

## Chapter 376

### They Get to See What I'm Like

The Tiwari clan seat was located in Arima Onsen Town, nestled in beautiful nature amongst thickly forested hills. The car taking Jason to meet the clan made its way north toward Kobe's Kita-ku ward also contained the Asano clan patriarch, Shiro, and his two daughters. The elder, Akari, was sitting next to her father, unsettled at the discussion between Shiro and Jason. The younger sister, Mei, was driving the town car, with Shiro and Akari facing Jason in the back.

"So, what exactly was the plan?" Jason asked.

"Use stealth specialists to follow us to where the Tiwari clan is hiding the door," Shiro said. "Two of them, each category three."

"It seems that either your mother doesn't trust you or someone else is trying to horn in," Jason said. "Or both. There are currently four silver-rankers following us. That I've noticed, at least."

"I can't sense them," Shiro said. "Are you sure?"

"They are all in cars," Jason said. "It could be that a bunch of silver-rankers all wanted to visit the same hot spring town at the same time and are driving there individually," Jason said. "Shade, go take a look. If they are here for us, go with plan C. Variant three, please."

"Are you sure you want to make that level of commotion?" Shade asked.

"If the Network wants to tear up our arrangement, they get to see what I'm like operating without shackles."

"Not having access to military supplies will make replenishing supplies for plan C harder."

"No, it'll just make it less legal," Jason said. "It won't be hard."

"Very well," Shade said.

"What's plan C?" Akari asked.

"Plan C is all about Shade," Jason said. "He can turn intangible, store objects in his own dimensional space and is very, very hard to detect. We loaded Shade up with a bunch of useful items and came up with a series of plans where Shade plants objects near targets."

"Like cameras?" Akari asked. "That would be useful. Is that what the C stands for?"

"No," Jason said, pulling out a palm-sized black box with a small antenna. It had a switch and a button under a plastic flip cover, as well as a green indicator light.

"Everything is in place," Shade said.

"That was quick," Shiro said.

"I was already moving when the discussion began," Shade said.

"Plan C does not stand for plan camera," Jason said, flipping the switch on the device, and causing the light to go from green to red. "It stands for C4. Give me the timing, Shade."

He lifted the cover over the button.

"Now," Shade said.

Jason pressed the button and a trio of simultaneous explosions rang out behind them.

Shiro and Akari both craned their necks to look out the back.

"I'd make sure we get out of the area before the authorities get involved," Jason told Mei, in the driver's seat. "It'll be quite the commotion."

"Commotion?" Shiro said, looking aghast at Jason. "Do you know what you've done?"

"Don't worry," Jason said with a friendly smile. "I made sure they were shaped charges, so the silver-rank shrapnel I made will have passed right up through the cars Shade attached the charges to the bottom of. It'll hit anyone inside like a, well, bomb, while not impacting nearby civilians. Too much. Any shrapnel that makes it above a certain height will break down into metal powder, too light to fall down and hurt anyone."

"Silver-rank shrapnel?"

"Yes, my artifice abilities are very basic, but investing some caltrops with a few simple properties is within my capabilities."

"How can you set off bombs in Japan?" Shiro asked.

Jason looked Shiro square in the eye, the friendly, casual expression vanishing into an icy glare.

"I need something to save the world and you want to take it for your own power? The Network wants to drop me to scabble over magical scraps, disregarding their very purpose? I can handle that kind of greed but this is what handling it looks like. The gloves are off, Shiro. I don't want to kill anyone but if saving this world from people like you means wading through a river of their blood, I will. Speaking of which, any lethal casualties, Shade?"

"No. The silver-rankers were each travelling alone, presumably to avoid low-rankers being detected. The blast itself had minimal impact on them but the magical shrapnel was much more effective. Their lives are not endangered but their ability to continue is certainly impacted and they are no longer following."

"Good," Jason said. "Collateral?"

"I selected a moment to avoid collateral damage, although there was some cosmetic damage to surrounding vehicles."

"The concussive redistribution magic on the container for the shaped charge directed the sound and force up," Jason explained. "Even more focused than a regular-shaped charge. More power where you want it and less collateral damage. A little simple magic goes a long way when you use it right."

"There was also some minimal property damage. Nearby civilians are unsettled, with a few minor injuries from low-speed traffic collisions in the ensuing chaos. One elderly man was having heart problems so I fed him a potion. Civic authorities have begun to arrive."

"Thank you, Shade," Jason said. "Excellent work, as always."

As their car left the area quickly, Akari and Shiro continued to look at Jason with horror, while his hard expression returned to the friendly one from before, as if nothing had happened. He pulled out a sandwich, took a bite, and then looked at them apologetically.

"Sorry, did you want one?" he asked with his mouth full. "I have more. Salad, ham. One with three different kinds of salami."

They both shook their heads. Jason took another bite and then looked at Shiro.

"So what now?" Jason asked. "What's your mother's contingency for her scouts getting taken out?"

"Contingency? Shiro asked. "This is not our area of expertise. We're monster-hunters, not special-forces soldiers. If the scalpel doesn't work, my mother will use the hammer. If she can't follow us to where the Tiwari are storing the door, she will likely use our silver-rank forces, most of which are loyal to her, to attack the Tiwari directly, capture the patriarch and have him reveal the location."

Jason nodded.

