

Chapter 361

Supernatural

"Really?" Dawn asked. Shade's motorcycle form made almost no noise but with the rush of air, she spoke loudly.

"What?" Jason asked back.

"You have a portal power."

"Which I might need to use in an emergency."

"Your familiar can turn into a car."

"On a beautiful day like this?"

"Or more than one motorcycle."

"I don't know what you're complaining about," Jason said. "Emi loves the sidecar."

Dawn's senses relied on projecting her aura through her avatar, but Jason sensed nothing, even as his emotions were laid bare.

As well as Jason hid it, his tangled nest of grief, frustration, and shame were plain for her to see. She had been observing him long enough to know that banter was a key coping mechanism of his and she let herself fall into it as they rode through the bushland separating the communal area of Asano Village from the residential clusters.

The roads were only months old but well made, the product of Ken's earth manipulation powers and a construction crew brought in by Hiro. The workers had been told that they were the day crew. The extra work they found done each morning was attributed to the night crew, who they never saw. They were paid well to not ask questions, so they overlooked the myriad incongruities that came from the night crew being Jason's father and his magic powers.

Jason and Dawn followed the road as it wound through pleasant bushland and climbed to the clifftop residential cluster, the most remote of Asano Village's mini-suburbs. Jason pulled the bike to a stop where a large yard spanned the gap between the road and the cliff-hugging house. Aside from a tiled path leading to the front door, the yard was all open grass.

There was an outdoor cabinet next to the door, up against the stone wall of the house. It had a magic lock that any essence-user could open with a little mana. Jason did so, taking out a pair of silver-rank suppression collars, along with two swords covered in faintly-glowing runes.

Item: [Practise Sword] (bronze rank, common)

Practise sword designed to allow full-contact attacks in safety (weapon, sword).

- Effect: All damage dealt by this weapon is negated, replaced with a mild stinging sensation.
- Effect: Inflicts [Minor Stun]. Strength of stun is based on the amount of damage that would have been dealt.
- [Minor Stun] (affliction, magic): Causes loss of function in the area of the body affected. Affects a larger area of the body when used against targets lower than bronze-rank. Delivers debilitating disorientation when used on vital areas.

Dawn waited at the edge of the yard with Shade, who had returned to his natural form of a shadow with silver eyes. Jason moved to the middle of the yard, letting out a pulse of aura, even though he knew Akari would have heard his approach. He clipped one of the suppression collars around his neck.

The collars Akari brought with her from Japan were more artistically designed than others Jason had seen. Most suppression collars were thick, plain and not designed with the comfort of the wearer in mind. These were more like jewellery, with elegant engraving and silver gilding. It would not be hard for him to shrug off the collar's effect but he let it work.

Akari emerged from the house wearing a dark blue kendo gi. Her hair was in a practical ponytail that always reminded him of Sophie, despite Akari's hair being shampoo-commercial shimmering black instead of metallic silver. Jason was wearing track pants, sneakers and an H.R. Pufnstuf t-shirt. She wordlessly took one of the swords and the other suppression collar, snapping it around her neck.

Jason and Akari squared off in the middle of the yard, each watching for openings. When they had started practising together, they had been evenly matched. Akari was a specialised swordswoman but had been caught up in human fighting styles designed around human limitations. She made good use of her speed, but her superhuman body was capable of far more than she was using it for.

Jason, by contrast, made complete use of his peak bronze-rank attributes. They were not the equal of her silver-rank attributes but his were fully leveraged when he fought. Her highly aggressive approach was not inherently bad but was poorly-suited to confront Jason's style heavily employing feints and counterattacks.

Jason was hard to read for the aggressive Akari, who found herself repeatedly baited into missteps and overextensions. Almost every loss she suffered found her admonishing herself for exposing herself.

Jason's strange, chimeric style would shift from approach to approach in ways that should have been discordant yet were somehow natural and smooth. In one moment it resembled kendo and the next, capoeira. Bursts of direct, rapid aggression gave way to elaborate and outlandish movements that seemed more like dance or acrobatics than combat. It shouldn't have worked, yet because of his superhuman capabilities, it did.

