

Chapter 258

A War of Stolen Moments

Sophie was dashing through the camp like a spectre, swift, ghostly and untouchable. She ended up running along the inside of the wall and onto the top, sprinting along it to reach her maximum speed. With a double-enhanced Hero's Moment empowered every speed ability she had, even she felt like her breakneck speed was wild and precarious. She did not relent on the pace, whatever she felt, as speed was the only objective.

Ability: [Avatar of Speed] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (86%).

- Effect (iron): Your movement abilities have increased effect and reduced stamina and mana cost.

- Effect (bronze): Periodically gain instances of [Momentum] while moving at speed. The greater the speed, the faster instances are accrued.

With every moment, more and more stacks of Momentum were gathered. She kept moving, determined to drain every drop out of the Hero's Moment spell.

"How are you holding up?" she asked through voice chat.

"Quite well, thank... argh!" Jason's voice came through.

"Good to know, but I think she meant us," Clive said. "We're doing the flasher move you came up with."

"The what?" Jason asked.

"The guy with the red tights," Clive said.

"The Flash, not the flasher," Jason said. "Also, they're not tights."

"They sounded like tights, the way you described them," Neil chimed in.

"I think we're all a little busy for this conversation!" Belinda yelled.

Jason had given up taunting with Shade. The Builder had thinned out the monsters and even his own forces as he scoured the camp for Jason. It was becoming increasingly hard to both stay ahead of the Builder and clear of the team, with more than a couple of near misses as the Builder came close to snatching him up.

He had been injured several times and had been using the monsters as a source of life drain, randomly laying out afflictions as he went. That was becoming harder and harder as the Builder continued to thin out the herd.

The close calls were getting closer with every passing moment. Frustrated that the greatest contribution he could make was running away, he desperately willed the team to success.

The tyranny of rank was an inescapable reality. For all that Humphrey's morale was renewed and reinvigorated, his body was not. He had reached the point that little more than will alone kept him moving. His body was ravaged by Zato's attacks and his own ability in equal parts. The team's bag of tricks was running low and Humphrey's stamina had reached its limit. His attacks had finally started doing real damage, but while his spirit was willing, his body was spent. He stumbled, faltering, breaking the chain of attacks he had almost miraculously maintained through nothing but muscle memory and willpower.

Zato had taken some real hits and a magic tattoo appeared on his body, shining brightly before dimming. Belinda recognised it as the upgraded version of her own magic tattoo that reset the cooldown of an ability. Hers had disappeared with her ascension to bronze rank and she was chilled as she saw it appear on Zato. She knew what power he wanted to use again.

Every member of the team had a gold spirit coin to use in absolutely clutch moments. Steeling herself, Belinda slipped it into her mouth to ensure the special attack that followed would work.

Ability: [Power Thief] (Magic)

- Special attack (boon, affliction, magic)
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 5 minutes.

 - Current rank: Bronze 3 (32%).

 - Effect (iron): Make a magical ranged attack. You become able to use a random active-use ability of the target, who cannot use that ability until you have done so. It can be an essence ability or the inherent ability of a magic creature, but functions at your rank, not the rank of the target. You may not use the ability more than once. This ability cannot be used again until the copied ability is used. If not used within 24 hours, the copied ability is lost, restoring the target's ability to use it.

 - Effect (bronze): You can choose a specific ability of the target. If the target does not have that ability, a random ability is stolen instead.
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Zato roared with fury as a light flashed from Belinda's hand, striking Zato and zipping back to her in an instant. He had just used one of his biggest trump cards, making the explode-and-heal power that damaged Sophie so badly available once more, only to feel it snatched away.

Zato lunged at Belinda, still under the effects of her Counterfeit Combatant power, clad in armour and holding a long-handled war hammer. In his fury, Zato didn't notice the gold-rank aura emitting from Belinda, who met his charge with the hammer, with gold-rank strength behind it.

The blow staved in Zato's head, yet even that wasn't enough to do more than stagger the metal man. Belinda, by contrast, felt the coin's power drain away and collapsed under the weight of her own armour.

Humphrey was too exhausted to move and with Belinda sharing his fate through the use of her spirit coin, Clive and Neil were suddenly left vulnerable. Zato looked grotesque with the huge dent deforming his head, but he was only staggered for a short time. In spite of his hideous disfiguration, he fought on.

