

## Chapter 251

### Losing the Battle to Win the War

Jason dashed forward, his sword flicking out.

“Faster,” Sophie said, catching every strike with her hand as she moved backwards, easily matching the pace of Jason’s advance.

“You don’t need to hit hard,” she said. “If you’re going to fight the constructs effectively, it’s about building up the power on your sword as quickly as possible.”

Fending off Jason’s attacks while moving backwards at speed was apparently not strenuous enough to make her incapable of carrying on conversation. They had chosen rough terrain on purpose, with undergrowth, vines and plants growing up through displaced brickwork. Sophie navigated it easily, without even looking around.

Her perception power, the only one on the team yet to provide magical senses, gave her an advanced form of spatial awareness. Each member of the team experienced a similar gain in spatial awareness, just from their senses advancing to bronze, but hers was an order of magnitude greater. It was the difference navigating a well-known room in the dark and moving through it with the lights on.

More than just navigating whatever space she happened to occupy, Sophie’s senses made her far better at reading the attacks of enemies. She could track the movements of everyone around her, intercepting attacks she could feel, even if she couldn’t see them.

Jason had experienced a surge in his combat skills between his bronze-rank attributes and the new Way of the Reaper techniques that made the most of them. For Sophie, though, reaching bronze-rank was putting wings on a tiger. Like Humphrey, her combat skills were the platform on which her entire power set was balanced, and being stronger faster and more aware of her surroundings were acting as force multipliers to her capabilities.

For Jason’s power set, by comparison, strategic movement was more critical than combat technique. Being in the right place at the right time was the most important factor in making the most of his abilities and the balance of his training reflected that. Since many of those powers would be ineffective against the cult’s constructs, however, he would be reliant on his sword. For that reason, Humphrey and Sophie were taking turns helping him hone his swordsmanship.

As with most things, Jason’s approach to swordsmanship was slightly off-kilter to most people. As with his knife-fighting style, quantity of hits was more important than quality. He didn’t need powerful strikes but frequent ones, to build up the power on his

sword. He did actually need to land hits, not just harmless taps, but even the least effective blow would get the job done, so long as it was effective at all.

With the bronze-rank advancement, the sword would not just build up charges with each hit. It would also leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more into line with Jason's normal style, although not as effectively as his normal powers. While that meant diminished capability, Jason was quietly relieved that his entire worth couldn't be replicated by a single, albeit impressive, magic item.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. Jason and Sophie brought their practise to a stop.

"There's been some activity?" Jason asked.

"It would seem that the Builder has moved to its new vessel," Shade said. "Unexpectedly, it did not kill of the previous one, but threw it out of the fortress immediately."

Jason and Sophie had been practising just outside the church building containing the cloud house. As Shade talked, they made their way back inside to meet with the team.

"The Builder's vessel survived having the Builder in it?" Jason asked.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Shade said.

"Well, wait on an explanation until we meet up with the team," Jason said. It was not long before the team were gathered in the lounge room of the cloud house.

"What are we dealing with?" Humphrey asked.

"The Builder's previous vessel," Shade said. "The Builder's new one, the former Mr Mercer, cast it out of the fortified camp in person."

"What kind of state is it in?" Jason asked. "I didn't think it would survive."

"It won't have, strictly speaking," Clive explained. "It'll be an energy ghoul, now; an undead thing only kept animate by residual magic. Little, if any of the original mind will be intact."

"It was acting in a very animalistic manner," Shade said.

"The magic sustaining it won't last long," Clive said. "It will need more to avoid going from undead to just plain dead."

"What kind of magic?" Belinda asked.

"The kind flowing through all of us," Clive said. "We've discussed in the past about how the bodies of anyone, iron-rank or higher, move closer and closer to a generic magical substance that it shapes as need. The magic involved in that process is governed by the soul. An energy ghoul feeds by disrupting that magic with a soul attack, then consuming it."

“Why did the Builder throw this thing out, instead of just putting it down?” Jason asked. “Won’t it be a threat to their people?”

“The cultists all have souls poisoned by their star seeds,” Clive said. “The Purity church people will be vulnerable to it, however.”

“Which the cult may not care about, now the leader of the church contingent is dead,” Humphrey said. “The Builder may not care about what they have to contribute, now they aren’t providing a silver-ranker.”

“I believe that we can surmise the church’s contribution,” Shade said. “The former vessel was in an improved condition, compared to when Mr Asano and myself met with the Builder.”

“He’s been feeding the church people to it?” Jason asked. “That’s a bad ally to have.”

