

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 79

iCARRIE

The S.A.T. Offices/lab, "Well, that is disappointing." she sighs, closing the email.

"What is?"

"Our Lord Stafford wants his property back over the holidays."

"Can we stall?"

"It is his property, Simeon. And he's been very generous letting us use it on the weekends."

Stone shrugs, "It's remarkably easy to find a reason why it's too dangerous to return to him."

"Do you do nothing honestly and straightforwardly?"

"Good God, Hishiko. How can you even suggest such a thing? Honesty? Me? The very idea is preposterous. You're the straight-shooter, I'm the loveable rogue."

"Stafford and, especially, his partner seem to disagree on the 'loveable' part."

"Everyone's a critic."

"And, in this case, they're the people we need to not antagonise. Let's see what we can arrange to keep it reasonable."

Peter closes the email, turning to Lisa, "Dr Black wants to update us before the break."

"Update us?"

"Presumably what we'll need to do so Carrie doesn't oopsie in public."

"Yeah, her going weird in front of my dad would be bad. But they're going to give us Carrie back?"

"They can hardly say no, can they? She belongs to me."

Lisa blinks, "Right. I don't trust that Stone."

"Fair. But, yes, they're giving her back. Or at least Dr Black didn't say they weren't."

"Fine. Did they say when?"

"Next week. She wants some time to get the notes into order."

"Next week it is, then."

Next week, the portal in the cupboard irises open, extending up to the height of a doorway. Dr Black steps through, the Carrie-ball in her hand. She knocks on the door, "Mr Stafford? I've arrived."

The door opens, "Come on out."

"Thank you. And to answer the unspoken question, Simeon, will not be joining us." She places Carrie on the table, sitting opposite them.

"So?" Lisa's eyes dart between the ball and Dr Black.

"So," she adjusts her glasses, "we believe we've uncovered the source of the issue. In fact, Carrie was convinced before we even did any testing what was the issue. She seems to have been correct."

"The initial destabilisation appears to coincide with Samhain, a year ago..."

"The collar."

"Precisely. More accurately, the frankly unbelievable breaking of a Proteus collar's effect."

"Unbelievable?"

"A Proteus collar is...it's a artifact. We literally can't make them any more. You see, most magic, all magic more or less, pushes against reality but doesn't actually change it. If you stop pushing, reality reasserts itself and the change is undone. Exactly how quickly depends on the nature of the change and the stop. A Proteus collar..." she spreads her hands, "...it remakes reality. For the subject, reality is what the owner of the collar says it is. The rest of reality accepts it. If you take the collar off, the change continues indefinitely. The change is the reality. Or so we've always assumed. It's not something we can check readily given how rare they are. But you managed to reassert a reality on the collared individual."

"That makes it sound so simple."

"Oh, the reports indicate it was far from simple, by any stretch of the imagination. You fell into a coma, Ms. McCagherty; Mr Stafford was considerably weakened as I understand things; Ms Weller

has become a magical anomaly that I would love to study further, but that's another matter; and Carrie..."

"...and Carrie was rendered unstable?"

"Exactly. The backlash affected all of you differently. Mr Stafford as the most used to wielding large amounts of magical energy was least affected. For Carrie, it seems it has made her aura... sticky."

"Sticky?"

"There's a much more precise technical term, although it's one we've had to invent. However, in essence, when an assistant uses magic repeatedly, that creates...channels in their aura. Magic flows more freely along those channels, which is what allows assistants with limited magical reserves to perform more complex magic if they're exposed frequently. In Carrie's case, a single exposure seems to mark her aura and, over time, the natural flow of magic...carves a new channel without her needing to be further exposed. It's quite a fascinating case. Fundamental research you couldn't dream of doing on a real person."

"Real person?"

"My apologies. I didn't mean any offence by that. Fortunately, the most recent incident was very useful."

"Which was?"

"Carrie became digitised."

"Huh?"

"Converted into computer programs. Like so many online stories and a fair few ridiculous movies, a computer patterned on a person's brain. Quite impractical for a regular computer at this stage of A.I. technology, obviously. We identified this as probably related to her being transferred through the phone network, quite a neat trick, by the way. Once that happened, we were able to make much more progress. It's much easier to work with a series of files rather than a person to follow a pattern. It was even easier once we were able to utilise Carrie's intellect without the distraction of a personality."

"Sorry, what?"

"Once Carrie was a program, it was possible to make modifications like with any other program. We created several presets for a given function. Obviously, we retained her original personality as one of those presets, but it was much easier to work with iCarrie than Carrie."

"iCarrie?"

