

PETER AND LISA: PART 22

MEET THE TROOPS

“Glad you two could make it. Does this mean you’re finally becoming sociable, Peter?”

“Very funny, Stu.”

“Ah, ah, it’s boss, now.”

“In your dreams.”

“He’s got far more interesting things to dream about, Peter.”

“I’m sure he has, Queen Saz, I’m sure he has.”

Sarah beams. “Of course he does, commoner.”

“Shall we meet the troops? Mark and Tabby are on stage, rehearsing, so we’ll get to them when they’re finished.”

“Do they all, you know, are they in on things?”

“Oh, yes, Lisa, they all know. E’s is a collection point for people with talent. We’re a safe house, workplace, and social club all in one. Good thing Stu and I are so talented and hard-working to manage all that, isn’t it?”

“How’s Stu going to cope on his own while you look after the bump?”

“He’ll cope fine, I’ll still be able to supervise him, so he won’t be without my expert guidance.”

“And I’m sure he’s grateful for that, Queen Sarah.”

“Oh, he is.” She grins, as Stuart rolls his eyes, earning him a light tap on his shoulder, “Aren’t you, Stuart?”

“Oh, yes, my Queen, very glad.” He replies, grimacing. They turn into a corridor, stretching out into the distance.

“Wow. Does this place have an echo?”

“Nope. Too narrow.”

“How the hell does this place pass planning inspections? People must notice that you’ve got corridors stretching off to infinity and beyond.”

“You’d be amazed how unobservant people can be around here.”

“Especially when Stuart’s giving them the tour.”

“**The Force is strong in this one.**” Peter breathes.

“Just ignore him, I do.”

“You will pay for your insolence.”

“Yeah, yeah, Darth Peter. Isn’t he cute when he’s a Dark Lord of the Sith?” She turns to Stuart, “How many miles are we going to have to walk to get to your troops?”

“You don’t think I’m walking any more than I have to, do you?” Sarah asks, raising an imperious eyebrow.

“Of course not, y’r Majesty. I was thinking you’d be making the gentlemen of the party be carrying you.”

“What a good idea. Henceforth you shall be my advisor on making the menfolk work harder. You are hereby elevated to the nobility.” She glances at Peter, “And I suppose your ruffian of a partner can be elevated to a lesser status as well.”

“I suppose so, your Majesty.”

“Well? You heard the Royal Advisor. Begin.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

Sarah giggles as she rises into the air, on a throne made out of wispy white cloud, “I could get used to this.” She looks at Peter, “You are now appointed Royal Carrier.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Now, Advisor, observe. Carrier, onwards.” The cloud drifts through the door and speeds away into the distance.

“What the...”

“It’s just so it doesn’t take people a month to get to their dressing room, Lise. So, Stu, which number are we seeing first?”

“Number 42. Rafi and ‘Jita said they wanted to meet the new blood first.”

“Ok. Let’s go, Lise.” He takes Lisa’s hand and steps through the doorway, vanishing after Sarah, his arm stretching back.

Lisa swallows and steps over the threshold, appearing immediately beside Peter. She looks back to see Stuart and the doorway a vertiginously tiny spot in the distance. And seconds later, he’s standing next to them, stepping up beside them. Lisa starts.

“You alright?”

“Yeah. It’s just, I’m not as used to this.”

Peter raises his eyebrow at that.

“You know what I mean. This is, this is weird. Corridors that go on forever and whisk you along them with a step. That sort of thing is going to take a while to get used to.”

Peter strokes her arms gently. Lisa leans against him.

“Cute, aren’t they?”

She looks up at Sarah, and sticks her tongue out. Sarah grins and knocks on the door. It opens, revealing a

smiling young Asian woman, her black hair falling around her face, “Hi, ‘Jita. Any chance we can come in?”

“I think that can be arranged.” There’s a few second pause and the door swings open, to reveal a slight woman sitting on the sofa in a white sleeveless top and jeans, her neck and arm stretching across the room. “Just let me get myself together again and I’ll be right with you. Rafi, the boss has arrived! Look busy!” her distended limbs flow across the room. “That’s better.” She flexes her fingers as she gets up, “Well, come in if you’re coming. Haven’t you ever seen an Indian Rubber Girl before?”

“‘Jita, you’re not trying to freak out the sahib, are you?” A dark-skinned man asks as he walks through another door, drying his hands on a tea towel. ‘Jita’s head stretches out to kiss him.

“Of course not, dear.” Her arm uncoils, snaking around his waist and up his chest. Rafi rolls his eyes as the arm retracts, pulling him across the room to land beside ‘Jita on the sofa. “I saw that, Rafi Kumar.” She squeezes him, her arm snaking back as she leans into his shoulder.

“Yes, Rani.”

“‘Jita, Rafi, ‘Jita. How many times? Rafi and Rani is just waaaaay too cutesy.”

“Like you two newlyweds aren’t too cute and luvvy-duvvy, anyway?”

‘Jita turns towards Sarah, “No sense making it even worse.” She grins, “Besides, our arranged marriage is going good.”

“‘Arranged marriage’?”

“At last, she speaks.” ‘Jita giggles. “Yes, Rafi and I had an arranged marriage. Rafi arranged to be at the temple at a certain time with our families.”

