete asked.

They died, Hoyt said. As I said, a century. Cultivation can improve lifespans by several times. A few Grand Elders are hundreds of years old, but *low* hundreds.

Vandale is at his limit, Anton said. Hes the strongest guardian the Order has, but he cant *go* anywhere. I understand why they dont want to spark a war, but the results are disappointing.

Gonna change it then? Hoyt asked.

... Yes, Anton said, I will.

How decisive! Hoyt grinned.

Words are easy, Anton said, But I have no idea how Id actually do so, or if I can.

You have us to help, Catarina said.

Were not much in the way of cultivators, Pete said, But if youre trying to make things better, you have our support.

What *is* better? Anton asked of nobody in particular. I guess Ill have to figure that out. But first I do believe were here.

Catarina frowned, There arent even any Spirit Building guards.

Of course not, Hoyt said, Theyre expensive. They dont want to cut into the profits of the mines.

Indeed, Anton said. Now then, well have the rest of you stay back a bit. Dont want to spook anyone into thinking were attacking. Anton walked a bit faster, Hello there! he called out towards the guards from about a hundred meters downhill of them.

Halt there! The guards called, This mine is property of the Callahans!

I am quite aware, Anton said, Im here with a business proposition. I heard these mines are quite difficult to work, and Im looking for just such workers. If you have any who have lasted for some time, I might like to purchase them. With that, Anton flared his energy a little bit. It was partially a threat, but more a sign of power- and thus wealth. Do you have anyone like that? The latest news was indeed that they hadnt replaced workers in some time. It was unusual enough to take note, and Anton had half been expecting to find they werent operational. However, if their workers were instead particularly survivable he might actually have a chance to find those he wanted.

The guards exchanged glances, Wait there. Well go consult with the taskmasters.

Anton waited as they turned to leave, but if they thought the distance was doing them any good they were quite mistaken. A hundred meters was quite close enough for him to kill either of them, being only somewhere in the middle of Body Tempering. In fact, it was almost optimal range for him to fight in general. He had no intention to do so, but

taking stock of his potential opponents was still important. Besides, almost everything about Ofrurg made him touchy and prone to violence. Who did these people think they were to keep people he knew as slaves? Nobody should be slaves, but Anton couldn't help absolutely everybody. Could he? No, of course not. Certainly not at his current level.

Chapter 67

If not for some particular details, Anton might have found the area quite pleasant. Fresh mountain air and a nice breeze blew away dust outside of the mine, and the mine itself was quite pleasant to look at. The structures set up in front of it were quite plain but practical, but that was something Anton liked in buildings. Things used for a purpose. The slopes of the mountain around were covered in trees and various forms of undergrowth and lively with animals.

But the mine was manned by slaves. Anton wasn't convinced that slavery was an appropriate punishment for crimes or debts, but at least he could understand the reasoning there. However, those who took others as slaves merely because they had the power to do so filled him with thoughts of what he might do with his *own* power. But he forced himself to calm and civil, despite the circumstances.

The taskmasters had lined up about a dozen slaves in front of Anton. They all looked relatively healthy and strong, but Anton was able to spot small scars. The way the slaves moved made it clear that some of them had been whipped- at least clear enough to Anton's senses. Though they were doing their best to give off a good impression, Anton understood that was just how things worked.

There were a few he recognized among the group. If he recalled correctly the one with the square jaw was Ebbe. He recognized Oskar as well. He thought he recognized one other from Dungannon, but that still left several others missing. Was he too late? Were they sold somewhere else, or dead or did he not even recognize their faces?

Anton did his best not to focus too much on any individual. Ebbe didn't seem to have recognized him, but Oskar's eyes flashed. There was a lot of anger there. At him? No. Anton's insight told him the man was wound like a spring. Ready to spring for the nearest guard and strangle him, if he could. Somehow Oskar seemed to think that there would be a fight. Was he expecting Anton to? Surely he had to know that his guards were cultivators. But then Anton felt it. It was small, hidden, but Oskar and the others radiated just a tiny bit of energy. Some form of cultivation, but well hidden. It wouldn't be enough for them to matter, though.

Hmm Anton said, trying to sound indecisive. Yes, they do appear quite durable indeed. Just what I am looking for. If you could name a price, I will think on it and return on the morrow.

Of course, the taskmaster said. He gestured to the guards, Send them back to work. Ill be speaking with the Senior inside.