While Zato recovered, Onslow and Stash moved from the edge of the fight where they had been on monster shepherding duties, placing themselves between Zato and the last members of their team both present and standing.

Zato began to move on the valiant familiars but he didn't get to make his attack as Sophie returned to the battlefield in a blur of motion. The Hero's Moment spell was on the verge of ending, and she stuffed a gold spirit coin in her mouth as she arrived in front of Zato.

Between Neil's double-enhanced spell and the gold coin, only her temporarily gold-rank power attribute was enough to hold her body together with the absurd power coursing through it. She ignored the pain, slapping her palm into Zato's chest. All the Momentum she had built up over the duration of Neil's spell was triggered, the power multiplied again and again and again by the empowering effects layered onto her. The resulting attack had so much power that simply unleashing it made the air crash like thunder.

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- **[Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking):** When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.
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The seemingly indestructible Zato exploded into a rain of liquefied metal.

➤ You have defeated [Zato].

Jason grinned, but he knew that his true contribution started now. His team had done their part and all they needed was time. It was up to Jason to buy them that time.

He gave up hiding and appeared before the Builder, who was staring at the tower with a rare display of emotion on the vessel's face. It wasn't rage but affront. The great astral being was less confused by the success of the lowly mortals than it was by their temerity in stand in its path. Jason did so literally, planting his feet on the ground between the Builder and the tower.

"What did I tell you?" Jason said. "The power of friendship."

"Your friends will be the ones to kill you, still."

"You get your shot first, mate," Jason said. "Your opponent is right here."

"You cannot harm me."

"Should be an easy one for you, then."

"Pleasure is a mortal concept," the Builder mused. "Even in these vessels I have only felt it for no more than a few fleeting moments across a span of time longer than your species has existed. I think I will take pleasure in watching you suffer."

"I do aim to please," Jason said, drawing his sword. "Shall we?"

Shade's bodies spread out from Jason to surround the Builder, although Jason kept one in reserve. The Builder could easily damage incorporeal creatures and, assuming he got out alive, he would need one of Shade's bodies to reconstitute the rest.

Jason, the Builder and all the remaining monsters felt the shift in the tower's magic, starting from the base. With that, the Builder lost interest in Jason and started striding in the direction of the tower.

As they moved into the mid-range of bronze, the team had broken through the limitations that were part of human, or human-adjacent existence. They could run faster than any Olympic sprinter, with stamina that would make a marathon runner shudder.

Sophie and Belinda were slumped on top of Onslow's shell as the familiar zoomed up the ramp on a cushion of air. Belinda was barely conscious, while Sophie was barely alive. Neil's magical intervention had been the only thing that had prevented her body from giving out after the power she had sent coursing through it.

Humphrey was in no better a state. His new power had brought with it a surge of strength, but as that passed, the lingering soul damage had left him debilitated. He was

slung over the back of Stash in the shape of a heidel, desperately clinging to consciousness as he sought to see the task to completion.

Neil was running, along with the dragon-tooth warriors Humphrey had managed to summon before collapsing entirely. His own summon was too slow to keep up and had been left at the bottom to block anyone who tried to follow them up.

Clive also sat atop Onslow, carefully maintaining a ritual circle around the crystal cube floating in front of him. It was a device he had cobbled together from materials originally intended to open a path back home, a plan rendered moot by the changes to the astral space's ambient magic. He had repurposed the materials to create a device that would invert the towers magic. It was a process Jason has insisted on referring to as 'reversing the polarity.'

The function of the device was straightforward enough. They simply had to take it from the bottom of the tower to the top. If that were all there was to it, Clive could have simply handed it off to Sophie and let her run up the outside of the tower. The trick was that Clive's cobbled-together device was made from improvised components and worked in accordance with theories he was only just beginning to understand.

In order to keep it operational, Clive needed to keep it encircled in a magical diagram that he needed to alter in real time as they moved the device. It was a ludicrous feat only possible because of Clive's power that let him draw ritual circles in the air, combined with his incredible skills as a ritualist. Even then, only months of drawing out rituals in combat had honed his reflexes enough to keep up. It took every ounce of his concentration as they made the way up the spiralling ramp inside the tower.

