

## Chapter 358

### Never Enough

Lauren Chamley and her family hunkered in the bathroom of their house, fearfully checking through the windows from time to time. Crammed in with them was another family, monster wave refugees that the Chamleys had taken in. Many of the families in Broken Hill had opened their homes, although there were never enough places. Most of the people brought in from the surrounding areas had been staying in a tent camp on the outskirts of town.

On one of her periodic checks, Lauren discovered that the house had been set on fire and realised they would need to flee. Knowing it would take both of their cars to carry everyone, she checked the driveway. Of all the terrible crashing they had heard from inside the house, two of those crashes had apparently been the cars. One of them had the back end stomped into the concrete driveway, while the other had wound up in the neighbour's wall, upside down.

The two families reluctantly left the burning house on foot, aiming to get away from the town and the monsters ravaging it. They ducked through yards and took any cover they could find to hide their passage. There were simply too many of them though, leading to their quick discovery.

Although the people they were killing didn't know it, the rock and crystal monsters were unusual for elemental creatures. Most elementals were an unusual type of monster. With their kind, the magical manifestation that would normally create a monster body only created a monster core before mindlessly animating elemental material around it.

These monsters were not actual elementals but true, fully manifested monsters. Although their bodies were of elemental substances the crystal in their forms contained a motive spirit, the false soul that most monsters possessed. What this meant was that rather than mindlessly aggressive elementals, the crystal monsters had minds, if animalistic ones.

Unfortunately, the minds of the small floating monsters had a deep-running vein of sadism, delighting in the pain and suffering of their victims. Rather than go for the kill, they played with their victims like a cat toying with a captured mouse.

The two families were not attacked immediately, the monsters that found them hovering ominously to delight in their fear. This proved lucky as an oddly quiet passenger bus became very loud by smashing through a fence, ramming the monsters and sending them flying.

More monsters were approaching and the bus interposed itself between them and the families. It was a strange design, sleek and black like a bullet train designed by a ninja. The bus door opened to reveal the friendly but anxious face of their neighbour, Griff, who ushered them aboard.

“Our car is in your house,” Lauren told him as she waved her family inside.

“Yeah, that was the point we got out,” Griff said.

The bus took off the moment the last person was in, at which point they noticed it had no driver. The bus was half full of townspeople and was already on the hunt for more survivors. Looking out the windows they saw the monsters peppering the bus with attacks, only for black tendrils to rise out of the bus and intercept them.

“What is going on?” Lauren asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Griff said. “I’ve seen more of these busses running around, though. It looks like they’re collecting survivors.”

“Look!” Lauren’s daughter yelled, pointing out the window. Everyone followed her gaze to a dancing figure of darkness and stars, striking down monsters with a sword shimmering with power. The figure moved with impunity, slaying another monster with every flowing motion.

“It’s him, right?” Griff asked.

“It’s him,” Lauren said. “I saw him when he was here a couple of weeks ago. Thank God.”

“I probably wouldn’t say that to his face,” said a voice that sounded vaguely like a butler. “He has a thing about gods.”

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In the almost two months since Shade had reached silver-rank, Jason and Shade had continued to uncover the nuances the familiar’s new abilities. One of those discoveries was that if all the shadow bodies involved in creating a vehicle wore starlight cloaks, the properties of the cloak were bestowed upon the vehicle. This was protecting the buses and the survivors inside from the projectile attacks of the monsters.

It took six shadow bodies to form a bus. This was enough for five buses and one body left over to be Jason’s own shadow, allowing him to coordinate the others. Conjuring all those cloaks had been extremely draining, but the presence of so many aggressive enemies also provided a solution. Every attack against an ally within Jason’s aura inflicted an instance of the Sin condition on the enemy making that attack. With all the attacks hitting the buses, that loaded up the monsters with afflictions.