The taskmaster brought Anton into what he could tell was one of the few luxurious rooms in the area. At least, it was comfortable enough. The prices the man names for the slaves was high, easily three times what he had expected. Clearly theyd understood there was *something* valuable about them in particular, but Anton doubted they knew they were cultivating. The strongest guard was in late Body Tempering, and cultivation fed directly into the ability to sense details of others. Anton was fairly certain only his training in Insight had allowed him to notice, but then again the guards had longer. Perhaps they were merely allowing the miners to persist with cultivation because they were weak enough. Anton thanked the man and promised to return the next day. That wasnt untrue given his intentions, but it was certainly incomplete.

Catarina moved along with Anton. They didnt move far, taking each step one at a time as Catarina kept them concealed. Mobile formations were difficult, so they were mostly relying on distance to make up for the deficiencies. There was a steep cliff at the rear of the encampment, and no guards watching from that side. In fact, only a single pair of guards was awake, watching the road. That was the only sensible direction for fleeing slaves to go, and they occasionally patrolled around the area. However, the unrestrained nature of their energy meant they were quite easy to pick out.

The two of them climbed up into the area when the patrolling guard was on the far side, quickly moving over to the door to the miners dormitory. Anton had easily been able to make out what it was when he visited earlier in the day, but he stopped at the door to feel more carefully for any sort of traps or alarms. It turned out to merely be locked from the outside, of little concern when he could manipulate the lock with his energy. It was only meant to keep slaves inside, after all.

He slowly opened the door, gesturing Catarina inside first. He stepped in silently after her as she used small flicks of energy to set up a small formation around Oskar. Anton kept his voice low, even inside the formation. Oskar. Wake up. The mans eyes flicked open. Anton had been ready to cover his mouth in case he was going to make an overly loud noise, but it didnt seem necessary. You can speak quietly.

Oskar nodded. Youre Anton Krantz, arent you?

Thats right. I saw you and Ebbe. What about the others who came with you?

Dead, Oskar said, Within the first week or two. They couldnt handle the pressure down there. They mainly just brought new batches of miners every fortnight.

Anton frowned. Bastards. Listen, I have enough money to buy you and Ebbe. I just wanted to make sure there werent more of you. I can buy you tomorrow and get you out of here.

No, Oskar said firmly.

What? Catarina exclaimed, You cant want to stay here?

Of course not. Its awful, Oskar shook his head, But I cant just leave everyone else. You- both of you- are strong cultivators, arent you? You feel stronger than any of the guards. Cant you just break us out of here?

Anton and Catarina exchanged looks. After a moment, Anton answered, Im quite certain that is a bad idea.

Fine. Then leave me here. Oskar took a firm stance, I wont leave without everyone else. And preferably the guards and taskmasters dead, but if we can get these men out thats secondary.

If only things were so simple, Anton said.

Why wouldnt they be? Oskar said. People from here ran into Graotan and enslaved us. If you have the strength, why cant you just kill them and free us?

Anton shook his head. The world just isnt fair, Im afraid. Anton could tell he truly meant he wouldnt leave- and forcibly taking him away wouldnt do either of them any good. But Ill try to figure something out. Keep your head down until then.

Wait, Oskar grabbed Antons arm as he turned. I dont want to force you into danger but the guards have just a few shifts. During the day a pair stand outside the mines and some watch the road Oskar gave as many details as he had to Anton. I suppose you know how they are at night well enough.

Anton nodded, We figured it out. I hope we will meet again soon.

By the time their conversation was done the guard patrolled once more- but they merely waited with their energy constrained for him to pass. Then they went back down and away until they wouldnt be noticed.

Everyone was sitting around in front of Anton. That included Pete and the others as well. I have to involve everyone in this decision. Even the five of you, since you should have different perspective. Anton explained everything he knew about the situation, including possible personal danger and potential retaliation against Graotan. I doubt it would turn into a war, but obviously people will die. Even if we leave no trail Anton

shrugged, So. What are your feelings? What about the taskmasters and guards? Do they deserve to die?

Honestly, Pete answered, I think they do. If they're anything like where we were, they're unnecessarily harsh. And if they're working people to *death*, they're worse. I can't say I really thought about the others when you freed us. There were so many and I didn't really grow close to most of them. I was just relieved to be free.

Anton looked around, waiting for others to speak. Hoyt was the next to do so. About the Order. They might not be pleased at killing people involved in what Ofrurg considers legitimate business. Not pleased, but I don't know if they could find any moral fault either. I'm willing to go along with what you decide. I believe the Order will still shelter you inside Graotan no matter what, but it might not be the best political move. Ofrurg deserves to take some hits, though. We can't just let them walk all over Graotan.

