

Chapter 373

Giving Face

“Are we landing at Kansai International Airport?” Emi asked as she emerged from the cockpit. “It’s on an artificial island.”

Jason looked up from the book of astral magic theory he was reading.

“Sorry, moppet,” Jason told her. “I’d love to do some exploring with you but we’ve already had too many delays. Dropping right out of the sky should be fun, though, right?”

“What do you mean, right out the sky?” Erika asked.

“We’re going to fly right over Ashiya and jet suit down,” Jason explained.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Erika said. “I must have totally forgotten when you explained that YOU’RE GOING TO THROW US ALL OUT OF AN AEROPLANE!”

“Totally understandable,” Jason genially acknowledged. “It’s a busy time for everyone, so slips of the mind are only to be expected. Do we have an ETA, Shade?”

“I will be starting the descent to drop height in approximately nine minutes,” Shade said.

“You’ve told them we’re about to arrive, right?” Jason asked Akari.

“Yes, I already got the estimated time from Shade and notified my father,” Akari said. “He was a little thrown when I told him how we’d be arriving, but we’re part of the Network, so very little is truly extraordinary.”

“Oh, so you told her about the jumping out a plane thing,” Erika said.

“We can’t go keeping things from her, Eri,” Jason said. “It may be distant but she’s family.”

“I’m your sister!”

“Exactly. Family is important,” Jason said.

“Shade,” Erika said. “Is there any chance you could drop Jason out of the plane now?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Asano, but I believe Mr Asano is a necessary presence when we meet the Asano clan.”

“Fine,” she grumbled.

In a smaller cabin at the rear of the plane, Jason and Akari went over some last-minute details in preparation for meeting the Asano clan. It wasn’t anything they hadn’t already gone over but Jason wanted to be fresh when they hit the ground. When they were done, they stood up to join the others in the main cabin.

“Before we go,” Akari said, “are you sure that you’re up to this?”

“I’ll try not to take offence at that.”

“I’m just saying that you’ve been through a lot recently. Broken Hill and then Makassar, twice.”

“It’s bad, yeah,” Jason said. “But that’s the job.”

“Is it your job? You never actually joined the network.”

“No, I joined the Adventure Society, which means putting myself between the bad things and the people who aren’t equipped to face them. Jumping worlds doesn’t change that.”

“And this Adventure Society is some bastion of virtue, compared to the network?”

“Of course not, but they let you make your own choices. You just have to be willing to live with the consequences. My friend Rufus taught me that.”

“He also picked up some of Rufus’ bad habits,” Farrah said, opening the door. “Get in here; we’re about to jump out of a plane.”

Jason and Akari went in finding the rest of the passengers waiting for them.

“You know, it’s a lot easier to deflate Rufus’ sense of self-importance,” Farrah said.

“He’s not actually responsible for saving the world.”

“What exactly are you saving the world from?” Asya asked. “The monster waves?”

“That’s a symptom,” Jason said. “I can leave that to the Network, ultimately. My concern is that they’re going to make the disease worse.”

“How?” Asya asked.

“Imagine a house on stilts,” Jason said. “There are so many stilts that the house is nice and stable until someone comes along and starts messing with the stilts and introduces a decaying factor. Magic termites or something. Things get wonky and people start taking a look at the stilts. They figure out how to slow down the decay, but then they realise that the stilts are made of solid gold. Do you trust them to leave the gold where it is because it’s keeping the house from collapsing?”

“What are you saying?” Asya asked.

“He’s saying,” Farrah said, “that after the grid comes back up, there’s going to be a magical gold rush. Unfortunately, every lump of gold that’s dug up brings your world a little closer to collapsing. There’s a lot of gold down there, so it won’t seem like anything is happening at first. By the time you start noticing the effects, it will be too late.”

“That’s why you didn’t tell me before. You don’t trust the Network.”

“No,” Jason said. “I trust people, not institutions. I’ll trust the people in the Network or the Adventure Society, but as a whole, you have to be careful.”

The Network won't do something destructive to the world," Asya said. "They wouldn't."

"I hope that's true," Jason said. "But when they see the Cabal and the EOA reaping the benefits, will the Network really stand still? Every branch?"

