

Chapter 250

A Significantly More Dangerous Entity

The Builder was now wearing Thadwick's face, but those that knew him would spot the difference immediately. There was a very different beast inside Thadwick's body and the change was startling. It began from the eyes, hard and unyielding. This was a gaze that knew its domain was everything it landed upon. Person, place, or object, all that it saw, it owned.

It was a far cry from the insecure haughtiness of the body's former owner and his constant need for validation. Uncertain arrogance had been replaced with world-shaking confidence, transforming his entire demeanour. From facial expression to posture, Thadwick's body exuded the domineering presence that had ever been his unrealised intention.

The Builder walked alongside Zato and Timos as they inspected their new weapons, lined up like soldiers on parade. The former clergy stood with blank expressions, their personalities wiped clean. The souls inside were screaming, but only the Builder could hear them. He was no more moved by their suffering than was the brick under their feet.

Their clothes, torn and bloody from the involuntary procedure, had been replaced with plain garments. Around a third of them had grey-coloured clothes, the rest had brown. Their original clothes were gone, but their skin was still coated with the rust of dried blood. The cultists hadn't bothered to wash them off following the gruesome conversion process.

To ordinary senses, the converted seemed normal, aside from the empty, blank expressions. To magic and aura senses, they were anything but normal. There was no longer any trace of essence power within their auras, all burned as fuel for the magic intricately engraved all across their skeletons with the fine precision of circuitry. So stark was the power coursing over and through their bones that magical senses could clearly feel it, radiating through their flesh. The magic felt alien, unnatural and artificial, surging around their bodies and through the clockwork core implanted in their hearts. The cores were a modified variant of the cores used to create constructs, and were regulating the magic of the converted.

To aura sense, the converted projected a uniform, blank and sterile, bronze-rank aura, coming from what had once been iron-rank essence users. It was stronger from the brown-garbed individuals than those in the grey, but in both cases the auras being generated were firm and unfluctuating. Most disturbing was that the auras were identical amongst all those standing in line. The unique signature that was an intrinsic trait of all

auras was unsettlingly absent. There was no trace of their individuality or the suffering they were experiencing in deepest depths of their souls.

The procedure of emplacing the engravings had been painstaking and gruesome, carving them onto the skeleton directly and by hand. Flesh was peeled back and the engravings made, bone by bone, before the flesh was returned. Only the massively accelerated healing bestowed by the procedure made it possible for the subject to survive. Even then, moving on to the deeper bones that required more extreme procedures to access was a delicate balance.

It began with the least invasive areas, moving onto the more critical areas as more of the procedure was completed. By the time the ritualists were going for the hips, pelvis and spine, they had already walked a precarious balancing act to keep the subject alive at all. Paralysis magic was key in preventing any disruptive movement or screaming.

“Many of them had divine essences,” Timos said. “That power was not consumed by the process but returned to their god, so those ones are somewhat weaker. I’ve given the weaker ones grey garments and the stronger ones brown, to easily identify each group. My concern is that Purity will know the reason for this sudden return of power.”

“The god’s eyes do not extend to this place,” the Builder assured him. “All Purity will know is that his people died in rapid succession. There are dangers in this place that are plausible enough explanation. He will suspect, but not risk the alliance by pushing the issue. Show me the difference between the stronger and the lesser.”

Timos nodded at a pair of cultists standing by, who stepped forward. They moved up to two of the converted, one brown-garbed and one in grey. Each cultist drew a long knife and sliced open the throat of the converted in front of them, blood spraying from the wounds. The converted showed no reaction, and the gaping slashes quickly closed, with that of the brown-wearing converted happening faster than the other. It only took seconds for the savagely slashed throats to completely heal over, marked only by the blood that had spilled out.

“Adequate,” the Builder said. “Did we lose any in the conversion process?”

“We did not,” Timos said. “The ritualists were fastidious in their work.”

