

Chapter 245

Faith and Glory

The power of the ring gate let the cultists drift down from the sky in safety, but they descended into trouble. The cultists drew more than a little attention on their way down, the blue light slowing their fall making them stand out both visibly and magically. The result was a slathering pack of monsters awaiting them on the ground.

The centre of the city had not been monster free for some time. The blood weaver was long gone and even if it hadn't been, the increasing magical density produced monsters with easily power enough to rival it. The magical saturation that had them manifesting thick and fast meant that the centre of the city was now just as infested as the rest.

That meant that the cultists descending first would need to fight out a safe zone for those that followed, but the monsters awaiting them were well beyond their expectations, both in number and power.

The bronze-rankers were able to hold their own against the gaggle of monsters moving in on their location. They were lucky in that no silver-rank monsters had yet appeared. The bronze-rankers were not able to carve out a space for those that followed, however, leaving their fellows to drop right into the jaws of battle. Meanwhile, more monsters poured in, hungry for the prey being dropped from heaven.

The iron-rankers that started arriving were quickly falling prey to the powerful monsters, the bronze-rankers too busy to protect them. Rather than a landing zone, all they had managed to create was a battle zone.

It was the arrival of the Builder's hooded figure that overturned the situation. Spears made of elaborately-carved stone erupted from the ground in clusters, impaling monsters as many as a dozen times. Grand walls, thick and high, rose up in a circle to box out the more widely spread monsters and isolating the closest ones. The bronze-rankers fell on the monsters that survived the spears, quickly establishing the landing zone they had failed to create alone.

The walls were not the solid stone of crude stone-shaping powers but brick and mortar, complete with battlements, observation towers and metal gates in each of the four directions. The result was larger and more elaborate than any silver-rank essence user could conjure up.

There was a command tent at the heart of the fortified camp. It was magically shielded against prying eyes and ears and contained a round table with four chairs. There two occupants, Zato was sitting and the Builder standing.

“Establishing this base camp has overtaxed this vessel,” the Builder told Zato. “It is beginning to break down.”

Evidence of the breakdown was readily apparent. The body of Dougall that the Builder was inhabiting had fiercely bloodshot eyes, sunken flesh and gaunt, pallid skin. Hair had fallen out in ugly clumps.

“The new vessel is ready to be inhabited,” Zato said. “We are working on a third, just as a contingency.”

“It should not be necessary, but I applaud your preparedness,” the Builder said. “So long as I do not use the kind of power that built these walls again, the next vessel should comfortably see us through our task, here. Since this one is close to being spent, I will make some more buildings, establish a true fort instead of these tents.”

“There is one problem with the next vessel,” Zato said.

“It has realised that it will be a hollowed-out puppet.”

“Yes,” Zato said.

“Not a concern,” the Builder said. “Unlike the previous transferral, I am here to participate in person. Resistance will not pose any impediment to the process. This vessel still has a few days before it becomes unusable, so prepare accordingly.”

“Yes, Lord Builder.”

“Make sure to kill this vessel once I am done with it. It will be little more than a walking hunger once I have left it. I do not need to explain why having an energy vampire roaming around would be a poor idea, even if it would quickly starve.”

“I’ll see to it, Lord Builder.”

Timos arrived at the tent, along with the archbishop, Nicolas Hendren. After announcing them from the outside, Timos lead Hendren inside before leaving again.

“Please sit,” Zato said, getting up.

Hendren sat and looked at the Builder. It was his first time seeing the vessel without it being hidden beneath a hood.

“Are you alright?” Hendren asked.

“This vessel channelled to much of my power establishing this camp,” the Builder said. “I will be taking another soon.”

“The Mercer boy?” Hendren asked. “Is that what he was yelling and screaming over?”

“It is.”

“The boy is an idiot,” Hendren said. “His mother spent every scrap of influence she had to make sure he would not have his star seed purged until we had a safe method, then he runs right back to you? An imbecile.”

