

Chapter 255

Here We Are

“This a bad plan,” Sophie yelled at Jason as they ran side by side. He was pouring on every bit of speed he could muster, while she was running backwards and still had to ameliorate her speed to match his.

“This is a fantastic plan,” he yelled back.

The were moving down a wide boulevard, chosen for being one of the more open and least overgrown. It was still more jungle floor than flagstone road, but they had become expert at navigating the terrain of the astral space and it didn't slow them down.

Behind them, the sound of the stampeding monsters pursuing them was like an endless rumble of thunder as heavy feet and other appendages pounded into the ground.

“Back in my world, people do a thing like this for fun.”

“For fun? I everyone in your world as crazy as you?”

“Of course not. I'm special.”

Periodically, the monsters would make ranged attacks against the fleeing adventurers, from magic blasts to needle spines the size of a forearm. Sophie was keeping an eye out for such attacks and would blast them all away.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (91%).

- Effect (iron): Effect (Iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

- Effect (bronze): Can affect magical projectiles and some magical area effects.

“Was I even necessary for this?” Jason asked.

“Of course you were,” Sophie said. “You're the only one who could annoy this many things enough to chase us this hard.”

Humphrey, Clive and Neil were hidden atop one of the buildings closest to the crater from which the central tower had arisen. The tower itself was in the deepest part of the

crater, yet still towered over every other edifice in the city. Laying flat on the rooftop, they watched the enemy encampment set up around the tower through magnification crystals.

The camp occupied the entirety of the crater. Walls had been raised up all around the crater's lip, some five metres high. The only glimpses they got of the inside was when the heavy stone gates were swung open to admit returning teams of cultists, constructs and converted.

The walls were the result of earth-shaping powers. These were crude affairs created by the cultists rather than the formidable walls the Builder had created around their previous fort. These fared poorly by comparison but were still five metres high and two thick. Anything less would have trouble holding up against silver-rank monsters.

The cultists had completely decamped from their original fort, to the dismay of the team. The fort would have been much harder to attack, but the objective was the tower, not the cultists around it. If the cultists had still occupied their original encampment, the team wouldn't need to deal with them.

Through their magnification crystals they had managed to get some sense of the interior, having set themselves up for the best view through one of the gates. The slope of the crater had been earth-shaped into a series of flat tiers, like exceptionally wide stairs. The cultists were set up on those tiers, leading down to the tower itself.

The tower was thrumming with magical energy, to the point of overpowering any magical senses. Even as far back as the building they were hiding on, their magical senses were washed out with the raw potency of it. It didn't present any danger, but even at range it was headache-inducing. They suspected that up close it would be hard to tolerate at all.

Periodically, groups of cultists would return to the camp, having made their way back to the city from the external towers. None of them were leaving, suggesting that the Builder was consolidating his forces.

"There she is," Humphrey said as another such group appeared. They were the usual mix of a couple of cultists, a few constructs and a contingent of the automaton-like converted. One of the gates in the wall opened to admit them, but only the observing team noticed one of the converted peel off to hug the exterior of the wall, beside the heavy stone gate.

"I still say this is a bad idea," Clive said. "She's so exposed. What if the Builder or the silver-ranker senses her through her shape-changing powers."

“We’re all taking risks,” Humphrey said. “She knows the dangers and she chose to go anyway. If we can lead the monsters into the camp instead of just around it, we have a much better chance of infiltrating the tower in the chaos.”

Hugging the wall of the cultist camp, the shape-changed Belinda took a steeling breath.

“How are those monsters coming along?” she asked through voice chat.

“Getting close,” Sophie’s voice came back. “You should start hearing them any moment.”

“I’ll get started then,” Belinda said, moving to the front of the gate and pulling a stick of chalk from her storage space.

“You can do this,” she assured herself as she started drawing out a ritual on the large stone door. “You definitely won’t be caught and flayed alive by an evil god-thing.”

She continued drawing, willing the gate not to open.

In the camp, Zato shook his head. The tower had increasingly been building up magical energy, to the point that was now bombarding the senses of everyone around it. The constructs and the blank-faced converted were not visibly affected, but his cultists were growing increasingly aggravated.

His cultists were being driven to the edge by the sensory bombardment. They were snapping at each other and he had already needed to intervene after a fight broke out. He couldn’t care less what they did to one another but it demonstrated an unacceptable lack of discipline. He refused to let them make him look bad in front of the Builder.

He tilted his head, listening as he heard what sounded like thunder. He looked up at the sky, the vibrant blue as empty of clouds as ever. The sound continued, even getting louder. The rest of the camp didn’t share his silver-rank perception and hadn’t heard anything yet, so no one around him was reacting.

He got up from his chair and quickly made his way up the tiers of the crater to the walls. There were stairs periodically placed around the insides and he took them two at a time to quickly reach the top.