As weeks turned into months, Jason would arrive again and again at her door to fight. With Akari's unflinching analysis and unswerving dedication, she rapidly addressed the flaws Jason had revealed in her combat style.

Jason was diligent in his swordsmanship, but for Akari, the sword was the core of her being. She learned to leverage her own attributes in her own way while modulating her forceful aggression into precision and care, improving her ability to read feints, avoid dangerous counterattacks and adapt to Jason's unconventional style.

Akari had been training in the sword as long as she could remember. Jason had little to offer in improving her technique, but the principles of the way he fought helped her to reforge herself with the tools she already possessed. A lifetime of training gave her the means to awaken her potential; Jason merely provided the impetus.

Jason had likewise learned from Akari. He tended to overcomplicate and get caught up in trying to be clever when clean, simple and direct was the superior choice. He did not share Akari's immersion in the way of the sword, so he did not make the same strides as her, but she helped him work on the weakest area of his technique, which was efficiency.

After two months, he went from winning four in ten spars to one in twenty when they faced off in the open yard. That ratio shifted significantly upward when they moved into the bush, however, where even without his powers, Jason moved like a ghost. The dedication Akari put into being a swordswoman, Jason put into being a predator.

As Dawn watched on they had a typical spar, with Jason infuriatingly hard to pin down. Akari was relentless, however, punishing every mistake Jason made with his wild combat style. Jason still managed to goad her into an opening, turning the tables with a flurry of counterattacks. Even on the back foot, however, Akari was calm, efficient and precise. What had once been a desperate defence was now clinical in execution, dismantling Jason's momentum as she inexorably turned the tables back.

Landing a clean hit on Jason's leg arrested his mobility as the stun inflicted by the sword took effect. This signalled the end as Jason at his best was barely able to hold her

off. A strike to his other leg dropped him to the ground, where her sword down on his head.

The magic of the sword meant he didn't feel more than a mild sting from any of it, pain an iron-ranker could ignore, let alone a peak bronze-ranker. The finisher was disorienting stun effect to his head that delivered a bout of debilitating vertigo. He lay on his back, giggling like a child who had spun themselves dizzy as he felt the world turn wildly around him.

Akari took Jason's sword and unclipped his suppression collar. The training device had a simple clasp to keep it closed, with no key. She looked down at him as Jason pushed himself onto his elbows, still grinning with a giddy expression.

"Sometimes I suspect you're losing on purpose just to get hit in the head with the training swords."

"No worries on that front," Jason said. "If I did that, you'd use your real sword on me."

"Just as long as you know," she said, helping Jason unsteadily to his feet. It left them standing close to one another.

"I should have been there with you," she said softly.

He gave her a smile devoid of his usual smirking undertone.

"It's not like you were taking a spa day. Broken Hill didn't stop every other threat out there and you had your own people to help."

"You shouldn't have had to face that alone."

"I didn't. I just got there a little earlier. Once the troops arrived I was pretty much reduced to opening portals and directing bus traffic."

Akari frowned.

"You don't always have to self-effacing, you know. It's the most Japanese thing about you, but it feels wrong when you do it."

He flashed her a grin.

"I'll keep my shameless braggadocio completely unearned, thank you very much."

"Definitely wrong."

She shook her head, then turned to look at Dawn.

"Who's your friend?"

"Your new housemate. We don't have enough places to give every swinging single their own crash pad. Let's go say g'day."

They walked across the lawn to meet Dawn as Akari removed the collar from her own neck.

"Asano Akari," Akari greeted with a respectful bow.

"This is Dawn," Jason introduced. "She may seem ordinary, but I assure you that she is not. In fact, she is, quite likely, the most remarkable human being on this planet."

"May I ask how so?" Akari asked. Her demeanour around Dawn was significantly more respectful than her casual attitude with Jason.

"Well, for starters, she's neither a human being nor on this planet."

"I think I'll step in," Dawn said. "Jason is notoriously bad at explaining things. My name is Dawn, as he said, and I am a diamond-ranker from outside of your reality. This body you see is an avatar; a near-powerless projection of my true self, which is residing outside of your reality."

"To be honest," Akari said, "what both of you said seems extremely outlandish."

"It does, doesn't it?" Dawn said and held out her hand. "Give me a sword."

