

Chapter 397

High Maintenance

In the meeting hall of his cloud palace, Jason sat across from the spectre of his friend, Greg.

“I have no idea what to say,” Jason said.

“Wow,” Greg said. “I had to die to see it happen, but at least now I know what it takes.”

“I was going to get you a greeting card but I couldn’t find one for getting you killed by a wizard with bomb fists.”

“And there he is.”

“I looked into some print shops for a custom card but with everything going on, the wait times are egregious. As for online, you can just forget about it. Shipping delays are crazy.”

Jason’s smile was a pained rictus; a poor disguise for his obvious guilt and grief.

“I don’t want you mourning for me,” Greg said.

“You’re dead,” Jason said. “You don’t get a say.”

“At least put aside the guilt. I chose this.”

“I gave you the choice.”

“And the alternative is what?” Greg asked. “Do you even remember how miserable I was when you came back? I was never much more than an adequate lawyer and I’d been all but pushed out of my father’s law practice. I was staring down the barrel of a long, mediocre life. I lived more in the last six months than in the six years before it. Running around, fighting monsters with my magic powers. I got laid so much.”

“Mate...”

“I know, but I totally did. I met beautiful women from other dimensions and played board games with a vampire. I had magic powers. Steampunk magic powers. I got killed by a supervillain. I died fighting to save the world. Jason, if you told me everything that was going to happen – every single thing, including how I died – I’d have made the exact same choice. I’d have jumped at it.”

“Greg...”

“Don’t you dare pity me. You made my life a triumph. My death, too, for that matter. Don’t you ever try and take that from me by feeling like you somehow hurt me or made my choices for me. I died a hero, Jason, not a victim. You don’t get to turn me into one inside your head.”

"You seem pretty determined to not let me get a word in edgeways."

"That's because you'll just talk some crap. Look, we've been putting up with edgelord Jason for a while now but it's time to knock off the melodrama. You're not Darkwing Duck, so stop swanning about pretending you're the terror that flaps in the night. You're a god damn chuuni. You were a chuuni in school, you were a chuuni when you got back from magic land and you're such a giant bloody chuuni by you right now that you don't even realise you're more chuuni than you've ever been in your life."

"Please stop being saying chuuni."

"Jason you need the chuuni power."

"Chuuni power?"

"The Cabal is digging up an army of ancient vampires. You think popping out of the shadows doing a Batman voice is going to help against that lot? They've been pulling that trick since Constantinople; they're going to be better at it than you. If you want to beat them then you need to run your game, not theirs. Play to your own strengths."

"Which are?"

"A vampire is basically an ancient super chuuni. And in the land of the chuuni, the genre-savvy man is king."

"So, you're pretty much talking out your arse," Jason said.

"Yep," Greg said with a grin. "Sounded good, though, didn't it?"

"Not even a little. You just said chuuni about thirty times. You were babbling nonsense."

"Well, you gave babbling nonsense up to go all edgelord drama queen. Someone had to step up."

Jason ran a hand over his face.

"Is this what it's like talking to me?"

"It used to be," Greg said softly. "Back when you were actually fun. Yeah, things have gotten bad. You've lost people. But if you lose yourself, then everyone on Earth is completely buggered, so it's time to stop moping and put on your big boy pants. The floral print ones."

Jason and Greg looked at each other and both started laughing.

"You are really bad at the final guidance from a friend thing," Jason said.

"It wasn't that bad."

"It was pretty much you just saying chuuni and edgelord over and over."

"Take a look in the mirror, guy. You've been acting like a chuuni edgelord over and over."

“Harsh. You’re way better at making me feel bad than your Dad, although he’s giving it a good go.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s blustering because he’s worried people will realise he’s just happy that I was the one who died and not my brother.”

Jason turned to glance at his mother across the room, in a group speaking with Kaito’s spectre.

“Yeah, I know that story,” he said, then turned back to Greg.

“I’m going to miss you, brother,” Jason said. “I’ll think of you every time I play a new board game you’ll never get a chance to try.”

“Oh, you prick.”

“You shouldn’t have called me a chuuni so many times.”

The streets of Sydney were much less congested than normal, in the wake of the transformation events. Government restrictions and business closures led to little enough traffic that the fleet of vehicles, mostly vans and SUVs, were able to sweep rapidly to the Sydney Network branch’s building.

Cabal members poured out of the vehicles, human forms transforming into a menagerie of bizarre creatures and mythological beings. At the head was the vampire lord, Willoughby. Oddly, there were what at least looked like ordinary humans operating camera equipment.

The Network branch's lower levels were largely filled with ordinary humans, many of whom had only learned the true nature of their organisation when magic went public. These were the administration offices for the businesses that had been both the source of funding and operational cover for the Network over the last half-century.

The lower floors became a bloodbath as the Cabal stormed the building. They had clashed with the network numerous times over reality cores but this was something different. The Cabal had invaded the Network’s home, intent on pulling them out root and stem. This was not a fight for riches or power but for survival. The Network’s tactical squads swiftly descended from the upper floors to engage the invaders.

Willoughby was startled by the resistance the Network put up. He had been warned repeatedly but he was not a good listener. Surprised was not the same as being defeated, however, and the vampire's might was not to be overlooked. When a powerful conjured machine gun ripped holes in him, streams of blood flowed out of the wounds and through the air like ropes. They entangled the man with the huge gun and dragged him into

Willoughby's waiting embrace. Draining the silver-ranker's blood rapidly restored his health and he pushed deeper into the building.

