

Chapter 377

Fanboy

The Arima Grand Resort was a palace hidden in a forest, the most opulent of the many accommodations in Arima Onsen Town. With magic now out in the open, Jason didn't have to go to the bother of hiding it as he approached the resort, Shade transforming from car to a cloud of shadow right outside the lobby, from which Jason strode as the dark miasma was sucked into his shadow.

Ignoring the resulting stares, Jason made his way across an atrium larger than most homes, spotting someone hurrying to intercept him. It was a young man of maybe twenty, with an earnest, nervous aura. It showed plainly in the anxiety on his face, but his aura was solidly controlled. If Jason senses weren't so much more powerful than the freshly bronze-rank young man, he wouldn't have been able to read his emotions at all. Most interestingly, his aura contained no trace of monster cores.

"Mr Asano," the young man greeted with a respectful bow. "My name is Tiwari Itsuki."

Jason returned the bow, a smile playing on his lips. The young man's aura shuddered with anxiety.

"I apologise for being the one to meet you but preparations are being made should events go unfortunately. Would you please follow me?"

"Of course," Jason said, following the young man who did a mostly adequate job of hiding his nervous energy. "I wouldn't be too worried, Mr Tiwari. I'm confident that the Asano clan has reconsidered their path going forward."

"Truly?" Itsuki asked as he led Jason across a lobby full of people staring at them.

"I just came from a chat with Asano Noriko. It could have been a bluff but I believe the Asano clan will be packing up and going home without paying you that visit."

"I knew you would do something," Itsuki said.

"Don't go crediting me too much."

Itsuki guided Jason out of the lobby and into the internal halls.

"There's no reason to be modest, Mr Asano. I've been following your exploits through the news, obviously, and all the network reports I could find. I actually asked my father if I could be the one to meet you. I'm taking you to the family's private residence at the rear of the resort grounds."

"I'll have to disagree about modesty," Jason said. "Always either be modest or wildly self-aggrandising. Avoid anything in between, for there lies mediocrity."

"That's... an unusual perspective."

"If it comes up," Jason said, "tell them to put that on my tombstone."

"Uh..."

"I'm not what you expected?"

"Not quite. I'd heard some things from Asano Akari, but they seemed a little outlandish. I'd thought she was joking."

"You know Akari?"

"I haven't seen her in person since she left. I suppose I won't be able to at all, now."

"It might be a bit awkward, yes," Jason said, sensing the sadness suddenly suffusing the young man.

"I see you didn't use cores to reach bronze-rank," Jason said, changing the subject.

"Sorry, category two."

"We have been using the otherworld terminology since we started training our people with the Hurin techniques."

"The Hurin techniques? They named them after Farrah?"

"Yes, Mr Asano. I had long considered myself unlucky, being unable to absorb essences until I was nineteen. The timing was perfect for the new techniques, however, and I was sent to Sydney with the first international representatives for training. I was in the same training group as Taika Williams."

"You know Taika? Have you and I met before?"

"I attended some lectures you gave on aura control at the Sydney branch but this is our first time actually meeting."

"Sorry I didn't recognise you. I've been rude."

"There were over a hundred people in attendance and I was just a fresh iron-ranker. There is no need to apologise."

"I did mostly leave training people to Farrah. I'm a bit rambling and unfocused to be a good instructor, which worked out better for you, I think, getting Farrah instead. I taught some people aura control in the other world for a while and they paired me with someone to keep me on track. That turned out to be a good idea."

"Miss Asano told me that you are difficult to keep on any track you don't want to be on, Mr Asano."

Jason laughed.

"That sounds about what Akari's assessment would be. That's why they had my friend Humphrey riding herd on me."

Jason's face took on a sad, reminiscing smile.

"The way things are going, here," he said, "I can't wait to go home."

“To Australia?”

“No.”

Itsuki looked at the expression on Jason’s face and didn’t probe further. They left the main resort building through a side door and Itsuki took the driver’s seat of a waiting golf cart. The resort was a sprawling complex made up of multiple huge buildings set into the forested surrounds, rising up the side of a large hill.

“You must have been quite active to reach bronze-rank in what? Five months?” Jason asked.

“I’ve done my duty as a member of the Network as best I can,” Itsuki said.

Five months was basically unheard of, even in the other world. Jason knew that ranking up in five months was only possible with a vast number of monsters. Even then, the boy would need an impressive level of talent and, more importantly, dedication. Only the kind of consistent conflict Jason himself faced living in an astral space could grant that kind of advancement, which meant the boy had to be all but living in proto spaces.

That kind of drive suggested an implacability rather at odds with the nervous young man driving the golf cart. Either he had unexpected depths or the off-kilter predilections of a serial-killer, redirected into monster hunting. Either way, he was someone worth paying attention to.

“If you don’t mind,” Jason said, “would you be willing to share your essence combination?”