"Call your mother and give me the phone."

"You want me to call her?"

"If we have any chance of ending this peacefully, we need to talk without being able to stab each other."

Shiro nodded.

"She wouldn't hesitate to try and solve you out of the equation, given the chance."

He dialled and handed Jason the phone.

"You shouldn't be calling me," Noriko's voice came through by way of a greeting.

"I shouldn't be blowing up cars on the streets of Kobe, either, yet here we are."

"Jason Asano," she hissed. "You aren't one of us. You don't deserve that name."

"I have zero interest in joining your clan, Noriko. The question is whether you are going to destroy that clan."

"I'm doing this for the clan. My son is weak, which is how you managed to turn him against me."

"Shiro didn't turn against you, Noriko. He wants to save the soul of your clan. If you attack the Tiwari, even if you win, the Asano clan will never be what they were."

"I'm a century older than you, boy, and you seek to lecture me on the soul of my clan?"

"You do have a wealth of experience over me," Jason acknowledged. "If I can see that your clan teeters on a precipice, then surely you can too. If you attack the Tiwari, then you create a schism in your clan at the same moment you create a dangerous enemy, and for what? A magic door you can't use."

"So you say."

"The Tiwari have had this object for centuries," Jason said. "You think they haven't tried to access its power? If they had succeeded, they would be ruling the world with their gold-rankers, not calling in favours to have your clan bring me to Japan."

"Even if the Tiwari do not lie and the item is locked," Noriko said, "we will find a way."

"Will you?" Jason asked. "After the infighting and the retaliation from the Tiwari clan? After I tell the world about the door and the fact that you have it? How many category-five dimensional magic experts do you have, Noriko?"

"We will do what we must."

"And is what you must do push forward, past every sign you should stop? Your plan was already sketchy. Now your scouts are gone, your clan's support has evaporated and the Tiwari know you're coming."

"My clan must seize this opportunity, whatever the cost."

"This isn't the opportunity, Noriko. The opportunity is in stepping back and keeping your clan whole. You already know more about what's coming than almost any faction on earth. Take the time to prepare and get a head start when the time comes to start racing after resources, with the full strength of your clan. Shiro might be against attacking and stealing from the Tiwari, but he won't stand by while everyone else grabs for power. You aren't choosing between having the door or not, Noriko. You're choosing between facing what's to come with a full and ready clan, and scrabbling after leftovers with your handful of silver-rankers while dodging Tiwari vengeance."

"I thought you didn't want people going after these objects of power."

"I don't," Jason said. "I'm not stupid enough to think I can stop them, though. Your clan included. I have also secured the assurance that the Tiwari will not seek retribution so long as you do not attack them."

"I have only your word on these things."

"You have little more than my word on almost any of it," Jason said. "The power you seek, my word on it. The danger it poses, my word again. You chose boldness because you didn't have time to verify and now you're mired in a bog of my design. Will you be sucked under and drown if you move ahead or am I lying and solid ground awaits you?"

"You like to hear yourself talk."

"Yes. Especially when I'm right. Go home and take all the advantages or fight and give them up. I'll be waiting for your decision with the Tiwari clan."

Jason hung up the phone and handed it back to Shiro, before turning to Akari.

"I never wanted to back your grandmother into a corner. All I wanted to do was show her that backing off isn't the weak, short-sighted move but the smart, forward-thinking one."

He then turned to Shiro.

"This is where we part. Go home. I hope this is the last time I have to deal with your clan, Shiro, because next time there will likely be blood. I'm sorry it ended like this, Akari." A Shade body emerged from Jason's shadow and Jason vanished into it.

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Jason rode in a Shade car toward the Tiwari clan seat, which was the palatial Arima Grand Resort.

"How did I do?" Jason asked.

"You were somewhat unfocused," Shade critiqued. "Your strengths are playing to emotion and controlling pace, which lends itself to a more rambling style of argumentation. Presenting the facts to demonstrate one choice is objectively better is not your strength. That being said, it was an adequate performance."

"We'll only know how adequate it was once the decision is made," Jason said. "Is she taking precautions in case you're watching?"

"None that I have noticed."

"I might take a peek, then."

Jason closed his eyes and saw through Shade's eyes.

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Noriko was standing beside a parked van, arguing with the silver-rank clan elders, their strongest combatants. The general consensus was to withdraw, while she tried to convince them to push on.

"It is probably all bluff," she said.

"Perhaps," an elder said. "I am unwilling to risk the clan on 'perhaps.' Unless everything goes perfectly, the boy is lying and this magic door gives us vast power, this act will split the clan and throw away our face forever."

"Agreed," another said. "We can struggle for power with everyone else without destroying who and what we are in the process. We even have a lead on everyone else. We should be dedicating ourselves to making the most of it."

The arguing continued but ultimately the choice was made to abort the attack.

"I will contact Shiro and that obnoxious brat," Noriko said.

"Oh, don't bother with me," Jason's voice said as a dark figure with silver eyes stepped out of the dark.

"You can watch us through your shadow beings," Noriko said.

"Yes. Your strategic situation was rather untenable, should you have decided to go through with the attack. I am not here to crow, however. My Asano family and your Asano clan henceforth have no connections, Noriko."

"If we meet again, it will be as enemies."

"I hope that day never comes," Jason said. "You should hope for it more."