He looked out at the surrounding area. The crater had been located at the centre of a huge square, surrounded by buildings damaged by the explosive detonation of the Order of the Reaper’s tower. Between the walls of the camp and those buildings was completely open space. He crested the wall just in time to see monsters start pouring out from between a pair of the buildings and into that open space. It was one of the gathered herds

of intermingled monsters that had been forming in the city, now running toward the camp in a frenzy

“What the...?”

He spotted two figures running ahead of the frenzied tide of monsters. His eyes easily made out the shadowy cloak drifting behind one of them as they ran.

“Rejector,” he muttered. He was about to shout the alarm when someone teleported right in front him. It was a large man with a large sword, stylised in the shape of a dragon wing. He took advantage of Zato’s startled pause, breathing fire over the cultists.

Humphrey spotted the man move onto the walls just as Jason and Sophie led the monsters into the square. Seconds mattered, so he made a snap decision, conjuring his sword and teleporting right in front of the man. Humphrey’s senses told him that this was the other silver-ranker but Humphrey didn’t hesitate. Immediately breathing fire, he unleashed his Unstoppable Force attack and sent the man tumbling backwards and over the edge of the wall.

Zato crashing to the ground was alarming, but no so much as it would be should he have actually called out the alarm. It gave the monsters precious time to chase Jason and Sophie closer to the gate, which meant less time for the camp to ready itself.

With Jason and Sophie on the approach and Humphrey already in the fray, Clive knew it was time to act. He called out Onslow, picked up the puppy Stash and climbed onto the familiar’s shell, Neil climbing up with him. The rune tortoise floated off the rooftop, drifting to the ground on a cushion of air. At ground level, Onslow’s speed picked up as he hovered over the ground, moving towards the camp with increasing haste.

The people in the camp barely had time to register the thundering sound of the monster herd before Belinda completed her ritual and the gate exploded inward. With the horde of monsters descending on her she used one of her abilities to join Clive and Neil atop Onslow’s shell.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

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

- Current rank: Bronze 1 (87%).

- **Effect (iron):** 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):** Illusion explodes when approached by an enemy, inflicting disruptive-force damage.
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“This is quite roomy,” she said as she appeared on Onslow, with Stash immediately hopping into her lap. Her own familiars she didn’t call out yet.

“He’s a good boy,” Clive said, giving Onslow an affectionate pat.

Even as fragment of the shattered gate were still falling to the ground, Jason and Sophie dashed through the gap with monsters on their heels. There was a blast as one of the monsters lunged at the illusion Belinda left behind. The rest of the monsters ignored it, continuing to chase Jason and Sophie unabated. Once through the gate, Jason and Sophie split left and right, but the camp contained more than enough to keep the monsters occupied.

The changes in magic to the astral space had given the monsters an affinity for one another, but a wild aggression toward anything not monstrous. It was akin to the berserk fury that overtook monsters at the end of their life cycle, but the monsters in the astral space were being affected far too early. As they poured into the camp, they found themselves with a cornucopia of things on which to unleash their unquenchable rage.

Zato got to his feet, ignoring the fact that he was on fire. Thadwick and Dougall had their essence powers consumed to prepare them to contain a sliver of the Builder’s power. Zato’s essence powers had likewise consumed as fuel for the Builders power, but in a fundamentally different way. Instead of a vessel, Zato had been transformed into a weapon.

Humphrey’s flames burned at Zato’s clothes and skin but he paid it no attention. Where his skin burned away, it uncovered a second skin of gleaming metal beneath. His hair burned away and the front of his eyes was seared away, revealing the crystal orbs that were his true eyes. He panned them around the camp, taking stock of the situation.

As he had been tossed to the ground, the gates had been blasted open and monsters had come spilling into the camp. They poured down the tiered steps of the encampment, attacking anything that moved and destroying anything that didn’t. Tents were torn up and the converted and constructs were triggered into action as they were attacked.

One of the monsters came Zato's way, leaping through the air at him. He grabbed it by the face, plucking it out of the air. He clapped down with his other hand, crushing its head and he dropped the corpse to the ground.

He looked down at his chest, the skin all burned away. There was a good-sized dent left behind from the blow that had sent him tumbling from the wall. He was surprised that the big bronze-ranker with big sword had been able to damage him that much. The metal rippled like water and the dent was smoothed out. He looked up at the spot on the wall he had been knocked down from, but couldn't spot the man who had sent him tumbling.

Humphrey hadn't been foolish enough to wait around for a silver-ranker to recover and had called up his dragon wings. He flew over the monsters still streaming into the camp and towards Onslow to rejoin the group. He was joined by Sophie who had run up the inside of the wall and leapt off, regrouping with the others.

