

PETER AND LISA: PART 26
THE GREAT ~~MIKE~~ MEPHISTO (AND FRIENDS)

“Why couldn’t we just,” she looks around the carriage but no one is paying any attention, as the countryside whistles past outside, “magic us down there? This will take hours.”

“Portaling in to someone else’s place is considered rather rude, and I don’t know the area well enough to go close. Besides which, there’s the whole attention thing.”

“The whole attention thing is a real pain.”

“True. But it’s better than having to fend off baying mobs with torches and pitchforks.”

“I guess. But, surely people aren’t...”

“Of course not, that’s why that paediatrician’s house in Wales was smashed up when people thought she was a paedophile. Because people never congregate into violent, unthinking mobs when they’re scared.”

“I suppose. But you are not that scary, Magic Boy.”

“Oh?” he arches his eyebrow, “You’re saying someone who can make people disappear like that,” he snaps his fingers, “isn’t scary?”

“But you bring them back.”

“But I might not. There’s nothing that forces me to bring them back. And let’s not forget sacrificing people to the devil for my powers.”

“But you don’t do that.”

“And who’d believe me? I’m a lying, cheating, evil, virgin-sacrificing bastard, after all.”

Lisa sighs, “Of course you are. Well, at least I’m safe from you, then.”

“True. Do you know how difficult it is to find virgins these days?”

“Well, I haven’t seen too many on the shelves at Tesco lately, I admit. And speaking of things not remotely virgin, how’s Carrie getting down?”

“Well, she said she was getting the train but...”

“There you are!”

“...she didn’t say which one.”

“Honestly, how do you expect me to find you if you hide away up here?”

“You didn’t say you were coming on this train.”

“Well, honestly, did you see the timetable? What other train would I be taking? Why can’t we just ‘port down there?” she flops into the empty seat opposite, the red aces peeking behind the black on her tattoo, a white baby-t with “Goddess” across her chest in glitter and jeans clinging tightly to her.

“Because, sister dear, no drawing attention to ourselves, remember?”

Peter, very wisely, says nothing.

Carrie sulks, arms folded across her chest petulantly, “Stupid rules. It’s just not fair. You can break every single law of physics going, in an afternoon, hell in one trick, if you do it right, but you can’t blip across the country. So not fair.”

“And that concludes the witness for the prosecution.”

To which Carrie sticks out her tongue, revealing a small silver stud.

“When did you get that pierced?!?”

And just as quickly yanks it back in. “Tuesday.”

“Why did you...”

“Because I was celebrating. Sarah found me this great place to live, and I’ve looked and it’s gorgeous, but it costs too much, so I’ve had to get a flatmate, but Tracy’s great and we get on really well, and we’ve moved in, well, at least we’ve moved in some stuff, though we’re still waiting for the cable guy to come round and fix things, so it’s not really liveable yet, not without net access, but it is just so great.”

“Ah, my magical home after the EMC threw me out.” Carrie sighs as they approach the theatre, its door painted black, ‘The Inferno’ written above in unlit red, stylised flames behind it. A poster stands to one side of the door, a life-size Asian woman, her short black hair highlighted with a single streak of blue smiling out, in traditional showgirl pose, arms around “The Great Mephisto” in red flames, a tiny thong bikini barely covering her.

“What was EMC?”

“Well,” Carrie smiles, “it was the shorthand for the place. Saying the Erotic Magic Club just took way too long.”

“The what magic club?!”

“Erotic. Are you sure you want to know anything else, sis? You’re looking a little red.”

“What does an ‘erotic magic’ show consist of?”

“Welllllll,” Carrie pauses, stretching her answer out, rattling her tongue stud around her teeth as if thinking, “it means that, at most, we were wearing leather hot pants that would make Kylie blush, and lots and lots of strapping and tying up. And obviously the audience would have to check everything out, make sure we weren’t hiding things, which was fun. All the girls had a gimmick, like fire-eating, contortion and so on. I did some simple sleights, which let me tell you is a lot harder when you’ve got nowhere to hide things, but easier as no one pays your hands any attention. And then one of us got picked and got to do the main event. And that was often freaky, but it is just so cool to be twisted up like that.”

“Hold on, this was a topless show?!”