“And ‘Jita arranged to be half an hour late.” Rafi finishes with an easy smile. ‘Jita scowls, folding her arms.

“We agreed we wouldn’t mention that, Rafi.” She pouts.

Rafi quickly turns back to the room, “Sit down, will you? You’re making me nervous.” He gestures at the vacant seats.

“No thanks, this is much more comfy.” Sarah smiles, leaning back in the cloud as the others take their seats.

“Is that? Are you sure it’s safe?” an arm stretches across the room, passing through the cloud. “It’s not even there! Aren’t you worried you’ll fall through it? Where can I get one?”

“‘Jita, one question at a time, maybe?” he strokes his hand along her arm as it pulls back and she leans back into him, wrapping her arms around him.

“It’s perfectly safe. Peter’s done far more difficult things since I’ve know him.”

“You’re doing this?”

“Yeah, it’s just like levitating, really.”

“What’s it feel like? Is it as comfy as it looks?”

“It’s gorgeous. It’s like being wrapped in cotton wool.”

“Rafi, we are so changing the act. That looks soooo much more comfortable than that scratchy carpet.”

“We’ll see. I doubt it’s as easy as all that.” ‘Jita looks pleadingly up at him, “We’ll try. And stop with the puppy eyes. You know that’s not playing fair.”

“You didn’t say I had, to, be...” her head lolls, eyes closing. She blinks, lifting her head up, “Stop that! No hypnotism unless we’re feeling...” Rafi coughs, “oops, sorry.”

“Moving swiftly on.”

An awkward silence slowly descends, “So, what do you do in your act? Apart from the scratchy carpet.”

“Well, sahib,” Rafi starts in a strongly exaggerated accent, “we show the mysteries of India, secrets that our fakirs have spent generations perfecting, and we show these wondrous mysteries by reading, minds, levitating exotic princesses and piercing my good self with nails and skewers.”

“And stuffing your poor helpless princess into a tiny box and shoving things through it, don’t forget that, Rafi.”

“Of course not, dear.”

“What’s with the, uhm, the accent? You sound like you’re Peter Sellers singing Goodness Gracious Me.” (Follow the link if you don’t know what I’m talking about: [Goodness Gracious Me](#))

“Ah, wise sahib, people are far more willing to believe in the wondrous mysteries of India if I don’t sound like a Londoner.”

“He’s much better at it than I am. So he gets to play the wise guru and I get stuck as the harem eye-candy.”

“You know that’s not what you are, ‘Jita.”

“I know.” She snuggles up closer, “And at least you’re not Mark. I still don’t see why Tabby stays with him.”

“Mark?”

“One of the other magicians. A real creep. Just being in the same room as him makes me feel dirty.” She shudders, “Even Tomboli isn’t that bad, drunken, lecherous old git that he is.”

“Jeez, Stu, don’t you employ anyone nice?” Peter grins.

“Obviously not. You’re here.”

“Well, Flo’s pretty nice.”

“Oh, really?” ‘Jita asks, “And just how nice has Florencia Beatriz Elena de la Vega been to you, Rafi?”

“Just friendly.”

“I’ve seen her idea of friendly, Rafi. It usually ends in divorce.”

“Not that friendly. Besides, she’s nowhere near as perfect as you are.”

“Ok. That saves the snuggle.” She leans back into him. “But watch it, buster, and not her.”

“Why would I want to, when I can watch you, instead?”

“Mmmm, right answer.” Her hand slides inside his shirt, a noticeable bulge moving down his body.

“Ummm, ‘Jita? Guests?’”

“I think we were just going, weren’t we?” Sarah smiles as the cloud rises up, “Have fun.”

‘Jita giggles as the door closes. “Now we can try hypnotism...”

“Did you really put someone called Kumar in 42? Weren’t you at all worried they’d take offence?”

“They asked for it, Lisa. Thought it was a giggle.” (This should explain the joke for those who haven’t a clue what I’m talking about: [Kumars at No 42](#))

“Ok, who’ve you lined up next on the magical mystery tour?”

“Tomboli, I think.”

“The drunken leech?”

“Ah, he’s not that bad. For a drunken leech.” She grins.

The corridor shifts. Lisa blinks as the doors blur past. “Give us a warning next time, would you? That corridor makes me dizzy.”

“Sorry.”

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, on your right, you’ll see the lair of Tomboli, magician, clown, comic, drunk.” Lisa looks up, to find Sarah leaning back in the cloud, now wearing a cap with a badge saying “E Tours”.

“Saz, what the hell do you think you’re playing at? You know no magic while you’re...”

“I know, I know. But I didn’t do it. Well, ok, I did, but it was a costume change! The clothes do more magic than I do!”

“It still uses some of your magic to power those changes...”

“Will you please be quiet out there??!! Some of us are havin’ trouble hearin’ ourselves drink with all this noise!” Everybody turns towards the now open door. In it a large man is leaning against the door frame, a thick cigar smouldering out the side of his mouth, a half-filled pint glass dangling from his hand. He chews on the cigar, tracing a smoky cloud in the air. His thinning black hair is pulled back, his eyes almost hidden behind his heavy brows and thick eyebrows. A pair of black braces hold up his trousers stretched over his ample frame and stained white t-shirt. “That’s better. I suppose you’d like to come in?” he turns, swigging from the glass as he walks into the dressing room. He turns, “Well, are you coming in or what?” he shakes the half-empty glass meaningfully. “If not, I’ve got things to do.”

