

Chapter 256

Outmatched

The walls of the encampment had become a prison to the monsters driven to panic by the Builder's aura. They were stampeding with nowhere to stampede to, a wild crush that was catching up the cultists and the construct and converted that served them. It was somewhere between a juice press and a meat grinder.

The air was filled with the sounds of combat and terror. The monsters let out a menagerie of shrieks, cries and roars. Cultists were yelling, trying to direct the constructs and converted. The automaton servitors made no sounds themselves, but the sounds of their destruction at the claws of frenzied monsters added to the storm of noise.

There was one space of eerie calm. No matter how scared or driven to madness they were, no monster would draw close the Builder. In the eye of the storm, Two figures stood still, staring each other down.

The Builder was wearing Thadwick's face. Instead of the snide, entitled expression, there was now an incredible presence animating what were actually quite handsome features. Instead of arrogance, there was a confidence that transcended the mortal shape it was inhabiting. That shape was still intact, the Builder's power not yet taxing it to the point of breaking down.

The Builder cut a heroic figure, facing off against Jason's sinister, shadowy appearance. Over flowing, black combat robes was his cloak of night, a veil of darkness and starlight with the promise of mystery and power.

"You have an inflated sense of your own importance," the Builder said.

It spoke softly, yet its words carried perfectly to Jason, even over the cacophonous din around them.

"Yep," Jason agreed. He also spoke softly, having no doubt the Builder could hear him as well.

"You think all this will let you stop me?" the Builder asked.

"It would be a lot of trouble to go to if I didn't," Jason said.

"I'm not going to kill you," the Builder said. "You have caused me trouble enough that I will make an example of you. The next person looking to cross me will think twice when they learned what happened to you."

"Really?" Jason asked, his voice this with derision. "You try and use my soul as a hand puppet and you want revenge because I didn't let you? For a great astral being, that's very human."

“Do not try and bring me down to your level.”

“You’re already here, mate, but that’s not on me. I’m just some random, low-ranked bloke trying to make his way in the world. Or worlds, plural, I guess. You saw some idiot sling a soul your way, tried to snatch it up and it didn’t work out. You could have left it at that but you just couldn’t let it go. You brought yourself down to my level and here we are. Well, slightly above my level. Frankly, you could do with a nerf, just for fairness. For all your vast, cosmic power, at the end of the day you’re a sentient being, just like the rest of us. I guess pride is a hard vice to shake, operating at your level.”

“Do you think I don’t see through what you are doing?” the Builder said.

“Engaging in classic hero-villain banter. I won’t lie; this is something of a dream come true for me.”

“Whatever your companions are doing, they will not succeed. Zato will stop them.”

“That’s funny,” Jason said. “I believe in my friends too. We have that in common.”

“I adjusted Zato’s body modifications personally,” the Builder said. “Even after the consumption of his essences, he is stronger than he ever was as a mere essence user.”

“The team knocked off a silver-rank essence user already. They can deal with your little hand puppet.”

“You killed Hendren through the escalating power of your flesh-rotting abilities. I reforged Zato in such a way that those powers cannot harm him. Even if you were with them to help, your powers would be futile. But you are not with them. I will capture you and he will capture them. I will claim their souls and they will be the ones to kill you, slowly and painfully. I will record it all, that every being that serves me will see for themselves the fate of the great Rejector. You will be a useful recruiting tool.”

“Yet, ironically, the one acting like a huge tool is you.”

“Name calling is the best response you can muster?”

“You’ve been inside my brain,” Jason said. “So you know that it pretty much is, yeah. I’m being facetious, though. In all honesty, that was some solid villain monologuing. You should look into getting a weather machine.”

“You still believe you can win,” the Builder said. “This is not a matter of win or lose. It is a matter of how long it takes for my intentions to be realised.”

“How about a compromise?” Jason asked. “We could give you something else instead of huge strips peeled off the side of reality. How do you feel about delicious sandwiches?”

“You are tiresome,” the Builder said. “It is time to end this.”

Jason felt magic surge in the ground beneath him. He vanished into his shadow as two slabs made of the ground beneath him rose up to snap together like a bear trap. All they caught was the body of Shade left behind, which was unharmed.

“Just a tip,” Jason called out from within the monster scrum. “You shouldn’t warn that people you’re about to make a sneak attack.”

