

Chapter 378

A Very Bad Mistake

Itsuki left Jason with the three elders, the Tiwari clan patriarch and his two younger brothers. The patriarch was Denji, the middle brother Souta and the youngest, Itsuki's father, was Koya. The office of the patriarch was a large room with a desk over to one side and a lounge area off on the other, with armchairs in a semi-circle around a coffee table, looking out through the window wall.

Denji invited Jason to sit and they all took lounge chairs as a security guard in an expensive black suit came in with a tray of tea. Jason nodded his gratitude and took a sip, then murmured something too softly for even silver-rank perception to make out.

"I'm not sure if you are aware of how monumental your arrival is for our clan," Denji said. "Since we learned of your existence and that you met the conditions of our long-held purpose, there has been much discussion within the clan. Not everyone is happy or even accepting of your arrival. You represent the destiny of the clan, which is a concept that not everyone in the clan has comes to terms with."

"Some of your members don't want me to take the door?"

"In practical terms," Denji said, we are no different from any of the other Network clans. The door remains hidden and untouched, with very few clan members even knowing its location, let alone having seen it. Even so, being keepers of the door gives us a sense of purpose. Many of our members are fearful of what it means should that purpose come to an end. When who and what you are came to light, many sought to discredit you and claim you were not the object of prophecy."

"And you put stock in this prophecy?" Jason asked.

"In honesty, Mr Asano, the prophecy is a simple concept to placate the clan. The elders have passed down the records from the founder, which give a more comprehensive explanation. This is not something shared with the clan at large, which has unfortunately led to duty sometimes drifting in the direction of faith. Some of our members may even intend you harm."

"I learned that as soon as I tasted the tea," Jason said with a smile.

"The tea?"

"I don't know about yours," Jason said, "but mine has rather a lot of poison in it."

"What?" Denji asked, leaping to his feet.

"It's actually not bad," Jason said, taking another sip.

- You have been afflicted with poison [Serpent Nettle Extract].
 - You have resisted [Serpent Nettle Extract].
 - [Food Poisoning] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

“Serpent nettle extract,” Jason said. “I assume I’m respected enough that it’s a category three poison they used on me.”

The faces of all three Tiwari elders were darkened with rage.

“Serpent nettle extract is a poison our alchemists harvest from plants in some of the more common proto-space environments in this area,” Souta said. “You might call it a Tiwari clan specialty. This definitely came from within the clan.”

“I think that’s jumping to conclusions,” Jason said. “Someone could easily obtain some and use it to sow discontent. That’s what I’d do.”

He took another sip.

“Why are you still drinking it?” an aghast Koya asked Jason. “Serpent nettle extract is the most potent venom we’ve ever encountered!”

“Actually,” Jason said setting the cup down with distaste, “the flavour profile starts out well but that aftertaste leaves something to be desired. If there’s any poison in yours, I’d give it a miss. I don’t want to be rude, being your guest, but is there any chance of a palate cleanser?”

Souta stepped forward, took an eyedropper from his pocket and squirted some clear liquid into Jason’s cup. A sickly green mist rose up, letting off an unpleasant stench.

“Yep,” Jason said, holding his nose. “That’s the aftertaste.”

“The smell is unpleasant but harmless,” Souta said. “That was definitely serpent nettle extract.”

Souta squirted liquid into the other cups, but only Jason's evidenced a reaction.

"It was Noguchi," Souta said. "He served the drinks, so he had to know which cup to give Mr Asano."

Souta said no more, striding toward the door.

“Mr Tiwari,” Jason called after him and he stopped.

“I had my friend go after the server as soon as I tried the tea,” Jason continued.

“Please allow him to guide you.”

“Your friend?” Souta asked and one of Shade’s bodies emerged from Souta’s shadow.

"This way, Mr Tiwari," Shade said and started gliding down the corridor. After a wide-eyed glance at Jason, Souta followed. Koya and Denji, in the meantime, were giving their own shadow wary looks.

"I'm beginning to be very glad that I'm not Noriko Asano," Koya said.

"You seem oddly relaxed, given the attempt to murder you," Denji said to Jason.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll tell me if it's anything beyond internal clan politics," Jason said. "I respect anyone with the decency to try and kill me directly, rather than go after my family. I'll try and kill them right back, if it's appropriate, but I won't hold it against them. Noriko Asano was all for going after my family, so she's going to cop it when she inevitably comes after me again."

The two brothers looked at Jason's friendly smile much differently than when he first arrived. They had the expressions of people who suddenly found themselves holding a snake by the tail.

"We are truly sorry, Mr Asano," Koya said. "You gave us a warning when the Asano clan were going to come after us and we repaid you with enmity. I'd like to assure you that this was not the clan leadership."

"That being said, while the clan elders may not be to blame," Denji said, "we are responsible. Such is the nature of leadership."

"I appreciate that," Jason said. "The simple fact is that I'm not interested in what my taking the door means for your clan, as callous as that sounds. Do you know why I need it?"