Catarina? Anton asked.

I'm not sure, she said. I feel like cultivators aren't supposed to just take injustices lying down. Even if we might get killed, she shrugged, I feel like we should do the right thing.

If only I knew what that was, Anton said. How much of myself and others should I risk? How far is too far? Anton shook his head, I will be honest. I would not feel a moment of remorse for killing any of these slavers. But the risk might be too high.

Don't we just need a plan? James spoke up. Most of those from Dungannon besides Pete were too intimidated to say much in front of Anton, but that didn't mean they had no opinions. Unlike with D- In Khonard, we have time. We don't have to settle on anything right away. I don't really understand the cultivation world, but much of it seems to be about might makes right. Even if you personally have a real sense of morality, I don't think these people do. So put some pressure on them. Even I know the Order is strong enough to keep them out of Graotan when they're not sneaking around. Maybe scare them. Either way, when we act it has to be decisive. James sat there awkwardly for a few moments.

You make good points, Anton said. It makes me think that I am not a good cultivator. He held up a hand to stave off protests, Oh, I understand I have the ability. But I'm an old man with cultivation. What have I done? Almost gotten killed by a beast tide, fought a few bandits, spent far more money than I really deserved... Anton shook his head. I spend time cultivating, but what have I done *with* my cultivation?

Saving Thuston was a great deed, Catarina said. And you saved these five, and the caravan.

I'll accept the first two as significant, Anton said. But I feel like I could have done so much *more* if I just let myself. Even now, I'm thinking to myself- Do I let people get away

with evil and others suffer so that I can have an easier time helping another handful of those I know? Instead, I feel like I should just act.

Were here whatever you do, Pete said. I appreciate my new chance at life, but I would not mind risking it for others.

Everyone else concurred. Eventually, Anton was left with his own thoughts. He didnt want to be a fool who rushed into things, and he didnt think he was a coward, but some part of him was still thinking like a simple farmer. Avoiding conflict and trying to keep his little community safe and cohesive, just continuing to live life. He didnt think that and of that was bad, but it wasnt what he needed.

Chapter 68

What are cultivators? That was the question Anton was asking himself. Cultivators were people who made use of natural energy to temper their bodies and self. With that energy, cultivators could do amazing things. Cultivators were like the Order of Ninety-Nine Stars, guardians of the common people. They were also people like Maximillian Van Hassel, bandits and murderers. Mentors and slavers, farmers and oppressors. They were just people.

That didnt help Anton make a decision in the slightest. He was strong enough to be relevant on a local scale. Large enough towns were outside of what he could influence even with Catarina and Hoyts support. Even if they stepped into Spirit Building, the three of them could affect the lives of hundreds at a time but likely not thousands. But should they? Protecting people from danger was easy and unambiguous. When attacked by forest creatures, there was little room for ambiguity in Antons mind. Even if they did something stupid to provoke beasts, Anton considered the lives of humans more valuable than beasts. He might lecture people after he saved them, but he judged that value nearly unconsciously.

It was where he had to weigh humans against other humans that things became tricky. The bandits working with Maximillian Van Hassel- clearly guilty. He had no qualms about killing them when he got the chance. But the Iron Ring Slavers who bought those slaves in a place where slavery was legal but the method of acquisition wasnt how guilty were they? The people who then bought slaves from them?

Anton thought about what gave him the right to decide some people he could kill and others he couldnt. To judge the value of one human over another. The answer he came up with was *nothing*. Similarly, nothing gave others the right to make that decision. Laws were decided upon by people, and different laws were made in different places. Sometimes the laws reflected the wills of the people- but some of the time the laws reflected the will of those with power. When both agreed laws were generally good, but following laws wasnt inherently good. And if laws were supposed to represent the wills of the people, who were those people? Anton knew that the majority of slaves- those

who werent broken down into husks- would say that slavery was unjust. But they would have no say in the laws, because they had no power.

So nothing gave Anton or others the right to decide what was right and wrong. Anton still believed that right and wrong existed. Good and evil actions might be intangible and it might not always be possible to *know*

whether something was good or evil or some mix, but he knew it was unlikely to perfectly match his own decisions. He wasnt perfect, nor was anyone he knew perfect. It was unlikely anyone could be. If there were gods, they were silent- at best speaking only to their own followers who had various levels of reliability.

