

Chapter 185

Magnificent Entity

“Moment of truth,” Jason said. He had drawn out the summoning circle himself, rather than let Clive draw it out with his ritual diagram power. All the materials were laid out; spirit coins, quintessence gems and other magical objects. After sprinkling some powdered lesser magic cores to double check everything was correct, he stood up, preparing to chant the incantation.

“When Gary heard Jason would be getting new familiars,” Humphrey whispered, “he tried to bet me the incantation would be really evil.”

“You didn’t take that bet, did you?” Sophie asked him.

“Gods, no.”

“Do you mind?” Jason asked. “I’m trying to summon an awesome British shadow creature.”

“Sorry,” Humphrey said. “You go ahead.”

“Well, I’m self conscious, now,” Jason said. “You’re all going to interpret the incantation as evil, even when it’s just a normal, harmless incantation.”

“It’ll be fine,” Humphrey said. “We promise to keep an open mind.”

“I don’t,” Neil said.

“Just do it,” Sophie said. “It’s not going to seem any less evil for all the build up.”

Jason groaned, but turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

“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.”

As Jason chanted, dark energy started boiling up to submerge the ritual circle.

“I don’t know what we were worried about,” Neil said. “That didn’t seem at all like he was calling up some all-consuming darkness and that we should kill him to keep it from entering the world.”

“I don’t know that I’d say evil,” Humphrey said with very little conviction.

“You wish you’d taken that bet then?” Sophie asked.

“No, I do not,” Humphrey said.

Jason dropped to his knees, then rolled onto his back. He took out a mana potion and chugged it to assuage the low mana headache suddenly pounding the inside of his skull.

“That was a lot easier than last time,” he said. “Summoning Colin didn’t just drain just my mana, but my health and stamina, too.”

Everyone's gaze turned to the ritual circle where darkness rose up like fire's dark twin, consuming light instead of shedding it, the room seeming to grow dim in spite of the magical glow-stones.

"That's odd," Clive said. "These stones are shielded so as to not affect the ambient magic in the room. Nothing in here should be able to affect them."

From the dark circle of black flame, a figure slowly rose. Nothing more than a silhouette, it seemed ephemeral, yet at the same time imposing. It had the rough shape of a man draped in a cloak. Jason's teammates couldn't help but think of Jason himself, as he looked with his magical cloak completely dimmed.

Suddenly the oppressive feeling drained away. The room lit back up and the black flames vanished, leaving only the figure who looked to be made from darkness itself, his edges blurry, even standing in the light.

"Hello again, Jason Asano."

"Shade," Jason said, a huge grin spreading across his face. "I was hoping it would be you."

"It has been some time since I walked the worlds," Shade said. "You seem likely to see more than most. I should warn you, that the vessels I inhabit now are far less capable than those I was bound to in the astral space."

"Vessels, plural?" Jason asked. He reached out a hand to touch Shade.

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- Shade (shadow of the Reaper).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Can occupy up to three shadow bodies.
 - Highly visible in well-lit areas but can move rapidly.
 - Shadow bodies can hide within the shadows of other people. When there is not at least one shadow body attached to the summoner, the summoner has no shadow.
 - Can drain mana by touch. Drained mana can be passed onto anyone with a shadow body hidden within their shadow.
 - While at least one shadow body is hidden within the summoner's shadow, summoner can see and hear through other shadow bodies.
 - Shadow bodies hidden in the summoner's shadow can contain traces of the summoner's presence. One shadow body can eliminate either the caster's heat, scent or sound, with additional shadow bodies eliminating additional factors.

"Shade," Jason said, "I think that will do just fine. Speaking of the astral space, though, did you happen to notice anyone who stayed behind when everyone else left?"

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the trial period ended, the vessels I was inhabiting were dissolved, returning me to the astral. This was the moment the gates closed, therefore those who had not used them remain there still. I am aware of which people they are.”

“You know who stayed behind?” Jason asked. “Actual names?”

“Yes. The powers afforded me by the vessels I inhabited were powerful. All that was said, I heard.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” Jason said and turned to his team. “I’m going to hire one of the Magic Society’s water communication chambers and get that list of names back to Greenstone. In the meantime, you summon up your familiars, Belinda. I’m pretty tired, anyway, after doing mine. I can finish up when you’re done.”

Shade sidled into Jason’s shadow and Jason left without any indication of his new passenger’s presence. The rest of the group cleared away the remnants of his summoning circle and Belinda started setting up her own. Like Jason, she was drawing her own magic diagram, with advice, but not assistance, from Clive.