"According to the clan records," Denji said, "the magic of our world would become imbalanced and require intervention. Someone would appear to make that intervention and he intended it to be himself. He believed that if something happened to him, someone else would appear, however."

"And something did."

"We do not know what, however. There have long been rumours of betrayal by aspects of the Network, but this was the mid 16th century. The Network was still a collection of unaffiliated secret societies, without a fragment of the power required to take down the founder."

The office door burst open as Itsuki rushed in.

"Mr Asano!"

"Itsuki!" Koya scolded. "What are you doing, coming into the patriarch's office like that?"

"Uncle Souta said that Mr Asano had been poisoned," Itsuki said.

"I'm quite fine," Jason assured him. "Thank you for your concern."

"Souta told you that?" Koya asked his son.

"He didn't tell me, as such," Itsuki admitted. "I might have just overheard."

"And he didn't sense you listening in?" Jason asked. "Not bad. Patriarch, given the circumstances, I think it might be best to cut through the niceties and go directly to the door right now."

"Of course," Denji said, then shook his head. "After all this time, it's not how this moment was meant to go."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Jason said. "Star Wars fans feel like this every time a new movie comes out."

Jason's companions emerged from Jason's portal onto one of the Arima Grand Resort's helipads, the one reserved for the Tiwari clan's private use in the middle of a wide lawn. Waiting with Jason were Itsuki, Koya and Denji. Only Farrah didn't come through, as she would need her own portal. While Jason waited out the cooldown on his portal power, he introduced the others to the Tiwari family.

"I cannot express enough our dismay at the attempt on Mr Asano's life," Denji said.

"The what?" Erika asked.

"It was just poison," Jason said.

"Oh, that's fine," Erika said with relief. "I once saw him drink bleach to make a point, and I'm not sure that even counts as poison. I'd have said it was more caustic than poisonous."

"Bleach is corrosive," Emi said. "I'm pretty sure it's poison if you drink it, though."

"Why exactly are people trying to kill you?" Yumi asked.

"They probably met him," Dawn said.

"Rude," Jason said.

"You punched my nose into my brain."

"That again?" Jason asked. "I've died three times so far, and you don't see me complaining."

"Really?" Asya asked. "You kind of bring it up a lot."

"That's because if people realise I just keep coming back, they'll realise there's no point killing me in the first place."

Denji and Koya shared an uncertain look as they witnessed the exchange, while Itsuki had a wide grin on his face. Jason used his portal again and Farrah stepped through.

“Any issues?” Jason asked her.

“I told you over the phone,” Erika said. “Nothing happened”.

“One of the Asano clan came sniffing around,” Farrah contradicted. “Just a bronze-ranker.”

“When was this?” Erika asked.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Farrah told her. “Don’t worry; he didn’t get any messages back and I was thorough. No one will realise it’s a corpse; they’ll just think someone burned some rubbish.”

“You killed someone?” Erika asked her.

“I’m fair game,” Jason said, then his voice turned cold. “You are not.”

“He has to be decisive when protecting the family,” Yumi approved. “If we show weakness, we’ll be treated as weak.”

Jason introduced Farrah to the Tiwari clan.

“You know, Miss Hurin technically meets the requirements for the prophecy as well,” Itsuki pointed out. “Depending on how important you consider the ‘man’ part of ‘a man who walks between worlds.’ Given that I don’t think they technically walked, it means there is leeway for interpretation.”

“Actually, there is more to the requirements than that,” Denji said. “You have never been to see the door, Itsuki, but you will soon learn.”

“I get to go?”

“You will, in fact, be the last Tiwari to see the door, if things otherwise go as planned.”

“Because that’s the way it always goes,” Jason muttered. “Alright, everyone back off so we can get this show on the road.”

Everyone backed away onto the surrounding lawn and darkness came storming from Jason’s shadow, Shade taking his sleek plane form.

“The door isn’t here?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah, I thought they’d have it in a basement or something,” Jason said.

“The greatest security is secrecy,” Denji explained. “From the beginning, the door has been hidden on an uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean.”

Jason and the others descended towards the water in jet suits, hovering over the water as Shade took the form of a large, twin-level motorboat. They settled onto the large upper deck.

“This is rather convenient,” Koya said as the jet suit evaporated around him.

“That was amazing!” Itsuki said. “Will my familiar be able to do things like that?”

"I don't know," Jason said. "Shade's ability to take different transportation forms actually comes from one of my abilities. It was a gift from Shade's dad."

"Your familiar has a father?" Denji asked.

"Yeah, his old man is Death," Jason said.

"What do you mean, Death?" Koya asked.

"You, know, Death," Jason said. "Scythe, robes, that Ingmar Bergman film. No wealth no land, no silver, no gold; nothing satisfies me but your soul. Death."

"As usual," Shade said, "what Jason is describing is only true from a very specific point of view."

