

“Have you seen a cultivation chamber before, Victor?” Dar asked, looking around the small cave. He’d brought Victor down beneath his lake house again, not far from where they’d performed Lam’s ritual.

“Yeah. The Warlord in Coloss had one. He let me and Valla use it for a little while before I figured out he was going to try to steal my bloodline.”

Dar nodded. Victor had given him most of the details of his adventures on Zaafor, back when he’d written in the Farscribe journal and recently when they’d spoken about his ability to claim power from the hearts of his defeated foes. “From what I’ve surmised about this ‘Warlord,’ I think it’s safe to say that he’s steel-bound. His frustrations sound like those of a man who hasn’t been able to break through.”

“Does that mean I might be able to take him?”

“Perhaps, but I think caution is advisable. Someone who’s been steel-bound for centuries, especially a man holding sway over an entire planet, may have gained enormous power, even though he never broke through into his lustrous veil.”

Victor sighed as he watched Dar slowly unpacking materials from a dimensional sack he’d carried down, grasped in his thick, stony fist. At the moment, he was making stacks of plate-sized, slightly concave stones that looked almost like they could be used for paving a garden. He held the sack, and it took no effort to summon the objects out, or Victor would have asked to help unload the supplies. He would have, that is, if his mind weren’t fixated on something Dar had said. “I’m starting to get frustrated with the constant mentions of the ‘test of steel’ and the ‘lustrous veil’ when I really don’t understand them. Is it such a mystery? Can’t you tell me what to expect?”

“You know more than you think. When you reach level one hundred, what will happen?”

“I’ll have to choose a new Class?”

“You’ll have to *create* a new class.” Dar looked at Victor and shrugged. “There’s a reason it seems mysterious; the process differs from person to person. Once you create your Class, you’ll need to continue gaining levels, using a portion of the Energy to improve the Class—another ‘mysterious’ process in that it, as you may guess, isn’t the same for any two individuals. If you think that’s frustrating, then understand that things only get worse; your breakthrough will likely take you by surprise, and when it happens, you’ll slip into your ‘lustrous veil’ and face new, unique roads to advancement.”

“Why ‘lustrous veil?’ I mean, the term sounds . . .”

“Frilly? Overly poetic? Think of it this way: in the iron ranks, you’re building up your foundation, your core of strength. During the test of steel, you’re refining all of that iron into something stronger, sharper. The lustrous veil is named so for two reasons: You’re adding the shine to your steel, and your process is hidden, obscured in the mystery of your individualism. No two people will hone their steel to a mirrored, lustrous shine in the same way.”

Victor sighed, realizing he wasn’t going to get much help. Dar continued to look at him and chuckled. “You think you’re the first iron ranker who felt frustrated by this? Listen, Victor, I won’t tell you what to do in your test of steel for a simple reason—if you try to repeat what worked for

me, you're likely to set yourself back. Things might *seem* to be working, and you may advance partially over the course of years or decades, only to find that the foundation you built with my guidance won't work for you. There's no surer way to become steel-bound."

"So, it's something I need to figure out myself."

"Not entirely. I'll give you guidance as you move from stage to stage, and that should help you gain an advantage over this insular Warlord enemy of yours. He's done himself no favors by keeping to his world, refusing to learn from the greater universe."

"I still don't get it, though." Victor chuckled at himself, shaking his head. "I mean, I don't think I'm stupid, but can you tell me how it's different after level one hundred? I get that the System will help me build a new Class, but so what? I choose the Class I like, and then I gain levels; what's *different*?"

Dar set down his sack and turned to face him, a broad smile exposing his teeth. "I see what's got you confused. You don't *pick* a Class and move on. You have to build your Class. Up to now, you've been given a Class by the System. You have no idea how that works, how it molds the Energy into your body with each level. At level one hundred, you're going to have to do things the way our ancestors did before the System arrived. You'll understand why you need that foundation when you enter your veil. As for the System, it won't give you much help. It'll help you start on the first stage of creating your Class, and after that, you'll only hear from it when you succeed in forming and refining it."

Victor nodded, feeling his frustration slipping away. "I think I'm starting to see the picture more clearly." He wondered if the Warlord had even finished building his Class. If the System only got him started and he had no idea what was expected, being the only person on Zaafor to reach that stage . . . Victor shook his head; it wasn't worth speculating. He'd find out when he faced the man.

"Good. Now, let's talk about cultivation. There's a reason the Warlord had a cultivation chamber. A person's advancement has three interlocking restrictions. One, you must build up Energy in your physical form. The System measures that in 'levels.' Two, you must strengthen your Core, building it, compacting it, and expanding it. The System measures that in Core ranks. Finally, you must also improve your body with racial advancements. If you don't, two things will happen. Do you know what they are?"

"I know I can't gain levels past a certain point if I don't advance my race."

"Exactly! How can you advance in levels, enhancing your physical aspect with Energy, if your body cannot contain that Energy without being destroyed? The second?"

"I'm guessing it has something to do with advancing my Core?"