The Builder gestured in the direction Jason’s voice had come and a wave of stone spike rose up from the Builder’s feet and crashed into the monsters. Jason, in the meantime, emerged from the other direction and lunged at the Builder. A wall rose up in his face, blocking him off, before exploded over him, thousands of razor fragments storming over him over him like a hurricane in a gravel quarry. His cloak danced to life, a forest of dark tendrils zipping out to intercept the projectiles. Most of the fragments blew past him, while the rest fell harmlessly at his feet.

Jason dashed into melee. As it turned out, great astral beings had little use for martial arts skills, and the one’s the Builder inherited from Thadwick were significantly sub-par. Jason’s dagger flashed rapidly, scoring quick marks on the Builder’s flesh.

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- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] and Mark of [Price of Absolution] on [Builder’s Vessel].
 - Transcendent power within [Builder’s Vessel] has negated these effects.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] does not take effect.
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“That’s not good.”

The Builder grabbed Jason by the face. Gordon appeared with a surge of Jason’s aura and beams of blue and orange energy blasted from his four orbs. They focused on the Builder’s arm and the Builder let go of Jason, who vanished into his shadow again. A dozen spikes burst out of the ground and floated between the Builder and Gordon. The air around them started shimmering and the spikes launched out, tearing large rents in Gordon’s incorporeal body. Gordon dissolved into a nebula and shot away into the crowd of monsters, where Jason has escaped to. Jason reabsorbed his familiar back into his aura.

Each of the combatants were making unpleasant discoveries as they fought. Jason was the worst off, with the realisation that he had no means to effectively harm the Builder. Even his strongest trump card, Colin, would be of no use when afflictions couldn’t take hold. The best he could hope for was that his sword would be effective, which was a slim chance against the most powerful enemy he had ever faced.

The Builder was discovering the limits of its vessel. Vessels were meant to be generals, not soldiers, and channelling even moderate amounts of power through them accelerated their degradation. This vessel in particular was weaker than it would normally tolerate but this was a pursuit it would undertake personally.

Jason's words had found their mark when he said the Builder's pride as a great astral being had been pricked. Even with the considerable luck and circumstance that made it possible for Jason to win the battle for his soul, the fact remained that he had won. Given the disparity in their power, it was an intolerable record for a being of near infinite power.

If Asano died by any means but the Builder's own design, he would achieve a kind of immortality as the Builder remembered the mortal who bested it for all eternity. This was not an outcome the great astral being was willing to tolerate.

Unable to effectively fight, Jason was forced to flee. Unable to let him go, the Builder was forced to give chase.

When the camp had been plunged into chaos, the rest of Jason's team started fighting their way through the madness. Like an icebreaker ship they were a solid wedge, smashing a path through hostile and inhospitable territory.

After the Builder's attempt to pacify the situation with its aura backfired so wildly, it had withdrawn it. This allowed the team's own auras to recover but the damage was done as far as the monsters were concerned. The crush would not abate until they died or escaped the walls.

The team had to fight past monsters, constructs and converted as they slowly made their way down the tiered levels of the camp. They didn't bother finishing off anything tough enough to survive a handful of attacks. Stopping to secure kills would only slow them down and nothing was following them in the crazed, shoulder to shoulder press.

As they closed in on the tower they found the monsters were pushing away from it, clearing something of a space as they jammed into one another to get away. The magic throbbing from the tower carried a similar feel to the Builder and the monsters were terrified of it.

The team spotted a large archway leading inside and made straight for it. As they did, a silvery metallic figure with crystal eyes stepped out. It radiated a silver rank aura, but not that of an essence user. It was strange and alien, like that of the Builder itself.

"I am Zato," it called out loudly over the noise. "If you submit now, things will go better for you. Either way, your souls will belong to the Builder, but if you join us willingly, you will keep your own mind. It is better to be a willing servant than a mindless slave."

“As much as we’d love the chance to turn into a shiny doorknob like you,” Sophie said, “we’re kind of busy, so we’re going to start the fight, now.”

True to her word, Sophie lunged forward, Humphrey close behind. Belinda moved to protect the team from any stray monsters, Stash doing the same as he took the form of a marsh hydra. Clive called out Onslow to join them and Neil chanced pouring a salt circle to call up his golem. With the support of the familiars and the summon, Belinda formed a wall to cover the team’s backs while they faced the danger in front of them.

Months of constant fighting in the astral space was a whetstone that had honed the team to a razor sharp edge. They each knew what the others would do before they went to do it, turning them from a team with strong synergies into a singular whole, moving and acting as one.