“Sounds like a wonderful idea.” Sarah drifts forward through the doorway after Tomboli, “I’ll have a black coffee, if you’re offering. Easy on the vodka.”

“No problem.” He leads them into the room, its white walls gleaming, glass shelves in their chrome frames holding a variety of photos, many black and white, more than a few signed. The floors are a glossy black, matching the chrome-legged black leather sofas, a glass coffee-table in the middle of the room.

Lisa stops in the doorway, staring at the pristine room. "This is your room?"

"Not what you were expecting, was it, darlin'?" Tomboli grins, a black jacket over his t-shirt, no longer stained but almost as white as the walls. He hands her a china cup and saucer, "Tea?"

"Uhm, no, I mean, yes, uhm, I mean, yes, tea would be good."

Tomboli brings out an old steel kettle, pouring into the cup. He holds his beer glass under it, pouring amber out of the spout. "Ahhh, much better." He drains half the glass before pausing. "Go on, sit down. Just use the coasters. I don't want to have to clean up that table again today." He settles down, leaving the kettle besides him, and places the cigar back in his mouth. "So, you guys are the new act, are you?" his eyes wander up and down Lisa. "Yeah, I can see you in skintights."

"Jita was right about you being a leech."

"Hey, I'm only human. You put some beautiful bird half falling out of skintight stuff that looks like it's been made by Victoria's Secrets during a cloth shortage in front of me, and I'm gonna look. Hell, I'm gonna stare, and I may drool, but that 'Jita is a very tasty-lookin' bird. Rafi's a lucky bloke to 'ave 'er. I just wish she could cook better. I've 'ad better ruby's* at 7 in the morning." (*Ruby=rhyming slang for curry, from Ruby Murry)

"Uhm, Tom, could you put that out, please?" Stuart nods towards Sarah, "You know..."

Tomboli glances across the room at Sarah, chewing on the cigar. "Ok, if you insist." He flips the cigar end over end, catching the glowing tip in his mouth. He pulls the cigar in, chews and swallows, puffing out a thick ring of smoke. "You doin' alright, Saz?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Tom. I just wish Junior'd get a move on. It's nice being waited on by people other than Stu, don't get me wrong, but I want to be able to go for a walk again, rather than a waddle."

"Seems you got that problem fixed t' me."

"I don't think I can really go down Oxford Street window shopping in this."

"Pffft. It's London. Who'd pay any attention? You could walk down the street with two heads and four arms and people would only notice if you walked into 'em." He reaches for the kettle again, pouring out another full glass.

"I think I'll pass on trying it out."

"Suit yourself." He gulps down half the glass. "So, what can I tell ya? I'm a clown. I do some small stuff, small beer for guys like you, but it makes people laugh. If I'm dealing with kids, I'll probably toss in some balloons and silly stories. If it's the grown-ups, the stories are just as silly but a heck of a lot ruder. Same with the act. I wouldn't do a bra-swapping trick with kids, but if the show's adult only, they get what they pay for. I prefer adult shows, to be honest. They don't mind if I have a little nip before going on."

"Or during."

Tomboli shrugs, "It got a laugh. And I know they told their friends good things."

"Come see the drunken clown?" Lisa asks.

Tomboli scowls a little, "You've got a very smart mouth on you, young lady. Might get you in trouble one day. Not everyone's got my sunny disposition, y'see. Mark don't treat his own bird that well. Some uppity flibbertigibbet might get on his bad side."

“But not a drunk?”

“Nah. He’s got a bit of a temper, and drink don’t help him with that, but he’s not that bad. Got enough chips on his shoulder to sell with a good bit of cod, mind, but he’s alright. ‘Part from when he cheats at poker. Besides, I’m not a drunk.”

“Three pints in five minutes?”

“Pffft. I’m just getting nicely settled before goin’ out. You can’t get drunk in London unless you win the lottery. If I don’t start out better’n half-smashed, I’ll never get anywhere. And it’s not like I ‘aven’t got a lot to soak up the booze with.” He grabs his stomach, pulling it up.

“Maybe you could afford it if you didn’t gamble so much.”

“Aaaah, you’re right. I spend a lot of my dosh on booze, fags, loose women and the cards. I guess I waste the rest.” He shrugs, resuming the drink. “Doesn’t help that I play cards with magicians ‘alf the time. No surer way to lose money. Even Vegas don’t take as much off ya as Mark an’ Scott between ‘em. ‘Course Scott’s got to slip away from ‘is old lady first, but if he shows, he’s dynamite. Soon as I get enough to get some magic-proof cards, we’ll see if things stay that way.” He chuckles. “Who you going to see next?”

“Trying to get rid of us already, Tom?”

“Well, y’see, I met this Swedish bird and said we’d meet up today, and, well...”

“Far be it from us to stop the course of true love.”

“Who said anything about love? She’s just seen the size of my shoes.”

Sarah shakes her head, “You’re impossible, Tom.”

“Around here? That’s saying somethin’.” He puffs his chest out, “Give my regards to Flo when you see her.” He moves his hands in an hourglass shape, wolf-whistling.

