

## Chapter 293

### A Big Dose of Normal

Jason returned to Erika's house in the crisp air of the winter Saturday morning. After giving his sister a night to process his sudden return, he was expecting a thorough grilling. He wanted to bring her into the fold as quickly as he could but knew that dumping everything at once was a recipe for disaster. He didn't want her making any mistakes because of something Jason communicated poorly.

Erika had arranged for their parents to come over to let them know about Jason's return, with Kaito and Amy scheduled to arrive after. Jason, Ian and Erika were waiting in the lounge room, in Erika's plush chairs. They weren't cloud furniture, but they were the next best thing. Erika's phone beeped and she checked the text.

"Oh, bloody hell."

"Mum?" Jason asked.

"She's too busy, apparently," Erika said. "She told me that she'd be here. I told her it was important."

"Are you really surprised?" Jason asked.

"It would be nice if she actually did surprise me for once and didn't blow me off," Erika said.

"You should have had Kaito set it up," Jason said. "She'd turn up for that."

"You're right," Erika said. "I didn't think of that."

"We'll stick with the plan," Jason said. "Dad should be here soon, with Uncle Hiro. Then we can bring Kaito and Amy over."

"Are you sure you're alright to see them?" Erika asked. "It's been a lot longer than just since you died. Went away. Oh, carp. I still haven't got my head around this."

"When I was so far away that I didn't have the choice," Jason said, "it put a lot of things into perspective. Mum wasn't wrong that the best thing to do was just accept it, but she really needed to wait a year before giving it. Maybe two. You know she's the one who actually told me about it?"

"You're kidding," Erika said.

"Nope," Jason said. "She always liked Amy but she was with the wrong brother. It kind of felt like she was calling to say that I was never good enough and now she had proof."

"I'm starting to see why you rushed back and hit town like a thunderstorm," Erika said.

“It took me years to move past what happened,” Jason said. “I don’t have to tell you that. You were propping me up the whole time.”

“Are you sure that you have moved past it?” Erika asked.

“Nope,” Jason admitted. “But at this point, staying away hurts more than coming back.”

“So, what do we do about Mum?”

“She’s a busy woman, obviously,” Jason said. “She’ll figure it out eventually.”

“You’re just going to not tell her?”

“Why don’t we tell Kaito that she already knows and let nature take its course?” Jason suggested.

“Isn’t that a little cruel?” Erika asked. “Wait a second. Kaito said he kept seeing you the other day.”

“That was fun,” Jason chuckled. “I shaved for that.”

“He thought he was going crazy.”

“That was the basic plan,” Jason said.

“Did you turn his helicopter into the Thanos copter?”

Jason laughed.

“Did you have to explain it to him?” he asked.

“His wife did.”

Jason smirked.

“Jason, if you just came home for some petty revenge, you may as well have not come,” Erika said.

“Of course I didn’t,” he said. “Petty revenge is just a perk.”

“You did do a pretty good job with the helicopter,” she acknowledged.

“It’s the off season,” Jason said. “It’s not like he’s using it right now and it’s not even proper paint. It’s water soluble and will practically just hose off.”

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“So what’s the big mystery?” Ken asked as he came inside and hugged his daughter. “Hiro was so adamant about me coming along that I thought he was roping me into smoothing things over with your grandmother for him. I told him he was better off asking your Uncle Shiro.”

“No, this is more than that,” Erika said, leading him into the lounge.

“So what’s is going on?” he asked.

“Hello Dad.”

Ken went dead still on hearing Jason's voice behind him. Slowly he turned around, if fearful of what he would see. His breathing became ragged as he saw Jason standing the doorway. After a moment of shocked stillness, Ken exploded forward to catch his son in a huge hug. Jason caught the familiar smell of old spice and soil as he returned the hug.

"Is it really you, boy?" Ken asked, not releasing Jason.

"It's me," Jason said.

Ken continued to hold onto Jason like he would never let go.