Shade was the vessel through which Kaito, Asya and Greg were projecting their souls and had control of how realistic those projections were. He was keeping them ghostly to prevent their loved ones from thinking the soul projections meant that resurrection was possible, although some still hoped in spite of assurances that it wasn't.

Shade's control meant that as Jason sat close to Asya, holding her hands in his, Shade could make them more solid, feeling like her actual hands instead of insubstantial ephemera.

"Greg and Kaito both told me I need to pull myself together," Jason said. "Is that what you're going to do as well?"

"Do I need to?" she asked. "Trust me to find such a high-maintenance boyfriend."

"High maintenance?"

"Oh, please, Asano. I love you but you are an absolute pain to deal with."

Jason's eyes went wide and she squeezed his hands.

"Yes, I said it," she told him. "It's not like I'll get another chance. I know you didn't get there yet, but you would have. I had no intentions of letting you go."

She tried to smile but didn't do a great job.

"I guess that's out of my hands, now."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? I hate to break it to you, Asano, but not everything is about you. You weren't a part of my life when I joined the Network. I made the choice to stand up and protect the world from whatever magic threw at it. I didn't want to die, but at least I died fighting for something worthwhile."

Jason nodded.

"I'm not going to tell you to pull yourself together," Asya said. "I'm going to tell you to stay focused. Keep your eye on what we died for, not the fact that we died."

"You don't want me going after the gold-ranker."

"You're right. All that gets you is revenge and that's not for us. That's for you, and you have more important things to be getting on with. Don't take stupid chances that cost you everything and get you nothing."

"He killed you."

"And killing him won't bring me back."

She poked him in the forehead.

“High maintenance. I’m dead and I still need to stop you from doing something stupid.”

“I wasn’t going to go after him,” Jason insisted.

“No?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She gave him a flat look.

“I mean, if he came looking for me…” Jason admitted.

“Then you run. Run and hide like a scared little boy.”

“What if I can lure him into—”

“No. Promise me, Jason.”

“Fine,” he grumpily acquiesced. “I won’t fight the gold-ranker. It’s not like I was going to anyway.”

“Oh, please.”

Jason bowed his head.

“I don’t know if I can do it, Asya,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “Everyone on Earth is relying on me, whether they know it or not, and I’m just making it up as I go.”

Asya’s ghostly form grew more substantial and she lifted his face with her hands, resting her forehead against his.

“You always have been, for as long as I’ve known you. How many times did I yell at you for insufficient debate prep? But it’s gotten you this far.”

“I’ve died,” he said. “Kind of a lot, and the world is coming apart at the seams.”

“And you’re going to save it. Then you’re going to be obnoxiously smug about it, but try and tone it down. You’re going to have trouble finding another girl willing to love all this.”

She leaned back and gestured at him with a sweeping hand and he grinned at her.

“Is that so?” he asked.

“You should listen to Greg and your brother,” she said. “Be the crazy weirdo I fell for.”

“I really want to kiss you,” he said, “but I would actually be kissing Shade. I’m pretty sure making out with your own familiar is crossing some kind of line.”

The deadline for Greg, Kaito and Asya's visitation drew close. Jason, Dawn and Farrah were meeting with them for the last time before handing them off to their families for their final goodbyes.

“You need to keep this guy in line,” Asya told Farrah. “He’s not as strong as you; he’s just good at faking it.”

“I know,” Farrah said.

“Hey...”

They made their last goodbyes and then the three ghosts went off to their loved ones, Jason heading toward Erika and the rest of the Asano family with Kaito.

“I love you, brother,” Kaito said as they walked.

“I’m going to bang your wife and raise your kids,” Jason whispered. “I’m going to make all three call me Daddy.”

“Oh my god, you’re an arse.”

As they waited out the clock for the three ghostly figures to reach the end of their time back on Earth, Shade quietly spoke to Jason.

“Mr Asano, there is a situation.”

Jason wandered free of his family to speak with Shade in private.

“Something at the village?” he asked. He had left one of Shade’s bodies at the village in case something happened while his family were all in the cloud palace.

“Not the village. The Cabal has initiated a full assault on the Network headquarters in Sydney. They are live streaming it and the news stations have picked up the feed. The military has been called out but this is far beyond them. The Cabal has one of the ancient vampires.”

Jason looked over at Kaito, Greg and Asya, talking with their families. Asya was keeping an eye on him and wandered over when she saw his expression. Kaito, Greg, Dawn and Farrah spotted her and followed.

“You have to go?” Asya asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

“The Cabal and their old vampire are live-streaming an all-out attack on the Network headquarters in Sydney.”

No one suggested not going. For all that they had fallen out with the Network, they all knew people there.

“Alright,” Asya said. “Go save the day.”

“Kick some arse, little brother.”

“Just remember to play the hero, not the villain,” Greg said.

Jason looked at them all for the last time.

“Whatever it is waiting for you on the other side,” he told them, “I hope it’s amazing.”

He opened a portal and stepped through. His portal ability was just strong enough to send three silver-rankers, allowing Farrah and Dawn to follow before the portal closed.

Kaito, Greg and Farrah turned back to the group, all of which were looking at them.

“He’s coming back,” Greg assured them. “He’s almost definitely not going to leave you out here in the middle of the ocean.”