Asya looked uneasy, not answering. Jason put comforting hands on her shoulders.

"I'll give you a proper, thorough explanation once we're on the ground and settled. I just need to get my hands on something before anyone else finds out about it.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "We are approaching the drop zone."

"Alright," Jason said. "Everyone hold still while Shade suits us up."

Jason and Farrah could both fly but were put in jet suits anyway, for better flight uniformity.

"This is awesome," Emi said.

"It's reckless," Erika said. "Planes are meant for landing."

"Technically, he's not a plane," Jason said. "He's the living shadow of death itself. Actually, that doesn't make it sound safer, does it?"

"No," Erika said, drilling a glare into him. "No, it doesn't."

"I anticipate it being a novel experience," Yumi confided in Emi. "I've been back to Japan several times since I was young, but this promises to be a rather unique visit from the outset."

"See?" Jason asked. "Even Nanna is keen."

Yumi's glare joined Erika's in latching onto Jason.

"See?" Jason asked. "Even Grandmother is keen. It feels weird calling you Grandmother when we look the same age. Can I just call you Yumi?"

"No," Yumi said definitively.

"Are we okay to use these from all the way up here?" Emi asked. "All the videos I've seen of suits like this are really low altitude and usually over water."

"That's just a safety precaution," Jason said. "They can go way higher, so we can ignore that restriction."

"That really seems like something we shouldn't ignore," Erika said.

"Shade is very reliable," Jason assured her.

"Mrs Asano," Shade said. "Be confident that I will not let anything happen to Miss Emi. As with the plane form which you currently occupy, these jet suit designs incorporate magic along with design aspects from a reality more technologically advanced than your own."

“How do we get out of the plane?” Emi asked. “Do we use that platform we boarded with, under the plane?”

Erika spotted Jason’s grin and a look of horror crossed her face.

“Don’t you dare,” she warned him.

“It’s just efficient, Eri,” Jason said. “Shade, if you would?”

The plane around them exploded into a cloud of darkness, dumping the passengers into the sky.

In the city of Ashiya, near Kobe, the Asano clan compound had been constructed across hills overlooking Osaka Bay. In a place where space was at a premium, the land value alone was astronomical, let alone the buildings that occupied it. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built twenty years before World War Two began, the famous American architect’s mastery of spatial composition incorporated the hills into the design of the buildings. The compound had four levels, yet no individual location was greater than two storeys.

With Shade controlling the flight suits, eight figures dropped out of the sky. Jason, Akari, Asya, Dawn, Farrah, Yumi, Erika and Emi, all flying in a V-formation as they swooped over the landscape to touch down in a courtyard in front of a waiting group, also of eight. The jet suits landed in front of the group in a line, keeping their distance so as not to blast too much air over the people awaiting them.

The jet suits turned into shadows, all zipping into Jason’s shadow like they were being sucked into a void. This left Jason flanked by friends and family, all dressed formally. Jason was wearing one of his remaining suits from the other world, a dark and dignified outfit designed specifically for such meetings. Jason’s general lack of formality had left him little reason to pull it out previously.

Both groups stepped forward and Jason noticed that the other group had been matched to his own, including a female elder and a girl in her early teens. They even matched up in rank, except for Dawn’s counterpart. Despite Dawn being, by any detectable measure, normal rank, her counterpart was a woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties but whose rank was near the peak of silver. Outside of Dawn’s true rank, the woman was the most powerful member of either group. She also bore a solid resemblance to Akari.

All of the Asano clan wore western-style business attire. The man in the middle, Jason’s counterpart, was Akari’s silver-rank father and patriarch of the Asano clan. Like

Jason's eldest paternal uncle, Ken and Hiro's older brother, the patriarch was named Shiro.

"Mr Asano," Shiro greeted with a polite bow.

"Mr Asano," Jason greeted back, reciprocating the bow.

"First," Jason said, "allow me to apologise in advance. In spite of my heritage, I do not know your culture well and am certain to make blunders in my decorum. Please know that any slight is unintended and is a result of my ignorance alone and not any absence of respect."

"Thank you, Mr Asano. I too would like to apologise for the pretence under which I sent my daughter to you. We presumed to judge your worthiness to the Asano name, only for you to make that name echo across the world."