“You’re a pig, Tom Bolam.”

“Yeah, but I’m lovable with it.”

Sarah shakes her head as the cloud drifts out of the room. “Well, I can’t argue with you there.”

“Don’t mention Tom, or cards. Marie doesn’t like Scott playing with Tom.”

“Why?”

“She thinks he’ll get him drunk or con him out of his money.”

“From what he was saying he loses a lot more than Scott does.”

“Oh, he does. But Marie, well, you’ll see.”

Stuart knocks on the plain door.

The door swings open. The thin man in the doorway is wearing a crumpled shirt, a pair of thin rimmed

glasses resting on his forehead. His white hair is pulled back and up, making him look like a clean-shaven, slightly wrinkled Gepetto. "Oh, hello, Stuart, Sarah." He looks at the cloud, tilting his head, "You do know you're sitting on a cloud, I take it?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Ah, Peter, my boy! My, how you've grown. How are you, how are you? Your parents are well?"

Peter shuffles uncomfortably.

"And this must be Victoria. Delighted. You look wonderful, my dear."

Lisa glances at Peter, who shifts even more uncomfortably.

"Scott!" a high voice calls from inside the room.

"Sorry, must dash, duty calls." The door closes.

"What the..."

The door opens, Scott looking a little sheepish as he stands aside, "Sorry, sorry, don't know what I was thinking. Come in, come in."

He ushers them through into a room wrapped in flower-patterned wallpaper. A brick hearth dominates one wall, china dogs and rabbits along the mantle. The carpet is thick underfoot, the chairs overstuffed.

A thin woman hurries over, her dark brown hair tinted with coppery highlights, piled high in ringlets. A long skirt almost touches the ground, a loose blouse draped from her shoulders. Her long nails are painted red, pearls around her neck, her face smooth with makeup, mascara shading her eyes. "You'll have to forgive Scott. He doesn't always act his age. I'm Marie. And you must be Richard's son. I must say..."

"Darling, have you seen my glasses? I can't seem to find them."

Marie sighs, "They're on your forehead, dear."

Scott reaches up, "Oh, so they are. Thank you, dearest." He leans over, giving Marie a peck on the cheek. He turns towards them, "Won't you sit down, all of you?" he gestures vaguely towards the sofa and chairs, sitting down into one battered leather armchair himself.

"So, Peter, how's your father doing? Haven't heard from him in, ohhh, a good few years now."

"Uhm, he's, ah, he's..."

"Scott, you know I told you about Richard and Janet." Marie interrupts, placing a china cup of tea in front of each of them.

"Oh," he looks across towards Peter on the sofa, "oh, right, yes, sorry, my boy." He scratches his head, pulling a coin out from behind his ear. He stares at it for a few seconds, then shrugs, putting it to one side.

"So," Marie says, drawing the attention away, "I am glad you're going to continue your father's act, dear. You're not going to update it too much, are you? I know we have to modernise, but there's something sad when the old classics are gone. And there is such a thing as too modern, isn't there? I don't know why she puts up with it; if he treated me like that I'd walk. Mind you, at least she's well mannered, not like that foreign hussy. I swear, I've seen more clothes on a nudist beach. Anton's nice, I suppose, if you like silence, but the way she just drapes herself over everything like some kind of centrefold, it's not decent. Especially when she's doing it over someone. Doesn't like to leave too much to the imagination, that one."

Of course, Tomboli's no better, always drunk, or drooling over her or some other piece of fluff, or playing cards till all hours of the night. I don't know why you put up with him, Stuart, and for a children's entertainer yet. You know he's drunk half the time he's on stage."

Scott pulls a red handkerchief from his sleeve, and polishes his glasses, replacing them on his nose as he pulls streams of knotted handkerchiefs from his sleeve, piling them up. "The girl's alright. A bit quiet, but she's sweet. What's her name, Meggan? Morgan? That's it, Miss Morgan."

"Yes, I suppose, but all that makeup, completely hides her face behind it, and she'd be so pretty without it, too."

Scott looks down, a playing card in his hand. He scratches his head, finds another playing card in his hair and puts them aside, only to find another taking their place. Marie studiously ignores the increasingly card-covered scene.

"What type of act do you have?" Peter asks, glancing towards Scott as he pulls more and more cards out of nowhere.

"Oh, we do the old classics, back from before P T Selbit came along. Scott's a wonder with making things appear, as you can see," she looks over at her husband, looking distinctly unimpressed with his behaviour, "but he also levitates me, card tricks, reads my mind, about the only time he does that. Our dove and silk acts are the best..." she stops as a white dove struggles out of the pile of cards, coos, and takes flight onto Scott's shoulder. "Just ignore him. When he gets in these moods, he'll do anything for attention."

Scott looks down sheepishly, the bird cooing as it changes colour from white to blue.

"Is he alright?"

"Yes, yes, he's just looking for attention. Sometimes he gets like this. He always gets over it. But it's probably best if he doesn't have an audience. He knows I don't tolerate this sort of nonsense."

"Ok, Marie." Sarah floats down, giving the older woman a kiss on the cheek. "See you later, Scott."

Scott rises, "Allow me to escort you to the door, dear lady."

