

## Chapter 292

### It's Complicated

The naked woman's feet trailed on the floor as she was dragged through concrete halls, not cooperating even enough to stumble along. The closest thing she had to clothing was the collar around her neck. They only used category two guards for her, which tied up some of their most valuable personnel. After what she did to the category ones in her first escape attempt, though, it was a necessary allocation of resources. They dumped her in a room that was a plain concrete cube. They moved her around a lot, never anywhere better.

The magical array securing the complex had been engraved right into the concrete. Every door was magically locked, which meant that the collared inmates would be unable to open them, even if they had the chance. Her captors were unconcerned about letting the inmates see it, since they were all collared and unable to so much as explore the array with their mystical senses, let alone grasp their function.

They were trying to keep her on edge, never giving her anything reliable or consistent, even in the miserable conditions. Sometimes there was a steel cot with no bedding, other times a plain mattress on the floor. She was never left in the dark and her sleep never went uninterrupted by blasting music or being hosed down with water. They knew she could handle the wet and the cold, denying her bed, blanket or clothes. All she wore was the suppression collar.

The only exception were brief interludes where she was given a warm bed and uninterrupted rest. These brief interludes were fleeting promises of what capitulation could offer.

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Two men watched her through a security monitor. Adrien was older, his stern features unflinching as he observed the woman on the screen. Michel was younger and visibly uncomfortable.

"We don't even know if she can understand what we're saying to her," Michel said.

"She understands," Adrien responded without turning his gaze from the monitor. He had no need to look to sense his subordinate's distaste for the methodology being employed.

"This isn't working," Michel said.

“She’s strong,” Adrien said, “but that’s good for us. The impediment is hope. It’s only been a few days and she still thinks there is something other than surrender. In time, the hope will die.”

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In her concrete box she was biding her time, reserving her strength. Her collar-suppressed senses were unable to explore the magic engraved into the walls and floors and ceilings. Instead, as they dragged her through the hallways that made up the concrete warren, she mapped the engravings with her eyes the same way she mapped the layout.

Her escape attempts were never the earnest attempts to break free that her captors believed. She had let them think she was turned around in the rat nest of subterranean tunnels. It never occurred to them that her understanding of ritual emplacements was sufficient to grasp their function from visual inspection alone. Each escape attempt, a seeming scramble to find a path out, was actually to get eyes on crucial elements of the magic array that her captors had not led her past themselves.

Just as she plotted out the layout of the complex in her head, she plotted out the workings of the magical array. She was approaching the point where she would understand enough of it to extrapolate the rest, after which point it became a matter how to turn it to her own ends. In the meantime, she would endure whatever indignities they chose to inflict.

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Erika put her phone away.

“Mum sent her apologies,” she said, leaning into her husband, Ian. “Via text.”

The party was in full swing as people swarmed in, out and around their house. There were two barbecues roaring in the gazebo, which also contained the beer fridge. Eskies scattered about contained even more booze, as no one got to touch Erika’s kitchen fridge.

She was dressed as the Riddler, complete with green bowler hat. The long, green coat covered in question marks helped with the winter cold, although the roaring barbecues kept the gazebo toasty and there was a fire pot on the patio.

“It’s probably for the best,” Ian said, lifting off her green bowler hat to kiss the top of her head. He was dressed as a pirate.

“Your dad would be enough to set her off,” Ian said, “but he brought his brother with him too. I think he was trying to cause trouble.”

“Yeah,” she wearily agreed.

“Look at it this way,” Ian said. “Emi is staying at Ruby’s house, your mum isn’t here to get in a fight with your dad. You have two dozen people here who love you and all your

potential friction points are gone. You can just have a drink, and then another drink and have a nice time.”

“How do you always know what to say?” she asked.

“Well, you’re smarter than me, so I just wait for you to get tired and then be as supportive as possible.”

“You’re a sly one, Ian Evans,” she said.