Belinda’s first summon had a more mystical and less sinister chant than Jason’s. Its appearance was heralded by silver-blue light that filled the room before coalescing over the ritual circle, compressing down until a silver lantern appeared around it. The lantern started floating around the room, bathing it in a cool light.

“It’s pretty,” she said. “I like this much more than some death shadow.”

“Shade was good to us in the astral space,” Sophie said. “He was presumably good to everyone, but I like him.”

Belinda was drained from the summoning, following Jason’s example and drinking a potion to relieve the mental exhaustion. Her familiar was bobbing in the air around her like a puppy seeking attention and she reached out to touch it.

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- Unnamed (astral lantern).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Reveals nearby hidden enemies.
 - Makes ranged attacks with bolts of disruptive-force, consuming small amounts of core energy.
 - Can intercept and negate magical projectiles. Negating powerful projectiles consumes core energy.
 - Core energy naturally replenishes over time. Summoner can use mana to restore core energy.
 - Familiar can be subsumed into the caster’s eyes. When it has done so, the summoner can see hidden enemies and consume mana to make disruptive-force beam attacks from her eyes.
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"You need a need a name, little guy," Belinda said. "Floaty? Sparkles?"

"That's terrible," Sophie said.

"You have a better idea?" Belinda asked.

Sophie thought it over as she looked at the silver lantern with the silver-blue light.

"How about Shimmer?" she said.

"I like that," Humphrey said.

"That is pretty good," Belinda said, then turned to her familiar. "What do you think? Do you like Shimmer?"

The lantern waggled side to side in the air.

"Does anyone know if that means yes?" Belinda asked.

Jason only returned once Belinda had recovered and mostly laid out her next ritual circle.

"Since it wasn't a scheduled message," Jason said, "I had to wait for them to go get someone. I wasn't just going to drop that information to anyone, so I spoke to Rufus."

"That extra time would have been expensive."

"Rufus said he'd get the Adventure Society to pony up for it."

"Pony?"

"It's like a small horse."

"Those are the one-headed heidels, right?"

"Yeah, except with silky hair instead of creepy reptile scales."

"And what does they have to with paying for things?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because language is weird."

"You know, you could make more of an effort to be understood through your translation power."

"Your Mum understands me."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Humphrey asked.

Jason groaned.

"Sometimes trying to aggravate people in this world only aggravates me," he complained, then levelled a suspicious gaze at Humphrey. "Were you being deliberately obtuse just to get under my skin?"

A grin teased the corners of Humphrey's mouth.

"You shouldn't be talking about my mother."

"That's true," Jason said. "That is not wrath I'd be looking to suffer."

Belinda completed her ritual and summoned her other familiar. Unlike the previous two, it was not foreshadowed by phenomena, suddenly appearing out of nowhere. It was a strange, flickering entity, skipping around the room without passing through the intervening space. Its form constantly shifted, changing with each flickering teleport. It first appeared with Belinda's form, then Humphrey's, then Clive's. Then it was a strange amalgam of Sophie and Neil, but only for a moment as the changes continued. Sometimes it would replicate a member of the group, other times, melding two or more forms together in a bizarre gestalt. It never took any kind of form of its own.

It stilled slightly, holding in place as Belinda approached it but still flickering, like a television with bad reception. She reached out and touched it.

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- Unnamed (echo spirit).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Can mimic the form of enemies or allies.
 - Can switch-teleport with mimicked allies.
 - Can mirror the mimicked ally's movements and attacks, but inflicts no damage or other effects.
 - When subsumed into the summoner's aura, the summoner can manipulate their own aura, projecting false traits or mimicking the aura of others.
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"It's deception based," she said. "It works like Humphrey's new power to make an illusionary double."

"It'll be interesting to see if it doubles Humphrey's illusionary double," Jason said. "That would make him almost impossible to defend against, short of running away."

Once again Belinda needed to pick out a name. She ultimately accepted Jason's suggestion of Gemini.

"It means twins in a language from my world," he explained.

That left Jason's final familiar, which he started setting up for.

"That last incantation was pretty bad," Neil said. "This one is called an avatar of doom, though. Who's going to bet which incantation is more evil?"

"Seriously?" Jason asked, not looking up from his task.

"I'll take avatar of doom," Sophie said. "It has to be worse."

"I don't know," Belinda said. "That whole bit about the end of all things in the last one was pretty bad. I'll bet on the shadow incantation."

"Yes, I'll take the shadow familiar as well," Clive said.