“Not always, sis.” She glances over as Lisa slowly lets out a sigh of relief, “Sometimes we ended up stark bollock naked.”

“You what? Carrie...”

“Oh, please, sis, not another lecture. If people want to pay good money to ogle me, let them. It’s my body, remember? If I want to show it off, it’s my business. And the extra money helped keep my student loan down to extortionate levels. You needn’t sound like I’m starring in the latest Viv Thomas porn film.”

“That’s...”

“Do you think you could continue this somewhere else, huh? Some of us are trying to work here.”

“What? Who said that?”

There is a muffled snort as Carrie quickly covers her mouth.

“Right here.” The rather irritated voice replies, “No, to your left. No, not that far. Oh, honestly, I’m right here!” Lisa finds herself staring at the poster, “Yes, that’s it. Hello. Welcome to the Inferno. The next show is this evening, but...”

“Hey, Jo.” Carrie waves, “How’s things going?”

“Oh, you know, so so, I’m feeling a bit flat at the moment.”

Carrie groans, “Don’t you get tired of pulling out that old joke?”

“So, these are them, huh? Your sister, right?”

“Right. My big, bad sister. And she’s the one who caught a real magician.”

“Awwww, poor Carrie. Always the bridesmaid...”

“Yeah, yeah. Enjoying yourself?”

“You have to ask?” she pauses, “He says he’s ready for you now. Door’s open. You do remember the way? Haven’t forgotten things since you abandoned us for the big city?”

“Funny. Watch it, or I’ll come back and give you a moustache.”

“Scary. Don’t mind the chaos, it’s prep time.”

Carrie grins, pulling the doors open.

“What’s prep time? And who was that?”

Carrie grins even wider, walking through the deserted foyer into a side door, “That was Jo. Looks like she finally persuaded Mike to let her work outdoors.”

"You mean he keeps her outside like that?"

"Probably not. And even if he did he's probably done something so she won't get cold and wet. He's really nice, well, not nasty, just a bit, well, you know, grabby. Although he does have very good hands."

"I don't want to know how good his hands are. He tries anything and he'll need new ones! Now, what was prep time?"

"You don't know what you're missing, sis."

"Prep time. Explain."

"Ok, ok, grouch. Prep time's when we're getting ready and it gets a little bit, well, mad."

"How..." a door up ahead of them crashes open, a statuesque blonde racing into the corridor, her hair streaming out behind her, her bosom threatening to bounce out of her tiny black bikini. Tucked under her arm is a second, nearly identical chest, the pendulous breasts pressed tightly to her as it squirms. "...mad?"

"Andi, you give those back!!"

"Mwah-ha-ha-ha!" Andi laughs in best evil genius form as a second blonde races out of the door, her shoulders joined directly to the top of her stomach making her a good foot shorter than her double, "Make me, Becks. You know they look better on me anyway!"

Becks leaps across the corridor as Andi flings open the opposite door, crashing into Andi's back, sending them both tumbling through the door with a crash and an ominous cracking noise.

"Now look what you've done!" Andi's voice shouts, "It'll take forever to get us sorted out!"

"You started it!"

"But they looked so lonely on the table. I only wanted to make them comfy."

"You stole them! You were going to get Mike to let you double up, weren't you?"

"NO! Well, maybe. But you didn't need to hit me so hard. Look at this, what good is a pile of parts going to be? It'll take forever for someone to find us and put us together! Mike's going to dock our pay if we're late again."

Carrie turns, "About that mad." she walks over to the door, grinning down, "Hi, Andi, Becky. How's tricks?"

"Carrie! You're back! Can you help me out here?"

"No, help me, let her stay there!"

"How dare you? Just for that you should stay here."

"And let you run off with my babies? No, thank you, help me out, Carrie, pleeeeeeeeeease!"

"Well, I don't know, Mike did want to see us and..."

"Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!"

"Oh, all right, I suppose it won't take too long. But you'll owe me."

"Oh, yes, yes. You can borrow sis's body when you want!"

"Hey!"

"Oh, you know you like being just a head. Besides, I'd let you share mine."

"You can have Andi's body. Just lose her head somewhere."

"Hey!"

"Well, that sounds reasonable. I'll take both offers."