“I had to be, to get the best woman in the world to agree to marry me.”

“Charmer.”

“Sadly, she died and I had to settle, so you lucked into all this,” he said, gesturing up and down his body. She flicked him on the nose.

“Ow!”

They started making their way around the guests, Erika receiving birthday congratulations as she checked out the various costumes. Most were store-bought or minimal effort and she felt a longing for her big parties in Melbourne. On balance, though, she liked where she was. The costumes might have been better in Melbourne but she preferred the people inside them here. Old friends and family were better than people looking for networking opportunities.

“Greg’s done well,” Ian pointed out.

“Oh, that’s an impressive Iron Man outfit,” she said. “That’s Greg in there?”

“Yep.”

“That must have taken him weeks.”

“He’s very lonely,” Ian said.

“Just because he can spend so much time on an impressive costume, that doesn’t mean he’s lonely,” Erika said.

“Must be a coincidence, then,” Ian said.

“You’re so bad,” Erika scolded.

“Who’s that in the Sith outfit?”

“Not sure,” Erika said. “The lightsaber’s a bit naff, but the rest of the outfit is incredible. That cloak seems really spooky.”

“There is something about it, isn’t there?” Ian said. “Shall we pop over and say, g’day? See who’s under there?”

They made their way in that direction but the person somehow slipped away unnoticed.

“Did you see him go?” Erika asked as they arrived at the spot he’d been standing in.

“No,” Ian said, looking about in confused. “I could swear I was looking right at him, too.”

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Jason spent most of the party in the shadows, using a combination of his cloak and subtle aura projection to make people overlook him. He watched his sister and her husband, glued to one another the entire night. He watched his father, Ken, who brought Hiro but left early. He went next door to watch his grandchildren while their parents joined the party.

Kaito was wearing a pale suit and pastel shirt. Just as Jason had rejected his mother’s attempts to impart Japanese culture, Kaito had rejected their father’s attempts to impart pop culture. Jason observed that his brother’s grasp of classic pop-cultural knowledge still appeared to begin and end with Miami Vice. Kaito’s wife, Amy, was dressed as the fourth Doctor Who. This permitted her a long coat and longer scarf to hold off the winter chill.

Amy had wavy brown hair and fair skin. She was pretty, but only by Earth standards; compared to the supernaturally beautiful women of the other world, she was rather plain. Nonetheless, Jason was stopped dead as she walked into view. Feelings he had convinced himself were long dead surged up within him.

Jason and Amy, the girl next door, had been best friends going back as far as Jason could remember. They were inseparable growing up and careened together into the confused hormones of adolescence. She had a crush on Kaito from an early age, which only complicated Jason’s already complex feelings toward his brother.

As she had matured and moved past Kaito’s disinterest, she had eventually come to reciprocate Jason’s feelings. It was only years after it came crashing down that Jason came to accept that he had been the one pushing their relationship in that direction. He realised that she went along as much to avoid losing him altogether as anything else. If they had been older and wiser, they both might have handled things better. He certainly wouldn’t have leveraged their friendship the way he had, a shame he carried to the present day.

It was the end of their first semester of university when things came to a head. They had both moved to Melbourne to study, him at the University of Melbourne and her at La Trobe. She returned home for the semester break, while Jason stayed in Melbourne to revel in his newfound freedom.

Jason was unsure exactly what happened between her and Kaito during that semester break and had no interest in learning more. The fallout had been bad enough,

with Jason dropping out but staying in Melbourne, while Amy transferred to a university in Sydney.

Aside from one disastrous trip home in the immediate aftermath, Jason had not returned to his hometown until now. He watched his brother and sister in law from the shadows, unseen.

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Erika and Ian looked for the man in the strange cloak, asking their guests if they knew who it was, but no one could tell them and he wasn't seen again as the party wound down. In the aftermath, Erika stood in the lounge room, taking stock of the mess. She tiredly rubbed the back of her neck and when she looked up, suddenly the man in the cloak was standing at the far end of the room.

