

Chapter 352

Grandmotherly Advice

"We've got her in the guest wing of the main house," Emi said.

"There's a guest wing?" Jason asked.

"It's better than the holding cells, plus only Farrah would be able to get her in there."

"There are holding cells?"

"Farrah though we would need somewhere to handle intruders until we figure out what to do with them. Plus, a drunk tank. We even have a magically reinforced divvy van. It's all in the administration quarter."

"That's thorough planning, I guess."

"She's up here," Emi said as she pointed at the section of the main residence ahead of them. Jason stopped walking.

"No she's not," he said.

"She's meant to be," Emi pouted.

Jason ruffled his niece's hair and she shoved his hand away, annoyed.

"It seems she wanted a look around. You run off, Moppet, and I'll sort it out."

"I want to see."

"Shade," Jason said.

Shadows emerged out of Jason and Emi's shadows, wreathing Emi in a jet suit that took off and flew her away with a yelp.

"I'll get you Uncle Jason!" her voice rang out of the village as Jason laughed, giving her a wave as she disappeared over a rooftop.

Asano Akari watched a girl spitting invective fly past the rooftop on which she was crouched. She frowned at the unusual sight.

"There are dark days ahead," a voice said and she stood up, whirling to face it. She hadn't sensed his presence at all, despite her silver-rank hearing and aura senses. She still couldn't make out his aura despite his being close enough that she should be able to smell him, which she couldn't.

"We should take our fun where we can get it," Jason said. "There's sadness enough to come."

"You are Asano Jason."

"Seriously, what is with people? Do I have amnesiac tattooed on my forehead?"

"I am Asano Akari," she said.

“G’day. I know we named this place Asano Village but you came an awful long way to visit.”

Examining the woman, Jason was struck by how much the woman resembled the sword at her hip. Her body and aura both were lean and sharp. The way she moved was swift, precise and efficient. Her hair was cinched back in a practical ponytail, her clothes were sleek and fitted while her face had the polished perfection of silver-rank. Although they did not look the same, Jason couldn’t help but be reminded of his first encounter with Sophie. This woman was all sharp edges.

He glanced at the sword hanging from her belt. It was a chokutō, a Japanese straight sword, and his magical senses told him it wasn't conjured. It was a genuine magical item of exquisite craftsmanship, at least physically. For the magical component, he would need to look closer.

People with weapon essences fell into three camps. One conjured their weapons, usually with multiple options for multiple situations. Another used the best weapon of their type that they could find, using their abilities to enhance them further. The last type did both, using their real weapon personally and employing conjured weapons for various unusual attacks and abilities. The weapon essence users Jason knew well, Valdis and Gary, fell into the second category, although he had met individuals of all three types.

“I’ve been told why you’re here,” Jason said, “but that didn't come across as very flattering as regarding your intentions. How about you tell me about why you've come here and we go from there.”

She looked Jason over. He looked like anyone off the street with his casual clothes, but his undetectable aura gave that the lie. He seemed to be standing at ease, but she could spot his careful balance, ready to move in an instant.

“You are of the assassination type,” she said.

“If you could call a man with an axe a tree assassin,” Jason replied. “It takes some hacking away to get the job done.”

“You accumulate damaging effects instead of making a decisive strike. Unusual for someone with a focus on stealth.”

“Really? When you’re waiting for a monster the size of a traditional rustic cottage to die, good stealth feels like exactly the thing you want, trust me.”

“Many believe that our powers reflect our true natures. Your way of fighting lacks honour.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed with a chuckle, looking at the sword on her hip. “Honour is how people with fancy swords fight people with sticks and claim it’s a fair fight.”

“That is a poor characterisation of honour.”

“And you came to my house to tell me I have none, which is a poor demonstration of respect.”

Akari nodded, acknowledging the point.

“I passed the first test, then?” Jason asked. “Something along the lines of not flipping out when provoked?”

“The assessment is ongoing,” Akari said.

“Then the next question is what gives you the right to come here to judge me and mine?”

“My family has been part of the Network of centuries. When you rose to prominence, we investigated your background and we do, indeed, have a shared ancestor.”

“That’s a fun fact that doesn’t answer my question. How far back is this ancestor, out of curiosity?”

“Early Edo period,” she said.

“The seventeenth century? Not exactly second cousins, then, are we? Which makes me wonder again why I should give a damn about anything you have to say about how we do things here.”

“My family believes in honour, dignity—”

“You keep talking about your family but I didn’t ask about them and I don’t care. State your business.”

She gave him a flat, steely glare that had no discernible impact.

“We have neither the right nor any interest in telling your family how to behave,” Akari said. “How you handle your affairs is your concern and your concern alone.”

“Glad we got that settled,” Jason said. “I don’t know where you parked but the guy at the gate will let you out. I think they’ll start closing airports pretty soon, so you might want to get a move on.”

“My family is well known in Network circles,” she said.

“Aaaand we’re back to the family. If there’s any kind of point you’re edging up on, that would be great. It’s kind of a busy week for me.”