If good and evil existed, he could only do his best to stay in line with them. If they didnt exist, then doing whatever he wanted was perfectly fine. There was, however, definitely a line between doing whatever he wanted and doing his best to stay in line with what he understood as good. Because while Anton wanted to kill every bandit who came to Dungannon and found his thoughts on that fully justified, he *also* wanted to make them suffer at least as much as the villagers of Dungannon did. It might even be justified, but *might* wasnt good enough. If he allowed himself to get so close to the line that he wasnt sure which side he was on, he could easily find himself taking a few steps beyond it. Anyone could justify going just a little bit further to themselves.

So, if he was at least as justified as anyone else with judging the value of human lives, how could he do it? Slavery as it stood in Ofrurg was fully unjust, for it took someones life away as fully as killing them with no real justification. Of those who were enslaved because of crime or debt Anton was certain not all were enslaved fairly, if that was even possible. So he might be justified killing everyone who bought and sold and owned slaves, but even if he had the personal power to start doing that, there would be consequences. Unless he was all powerful- something untrue of even those at the peak of cultivation- there would be retaliations. Anton wouldnt even really be able to blame people for defending themselves, no matter how evil their actions might have been before that. Nobody wished to die.

But if he were to value the slaves that would be saved higher than the slavers, what about those who would die as an accidental consequence of his actions? If he started a war, cultivators from Ofrurg and Graotan would certainly die. Were cultivators worth more than commoners? Antons initial thoughts were both no and yes. Some might proclaim to weigh all human life equally, but Anton knew he didnt. Family was more important than others. Those he knew were more important. Those he judged to be doing something of value or with the potential to do so held more value in his mind. He couldnt change that, but at least he could consider it when he had time to think about his actions.

After sorting through those thoughts, Anton had made his decision. He considered the likely consequences of acting against those of doing nothing. How much risk was he willing to take? Could he leave men enslaved to die in the mines to protect himself and

avoid conflict? He could, but he wouldn't. If he had the personal power, he would slaughter his way into Khonard to save Devon. He should have faked some political power- in the sense that he wasn't sure if the Order would have supported his threats and not that he thought they were incapable. But while *he* knew they wanted to avoid conflict, they weren't entirely inactive. Others wouldn't necessarily know the whole truth. Anton would prefer to *actually*

have the Order willing to enter conflict for himself, but he had been fairly certain their response would have been limited. But he could have confidently said it regardless. If it had gotten him kicked out of the Order later, he could have dealt with that consequence. On the other hand, Anton wasn't sure if that was something they would disparage. If he murdered in the Order's name, that was something they would not stand for. If he simply intimidated people who were unreasonable, why would they care?

He was just hesitant. He knew the Order was good, because the people who made it up were good. Vincent had been trying to hunt down the bandits and had simply failed. The Order tried, but not *enough*. It was, frankly, something he could understand. The Order was old and tired. He'd seen it in many people, and very occasionally when nobody was watching he'd even *acted* old and tired.

By the time Anton finished sorting his thoughts, he was late for the meeting at the mine. But he wasn't going to show up. Cultivators were known to be fickle, and he didn't feel like talking to people he was just going to kill. He needed to make sure the others didn't think he was crazy, because it would be really hard to justify himself by saying that he decided killing slavers was okay if nobody else agreed. He could also use others to keep himself on the right side of the line. Even if nobody knew where it was, everyone at least had a sense for the ephemeral thing. But after he talked to them and before he started shooting people with arrows, he had something else to do.

Oskar and the others weren't the only slaves from Dungannon to be sold into the area. Anton was fortunate enough to have information from the Ears of the Fox that had led him to another. Even if nobody was alive to denounce his actions, Anton wouldn't be comfortable staying in the area for whatever investigations happened. Thus, he had to find the others first. Oskar would have to wait, but he wouldn't mind. Especially not when Anton showed him his wife.

According to the information, she'd been sold as a maid to a certain minor noble in the area. Nobility was a complicated thing, especially since it was generally trumped by cultivators, but in essence it was a rich family that had been so for many generations. They had some political power aside from their wealth, but because they did not produce strong cultivators they were ultimately limited. That was better for Anton, because sneaking into the house was much easier.

I spotted formations around what is likely the master bedroom, Catarina said. She spoke quietly, with a little bit of energy directing her words. They didnt have access to a formal technique for private conversations, but they were experimenting with their own. At least their version would be quiet, if not immune to being overheard by cultivators. Much more complicated than what I bypassed on the outer walls.

One thing about having wealth for some time was that theyd been able to hire formation experts set up long lasting formations. They could arrange from simple alarms to defensive shields to even traps designed to kill intruders. Do you sense any others?

Catarina shook her head, I dont imagine anyone would spend so much money to protect their servants- and the formations on the wall would likely alert them to escaping slaves as well.