"I'll get to one of the other gates and let you in," Jason told them through voice chat. "Make your way to the first gate to the left of where the monsters are coming in."

He started making his way through the camp, which had become a wild melee. Monsters clashed with the constructs and the converted. Some cultists were trying to organise their unthinking minions into some kind of order, while others scrambled in a futile attempt to find safety as monsters continued pouring in.

Jason noted that the converted and the constructs had both picked up new abilities. Some looked like those they had encountered before, but they were now able to separate into wholly separate segments, able to operate independently. The smaller constructs were better equipped to chase down smaller and faster enemies.

The constructs were dividing into two types. The majority were the original constructs, modified to separate. Once divided, their components parts were rather bizarre in form, having not been originally intended for the purpose. The newer constructs were purpose built, and while they were less physically sturdy than the originals, their divided parts were faster and more dangerous.

The converted had acquired grotesque new powers of their own. Some were fighting with huge, retractable blades coming out of their arms. Others were segmenting their limbs, which remained connected with wires and gave them a strange, flailing attacks.

Shade's bodies moved through the mess. It gave Jason pathways to shadow jump in the direction of the gate, although he did not go unmolested. He had to stop and deal with a persistent pair of monsters and then one of the converted. He quickly unleashed a storm of afflictions that rotted the flesh off its bones, but it kept fighting, even when it was little

more than a skeleton draped in scraps of black flesh. Jason's used his execute ability to finished the job.

Before he reached the gate he also took the time to dispose of a cultist that looked to be doing a decent job of directing the constructs. Jason wanted as much discord as possible to cover the team's activities, so he dealt with the industrious cultist before she could start getting things in order.

Finally reaching the gate, he found it unattended in the chaos. There was no mechanism, just a heavy bar, but his bronze-rank strength was enough to remove it and pull open one of the heavy stone doors.

"About time," Neil said as Jason found the team waiting outside. "You've obviously been lazing about in there."

"We need to get in that tower as quickly and quietly as we can," Humphrey said. "Put Onslow away, Clive. He stands out a bit much."

Onslow let out a sad squeaking noise that was oddly-high pitched for a creature so large, but dissolved into blue sparks that flew towards Clive, sinking through his clothes to take the form of a tattoo.

The team started making their way through the mess of combat, fighting their way through as a unit. They were slowly carving a path down the steps of the sloped encampment toward the tower when the Builder descended from the sky, although he did not land close to the team.

The Builder either didn't have a slow falling power or just didn't care, crashing into the ground like a boulder. The monster that had been between him and the ground was killed instantly. It looked as if the Builder had simply leapt from the tower's upper reaches.

As it stepped off the carcass, the Builder blasted out an aura. It was at the very peak of silver rank, powerful and terrible, like the weight of a building pressing down. Jason's aura had an echo of transcendence that only someone skilled and sensitive would recognise. The Builder's aura was thick with it and the effect was oppressive to the point of feeling like being at the bottom of the ocean.

The team, like all the monsters around them, had their auras suppressed, leaving them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Only Jason's held firm and the Builder turned its head on a swivel and the pair locked eyes.

For a single moment, the camp went still as everything was suppressed by the Builder's aura, the strongest he could produce with his current vessel. The sound of battle faded as the Builder's minions fell still and the monsters were cowed. In the strange, eerie

silence, Jason and the Builder looked at one another. Jason started walking forward, past the stilled minions and fearful monsters, holding the Builder's gaze.

The Builder was not a rancher, farmer, or anyone else who worked with cattle or other livestock. If he had been, he might have had some idea what happens when a very large number of very scared animals are held together in an enclosed space. The fear-induced stillness of the monsters only lasted for a strangely silent moment before the spell was broken.

Panic took over and chaos exploded over the camp like a bomb as the monsters went wild and screams of terror rent the air. The monsters tried to stampede but they had packed themselves into the camp and the walls now boxed them in. That didn't stop their mad scramble to escape, the crush turning the camp into a furious meat grinder. Even the previous melee seemed like a quiet church service in comparison.

The converted and constructs were once again triggered into combat mode but the monsters didn't even fight back in their desperation to escape the terrifying presence of the Builder. They were more dangerous in their panicked crush than they had been in berserker rage.

The team's aura training had included having their auras suppressed, so they weren't debilitated, although it left them extremely uneasy as they once more started fighting their way towards the tower. Sophie made to go after Jason but was yanked back by Humphrey.

"He has his job," Humphrey yelled at her over the din, "and we have ours."

The eye of the storm was the empty space around the Builder, the place the monsters were pushing into one another to avoid. Jason stepped into that space, the two looking at each other in a calm bizarre amidst the fury going on around it.

"Here we are." Jason said. "I'm just telling you now, so you don't say you weren't warned: This time I brought pants."