“Good. Having a vessel present gives me the ability to control them directly, but I cannot share their perceptions the way I can with those carrying star seeds. Begin organising them into teams with our people and the constructs. We begin the next stage in the morning. Now, show me my previous vessel.”

The team, now fully recovered, were discussing their next move.

“We need more information,” Humphrey said. “Did you get anything from what we took from Hendren, Clive?”

“No. In so far as I can tell, Hendren thought that this was just another astral space the Builder was trying to steal. There’s nothing about those giant golems or what the Builder might want with them.”

“When I was scouting their camp using Shade’s body, they looked to be gearing up to set out from their walled-off fort,” Jason said. “Whatever they’re doing, they can’t do it from where they are.”

“They probably need to go to the towers around the city, right?” Belinda said. “They have to be doing something with those world engineer things. Are they going to wake them up?”

“If they are,” Clive said. “I have to wonder what does the Builder gets out of that. Right now, they’re locked away in this astral space?”

“They’re diamond-rank,” Neil said. “For all we know, they’re powerful enough to leave this astral space using their own abilities.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Clive said. “You could well be right. The little I’ve learned about diamond rank has a recurring theme of the old rules no longer applying.”

“Maybe he isn’t looking to wake them up,” Belinda said. “Those towers are the anchor points tethering this astral space to our world, right? The portals linking it to our world are integrated right into them. What if their real purpose is some kind of delivery system. Rather than wake them up, he’s trying to move them into our world?”

“Whether they’re moving on their own steam or getting a push along, a dozen, diamond-ranked super-golems is not what we want floating about,” Jason said. “We may not know what they do, but with a name like world engineers, I think we really need to stop them from doing it.”

“Then what’s our next move?” Sophie asked.

“I hate to be passive, given what’s potentially at stake,” Jason said. “I don’t think we can just stage an attack on their fort, though. They have another silver-ranker, a small army of priests and cultists and however many of those construct creatures they’ve built. They also have the Builder itself. Do we have any idea how much power it has, or what it can do with that power? And by we, I mean Clive.”

“I don’t know,” Clive said. “Those walls it built are an impressive edifice, but you said it’s vessel looked more dead than alive. Most likely, that strained the vessel it’s occupying. You said you were sensing silver-rank magic from it?”

“Yes, although I couldn’t sense it at all until it was standing right in front of me. It seemed like silver-rank magic holding the body together, but I have no idea if that’s its limit.”

“Most likely,” Clive said. “A more powerful vessel would require a more powerful sacrifice and they don’t have a silver-ranker they can just toss away for that.”

“I think we can all agree that a pre-emptive attack would be ill-advised,” Humphrey said. “You’re counselling patience?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “We watch and we wait. When they make a move we look for a chance to dig out what they’re doing. Once we know what they’re up to and, hopefully, how, we can start figuring out how to stop it.”

“Does that mean we start hanging around the outside of the fort, waiting for them to come out?” Neil asked.

“I’ve already sent Shade to do exactly that,” Jason said. “He’ll be keeping a good distance, because we can’t be sure how sensitive the Builder’s senses are, but he’ll spot it if they make any big moves.”

Zato, Timos and the Builder walked past the array of construct creatures, most of which had been completed. Under normal circumstances, creating such creatures was a laborious and magic-intensive process. Access to clockwork cores made their construction cheap and relatively easy, for those with the expertise to use them. For the cult ritualists who specialised in their use, it was simplicity itself.

Clockwork core constructs were a cheap and dirty version of regular construct creatures. Those crafted through the usual process were a superior product, but the requirements in materials, time and facilities were considerable. The ability to quickly produce large numbers of constructs in the field, with no need for specialist workshops made clockwork core constructs more valuable than those that were, rank for rank, more powerful.

The only drawback to this approach was securing a supply of the clockwork cores. Without a clockwork king to produce more, the cultists were running increasingly short. The battles in the desert astral space and on their island base had cost them a vast number of the constructs, both destroyed outright and abandoned in the need to go to ground.

The constructs they were assembling now were consuming the last of their cores. Even the Builder itself was unable to produce new ones with its current vessel, which was not strong enough to endure the power it would take to create more.

