

Chapter 243

A Valiant Death

“I could feel the power he was throwing off like heat,” Thadwick said, full of enthusiasm. “I want that power.”

“And you will have it,” Zato said. “Dougall began the treatments earlier than you, so his power came into its fullness earlier.”

Dougall’s new presence within the cultist enclave had not gone unnoticed. Although he remained in seclusion, all had felt the power radiating off him like heat. They felt the instinctive drive for veneration coming from the star seeds within their souls, and saw the respect with which Timos and Zato treated him. Those who had asked about him, however, had been met with nothing but stony silence.

“Why only us two?” Thadwick asked. “Why not give this power to everyone?”

“Because not everyone is worthy,” Zato said. “Only those of noble blood have the right to the most noble of power. Sadly, our leadership was largely lost. Dougall, like you came to us from the nobility, and is therefore a treasure to us. Like you.”

“I thought I heard someone say he was a servant.”

“No, he had servants,” Zato said. “Like many of the high blood, those around him grew jealous of his inherent superiority and sought to bring him down. We, of course, took him in, knowing that even a drop of noble blood is worth more than all the blood in the bodies of we commoners.”

“The high blood,” Thadwick repeated. “I haven’t heard that term in a while. It isn’t acceptable anymore. My great uncle used to talk like that, until mother shushed him up. We didn’t used to have to treat the rabble like they’re equals. I think my mother actually believes that dross. It always disgusted me about her.”

“You will find no such problems here.”

“Timos didn’t seem too reverent.”

“Which is why I have moved you to my side. You stand above him and, in time, will stand above me. The day will soon come when your voice will be our law. The commands coming from your mouth will be our purpose.”

“Good,” Thadwick said. “I was always told that I was born to a great birthright, only to be denied at every turn. I’m glad to finally find people who understand my value.”

“Thadwick,” Zato said with a smile. “If nothing else, I can assure you that everything you deserve is coming your way.”

A cultist came up to them.

“Leader,” the man said. “The church has started to arrive. Should I send people to meet them?”

“Not until the archbishop appears,” Zato said. “Then, come notify me.”

The church of Purity’s members were arriving at the Vane estate through a portal, in lots. There were fifty eight in total; mostly iron-rank, leavened with a solid contingent of bronze and a sole silver ranker, in the person of the archbishop. It took three portals to bring them all through, with the archbishop arriving last.

It had been hard times for the church members chased out of Greenstone. Only those with at least a full set of essences had been considered worth saving; the rest were abandoned to the investigations of the Adventure Society. They were too ignorant to do any damage, in any case.

The archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, looked extremely disgruntled to have been summoned, although he did, with reluctance, appear. His people were milling about, unsure of what do. The cultists emerged from the cult’s subterranean complex, impassively warding off anyone who approached the no-longer hidden entrance. They refused to interact with the gathered clergy unresponsive to any questions sent their way.

Only once Hendren himself arrived did the cult make an approach. Timos appeared from underground, accompanied by another man hidden completely within hooded robes. Hendren frowned, both at the absence of the leader, Zato, and his inability to sense the aura of the hooded figure. If the cult had reinforced their numbers with a gold-ranker, his ability to direct the course of events would be significantly hampered.

They walked away from the lower-ranked cultists and clergy, Timos with the hooded figure and Hendren with Anisa Lasalle.

“Timos,” Hendren greeted brusquely. He noted the subordinate stance Timos took, relative to the hooded figure. Anisa was standing near Hendren in much the same posture. The figure said nothing as Timos reciprocated the greeting.

“Archbishop. Given our limited space, your people will be required to camp above ground, as I believe you have already been made aware of. Naturally, we have set aside a place for you, personally, in one of our more comfortable chambers, below.”

Timos turned a snide gaze on Anisa.

“Will the priestess be sharing your chamber,” he asked, “or remaining up here to keep your men occupied.”

Anisa’s face curled up into a snarl, but she stilled at a pacifying gesture from Hendren.