"You kept vanishing on us," Erika said.

He hit the spring action on his plastic lightsaber.

"The dark side of the force is a pathway to abilities that some would consider... unnatural."

Erika found the voice familiar, but couldn't place it.

"The party's over and it's time to go home," she said. "Who are you?"

Jason pushed back the hood of his magical cloak.

"Hello, Eri."

Erika stood stunned as Jason waited, not saying any more as she stared at him, wide-eyed. She took one hesitating step forward, then another, before hurriedly shuffling across the room.

"Jason?" she asked, her voice soft as if afraid that to speak too loud would scare him off.

"G'day," he said with a warm smile.

Her hands went up, unsure whether to hug him or grab him or just poke him to see if he was real.

"How?" she whispered.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "There'll be plenty of time for explanations."

Her eyes searched his face, as if it held the answers to questions plaguing her for a year and a half. It was not quite the same face she remembered. She took in the beard, the two small scars. The eyes were the same, dark and penetrating. So was the vaguely smug, perpetual half-smirk.

"Where the hell were you, you frigging asshole?" she asked, throwing herself into him and embracing him in a fierce hug. His body felt different.

“Have you been working out?” she asked.

He chuckled, returning the hug.

“Work keeps me fit,” he said.

They stood in the lounge, Erika clinging to him like she was afraid he’d disappear again. Ian’s slightly inebriated, sing-song voice came drifting in from the hall.

“Erika... who’s ready to walk the plank?”

He walked into the room with a plastic cutlass on one hand and a bottle of rum in the other, wearing only some pirate-themed boxer shorts and a tricorn hat. He spotted his wife hugging the man in the dark cloak.

“What the... Jason?”

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“What the hell kind of answer is ‘it’s complicated,’” Erika asked.

“A complicated one,” Jason said. “I’m going to tell you everything, I will. It’s just has to come in stages.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because some things you need to see for yourself before you can accept them,” Jason said.

Jason sat across from Ian and Erika at their dining table. Ian had made a quick trip to obtain pants, while Erika held Jason’s hand across the table, as if afraid he’d make a break for it.

“You expect me to just accept that?” Erika asked. “I knew there was something shady about what happened. I was looking into it for months. There was some kind of crazy cover up...”

“I know,” Jason said.

“You know? But you let me keep thinking you were dead?”

“I didn’t know then,” Jason said. “I had no say in what happened. I only got back a week ago and I’ve been playing catch up.”

“You’ve been here a week? Back from where?”

Jason sighed.

“Alright. I’ll give you the broad strokes, but you probably won’t believe me. When you just lay it out, it comes across as quite ridiculous.”

“Compared to a conspiracy where I had to back off instead of getting murdered?”

Jason’s face took on a sudden savagery unlike anything she had ever seen from him in the past.

“Who threatened you?” he asked, his voice full of dark promise.

"I was looking into it with this cop, back in Melbourne," Erika said. "He pretty much torpedoed his career trying to help me. He finally told me to back off because people who dug too hard were turning up dead. I know that sounds like some crazy conspiracy."

"No," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure I know who that was. Broadly speaking. I'm sorry you've been caught up in all this."

"In all what? Seriously, Jason. You fake your death and vanish? What's going on?"

"I didn't fake my death, Eri. Look, this is going to sound insane, even by murderous conspirator standards. It started when I got caught up with this... let's call him a fringe religious extremist. He never intended to get me involved, it just happened by accident. Next thing I know, I'm a very long way from home, with no way back."

"You couldn't pick up a phone?"

"No," Jason said. "No phone, no internet, no radio."

"Where were you? The Sahara desert?"

"No, the Kalahari."

"What?"

"It's further south."

"I know where the Kalahari desert is, Jason. You're telling me you've been in Africa this whole time?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't think to tell anyone when you left?"

