

Chapter 257

The Power of Friendship

Once again, the team's pinpoint timing salvaged a very poor situation from what would otherwise have been a total disaster. Sophie used the last of her strength to throw out a bloody fist, barely able to lift an arm from which half the muscle had been shredded. As she did, Neil's Bolster ability landed, enhancing the power the punch carried.

Ability: [Deny the Reaper] (Balance)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Target enemy suffers a small amount of transcendent damage and you are healed for a small amount. As a counter-execute effect, the damage and healing scale exponentially with your own level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Provides a heal-over-time effect. Healing scales exponentially with your own level of injury at the time the ability was used.

With Sophie's bedraggled state, plus the boosts to her spirit attribute and the enhancement from Neil's spell, it was by far and away the most potent use of a power she had ever executed. The healing it provided was near-miraculous, knitting together muscle and regrowing skin between one breath and the next. Even with perfect circumstances, though, it was not enough healing to fully restore her condition. The ongoing heal component of the ability started going to work, aided by a life bolt spell from Neil.

Sophie's fist was buried in his chest and she yanked it out with an unpleasant wet sound. Her hand glistened with liquid silver, mixed with a little blood, although that could easily have been hers. Her body began emitting an amber glow.

"Gift evolution!" Clive exulted through voice chat. "I'd put money down on it being a rank-jumping power."

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- Celestine racial ability [Astral Affinity] has evolved to [Boundary Breaker].

Ability: [Boundary Breaker]

- Transfigured from [Celestine] ability [Astral Affinity].
- Increased resistance to dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.
- Ignore the enhanced resistances derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced resistance from being higher rank, not other sources of resistance.
- Ignore the enhanced aura suppression and aura suppression resistance derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced effects from being higher rank, not the inherently superior strength of higher-rank auras.

The rest of the team sent their congratulations, even as they kept fighting, but Sophie herself was conflicted. She had received what she needed most of all, but not from a triumph but a costly mistake.

“It’s not about the reward you earned,” Humphrey told her. “It’s about the lesson you learned.”

Much of the wisdom Humphrey had to offer were saying that had been drilled into him by his mother. This statement very much had the cadence of that, which mollified Sophie somewhat. She had come to respect Danielle a lot when Danielle helped her get a handle on some of her powers that were similar to Danielle’s own.

Humphrey found himself in an odd position in the wake of Zato’s explosive power, where he was both too damaged and not damaged enough. He needed healing to get back into a state ready to fight Zato, as a half-recovered state would quickly be punished. He did have his Immortality power but he was not so damaged that he wanted to use it. Even after her self heal, though, Neil was focusing his healing on Sophie. Humphrey knew it was the right choice, given that Sophie could inherently suffer fewer hits than he could himself.

He made a decision and pulled a potion vial from his belt and downed the contents. It was a silver-rank health tonic they had taken from Nicolas Hendren, the over-ranked potion giving Humphrey an overcharged burst of healing. The price was that the magic would linger, meaning that the fight would be done one way or another before he could use another potion. It was the best compromise he could think of, not fully healing him, but letting him recover enough to keep up the fight while keeping Immortality in his pocket.

As for Zato, he had suffered the first true blow of the fight that inflicted real, lasting damage. His last attack had completely healed him from the slow build-up of damage he had sustained from the team's earlier attacks. The transcendent damage from Sophie's counter-execute, though, went through him like his body was made of water. It didn't care about his rank or the metal that had replaced his flesh. Not even the power the Builder had gifted him with could withstand that power.

The odd pause following Sophie's strike was ended by Clive. He hadn't made a large impact on the fight, throwing out a few buff spells before drawing out ritual circles as fast as he could, which turned out to be pretty damn fast. He'd always been a strong ritualist, but months of throwing out combat rituals had honed his skills to a fine point. In this case, his circles empowered his weapons and reconfigured their damage from disruptive to resonating force. Having finished his preparations, the twin blast from his wand and staff was the starter's gun for the next phase of the fight.

Jason was playing mouse to the Builder's cat. The frenzy of stampeding monsters fighting with cultists and constructs made it hard for the Builder to easily sense him. The vessel's senses had been enhanced beyond what Thadwick had possessed but to an entity of the Builder's power, even diamond-rank senses would have felt like blindness.

A seemingly incongruous aspect of auras was that the more powerful they were, the harder they were to detect if their owner didn't want them to be. The feeble aura of an iron ranker was easy to pick out, while the potent aura of a gold-rank soul was easily hidden. The key was control, with a stronger soul able to exert more control over the strength radiating out of it. This was assuming that a person had an aura power, therefore meeting the minimum requirements to exert that control. As Farrah had once warned Jason, a powerful soul with no means to control it was unruly to the point of being dangerous.

