

## Chapter 295

### Always Tell the Truth if You Can Get Away With It

Jason led the uncharacteristically docile child outside and they got into his car. She goggled at the gull wing doors and sleek interior. She was even more startled when the car took off without Jason touching the steering wheel. For a long while they drove in silence, Emi watching Jason contemplatively. She kept one of his hands in a tight grip.

“Why did you go away without telling us?” she asked finally.

“I didn’t get to choose that,” he said.

“We’re you kidnapped?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“By the people who did that to your face?”

“No,” he said. “That was someone else.”

“Where were you?” she asked.

“Africa.”

“Someone kidnapped you and took you to Africa?”

“Yeah.”

“And you couldn’t contact us in all that time?”

“No.”

“I’m twelve, not an idiot. You expect me to believe that?”

He chuckled.

“You will,” he said. “Once you hear the whole story.”

She lapsed into silence again and it was a little while before she spoke. When she did, her voice was almost a whisper.

“Why did you let me think you were dead?”

He looked at her face as she wiped moisture from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said. “If I had the choice, I would never let that happen.”

“Mum went through a crazy conspiracy phase,” Emi said. “Turns out she wasn’t so crazy.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” she said.

“Lots of things,” Jason said. “I have a lot to show you.”

“You’re talking around something,” she accused.

Jason turned away from her to look out the window, letting out a sigh.

"I am," he said. "You really want to know?"

"Of course I do."

"Alright," he said. "What if I told you that magic was real?"

"That's nonsense," she said.

"Agreed," Jason said. "What if I told you that it was true anyway?"

"You'd need some compelling proof," Emi said. "The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness."

"You're quoting Laplace? You couldn't go with Sagan and at least pretend you're not that much smarter than me?"

"Stop dodging, Uncle Jason," she said. "I'm going need an explanation better than magic."

"Or some evidence proportioned to its strangeness, right?"

"If you could prove magic is real, then you'd make millions of dollars and be all over the news."

"I did make millions of dollars and get all over the news," Jason said.

"The news has been nothing but that thing in Sydney for days."

"Yep," Jason agreed.

She narrowed her eyes at him, looking eerily like her mother.

"You're saying that you're the Starlight Angel?" Emi asked.

"I prefer Starlight Rider," Jason said. "Angel comes with connotations I'm not entirely comfortable with."

Shade pulled to a stop and the doors opened. They driven to Castle Bluff, Shade stopping at the impressive coastal lookout. Jason got out and Emi followed. Although the mid north coast enjoyed mild winters, there was no one else around as the day turned into evening. Emi took his hand and they sat on one of the public benches set up on the lookout. The sun was dropping low behind them, leaving the sky over the Pacific a rich purple.

"Do you believe in magic, Emi?"

"Of course I don't. You got weird, Uncle Jason."

Jason took a deep breath to steel himself.

"I have secrets," he said. "Secrets that I haven't told your parents about, yet. I will, but I think you can handle them a little better than they can. Take a look at my car."

They turned around on the bench to look at the car.

"Pack it up, Shade."

The car exploded into a swirling mass of darkness that swept over and vanished into Jason's shadow. Emi leapt to her feet, staring wildly between Jason and the spot the car vanished from. She walked over, feeling the air with her hands as she stepped cautiously through the space it had just occupied.

When she turned back to Jason, he was draped in his combat robes, his starlight cloak shining and a huge, dark motorcycle next to him. He pushed the hood back off his head to reveal his face.

"You're him," Emi said.

"I'm him," Jason said.

"How?"

"Magic."

"Magic isn't real."

"That's a sensible position to hold in the absence of evidence to the contrary," Jason said.

Emi warily moved closer to him, looking him over. His cloak shone with starlight and there was a sword at his hip. She trailed her fingers over the snakeskin leather of his robes, shaking her head.

"The Starlight Angel was able to heal people," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Can you heal people?"

"Yes."

"What about Grand Nanna?"

When he had last seen his maternal grandmother, she had been in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Jason's mother had her placed in a hellaciously expensive private care community in Castle Heads.

"Is she still at Garden Shore?" he asked.

Emi nodded.

Jason called up a portal arch, startling Emi once again. He reached out and took her hand.