“A great astral being is one of the few that do not need fear a god’s retribution,” Clive said. “The gods of our world can’t see into this astral space, because it isn’t part of our world. So long as none of Purity’s people come back alive, the Builder can just blame all the deaths on us.”

“I’m happy to do my part,” Sophie said. “I’ll kill them all with a smile on my face.”

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded. “Since when do you smile?”

The team stifled laughs at Sophie’s affronted expression.

“Let’s keep on topic,” Humphrey said, despite the poor job he was doing of schooling amusement from his own face. “How dangerous is this thing?”

“Was it a silver-rank aura?” Clive asked Shade.

“Yes,” Shade said. “Its aura is unstable, but quite violent.”

“And that’s the real threat,” Clive said. “The physical danger it poses is relatively small, akin to an ordinary, silver-rank monster. No additional powers, not even claws. Just the silver-rank attributes.”

“Relatively small,” Jason said. “You haven’t gone toe-to-toe with a silver-rank monster. Just the attributes is plenty dangerous enough.”

“But not something beyond your ability to handle alone,” Clive said, “which is the important thing. If it can suppress our auras, it will launch a soul attack. We’ve seen the results of that courtesy of you, Jason. We can most likely withstand it, but you’re the only one of us likely to hold up well enough to remain combat effective. The rest will have to focus on maintaining our aura integrity.”

“That puts it all on Jason,” Humphrey said. “Are you up for that?”

“I’ll have to be,” Jason said. “I still don’t understand what the Builder is looking to accomplish in feeding this thing up and sending it off. What does he get from doing that?”

“An energy ghoulish is incredibly sensitive to the life and soul magic. It also ignores monsters, because it can't feed on them effectively.”

“He wants to use it to find us,” Sophie said.

“That seems likely,” Clive said. “It's not a bad idea, either. It probably won't even take that long to find us. It's movements will be erratic until it catches our trail. Not an actual trail, but a sense of our magic. Once it does, it'll make a beeline, right for us.”

“I have one of my bodies following it,” Shade said. “It is making a straight line, but not in our direction.”

“I think Mr Standish may be incorrect in counting the soul attack as the largest danger the energy ghoulish presents,” Shade said. “Following the ghoulish is a small scouting construct created by the Builder. The moment we engage with the ghoulish, the Builder will know.”

“It seems that you were right, Clive,” Humphrey said. “The Builder is using this thing to flush us out.”

“It makes sense,” Neil said. “If you have it laying about, why not throw it at us? It's kind of wasting a soul-sucking monster, otherwise.”

“It's not an actual monster,” Clive said. “And it doesn't actually ‘suck souls.’ It would if it could, but souls are inviolable. You can't just crack them like a breakfast egg. No one is going to open themselves up to an energy ghoulish, which is for the best, given the result.”

“The result of what?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, if it actually managed to consume a soul, it would transform into a soul vampire. Much more powerful, much more dangerous. We don't have to worry about that, though.”

“Why not?” Neil asked.

“I told you; souls are inviolable,” Clive said. “It's not like there's an unattended soul just laying about for it to eat. Why are you all staring at me?”

“An unattended soul,” Neil said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Where would it possibly find one of those?”

“About eight kilometres away,” Jason said.

“What?” Clive asked.

“The one wrapped around the sword, remember?” Neil asked and Clive's eyes went wide and he leapt out of his chair.

“Oh, that's bad” he said. “That's really, really bad. We can't let that happen. Especially not a soul that powerful.”

He started pacing back and forth.

“Maybe its fine,” Clive said. “Maybe whatever’s been done to that soul will make in intolerable to the ghoul. It’ll just ignore it.”

“Right now, the ghoul is moving in almost a straight line in the direction of the location you are discussing,” Shade said. “So long as you leave in the next several minutes, you will be able to comfortably intercept the ghoul.”

“Why didn’t you say that before?” Clive asked Shade wildly.

“I largely avoid embroiling myself in the affairs of the great astral beings,” Shade said. “My affiliation with the Reaper tends to cause complications. As such, I am unfamiliar with the specifics around taking mortal vessels and their subsequent condition.”

“Then we need to move,” Humphrey said. “I can only imagine that letting the ghoul consume that soul is trouble enough, let alone unleashing the sword it imprisons.”

“Double the trouble,” Jason said.

“Are we sure this whole thing isn’t a trap?” Sophie asked. “Does the Builder know about the sword and is baiting us into trying to stop the ghoul?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Clive said. “We have to stop it even if we know for certain it’s a trap. A soul that powerful might even let the ghoul rise up to a gold-rank soul vampire. If that happens, I don’t see us leaving this place alive, let alone stopping the Builder.”