"What?!!"

"What?!!"

She grins down, "Well, you can always refuse the help. Oh, sis, can I borrow Peter? I promise not to break him."

Peter and Lisa walk over to the door, and look down. Lisa's eyes widen at the squirming pile of female body parts, identical blonde heads glowering at each other at one end, hands scrabbling through the pile.

"This is your fault!"

"Is not!"

"Is so!"

"Not!"

"So!"

"Is not, hey, is he the one Mike wanted to see?"

"Mmmmm, maybe we can renegotiate. Forget Carrie. He can have us both."

"No, he can't."

"Awwwwwww."

"She's possessive, girls, don't worry. She won't even let me play with him." Carrie sighs as Peter starts sorting through the pile.

"Awwwwwwwww. Ooooooh. Up a little."

Peter reassembles the girls, quickly, with much pleading and cooing, and glowering from Lisa, both standing just over six feet tall, black strappy heels pushing them almost to Peter's height.

"Aaaaah. That's better."

"You sure you don't want us? Two sexy women completely at your command?" Andi, Lisa thinks, purrs, licking her lips.

"Sorry, I'm taken."

"Awww. Just our luck."

"Too true, hey. That's my arm. Give it back."

"It is not."

"Is too. Look, there's that scar you gave me when we were 6. Give it back!"

"Got to catch me first!" and she takes off down the corridor, closely pursued by her twin sister.

"Are they always like that?"

"More or less. Sometimes I'm not sure they even know whose parts are whose, they argue about it so much. Angie suggested we tattoo little As or Bs on them." she holds the door Andi burst through open, "After you."

"What'll happen?"

"Nothing, sis. It's just a door. Paranoid much?"

"Around you, sister dear? Nowhere near enough."

Peter rolls his eyes towards the Artex ceiling, "Thank you, God, for making me an only child."

"Oi! Less of that, Magic Boy." she walks through the door, and into a large hall, cluttered with equipment, a sort of cleared path meandering through boxes and numerous sharp implements. A guillotine looms to one side, the dark wooden frame and basket looking worryingly blood-stained. A number of swords rest in a disturbingly human-looking stand, the blades jutting out of the ribs. Lisa shudders, "Anyone you know?"

"That? Oh, that's just a frame. What? You think he treats us all like we're just props?"

"He's got someone outside as an advert."

"Well, yeah, but only because she'd been begging him for a month before I left."

"She begged him for that?"

"Yeah. You think I'm the only one around here with odd tastes? Andi and Becky spend half the time mixed up and the other half spread out all over the place. I once found a hand had crawled into bed with me. Good way to wake up."

"Why?"

Carrie smiles, "I don't think you want to know, sis, I really don't."

"Fine."

A devil's mask leers down from the walls, horns spread backwards from the scarlet grimace, leather masks and straps surrounding it. "What kind of show does he do if he needs those?"

“Those? Oh, they’re mostly for effect. It looks rough, but it really isn’t. “

“Oh?”

“Oh. Mike’s made them so that they give your body enough give to pull them tight without it hurting. It’s all an act, sis. The shows are adults only, so you’ve got to give them a reason for thinking the 18 tag’s worth it. Honestly, what kind of girl do you take me for?”

“I don't think you want to know, sis, I really don't.”

“Copycat.”

They round a corner, the room opening out, a large circular wooden target standing on the wall, the rings alternating red and white, cracks running through the wood. Spreadeagled on the board is a lithe redhead, spears of metal stabbed through her ankles and wrists, pinning her in place. Another spear punches through her navel, her naked breasts sprouting more metal, a pair of black thong panties her only clothing, still unpierced. A thick-set man stands in front of the board, dark brown hair hanging over his shoulders, a black t-shirt hanging loosely around him, faded jeans covering the top of his boots. “You didn't have to be quite so thorough.” the woman pouts.

“Of course I did. You kept trying to cover up.”

“Aren't I allowed to keep my air of...visitors!”

“What do you mean 'visitors'?”

“I think she means us.”

The man turns, a little brass rectangle name badge on his left breast. A short beard wraps around his mouth, a pair of thin glasses over his hazel eyes. “Hey, Joe.” Peter says, “How you doing?”