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Garden Shores was an expensive assisted living community with extensive staff and state of the art medical facilities. A small number of large cottages nestled amongst a sprawling garden of native plants, situated along a picturesque shoreline of craggy rocks. Behind them were various buildings for administration and other services.

In a secluded part of the garden, in a copse of eucalypts, a line of shadow drew its way across the ground. An arch of glossy obsidian rose up from the shadow, the darkness rising up to fill the arch. A short while later, Jason and Emi emerged from the dark arch, her hand grasping his in a rictus grip. She looked around, wide-eyed, before doubling over with nausea.

"It'll pass," Jason said. "Most people throw up, the first go around."

"I'm alright," Emi, standing up straight but looking peaky. The same fortitude that made her adore theme park rides helped her to endure her first taste of dimensional translocation. She turned her gaze back to her surroundings, then immediately began moving off, touching the grass and the trees.

"It's not a holodeck, Emi," Jason said, amusement in his voice. "We're really here."

"That's thirty kilometres," she said.

"Yep."

"Did you drug me?"

"You think I drugged you?"

"Getting dosed with something that makes me suggestible and knocking me out long enough to bring me here is still more plausible than magic powers. A hallucinogenic makes more sense than your car disappearing, and the nausea could be a side effect."

"I went through what you're going through now," Jason said. "The sceptical mind, as it turns out, does not handle the truly outrageous all that well."

"Are you complaining that I'm not more gullible?" she asked.

"Not at all. You're going to experience a lot of strangeness and sorting out the real from the unreal is only going to get harder."

"So why should I believe it wasn't drugs?"

"Think about your own thought processes. They're lucid, clear and analytical. Which is weird, because you're twelve. Shouldn't you be obsessed with a boy band or video games or something?"

"Just because you were basic at twelve doesn't mean the rest of us have to be, Uncle Jason."

"I'm getting owned by someone who can't reach the high shelf. Loving this day."

"Get to the point, Uncle Jason."

"Right, yes. Your thoughts. Lucid, analytical. Admittedly, it's a subjective viewpoint, but if you were dosed up on the kind of drugs that made the impossible possible, then your head shouldn't be as clear as it is."

“You isolated me,” Emi said. “Took away any comparative viewpoints to measure against.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason conceded. “I originally intended to show your parents all this first, but I think that you and I can show them together. You can help me.”

“You really haven’t told Mum and Dad?”

“The only ones from the family who know are you and your Great Uncle Hiro. Come on; let’s go see Nanna. I haven’t been here in a long time, so I’ll need you to tell me which one of these is hers.”

Emi led the way, leading Jason by the hand.

“Mum doesn’t let me see Grand Nanna very often,” Emi said as she looked around to get her bearings in the evening twilight. She didn’t show any nervousness except for the tight grip she kept on his hand. Jason could feel her trepidation at the thought of her great grandmother’s condition through her aura.

“She’s gotten pretty bad,” Emi said. “She’s usually thinks that I’m Mum or Grandma when they were little.”

Jason nodded. He had only seen the early stages, but had kept up an email correspondence when he set off for university. Her emails had become increasingly incoherent over time before stopping altogether. He felt pangs of shame that he had let his bitterness and self-pity stop him from coming back home to see her when she could have used it the most. He wondered if that was why had brought Emi here, despite the trouble it would inevitably stir up.

“Actually,” Jason said, stopping. “Before we go see Nanna, I should make a phone call.”

Jason’s phone was in the clothes he had switched out for his combat robes to impress his niece with and he had to fish it out of his inventory. As soon as he did, it beeped with messages from his sister.

“Missed a call from your Mum,” Jason said, even as Emi’s phone started to ring. “I’m guessing that’ll be her.”

Emi nodded as she took her phone out, then handed it to Jason.

“Oh, come on,” Jason said.

“You’re the responsible adult,” Emi said.

“Says the girl who’s twelve going on forty,” Jason said, taking the phone. “Erika, hey.”

“It’s time to come back, Jason. Also, did you give me a fake number? When I tried to call you it said your phone was out of area.”

“I think we were going through a tunnel. We’ve got one thing to do before we come back.”

“What tunnel?”

“Oh, here’s that tunnel again.”

“There aren’t any tunnels around here.”

Jason hung up and handed Emi back the phone.

