

Chapter 373

Not In a Position to Criticise

In a quiet dojo, Akari and her father faced off, each wearing a gi, a suppression collar and holding a wooden sword. The swords and the room were both parts of an integrated magical system where the swords would not deal damage but inflict numbing pain that would briefly paralyse, in accordance with both the location struck and the force of the strike.

At the side of the room, Jason was in a relaxed kneel, also wearing a gi and suppression collar. Kneeling to one side of him was his grandmother, Yumi, with Emi on the other.

"I have always held, Mr Asano," Shiro said, "that to truly know a person, you must cross swords with them. To master the blade, you must put yourself into it, mind and spirit in alignment. To a blade master, your sword is who you are."

"That would mean that you can only really know someone if they happen to be really good with a sword," Jason said. "That's a pretty small sample size."

Shiro chuckled.

"Sadly true."

"What if I got one of those bendy swords you hide in a belt?"

Shiro laughed again.

"Simply suggesting it tells me a great deal about you, Mr Asano. If you actually did it, that would tell me something more. Should you then wield it against me, I would truly have your measure. This method is more flexible than you may think. For example, my daughter has been away for some time. If and how her sword has progressed in that time will enlighten me both on her and on you, who has been her sparring partner in that time."

Jason took the cue to fall silent as Shiro refocused on his daughter. They started circling one another with careful footsteps.

"Where has my aggressive daughter gone?" Shiro provoked. "Has your time away filled your heart with doubt?"

"You are the teacher and I the student, father," Akari responded calmly. "It is not for me to instruct you on the difference between hesitation and consideration."

"Interesting," Shiro said. "Are you a man whose sharpest blade is his tongue, Mr Asano?"

"Yes," Yumi said, answering for her grandson. Emi smothered a little laugh.

"Have you lost your boldness, Daughter?"

“Perhaps I have merely learned to spot the difference between boldness and reckl—”

Without warning, Akari shot into action mid-sentence, launching into a barrage of strikes that had her father moving back in measured steps as he fended off attacks. It was spectacular to behold, as the speed and agility of silver-rankers made a swordfight more akin to film choreography than a fight between normal humans. Not only were reaction times, balance and spatial awareness vastly heightened, but even if the swords were real, no single blow would land a debilitating strike. Silver-rankers were just too hard to put down.

The factors affecting the combatants led to longer exchanges, with greater risks taken and the action-movie clashing of blades in rapid succession. Akari’s father calmly withstood his daughter’s barrage, slowly clawing back control of the lengthy exchange. He had been on the end of such turnarounds many times while sparring with Akari during her residence at Asano Village. Shiro launched into a counterattack, making his own sequence of unrelenting attacks until Akari deftly disengaged, dancing lightly back.

“You have sharpened your aggression from a blunt stick to a sharpened stick,” Shiro told his daughter. “It is not a sword yet, but you have made impressive progress. It seems that broadening your experience has had a positive influence. Let us see which other flaws you have managed to work on.”

Moving to attack Akari, Shiro started incorporating quick footwork, small but critical shifts in position as he threw attacks based less around speed and more about unexpected angles and nuanced variations. Akari countered by defending with efficiency, exploiting the lack of same in her father’s approach until he backed away.

“Adequate, Daughter.”

Shiro continued to spar with his daughter until he finally nodded with satisfaction.

"In a very short time, you have made progress in tempering your aggression, responding to unusual attacks and utilising your physicality. I see that you have been diligent, Daughter, and I am curious about your recent sparring partner."

Shiro turned to Jason.

“Are you stronger than my daughter, Mr Asano?”

“When your daughter came to visit my family, the flaws in her mindset were obvious. Too reckless, the under-use of her superhuman physicality. A lack of experience against people using anything other than clean, efficient fighting styles. The technique you drilled into her over the years was carrying her, which had allowed her to avoid her shortcomings. You might say that she was an excellent sword being poorly wielded. Fortunately, my own approach was very suitable for exploiting those flaws. Once I started hammering on them,

she adapted and my early victories became a cavalcade of defeats. Akari is far more formidable than I am."