Then let us hope that Patricia is easy to find and retrieve, Anton carefully opened his senses to feel for where people were while limiting how much he might be felt by the few cultivator guards. Besides the formations the area was less well defended than the mines, but he didnt want to spark trouble if he didnt have to. He wanted everyone to get out of Ofrurg alive.

Chapter 69

The manor they were sneaking through wasnt so expansive that it took long to reach their destination even at a slow and stealthy pace. It took longer for Anton to pick the correct room to enter. Recognizing someone with his energy senses was easy, but that only applied to those hed met *after* he was able to use energy. Combined with the fact that he was not intimately acquainted with Patricia it took him longer to settle on the right person.

The individual rooms seemed decent enough, if small. A large step up from the dormitory at the mines which had bunks packed in as tightly as they could fit and no attempt at comfort. But comfortable slavery was still slavery.

Lighting the small lamp in her room caused her to stir, But Catarina had already set up a simple formation to keep things quiet. Patricia, Anton used his most pleasant voice to try to wake her up without giving her a fright.

Her eyes snapped open, Who are you? Her voice was not quiet, and he could tell his distance standing across the room still didnt exactly make her comfortable with being woken up in the middle of the night.

Anton Krantz. From Dungannon. I apologize for waking you in this manner, but it was the most expedient method. I dont plan to stay in the area long. I plan to leave soon, with both you and Oskar. Unless you have any objections?

How? she asked. I cant its not possible to leave.

We got in, Anton gestured towards Catarina. And we can get you out. All you have to do is follow us.

She clearly hesitated for a few moments. I cant leave without Kevin. But its too dangerous.

Who is Kevin? Anton asked.

Hes our son. I was pregnant when we were taken away. I wasnt showing until after we arrived here. Patricia tightly gripped the bedspread covering her.

He was taken away then? Is he in the manor?

Patricia nodded, her head hanging low. Yes. Hes in the same wing as the mistress. I am not even allowed to take care of my own son. Marin- the head maid- is the one who does so. Anton waited to see what else she would say, She lets me see him more often than I am supposed to, but it is rarely more than once per week.

Tell us where he is and we will bring him. And anyone else you want to come with you.

You really can?

Anton stood tall and proud. Absolutely. The two of us will protect you from harm. What about the other slaves here?

Patricia hesitated. I know I should want them to be free as well, but I hardly know most of them. Marin is a good soul, and several of the others. I cannot vouch for all of them.

Anton held out a hand. Wait here, then. We will attempt not to be spotted, but if you hear a commotion we will do our best to distract the guards. You can escape from the rear-right corner, over the wall. Wake any others you trust and be ready. Youll want to wear whatever your best outfit for travel is, if you have an option.

Catarina led the way towards the other wing of the manor. Rather than spotting guards it was more important to avoid any formations that had been set up. Catarina might suddenly stop and Anton could do the same, but if she had to call out to tell him things would be more complicated. Besides, trailing by a few steps wouldnt significantly hamper Antons ability to detect patrolling guards.

The main area has no formations, Catarina said. They would probably trigger from everyone passing through and be useless. The doors to the other wing are quite heavily protected, however. Youll have to watch my back for several minutes while I deal with it.

Anton gladly did so. He was just able to sense the formation, but wouldn't be able to interact with it in any meaningful way. He was confident he could break the doors open but Catarina could do that too. He was also nearly certain that would alert the entire manor to their presence. He held his bow at the ready as he kept his eyes and ears on full alert. His sense of the guards' energy also said they were nowhere near, patrolling the outside of the manor, but if they sensed him they might try to approach secretly. It was unlikely they could hide their breathing, however, and it would be nearly impossible for his eyes to miss them.

It didn't take long for Catarina to finish her work, then with a little bit of additional energy the door clicked open. Anton suddenly reached out a hand to her shoulder and held her back. Both of them stood quietly as the door swung open slowly, revealing a patrolling soldier walking down the hall. Away from them. The formation had hidden him until it was released, and the lock had only taken an instant to open. Anton was ready to kill the guard, but he was certain that doing so would raise the alarm. Even if there weren't formations to detect it, once he released an arrow it would be blindingly obvious. If he used a physical arrow it would be slightly more subtle, but he would have to charge it with energy to be certain of killing the man in a single shot.