“You have started to shape your family into a clan,” she said. “How you conduct yourselves is not our affair, but you share our name. If you flounder and collapse, that reflects on us, fairly or not. We don’t care what you do, only that you are strong. Right now, your nascent clan stands or falls with you.”

“So you came to make sure I had the goods so this whole project doesn’t collapse in a pile and make you look bad.”

“Yes.”

“So what happens now?” Jason asked. “We fight?”

“That would be pointless,” Akari said. “Your capability in that area is well-documented, but you cannot carry a clan on the strength of arms alone. You need leadership. Management. Foresight. You need to choose subordinates well and raise your people up as a whole. You have to weather setbacks and resolve challenges. Know when to stand firm and when to bend. This last one is something we have heard may be your weakness, yet can be the most important.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of assessment where you do a quick few interviews and pass out a survey,” Jason said.

“No. It will be extensive, carried out in a time of challenge and transition. If you can thrive in the coming days then we will be satisfied.”

“And why should we put up with any of this?” Jason asked. “You have no authority over me or my people and acting like you do is kind of giving me the irk.”

“For the duration of the assessment, you will have something that your fledgling clan very much needs: an additional, expert category three.”

“You’ll come work for us while you’re doing your little checks?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll actually do what you’re told? We already have the obnoxiously independent leadership position filled.”

“I will act as directed, within reason, and make clear beforehand when asked to operate beyond the limits I am willing to tolerate.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’ll take it to the family and we’ll talk it out. What happens if we tell you to take a hike?”

“Then I will leave and we will hope that your clan is consumed in the coming crisis, which is an acceptable demise that will not reflect poorly on us. Should you survive, once things have settled, then further action will be considered.”

“Good to know.”

Jason sought out his paternal grandmother. Her name was Yumi, although anyone that used it got a glare that stung like a slap across the ear. Yumi had been fully versed in magic during Jason’s time away, through the Network’s induction program.

She had one of the bushland residences, nestled amongst the trees. Jason sensed her up on the balcony and leapt two stories up with his cloak floating around him, which disappeared as he alighted on the wooden floor.

“Polite people knock,” Yumi told him from over a cup of tea. She was sitting at an outdoor table made from native wood.

“I was hoping you could help me with something, Grandmother.”

“This is about our visitor?”

“You’re the only member of the family who was actually Japanese. I was hoping you could share some insights.”

Yumi had come over from Japan with her late husband, shortly before their first child was born. Things had not been easy for Japanese immigrants in the seventies, but they had thrived, eventually becoming naturalised citizens.

Jason talked Yumi through his conversation with Akari.

“What do you think she really wants?” Jason asked. “There’s no way the Japanese Network gives up someone of her skill and power now. Even if she was already on her way here when the grid went down, they should have had her on a plane home immediately. They definitely shouldn’t be offering her up for some open-ended service to a fledging Network family in a different country.”

Yumi had quietly taken in Jason’s explanation and did not respond immediately, sipping delicately at her tea.

“Jason, I have heard it said that you and Miss Hurin are extremely valuable to the Network. Without your usually braggadocio and nonsense, how valuable are you, exactly?”

“Priceless,” Jason said. “So long as we cooperate, we represent knowledge and resources that doesn’t stop paying off. We’ve been offering it on the cheap, too, because protecting the world from monsters is the goal, not a means to profiteer from.”

“There is your answer, then,” Yumi said. “The Asana Network family in Japan want to use our connection, tenuous as it is, to gain advantages from you.”

“Then why come in so aggressively like this?” Jason asked.

“To save face. Their intention is to offer you a service in providing an expert when you need it most. They most likely believe that you will feel obligated to return the favour should their darkest day come to pass. This woman is not here to judge you but as an overture. How she is conducting herself is simply a show of strength, so as for her Asano family to not show weakness in front of ours, maintaining their face.”

“Do you think we should accept that overture?” Jason asked.

“That depends,” Yumi said. “Would she truly be an asset to us?”

“With the state the family is in and what is about to happen? Absolutely. It will be years before we produce our own people even close to her calibre.”

“Then are you willing to reciprocate, when the time comes?”

“I think that’s something I can live with,” Jason said. “Provided there aren’t any unseen dangers lurking below the surface.”

Yumi nodded her approval.

“Yes,” she said. “Make sure that this isn’t an attempt to lure you into some specific troubles.”

“If I find something out, we turn her away, then?”

“No,” Yumi said. “If she’s hiding something then we don’t reject her. If they are dealing with us in bad faith, we close our fist around them.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “We don’t turn her away but demand more.”

“Exactly,” Yumi said. “So long as you are confident of handling whatever mess they want to bring you into, we milk them for all they’re worth.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ll call a meeting or the family to make a final decision, then.”

He moved to jump off the balcony when his grandmother spoke and he paused.

“Jason,” she said. “Did I ever tell you that you were my favourite grandchild?”

“No, Grandmother.”

“Good, because you’re not. You are coming along, though.”

Jason chuckled and leapt over the railing, leaving his smiling grandmother behind.