Marie rolls her eyes, "You'd better let him."

Lisa lets Scott's white gloves take her hand. She feels something hard and cold appear in her palm from the glove. Scott winks, his eyes gleaming. "Just something to make up for an old man's foolishness around youth." He whispers.

Lisa turns, but Scott pulls his hand back, leaving a gold sovereign in her palm. "Take care all. See you soon. Toodle-oo." He waves, closing the door behind him, a rabbit peeking out of the top of his jacket pocket.

"How many more regulars do you have? I'm amazed you've got room for us!"

"Only a few left. And talented friends of the owner can usually find a slot."

Lisa raises her eyebrows.

“Ok, and we need another big box magic act. Mark’s the only one who really goes in for that kind of thing and he’s not to everyone’s taste. Once you get comfortable, you’ll be a pretty good draw.”

“We’re not going to be performing all that often, though, so how...”

“That’s what you think. You’ll get the bug once you get your first good taste of applause.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

Sarah grins down from the cloud, “Care to put your money where your mouth is? I bet you’re a regular within, oh, let’s make this easy, three months.”

“How much?”

“Depends. How confident are you?”

“£100.”

“Done!” she reaches down, shaking Lisa’s hand to seal the deal. “Easiest £100 I ever made. Regular doesn’t mean frequent, you know.”

“What?”

“And I’m in charge of the schedule.” She grins. “You’ve got a lot to teach the poor girl, Peter. Tut tut.” She wags her finger disapprovingly at him, “Too much kinky magigasm, not enough on making agreements without a lot of care. Such a disappointment.”

“Are you finished?”

“Nope. I figure this could go on for at least another half-hour. Or until she comes to the door. Whichever comes first.” She floats up to the door, and raps on it hard, “Come on, Tracy, we know you’re in there. If you don’t open up by the time I count to five, I’ll replace all your Cure CDs with Girls Aloud. I mean it. 1...2...3...” the door opens a fraction, revealing a pale white face surrounded by long curtains of raven black hair peeking around the door. Thin lips are painted black, heavy eyeliner making the face’s dark eyes appear sunken and hollow.

“Yes?”

Sarah beams, “Hi, Tracy. You remember we said the new magician would be coming round...” she gestures at Peter with a proper showgirl flourish, spreading her arms, “ta-da.”

Tracy shrinks further behind the door.

“And I’m Lisa. Also known as chopped liver.”

“Awww. Poor neglected Chopped Liver.” Peter wraps his arm around her shoulder, earning a slight scowl, although she does lean into his arm.

The door slowly opens, although this doesn’t reveal much more about the person behind it.

“C-c-come in.” squeaks from behind the door.

Inside, the walls are a rich royal purple, spiderwebs of black lace draped in the corners, softening the edges. At the back of the room is a small dresser, a large oval mirror in an ornate bronze frame up against the wall. Just below the ceiling, a procession of zodiacal symbols and signs parade. A long black dress, made from a sheer, flimsy fabric, hangs on a hook by the dresser, besides a parchment-like poster covered

in concentric rings and more symbols than an algebra exam paper. The lights in the room are low, candles flickering on the dresser itself, filling the room with a tang of incense. Along one wall, in a blackened wood bookcase, are dozens of thick tomes, wrapped up in cracked leather bindings, more black lace hanging over the corners.

Lisa turns to look back at the door. Slowly it closes, revealing a ghost behind it, the girl's white face in complete contrast to her black dress. A black blouse covers the top of the dress, the cuffs drippings lace around pale white hands with obsidian nails, the hands clasped in front of her like a naughty schoolgirl, her head bowed, a curtain of black hair streaked over her face. Behind the door, and the silent figure, is a poster, a pale woman in a sheer black dress, slit dangerously low down the front, her black hair cascading behind her, hands on a cloudy crystal ball, fog swirling around her. The jagged red letters at her feet read 'Morgana'. Tracy looks up, violet eyes meet Lisa's and her head immediately turns away, hiding behind the screen of hair.

"Tracy, come on out of there. I keep telling you hiding in the shadows is bad for your health."

Tracy comes slowly out of the door's shadow, head still slightly bowed.

"That's better. Now, let's sit down and see if we can get a conversation going, shall we?"

"Might be a bit of a problem there, Saz. There's only one chair."

"That's not a problem, Stu." Peter smiles, and sits down on thin air. He leans back, hands behind his head.

"Showoff." Lisa mutters, kicking into the space where the chair's legs would be. Peter waves his arms wildly and drops to the floor.

"Ow! That wasn't nice, Lise."

"I didn't think it would work." She replies, trying to stifle laughing. Sarah doesn't bother.

"Wow. Someone can finally put you in your place, Peter? Whoever thought we'd see the day."

Peter picks himself up, and takes hold of the chair, pulling it out. A streak of black leaps off the chair, landing on the dresser, cards flying out of its way. The small pitch-black cat stops, turning its disdainful eyes on Peter before turning up its nose and settling down on the dresser, revealing the white streaks along its legs.

"Salem!" Tracy shouts, picking up the scattered cards, "Bad kitty." Salem opens one green eye, and closes it again, burying her head deeper into her tail, "You spoiled my reading." The tip of Salem's tail flicks.