They had experienced what amounted to three monster surges back to back, struggling to keep up as the monsters grew more and more powerful. It had brought their skill, power and experience to the point where they were literally transformed from the people they had been at the beginning.

The result of all that growth in their power, skill and teamwork was that they barely managed to avoid immediate death as Zato counter-attacked.

Zato was not an unthinking construct, despite surrendering his organic body for shining metal. Nor was he a monster driven by instinct. He immediately broke through Sophie and Humphrey, bowling them out of the way in spite of Humphrey’s strength. Zato knew that the backline members were the key to breaking apart the team and charged at Neil like a silver rocket.

The attack landed on Neil, who exploded in a wave of force, blasting Zato back. Belinda’s perfectly-timed Bait and Switch ability had teleported Neil to safety, leaving an illusionary trap for Zato.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.

- **Effect (bronze):** The illusion explodes when approached by an enemy, inflicting disruptive-force damage.
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With Zato's first attack blunted, Sophie and Humphrey moved back in, while the others repositioned defensively. Zato was barely staggered by the explosion, suffering little worse than the arresting of his momentum. His metal body was resistant to the disruptive-force released by the ability, which was more effective against magical defences. It was resonating-force damage that would be most effective against Zato's metal form. Humphrey knew this and swung in with Shield Breaker, his resonating-force special attack.

Zato's body was incredibly resilient, even against Humphrey's special attacks. They were just threatening enough that Zato was forced to engage, rather than ignore him. Even with his dragon armour, Humphrey would not hold up to Zato's sustained attacks. While he lacked Sophie's evasiveness, he had his own means of adding to his defensiveness.

Humphrey's attacks were hard to avoid and Humphrey himself was hard to hit, as there seemed to be four of him attacking at once with his huge dragon wing sword. One of the illusionary doubles was from Humphrey's own ability, Attack of the Mirage Dragon, which created a double each time he attacked. It didn't inflict any damage, but Humphrey could switch-teleport with it, making his true attack unpredictable.

The other two illusionary forms came from Belinda's familiar, Gemini. The living illusion could duplicate Humphrey's appearance, including his own illusionary double.

Zato proved to have far more capability than merely the strength and fortitude that came with his metal body. His silvery body flowed like quicksilver, reshaping itself to produce a versatile slate of combat abilities.

In close, he could produce spear-like protrusions from anywhere on his body, making unexpected attacks from unexpected angles. He also grew extra limbs, which he transformed into blades. At range, he could project metal spikes, which he threw past Sophie and Humphrey to target Neil, whose healing and shields were making up the difference between Zato and Humphrey's combat abilities.

Sophie focused on intercepting the projectiles as Humphrey held up Zato's forward movement. Zato then revealed that the spikes were far from his only trick. By plunging his hands into the ground he could make spikes spring up at range, then explode them into splinters. That attack savaged Neil appearing within his mana shield and exploding to send shrapnel digging into his body. Sophie and Humphrey redoubled their efforts to hold Zato's attention while Neil tossed back a healing potion and followed up with a life bolt spell on himself.

The one key advantage the team had was a curse levied on Zato by Belinda. It took multiple attempts to latch on past silver-rank resistances, the cooldown not triggering until it finally landed.

Ability: [Power Lock] (Magic)

- Special ability (curse).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (47%).

- Effect (iron): When the target uses an ability, a random other ability also goes on cooldown, as if it had been used. If the target has no other abilities, the cooldown on the ability used is doubled or, if the ability has no cooldown, it becomes unavailable for a brief period.

- Effect (bronze): The ability placed on cooldown consumes mana as if it had been used. If the ability had no mana cost, the target suffers disruptive-force damage commensurate with the strength of the ability.

Belinda's curse meant that Zato had to constantly change up his powers while waiting for others to become available. Many of his best abilities were locked out before he even had a chance to use them and his combination attacks were neutered as key steps were denied to him. It was a frustrating and effective impediment that was crucial to the team's survival, as even impaired he was on the constant verge of overwhelming the team.

While he was stuck using them almost at random, Zato had no shortage of powers to go through. Most were either some variation on shape-changing or firing metal projectiles. As the fight dragged on he threw balls that exploded into shrapnel, turned his arms into razor whips and his fingers into knives.

Sophie desperately intercepted the storms of projectiles thrown in the direction of their healer. As quick as the mercury Zato's body resembled, her flickering figure was a steadfast barrier for Neil.