“Your role in that affair is worthy of praise,” the Builder told Hendren. “My people made a rash choice in implanting star seeds as a distraction. It gave those who would fight us too much information. Placing yourself in the middle and slowing the process of removing those seeds to a crawl was the bold move of an effective ally. Your side and mine have both made mistakes, but individually, you have my respect.”

“The respect of an ally is a valuable thing,” Hendren said diplomatically, then turned to Zato. “May I inquire as to why you asked me to specifically exclude Priestess Lasalle from this meeting?”

“The priestess is a woman of zeal,” Zato said. “The strength of her faith is a testament to your god. That kind of dedication can be inflexible, however, when circumstances dictate compromise. As a gesture of goodwill, I have likewise excluded my own second from this meeting.”

Hendren gave a reluctant nod.

“Anisa is unflinchingly dedicated but, as you say, she can be reluctant to adapt. She gets caught up in the way she feels things should be, instead of accepting them the way that they are.”

“Circumstances here are not as they should be,” Zato said. “The unanticipated change to the magical density will require a number of hard decisions.”

“The monsters are certainly too strong for our iron-rank people,” Hendren said. “Do you know what caused it?”

“Our original astral magic specialist was lost some time ago,” Zato said.

“Landemere Vane,” Hendren said. “It seems Jason Asano was always destined to plague this enterprise.”

A flash of rage crossed the face of the Builder’s vessel, accompanied by a burst of aura that was brief, yet enough to leave the other two swaying unsteadily in their seats. The sounds of the camp outside were stilled to silence as the aura passed over it. The two men waited to see if the Builder would speak, but he said nothing.

“The specifics are irrelevant,” Zato eventually continued. “It seems that our other ritualists made an error in the tunnel formation. Sadly, it was all set in motion months before the Lord Builder was on hand to guide us. They were unable to grasp an element of the design Vane left behind, so they improvised, substituting in another aspect of dimensional magic. That alteration had no effects apparent from the other side, but we are

working with potent dimensional forces. A tiny change became a dangerous fluctuation by the time the bridge was affecting the astral space.”

“You didn’t realise?” Hendren asked, turning to the Builder.

“The senses of this vessel are limited,” the Builder said. “As for this realm, I can only see into physical realities through a vessel or those who carry my seed. That includes a borderline physical space, such as this one.”

“What happened, exactly?”

“The dimensional membrane of this world was disrupted, causing a rapid alteration in the magical density,” the Builder said. “The ring gate has stabilised the tunnel and the plan continues, but the strength of the monsters represent an unanticipated obstacle that will need to be accounted for.”

“The practical result,” Zato said, “is that our people are too weak to carry out the plan. Your people, too. Iron-rankers cannot be sent out under these conditions, even with bronze-rank supervision. There are silver-rank monsters out there, and not just a few. Do you trust your bronze-rankers to handle a pack of silvers? That takes elite and experienced essence users.”

“Adventurers,” Hendren said.

“Yes,” Zato agreed. “I know your clergy had some Adventure Society members, as does our number, but none full time. Neither of us have the people to handle this in the numbers we need. Especially given that the strength of the monsters is not the only reason to be concerned about them.”

“The changes in the ambient magic has agitated the monsters,” the Builder said. “It had altered their behaviour to a degree we don’t yet know. They may settle as the ambient magic does the same but there are no certainties. As it stands, the groups out there are more dangerous than normal monster packs.”

“What about construct creatures?” Hendren asked.

“They will be an integral part of our response,” Zato said. “We still retain a supply of clockwork cores that we will be using to build up a force of constructs. The weakness of constructs is that they need direction. They can supplement the strength of our people, but not replace it. We need more people who can operate independently in this monster environment. We cannot send teams out on tasks if they all need our strongest people to protect them.”

“I’m not sure what you want from me,” Hendren said. “I can’t just bump all my people up to bronze rank.”

“I can,” the Builder said.

“Excuse me?” Hendren asked.

“I can remake your iron-rankers into bronze-rankers.”

“How is that possible? Why haven’t you done it to your own people?”