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Things with Jason's father went very differently than with Erika. She had launched into an interrogation almost immediately, where Ken only wanted to know two things: was Jason alright and was he back to stay. He couldn't stop grinning as his teary eyes drank in the son that had been returned to him.

"I'm not looking to disappear any time soon," Jason assured him. "Not like last time. Things are kind of up in the air right now, professionally, but I'm looking to base myself out of Casselton Beach for at least the near future."

"Professionally?" Erika asked. "You know, I've been going over what you told me yesterday and the more I think about it, the more it comes off as a pile of hot nonsense."

"How much did you tell her?" Hiro asked.

"About what I told you, at first."

"None of the really implausible stuff, then," Hiro said.

"That's not the implausible stuff?" Erika asked, her voice rising an octave.

She turned to Jason and saw that he was looking suddenly nervous.

"They're here," he said.

Shortly thereafter, there was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of it opening.

"G'day," Kaito's voice called out. "We're arrived for the mysterious family meeting."

"Lounge room," Erika called back, glancing at Jason only to realise that he'd vanished like a ghost.

"Do you know who that car outside belongs to?" Amy asked as they came in. "It looks like the Batmobile."

"Hey, Dad," Kaito greeted. "Are you alright?"

"Better than alright," Ken said. "Who has the girls?"

"Mrs Glenn."

"Mrs Glenn," Ken chuckled. "She used to look after you when you were little."

"She's great with the girls," Amy said. "The only concern is that she'll get too attached and flee the country with them."

"You should be safe there," Erika said. "I doubt Mrs Glenn knows a good passport guy."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Amy said. "She seems like a woman with a history."

"So, what's the big mystery?" Kaito asked.

"That would be the owner of the car outside," Erika said. "He seems to have disappeared on us. Again."

"Can you blame me?" Jason asked from the doorway. "I'm nervous and love dramatic entrances."

Amy and Kaito turned around, wide-eyed.

"G'day, Kaito, Ames. How've you been?"

Kaito pointed at Jason.

"You... but... did... how...?"

"I guess we know who painted the helicopter," Amy said. "Not dead, then?"

"I tried it," Jason said. "Wasn't for me."

Despite her light voice and flippant words, Amy's face was stricken, her eyes panning over Jason, cataloguing the changes from the boy she remembered.

"Why don't we all sit down?" Ken suggested.

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After Jason talked the rest of his family through essentially the same thing he told Hiro and Erika, he left them alone in the lounge to digest while he went out into the back yard. It was the same backyard he had growing up, although there was a strange sense of alienation. Part of that was his heightened senses; he was literally looking at his childhood haunt with new eyes.

There were also the details that showed the passage of time. The old, dilapidated fence had been stripped out and replaced, although he guessed his father had done that. The Gazebo had been rebuilt from scratch, clearly to better suit Erika's style of culinary entertaining.

The lemon tree was bigger and showed signs of care. Erika clearly wanted those lemons and had taken the time to foster fruit growth. The flower garden their mother had always insisted she'd find time for was now a herb garden. The patio furniture had been replaced; their mother had purchased for appearance, where Erika and Ian purchased for comfort. The wood and cloth folding chairs were a little daggy, but nice to sit in.

He could sense his family inside the house. Their emotions were practically being shouted through their auras. There was a lot of confusion and no small amount of suspicion, mainly from Erika and Amy. They were the smartest and knew him the best;

they had immediately realised how much he was withholding, not that he made any great attempt to sell his story to them.

The first one to make his way outside to join Jason was Kaito. They each claimed a folding lounge and neither spoke for a long time.

“That was a prick move with my helicopter,” Kaito said, finally breaking the silence.

“You don’t like yellow?” Jason asked.

“Not that. Pulling a prank that my wife had to explain to me. Reminding me of all the things you and her have in common.”

“You’re reading too much into it,” Jason said.

“No I’m not,” Kaito said. “You might have forgotten how much you and I look at the world the same way. We just act differently on what we see.”