“Oh, I'm good. At least you know who I am this time.”

“And you're not going to kiss me, right? I got into enough trouble last time.”

“Sorry, man.”

“Oh, not a problem. We made up afterwards.”

“Is there any particular reason you've got a naked woman pinned to that board like a butterfly?”

“Well, she's modeling for me, but she keeps covering herself up.”

“Oh, Joe, you're being very mean to poor Angie.” Carrie walks up to the board, taking hold of the navel spike. “You know, she likes you to play with these a bit.” she slowly wiggles the spear. Angie bites her lip hard.

“You,” she gasps, “are an evil, evil, evil woman. Do it again.”

“If you wanted to see her tits, why shove those through them?”

“Oh, it wasn't that sort of modeling...”

“Shame!” Carrie calls, slowly rotating the twin spears in Angie's chest, a sharp intake of breath coming from the pinned woman.

“She's modeling the panties. I wanted to see if Anne would suit me.”

Lisa looks at him, raising her eyebrow, “Suit you? Not hardly.”

“Not like this, when I'm Sue. Angie's got the same build Sue does.”

“Hold on, these are Anne?” Carrie squats down, “Ooooh, he got them in at last, yes!”

“What are you talking about?”

“These,” Carrie explains patiently, “are another assistant. Come take a look.”

“Those are someone?”

“Oh yeah. I've been dying to try something like them out. But Mike couldn't get hold of any when I asked him. Or he said he couldn't.” she turns, looking up as Lisa approaches, “Closer than that, sis. Cute, isn't she?” Carrie points at the front of the sheer black panties. A slim figure looks back, dark autumnal russet hair hanging above her shoulders. A red flag coils around her, sliding over her pert breasts, and around her back, covering her sex with a golden

hammer and sickle. One hand holds the top of the flag to her shoulder, the other holding it in place at her hip.

“Uhm, what do you think?”

Carrie beams up at him, “Oh, who cares if she'd suit you or not? If you don't wear her, I am so stealing her for myself.”

“What do you think, Anne?”

The figure on the panties smiles, giving the thumbs up, quickly putting her hand back as the flag starts to slip. Angie moans softly. “Mmmmmmm. Whatever you just did, do it again.”

“Oh, that is it. We need to get to see Mike right now. If he's got any more of these and he's been holding out on me...”

“You'll what?”

“I'll be very, very cross.”

“And what will you do? Spank him?”

“Oh, no, sis. Much, much worse. I won't spank him.”

“So what will you do?”

“I told you.” she grins, looking over her shoulder, “I won't spank him.”

“I did not need to know that.”

They continue along the meandering path through the equipment, continuing the macabre theme, skulls adorning the designs, manacles dangling on their dark metal chains, a giant buzzsaw looking rusted hangs from the ceiling, dark red splotches over the metal.

“What the...”

“Oh, just ignore it. Mike thinks he's the new Richiardi.”

“Oh.” she turns to Peter, whispering, “Who's Richiardi?”

“Oh, honestly, sis. Don't you know anything? He was a magician who had medical teams standing by for his buzz-sawing. Really bloody stuff. Mike won't tell me if he was for real or not, but he did it in surgical garb and got covered in blood and gore.”

“And how long have you known that?”

“Since I asked Mike when he tried to explain the show's guiding ethos.”

“And how does that fit into the guiding ethos?” she points at an ornate filigree encrusted arching cage.

“What? Oh, that. That's Sandy's place. Watch.” she creeps up to the cage, “Sandy, come on out, I got some people to meet you.”

“Don' wannu. Sleepin'.” a tiny voice mumbles from the cage.

“Awww, come on, don't be like that.”

“Go 'way. Got show tonight.”

“You haven't been out partying till all hours again, have you?”

“Go 'way, 'Mother'.”

“No.”

“Alright, alright, God, you just wait till I get to make you this size.” a tiny figure rises above the base of the cage, her long brown hair disheveled, her whole body no longer than a finger. She pulls herself up on the wire bars, squinting out. “Eeep.” and dives back down, “You bitch! You didn't say there'd be a guy there!” she rises up again, a handkerchief wrapped tightly around her as Carrie giggles. “Stop that! I know you don't care if the whole world sees your tits but some of us have standards!”