Jason's expertise with aura control was quite possibly the area in which he excelled the most, which was combined with an aura strength realms beyond the ordinary. It was a strength born of his close call with the elemental tyrant, his meeting with the gods and, more than anything else, his soul battle the Builder itself. The result was an aura strength more akin to a silver-ranker than a bronze.

Jason's expert control and formidable aura power combined with the ability Gordon granted of making his soul even harder to detect. The result was that even the enhanced silver-rank senses the Builder's vessel produced had a hard time picking out Jason's presence.

Hidden amongst the teeming monsters, Jason was not just a mouse, but a mouse with an invisibility cloak in a pile of other mice. Unfortunately, the Builder was a cat with a flamethrower. It had begun the chase with little understanding of its vessel's limitations but it was a very quick study. It had gone from crude attacks to destructive waves of rippling earth spikes that maximised power and area with as little strain on the vessel as possible.

There was an inevitable cost to repeatedly channelling power, the strain on the vessel beginning to show as it grew increasingly pale. It was an acceptable rate of decay, given that the Builder's design was already in motion. So long as Asano and his companions were kept from interfering, the situation would resolve itself without further intervention from his vessel.

The Builder's powers all involved manipulating the physical material around it. Simply reshaping it had the least cost, thus the spike waves that were a simple reshaping on the stone underfoot. Imbuing materials with additional power, was more costly. This ranged from imbuing it with disruptive-force to harm incorporeal entities to animating the material, like a short-lived construct creature. The effect that levied the greatest cost to the builder's form was transmuting one material into another, such as stone into steel.

The Builder was sweeping whole swathes of the battlefield in spike waves, even as its senses probed for Jason. It didn't care what got in its way, be that monster, construct or converted. Even the Builder's own cultists were mowed down ruthlessly as wedge-shaped chunks were cut out of the stampeding crush with every wave of impaling spikes.

The Builder was single-minded and methodical in its pursuit of Jason, but Jason nonetheless took the effort to provoke it. Having one of Shade's bodies move close enough to speak through allowed him to constantly harass the great astral being.

"Do you have a name outside of just 'the Builder?' It doesn't come across as imposing as you seem to think. It just makes you sound like an intergalactic brickie. Actually, I take it back; that sounds kind of awesome. Invaders from beyond the stars is done to death. A guy from beyond the stars who knocks up an outdoor dunny while unrepentantly flashing bum crack? That's a fresh idea. You might want to write this down, mate. I'm giving you gold, here."

"I will be giving you unimaginable torment soon enough."

"Oh, nice. Solid villain line; good job on the banter. You've already tried shaving chunks of my soul off like lemon zest, though, so I'm pretty sure I can imagine it. Having my friends kill me though? That's a prick move. I'm pretty sure my friends are going to beat your friends, though."

"I am beyond your mortal imagining. I have no friends."

“Well that’s just sad. Not because of the loneliness thing, although that too. You just admitted defeat.”

“There is no defeat. My will is inexorable.”

“Mate, this is the climactic battle and I’m the only one rocking the power of friendship. You’ve got no chance. You better knock out a back-story flashback toot-sweet or it’ll be a total walkover.”

As demonstrated when it sent Nicolas Hendren after the team, the Builder had some ability to track Jason’s location through the bond to his familiar. For this reason it tolerated Shade’s presence without eradicating the familiar’s body. Jason knew this as well as the Builder, but kept Shade nearby anyway. While he knew there was no goading the Builder any more than he already had, he needed the Builder to have at least some idea of his location. It allowed him to lead the Builder and his destructive power away from the team.

Despite Sophie’s heavy blow on Zato and a timely gift evolution to give her a greater impact on the fight, it had not been the turnaround moment that the team needed. While her attacks were more effective, she still needed to spend most of her time dealing with the projectiles Zato continuously hurled at Neil. Her power upgrade meant that she was able to deal with the attacks without taking the same level of damage but it was still eating into time she would rather use to pile on damage.

Belinda assisted Sophie in this regard, splitting her attention between keeping monsters off their backline and playing meat shield for Neil against Zato projectile attacks. She had activated her warrior-form power, Counterfeit Combatant, and was sporting heavy armour and a large shield, along with a long-handled war hammer.

No matter how much damage they inflicted, Zato was the immovable object to their apparently stoppable force. Aside from the one gaping wound in his chest, which did not seem to impair his combat ability, even Humphrey’s powerful attacks achieved little more than superficial dents. The more they attacked, the more their enemy seemed dishearteningly indestructible.

Clive had entered the fray, blasting away with his ritual-enhanced weapons. While the results were visible, they were as minimal as everything else and Zato insultingly disregarded Clive’s threat, continuing to hammer of Humphrey and Sophie while trying to land a decisive strike on Neil.