“I guess it’s a matter of values,” Jason said.

“Jason, is this one thing going to hang over us for our entire lives?”

“Yeah, brother, it is,” Jason said. “You don’t get to talk to me about prick moves. Remember that one of the things you and Amy have in common is that you worked together to gouge the heart out of my chest and back over it with a school bus.”

“We could have done things better,” Kaito said. “It was always going to be bad, though. I am sorry, Jason.”

“Nobody cares if the guy who stabbed them in the back is sorry, Kaito. They care that they got stabbed in the back.”

“Do you even know how stifled she felt by you?” Kaito asked.

“I realised,” Jason uncomfortably conceded. “Eventually.”

“There was no good way it was going to go.”

“So you decided to go with the worst way, yeah? Thanks for that.”

Kaito sighed and got to his feet.

“I was hoping that you coming back from the dead meant we could, I don’t know. Move past it.”

“We can,” Jason said, also standing. “But I had to say those things, brother. I’ve been waiting six years. I’m probably going to say them again. In fact, I suspect I’ll be kind of a arse about it.”

“As long as you stick around to say them, I’ll listen,” Kaito said, offering his hand. Jason shook it.

“Then I’ll go complain to my wife,” Kaito added.

“Oh, you prick.”

“I’m probably going to be a bit of an arse as well,” Kaito said.

Kaito went back inside, sharing a look with Ken, coming out. Jason hadn't paid a lot of attention to reading emotions through auras and was unable to read the complex interplay between the two men conveyed through that brief glance.

Ken pulled his son into another long hug.

"I'm sorry I didn't stand up to your mother more," he said.

"It's alright, Dad."

"No," Ken said, pulling back to put his hands on Jason's shoulder and look his son in the eyes. "It was my job to hold the family together and I let you be pushed out."

"Dad, none of it was easy and we all made mistakes."

"And it was my job to rise above them, which I didn't."

Ken brushed his fingers over his son's scars, bisecting one eyebrow and leaving a hairless line in his beard.

"Are you alright?" Ken asked softly.

"Honestly?" Jason said. "No."

Jason sat back down, Ken claiming the chair vacated by Kaito.

"I'm not the person I want to be right now," Jason said. "I've done things. Had things done to me. I'm not making great choices right now and I'm hoping that being home will help me to get back some of what I lost along the way."

"This mercenary work," Ken said, broaching the topic like an animal handler trying to catch a wild creature. "You saw fighting?"

"Yeah."

"Did you...?"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"We're here, son. I'm here. Whatever you need."

Jason looked over at his dad.

"You know what I really need?" he asked. "I need a big dose of normal. I need the things I'm cranky about to be that my brother married my ex. I need my problems to be finding out of season chutneys and my mum being disapproving and stand-offish. Hell, I need Koji to come by and hypocritically accuse me of being a banana. Is he still in town?"

"Your cousin? Sure. Shiro bought the caravan park a couple of years ago and left Koji to run the place. Into the ground, mostly."

"Uncle Shiro bought the caravan park? I thought he was all about those high-end developments."

"He is," Ken said.

“Oh,” Jason said. “He’s going to replace the caravan park with a bunch of fancy holiday homes? Try and turn Casselton Beach into the next Castle Heads?”

“Pretty much. Your mother’s snobbish hands are all over the project.”

Jason sighed. “I’m going to have to tell Mum that I’m back.”

“Erika said she was meant to be here,” Ken said. “Of course she’s too busy for her son who came back from the dead.”

“In fairness, she doesn’t know that’s what this was about.”

“Erika said she told her how important it was,” Ken said. “But nothing’s more important than whatever your mother has going on.”

“I’m sorry you and Mum got divorced, Dad. I know that I was the catalyst.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Jason. Your death just brought things that had been building up for a long time into the open.”

Ken got up from the chair.

“I don’t want to just be complaining about your mother the whole time, so I’ll let someone else have their turn.”