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The Builder, Zato and Timos were preparing to exit the walled fortress with an assembled group of cultists, constructs and converted Purity priests.

“You have a concern, Timos?” the Builder asked.

“I don’t feel it’s appropriate to say, Lord Builder.”

“Speak, Timos.”

“It’s just... that face,” Timos said. “I spent more time than I would care to, holding Thadwick Mercer’s leash. It’s still a little odd seeing his face without his unique mix of vacuousness, insecurity and disdain.”

“I always find that obtaining the memories of a vessel to be interesting,” the Builder said. “Very few things are difficult to a transcendent being, but obtaining a mortal perspective is one of them. It makes predicting mortal behaviour difficult. So often you make choices that objectively work against your own interests or are even self-destructive.”

“If that’s what you’re looking for, I don’t think you could have found a better vessel,” Timos said. “Thadwick Mercer was a disaster of self-sabotage.”

“Indeed,” the Builder said. “I was hoping for some insight into the Rejector, but this vessel was so self-deluded that I don’t entirely trust the memories.”

The Builder tilted its head, as if listening to something.

“The ghoul is moving with speed and purpose,” it said. “It has been attracted to something.”

“The Rejector’s team,” Timos said. “Perhaps they were nearby, scouting the fortress.”

“I’ll take some of our forces and capture them,” Zato said.

“No,” the Builder said. “Rushing to the attack is what cost us Hendren, but there is no benefit in losing you. Send a force of converted and constructs under the command of one of the bronze-rankers.”

“I’ll arrange it, Lord, but I am uncertain they will find success against a group that already defeated a silver-ranker.”

“They will not,” the Builder said. “That is not the purpose of sending them. The mobility of being a small group is their key advantage against us. Rushing out to attack each time we catch wind of them only plays to that strength. One of our advantages in numbers and it is time to make use of them.”

“Please enlighten me, Lord,” Zato said.

“I will send observers with this force. We shall see how the Rejector and his team fights them, that we might develop countermeasures for future encounters. All it will cost us is a small portion of our superior numbers.”

“Planting the seeds of victory in the soil of defeat. My Lord is wise and long-sighted.”

“Don’t be a sycophant, Zato. I am not a god, in need of fawning worshippers.”

“Apologies, Lord Builder.”

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Since the leap in Jason’s aura power after his encounter with the Builder’s star seed, Jason had been engaging the team in anti-suppression training. He couldn’t raise the strength of their aura, but they could train to make the most of the strength they had. By keeping their aura projection uniform and resolute, they would present no weakness for the ghoul’s aura to pounce on and collapse their auras entirely, leaving them exposed to its feeding ability.

This paid off when they encountered the ghoul, who immediately let out a soul-piercing shriek to go with its soul-suppressing aura. Aside from Jason, the team were all staggered, but not debilitated. Jason himself plunged forward, undaunted.

The encounter happened in amongst tightly-packed buildings, the jungle overgrowth turning narrow streets into cramped canyons. Vines covered the walls and trees on the rooftops formed a canopy that stretched over the streets and cast everything in shadow.

The ghoul was a ragged, wretched thing, its clothes torn and bloody. Even though it was more intact than when Jason had seen it as the builder's vessel, he saw even less of the man he remembered.

Dougall had been the one to capture him, in what felt like a lifetime ago back at the Vane Estate. It had only been a just a few months more than a year ago, but Jason was literally and figuratively transformed. He had been scared and confused, halfway to madness and not entirely certain he wasn't the whole way there. Scrambling to survive, let alone understand what was happening to him, the repeated hits to the head with a shovel did not help.

The man who had been holding that shovel had undergone an even greater transformation than Jason, although not for the better. A less than pleasant man in life, undeath had rendered him into an even more unpleasant monstrosity.

The ghoul was silver-rank, but without the power to penetrate Jason's aura, it was no more threat than its silver-rank attributes, themselves on the lower end of the scale. It fought unthinkingly and without skill, while the environment was a playground for Jason's abilities. His affliction powers were able to shine against the creature's silver-rank fortitude, hardy enough to withstand far more punishment than any bronze-ranker. The escalating nature of Jason's afflictions proved their worth as they inevitably overwhelmed the ghoul.

With the enclosed space and the team concentrating on fending off the ghoul's aura, they had not detected the presence of the builder's forces until they were almost upon them. Even as Jason's execute was annihilating the ghoul, the team heard the approach of the clunky stone constructs.