The team was not without their own gains, with Neil’s perception power giving them a slight edge. Its ability to see vulnerabilities was something he normally used for assessing the team’s injuries, but it also spotted one of Zato’s few vulnerabilities.

“Parts of his body become fluid when he uses a shape changing power,” Neil alerted the others through voice chat. The ability to communicate without being overheard or needing to yell over other noises was a critical element of facilitating teamwork. “If you can time a disruptive-force attack instead of a resonating one in just the right moment, you’ll do some extra damage.”

In spite of the team refining their attacks, the power gap remained. Even with Sophie’s growing might, Zato was too strong, too tough and boasted too many forms of attack. Even with the team’s focus on keeping Neil safe, Zato’s attacks would still sometimes get through and land some damage on the healer.

The team retained more injuries as Zato’s damage started outpacing Neil’s healing. The team’s key cooldown powers were used at critical moments, not to swing the battle in their favour but to keep it from getting away from them entirely. Humphrey’s Immortality, Belinda’s full cooldown reset. Their last trump card was Neil’s Hero’s Moment power, but it would cripple whoever it was used on when the power ended. Until they would get within striking range of finishing the job, it was a power that was off-limits.

Despair started to set in as they looked down the barrel of what seemed like Zato’s inevitable victory. They could not deal enough damage, the gap normally filled by Jason, but it was clear his powers would not work against Zato’s silver body. In any case, Jason had his own overwhelming enemy to face.

“You really thought you could derail the Builder’s design?” Zato taunted. He sensed that victory was close and tried to push to his enemies’ morale to the breaking point. “We have been planning this longer than any of you have been alive. You thought to stop the efforts of years with your meagre abilities and pathetic ideals? You think that you possess the power to undo all that we have wrought? You won’t just fail here. You won’t die. Your souls will be taken. You will each become weapons against everything you love and all you sought to protect.”

Humphrey’s weariness and the seeming futility of his efforts had eaten away at his spirit. He rallied his determination but Zato’s words stirred up fear of become exactly what Zato said, a weapon against his own people. Exhausted, he watched, sword hanging limply from his hands as Zato and Sophie engaged in a wild struggle. As her power grew over time she had been taking on more of Humphrey’s frontline role. Humphrey told himself to move, to lift up his sword and keep going, but his arms wouldn’t move.

Just as he was on the verge of giving up, his mother, Danielle, appeared out of nowhere and slapped him hard across the face. He stumbled, startled as she glared at him in fury.

“What is your name?” she demanded, her voice hammering down with righteous anger.

He looked at her in confusion, then his eyes went wide. His shoulders firmed as he stood up straight, resolve returning to his posture. He had not recovered stamina or mana. He had not been healed. His Immortality was long gone, used and used again when Belinda reset it. He had received no fresh boons, gained no extra power. All that changed was his resolve.

Humphrey head swung on a pivot, from his mother to Zato, who ignored him while trying to overwhelm Sophie while Humphrey was flagging. Humphrey’s gaze locked onto the enemy as his mother turned back into Belinda and returned to where the familiars were holding the line against the monsters.

Humphrey hefted his dragon sword in one hand and hurled it, spinning end over to end to clang off Zato’s head before dissolving into nothing. The attack did not harm Zato but it got his attention and he wheeled on Humphrey.

Zato knew that his victory was imminent. He knew that the adventurers were no match for his power. They were a spent force; an arrow at the end of its flight. Their situation was hopeless, their defeat certain. But for a single, fleeting moment, passing as quickly as it came, something he saw in Humphrey’s eyes sent a chill to the very core of his soul.

“My name,” Humphrey announced, stepping forward one slow step at a time, “is Humphrey Francis Eugene Geller. My family have been adventurers for sixteen generations. We aren’t alchemists or weaponsmiths on the side. We aren’t ritualists or scholars. For hundreds of years we have done one thing, and one thing only: protect our world from people like you. You say that we aren’t ready? That we can’t match your years of preparation? We’ve been preparing for you for sixteen generations, and do you know what we’ve been building to for all that time?”

Humphrey raised his arm to point at Zato and a sword appeared in his hand. Not the heavy, powerful dragon sword, but the light razor wing sword, aimed right at his enemy.

“We’ve been building,” Humphrey said, “to me.”

Amber light flooded out of Humphrey as he stood, sword levelled at Zato. The team and Zato both stood stock-still.

“Gift evolution?” Neil wondered through the voice chat. “Humphrey had all his gift evolutions. Is it even possible for that to happen again?”

“No,” Clive said, his voice dazed as he looked on. “But I don’t think he cares.”

The amber light shining out of Humphrey turned blood crimson.

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- Human racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] has evolved to [Hero's Sacrifice].
 - You have evolved an already evolved ability, breaching the limitations of your soul's potential. You will experience a brief surge of enhanced power, followed by a significant backlash.