“There’ll be time enough,” Jason said. “I’m looking to stick around for a while.”

“Plenty of time to pile on that normal you’re looking for,” Ken said. “And I will, believe me. I love you, son.”

“Love you, Dad.”

Erika came out and claimed the seat next to Jason.

“How was it with Dad?”

“It was good,” Jason said.

“Did he complain about Mum?”

Jason just chuckled.

“You can expect a lot of that,” Erika said.

“Is he okay?”

“None of us were great after you died. He blamed himself for you not coming home after Amy and Kaito. Not as much as he blamed Mum, but still.”

“I wish things hadn’t gone the way it did.”

“And you found a wish-granting genie out in the desert, did you? Or are you just whining about things you can’t change?”

“It wasn’t a genie,” Jason said. “Too far south. Also, real genies don’t grant wishes. They’re pretty much just elementals spirits with an overdeveloped sense of self-importance, from what I hear.”

“Oh look; it’s a stream of utter nonsense spoken with total conviction. You really are back. I still don’t understand why you weren’t able to at least get us word that you were alive.”

“You will,” Jason said. “I’ll tell you everything, and soon.”

“Why not now?”

“Because what I have to tell you isn’t something you can just accept. Especially from the guy spouting utter nonsense with total conviction. Extraordinary claims and extraordinary evidence, you know?”

“You have some extraordinary claims to make?”

“You have no idea. The other thing is that I just want things to be normal. Or as close as I can get. At least for a little while. Before things start becoming strange.”

“You know, Jason,” Erika said, “I’m not sure you’re being vague and ominous enough. Any chance you could crank that up?”

“Ask and ye shall receive, little sister.”

“I didn’t actually mean…”

“Change is coming, be we prepared or not” Jason intoned, leaking a little of his aura to add gravitas. “You’ve heard the stories of the starlight man.”

“You mean that Starlight Rider guy? That’s all that been on the news for days.”

“People are going to look back and realise this was the beginning.”

“The beginning of what? And stop using that voice. You’re just daggy, not creepy.”

“You’ll have to wait until I show you what’s coming,” Jason said in his normal voice.

“You won’t believe me if I just tell you. But change is coming, Eri.”

“What change? What are you talking about?”

“Everything. Everything is going to change. I need to get the family ready for that.”

“Jason, you sound like a crazy person.”

“I’ll sound worse before I’m done. For today, just let it go. We’re just going to go around in circles if you keep hammering away.”

Erika groaned.

“You’re a pain in my arse, you know that? Not even twenty-four hours since you sprang back to life and I’m ready to kill you all over again.”

“It’s been done before.”

“I’ve known you your whole life, Jason. Don’t try to distract me with your nonsense.”

“Just give me some time, Eri, Please.”

“Fine,” she said unhappily. “We need to talk about Emi right now, though. She took her Uncle Jason’s death very hard and me running around playing conspiracy theorist



didn't help. She's finally back in a good place and I don't want her to get off track. You know the academy has her in their advanced program."

"Of course they do," Jason said, smiling. During his most self-pitying moments, his razor-sharp little niece had been a big part of keeping his head, if not above water, then at least not too far below the surface.

"How do you want to tell her?" he asked.

"Come back tonight, for dinner, Erika said. We'll herd the mob out and it can be you, me and Ian when she gets home from her friend's house."

Jason got up from his chair.

"I'll go then," he said. "Text me a time and I'll be here."

"You aren't done yet," Erika said. "There's one more person who hasn't gotten you alone."

Jason turned his gaze toward the house.

"I wasn't sure she'd want to speak with me," he said. "I'm not sure I want to speak with her."

"No one is going to pretend this situation is easy, Jason. Or normal. But she's not going anywhere, so unless you're looking to disappear again, you have to face her sooner or later."

"I'm not going anywhere. I have things to do here."

"Then you and Amy will have to figure out how to be in a room together."

"Alright," Jason said. "Send her out."