But he didn't have to. At least not yet. He continued walking, unaware of the two people standing directly behind him. Once he was far enough away he turned a corner and the two of them quickly closed the doors behind them and started down the hallway. Anton listened for sounds of breathing. He especially listened for a tinier set of lungs. The two of them hurried down the hallway at the fastest pace they dared, since if the guard came patrolling back they would have to deal with him. They might be able to slip into a room if they found one without formations with well oiled hinges, but betting on that was too much.

Anton finally heard what he was listening for. There, he said almost silently.

He could sense the formations, but the way Catarina grimaced he knew they were more difficult than the previous ones. It made sense, because they were not far from a large set of doors that was likely the master bedroom. Patricia hadn't been able to give them a complete description of the layout, but she *did* say the head maids' rooms were connected to the master bedroom. That was where Marin was staying, along with Kevin.

Before Catarina could make sense of the formation or begin altering it, Anton pulled her away from the door. He had his full attention devoted to patrolling guards, and if they stayed still they would be flanked. They moved down a side hallway and looped back around as Anton felt they were safe. They had to do the same several times as Catarina puzzled out how to deal with the formation.

Almost done, she said. Anton could see and feel her moving her hands and flickers of energy, temporarily rearranging the formation.

They're coming again, Anton warned.

I cant stop now! Catarina hissed. Nearly There!

At that same moment, Anton fired an arrow. Steel arrowhead and wooden shaft were stabilized by carefully cut feathers as his energy guided the shot. Spirit Arrows might not be instantly recognizable, but hed rather leave the fewest traces possible. The arrow struck the guards throat just as he was about to shout, twisting in the air as he attempted to dodge it. However, he was merely in the middle of body tempering, so neither his body nor energy could withstand what Anton had available. Damn it. I was hoping to get out secretly. Lets go!

Catarina opened the door and yanked Anton inside. The formations here dont let sound in or out. Babies, you know.

A figure on the bed was awoken by Catarinas announcement. Who?

Doesnt matter, Anton said. Were here to bring you out. Patricia told us about Kevin here. Were bringing you away. No time to change. Grab clothes and anything he needs, then were going. Anton gestured, I just killed a guard outside.

Killed? Oh my. Marin turned into a flurry of motion as she got up from the bed, bundling clothes for herself and various other things for Kevin. Despite having just been woken up, she was quite coordinated. Are you sure we should?

Do you want to remain a slave? Anton asked. This is your chance.

Marin nodded. Trust it to cultivators to show up with unreasonable demands and expect people to listen. Despite saying that, she *did* finish her bundle in less than a minute, and had Kevin cradled on top of it.

Good. We have to hurry, Anton said. Catarina, if you would?

Catarina lifted Marin into her arms. She was at the completion of Body Tempering, so it wasnt strange in the slightest that she could do it with ease. Even if muscle wasnt one of her prime temperings, she was stronger than any non-cultivator could be. Marin yipped as she found herself swept off her feet, but they really didnt have time.

They hurried through the hallways. Anton would have liked to pick up the body of the guard hed killed, but that was far out of their intended path. The bloodstains would be obvious regardless, so it would barely change the time for someone to react if they came to that part of the patrol.

They managed to make it back to the first wing of the manor where Patricia and a handful of others were waiting when the yelling started. Anton fired an arrow through the handles of the door at the end of the hallway, not caring if it was locked or not. He was able to sense they werent strong enough to counterattack him from that distance- and indeed once he destroyed that part of the door it was clear they had no offensive

capabilities at all. He shoved the door open as he stepped outside, before he ran to jump on the corner where Catarina had disabled the formation. Catarina was still carrying Marin- though she could have likely run on her own as fast as the others she was herding.

Anton saw several guards coming around the corners of the house. However, though the manor was *quite* large, it was nothing compared to the distance of a good archery range. There were a few guards a bit too far for optimal shots, but several arrows pierced into the breastplates of approaching guards. There were at least a dozen guards and cultivators moved fast, but what that *really* meant was not that they could reach Anton before they died, but instead that they were able to swiftly dive back around corners and into doors to take cover. Anton kept his eyes and other senses out for any sign of movement, but as the next brave soul came into view, a man at the late Body Tempering stage, Anton put a bit more effort into his shot. The man made a valiant effort, diving back into cover while instantly bringing his defenses to their full height. However, Anton's shot had already been straight at the wall he landed behind. A wall simply made of fine wood. The arrow pierced a narrow hole through the corner- and through the man. Anton made sure that all of the other guards would feel how much energy went into that, including the fact that he was at Spirit Building. While that also meant they could possibly recognize his energy signature later, it wasn't something you could so easily describe to others. Anton hoped they couldn't pick out his cultivation method, but it was unlikely any of them were particularly familiar with it. Either way, as he helped a handful of women and two men over the wall he knew they had to move fast. Though they were on the outskirts of the city, it was likely Sartons guards had been called.