Itsuki’s aura shuddered and his nervousness was made plain on his face.

“It’s alright to say no,” Jason chuckled.

“No, it’s just a little embarrassing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Jason said. “I have a friend, once of the most skilled essence users I ever met. Someone who taught me, in fact. He has a story about a lesson he learned getting showed up by a man with the duck essence.”

“It’s not like that,” Itsuki said. “It’s just... my essences are dark, blood and omen, with a doom confluence.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “You really have been following my exploits, haven’t you?”

Itsuki’s face went red.

“I’ve never met a fan, before. Do you have any of my merch? The proceeds go to charity, which is the only reason I went along with Terrance and his nonsense.”

“Terrance?”

“Never mind. You didn’t get the knockoff stuff from China, did you? I’m sure the Network there is behind it, not that they’ll admit it.”

“Mr Asano, please.”

Jason laughed, slapping Itsuki on the shoulder.

“I’m just messing with you, bloke. Are you an affliction specialist?”

“Yes.”

“Nice. We should find some time to swap notes, maybe clear out a proto-space together.”

“Really?”

“If events don’t overtake us, sure. No promises, though. Events overtake me quite a lot. Just earlier I was setting off a bunch of car bombs.”

“That was you?”

“Yep. Only had to use three, because two of them were in the same car. They definitely weren’t just some couple going on holiday right, Shade?”

“I am quite certain of their sinister intentions,” Shade said. “Unfortunately for them, it takes a lot to catch up to you in sinister intentions.”

“Oh!” Itsuki exclaimed, almost driving the cart off the path. “You’re Shade, the shadow familiar.”

“I know,” Shade said. “I am starting to see why people telling you your name all the time all the time is annoying, Mr Asano.”

Jason laughed as Itsuki went pale.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason told him. “Do you have a familiar? They’re pretty rare on this side.”

“Yes, Mr Asano, I do. My father made sure I had the ritual training to make it possible. I only have the one, though, and it does not communicate. I don’t exactly know what it is.”

“We can take a look later,” Jason said. “See if we can’t figure it out.”

“I apologise, Mr Shade,” Itsuki said. “I’ve watched the ritual of your summoning many times.”

“Because that’s not creepy at all,” Jason said.

The golf cart rode up the hill through the complex that was oddly like a small town, if there was a small town occupied exclusively by billionaires. They arrived at the rear of the complex, which was the highest point on the hill. Compared to a palatial buildings elsewhere, the Tiwari residence was smaller, more modest and had more traditional Japanese influence in the architecture than western. More modest meaning that it was a giant mansion, rather than a hotel for people who through the Palace of Versailles was an adequate start.

Jason could sense the protections embedded into it. They were not so intricate and formidable as a Network branch office but he would still have to be careful should he attempt to intrude, unnoticed or otherwise. It had not been enough to prevent Shade entering to approach the clan Patriarch, so that Jason could clandestinely warn him of the Asano clan's intentions.

The defences seemed to be in an active state, which probably mean they were burning through spirit coins. As he watched, the defences started spooling down.

"They must have heard the Asano clan isn't coming," Jason said.

"What makes you say that?" Itsuki asked.

"The magical protections are being wound down."

"You can read our magical defences just from looking?"

"The benefits of a grounding in magical theory were explained to me many times," Jason said. "It turned out to be very true. I take it that you were only taught the practical basics of rituals?"

"Yes, Mr Asano."

"Try studying up on the theory. It'll be worth it, I promise."

"I'll do my best," Itsuki said. "There is only so much material I can get my hands on."

They stopped outside the building and went to the doors on foot, where two men were standing guard in black suits. They bowed as Itsuki and Jason approached.

"Lord Itsuki. The defences are being stood down to readiness condition two. Your father wishes you to bring Mr Asano to the patriarch's office."

"Thank you, Ryuhei."

Itsuki was like a different person in front of the doormen. All traces of nervousness gone from his face and his aura was brought under control. If Jason's senses weren't so powerful, he wouldn't have been able to read him at all.

"That is some impressive aura control," Jason said. "You learned Farrah's lessons well."

"And yours, Mr Asano. The compliment is great, coming from you. Miss Hurin once told me that your aura has strength and power enough to be used as a weapon itself."

"I prefer not to," Jason said. "Some weapons are best left in their sheath."

The inside of the Tiwari residence was busy, although the people hurrying about frequently took a look at Jason and Itsuki as they passed by. Jason assessed the building as being deeply modernised, under a façade of old-world dignity. Jason's silver-rank perception picked out surveillance systems and communication signals imperceptible to a normal human, all hidden under traditional Japanese décor. Itsuki led Jason to an elevator,

where a man with an expensive suit and a discrete earbud stopped them. Jason could sense that he was silver-rank.

“Uncle Souta,” Itsuki greeted.

“Itsuki,” the man said, then bowed respectfully to Jason, who reciprocated.

