

## Chapter 375

### Honour

“Where are our guests now?” Noriko asked. She was the strongest member of the Asano clan and the patriarch’s mother. Noriko and Shiro were in a room with the rest of the clan leadership, eight elders kneeling around a low table.

“Lunch is being prepared, hosted by my daughters,” Shiro said. “Jason is taking a call from the Network.”

“We’re monitoring it?” Noriko asked.

“We are,” Shiro said, “although that does not make me comfortable. We are hosts.”

“You will need to swallow much more than that before we are done,” Noriko said.

“Akari told us the basics of what is to come, but if the power on offer is as formidable as what Jason described to you, then we have no choice but to pursue it.”

“Akari will not like going against him.”

“If this far-flung relative speaks the truth at all,” one of the elders said. “It could be some elaborate ruse at our expense.”

“I’m not sure that’s a risk we can afford to take,” said another. “If the power is truly as Shiro has described, we cannot afford to step back from it.”

“Exactly,” Noriko said. “Not only must we fully pursue the opportunities that will be available to all, but we must seize the one that only we have a chance at. It will allow us to not just keep up with those standing at the peak but potentially raise our entire clan to stand at the absolute pinnacle.”

“You don’t just wish to go after the magic that is coming,” Shiro realised. “You are suggesting that we seize the object that Jason has come for from the Tiwari?”

“Yes,” Noriko said.

Shiro frowned unhappily.

“You wish to repay a debt with betrayal?” he asked. “This, on top of betraying those we entertain as hosts.”

“To do any less would be a betrayal of our own people,” Noriko said. “There is no honour in weakness and in the chaos to come, only the strongest shall rise. The rest will be lucky to survive and I refuse to abandon the fate of the clan to luck.”

“What about Network repercussion?” an elder asked.

“You think the Network will stand by Jason and his intentions when they see the EOA and the Cabal grabbing the power to push themselves to category four?” Noriko asked. “As much power and knowledge as he apparently represents, he is not worth giving up

category four power for. Jason will either be forced to accept the Network's intentions or stand aside."

"He will not stand for it," Shiro said. "I can be certain of that much from Akari. She will react poorly to this."

"You are her father and will take her in hand," Noriko said. "One of your roles as her parents is to guide her through the hard but necessary choices."

"I guided her onto a path of honour. Turning her from it is not so simple as you make out."

"Yes, it is," Noriko said. "Do not confuse your own reluctance for difficulty. Mei and Akari are obedient girls."

"How will Asano react?" an elder asked. "We have all read Akari's reports from Australia. It does not seem out of character for Jason to do something rash."

"Then he will reap the consequences," Noriko said. "He will be cautious while he has family here."

"Hostages?" Shiro asked. "Putting aside honour is one thing, but do you intend to burn our name in effigy?"

"One of my roles as your parent is to guide you through the hard but necessary choices, Shiro. This is not a time for hesitation or half-measures. The world is changing and we must be ruthless if we do not wish to be cast aside by those with the will to rise to the top."

"Are we not being pre-emptive?" Shiro argued. "All we have is one conversation with Jason to go on. He could be exaggerating or blowing things out of proportion."

"Agreed," an elder said. "We should learn more before acting."

"Those are the words that will doom our clan!" Noriko pronounced. "All across the world, people are readying to act with boldness. If we hesitate when faced with an opportunity like this, then we are truly without hope."

Shiro hung his head, seeing that he would not be able to turn events.

"Jason's senses are sharp," he said. "Our preparations must be carefully conducted."

"Do not tell Mei and Akari anything," Noriko said. "So long as they believe we are going along with Jason's intentions, they will be a mask for our own."

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Jason was on a video conference call, Asya standing beside him. There were a half-dozen people on a screen in front of him, including Terrance, Anna and Ketevan from the Sydney branch of the Network. The others were all from the International Committee's offices, each one much higher up in the organisation than Asya.

“You messed up really badly with those comments about sharing the blame, Jason,” Terrance said. “Coming right in front of the announcements about the EOA cutting deals with all those countries, you as good as legitimised them.”

“Yes, because my influence is so all-encompassing that one remark from me can change the fate of twenty countries,” Jason said. “That’s hot nonsense. I may have spoken in anger but I didn’t lie, Terrance. The EOA might have dropped the grid, but Makassar is on the Network and the Cabal.”