If they could make it unseen, Catarina had prepared a safe zone where the others were waiting. Hopefully it would keep them concealed long enough for the three cultivators to move outside the city and free Oskar and the rest. It should only take an half hour to get there, and Anton estimated about twice that to return. They could be out of the city before dawn and covering their tracks. It seemed to Anton he'd underestimated the danger but there was also more good to be done than he'd thought. Not only could he reunite husband and wife, but there was a child as well.

Chapter 70

The very same night they freed Patricia from the manor they headed to the energy stone mines. Anton hoped he hadn't rushed things too much, but now that they had caused a commotion he wanted to finish things and be off. He had no desire to stay in the area where he might be hunted down. And more importantly, others he cared about. But he also wasn't content to be passive about it. He'd assessed the situation and made his judgement that action was within acceptable risks. Now he just had to see if he was right.

Hoyt was the one accompanying him to the mines. Anton was fairly confident in his ability to deal with all of the cultivators guarding the mines alone. With Hoyt, he had no

concerns. Normally it would have been better to use everyone he had at his disposal but Catarina was watching the others. There were almost a dozen people they had to protect that they couldn't bring running around with them to a battle, but also couldn't just leave alone. Anton was aware how effective formations could be at keeping a group concealed, and so Catarina had to maintain that. If things went terribly wrong, she could help that group flee.

But he planned to be quick and give little time for that. He wasn't sure how much uproar there would be when mundane slaves were stolen. He imagined there would be more concern about the principle of the thing than the actual value involved. The dead cultivators would be considered as well. Fortunately, Sarton was remote enough that they didn't have many high ranking cultivators, and those they *did* have wouldn't necessarily be interested in a manhunt.

Anton focused his eyes to spot the guards up the path. With the effects of Hawk Eyes Archery, he was able to pick them out easily. In return, he doubted they could see more than blurry shadows. He needed to get a little bit closer before he tried an attack, but there wasn't really anywhere for them to run. Anton waited as he slowly crept closer, using boulders alongside the path as cover. Hoyt should be coming up the back side, and Anton judged he should be in position.

He gathered energy in one smooth motion, drawing an arrow and firing it. Killing people in cold blood wasn't honorable, but as far as Anton was concerned he was killing someone engaged in active evil. These guards weren't protecting the miners or even really the goods they mined. They were keeping slaves trapped. He'd heard enough from Oskar that he judged them sufficiently guilty regardless of their current activity.

It wasn't really fair, a Spirit Building cultivator attacking someone in mid Body Tempering. But neither was it fair when they used their own cultivation to suppress those without cultivation. It was just the level of fairness they deserved. Anton flew with his arrow, feeling as he/it struck the cultivator straight in the throat, passing through gaps in his armor. One man was down and a half-dozen sources of energy flared. Anton had no way to hide such an attack with so much open area around, so he didn't even bother. Instead, he'd ensured that his first shot was successful.

Anton didn't sense Hoyt's energy, instead feeling all of the sources moving towards him. The second guard at the top of the road was shouting something, but he made the wrong choice to try to charge towards Anton instead of running away. The slope was gradual enough he couldn't have gotten much cover anyway, but even as he readied himself to throw a weapon Anton was shooting more arrows at him.

Instead of a single lethal shot he went for a quick flurry of arrows. He aimed at several different weak spots and vitals. His opponent was aware of his attack and was able to handle the first volley, but the second volley Anton fired each shot at a different speed. The first shot was slowest and the last sped to catch up to it, four arrows arriving at almost the same instant. The man could only fling himself to the side to try to avoid the

attacks, and that saved him from instant death. One arrow still stuck in his side, however.

There was no sign of Hoyt yet. He wouldn't have abandoned the mission, so he must have been held up somehow. That was probably still fine. Anton just needed to make sure he made efficient use of his energy. Instead of finishing off the first guard, Anton continued up the slope at a moderate pace and let the man pull away, injured. If he had been using purely Spirit Arrows the man would be spurting blood from his side. Instead, he had to make the choice between letting an arrow continue digging into his side as he moved around or a similar fate.