"You use her first name?"

"Impolitic, I know, but when everyone is named Asano, a logistic necessity."

Shiro turned back to Akari.

"And you, Daughter, how would you assess Mr Asano's ability as a swordsman?"

"You and I live our lives around the sword, Father," Akari said. "Jason does not. He accepts that he will never be a sword master the equal of you and I and embraces the limitation. He trains his swordsmanship for practical purposes rather than as a way of life, and his practical purposes are not to be found in an empty dojo."

"Meaning?" Shiro asked.

"If you ever fight him for real, Father, do it where you can see him."

Shiro let out a chortle, taking the training sword from Akari and holding it in Jason's direction. Jason stood, bowed and stepped onto the tatami mats, claiming the sword.

"Tell me, Mr Asano," he said. "Is my daughter saving you face or are you truly more at home in a more real-world environment?"

"Definitely saving face," Jason said. "I'm quite rubbish."

"He also lies," Akari said. "He always keeps a trick in reserve and fights without honour."

"Yep," Jason agreed merrily. "Honour was invented so that people who own swords could get people who own sticks to fight without cheating. I'm very pro-cheating."

"Do not bother trying and unbalance my father with words, Jason," Akari said. "His will is as sharp as his blade."

"He's holding a blunt training sword," Jason said. "Also, how do you know I'm not just stalling for time while Farrah uses earth magic to dig a tunnel under us and draw a ritual circle on the underside of the floor?"

"What?" Shiro asked as Jason let out a chuckle.

"Mr Asano, you seem like a different person to the one who arrived at my home yesterday."

"I'm in favour of letting people knowing what they're going to get with me, Patriarch, and letting them take it or leave it. However, I wanted to demonstrate the high regard in which I hold your clan and make my arrival as respectful as I was able."

"I see. You hold my clan in high regard?"

"While you've had your daughter observing me, I've done my homework on you, in turn. Your clan has spared nothing in dedicating their time, resources and people to

combat the troubles the world faces now. I have seen Akari working with the Network in Australia. She fights with dedication, and not for pride or reputation but to help people as best she can. She's a credit to herself, your clan and to you, her father."

"Your sharpest blade truly is the one in your mouth, Mr Asano. Let's see how you do with the one in your hand."

Shiro and Jason walked through the grounds of the Asano compound, Jason still rather woozy.

"I apologise for striking you so many times in the head, Mr Asano."

"No worries," Jason said. "The tingle of those training swords gives you a bit of a buzz, once you get used to them. You know, you're a lot more relaxed than I was expecting. Akari took weeks to loosen up even a little."

"As you have placed effort into accommodating our sensibilities, I try to accommodate yours, in turn. I was unsure what to expect, to be honest. Your media appearances, reports from the network, what my daughter told me and the footage I have seen of you in battle all paint pictures that don't quite line up. I was hoping that, in person, I might find the connective tissue."

"Sometimes I'm not sure how it all comes together either," Jason admitted. "In the other world, I resolved to remake myself, only to come home and find myself falling into old patterns. Before the current crisis, I went walkabout, to try and settle myself.

"Walkabout?"

"A solitary journey, usually a rite of passage into manhood. I'm still pretty much a man-child so I've tried it a few times, now. It never seems to take quite right, but it's stopped me from cracking so far."

"You are new to magic, yet in just a few years have seen more than most," Shiro said. "It is easy to forget that, given that your name has become so synonymous with magic."

"Our name," Jason corrected.

"Just so."

Jason looked around at the western-style home.

"I was surprised to find your home is built in the western style. By one of the most famous architects in the world, no less."

"Frank Lloyd Wright spent several years in Japan, in the early twenties," Shiro explained. "Less well-known than his role as an architect, he was also a rather prolific dealer in Japanese art. A number of his designs remain here, although ours is the only

extant residential building. My mother assisted him with some trouble he was having with the Cabal, who were much less reclusive a century ago.”

“The Cabal?”

“I’ll spare you the details for the sake of dignity. Suffice to say it involved a kitsune and a significant quantity of lard.”