"What we call the computerised personality. It's like a root system. It has all the knowledge and understanding of nuance but none of the stubbornness or inappropriate playfulness. From there we created a research assistant and...it might be better to demonstrate. Carrie, display presets."

The ball quivers, a holographic display hanging in the air above it. Words appear in the air.

'Original.zip

'Root

'Research

'Display

'Training assistant

'...'

"You zipped up her personality?!!"

"It wasn't necessary for our purposes."

"Lise..."

Lisa folds her arms, but doesn't protest any further.

"So, as you can see, we have a variety of modes for what we need it for. Default; Assisting me in my experiments; Showing how our products work; Allowing our less experienced staff to gain some experience..."

"You're treating her like a..."

"I understand it is difficult for you because she's your sister, but to us she is a thing. And a malfunctioning one at that."

"What?!"

"Anyway, this is a digression. My point was that this digitisation enabled us to determine what was happening. Each magical feat is represented by a container with file structure and receptacle for energy. As Carrie's magical energy accumulates, the energy flows into those containers until one overflows, resulting in the spontaneous expressions of magic we're discussing. This seems mostly to be random, or there's a pattern that even iCarrie can't detect. But after a threshold, around 50%, maybe 60, that container becomes preferentially filled. Once a container is 'filled' like this, the other containers reset. Carrie is able to access it like an assistant who's become used to the magic."

"Have you found a way to stop it?"

"No. The build up is natural, and we haven't found a way to interrupt it. We're working on a command to direct the energy flow so that the spontaneous activations can be better controlled, but that hasn't reached fulfilment yet. We are working on it. Obviously, returning it to you will delay that. We'll try to give you warning on how long it will take for an activation, but we've not got as much precision with that forecasting as I'd like."

"What are the three dots for?"

"Dots?"

Lisa points at the still flickering display. "Those three dots at the end."

"Oh, you can scroll down so that only the bottom menu item is showing, like in a regular computer."

"Or you could be hiding something in there."

Dr Black puts her hand into the display and rolls her fingers up. The menu rolls with the gesture until Training Assistant is at the top above empty space, and three blinking dots at the bottom. Black's eye narrow. "That...is not right." she scrolls some more and some more and then some more, moving through screens of blank space before words begin to appear again in the menu.

'Camgirl

'Relief station

'Fucktoy'

She grits her teeth. "I did not know about that, I promise you."

"Uh-huh. Sure." Lisa replies, unfolding her arms, her fists balled tight enough to whiten her knuckles.

"I didn't! If nothing else, that would be such a waste of its potential."

"You turned my sister into a...!"

"I didn't! If I knew those existed, why would I deliberately scroll to show you?"

Lisa pauses, her nostrils flaring.

"Put my sister back to normal. Now!"

"Yes, of course. Unzip and install preset 'Original'." the sphere quivers, "Restore body." And Carrie unfolds until she's sitting naked on the table.

She blinks, "Oh, wow, that was some...nap?" she looks around, "Why am I back here? It's only Tuesday. Not that I'm complaining. But..." she stops as Lisa throws her arms around her.

"I think you'd best be going, Dr Black."

"Yes. I'll contact you about..."

Peter looks across at Lisa. "You might want to wait until the new year. Give Lise a chance to cool down to something less than supernova level."

"Yes. I see. I didn't..."

"I'll talk to her."

Dr Black looks over at Lisa, the emerald green eyes glowering back resembling a very, very angry tiger's. She swallows a little and walks quickly back through the portal, shouting "SIMEON!!" as it closes.

"Carrie, can you give us a minute?"

"Uhm, sure, I gue..." she crumples into the ball before she even finishes the word.

"I don't want to hear it, Magic Boy."

"Can I just..."

"I know what you're going to say. You're going to say Carrie needs to go back there."

"She..."

"They turned her into a sextoy!! Why am I the only one who seems bothered by that?! At the very least, the idea that someone is abusing your 'property' should get to you! Even if you don't give a fuck about Carrie getting back to being human!"

"And that's why she has to go back."

"Oh, really?" she folds her arms, her head tilting in frustration, "I'm going to love to hear this one."

"They are the only ones who might be able to 'fix' Carrie. Full stop. So, if you, if we, ever want her back, they're the route to that. The only route. If she can control the spontaneous magic, I can argue with Stuart about it being safe enough to let her go back to parts of her life."

"Again, a fucking sextoy!"

"You know I'm right."

"That doesn't make this easier, Magic Boy."

"I know."

"This fucking sucks!"

"I will do something about the..."

"Sextoy." she replies angrily.

"Yes."

"Does it involve leaving me in a room with that fucking Stone guy and a baseball bat?"

"No. I don't want Absalom going after another one of us."

"Fine." she growls, "I guess I have to accept that, too."