"I don't think he's listening."

"She. You can't have a tom witch's cat." Tracy says matter-of-factly, still picking up the cards. "It upsets the joining with the Goddess."

Peter hands her a card from his lap, a knight in an open faced-helm on a pacing white steed, a golden cup held in his hand.

Tracy looks from the card to Peter, "The Knight of Cups, Lord of Waves and Waters, King of the Hosts of the Sea. A deep, and caring, but easily bored dreamer. Intelligent, imaginative, principled but with no direction."

"Perfect! I think she's nailed you, Peter. May I?" she draws a card from the deck, turning over a woman in a dress of roses, holding a sceptre with one hand, a golden coronet entwined in her golden hair. A

shield lies against her dark red throne. “The Empress, Daughter of the Mighty Ones. Maternal care, domestic stability, abundance, fertility, security, creative in love and money.” She glances at Sarah, “Sometimes indicates pregnancy.”

Sarah laughs, “Well, a little late on the warning, but...”

Stuart takes a card, a man seated on a throne wrapped in roses, his dark robes bedecked with leaves. A silver rams head is on one arm of the throne, under a pentacle on a golden disc, while a silver bulls head rests on the other under his sceptre, “The King of Coins, King of the Thrones of the Earth. Loyal, dependable, cautious. Patient, slow to lose his temper, but firm in his wrath, but lacks imagination.” She looks at Stuart, “Sometimes.”

“Fairly accurate, I think.”

Tracy smiles shyly, offering the deck to Lisa. She rolls her eyes and pulls out a card, showing a young man in a short tabard and hose, holding a greenwood staff erect, a small cap over his brown hair, a small copper cape hanging straight down from his shoulders. “The Page of Wands, Princess of the Shining Flames, Rose of the Palace of Fire. Trustworthy and reliable, who brings light, joy and entertainment to all. Never sits still, always wanting to explore, and be the centre of attention.”

“I think we get the better titles out of this deal.” She smiles.

“Oh, I agree.” Sarah replies, “All hail Chopped Liver, Princess of the Shining Flames!”

Lisa sticks out her tongue and turns her back on Sarah, “Your turn. Or don’t we get to find out about our oracle?”

“B-b-but, I’m not, I mean, I, I...” she draws a card, a benign Moon, crescent face in a disc between two pillars, hovering above a dog, a fox and a lobster crawling out of a pond onto a winding trail down the centre of the card, “The Moon, Ruler of the Flux and Reflux, Child of the Sons of the Mighty. Dreams and psychic visions. Imagination, the unconscious mind. Acting or writing, but always seeing what is not.”

“So, Child of the Mighty Ones...”

“Don’t make fun. This is serious. Just because you don’t believe, doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

Lisa takes a step back.

“She’s still a sceptic.” Peter explains.

“After dealing with you, she’s sceptical?” Sarah asks incredulously.

“‘She’ is still very much in the room as well, you know?”

“Of course, we wouldn’t want to ignore Princess Chopped Liver, do we?”

“Just you wait until you’ve had that kid, Sarah, I’ll...”

“Wh-what are you sceptical about?”

Lisa looks around the room, “This. All this. It doesn’t make sense to me. You believe, and I’m happy for you, but I can’t take horoscopes and things like that seriously.”

“Ohh, horoscopes.” Tracy sneers, “They’ve got as much to d-do with astrology as the Day After Tomorrow has with climate change. If you believe that you and five million other people are all going to

have the same day, you're really naïve or really stupid."

"Or both."

Tracy smiles, "Or both. That" She points to the parchment chart on the wall, "is a real horoscope."

Lisa takes a closer look at the chart, but comprehension doesn't come. "Whose is it?"

"Mine." Tracy says proudly. "I worked it myself. But I'm still trying to get the exact time of birth to make it right."

"And this let's you see your future?"

Tracy fixes her with a withering look, "Of course not. This just defines who I am. You'd have to be a real moron to think astrology can predict the future."

"Hey, until a minute ago all I knew about astrology was that it gave people terrible taste in jumpers!"

Tracy laughs, "And h-h-hairstyles."

"Well, if we've had enough fun with poor old Russell Grant..."

"Can you ever run out of fun with Russell?"

"As I was saying before Princess Chopped Liver interrupted, Tracy, why don't you explain what your act is?"

"W-w-well, I read minds, mostly. Some psychometry, you know, object reading, remote sensing. Only I'm Morgana when I do it, in that dress. They cover the whole stage in dry ice and shine the lights on me so I look really, really pale. All spooky and s-s-sexy. And not s-s-s-stuttering!"

"How's Tom's hypnosis doing on helping that?"

"Oh, v-v-v-very well. If I wanted to be a d-d-duck! I don't stutter when I quack! He deserves his card."

"His card?"

"The Devil, the Lord of the Gates of Matter, the Child of Time. Obsessed with the physical and money. Sex-obsessed. Wants, needs and desires."

"Sounds about right."

Tracy smiles evilly, "But he's going to get a surprise next time. Scott's been teaching me hypnosis, t-t-too."

"That could be fun to watch. So, what's next in our fortunes, Tracy?"

"Oh, w-w-well," she grabs for the Tarot and pulls out three cards at once, "The Empress of Wands and the King of Swords. You're going to see Flo and Anton. Then the Magician, so you're finishing with M-M-Mark."