"Oh, come on, Clive," Jason said. "You too?"

“What about you, Humphrey?” Belinda asked.

“No, he’s the judge,” Neil said. “He has to be objective, so I’ll round out the numbers and pick the new one as worse.”

“I should kick you all out and do this alone.”

Belinda and Sophie immediately booed him, Neil joining in as well. He turned around to glare at them as Humphrey and Clive shrugged their shoulders, helplessly. Jason shook his head and ignored them until he was done.

“We didn’t decide what we were betting for,” Belinda said.

“The losers buy everyone’s snacks at the mirage chamber tonight,” Neil said.

“That’s reasonable,” Clive said.

“Really, Clive?” Jason asked.

“You don’t get to complain,” Neil said. “Your snacks get bought for you either way.”

“My issues aren’t snack-related,” Jason said.

“Maybe just get it done and out of the way?” Humphrey suggested.

“You’re just in it because your snacks are guaranteed, too.”

Scowling, Jason turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

“When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring.”

At first, it seemed like nothing was happening. Neil had just opened his mouth to accuse Jason of getting it wrong when the glow stones lighting the room started flickering.

“That really shouldn’t be happening,” Clive said.

The glow stones started going out, one by one, until the room was plunged into darkness. Then they all flared up at once, flooding the room with glare before they started shattering, stone fragments falling into the crystal that should have shielded them from anything in the room.

After the blinding brightness, the dark seemed especially deep. As they looked around, a speck of orange light appeared, floating over the circle. It expanded, swirling in the dark like a nebula in the void of space. The orange was joined by blue and soon they could see the expanding colours take the shape of an orange eye with a vibrant blue iris.

The darkness around the nebula eye started to coalesce, taking on physical substance the way Jason’s conjured cloak did. It even took on the form of a cloak, draping around the nebula eye, which floated where the torso would be. Two orbs manifested around the cloak, themselves smaller versions of the eye. One was blue in orange, the other, orange in blue. They drifted through the air, slowly circling the cloak like guardians.

Jason's teammates had been poised to mock the incantation but were transfixed by the beauty of the familiar. In the darkness left from the shattered glow stones, the eye nebula and the floating orbs were the only sources of light.

"Ah, crap," Jason said. "I'm going to be a chuuni forever."

"Hey, Clive," Neil said.

"Uh, yeah?" Clive said.

"I'm guessing that wasn't meant to happen either."

"No, it was not," Clive said, his normal inquisitiveness reasserting itself as he moved to stand next to Jason and look at the new familiar.

"It's curious that the familiars are both reflective of your appearance," Clive observed. "Your appearance while wearing your cloak, anyway. I did notice that Shade looks somewhat different than he did in the astral space. There, his silhouette was closer to a person's form, instead of the cloak shape he inhabits now."

"Can you speak?" Jason asked the familiar. The shadowy cowl shook its empty non-head slowly, an ominous gesture in the light coming from its own body. Its cloak shape was dominated by the eye, but the rest of the space in the cloak was slowly being occupied by what looked like a less formed nebula, with shades of red, green purple and other colours that shifted like a rainbow tide.

"You can understand me, though, that's good," Jason said. "Let's try this: Make the orb that's blue on the outside glow slightly brighter for yes and the one that's orange on the outside for no. Can you do that?"

The blue orb glowed brighter.

"Nice. This will work out just fine."

He reached out to touch the avatar, his hand getting a strange tingle as it met the light of the nebula eye.

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- Unnamed (avatar of doom).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Each orb can make sustained beam attacks. One orb inflicts disruptive-force damage, the other, resonating-force damage.
 - Enemies damaged by the avatar are afflicted with [Vulnerable]. Sustained beam damage will cause additional instances to be accrued.
 - The avatar's normal movement is slow but it can make rapid energy dashes, inflicting disruptive-force damage on enemies in the path of the dash. Orbs do not attack during the dash.
 - Can be subsumed into the summoner's aura, making the summoner's aura much harder to detect and read.

- [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
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“No name, then?”

Orange orb.

“Do you want one?”

Blue orb.

“Yeah, you should have one. I can’t be all ‘hey, Avatar of Doom, do you want a sausage?’ That would be absurd.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s big on sausages,” Belinda said.

“You have to give it a majestic name,” Neil said. “Even I’m willing to acknowledge that is a magnificent entity.”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I’m going to call you... Gordon.”

“What?”

“No!”

“You can’t call it that!”

“What do you say, Gordon?” Jason asked. “Want to go take a look at the mirage arena?”

Blue orb.