"I'm like Obi-Wan Kenobi," Jason said cheerfully. "Let's get this boat moving!"

Soon the boat was roaring over bright, clear water, between towering islets of stone. They passed by small, uninhabited islands covered in lush greenery. Denji directed Shade on where to go as Erika spoke to Jason.

"We had a plane and those jet suits," she said. "Why do we need to go anywhere by boat."

"Look around us, Eri. How can we not go by boat?"

"I thought you were in a hurry."

"I am, Eri. But I also want to have a nice, fun day before I find myself annihilating monster victims animated as walking corpses again. Let me have this one." She pulled him into a hug.

"Of course, little brother."

Jason moved over to the railing, joining Farrah in leaning up against it and looking out.

"This is what adventuring in my world is meant to be," he told her. "Exotic locales and ancient treasure in hidden ruins. Looking at all this tropic beauty, the horrible things we saw just a few days ago seem so far away."

"It's a nice change from the dark days behind us," Farrah agreed, "but I fear there are more to come. For now, though, let us take our joys where we can find them."

"Deal," Jason said, turning to look at Asya and flashing her a grin. She was sitting on a bench that ran along the side of the motorboat's upper deck and he sauntered over to join her, their bodies leaning into one another.

"How glad are you right now that you never joined the Federal Police?" he asked.

"I'm not sure how much the network is for me, either," she said. "I don't like the direction they're taking. You need to explain why this is so important."

“I told them I have to save the world,” he said. I’m not sure how to raise the stakes from there. I mean, yes, I might be saving the universe, but probably not. Dawn thinks it should be able to handle Earth’s destruction.”

“You were very vague about the details.”

“Because I didn’t want an army of Network goons racing me to this door.”

“They’re an army of goons, now?”

“You’d prefer the term faceless henchmen?”

“How about faceless henchpeople?”

“I can work with that.”

“Jason!” Itsuki exclaimed, arriving above deck after exploring the boat. “Your familiar is incredible!”

“Mate, you seriously need to learn to how to read body language,” Jason said, disentangling himself from Asya.

“What?” Itsuki asked with an oblivious expression.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “You know, I actually met Shade before he became my familiar, even though I summoned him. I had recently met this new friend, Emir, who was holding a competition. I originally met Farrah and her companions because they were working for him, as it happens, but they were out of town when he arrived and he came looking for me...”

The boat was anchored in a lagoon at an uninhabited island, waiting for low tide. Jason had suggested Shade take a submersible form but Denji explained that there were magic protections they would need to move past. As a result, Jason, Erika, Emi, Asya, Farrah and Itsuki were swimming in the turquoise waters.

Yumi and Dawn were chatting with Denji and Koya, who were startled at the revelation of Dawn’s true identity, much of which she had to explain to them. She was a treasure trove of knowledge about the very concepts around which their clan had been built and found her company a revelation.

Sunset colours were working their way into the sky as the tide grew low enough to largely reveal the sea cave into which they would be heading. The swimmers reboarded and they beached the boat, which then vanished into Jason’s shadow, depositing the passengers onto the soft sand. Sorting out who would and wouldn’t go into the cave, Emi protested when told she wouldn’t be going in.

“I’ve been hidden away this whole time! What was the point of bringing me?”

"I know, Moppet, and I'm sorry," Jason said. "I knew that people would probably try to kill me, because they usually do, but I didn't expect the whole Asano clan to turn on us. Akari's Nan really bugged up the trip. But this is a sacred place for the Tiwari clan, not a tourist spot."

Koya and Denji shared a glance, both nodding.

"Since she is your niece, Mr Asano," Koya said, "we are willing to bring her along, given your status in this. She can bear witness, alongside my son."

"Alright, Jason said. "But I want quiet, and I want respectful, young lady. Is that understood?"

Emi nodded eagerly, a huge grin on her face.

"I also need your mother's permission," he added, upon which Emi turned a weaponised expression of longing on her mother.

"Is it safe?" Erika asked.

"For her, yes," Denji said. "Only Jason will face any challenges within."

"Wait," Jason said with exaggerated panic. "Is it safe for me?"

"I believe so," Denji said.

"You believe so? I'm not feeling the confidence."

"Stop being a coward," Farrah said.

"Cowards live!"

"Well, you keep dying, so clearly that's not you."

"Why am I always the one who has to save the world," he muttered petulantly. "No one tells Kaito he has to save the world."

"Seriously?" Erika asked.

"For him, it's all, 'Kaito, fly around in your helicopter with your wavy air,' and 'Kaito, team up with this hard-edged, implausibly attractive detective and solve crimes.'"

Watching the exchange with increasing misgivings, Denji leaned towards his brother.

"Have we made a very bad mistake, here?" he whispered.

"It's probably fine," Koya said. "I was having Itsuki tell me about anything he learned from the Asano girl while she was living with them in Australia. Some of the things she told him are starting to make a lot more sense."

"I hope you're right."