"I didn't leave, Erika. I was taken."

"You were kidnapped?"

"Not on purpose, but essentially, yeah."

"To Africa."

"More or less."

"More or less? You know they have phones in Africa."

"Not where I was. That would be the less."

"You couldn't go somewhere there was one?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

Erika let out a groan.

"What happened to your apartment?" she asked. "You'd better not say gas leak."

"It wasn't a gas leak. I'll tell you all about it, but not tonight."

"Why not?"

"I don't think you want me to say," he said.

She groaned again.

"You look different," she said. "You sound different."

"Part of my training," Jason said. "I do a thing with my breathing that makes my voice different."

"I like it," Ian said. "It's deeper, with a little hint of reverb. It's sexy."

"Thanks," Jason said brightly.

"How can I be sure it's even you?" Erika asked.

"Because you want to punch me in the face," Jason said. "You know that feeling."

"You're right," she said. "I do want to punch you on the face. How about you keep telling us your ridiculous story instead."

"Alright, so this guy took me by accident. I... managed to get away, but it turns out he has a whole family of nutjobs and they catch me immediately. That was when I met these other people they caught, and these people were private security contractors. They'd been hired to look into this crazy family living out in the desert and got themselves caught."

"Private security contractors?" Ian asked. "You mean mercenaries?"

"Whatever you want to call them," Jason said. "Mostly they work for the local authorities. They helped me get out of the situation I was in and recruited me."

"They recruited you to be a mercenary?" Erika asked.

"Yes."

"You."

"Yes."

"Did they mistake you for someone else?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"This is not helping my self-esteem, Eri."

"Your self-esteem doesn't need it. You're telling me you're a mercenary?"

"Not right now," Jason said. "It was the only way we could think of that might get me a way home. These people, they trained me up over a few months. They became my friends."

"They taught you to shoot people?"

"I'm more of a knife guy."

"Oh, you're a knife guy," Erika said lightly. "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND?"

"I warned you it would come across as ridiculous," Jason said.

“You weren’t wrong,” Erika said, swiping the bottle of rum from her husband and taking a swig.”

“Alright, go on,” she said.

“So, I worked this job for a while until I stumbled into a way back home. That was a week ago. I’ve been staying with uncle Hiro while I get a handle on everything.”

“Uncle Hiro knows?”

“Yeah. It’s just him and you two. No one else, yet. Not from the family, anyway.”

“This is a lot to take in, Jason,” Erika said.

“I know. It’s only going to get worse once we start going through the details.”

“Maybe we just leave that for tonight” Ian interjected. “How about we just be happy that Jason has come back to us.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I’m going to need your support when it comes to Mum and Dad, Eri. And Kaito.”

“Oh, carp,” Erika said. “That’s going to be a huge mess.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed. She squeezed his hand.

“Are you still saying carp instead of crap.”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Carp is worse than crap.

“You’re a chef,” Jason said. “Show some professionalism.”

“No. Carp is the worst.”

“And people say I’m weird,” Jason said.

“You came back from the dead claiming to be a knife mercenary,” Emi exclaimed. “Knife mercenaries and coming back from the dead aren’t actually things that exist.”

“Yeah,” Jason said awkwardly. “This is going to be an interesting week for you.”

“Do you have somewhere to stay?” Erika asked. “Your old room is a guest room, now. Emi had Kaito’s old room, because it’s the biggest.”

“I have a houseboat at the marina.”

“You’re living on a houseboat?” she asked. “Like the Highlander? TV show Highlander, obviously.”

“That was never a good TV show,” Jason said.

“Let’s be honest; it was never a great movie,” Erika said.

“I liked that movie,” Ian said.

“Me too,” Jason agreed.

“It was a good idea with a middling execution at best. Search your feelings, boys; you know it to be true. A lot of that movie coasted on the soundtrack.”

“Oh, hell yes,” Jason said. “I haven’t heard a Queen song in a year and a half.”