“It doesn’t matter who is responsible, Jason,” Anna said. “The important thing right now is undercutting the EOA’s influence and you gave them a boost, instead, right when they needed it most. Because no, you can’t sway the fate of twenty countries alone, but you are a voice that people listen to.”

“Then I’m going to try and give that voice some integrity,” Jason said. “Yes, pushing it all onto the EOA right now would help the Network, but if you keep compromising your principles to meet the needs of the moment, eventually you don’t have any principles left. You wake up one day with blood on your hands, not recognising the person in the mirror.”

“It’s all well and good to talk about ethics,” Anna said, “but we have to deal with the reality right now. And right now, the reality is that this move by the EOA has them gaining massive amounts of ground on the Network and you helped with that.”

“I’m not part of the Network,” Jason said. “I quite specifically didn’t join because I didn’t want to be making a choice between the right thing to do and what I was told to do.”

“That is actually our reason for contacting you,” one of the International Committee members. It was a stern-looking woman, the first member of the IC to speak since the initial introductions.

“The agreement you reached with the Sydney branch has been deemed to be no longer feasible,” she explained. “The time has come for you to truly come under the Network’s umbrella. To become a member with all attendant responsibilities and privileges.”

“You know that isn’t happening,” Jason said.

“Either way, our agreement with you is annulled, as of now,” the IC member stated.

“Fine,” Jason said and ended the call without further discussion. Then his face contorted in anger.

“Jason?” Asya asked, having remained silent through the process.

“They know,” Jason said. “I’m not sure how, but they know what’s up for grabs once the grid comes back up. They know I won’t stand for it so they’re cutting ties now. The next

step will be to undermine my influence. They're going to start portraying me as a fringe, rogue element. Probably some kind of extremist."

"You can't be sure of that."

"I am. I understand that this puts you in an awkward position."

"You know I wasn't the one to tell them, right?" Asya asked, uncertainty and anxiousness on her face.

He stepped forward, catching her in an embrace.

"Of course I know that," he said, comforting her with a firm but delicate hug, their bodies fitting into one another. "I told you that I trust people over the organisations they belong to. This is why. I trust you."

"So, what now?"

"Now it's time for you and the others to go," Jason said. "Things are about to get very ugly."

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Akari and Mei approached the rooms where Jason and his companions had been staying and Jason let her in.

"Where are the others?" Akari asked on finding only Jason inside.

"They decided to go play tourist while I take care of business," Jason explained. "Any danger that finds them with Farrah there will soon wish it hadn't."

"Security didn't notify us of their leaving the premises," Mei said.

"They went with my shadow friend, Shade," Jason said. "He's very stealthy. He could be right there in the room with you and you wouldn't even know."

Akari narrowed her eyes at Jason.

"Jason, what are you doing?"

"If it's any consolation, later," Jason said, "Your father was heavily against it."

Akari frowned, confusion and worry passing across her face.

"It hardly takes two of us, now that you are the only one travelling to the Tiwari clan," Akari said. "Mei, you escort Mr Asano while I inform Father of the change."

Mei looked from Jason to Akari with concern, having no idea what was causing the tension between them.

"Very well," she said.

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"Father, he knows," Akari said, striding into the patriarch's study without knocking or preamble. Shiro was leaning against the desk, wiping a cloth carefully down the length of an unsheathed sword.

"Who knows what?" Shiro asked, not looking up from his task.

"Jason knows what you are going to do."

Shiro slowly raised his head to look at his daughter.

"And what makes you think I'm going to do anything?"

"He sent all his people away in secret and made some thinly-veiled implications."

"What did he say?"

"He made the point of saying that his familiar can be in a room and you would even know it was there."

Shiro let out a laugh.

"He sent you on a fishing expedition, Daughter. His task is an important one and he is being appropriately cautious. He's doing the right thing. Return to your task."

"Are you sure, father?"

"Quite certain, Akari. Attend your duties."

She gave a slight bow, then left again. Shiro put down the Blade walked over to the door and closed it, before pulling out his phone to call Noriko.

"Yes?" Noriko answered brusquely.

"Asano knows."

"How certain are you?"

"He most likely had his familiar watching our meeting."

"That shouldn't be possible," Noriko said. "We have embedded protections in place."

"It occurs to me that Jason's companion, Farrah Hurin, is the foremost expert in array magic on the planet. Are you willing to bet that she couldn't have circumvented our magical defences?"