"That's right! Just as you can't gain levels beyond the limits of your body, your Core cannot outstrip your physical form, else it, too, could destroy you with the Energy it contains."

"So, the Warlord?"

"Yes, the Warlord—he likely spends much of his time cultivating because he's grown too powerful for his world. The Energy he takes from slaying the beasts or people on Zaafor likely

doesn't impact him much. One thing you'll learn is that if you push your Core, reaching the limit of your racial tier, then you can use the excess cultivated Energy to advance your level. Again, you can only do that until you reach the peak of your body's capabilities. With an 'epic' race or bloodline, that peak is well over level two hundred."

"So, if he has an epic racial tier, he could be level two hundred or more?"

"Yes, and likely with a Core in the epic tier as well. Do you see how, even steel-bound, he could be formidable? Even so, it's not as dire as it may seem. Levels gained while steel-bound are far less impactful than levels gained in the iron ranks."

"Are all people who've entered their 'lustrous veil' that high level?"

"Some. Some might break through early and quickly. I know a woman who was only level 108 when she broke through."

"So, the Warlord could be stronger for staying steel-bound for so long?"

Dar barked a quick laugh, shaking his head. "No, lad. He'll be stronger than any iron ranker, and some other steel-bound folks, but anyone in their veil will have glimpsed true power. They'll have abilities that he simply cannot counter."

Victor nodded, reaching up to scratch the back of his head. Was Tes in her lustrous veil or whatever name the dragons had for that stage of advancement? He had to think she was; she'd been utterly fearless when facing the Warlord. Was her "elder magic" a clue to the test of steel? Was it what masters in their lustrous veil used? He hoped her early lesson in the pre-System magic would aid him when the time came, and he resolved to practice with it and try to learn new applications for it like he'd done with the spell to summon his spirit totems.

"Was the Warlord's cultivation chamber a spherical chamber?" Dar asked, interrupting his thoughts. Victor looked up to see his mentor was once again piling what looked like building materials on the cave floor.

"Yeah, it was. He had a platform suspended in the center so a person could sit in the middle of the chamber."

"Mhmm. I imagine he had many treasures in there, considering he's lord over the entire planet. I've done something similar in a world or three. I don't think you quite understand how wondrous your ability to build up your Core via the heart ritual is. Your tale of running through the wastes of Zaafor, eating the hearts of great spiders and minor wyrms, each time flooding your Core with Energy . . . Honestly, Victor, I wonder if we waste our time with this chamber. It might be wiser to simply send you into dungeons to rip the hearts from every monster you encounter."

Victor looked at him, not sure what to say. If he were honest, he'd be just as happy to do what Dar suggested; the act of cultivation was sometimes cathartic, but frequently, for him, it dredged up painful memories as he forced himself to relive and work out what made him so angry and fearful.

Dar saved him from a reply by saying, "No. Cultivation isn't only about building Energy, not for a Spirit Caster. You must inure yourself to the Energies with which you toil. In any case, we won't

try to match the Warlord's chamber with your first one—a flat floor, curved walls, and a domed ceiling will suffice.” He grunted as he shifted a large stack of lumber. “I sent Drema to collect these building supplies, and she did you some favors. It looks like she had the timbers cut to the exact lengths I specified and purchased brackets to join them. You'll have an easy time of it.”

Victor surveyed the stacks of stone, the bags of mortar, the large metal buckets, the sacks of nails, and the piles of wood. “What am I building?”

Dar smiled, produced a large roll of parchment, and unfurled it, holding it out to Victor. It was densely inscribed with the detailed plans for a domed, stone-lined room. Victor could see the blueprints for a wooden framework and instructions for building it down to the individual nails. The next stage showed where to place each octagonal, plate-sized stone, with precise instructions for mortaring them into place. “Huh. I thought there'd be more magic involved.”

“Sometimes it's good to do things with your own hands, Victor.” Dar nodded and moved toward the tunnel leading back to his house. “While you construct the chamber, I'll procure the other cultivation items you'll need. Normally, I'd send you on quests to gain each one, but we're a bit pressed for time. Speaking of which,” he pulled a golden watch from the pocket of his bright orange, silken pants and studied it, “I also need to stop by the council building. They're making a decision about releasing you from your debt.”

“You think they'll let me off?”

“I have my enemies on the council, but I'm hopeful that a bit of wealth and a favor owed will move things our way. The truth of the matter is that they cannot stop me from sending you away, though it could make your return problematic if we disregard their decision.”

Victor wanted to tell him to forget it, that he'd do the three tasks, but he knew Dar didn't want the Sojourn council to interrupt his training or delay his departure. Nevertheless, he hated that his debt to the Master Spirit Caster was mounting by the day. Thinking of debts, he frowned, looking at the building supplies. “Are these magical materials?”

“The tiles, aye. They're a dense material, resistant to the passage of Energy and further enchanted to reflect it. Don't fret, though; they're cheap in the greater scheme of things. It's the cultivation sources that are going to cost me.”

“Nothing I can do?”