"Sounds like a plan. See you later, Tracy."

"Bye." Tracy waves, closing the door. Then she notices a fourth card hidden behind the Magician, the Tower. "Ooooh, that isn't good."

“How are you enjoying the tour, your Majesty?”

“It’s wonderfully refreshing. Unfortunately, the guide is impudent and should be executed forthwith.”

“Of course, Princess Chopped Liver. I shall see to it directly.”

“Good. Carry on.”

“Did you have a preference for method of execution, Princess?”

“Oh, guillotine, definitely. Followed by parading her traitorous head around the kingdom.”

Sarah’s eyes sparkle, “Yes, your Majesty.”

“I don’t think your wife’s good for Lisa, Stu. At home, she’s almost sane.”

“I resent that, Magic Boy.”

“Yeah, you can’t talk to Princess Chopped Liver like that!” Sarah agrees. “And if you’re sniggering rather than coughing behind that hand, you are in deep trouble, Stuart!”

Stuart clears his throat, and knocks on the door.

“Quem é ele?”

“Uhm, Saz?”

“Allow me.” She sighs, “Totally useless at man-management, or especially woman-management.” She rolls her eyes theatrically as she floats up to the door. “Florescia de la Vega, se você não abrir esta porta e não falar o inglês, eu arrastarei sua parte traseira azeitona-descascada para fora aqui e espancá-lo-ei até que Anton grite.”

“Ah, Sarah, you have come. Anton, the door.”

“What did you say, Saz?”

“I just asked nicely if she’d open the door and speak English so certain monolingual husbands could understand.”

“I’m bilingual.”

“Draconic doesn’t count, dear.”

The door opens. Behind it is a tall, well-muscled figure, looming over them. His black waistcoat hangs open over a rippling torso, the leather creaking occasionally, black tattoos peeking around the edges and tracing along his arms. He stares impassively behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses, his scalp shaved bald, a copper goatee covering his chin. Of course, what draws the eye is what’s in the large, calloused hands. One hand holds a machete, stained with dark drops hanging from the blade, the other holds two of the wide blades. Thin white scars run down and across his forearms cutting through the black ink. Lisa takes an involuntary step back.

“Hi, Anton.”

He nods, and stands aside, gesturing in with the stained machete.

Sarah floats past.

“What’s on that blade? It looks like blood.”

Anton looks up. “Es ist Blut. Ich habe Abendessen vorbereitet.”

“Oh.”

“Anton, I meant you speak English as well.”

“Ich verwirklichte. Aber er würde erfreulich sein aufzupassen.”

Sarah laughs, “I’d include you in the spanking.”

“Denken Sie dieses würden sein ein Problem?”

“Sprechen Sie einfach Englisch, bitte.”

Anton shrugs as they walk into the room. An olive-skinned woman lounges on the sofa, a short red dress clinging to her figure like its life depended on it, cut barely along her thigh and only just covering her bust. Her black hair is cut short, small curls hanging over her forehead. She purses her ruby lips and blows out a smoke ring, popping it with a delicate red fingernail. She stretches languidly, like a cat that’s waking up, the dress clinging frantically to cover her, turning her smouldering eyes on them.

“This is...”

“Florescia Beatriz Elena de la Vega,” the woman on the sofa purrs, raising her hand, “and you’ve met my Anton.” Anton nods. “And Sarah finally brings you to me. What is it you say, ‘saving the best ‘til last’?”

“Actually, we’re seeing Mark next.”

“Ah, Mark, tall, handsome, dark, and dangerous.” she purrs through the list, “He is a scary man.”

“Too much man for you?” Sarah asks sweetly.

Florescia’s eyes narrow, “Too little. A real man knows how to treat a woman. Like my Anton. So attentive.”

Anton scowls at Mark’s name, knuckles tightening on the handle of the machete.

“You have met the others, of course. Little Tracy, so scared and timid, poor little mouse, so afraid of being a real woman. And Scott, such a charming, old-fashioned gentleman, like having Gepetto for an uncle. How he puts up with that shrew of a wife I will never understand. And of course that nice young ‘Rafi and his jealous little wife.” Anton looks down at the floor at that, shifting from one foot to the other.

“And what’s your act?” Lisa asks, mentally adding and does it involve a scratching post?

“I show you.” She rolls upright, gliding up off the sofa, slinking towards them. She throws her head back, hands on her arched back, coincidentally thrusting her chest forward to the protests of the dress. She opens her mouth and a gout of flame rolls out, singeing the ceiling. She brings her hands out, sweeping them through the flame, emerging with a flickering flame on each palm. She dances around them, twisting the flames into ribbons before she sinks back to the sofa. “That is my act. Anton, show the nice people what you do.”

Anton nods and wipes the machete clean before tossing all three into the air, sending them spinning up, flashing in the light. He catches each and immediately sends it up again, each throw a little higher. Flo claps her hands once, sharply. Anton drops to his knees, throws his head back and the machetes plunge down his gullet, one after the other. He rises awkwardly, the hilts emerging from his mouth and bows stiffly before pulling the blades out. “Good, yes? Sometimes we are together, Anton and I will juggle burning torches. Sometimes we are separate.”