This was something Jason had been taking advantage of more and more. A Shade body wrapped in a starlight cloak was hard to distinguish from Jason himself unless they were standing still in good light. This made them excellent decoys soaking up attacks and triggering Jason's aura's retaliation. On stronger enemies, this gave Jason a chance to frontload his afflictions, while he had another strategy for the weaker ones. It was a strategy that had sent two of his lingering abilities skyrocketing to the front of the pack.

One of the buses tore away, leaving behind the cluster of now-afflicted little monsters that had been attacking it. Jason tossed his sword into the air and caught it with a shadow hand as he threw his real arms out to the side.

*"Feed me your sins."*

The rock and crystal monsters were immune to Jason's necrotic damage and bleeding powers, but they were subject to the curses levied by his aura. This means that they could be drained away.

The unliving monsters had no life force, so the afflictions were dragged directly out of the crystals in their bodies. The Sin curses flowed out of all the monsters at once and into Jason's waiting hands, flying through the air like a black and purple spiderweb.

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#### Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
  - Base cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
  
  - Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.
  
  - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
  
  - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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Jason had been startled at how swiftly the ability had climbed up once he started using it in this fashion. Even though he'd had to use it on one monster at a time before it ranked up, no cooldown meant that he could fire it off in quick succession. Many fights had been nothing but his aura and his cleansing power, topping off his mana and leaving behind the transcendent damage holy affliction, Penance. That affliction was now burning through the gathered monsters.

Being smaller and only bronze-rank, without the immense vitality that came at silver, the transcendent damage burned through them in short order. They started dissolving into rainbow smoke, and since enemies wholly annihilated by transcendent damage were auto-looted, this was something that Jason had taken advantage of every time he encountered weak, swarming monsters. As Gordon ran around beaming them down, Jason would take out as many as he could using Shade decoys, his aura and his affliction drain.

Feast of Absolution's ascension to silver demonstrated once again why it was arguably Jason's most potent ability. It was the often-overlooked passive it was paired with, however, that gave Jason his first taste of true silver-rank power.

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#### Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
  - Cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.
  
  - Effect (silver): Health, mana and stamina gained through your own essence abilities of the drain and recovery type can exceed the normal maximum. Excess health, stamina and mana deplete over time until the normal maximum is reached.
  
  - [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.
  
  - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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Now, instead of wasting all the mana and stamina that Feast of Absolution was feeding him, he could absorb it all, even if it started draining away immediately. More importantly, he could use his health draining abilities while fully recovered, stocking up hit points like a D&D character to absorb hits that would normally take a silver-ranker to survive. That would be less of an issue once he reached silver, but while he remained at bronze-rank it was potentially an immeasurable boon.

Jason had long employed a drain-heal method of staying alive in fights, but without the fortitude of silver-rank, he was always running on a knife's edge. If not for Colin's regeneration, his incredible amulet and his custom combat robe he would have fallen many times.

As monsters disintegrated around him, Jason's shadow detached from his body and turned into a motorcycle. He leapt on and rocketed off in pursuit of another bus being harassed by monsters. As he went, he struck down the monsters he passed with his sword like a hooligan hitting mailboxes with a baseball bat.

He could sense the silver-rank monsters and the superheroes fighting them. It was his first time encountering them in person and he made a startling discovery, but it was not the time to explore it. Since the silver-rank monsters seemed uninterested in the populace, Jason left them for the heroes and continued scooping up survivors.

The five buses could not be everywhere and had to head to Jason's still-open portal to empty themselves of passengers periodically. Jason did his best to shield survivors until a bus could arrive, shepherding them together in readiness to board quickly. He could only cover so much ground, though, and throughout the town he sensed lives being snuffed out in quick succession. He had to rely on his meditative techniques to keep his mind clear, knowing that bad decisions made in anger would cost lives.

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On Kaito's helicopter, the passengers were still watching the live feed from the town.

"... Jason Asano, the Starlight Rider, has arrived to join the other heroes in trying to save the town. Despite his valiant efforts, however, the situation only serves to highlight how one hero has been propping up the failing Global Defense Network. Even as we watch, the—"

Suddenly the cracked door they were filming through was swung wide open.