“Nay. Again, don't worry; the service you will provide to my neglected descendants on Ruhn will be worth the meager investments I'm making in you. Let's see here.” He paused by the tunnel opening and gave Victor a long look. “You've got fear and rage, so I need inspiration, glory, and magma, yes? Nothing else you're keeping secret?”

Victor looked up from his study of the blueprint and narrowed his eyes at Dar. “You expect me to believe you can't see my different affinities?”

Dar smiled and shrugged. “I believe you have a secret or two you've yet to trust me with.” When Victor's eyes widened, he held up a stony hand and said, “No matter. I trust you've told me what's important. We're all entitled to a closely held secret or three. Build this chamber, and we'll speak again tonight.”

As his mentor turned to leave, Victor said, “Dar, wait. Um, I promised Lesh I’d try to get a regular practice schedule planned out. He’s a good sparring partner, and I also was wondering if there was anything you could tell me about breath Cores . . .”

“One thing at a time, Victor. Finish this construction, then spar with your friend. Tomorrow, we’ll add your treasures to this chamber, and then we’ll talk about your schedule. And yes, I have a few things I can tell you about breath Cores; it will be part of your training. Now, I’m off.” With that, he turned and almost seemed to flicker out of sight as he employed some skill or spell to whisk himself away.

Victor straightened the blueprint in his hands and looked over the steps Dar had outlined for him. Had he written this out? It wasn’t exactly something only a Master Spirit Caster would know; basically, Victor was going to do some wood framing and then build up an interior stone façade. The whole thing made him think of corny movies where a martial arts master would make the student do sweeping or carry stones, driving the student crazy with frustration. Then, the master would laugh and explain how the chore movements *were* the martial arts techniques.

Victor chuckled as he began hammering nails into the pre-cut wooden frame pieces. The blueprints said to start with the base, so that’s what he did, using metal brackets to connect each length of wood as he placed them around the edge of the cavern. Dar must have measured the space because the framework was going to fill it as much as possible while maintaining a roughly circular shape. In reality, it would have sixteen sides, with each face aiming directly at the center of the space.

His hands were nimble and strong, and Victor no longer grew tired from manual labor, at least nothing he’d been able to throw at himself. Perhaps if he went to a world rich in Energy and had to dig or mine dense, powerful ore, he’d find that exhausting. He didn’t know. As it was, he had the frame built in less than an hour and fifteen minutes later, had nailed up all of the backer boards for the stone façade. He set to work mixing the mortar, and when it felt thick enough to spread, he used the trowel Dar had given him to begin mounting the bottom row of eight-sided, concave stone tiles.

While he worked, Victor’s mind wandered. He thought about the dinner parties he had lined up and began to warm up to the idea of meeting and speaking with some of the people he’d fought in the dungeon. He felt it was the right thing to do, inviting those folks. Even the ones who’d talked trash in the dungeon might be totally different in a social setting. He’d known wrestlers like that. Shouldn’t he work to mend fences and build peaceful relations before leaving his friends here? Lam had said she would invite them, so he didn’t feel he had to do anything more. If some showed up, great, and if none did, so be it.

Thinking of parties reminded him of Fanwath and the people he’d left there. Wouldn’t it be nice to visit? Wouldn’t it be fun to invite them to see Dar’s lake house and experience Sojourn? Deyni would be in heaven! He wished he could afford a permanent portal like the ones connecting the cities of Fanwath.

Something told him such a gateway between worlds would require an order of magnitude more power and know-how. Even setting that aside, though, he knew there were people who could open temporary gateways between worlds. He wanted to learn that kind of power. Would the ability to walk through the Spirit Plane be similar? How hard would it be to bring people? Dar acted as though it wasn’t trivial.

The instructions on the blueprint said to trickle Energy into each stone after setting it, and when Victor did so, they grew solid and unmoving, the mortar beneath completely cured. The ability to instantly set the tiles made for easy and quick work, and, despite the chamber being a good fifteen feet in diameter, he rapidly built up the stone façade. Seeing the chamber take shape around him was relaxing and gratifying work. Victor was relaxed, and his mind gradually stopped worrying at all the things going on in his life, and he lost himself to the work, utterly zoning out.

When he finished, he was almost disappointed that he was done. He'd enjoyed the honest labor, seeing the room taking shape and feeling a little accomplishment as each stone tile fit snugly into place. He thought those feelings said a lot about what was going on with his life. He was trying to control too much. He was wracking his brain trying to understand love, trying to keep track of too many, sometimes conflicting, goals. He needed to take Lesh's advice and focus on what he could control, grasp the joys within reach, and make the best of the hand he was dealt.

Building the enclosure perfectly—and it was perfect—had been an excellent example of that. He felt better having done it, having let his mind rest, and having focused wholly on the task. It was an introduction to what he needed to do for the next few months. He needed to give himself over to his training. When he wasn't training, he needed to make the most of his time with Valla. He needed to let go of the many worries that gnawed at the fabric of his sanity. "Yeah," he said, stooping to pick up the tools and leftover building supplies, stuffing them into the dimensional sack Dar had left behind, "that feels good."