

## Chapter 355

### Another Step Forward

Akari watched in horror as the leeches crawled off the dried-out remains of what had been, a short while ago, a very intimidating monster. The leeches formed a pile from which a bloody rag shot out to wrap around Jason's hand. The pile then rapidly melted into blood that flowed up and through the rag to finally seep into Jason's skin and disappear.

"Colin can't pop in and out as easily as my other familiars," Jason said. "It's likely as not on account of him being physical, as opposed to incorporeal. When he does come out, though, everybody sure does know about it. Am I talking like a cowboy? It feels like I'm talking like a cowboy. A magic cowboy. That's pretty cool. I bet you could do a great quick-draw combo. On the cheap, too. Gun and swift essences, obviously, but what about the last one? Eye or hand would both work, I reckon. What do you think?"

"Are you an insane person?"

"Probably. This whole ninja warlock thing doesn't seem very plausible."

"We just watched a leech monster devour a two-headed dinosaur."

"That doesn't seem very plausible either," Jason acknowledged. "Good point."

"We just saw that," she said, pointing at the huge ruined monster, "and you're casually discussing some hypothetical essence combination?"

"Lady, you're silver rank. Category three, whatever. Please tell me they didn't just pump you full of monster cores without ever putting you in front of an actual monster?"

"Of course not. I'm just not used to someone who fights like you. You're worse than the dimensional entities."

"Well, that's downright rude, Ma'am."

"Stop talking like a cowboy."

"Counter argument," Jason said in an increasingly sketchy American accent. "What if I double down and get a big hat?"

"What is wrong with you?"

"It took the Network a while to figure that one out. It turns out that once you pass a certain threshold of handsomeness, it starts affecting the ambient magic."

"You are the most aggravating person I have ever met."

"You're not even top three for me. At least you've calmed down some."

"You think I'm calm?" she asked incredulously.

“Perhaps calm isn’t the right term. At ease, maybe. At least you’ve stopped thinking about the fact that every other time you’ve gone on a monster hunt, there were a lot fewer monsters around you and a lot more allies.”

“You’re trying to be supportive? This is the way you do that?”

“You’re not the type to respond to regular sympathy, especially not from a man famous for his lack of sincerity. You’re not my first tsundere.”

“I am not... are you looking to get buried in the forest, never to return?”

“Oh, you can bury me in the forest but I wouldn’t be so confident on the never-to-return part. Resurrection is kind of my thing.”

“You’re saying you can’t be killed?”

“Oh, I can be killed just fine,” Jason said. “It does make me a little cranky, though, so I’d advise against it. Now, I’d love to keep on chatting away, but we do have to deal with the monsters bearing down on us right now.”

“What?”

“You haven’t sensed them yet?”

Akari concentrated on extended her senses, detecting a swarm of weak but multitudinous auras coming their way. She recognised them as wisps from their aura as they were a creature she had encountered in the past. They normally appeared in one of two circumstances: either in swarms or as bait, luring victims into ambushes by more dangerous monsters.

Individually, wisps were feeble and frail creatures whose only attack was a mana drain. Their level of threat was based on the combination of their rank and numbers, as well as how well-equipped their would-be victims were to fight incorporeal entities. Any form of magic attack could affect incorporeal creatures to some degree, but only specialised attacks were truly effective.

Akari had attacks effective against such creatures and the approaching auras were universally bronze-rank. This meant they posed only a limited threat to her, even in the massive numbers she could sense. Her concern was Jason, who was no higher rank than the monsters. He was also known, from her family’s investigations, to specialise in fleshly enemies with few area attacks.

She shifted a tense gaze from the direction of the approaching swarm to glance at Jason, going wide-eyed as she spotted him standing with a sandwich in one hand and what looked like iced tea in the other.

“What are you doing?” she asked and he looked down at his hands in confusion.

“Do you not know how sandwiches work? How sheltered was your upbringing? Were you raised in some isolated mountain fortress? Was there a hot springs episode?”

“I am not an anime character,” she said through gritted teeth.

Jason flashed her an impish grin.

“Boys, why don’t you go out and save the nice lady the trouble?” he asked. Gordon and a handful of Shade’s bodies emerged and dashed off into the trees. Akari tracked them by their auras and magical emanations as they clashed with the approaching swarm. Gordon’s beam attacks vaporized the creatures as they repeatedly passed through the swarm, while the Shades eradicated every one he encountered with a touch. His ability to mana drain outstripped theirs easily and it turned out that they were highly susceptible to their own form of attack. As each was drained in an instant, they dissolved into barely perceptible motes of dust.