That got raised eyebrows from Jason and Akari both.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked.

"Quite," Dawn said.

"I'm just asking because of that time I punched you so hard that you died."

Akari turned to give Jason a wide-eyed look.

"It's fine," Jason told her while gesturing at Dawn. "Look, she's fine."

"My new avatar can leverage my senses much better," Dawn said, giving Jason a flat look.

"In case I try to punch you in the face again?"

"I was more worried about Miss Hurin."

"Good call. Farrah definitely wants to take a swing too."

"Miss Asano," Dawn said. "Would it be accurate to say that you learn what you need to know about a person through their sword?"

"It would," Akari said.

"What does my sword tell you?" Jason asked.

"That you always make the outrageous choice, even when the simple one is better. That you overcomplicate everything and will often make two moves when all you need is one."

"Meaning that you're all flash and no bang," Dawn said.

"Hey," Jason complained. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You killed me."

"So what? I've died twice; you need to get over it."

"I truly hope you survive to diamond rank, Mr Asano. I am looking forward to you and I having a very different conversation."

"Are you going to kick my arse?"

"Across reality and back."

"Like Star Trek, except the warp drive is a sexy lady," Jason said with a creepy smile.

"You are disgusting," Akari told him.

Jason flashed her an impish grin.

"Give her a sword," he said.

"Are you certain?" Akari asked.

"It's fine. I already killed her, so how bad can it get with stun swords?"

Dawn gave Jason another flat look.

"Very well," Akari said. She moved to put the collar back on her neck but Dawn gestured for her to stop.

"It's fine," Dawn said.

Akari gave Dawn an assessing look, then nodded, handing the collars to Jason and the second sword to Dawn.

"It might be a little heavy."

"I'll manage," Dawn said, holding it in two hands.

The two women moved to the centre of the yard while Jason stood next to Shade.

"I would ask if you really needed to antagonise both women," Shade said, "but I have known you long enough at this point."

Jason responded only with a chuckle, then his face turned dark.

"What's the count?" he asked.

He had one of Shade's bodies keeping an eye on the Broken Hill death count as it was updated.

"Nine thousand confirmed, with an estimated total of twelve to fifteen thousand."

"Damn it."

"The survivor count came to over nineteen thousand," Shade said. "No small part of that is down to you."

"To us," Jason said. "Without your buses, that number would have been halved, easily."

Akari watched Dawn, standing in front of her, sword held in both hands. Every sense she had told her that Dawn was a normal person but Jason had said she was anything but. Akari had learned that while Jason liked to lie frequently and transparently about inconsequential things, he was honest about the ones that mattered. As such, she didn't take the woman in front of her lightly.

With no collar, Akari opened by slamming both her aura and sword down at Dawn. She missed, without being entirely sure how. The fight that followed was the single most bewildering combat of Akari's life.

Dawn was slow and weak, yet she seemed to know every move Akari made, not just before she made it but before she even thought of it. Every action Akari took, Dawn and her sword were exactly where they needed to be, as if by coincidence.

Akari's silver-rank speed and strength massively outstripped the other woman, but Dawn was always in exactly the right spot, in exactly the right pose. She could not block, yet her sword deflected Akari's just enough to turn hits into hair's breadth misses. Akari felt as if she were trying to cut down the wind, her blade passing through the air again and again.

Dawn even managed to slip past Akari's defences to land hits, although the damage was negligible. The magic swords translated damage into a stunning effect, but Dawn's damage was so light it left Akari with barely a noticeable tingle.

Eventually, Akari made a mistake and Dawn's sword came up under her chin. Even that was not enough, only the rank of the sword allowing for a mild buzzing sensation in her jaw. Akari stopped anyway, stepping back and bowing deeply.

"I am a magical swordswoman," Akari said, "yet I cannot find any word that better describes your ability than supernatural. Will you teach me?"

"I will," Dawn said, "but that will have to wait. The time has come to discuss your true reason for coming to Australia."

Jason wandered over, looking Dawn up and down.

"You let me hit you, didn't you?"

"It was something you needed to get out of your system. I didn't think you would do it hard enough to kill me."

"Well, I had been drinking. And I really, really wanted to punch you in the face."