The remaining cultivators huddled together in the building that housed the guards and the taskmasters. The taskmasters had at least a small amount of cultivation, but they weren't equal to the guards. Anton supposed it made sense for everyone to stay together. Assuming Anton was the only attacker was foolish, and they *knew* he could shoot arrows so being inside was safer. That was where the comfortable nature of their little building worked against them. It had *windows*. Large enough to let in plenty of light and arrows. It wasn't fortified by formations or made out of anything spectacular, so Anton took his time shooting one arrow at a time inside after he reached the top of the rise and had a decent angle. With single methodical arrows he could control the trajectory much more precisely and deal with pesky things like corners. He managed to injure one more guard before they decided their position wasn't helping, and at the same time Anton figured out where Hoyt was. When the miners came pouring out of their dormitory, it was quite obvious.

Anton wasn't sure if that was a good plan or not. Now that they were free they could flee to a safe distance on their own. However, the guards might think they were a good target to go after which might not have been the case when they were uncertain of the attackers motives.

The cultivators poured out of their hut together, most of them running towards Anton who was now a bit uncomfortably close. One seemed to think that the miners would indeed be good hostages or felt like slaughtering them. However, he soon found himself with arrows in the back of both legs. Armor was typically weaker on the rear, and Anton surmised his energy defenses were less capable of reacting to his attacks as well. Probably because he couldn't see the attacks coming.

That choice by Anton let the others get about a third of the way to him, sprinting at full speed. He fired several shots, but the two guards in front worked together to parry his attacks. They weren't flawless, but together they weakened his attacks enough they couldn't pierce straight through their defenses. So he shot one of the taskmasters in the middle instead. Either of the two guards in front could have dodged the attack if he targeted them, but he suddenly pulled back on the speed of his arrow as it got within striking range, making their parries miss. That lowered the power, but he didn't need so much to kill his target.

Four guards and a couple taskmasters remained uninjured. He found that drawing arrows wasted a fraction of a second he couldn't afford, so he switched to purely Spirit Arrows. They were more maneuverable anyway. Two more quick shots struck the shoulder and thigh of the front guards before they were an instant away from reaching him in melee combat. But Hoyt was slightly faster than them.

There was no chance they hadn't noticed him coming up behind them- the escaped slaves had drawn enough attention to him. However, they'd remained coordinated, intent on taking out Anton together. It made sense- if they could move away from Hoyt and kill Anton, their life would be easier. Instead, the rear two had to make a sudden turn before they got close and one swing from Hoyt turned them into just a single rear guard. He had no reason to be cautious with his attacks when killing them also protected him, and his energy was sufficient to block at least a few hits from one of them.

The remaining parts of the group still moved to surround Anton and stabbed several spears and swung swords at him simultaneously. They were correct to assume that Anton was weaker in melee combat, but there was a reason he hadn't retreated while shooting at them. He simply didn't need to. His insight was almost fully trained, and even early Spirit Building had a large gap with the men he was fighting. He could see their most likely moves even more smoothly than he was used to. Clever use of Swan Steps also made the taskmasters' attacks interfere with the guards. With a swing of his hand axe, he sliced into one taskmaster, his attack continuing to slice along the neck of one of the guards. His attack didn't quite hit the intended vital spot on the guard, but his movements took him past their encirclement towards Hoyt.

Anton's movements distracted the guard enough for Hoyt to chop into his ribcage, and then the two of them faced the remaining group side by side. There was another short round of combat where Anton was glad his defensive energy could resist some of the more accurate attacks and more guards died and then the rest were running. It was probably the correct choice, but Anton still had a bow. Though Anton didn't feel any joy in killing them, his mind was clear of guilt. In fact, it was more focused than usual.

He'd already spent enough time cultivating to reach the eleventh star. It wasn't gathering energy to push through that he needed. It was just a little bit of something else. As Anton looked down at the fallen guards, he realized it wasn't even combat experience or the like. It was *decisiveness*. And maybe a little bit of serenity.

After making sure the guards hiding inside the hut were dead and counting to make sure the numbers were what he remembered, Anton went over to all of the miners. They hadn't actually run away, instead having equipped themselves with picks and any other heavy tools they could find. It was nice that they prepared to fight, but it wasn't necessary. As Anton looked over them he found someone missing. Where's Oskar?

He's in the mine, sir. Said there was something important in there.

Strange. Anton wondered what could be more important than escaping quickly. He was about to go in and find out when he sensed Oskar. He was running quickly, a small sack clutched in one hand and a scroll in the other. Anton! Sorry to make you wait. I stashed a few things in there. He held up the sack. Anton could feel the energy from it, but despite there being at least a dozen decent energy stones he was drawn more to the scroll. Something about it drew his attention, beyond the fact that it was clearly meant for cultivators. That would have to wait, though. Besides, it belonged to Oskar, whatever it was.