Akari sensed the pair of familiars methodically eliminate the wisps like they were painting over an exposed wall until there was nothing left to sense. She and Jason moved to the location of the startling brief battle as Jason’s familiars returned to him.

“Good job, blokes,” Jason said as the familiars disappeared back into him. Still eating his snack, a pair of shadow arms emerged from his cloak to trail their fingers through the dust as he walked over the battle site.

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➤ [Would you like to loot \[Greater Forest Wisp\]?](#)

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He left the area before triggering the looting so the rainbow smoke wouldn’t impair the enjoyment of his sandwich. Once he did, the colourful mist rose up and out from the tree canopy over quite a large area.

“I reckon we swing east, where those things came from next,” he asked. “I suspect we’ve pretty much cleared out this direction. What do you think?”

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After regrouping with the main Network force, Jason sent most of Shade’s bodies out to sweep the region for monsters. The Network teams were regrouping and switching to a mop-up protocol as they hunted down any straggling monsters. They were easy to miss in the sprawling forest region and he coordinated with other essence users deploying their own scouting abilities, like Kaito and his drones.

The base camp was being packed up, although the tactical teams remained on standby in case they needed to move rapidly if the scouts found something unexpected. Jason sat in a quiet corner, meditating to consolidate the gains of his latest experiences.

Akari joined him in meditation, hers differing in that she had laid out a mat with a ritual circle stitched into it and was holding a monster core in her hands. After joining up with the Network team, her reserve that Jason had cracked open went back in place, although she was not quite as cool with him. That was not the same as friendly, though, as she remained wary of the strange man who mixed absurdity, power and horror in equal measure.

Individual essence abilities each felt different as they ranked up. As another of Jason's crossed the threshold to silver, he felt an icy cold within the depths of his soul, although it did not offer pain or discomfort. It was a part of him, and a part he felt warmly about, despite the chilly sensation.

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- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Bronze 9 (100%).
  - Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Silver 0 (00%).
  - Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

#### Ability: [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Familiar (ritual, summon).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Summon a [Shadow of the Reaper] to serve as a familiar.
- Effect (bronze): Summoned familiar has bronze-rank vessels with additional abilities.
- Effect (silver): Summoned familiar has silver-rank vessels with additional abilities.
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.

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Akari sensed the shift in Jason's magical state, even catching a glimpse of his normally hidden and rather intimidating aura.

"What ability was it?" Akari asked.

"One of my familiar summons, Shade," Jason said. "I'll need to resummon him before he can use his new strength. I've been trading resources in preparation for resummoning all my familiars ever since I first started working with the Network."

"Is it resource-intensive?" she asked. "I've known very few essence users with familiars, most of them ritualists in support teams."

Jason nodding, knowing that was typical across the Network.

“I have most of what I need,” he said. “Silver-rank materials are still somewhat thin on the ground, though and the materials for Gordon are proving especially tricky.”

“Which one is Gordon?”

“The one who looks like he has the God’s Eye Nebula inside him.”

“And he’s called Gordon.”

“He doesn’t have to let what he is define him,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, it does define how to summon his silver-rank vessel. I’m pretty sure the Americans and the Chinese have what I need but I’m not on great terms with either of them. I kind of hauled off on Americans when they tried to recruit me.”

“Why?”

“I made some implications about their policies as a nation.”

“You think your government would be any better if they had America’s global power?”

“No,” Jason said, like a child admitting he hadn’t made his bed.

“What about the Chinese?”

“There have been allegations that I may have filmed some things while I was passing through their country. Footage that possibly might have mysteriously found its way to the international press.”

“What kind of things?”

“Camps, mostly. Not the toasted marshmallow kind. You might have seen some of it on the news a few months back.”

“Is there anyone who doesn’t immediately dislike you?”

“What are you talking about? People love me.”

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“I’m still not sold on this idea,” Jason said. He was back in Asano Village, walking alongside Farrah. He had placed the cloud house back in its flask and set it up in a grassy field just outside the village for a special event, at Farrah’s insistence. He had set it up in the form of a single hall, with an open space and amphitheatre seating.

The vortex manipulator was sucking ambient magic in through the building’s roof, disrupting the village’s magic but it was a temporary necessity. Conducting a silver-rank ritual would otherwise require heavily charged mana lamps.

As they left the village thoroughfare, Jason and Farrah were far from the only ones walking over the grass toward the hall. Members of the Asano family and other village residents were collectively moving across the field to head inside. Many of them were pointing out Jason to one another since he was now a celebrity who many of them had barely met.