"The Builder has to be coming, right?" Belinda asked. Her coin-hangover left her feeling fearfully vulnerable.

"All we can do is trust Jason," Humphrey said.

Jason Asano was a lot of things. Mouthy to people he really shouldn't be was certainly one of them, as the Builder had long discovered. The Builder was now discovering that for all the things Jason was, one thing that he was not was easy to ignore.

The strongest of the Builder's minions had, against all odds, fallen. It was finally forced to act personally to see its intentions fulfilled and had intended to leave the matter of Jason for later. While it might derive satisfaction from what it intended for the Rejector, its intentions for the world Asano struggled to protect took precedence.

The Builder didn't give a lot of thought to the vessels he occupied. Knowledge of the mortal form was something beneath it. It used and discarded the vessels as needed,

without regard for them. If it had ever thoroughly explored their memories, it might have known that there was such a thing as Achilles tendons.

The Builder's vessel was not as physically resilient as Zato's metal body, by any means. If the Builder could have eschewed a fleshy vessel then it would have. No artificial construct was sophisticated enough to contain its power, however. Only the magical matrix that operated the body of an essence user was sufficient, after appropriate modification.

A vessel might be far more sturdy than an ordinary body, but it still adhered to basic, physiological truths. One of them was that without certain muscles, it was a lot harder to stand up.

It taxed the body very little to repair the kind of small injuries that Jason was capable of inflicting. Those brief moments of delay, however, were more valuable than gold for the team rushing up the tower.

The Builder was striding away from Jason, ignoring him for the moment in the belief that Jason was unable to substantially damage its vessel, which was true. What Jason could do could do was educate the Builder on the critical areas where a small wound could cause specific, debilitating problems. Even if immediately healed, they stole away more of the precious moments.

Jason did not undertake this task alone. Colin's afflictions, as Jason suspected, were no more effective than his own. What Colin could do was teach the Builder that eyes did not respond positively to rings of pointy teeth.

Jason was only stealing moments, but he and the Builder both knew that moments counted. Recognising that ignoring Jason was hurting it, the Builder attacked. Crippling would be ideal but killing was acceptable. Asano's immediate fate was unimportant compared to the Builder's other goals, so long as that fate was decided by the Builder itself.

Pinning Jason down was easier said than done. The Builder was still limited by the physical integrity of its vessel and could only levy silver-rank attacks.

Although he was no longer running, Jason remained elusive, using Shade's bodies to jump around, avoiding the attacks the Builder made by reshaping the ground beneath him. Shade was likewise on the move, avoiding the force-wreathed projectiles the builder flung his way, providing Jason with an ever-shifting series of shadow-jump portals.

Now that he was forced into open combat, Jason knew that, for all his mobility, he would not be able to keep up the fight for long. Luckily, he didn't need to. The magic of the tower was an obnoxious presence to anyone with magical senses and the change that started at the bottom and was rapidly ascending was obvious.

The Builder was faced with a conundrum. It could wield a single burst of gold-rank power, but that would tax its vessel to breaking point. It was forced to decide between using that burst to put an instant end to Jason or save it for the rest of his team.

Ultimately, stopping the team was the imperative. The tower's magic made it clear that they were entering its upper reaches and the Builder needed to move swiftly. It shot up into the air on a rising column of stone and earth that carried up toward the open windows running up the outside of the tower. The column was a compromise that consumed the vessel faster than the Builder wanted, but left it with vitality enough for one burst of gold-rank power.

Again Jason proved himself an annoyance not so easily cast aside. He called out Gordon, still ragged from the Builder's earlier attack. Gordon's two resonating-force orbs shot out as Jason's direction, colliding as they met the column and exploding, cutting the column off.

The column collapsed and the Builder fell with it, although walked out of the resultant cloud of dirt and dust unharmed. Anger showed on its increasingly withered face, but was quickly schooled away. It looked up at the tower where the shift in magic was nearing the upper reaches. The Rejector's companions needed to be stopped, forcing the builder's hand. Its vessel started to wither in front of Jason as it invoked a gold rank power while reaching a hand toward the tower, which it clenched into a fist..