“Mr Asano,” Souta said. “My name is Tiwari Souta. I am afraid that you will need to disable whatever means you are using to obfuscate our security before moving forward. I apologise, but given the circumstances, we are wary of allowing anyone with the name Asano access to our clan leadership.”

“Uncle Souta! Mr Asano was the one who warned us!”

“Decorum, Itsuki,” Souta scolded.

“Apologies, Uncle.”

“It’s perfectly understandable,” Jason said. “Dial it back, please, Shade. In fact, you may as well pop out.”

A Shade body emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“It wouldn’t do to go smuggling people in, so let’s get out in the open, yes? Front and centre, gents.”

Gordon manifested next to Shade, while Jason pointed an arm down the hallway, palm out. Glistening blood seeped through the skin of his palm and then started spraying out in a stream, unsettling Itsuki and Souta. The blood congealed into a robed figure that looked identical to Jason, except for the red-purple colour of its skin.

“Gentlemen, meet Shade, Gordon and Colin. My closest companions.”

Jason and his familiars all lined up together, looking like a blood clone, and a shadow clone and an alien void monster.

“I’m not so sure about this,” Souta said.

“If you accept me, you accept them,” Jason said. “Literally, since they are my familiars. If you don’t accept them, then you might as well tell me where the door is and I’ll make my own way.”

Souta looked over the four of them, lingering on Gordon, who looked like a floating violation of the laws of physics.

“If you had not revealed them, would we have any means of detecting them?”

“No, but your patriarch certainly knew about Shade. I’m pretty certain that Itsuki, here, could have told you about the others, if you didn’t know already. Don’t go crediting me with too much honesty.”

Itsuki had been looking at the familiar’s with distracted amazement, only looking up when his name was called.

Souta looked at Itsuki sternly but Jason could sense the man's mix of exasperation and affection. He tapped his earbud, then nodded.

"Very well. Please come along."

Jason's familiars unmanifested. Shade returned to Jason's shadow, Gordon vanished and Colin was reabsorbed, then Souta, Itsuki and Jason entered the elevator.

"Do you get heavier when Colin is inside you?" Itsuki asked.

"I think so," Jason said. "I didn't used to, when he would just disappear, as much as it seemed like he was entering my body. Now we seem to merge more physically than before. I'm not sure if it's him or me that changed, or a little of both."

The elevator ride was short and they walked down another hall towards a set of double doors.

"Is your father the patriarch?" Jason asked Itsuki.

"No, my uncle is. Father is the youngest brother, Uncle Souta is in the middle and Uncle Denji is the patriarch."

"Your father has two older brothers as well?" Jason asked. "Itsuki, are you trying to steal my identity?"

"What?"

"Mr Tiwari," Jason asked Souta. "Does Itsuki have a poster of me on his wall?"

"I don't," Itsuki said unconvincingly.

"It's the one where I'm on the roof of a building like Batman isn't it? I always thought that one was over the top."

"That one was your idea," Shade said.

"Quiet, you."

They reached the doors where a pair of men in black suits stood guard.

"I love the men in black look your security people have going on," Jason said. "Very intimidating."

The men opened the doors to allow them into a large office where the back wall was made entirely of glass, looking out over the resort as it sprawled down the hillside. Two men were waiting for them, both silver-rankers, bearing no small resemblance to Souta.

"Mr Asano," the patriarch, Denji greeted. He moved forward to shake hands rather than offer a Japanese bow. "It is good to meet you in person, although your shadowy go-between was quite remarkable. And stealthy."

"I have a friend who could recommend ways to keep him out," Jason said. "You'll have to forgive me for asking her not to."

“You speak of Miss Hurin,” Denji said. “My nephew holds you both in high regard. I understand she is also in Japan?”

“She is making sure that my friends and family don’t suffer the undue attention of the Asano clan. Given our shared ancestry, our meeting was rather disappointing.”

“Disappointment is the order of the day,” Denji agreed. “I have just gotten off the phone with Asano Shiro, who I have known since we were boys. It is sad to lose a friend and an ally, but their intentions today are beyond forgiveness.”

“Shiro was against the move from the beginning,” Jason said.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Denji said. “It’s his mother. I do not know how you convinced that woman to back off.”

“I didn’t do anything. She merely came to see the consequences clearly.”

“That seems rather easy, given the woman in question.”

“I was thinking much the same thing. I suspect that she’ll come for me again, once I have the door.”

“That would not surprise me, although perhaps the fear of Network retribution will stay her hand.”

“I doubt it. The Network and I will be increasingly at odds, from now on. Which puts you in something of an awkward position, sorry.”

“Not at all,” Denji said. “Our clan’s first duty is to the Network’s founder and the task left to us, not the Network’s modern incarnation.”

“And that task is protecting the door?”

“Yes,” Denji said. “Until someone that can use it arrives.”