“Because my followers are the price,” the Builder said. “I can sacrifice an iron-rank follower with a star seed to create a special kind of clockwork core. It can be used to raise another iron-ranker to bronze. I will sacrifice my iron-rank follower to make yours powerful enough to contribute.”

“No,” Hendren said flatly. “We are the church of Purity, in case you have forgotten. We are not going to taint ourselves in the name of short-term power.”

“No?” the Builder asked. “What do you think this pact between myself and your god is? Your deity knows that its objectives cannot be met alone. Without a power from beyond your world, the other gods would stop any attempt to enact your god’s grand agenda.”

“I do not presume to know my god’s purpose,” Hendren said. “My role is to serve. To obey.”

“You don’t even know what your god is after?” Zato asked incredulously.

“The truth is hidden from us, that we cannot despoil our god’s plans, should we be compromised,” Hendren said. “We do not need to know our god’s design. We have faith. We are willing to put aside our base, mortal perspectives and surrender ourselves to a higher power. One that knows better than us. That is better than us.”

“Surely it had occurred to you that my intrusion on this world is, itself, a form of impurity,” the Builder said. “Yet your god participates. Why? Because there will come a time when my agenda is done and I will be gone. It is then that your god will have a chance to undertake a great purge in a world reeling from the damage I have left in my wake. To cleanse the filth and make a world that is clean. While the power structures that would resist you are fighting me, your church will be preparing to move in when I am gone and they are at their most vulnerable.”

“So you say,” Hendren said. “I would not presume to know the intentions of my god.”

“And, in this place, you cannot ask,” the Builder said. “This realm is outside your world, therefore beyond your god’s authority. He has no eye to see, no voice to speak. No hand to move. You are his highest agent, here, Nicolas Hendren. What did your god advise you, before you came here?”

“To do what is necessary,” Hendren said.

“Your god understands the reality,” the Builder said. “That compromise today means purity tomorrow. Yes, there will be sacrifices. These people of yours, once we empower

them, their purpose and destiny will be fixed. They will serve, as necessary, and then you will purge them, once the work is done.”

“I cannot ask this of my people,” Hendren said.

“Faith is about surrendering to a higher power,” Zato said. “Your words, archbishop. Does Purity’s clergy serve only when they want to, or when they are called? What greater honour is there than sacrifice in the service of your god?”

“Making the sacrifice of your people is a burden you will have to bear,” Zato said, “for it is not a sacrifice in which you will share. You will have to remember them. Honour them. Let them be your symbol. Your martyrs. What you do here will show your god that you can be more. A greater servant making the decisions that a leader must make. It is your chance to prove yourself worthy of taking a larger role in the service of your god.”

Hendren frown, looking down at the table in front of him. The absence of his god’s voice troubled him, but it also made him the highest moral authority in the realm in which he found himself. In a way, that made his decisions right for the simple reason that he made them, as was the case with his god.

“Very well,” Hendren said, then looked up from the table to meet the ruined eyes of the Builder’s vessel. “I will need time to bring Lasalle around. She will need to be convinced, to create a unified front.”

“Of course,” Zato said. “We have our own preparations to make. Our own sacrifices to prepare.”

Anisa, as it turned out, was far less of a concern than Hendren had feared.

“We must not be short-sighted,” she said, in response to his explanation. “No sacrifice is too great in service of the god. Even amongst our clergy, few are truly worthy, truly pure. Only those like you and I must be completely vouchsafed. For the rest, sacrifice in furtherance of our god’s agenda is a greater glory than they deserve or have any right to expect.”

Thadwick sat forlornly in a cage, arms hugged around his legs. With the arrival of the cult in the astral space, he had finally felt the full power of ‘Dougall’ on display. He finally came to realise that the power he had been offered would never be his to control, that he was nothing but a cup to be filled and held in the hand of another.

The power inside him that had brought him to bronze-rank, at the cost of his essence powers, had felt so grand, so potent. Now it felt alien; a threat he could not escape because it was already inside of him.

Head bowed, Thadwick did not see the shadowy figure of Shade step through the bars. What he did recognise was the hated voice that emerged from Shade's body.

"Hello, Thadwick. It's been a while."