"Do you know if he's warned the Tiwari?"

"I do not."

There was a period of silence as Noriko processed the new information.

"It's not too late to turn back to the honourable path," Shiro said. "Choosing the path of power makes sense when there is power to be had, but if not, why throw away our honour for nothing."

"The fact that this is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss has not changed," Noriko said. "It will just cost us a little more blood."

"You want to move forward, whatever the cost? Whatever the risk?"

"The cost of not seizing this chance is worth any risk."

"I disagree," Shiro said. "I'm putting a stop to this before it begins. It's not too late to do nothing."

"You'll do no such thing," Noriko hissed.

"I have always valued your guidance, Mother, but I am the patriarch of this clan, not you."

"If the puppet cuts its own strings, Shiro, it falls down, helpless. Do as you're told."

"You are that unwilling to compromise?" Shiro asked, voice heavy with resignation.

"My will is unbending, son. This is not news to you. Your choices are either to work for the betterment of the clan or throw it into chaos for some Australian you met yesterday."

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Mei was driving a black town car into Kobe. Shiro and Akari sat together in the back, with Jason across from them.

"You look conflicted, Shiro," Jason said.

"Do I?" Shiro asked. "Is that why you sent my daughter to see me?"

"Yes. I think the man who raised Akari will want to be able to look her in the eye tomorrow. There is still a window to stop this before it starts."

Akari watched the two men warily but did not interrupt, despite her burning curiosity.

"I can't stop this, Jason," Shiro said.

"That is unfortunate."

Shiro sighed, turning to look at his daughter. Jason said nothing, sitting casually.

"I can speak for most of the clan," Shiro said with the weariness of a tired old man.

"Most of our oldest and strongest warriors will remain loyal to my mother, however, and I'm sure you know that with essence users it is a power game, not a numbers one."

"The tyranny of rank," Jason said. "I'm familiar with the concept."

"So those are my options," Shiro said. "Keep the clan together, throw away our honour and who knows how many lives of an ally clan to whom we are in debt, or split the clan. Tiwari blood will be spilled either way, and our clan could very easily meet its end."

"Father, what are you talking about?" Akari asked.

"Your grandmother wants to take the magic door by force," Jason explained. "She will not be dissuaded, despite your father's considerable attempts to persuade her to maintain the clan's honour."

"Father, is that true?"

"I'm sorry, Akari."

"It won't even do any good," Jason said. "According to the Tiwari, I'm the only one who can use the door."

"You did contact them, then?" Shiro asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "Their patriarch was hard to convince that you would throw away your honour, Shiro."

"Why can only you use it?" Shiro asked. "The prophecy about a man who walks between worlds?"

"After your meeting," Jason said, "I spoke at length with the Tiwari patriarch through an intermediary. The prophecy is a poetic way of describing a very real magical restriction."

"Was it left here for you?" Akari asked.

"Partly, I suspect," Jason said. "I imagine the first choice was that the Network founder would return for it, using the restriction as a security system. Another outworlder being sent here was probably a less-than-reliable backup plan."

"So, how do you see this going?" Shiro asked. "My mother will not be inclined to accept the Tiwari's claim. Even if she does, that just means she'll try and capture you as well, Jason."

"It will take a lot to make her back down," Jason said. "I'm hoping that the combination of the Tiwari being ready, the fact that she can't even use the door and the threat of a schism in the clan will be enough to get her to back down. I've convinced the Tiwari to let your clan leave in peace if they are willing to do so. The friendship between your clans is dead either way, however."

"You think I'll turn on my mother and start a civil war inside my clan?"

"I'm hoping that you'll save your clans soul, Shiro, as well as its people. Once the fighting starts I won't stop until the job is done."

"My daughter told me not to fight you unless I can see you," Shiro said.

"You won't see me," Jason said. "You'll see your clan staggering out of the dark, dead on their feet."

"You're very confident."

"Yes. I'm either right to be or I'm not. Do you really want to find out, Patriarch?"

Shiro looked into Jason's cold, silver eyes. He had never sensed so much as an echo of Jason's aura but suddenly he felt something his senses could barely touch, like an object just beyond the reach of his fingers. It was deep, like a dark abyss, with the promise of power and danger, giving Shiro an ominous sense.

"Are you still human, Jason?"

"No," Jason said. "Not anymore."