Zato led the others past the constructs to where the Builder's previous vessel was in a cage made of magically-shaped stone. The cage was surrounded by an active magic circle, glowing with purple light. The vessel was visibly healthier than it had while possessed by the Builder, and while it was far from looking flush with life, it no longer had the appearance of a weeks-old corpse.

The reason for its recovery was not just the absence of the Builder's power eating it away from the inside but also the dead bronze-rank priests piled up in the cage. It had fed on them all for the sustenance it needed to survive. Feeding, however, had not let it move beyond the animalistic instincts it had been left with on the Builder's departure for a new shell. The intelligence of the man it had once been was nowhere in evidence. Crouched in the cage, it stared at them, warily.

"What exactly does it feed on?" Timos asked. "My understanding is that the soul is inviolable. I cannot imagine this feral creature having the skill of you, Lord, at forcing people to yield that barrier.

"While it is commonly accredited as feeding on the soul, that is not what energy vampires do," the Builder explained. "They are also, strictly speaking, not vampires. They are more akin to ghouls; wretched things that know nothing but hunger. They do attack the soul, which disrupts the magical matrix that governs the physical body, and they feed on this disturbed magic."

"It can't truly feed on souls, then," Timos said.

"It could, if given the chance. When such a creature does find a way to feed on a soul, that power is transformative. The ghoul truly does become a form of vampire; a significantly more dangerous entity. Such chances are rare, however."

"And it won't go after monsters," Timos said.

"No," the Builder confirmed. "It requires a true soul to trigger a reaction that disrupts the body's flow of magic. The false souls of monsters barely react to such attacks, making them poor sustenance."

"So it won't go after the monsters," Zato said, "but what of the twisted flesh creatures that inhabit this astral space? Are their souls damaged enough for the ghoul to ignore them?"

"There were hundreds of them, according to our agents in the Adventure Society," Timos said. "One of the last reports before our people had to withdraw from their positions was that the Rejector intended to wipe the flesh creatures out."

“They have likely thinned out the numbers in their time here,” Zato said. “I can’t imagine they eliminated them all, under the conditions here, but hopefully there are few enough left that it isn’t an issue and the ghoul seeks out the Rejector.”

“Souls that have been significantly altered create an unusual reaction in the body’s magic, which taints it to such ghouls,” the Builder said. “It is the same reason it might attack you, but cannot feed off of you. The alterations I have made to your soul make you poisonous to it. The flesh creatures are similar and it will not go after them.”

“The ghoul should go right for the Rejector, then, once it catches wind of him,” Zato said.

“Yes. The flesh creatures will not be concern,” the Builder said. “What will be a concern to us are the vorger that created the flesh creatures in the first place. They would not be so foolish as to come anywhere near me, but once our teams move out, the vorger will move in on them.”

“I’ll make sure that each team contains people capable of handling incorporeal pests,” Timos said.

“Good,” Zato said. “Lord, do you wish to release this energy ghoul now?”

“Yes,” the Builder said.

“I shall have our ritualists securely remove it from the fort.”

“No need,” the Builder said. “I shall deal with it myself.”

The Builder strode through the magic circle, which flickered and dimmed as it passed over it. Nearing the cage, the magically-moulded bars started to run like mud, quickly thinning to an almost watery consistency and splashing onto the brickwork, where it immediately hardened again.

The ghoul leapt at the Builder, who snatched it out of the air with one hand, claspng its fingers around the ghoul’s neck. The ghoul collapsed in his grip, falling limp like a rag. The Builder then carried it to the nearest gate in the wall, which opened at his approach. The builder tossed out the ghoul, which regained its senses in the air, twisting into an animalistic catfall. It looked back, fearfully, before scrambling away, still of all fours.

The Builder raised a hand and dust started rising up from the ground, swirling together into a small but solid shape. It was a crystal eyeball with spider legs that, immediately on being completed, scurried off after the ghoul.