“Really, Timos?” Hendren asked. “I would hardly think this is time for such pettiness between allies about to share an undertaking.”

“Some allies are more enthusiastic than others,” Timos said. “Of course, I did not mean to imply anything salacious. I apologise if my unwitting remarks caused your minds to naturally follow an unwelcome path.”

“Just have your people show mine where to set up camp,” Hendren said. “Then there are things in need of discussion, but not with you.”

Hendren turned to the hooded figure.

“Are you the new leader, here?” he asked.

“He’s the leader everywhere,” Timos said. “You will speak to him only when spoken to.”

“This is a poor way to treat allies,” Hendren said.

“You have been poor allies,” came a voice from the hooded figure. The voice was soft and carried no aura, yet somehow slammed into Hendren like a runaway brick cart. He immediately understood who – what – was within the robes.

“Most of our people are unaware of the Lord’s presence,” Timos said. “If you or your priestess are responsible for changing that, the repercussions will be severe.”

“We understand,” Hendren said. “Don’t we, Anisa?”

He was suddenly and fully aware that any influence he had would need to be persuasive, rather than authoritative, which was not where Anisa excelled.

“Yes, Archbishop,” Anisa said, reluctant but obediently following her superior’s lead.

“Priestess, work with the cult’s people to see our own set up. I shall go below to discuss the next step with our allies.”

“Are you certain I shouldn’t go with you?” she asked.

“Quite certain,” Hendren said. “Take command of our people here. Keep them in line and make sure no one starts trouble with our allies.”

He gave her a pointed look.

“Words can hurt us here, Priestess. Be careful that they don’t.”

Timos gave Anisa a smarmy smile, but after the archbishop’s warning it was met with stony indifference. She went off to organise their people without giving Timos a second glance.

Timos led Hendren into the complex below, the hooded figure of the Builder silently accompanying them. Hendren noted that in addition to making no sound, the figure left no footprints in the sandy dirt that had taken over the estate grounds.

“How long until the path opens?” Hendren said as they made their way underground, down the stone steps.

“Days,” Timos said. “Two weeks, at the outside.”

Iron-rank monsters had become infrequent in the overgrown city. When they did appear it was either in great numbers or alongside more powerful variations of their kind. In the first instance, the team didn't even bother to fight them, sending them fleeing with a burst of aura suppression. Only the most mindlessly aggressive were foolish enough to attack, with catastrophic results.

Sophie's wind blade power alone was a disaster to weak, amassed enemies. Its strength wasn't great but it had bronze-rank power behind it. Additionally, the new effect it had gained for ranking up was that the blades grew wider as they travelled, allowing Sophie to cut down weaker enemies in clusters.

Bronze-rank monsters were becoming a decreasing challenge as they team grew their power and honed their skills. It was the increasing frequency of silver-rank monsters that let them push themselves to new heights.

Taking on a silver-rank monster at bronze was not so easy as facing a bronze-rank monster at iron. Each rank represented a larger leap in power than the last, making rank-jumping a trickier proposition with each level of advancement. Silver-rank monsters were easier to handle than even a mediocre silver-rank essence user, but that was not the same as being easy.

Only Humphrey, Jason and, Sophie were able to take on weaker, solitary silver-ranks alone. Even then, they didn't try until they had consolidated their power. Only with a full grasp of their bronze-rank abilities and after advancing them into the lower-mid point of bronze did they even attempt it.

Even then, it was only weak solitary monsters that any of them confronted alone. Such fights were uncommon, as even the silver-rank monsters were appearing in packs. It was generally the most dangerous that appeared alone.

The team was tearing through the city at an ever-accelerated pace, even as the monstrous opposition grew stronger. The flesh abominations no longer posed the threat they had in the past. Once the team was at bronze-rank, the abomination's ability to adapt was no longer the equal of a full suite of essence powers. Belinda especially, with her versatile powers, could adapt to an abomination faster than it could adapt to her.