The tower was literally coming to life to impede the team. Stone flowed like water into crude, humanoid shapes; animated creatures that attacked the team even before they finished forming. They were no stronger than Humphrey's dragon-tooth warriors, but the team was already at the end of their tether with most of the team unable to fight. Stash left Humphrey to Neil as it took on a hydra form, barely able to fit on the ramp. They fought through the animated stone, but their progress was massively slowed.

Slowing the team gave the Builder time to crush the scurrying bug that was Jason. Gordon had been called back for safety, a choice proven well-made as the Builder abandoned any idea of maintaining its vessel, burning through its vitality with a storm of disruptive-force-empowered projectiles. As Shade's bodies were cut down one by one, the Builder started making something. The materials were conjured up from the ground, like everything else, but this was smaller, taking form more slowly and carefully. Stone was transmuted into metal and magic was imbued into the device.

Finally, Jason ran out of moments to steal. As Shade's bodies were cut down, Jason's mobility was cut down with them. Despite its increasingly decrepit state, the

Builder's vessel was still fast and powerful, dashing forward and grabbing Jason by the face. With its other hand it slapped the suppression collar it had made around his neck. The vessel continued to rapidly wither as another column rose up, carrying the Builder and his new pet towards the tower.

The team were aching close to the end of the ramp, leading up to the flat roof of the tower.

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- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
 - Your party has been disbanded.
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There were large, open windows placed regularly up the tower's length and the Builder stepped through one of them, blocking their path. It dragged Jason with it, holding his collar like a dog.

"You have done far better than I anticipated," the Builder told them. It was a withered husk, now, its voice inhuman and raspy. Even so, the team knew they would not be getting past it.

The Builder's eyes rested on the cube, floating in front of Clive.

"While I am not one to offer enemies second chances," the Builder said, "the brute-force enslavement of your souls would be a waste of good material. I offer you another chance to come willingly, which you should accept. Your souls will be mine either way."

Jason crawled pitifully in the direction of his friends, who looked on with miserable expressions. The Builder let him slink away. If Asano wanted a last moment of companionship before those companions were turned against him, he would just suffer all the more. Jason was not looking for companionship, however. He was looking for a run up.

Very few things truly surprised an entity as old as the Builder. Jason's aura pushing back the suppressive force of the collar was one of them. The collar's power was strong and Jason was only able to successfully push it back for a few scant seconds, but Jason's entire battle had been a war of stolen moments. It was time enough to retrieve a gold spirit coin from his inventory, which he slipped it into his mouth. Immediately he leapt up, exploding forward with gold-rank strength and speed.

The Builder was able to react, even against gold-rank reflexes, causing a wall of spikes to rise up between them. Jason ploughed right into it with his gold-rank power, impaling himself a dozen times but still breaking through with momentum to spare. Just as

he had smashed into the spiked wall, he smashed into the Builder, sending them both tumbling out through the window.

Still leaning on Clive for support, Humphrey had been ready to react from the moment he saw Jason acting submissively.

“GO!” he shouted, jolting the team into a final race against time. They raced the final stretch to top of the ramp, feeling the last of the tower’s magic turn as they stumbled onto the roof.

“That’s it,” Clive said. “The world engineers are done, as is the magic to let them penetrate our world.”

“The Job’s done, even if we die here,” Humphrey said.

“How about we don’t,” Clive said, dropping down off Onslow, then looked darkly toward the edge of the tower. “Not any more of us, anyway.”

Before leaving the tower at the edge of the city, they had removed the portal arch from the top and stowed it in Clive’s inventory. He pulled it back out and started drawing a ritual circle around it. If he was right, all the portals had opened, leading back to their own world. All he had to do was reconnect this one to the magical systems already in place and their path home would open.

Neil looked toward the edge of the tower.

“What about Jason?”

Humphrey’s face was filled with anguish, but also determination.

“He wouldn’t want us getting ourselves killed to bring back a corpse,” he said. “We open the gate and we go.”

Sprawled atop Onslow, Belinda gave the unconscious Sophie a worried glance, but said nothing.

Jason tried to yell something pithy about pants as he and the Builder tumbled through the air, but there was a stone spike through his neck. Everything was a blur as he spun around, and then it all went black.

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- You have died.
 - All equipment has been returned to your inventory.
 - [World-Phoenix Token] has been consumed.
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