Many of the ranged attacks Zato threw out were wide-area shrapnel attacks, from which Sophie suffered a beating. Weak, multitudinous attacks were what more traditional defenders were best at, while Sophie specialised in dodging or negating powerful, singular attacks. The peppering of attacks was precisely what she was worst at handling, which Zato quickly picked up on.

He started throwing more and more shrapnel attacks at Neil, knowing that she would surrender her vaunted evasiveness to body-block the shrapnel. She was able to blast

many of the attacks away with her Wind Wave, but Zato was both sneaky and prolific with his attacks. Neil was hard pressed to maintain shields and healing on both Sophie and Humphrey, but he smoothly churned out spell after spell, power after power, all with impeccable timing.

Sophie's damage was too negligible to be a real threat to Zato, relegating her to the frustrating but critical role of meat shield. The one advantage of the constant attacks she was subjected to was that her powers grew stronger as she suffered attacks.

Her Karmic warrior power stacked up instances of two holy boons with every attack. One increased her power and spirit attributes, while the other reduced damage from subsequent attack by the same person. As with the fight with Nicolas Hendren, she was stacking up enough instances to have a real impact. On top of the damage reduction, the holy boons also combined with another of her powers.

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (57%).

- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you is reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional or astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

- Effect (bronze): Increased curse, magic and unholy resistance. You cannot receive unholy boons. Each instance of a holy boon on you increases the damage reduction of this ability.

With each attack she received, Sophie's defences grew. The Agent of Karma boon made her tougher as it increased her power attribute and strengthened her magical abilities by enhancing the spirit attribute. This affected both the damage reduction from the Good Karma boon and the damage reduction from the Strong Soul power.

The layering bonuses didn't change Sophie's role as a meat-shield for projectiles, but it made her better able to weather the storm. She was still hopelessly outmatched, however. Beyond the simple disparity of silver-rank versus bronze-rank powers and physical abilities, she had to deal with the resistances of rank disparity that Humphrey's Hero's Drive power allowed him to ignore.

Humphrey had received the Giant's Might boon from Neil, adding weight to his special attacks that were the only real source of threat to their opponent. Zato was still stronger and tougher by a good margin, more so than the silver-rank essence user they had fought. If not for his superior skill and the support of his team, Humphrey wouldn't have been able to force Zato's attention as much as he did. Zato would have already broken through and ravaged their backline.

As resilience accumulated, Sophie was growing frustrated at her inability to have a real impact on the fight. As her power grew stronger as she soaked up more and more attacks, frustration became impatience. She knew she was a more than match for Zato's skill, and tired of passively intercepting attacks she dashed in, determined to make an impact.

Using her Eternal Moment power to massively accelerate, she unleashed a barrage of attacks. Her passive damage powers included resonating-force damage, which had been amplified by the boosts to her spirit attribute. With her fleeting, time-stopped moment, she unleashed a furious flurry of strikes, all of which took effect as she returned to the normal passage of time.

Zato's whole body rippled at the accumulated impact. He immediately retaliated by growing a half-dozen extra arms that ended in hammers, rather than fists. They swung in on Sophie, who could have dodged but didn't. Instead, she used her Moment of Oneness power to absorb the blows and then deliver all the damage back with an elegant palm strike that punched a large indentation in his torso.

Despite having a huge dent into his chest, Sophie saw Zato's grin and realised she had made a mistake. After baiting out her power to absorb a strong attack, Zato used one of his trump cards and his whole body exploded into a huge mass of shrapnel.

Humphrey was the most physically resilient of the team, but he was also very close and very large, courtesy of Neil's spell. His armour softened the blow, but more than a few chunks of shrapnel pierced right through it.

Sophie had her accumulated damage resistance, which was the only reason she survived. She was quick enough to shield her head with her arms, which were flayed along with the entire front of her body. Her accumulated damage reduction and light armour weren't even close to absorbing that level of damage and her armour was shredded to ribbons, along with most of the skin on the front of her body.

Clive, Neil and Belinda didn't suffer the attack as the shrapnel stopped in the air, forming a perfect sphere, then reversed course. The metal shard flew back together to reform Zato's body. It wasn't just a matter of returning him to the state he had been in,

however. Zato was unmarred and unharmed, having repaired not just the damage from Sophie but all the damage Humphrey had managed to build up.

Humphrey was severely injured and Sophie was a bloody wreck, barely standing upright. Their enemy was completely refreshed, his silver skin perfect and unmarred. Every bit of the damage they had done had been undone in a moment.

“You really should have submitted,” Zato told them imperiously. “Now you are going to suffer.”