With their strategies tried and tested over innumerable confrontations the abominations were no longer even worth using for practice. The team went full-force to

down them as quickly as possible and move on. They started clearing two, three, even four in a day, releasing hundreds of the tormented souls trapped within. The team knew they were coming close to the end of their self-imposed task as it took longer and longer to find the abominations by following the soul compass.

Eventually, the compass led them into what they realised was the new territory of the blood weaver. Once more they found the residual webbing and the empty shells of converted monsters.

“The blood weaver will be having a harder time,” Clive said. “The monsters are growing too strong. It won’t be able to overpower and turn them.”

“Maybe,” Humphrey said. “It may have thrown weaker monsters at stronger ones in waves, then turned those stronger monsters.”

“Even if that is the case,” Clive said, “It won’t have been able to do that more than a handful of times.”

“A handful is enough,” Humphrey said. “A few silver-rank monsters is our limit, even as a team. Our abilities are growing, but if we become arrogant or complacent, we can easily die here.”

When the confrontation with the blood weaver came, there were no so many silver-rank monsters as they feared. The nasty surprise was that the blood weaver had managed to capture and turn three of the flesh abominations. Vampiric power combined in dangerous ways with the nature of the flesh monsters, to various effect.

The first unpleasant surprise was that something about the nature of the abominations and their new vampiric state made them less vulnerable to Jason’s blood powers, instead of more, like the other vampiric monsters. The powers still took hold, but at a reduced strength. Fortunately, they still had increased effect against the other vampiric minions.

The other aspect of the vampire abominations was that they could warp themselves to produce an array of different drain attacks. Mana, health and stamina were all drained away by barbed flesh whips, needle claws and eerie, disjointed limbs covered in toothy maws.

By the time they carved their way through to the blood weaver, the team was spent enough that even the relatively weak creature still posed a threat. In the end, though, they were resting atop a building that served as an anchor for the new nest, the weaver and its minions all dead.

Jason hadn't even bothered to pull out the cloud house, the team sprawling onto the tiled rooftop, exhausted. Neil had only half-healed the team back up before he was too wrung out to finish the job.

"That was bad," Belinda said. "Top Five worst fight, easy."

"Top three," Neil said.

"I don't know about top three," Clive said. "I mean, the vortex elementals were number one, right?"

"Definitely," Jason agreed. "The mirror fungus was definitely top three."

"I'd say the stutter hawks, too," Humphrey chimed in. "That's the top three."

"Nope," Neil said. "You didn't have to heal and replenish the team through all those drain attacks. The vampire abominations were worse than the stutter hawks."

"Actually, yeah," Clive said. "I'll accept that. Top three."

"We really shouldn't just be laying here," Humphrey said. "A monster could jump on us while we're not defending ourselves."

"At this point the monster can have me," Sophie said. "I'm getting some rest even if it's the cold rest of the grave. Do you know how hard it is to get tired with my powers? This is the first time I've been genuinely tired since we left Greenstone."

"You want someone to get up, then get up," Neil said to Humphrey.

"Alright, I will," Humphrey said, then didn't so much as twitch. "Am I up?"

"No," Belinda said.

"Well, I tried," Humphrey said. "At least I'll be able to say I died valiantly."

"I'm bleeding on the roof," Belinda said.

"If the landlord complains, I'll lie for you," Jason said.

"That's very decent of you," Belinda said.

Eventually the team did pick themselves up before something climbed up the side of the building to eat them and Neil finished healing the team back up. They decamped to another location and Jason set up the cloud house. Humphrey became everyone's hero by volunteering first watch, while everyone else except Clive went to bed. Clive made his way onto the roof where he conducted the latest in his ongoing tests to gauge the integrity of the dimensional membrane dividing the astral space from the true astral.

"Well?" Humphrey asked as Clive came back down.

"It could be any day, now," Clive said. "not long from now, we're going to be up to our armpits in cultists."