Stuart looks at his watch. “Mark and Tabitha should have finished by now. See you later, Flo, Anton.”

“Aww, so soon. Come and see me again later.”

The door shuts. “Is she for real? God, I can see why ‘Jita thinks she’s up to something. If she could bottle that raw sex, she’d make a fortune.”

“Mmmm.”

“Mmmm what?”

“Oh? Well, I suppose we could bottle her. Not sure how much...”

“And only from you would that comment make any sense, Magic Boy. But if I catch you thinking of her in a more, solid way, you’re in trouble.”

Peter holds his hands up in surrender.

The corridor blurs in the distance, a tiny black point rushing towards them, growing into a pale wraith wrapped in black.

“There you are. Thank Gaea I c-c-caught you.” Tracy holds out the Tower card, a stone tower on fire, blasted by lightning, people falling out into space, “It was under the Magician. If you go to see Mark, there’ll be disaster.”

“Disaster? Well, you stay here with Tracy and figure out what the disaster is, Magic Boy. I’m sure between you you’ll be able to stop it. Meanwhile, I’ve got a handsome, dark, dangerous and scary magician to see.”

“B-b-but...”

“I’ll be fine. Disasters are my sister’s speciality, not mine.”

“B-b-but...”

“She has a point. We can’t have Princess Chopped Liver going wandering off by herself.”

“I suppose. In that case, would your Majesty care to accompany me for a stroll?”

“P-P-Princess????”

“Just ignore them, Tracy.” Stuart turns towards them, “Do the cards have anything to say about what the disaster is?”

“Hmmp. Well, if we’re going to be ignored...” the cloud drifts with Lisa down the corridor, rapidly

dwindling away.

“...we might as well go see Mark.” they stand at a door marked backstage. “Although, Tracy might be right.”

“Oh, please, he's going to do something to the boss' wife? Anyway, I always carry this.” she pulls out the lightsabre. “A girl can't be too careful in London these days.”

“Hmmm, I can see it now, 'Chopped Liver, Warrior Princess'. It has a nice ring to it. Maybe get Lucy Lawless in the main role.”

“I was thinking Kirsten Dunst, myself.”

“Maybe. We'll cast the other roles later. In the meantime, we've got someone to introduce you to.” she pushes open the door. Through the translucent drapes, they can see a man pulling a collection of chains across the stage. His black t-shirt clings to his chest, hugging his washboard abs. His skin is smoothly tanned, strands of dark chestnut hair falling over his forehead, a short chinstrap beard and moustache around his mouth. He shakes his head, setting his hair jostling and shoulders the chains, turning his back to them, faded blue jeans holding tight.

“That's Mark? Flo has a point.”

“Down girl. You're taken, remember?”

“I'm not going to buy anything. I'm just,” she looks through the drapes, “windowshopping.”

“Of course.”

Mark dumps the chains into a chest and strides back across the stage, a slight smirk lightning on his mouth.

“Can he see us?”

“Nope. Those are one way. Let's us keep an eye on things without disrupting the show. It's also helpful for newer assistants. They can see when they need to come on.”

“Oh, and of course, you'd never use it to spy on the eye-candy.”

Sarah smiles, “Of course not. I use it to evaluate their performances in confidence.”

“Of course. Well, he certainly looks dangerous. Got the whole alpha predator vibe going on. Bet he's got fangs under that smile. Very David Boreanaz.” Sarah looks at her quizzically, “He plays Angel.” another quizzical look, this one with a wicked smile added, “Peter likes it.”

“Of course he does. Mark does normally do the show in leather, overcoat and all, you know.”

“Must be hot.”

“Well, he at least appears in the coat, Princess Pedant.”

The drapes part. Mark stops, and smiles. He doesn't have any noticeable fangs. “Well, well, I didn't know today was my birthday. Two lovely ladies waiting for me.”

“Mark, this is Lisa. Lisa, this charming scoundrel is Mark. Tabitha about, Mark?”

“Enchanted.” he bows, taking Lisa's hand and kissing it. “I put Tabby away when we'd finished practising

the performance. But to what do I owe this visit?"

"Oh, I'm just showing our new act around, meeting the troops. The usual. We did tell you."

"Of course, Sarah. It completely slipped my mind. And the new act is impressive indeed, if she's the one who conjured your throne. Perhaps I could persuade you to join my act?"

"Didn't Sarah say you've already got someone, Tabitha, wasn't it?"

"Tabitha? Oh, Tabby's nothing important. She's just my assistant. But you could be something much more."

Lisa's eyebrows rise sharply, "As much as I hate to disappoint you, Romeo, I've got a Magic Boy to play with."

"Bah. A woman like you deserves a real man, not a boy."

The eyebrows rise further, "And this 'real man' would be you?"

"I think you'll find I'm well qualified."

Lisa smiles her sweetest smile, tilting her head slightly, "And if you want to stay qualified, Casanova, you'll back off. Or I'll introduce your qualifications to something sharp and hot."

The door to the corridor opens, "Ah, you've met Mark. Mark, this is the other half of the..."

"You!! What the fuck is this, Stuart?! Your new act is this murdering bastard?! Fuck that! And fuck you!" he barges past, the door slamming behind him.



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