“You’re bad man,” Emi told him.

“I prefer naughty,” Jason said. “It’s sexier.”

“Uncle Jason, I’m twelve.”

“Sorry about that. I mean, you’ve had the talk, right?”

“Yes. Stop being gross.”

“Sorry.”

He took his own phone and called a number than Craig had provided him.

“Asano?” Annabeth said.

“G’day,” Jason said. “Do you prefer Annabeth or Anna? I’m going to go with Anna. Anna, I’m here with my niece and I thought you’d like a heads up.”

“About your niece?”

“No, about curing my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s. I thought maybe your lot would like to cover it up so it doesn’t make as big a hullabaloo as the last thing.”

Silence came from the other end of the line.

“Anna?”

“Do you have any concept of how many problems I have with what you just said?”

“It sounds like you might want to swear, but I’ve got you on speaker and my niece is twelve, so you probably shouldn’t.”

“What?”

“It’s Garden Shores Assisted Living Community, just outside Castle Heads. Thanks, Anna.”

Jason hung up over the bluster coming from the other end.

“Who was that?” Emi asked.

“You know the Men in Black?” Jason asked. “That was them. Well, the People in Black.”

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They avoided the reception building as Emi led them to the cottage occupied by Jason’s maternal grandmother. Jason had his cloak dimmed down to black and occasionally wrapped it around Emi as a staff member passed them by.

“How did they not see us?” Emi whispered as they watched a pair of orderlies wheel a laundry basket toward the utility building.

“My cloak makes us harder to see in the shadows,” Jason said. “With magic.”

They reached to door and Jason took out a small crystal key, one of the single-use opening devices he made for dealing with normal and iron-rank locks.

“Let’s see if this works,” he said, touching it to the card-reader lock on the door. The key evaporated into the air and red light switched to green and Jason lightly pushed the door open. He glanced at Emi, who was staring at where the key vanished.

“It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?” he said softly. “Just be thankful that no one is trying to eat you.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Jason said, leading her inside.

Emi slowed down and Jason accommodated her, still reassuringly holding her hand. Together they moved into the lounge room where they found Jason’s grandmother watching television, glassy-eyed. She didn’t react to their presence at all and Emi shrank behind Jason. He looked down at his niece.

“Once I do this, we’re going to leave immediately, okay? We don’t want to be around to answer questions.”

Emi nodded.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked. She nodded again.

“Are you sure?”

“Come on, Uncle Jason.”

“Alright,” he said. “Here we go.”

He raised an arm in the direction of his grandmother.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

Emi’s eyes turned into round headlights as a feeble red life force emerged from the old woman in the armchair, with unpleasant colours teeming through it. The tainting colours started leaking out in a stream that moved across the room and into Jason’s hand, pouring out of her and into him until the red glow of her life force was clean, even looking a little firmer than before.

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- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Alzheimer’s Disease] from [Glenda Pottsworth].
  - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Arthritis] from [Glenda Pottsworth].
  - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Liver Cancer] from [Glenda Pottsworth].

- Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
  - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.
  - Cleansing afflictions has triggered [Sin Eater]. You have gained an instance of [Resistant] and [Integrity] for each instance of affliction cleansed.
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Jason's grandmother looked at him with confused eyes, seeing only a form shrouded in darkness. Jason took out a healing potion, moved forward and tilted her unresisting head back to tip the potion into her mouth. After making sure that she swallowed it, he grabbed Emi's hand and quickly led her outside.

Emi was still dazzled by the magical light show, not resisting as Shade emerged to take his car form and Jason put her in the passenger seat. Jason got behind the wheel but let Shade drive them away. They had been there long enough for Jason's portal ability to come off cooldown but Jason wanted to give Emi the car ride back to process. As it was, he was already regretting letting her see so much so quickly.

"What was that stuff you gave her?" Emi asked, after a long time.

"Healing potion," Jason said. "I took away the Alzheimer's but I have no idea how much damage it did to her brain. I'm not sure how much she'll get back from healing it. I can't be sure what the results will be."

Emi lapsed back into silence, Jason leaving her be.

"What do I tell Mum and Dad where we went?" she asked.

"That we went to Castle Bluff, and then to see Grand Nanna," Jason said. "Always tell the truth if you can get away with it."