

Chapter 356

Tactical Flexibility

The residents of Asano Village spilled out of the hall into the blessed sunshine, freed from Jason's domineering aura and the unnatural darkness they had been plunged into. Even though the darkness had faded, reaching sunlight coming down from open sky still felt like an escape.

Once outside, many made a beeline for the village, putting the amazing but unnerving demonstration of magic behind them. Others stopped to watch as Jason returned the solid building they had just been occupying to a flask, like putting a genie back into a bottle. Jason's other close friends and family had seen it before and had already paused their other activities longer than they should, thus were rushing back to resume them. The exceptions were Farrah and Emi, who stood by Jason as the building slowly dissolved into cloud-stuff that snaked its way into the bottle.

"You got the recordings for Terrance alright?" Jason asked.

"I haven't checked them but it should be fine," Farrah said. "Once I get back to Sydney I'll give them to him. You really need to rank up that portal ability, Jason."

"One power at a time," Jason said. "I'm going to put Shade through his paces, now that he's ranked up. You're higher-rank than me now, Shade, so I'm anticipating you doing most of the work while I slack off."

"Miss Emi," Shade said. "If you find yourself in need of a shadow-based familiar once you obtain essences, I think you and I should talk."

"Traitor!" Jason exclaimed.

After returning the cloud house to its hidden location underwater, Jason wanted to go out and explore Shade's expanded limits and capabilities. In the village thoroughfare, Shade took the form of a motorcycle which Jason climbed on and they took off.

The front gate at the edge of the property was around three kilometres from the village proper and there was a large crowd on the other side as Jason pulled to a stop. On either side of the road, tents and campers had been clustered.

Once the location of the Asano compound had been released in the press, panicked people had come seeking the Starlight Rider's protection rather than head for the designated safe zones. Mixed in were some with fringe opinions about him that Jason had no interest in. As he pulled up behind the gate he spotted sign and placards welcoming the

messenger of God, decrying the Antichrist and an oddly large number mentioning chemtrails.

“Has Kaito been leaving condensation trails with his helicopter?”

“No,” Shade said.

“What’s them chemtrail thing about, then?”

“I don’t know,” Shade said. “Something I have learned in my very long life is that not all knowledge is worth possessing.”

“A font of wisdom, as ever, Shade.”

Aside from the would-be refugees and the loons, there was a contingent of press, present, in what Jason suspected to be one of the least coveted jobs in the current media landscape. He looked over at the sketchy portable toilets that someone was charging for the use of and confirmed that suspicion on the spot.

Numerous people had attempted to bypass what seemed like the simple security of a chain-link fence, even if it was a rather odd one. What they discovered was that anyone who attempted to climb over it passed unconscious, courtesy of the mana-draining field Farrah and Hiro had built into it.

In one instance, a press helicopter had attempted a flyover of the property, only for the pilot and passengers to wake up in a different state with no helicopter, no recording equipment and no idea what happened.

Those who tried to cut their way through the fence suffered considerably worse, discovering that the fence wasn’t so much electrified as it shot lightning bolts.

The village largely ignored the people gathered outside so long as they adhered to two rules: leave a space around the security room and keep the road clear. This second rule was currently being broken by the press gathering in front of the gate to shout over one another, firing questions at Jason.

“You’re obstructing a public thoroughfare,” Jason said. His voice was soft yet somehow carried across the whole group, which fell into silence as Jason’s aura descended. He could see frantic eyes light up with the desire to mob rush the gate as it started to slide open but Jason continued to use fine aura control to not just keep them in place but have them scramble back off the road.

Before he set off, Jason looked around he reporters for the one that was holding up the best against his suppression. He relaxed the strength of his aura against that one person to almost nothing and the man fought through the fear to yell out a question.

“You haven’t allowed press into the compound since before the dimensional invasion began. What are you hiding?”

Jason turned, his silver eyes falling unerringly on the man despite his position at the back of the pack. Then he grinned.

“What I’m hiding is my family. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but there are monsters about.”

Without waiting for a response, Jason’s bike shot off like a rocket.

“...but there are monsters about.”

Anna muted the television on the wall of her office with a groan.

“Why does he keep running into the press?” she complained. “He has magical stealth powers.”

“Because I asked him to,” Terrance said.

“You did this?”

“Of course I did,” Terrance said. “The EOA went to the trouble of legitimising him, after all. We’ve been doing the faceless government response thing and I get it: we want to show everyone that there’s a system in place and that society isn’t crumbling around us. Yet. But the EOA has been kicking us up and down the street with the good-looking superhero act and we need a human face for people to get behind.”

With the Network transitioning their Media Interdiction department into the more traditional Media Relations department, the new Director of Media Relations was Terrence.

“Publicity is a secondary concern at this point.”

“Right up until it isn’t,” Terrance said. “Did you know the superheroes are claiming credit for the grid?”