“Kitsune are real?”

“Oh, yes. Have you had many dealings with the Cabal?”

“No,” Jason said. “My friend, Craig, is a vampire, but that’s about it.”

“They are a strange and eclectic group, taken as a whole. My understanding is they were the magical factions of ancient times, only coming together in the face of external threats. Their internal politics are fractious and uneasy but they are the object of romance and legend. I admit that they have always fascinated me.”

“It’s time our discussion turned to my reason for coming to Japan,” Jason said. “I take it that Akari has appraised you of everything.”

“Yes. You have surprisingly won my daughter over, Mr Asano.”

“Alright, this is getting silly,” Jason said. “Almost everyone here is an Asano. Although I realise it denotes a level of intimacy, is there any chance I can convince you to take a cue from my culture?”

“First names? I suppose we can be considered family, of a kind. I propose that you and I take that step and see how others react.”

“That works for me. Shiro.”

“Then let us return to the topic at hand, Jason. The truth is, our intention was always to bring you here, to settle an old debt to the Tiwari clan. We had no idea that the stakes would turn out to be so high. You truly believe that the world is in peril?”

“I’ve seen a being with power beyond the gods trying to strip an entire planet for parts. I fought him, hand to hand.”

“How did that go?”

“Very badly. All my attacks bounced off and he easily killed me.”

“Killed you?”

“I’ve died three times, so far. That was number two.”

“That’s an extraordinary claim.”

“Extraordinary claims and fields of death are my life, now. Even though it wasn’t so long ago, and didn’t last so long, I miss the life of light-hearted adventure and quips. I want to see this world safe and go back to exploring the other one.”

“You really think you can go back?”

“At this point, it’s inevitable, assuming someone doesn’t kill me in a way that sticks. But first, I need that magic door the Tiwari have been looking after.”

“Arrangements are being finalised as we speak,” Shiro said. “I will take you to meet them after lunch. In the meantime, I would like to discuss what happens after the grid comes back online.”

“We’re not sure exactly what will happen,” Jason said. “What we do know is that certain elements that make up the fundamental building blocks of our world will be rendered physical. This should be something that only the Tiwari door can accomplish, but our world has gone rather awry.”

“What exactly is the danger?”

“There will be objects that manifest in affected areas. It’s a component of the dimensional makeup of our world, affecting the dimensional membrane that separates our physical reality from the astral.”

“I confess that I am not well versed on these concepts,” Shiro said.

“Basically, the dimensional membrane is like the skin of our universe, keeping the insides in and the outsides out. These objects I’m talking about also make up the link between this reality and the other one to which we are connected. That link had been stable for billions of years before someone came along and interfered with it. Now, centuries later, it’s reached the point of continuous dimensional spaces and monster waves.”

“And these objects represent some kind of new threat?”

“Not exactly. The objects represent a source of unparalleled power. They’re like a diamond spirit coin combined with a category five monster core, in a form that can be used at need and the rest kept for later.”

Jason had an increased understanding of the astral magic involved since he had been studying with Dawn’s assistance. His knowledge was still shallow but was quickly accelerating.

“That kind of power would be world-changing,” Shiro said. “It would let us move past the category three threshold we’ve been stuck behind.”

“Yep, and they’re going to start popping up in the middle of these events that we don’t yet understand. Every faction will be scrambling for them, even though every one they take will make the world a little less stable.”

“How many of these objects are out there waiting to be exposed?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “Millions. Billions, maybe. But that will just give people an excuse to take them and say it doesn’t matter because so many are left.”

“The Network won’t be any different,” Shiro said. “They will scramble after them like the other factions, if only to avoid being overtaken.”

“I agree. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to criticise – not that it’s ever stopped me before. I also need to collect them, to realign the link between worlds. My understanding is that the door can be used to accelerate the process, meaning I need to take it off the board before the other factions become aware of that fact.”

“Yet, you trust me with this information.”

“Honour may not be for me, but it is for Akari. I’m betting it is for the man who raised her, as well.”

“The temptation you describe is great,” Shiro said. “I am not sure how well my honour will hold up.”