"Why is there a bunch of people with magic powers hiding in here, pretending to be a news crew, while people who don't have any powers are dying out there?" Jason growled. "You are going to get out of here and start helping people to safety."

He pointed to one end of town.

"Find anyone not on a bus and get them to the portal down that end of town. If I find you hiding again – and I will – you'll wish the monsters got to you first, you cowardly sacks of shi–"

The feed cut out, replaced by a pair of news anchors.

"Uh, we seem to be having technical difficulties, but I'm sure our news team will be fine with Jason Asano watching over them. Going to Michael for analysis of the unfolding situation..."

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"...military and GDN personnel are rapidly setting up a camp to receive them, even as more Broken Hill residents emerge from the portal you're seeing on screen. We are standing some four-hundred kilometres from Broken Hill, yet the people escaping are claiming that they travelled that distance instantaneously through the mysterious arch believed to be one of the Starlight Rider's many abilities. There seems to be a strong nauseating factor to the exotic form of travel as many of the escapees are demonstrating, right on the grass..."

Terrance was talking on his phone as he watched the coverage.

"Make sure the coverage highlights the difference between the EOA fighting monsters and Jason rescuing people. I want to see interviews with every person from Broken Hill with the power of speech. No, don't send a news crew to the town, you maniac. Take a footage feed from Kaito's drones and have a panel of analysts dissect how useless their superheroes are."

Just as he ended the call, Aram came rushing into Terrance's office.

"New development?" Terrance asked.

"We're pretty sure the EOA are responsible for the Broken Hill disaster."

"No kidding," Terrance said. "I do not want a single word of that getting into the press. No pointed suggestions, no leaks, nothing."

"Isn't it bad for them?"

"The moment accusations start, the EOA will turn it around to accuse us of setting them up. Salacious accusations going back and forth slide right into their tone of discourse, not ours, which will make us look desperate."

"We have proof!"

"So does climate change and how's that going? If I hear anyone on our side peddling a line about the EOA being behind this, I will personally have wild monkey sex with your father."

"My father's dead, you arsehole."

“Then he won’t struggle, will he? Get back to work.”

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Jason was tireless as he went through Broken Hill, constantly draining afflictions to amass stamina and mana. He would lure monsters to a bus to draw them away from scattered survivors and then afflict and drain them in clusters, before sending the buses to collect those survivors.

His incredible senses allowed him to tag monsters and survivors on his tactical map ability, the sight of which constantly threatened to crush his spirit. As fast as he worked and as hard as he fought, it was never enough. Again and again, the red dots of an unfriendly intersected with the green dot of a friendly, which then blinked out.

The superheroes had finally finished off the silver-rank monsters and had started chasing down the smaller ones, but they were built for cinematic battles, not efficient sweep-and-clear. Only the arrival of Kaito and the Network strike teams would be able to carry that out successfully, their numbers and practised tactics outpacing what Jason could accomplish.

When reinforcements finally came into range of his voice chat power, Jason was filled with relief at the assistance and remorse that he couldn’t do more. It hadn’t been that long but it felt like an endless slog as more and more lives faded from his senses. He opened up a voice chat to start relaying the situation they were flying into.

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Finally, Jason found himself in the remains of the town, every civilian in it either dead or evacuated. He had used his portal again and again as it reached capacity. At his current rank, a thousand normals could go through before hitting the limit, which put the survivor count, based on portal use, at less than twenty-thousand survivors.

He had swept the town and patrolled the outskirts multiple times to make sure, as had Kaito with his drones. He stood amongst the ruins and the dead, feeling empty and at a loss. They didn’t have hard numbers yet but he could see with his own eyes the bodies piled up in the burned-out remains of the tent camp. Based on that and his portal count, he estimated somewhere between ten and fifteen-thousand had died.

Jason instinctually wanted to collect up the bodies instead of just leaving them where they lay, but there would be an organised operation to collect and identify the dead that he would only muddle up if he interfered.

His gaze turned to the superheroes, standing together with their media team who were pointing a camera his way.