“They’re admitting to taking it down?”

“NO, they’re claiming that they were secretly keeping away the monsters until terrorists took down their early warning system.”

“They’re claiming to be us?”

“Anna, if they convince the public that they’re us, it’s only a matter of time before governments start switching their support from us the EOA.”

“That’s insane.”

“I don’t think they care. They know that we’re busy protecting the world with a massive outlay of people and resources. They’re busy taking credit for it using a few flashy idiots in spandex with dedicated media crews.”

“They’re not actually wearing spandex, are they?”

“No, their costume design is actually pretty fabulous,” Terrance conceded.

“You do realise,” Anna said, “that if you go with Asano, your human face of the Network is not actually human.”

“He’s from a small town, Sweetie, not space.”

“Never mind. He’s not actually Network, either.”

“Look,” Terrance said. “Asano is charismatic, great at handling the press and he has this light and dark thing that plays amazingly with most of our test demographics.”

“You’ve done focus groups?”

“Of course we have. He tests low with older people, which is partly just racism and partly a religious-based backlash to everything going on. That’s actually a positive, though, because it shows that he’s the face of magic, not the EOA’s knock-off Justice League. He does great with the other demos, though because he has these dichotomies that balance each other out across the board. The lefties love supporting him because he’s not white and it makes them feel good about themselves. The conservatives are on board because of the footage we’ve leaked of him riding around the outback on a motorcycle, tearing through monsters.”

“You’ve been releasing our combat footage?”

“Don’t worry about that. He’s got that easy-going larrikin thing that makes him relatable, but he’s also shrouded in mystery. His powers are dark, dangerous, which brings in the edgelords but he’s also running around healing people like emo Jesus. Actually, Farrah should have some footage for me that will let us show off that dark power thing a little more.”

“You want to play up the dark powers when people are scared of monsters running around?”

“People need to know that someone is going to save them right now. The EOA has been selling this superhero narrative and people are eating it up, so we have to sell it better. They’ve been showing off a bunch of second-rate supermen but they’ve forgotten that people like Batman more. Asano is an Australian, multicultural, yobbo Bruce Wayne.”

“And you can sell this? I’ve met the man and he’s mostly pushy and weird.”

“You think I picked him on a whim?” Terrance said, “I’m a professional, Anna. I watched every bit of footage we have on him, went over action reports and interviewed anyone I could find who has dealt with him. Then I interviewed him.”

“And?”

“He becomes what he needs to get what he wants. He might seem off-kilter to you, but that’s because he wants you off-kilter. With regular people, he’s relaxed and charming.”

When he needs to be in control, he's fierce and domineering. He's confident, he's handsome and he's exactly what we need right now."

"Handsome," Anna groaned, slapping a hand over her eyes.

"Oh, he's a tasty treat, alright. I mean, those eyes; it's like he's hunting you. Gives me the shivers."

"Oh no."

"The sexy shivers."

"Terrance," Anna said disapprovingly.

"And have you seen his brother? We should get some publicity shots of them together. Maybe after spraying them with water."

"Terry..."

"I'd be the creamy filling in that sandwich any day. Plate me, I'm done."

"Do I have to call HR again?"

"Don't be such a prude, sis. It's just you and me."

"Do you want me to tell Mum how you've been acting at work?"

"Oh, you wouldn't."

"I damn well would," Anna said.

"You know, Anna, she keeps complaining that you're never home for dinner. She likes having everyone together but you're always here."

"Yes, well sometimes I have work late. It's the monster apocalypse."

"You know the nomenclature guidelines don't like that term," Terrance said.

"I will not be lectured on appropriate language in the workplace by you."

Jason could have easily tested Shade's abilities in Asano Village but a motorcycle ride in the warm sun of late summer was a balm after the intensity that followed the grid's collapse. Jason had spent almost every waking moment patrolling for proto-spaces or flying off to help put down monster waves. He knew that he would inevitably be called up again, but for the moment he enjoyed the simple pleasure of the wind on his face.

Jason took advantage of the respite, riding to a little coastal town that made Casselton Beach look big. Normally there would be a few tourists and locals enjoying the white sand and clear water but the town had been evacuated. No small number of them were now in tents in front of Asano Village's main gate.

He stopped riding at the edge of town and started walking down the only street. The only noise was the sound of the ocean and the quiet emptiness in the middle of a bright, sunny day was eerie.

“My world is never going back to the way it was, is it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Shade said, a body emerging to glide along the ground next to Jason. “But you will have to become far stronger if you want to hold those responsible to account.”

“Assuming I ever reach that kind of level, who will I have become? Sometimes I look at the way I conduct myself and feel like I’ve become a caricature of myself.”

“Magic pushes people to extremes,” Shade said. “Power gives people the chance to be what they truly desire. It strips away the layers they place between their deepest selves and their behaviour.”

“I’m not sure I like what that says about me.”

