

Chapter 395

Appreciation

In Asano Village, a portal arch quietly rose up inside a house. Cheryl Asano, Jason's mother, froze as if time had stopped. She had seen little of her youngest son since his return from apparent death, except on the news. She hadn't seen him at all since her eldest son followed him out into an increasingly mad world, only to return as a corpse. She had only seen his famous portal a handful of times in person. Like most people in Australia, she had seen it on the news as thousands of Broken Hill residents escaped through it to safety. She had watched everything she could find online about her son over and over again.

She gulped as her son stepped through the portal, his expression slightly surprised to find his mother standing right in front of him.

"Hello, Mother."

"Jason, I..." She trailed off, not knowing how to begin.

"Hold that thought," he said as Erika and Emi emerged from the portal. Neither had seen her since Kaito's death and, unlike Jason, immediately moved to hug her.

"I'm going to quietly go round people up," Jason said. "Mother, we're using your place as a gathering point because it's more discreet. I don't know how many people are the eyes and ears of outsiders."

"Jason..." she began but his shadow rose up, he stepped into it and was gone.

Jason found Taika in the village's main security office and happily grabbed the big man in a huge hug.

"I'm sorry about your bro, bro."

"Thanks, mate."

Jason had originally intended to take Taika as part of the team travelling with him, only to change his mind. He had not wanted to entirely deprive the village of people he could trust and rely on. Given that Taika would likely be dead otherwise, he was relieved at how it worked out.

"Bro, I saw you killing those superhero guys with your mind. They say you're a proper supervillain now but if the other guys are all dressed like tin-pot dictators, that pretty much makes you the good guy."

"You don't think I'm bad for killing all those people?"

"They came for you and yours, bro. Put 'em down hard and don't look back."

Jason knew that for all his jovial personality, Taika had seen dark days long before Jason came along. He didn't know the details but he knew Taika had left New Zealand to escape dangerous circumstances. Taika had become familiar with the cruelty and fickleness of death long before Jason.

“Taika, I need you to round up some people in the village and take them to my mother’s place.”

“What do I tell them when they ask why?”

“That it’s mandatory and you don’t know. Don’t mention me at all. Some of them will probably react poorly.”

“No worries, mate,” Taika assured him. “I got you.”

Jason was very good at hiding any kind of nervousness or uncertainty, both in his body language and his aura. He was visibly anxious as he sensed a group of people approach his mother’s front door.

They were the last to arrive by design, Jason having asked Taika to bring them last. There was no shortage of people present already, crowding even the generous, open-plan space of his mother’s house. Already arrived were Amy and her daughters, too young to understand what was going on. The Japanese Asano sisters and Itsuki were both present, as were the family of Jason’s deceased friend Greg. They had known Jason since he was a young teenager but now looked at him like a stranger. Between who and what Jason had become and the death of their son, Jason could feel the distrust and hostility in their auras plain and clear.

Jason was anticipating worse from the people Taika was leading to the door. The Karadeniz family, Asya’s parents and siblings, were taken aback as they saw all the people. When they spotted Jason amongst them, their expressions went dark.

“Mr and Mrs Karadeniz—”

The long legs of Asya’s mother let her stride across the room in just a few steps, loudly slapping Jason across the face. Jason had nothing to say, bowing his head the way he had before Greg’s family. He felt that his eyes should be welling with tears but that was not something his body did anymore. It had been years since Jason had been a human but he had never felt as inhuman as at that moment.

“Why are we here?” Asya’s father asked in a hostile voice.

Jason nodded absently, more to himself than anyone else.

“I have some friends who have afforded us a unique opportunity,” Jason said. “One that has, to my knowledge, never been afforded to anyone else on earth.”

“What kind of opportunity?” Greg’s father asked.

“One for comfort, I hope,” Jason said as he raised a portal. “Please all go through.”

“You seriously expect us to go through that?” Asya’s mother asked.

“If you choose not to, I understand,” Jason said. “If that is your decision, I won’t tell you what you missed. I don’t want you carrying that regret for the rest of your life.”

“Why not just tell us what’s through there right now?” Asya’s father asked.

“Because I don’t think you’ll believe me,” Jason said. “Even if you do, I’m worried about misunderstandings if you don’t see it for yourself.”

“Don’t play games,” Greg’s father said. “You’ve always liked playing games, Jason, but I won’t stand for it.”

“That’s right,” Asya’s father said. “What is on the other side of your magic door, Asano?”

Jason stared at him, hollow-eyed, for a long time.

“Your daughter,” he said finally. “Go through or not. All I’m offering you is the choice.”

“What are you—”

Shade rose out of Jason’s shadow. Jason stepped into him and was gone.

“Mum, are you crazy?” Asya’s brother asked. “He killed a bunch of people with his brain. That was two days ago.”

Jason used his ability to shadow jump between Shade’s bodies to avoid using up the energy of his portal. He appeared next to the other side of the portal, which was some twenty kilometres offshore from Asano village, atop a tower at the centre of his cloud palace.

Jason had finally used the palace configuration of his cloud flask. It produced a sprawling construct, floating on the surface of the Pacific as ocean waves failed to so much as make it shudder. It was solid as an island but smaller than the palace form Emir preferred as Jason usually deployed his cloud constructs in their adaptive forms.

The adaptive form offered both protection against search magic and camouflaged against direct observation. The palace was made up entirely in shades of blue and white that, from a satellite, would be indistinguishable from the water around it.