"These are difficult and dangerous times, Patriarch. I understand your position and the need to act delicately. I took no offence at all."

Jason took an elaborate wooden box from his inventory. It was unremarkable magically, being only a mildly-reinforced iron-rank container. It looked well-made but otherwise ordinary. What made it special was twofold: that it had come from the other world, as well as the gold-rank magic detectable on the object within.

"I offer a gift as a gesture of respect to the Asano clan," Jason said, gently setting the box down between them. "This container comes from another universe. It was the packaging for a suit of armour that was made for me there and I have long used it to organise many magical items from the other world. The armour that came with it was ultimately destroyed in the category four astral space in Makassar, so it seemed appropriate that I use it to store a new set of armour I obtained there."

Jason opened up the box, revealing the folded set of armour mixing cloth, leather and hard chitin plates. It had been worn by the dinosaur man, King, and almost destroyed passing out of the astral space. A gold-rank item was a gold-rank item, however, and over time, it repaired itself and was fully restored.

"It is called the Armour of the Dinosaur King. I hope that should any member of your clan reach category four, this armour can help vouchsafe their life."

Jason felt tremors run through the auras of the Asano clan members at being presented a set of gold-rank armour, although their demeanour did not shift, aside from the briefest glare Shiro flashed his daughter, standing next to Jason. The patriarch took out a box of his own, this one a plastic container with an image Jason recognised on the side. The patriarch looked embarrassed as he placed it next to Jason's box.

"Next to your gift," Shiro said, "I can only make a paltry offering in reciprocation. This is a framed set of animation cels from *Beast King GoLion*."

Jason's face lit up in a grin.

"Seriously? That's awesome."

"You need not be polite, Mr Asano. Our gift pales in comparison to the treasure you have given."

Jason gave Shiro a smile.

"I disagree, Patriarch. The true worth of a gift is not in the value but the sentiment. Does not a mother value a handmade card from their child over an expensive one bought from a store? My gift is simply something that I came across in my travels, while your gift demonstrates thoughtfulness, care and effort. My father will be truly delighted when I show him what you have given me."

Jason picked up the box containing the Asano clan's gift and placed it in his inventory. The woman standing next to Shiro conjured a silver cabinet and placed Jason's gift inside, after which the cabinet vanished.

Jason gave another respectful bow.

"Your consideration humbles me, Patriarch."

"As your generosity does me, Mr Asano."

Shiro turned to the woman who had conjured the cabinet, a silver-ranker standing across from Farrah. She bore quite a resemblance to Akari.

"This is my younger daughter, Asano Mei," Shiro introduced. "Please allow her to escort you to your accommodations while I take the chance to catch up with my long-absent elder daughter. You can rest after your journey and I will have refreshments sent to you. Later, if you are amenable, I will give you a tour of our home."

"We thank you for your hospitality," Jason said, allowing himself and the rest of his group, barring Akari, to be led away.

Most of Shiro's party left as well, once Jason and his group were out of sight. That left Akari, Shiro, and the powerful silver-ranker that was Akari's grandmother. Shiro cracked a huge smile and gathered his daughter in a huge hug.

"I missed you, child."

"And I, you, father."

"This man you have brought back. He is not what I expected."

"He never is," Akari said.

"He may not know our ways, but he does know how to give face."

“I will admit that surprised me,” Akari said. “I half expected him to arrive in a floral-print shirt, board shorts and sandals. I even suspect he’s putting on a more formal display just to mess with me, having guessed what I reported back to you. I am sorry about my judgement on the gift. I don’t know what he originally intended to offer, but I doubt it could be as grand as a treasure taken from the first category four monster to arrive on Earth. He didn’t tell me that he even had it, let alone that he would gift it to us.”

“He put on quite the display,” Akari’s grandmother said, claiming her granddaughter for a hug of her own. “It makes me wonder what he wants from us.”

“It’s about the Tiwari clan,” Akari said. “He knows more than I was willing to communicate until I saw you in person.”

“Because of this Dawn person?” Shiro asked.

“Yes.”

“You were very vague, only stating that we much show her the utmost respect of an elder. Are you ready to tell us more?”

“Of course,” Akari said. “Let us go inside and I will explain everything.”