“Most of these people haven’t seen some proper magic,” Farrah said. “They’ve seen magical effects on the news and here in the village, but now they can see a proper ritualist at work.”

“I’m a proper ritualist?” Jason asked.

“You’re adequate.”

Jason grinned at Farrah’s disapproving expression, knowing how demanding Farrah’s standards as an instructor could be. Her adequate was high praise.

“It means a lot coming from you,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“I’m not sure that resummoning Shade is the ritual to introduce them with, though.”

“It’ll be fine,” Farrah said. “It can’t be as bad as with Colin, right? You’re not going to bleed out your butt hole and pass out, right?”

“I didn’t bleed out my butt hole.”

“You bled out of everywhere. We thought you might be dead.”

“It went a lot better when I resummoned him at bronze-rank.”

“You know, having a familiar of higher rank than you can be strenuous at higher ranks,” Farrah said. “It’s one of those awkward aspects of being close to a rank-up. You should be fine, given your soul strength, though. Maybe not when you’re pushing up against diamond, I don’t know, but that will be a good problem to have.”

“Yes it will,” Jason agreed.

They went into the hall where people were being organised into the seating. Managing the villagers was the village committee role of Jason’s Nanna, who was very lively after months of recovery from her Alzheimer’s. She had a small staff who were making sure people found places to sit without contention.

The villagers watched as Jason and Farrah set up the ritual circle on the stone floor the cloud house had replicated for the hall, tracing out lines with chalk. It was a large and complex ritual circle with silver spirit coins and silver-rank dark quintessence gems set out in many small piles.

“You know you can get ritual bowls to hold those things,” Farrah said. “Kind of like those little bowls Greg uses for board game bits, except magic and expensive.”

“I don’t think those can be sourced locally,” Jason said.

“Probably not,” Farrah acknowledged.

“Okay, I think we’re good,” Jason said as they completed adjustments to the ritual diagram. Farrah moved over to Erika, who took over crowd control, telling everyone to settle down as Farrah subtly quieted the group with her aura.

“What you’re about to witness is magic,” Erika announced. “Proper, wizards and spell-book magic. You are all going to watch in silence, or There Will Be Repercussions.”

Farrah emphasised Erika’s words with a slight aura surge and the audience felt like gravity was pushing them into their seats. Farrah and Erika took their own seats at the front, next to Emi, leaving Jason alone in the middle of the hall with the ritual circle, in total silence.

He started chanting, his intonations cold as the merciless void of space. As he chanted, the ambient magic was stirred up to the point that even normal people could feel it, but Jason’s aura was projecting out, leaving them frozen in place.

*“I call to the realm beyond cold and darkness, where death has no meaning for life has no place. Let mine be the dark beyond darkness, falling on the final road to the end of all things. Let mine be the shadow of death.”*

The shift in the ambient magic started to affect physical reality as the hall grew dim. With the final word of the chant, the hall was plunged into darkness yet not a sound disrupted the ritual, the onlookers still arrested by Jason’s aura. A point of cool celestial starlight appeared on the floor and started slowly tracing out the magic diagram until the ritual circle was shedding dim light throughout the hall.

In the darkness between the lines, the piles of coins and quintessence sank into the floor like they were melting. Jason’s aura faded, only for a new one to take its place, spreading out from the ritual circle. It had the feel of an infinite void, inexorably waiting for all things to enter, patient with the certainty that they inevitably would.

A dark figure rose up from the centre of the circle. Then another and another, shadowy forms barely visible in the light of the glowing circle at their feet. The only truly discernible features the dark figures had was that they seemed to be wearing cloaks, within the hoods of which were bright, silver eyes.

Jason could see much more clearly than the others and was startled by what he saw. Not only were the eyes mirrors of his own but Shade’s new bodies kept coming and coming. At bronze rank, Shade had seven bodies and Jason had expected around a dozen or maybe fifteen at silver. New bodies kept rising up to crowd the circle until thirty-one Shades were standing in the room.

With each new body, Shade’s intimidating aura grew stronger, until the last body finally appeared and it vanished, like a magic trick. The light returned to the hall, the ambient cloud house lighting that was familiar at least to Jason and his closest companions. The dark bodies rushed forward in a wave, vanishing into Jason’s shadow until only one remained, standing in front of him.

“Another step forward,” Jason said.

“Yet many are to come,” Shade answered. “This world is large and not the only one demanding your attention. And beyond them lies the infinite.”

“That’s a little above my rank, right now,” Jason said.

“Since when did that ever stop you?” Shade asked.