Even in the adaptive form, the palace was still sprawling and huge. A series of concentric rings made up the four-storey buildings, connected by covered, open-air walkways like the spokes of a wheel. At the hub of the wheel was an eight-storey tower with a flat rooftop designed as a lookout. This was where the portal emerged, the salty ocean wind blowing over it in spite of the elevation.

Jason waited, knowing that a discussion was taking place in his absence. Having finally admitted to himself that he was not as capable of moving people to act as he had once thought himself, he had left Erika and Emi to be his ambassadors. Even his short display with Greg and Asya's families showed him that he would only make things worse. To Jason's surprise, when someone finally came through the portal it was Asya's father.

"Asano, what do you mean by saying my daughter is..."

His words dropped away as he noticed the floating palace around him, the beautiful building made of clouds spread out before him. More people came through, spreading out along the balustrade that circled the tower roof and goggling at the palace. Erika moved over to stand beside her brother, hooking her arm into his elbow as they looked out at the palace below and the ocean beyond.

"You once told me that you came back to show me wonders," she said. "With all the horrors that magic has brought, it's easy to forget the marvels."

"I thought I would be the only magical thing in this world," Jason said. "I wish I'd been right."

There was a huge elevating platform in the centre of the flat tower rooftop and Jason directed everyone onto it. He could have opened the portal directly to their destination but he had wanted to prime them to witness the extraordinary. For that reason, he led them on a meandering path through the palace, picking up Ken, Hiro and Yumi along the way.

The interior of the Palace was more colourful than the disguised exterior, with the glorious sunset colours that were cloud construct default. It was also filled with the plants Jason had harvested during his long stay in the jungle astral space of the Order of the Reaper, with lush green leaves and vibrant flowers. Since they were all non-magical plants, just feeding enough plant, earth and water quintessence to the cloud flask allowed it to maintain them. The jungle plants gave the palace a lush, tropical feel, complete with rich, fresh aromas.

The group had lost any notion of interrogating Jason for the moment as they toured the wondrous space until Jason brought them to a vast and empty chamber. It was circular in shape, with a ceiling high above them. The only things the room were Dawn, Farrah and three of Shade's bodies. Each instance of Shade was standing in the middle of a hellishly complex ritual circle, all in a row. There was a fourth, empty ritual circle, positioned behind the line of three that Shade occupied. All four circles were piled high with spirit coins of all ranks, with even a diamond coin in each one.

"I'm sure you have all seen my companion, Shade," Jason said. Shade was, indeed, a well-known figure, even having been interviewed once when Jason allowed a media junket in Asano Village.

"What you may not know that that Shade's progenitor – his father, if you will – is an entity that governs the souls of the dead."

This caused a stir in the group, Jason sensing grief, anger and disbelief in their auras.

"This," Jason said while gesturing with his arm, "is Dawn. She is a deeply remarkable person, not just for her origins and power but for her kindness. Recently she took the time to contact Shade's father in order to give us all a gift. I don't even know what price she paid for this gift, as she refuses to tell us. Suffice to say, I am quite certain it was great."

"What are you talking about, Asano?" Asya's father asked. His shock at their surroundings was wearing off and his patience with it. "If this is some kind of nonsensical séance..."

"That's exactly what it is," Jason said. "What we have for you here is an opportunity that so many lost in grief can only helplessly wish for: a final chance to say goodbye."

As he sensed the sceptical affront rising from the group, Jason marched to the middle of the empty ritual circle and opened up a portal. This was not a normal portal, despite the identical look, but a medium for the ritual magic Dawn had put in place. It was an intricate work of magic far beyond Jason and Farrah's capabilities. He had been very careful crossing the sophisticated magic diagram, so as not to disturb it.

Dark streams of power flowed from Jason's portal into the shadowy forms at the centre of the other ritual circles, which immediately started to undulate. The group looked on in trepidation, anticipation, disbelief mixed with hope, fear and confusion.

Over the course of around a minute, the three dark shapes took on the forms of Asya, Greg and Kaito, but dark and semi-translucent, like ghosts. At first, they were unmoving, their expressions blank like dummies. Then they suddenly animated, roused from torpor.

"For the next nine hours," Jason said, "they will be here for you to say the things you need to say. This will never happen again, so don't leave anything unsaid."

At first, nothing happened. The three souls projecting into Shade's bodies as vessels were disoriented by the process and their loved ones were all in shock. Then Greg waved.

"G'day, Mum."

Like a dam had broken, Jason felt a maelstrom of emotion bombard the room as the group swarmed the three souls. Projecting through Shade, the ghost-like figures were oddly soft to the touch, as if they were made from the same cloud-stuff as the palace.

Dawn could have arranged a more realistic depiction but felt being too lifelike could be dangerous. Jason wholeheartedly agreed, wanting to avoid the desperate hope of resurrection.

Dawn was the leader of the Cult of the World-Phoenix, albeit on a working sabbatical. Before creating her current avatar and returning to earth, she had contacted her counterpart in the Cult of the Reaper, convincing him to allow Shade, a shadow of the Reaper, to act as a vessel to project the souls of Jason's fallen companions.

It was not a new or unique event, with contacting the dead having a long history. There were very strict rules, however, the most important being no discussion could be made on the nature of the afterlife. Other rules included the fact that each soul could only be contacted one time.

Jason watched as the group converged on their dead loved ones, wandering over to stand next to Dawn.

"I don't think I can express the graciousness of what you've done here," he told her. "All I can do is thank you."

"When I came to you to save the world, you didn't negotiate or ask for payment. You didn't try and pass it off. You got to work. Call this my appreciation for that."