“You could have done far worse, Mr Asano. The perfectly righteous man is a myth. I’ve encountered people on myriad worlds and beyond the truly good ones are those doing their best, in spite of their flaws. I’ve seen gods consumed in pettiness and rank villains become vaunted messiahs. What I have never seen is a perfect person, from base mortal to great astral being.”

“You’re saying to stop worrying about what I’ve done in the past and focus on doing my best in the future.”

“I am. I have high hopes for you, Mr Asano.”

“But higher hopes for my niece.”

“If a better ship comes along, it’s only natural to board it.”

“It’s talk like that that makes me like Colin and Gordon more than you.”

They made their way down to the beach.

“It’s not a new ability,” Jason said, “but what kind of vehicles do you think you can manage with all those extra bodies?”

“The existing rank restrictions on the forms I can take remain,” Shade said. “The ability that lets me use such forms is yours, not mine, so flight and submarine forms will still take more bodies to achieve lesser effects.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “What kind of limits can you hit with your new body count?”

“I can probably manage a small private plane by employing almost all of my vessels, although that would be forcibly using my higher-rank to push the limits of your lower-rank ability. The energy I would consume in doing so would make the spirit coin cost of that extremely prohibitive until you rank up.”

“So you’re really waiting on me, then. I don’t suppose you could manage a giant rotary cannon if we pulled up a tank or something?”

“We’ve been over this, Mr Asano. I can mimic attack forms that are a permanent part of the structure, but not special and projectile attacks. I can create claws or a battering ram but not poison breath, shooting spines or projectile weaponry.”

“I thought maybe with the rank up...”

“You want to replicate your brother’s entire power set with one racial gift, yes. Give it up, Mr Asano.”

“It’s my ability. Maybe when I rank up.”

“Perhaps we should move on to an ability I actually do possess?”

“Fine.”

Shade’s new plethora of shadow bodies meant that Jason could expand the people he kept a Shade in the shadow of. He could now include his father, his sister’s entire family and Farrah without losing too many bodies for practical purposes.

As for actual new abilities, Shade had gained two on reaching silver rank. One was that any of his shadow bodies could teleport to any of his other bodies. This meant that Jason could deploy Shades all over and call them back at need, or send a group of them to help a family member should they run into trouble.

The range of this ability was equivalent to a portal ability of one rank below Shade’s vessel. This meant that at the baseline of silver-rank, the range was the same as Jason’s portal had been when it first reached bronze, which was roughly forty kilometres.

Shade’s other new ability had the same range limitation. Within that range, Shade was able to act as a medium for any of Jason’s non-combat abilities. This meant that he could shadow jump to one of Shade’s bodies, ignoring the usual requirement of the target shadow needing to be nearby. This massively expanded his non-portal teleportation range, which could be critical when he ran into the cooldown of the portal.

During the motorcycle ride, Shade had left a shadow body behind every few kilometres. Jason stepped into the Shade next to him and appeared next to the most recent body left behind. He stepped back immediately and proceeded to hop from body to body until he arrived back in Asano village.

“No portal arch, no cooldown,” Jason said. “I can’t bring people along, it ups the mana consumption and the range isn’t ideal, but still, this is awesome.”

“It does offer additional tactical flexibility,” Shade said. “I will be able to go to areas you cannot see directly and provide you with shadow jumping options. It is an adequate use of the power.”

“Calm down, mate. Don’t get too excitable.”

Jason stepped back into Shade, jumping back to the beach and began testing other abilities. Another aspect of using shadow bodies as a medium for his powers was that Jason could use his non-combat abilities from Shade as if they were his own body, once again within the same range limit.

His perception power worked, so when he shared the senses of one of Shade's bodies he had his full perceptual range. His Hand of the Reaper ability did not, as the afflictions it could apply apparently marked it as a combat ability.

The most unexpected result was when he manifested his cloak over Shade, for the simple reason that he was able to do so even while having one conjured on himself. To date, he could only have one cloak because he had to occupy it. With Shade's new capability, that was no longer a hard limit.

He had most of Shades bodies teleport to him, aside from the ones attached to family members, then conjured cloaks on all of them. The mana cost of conjuring his cloak was only moderate but having conjured twenty-seven in short order had carved off a serious chunk of his mana.

"Strewth," he croaked, with a slight headache from dumping so much mana in an instant. It had been even more than an extreme mana cost spell, like summoning Shade in the first place cost him. Fortunately, he was near the peak of bronze and his mana pool was rich, courtesy of his high spirit attribute.

Once his cloak ranked up, it would cost a moderate amount of mana for a silver-ranker, which would make it more prohibitive until he has a silver-ranker's mana pool. It was one of the difficulties of being on the cusp of ranking up.

Jason popped a bronze-rank spirit coin in his mouth to help him recover.

"I think I'll go home for a rest," he said, right as his phone started beeping an alarm.

"Oh, bloody hell."