Ability: [Hero's Sacrifice]

- Transfigured from evolved ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
 - Previous effects of racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] have been lost.
 - Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.
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"I'll use Hero's Moment," Neil said through the voice chat. It allowed the team to communicate silently as no one moved in the strange stillness. Humphrey and Zato stood facing one another, eyes locked.

"If you're going to going to crap out soon anyway..." Neil said.

"No," Humphrey responded firmly. "Red tights."

"No!" Sophie exclaimed. "I can't just leave you here alone! You'll all be dead by the time..."

"It's the only way," Humphrey cut her off. "We'll hold until you get back."

"But..."

"RUN!" Humphrey roared out loud and the spell was broken. He and Zato lunged at each other, Zato sprouting four extra arms, each ending in razor-sharp axe blades. He lashed out with the full speed of his silver rank attributes and the enhanced strength of his metal body.

Humphrey's skill had been a match for Zato's the entire fight. Just as he had said, he was trained from birth for the life of an adventurer. Sixteen generations of knowledge and experience had been poured into him, the Geller family a foundry for the strongest steel. Martial techniques, combat philosophies and insights formed by centuries of adventurers, refined and distilled into the latest generation of a grand tradition.

From the beginning, Humphrey had been pitting his lesser strength against Zato's greater, caught up in the idea of needing as much power as he could muster. Once he accepted that he could never muster enough power, the tenor of their combat entirely transformed.

Six blades came at Humphrey. He parried four and dodged two with a grace that he had spent the whole fight surrendering in the name of strength. He didn't have Zato's speed but his technique and economy of motion more than compensated, his razor wing

sword moving in an elegant dance. Not only did he evade the attacks, but he immediately retaliated, raking his sword across Zato's body.

Blood seeped from Humphrey's eyes as he used his new Hero's Sacrifice gift, but for all Humphrey's grand declarations, Zato had not grown any weaker. Humphrey's sword was lighter and less powerful than his dragon sword, barely slicing a shallow line across his enemy.

"That's it?" Zato mocked. "All that big talk, light shining out like you're some mighty hero, and that's all you can muster? You'll have to do a lot better than that!"

"I'm working on it," Humphrey shot back, his sword continuing to snake over Zato.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each attack.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.

- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

In the brief moment that Zato and Humphrey had been clashing, Sophie stood ready to run as Neil used his bolster spell on Belinda, enhancing her next power. Belinda then used her Mirror Magic ability to copy the spell, using the bolstered version of Neil's own Bolster spell back on him.

Neil was unable to use Bolster on himself, but Belinda's power to mimic spells not only let him do so, but made it doubly effective with the Bolster enhancing itself. He then used the double-strength Bolster to cast a massively empowered Hero's Moment spell, which he used not on Humphrey, but on Sophie. It was what she had been waiting for and she erupted away from the team, flooded with a terrifying power. She fled the site of the battle, vanishing into the ongoing monster brawl around them.

Humphrey continued to clash with Zato, lashing out again and again. Blood ran from his eyes, nose and ears as he chained his Relentless Assault attacks. He could taste the blood, copper in his mouth as he enhanced every attack with his new power. The escalating cost of the special attack increasingly sapped his stamina as Hero's Sacrifice sapped his health.

He ignored both as he continued his flowing stream of attacks, cutting away at Zato, not with a hammer but with a scalpel. Despite this, his attacks still had limited effect and would continue to do so until he reached his special attack's resonating-fierce threshold.

Despite Humphrey's skill, the damage was not a one-way street. His own attacks were hurting himself as much as they were Zato, yet he did not relent to use his new power. Zato was raining his own attacks down on Humphrey, who was coming off worse from the exchange. It was only a continuous stream of healing and shields from Neil that allowed him to struggle on.

Humphrey's fluid expertise and rapid strikes reached the resonating force threshold of his special attack in fairly short order. The harsh reality, though, was that even with his new ability and the surge of power that came from awakening it was simply not enough. Zato's body remained all but impervious, even as the special attack escalated to potent levels. Zato was taking dents, but nothing he couldn't shrug off.

Zato realised that he had been dragged into Humphrey's pace, suddenly remembering that he was the one with the power. He was the one with the advantage. Sophie was gone and Humphrey's attacks were all show, with no genuine threat behind them. With that realisation, Zato turned his attention once more to the healer. Once Neil was dealt with, the fight was as good as over.

Zato left Humphrey behind and dashed at Neil, only to be struck with a reality of his own; Humphrey was part of a team. Clive's Juxtaposition spell swapped Neil and Humphrey's positions, leaving Zato once again facing off against Humphrey, whose special attack sequence continued unabated.

While the team's big-ticket powers had been spent, they still had a variety of tricks up their sleeve that could buy them precious moments, whether for Humphrey's attack to grow stronger or for Sophie to come back.