“Oh, yeah, you've got standards, Sandy. That why you let Mike paw all over you when you're serving as his mini-assistant?”

“Mike is a gentleman, if you tell him to be one strongly enough, and at least I wear actual clothes, not dental floss painted black.”

“I think I like her.”

“Who are you? And why should I care if you like me or not?”

“Lisa. Her big, bad, evil sister. Who has standards.” she smiles, as Carrie sticks her tongue out.

“You can't be Wonder Slut's sister. No horns, no claws, no breathing fire. Nope, not falling for it.”

“Hey!”

“What? You're not going to deny you love being naked, tied up and displayed for all to see, are you? I know I wouldn't believe that.”

“Or me.”

“You see, it's common knowledge.”

“Thanks for the support, sis.”

“You're welcome, Wonder Slut.”

Carrie scowls, “You are going to enjoy that, aren't you?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you sooooo much, Sandy.”

“Shouldn't have got me up, should you?”

“Guess not. I probably shouldn't tell them we call you the human vibrator either, but, well, too late now.” she winks at the cage, “See you later, Sandy.”

Sandy turns a variety of colours, settling on a fiery blush before she dives into the cage, pulling herself completely under the handkerchief and dragging it into a small shelter at the base of the cage.

“Finally. I thought Wonder Slut had gotten us lost in there.” Lisa mutters as they step out of the hall into a narrow corridor, the paint on the wall peeling slightly. Carrie whirls on her.

“Will you cut that out?! I don't call you the Bitch Queen from Hell every five seconds, do I? Enough with the Wonder Slut!!”

Lisa blinks, “Ok. Sorry, Carrie.”

“Fine.” she takes a deep breath, “Apology accepted.”

“Wouldn't want to ruin your secret identity.”

Carrie sucks in a breath and stomps off down the corridor, her fists balled.

“That wasn't nice.”

“Oh, don't you start, Magic Boy. I'm just giving her a little taste of her own medicine. I don't think she likes it much.”

“And of course you're not enjoying this at all, are you?”

Lisa glares at him, “Alright, alright, so I'm enjoying making her suffer a bit. She deserves it.”

“Yes, dear.”

She gives him another sharp look, “Alright, I'll stop. There's no need for the puppy eyes.”

Peter puts his arm around her, kissing her on the forehead, “Shall we go after her?”

“Yeah, I suppose. She is the one who knows where she's going.”

They catch up with Carrie, as she stands at another door, the corridor stretching off towards the fire exit.

They catch up with Carrie at a simple door, 'Boss' stamped onto the nameplate. Carrie doesn't look round, her shoulders taught, hands still tensed. “Carrie, I...”

“Forget it. Doesn't matter.” she replies tightly. She raps on the door, “Just sleep with one eye open from now on, sis.”

“S open.” Carrie pushes the door open, stepping into a cluttered office, a monitor screen nearly buried under piles of paper: some bills, some letters, some extremely precise technical drawings, or weird arcane symbols. The desk is likewise strewn with papers, covering the wood and heaped into dangerously unstable piles. Behind the desk, a man sits, leaning back in his chair, his black hair pulled into a widow's peak high on his forehead, his eyes

glittering, his pointed beard speckled with steely grey. His sleeves are rolled up, his arms covered in hair and darkly tanned.

"Should I be worried by that?"

"She's your sister, Lise. What do you think?"

"That I'm sleeping with one eye open."

Mike looks up as Carrie walks in, ignoring the papers covering the floor, stroking a tabby-furred ball curled up in his lap, a thrumming purr emerging. "Ah, the prodigal daughter returns." he pauses, tilting his head slightly to look at her, "And doesn't look happy. Was coming back to see me really so bad?"

"A little family dispute. Nothing to lose sleep over." she pushes a stack of papers off one of the chairs, flopping down. "I couldn't be mad at you." she smiles, "Unless, of course, you haven't got me my stuff. And don't try weaseling out of it again, I've already seen Anne so I know you've got them."

"Well," Mike reaches under the desk, "I was going to give you this," he places a small wooden box, about six inches square onto the desk, balancing it on the paper, one hand resting on it, "but if you're going to be all demanding..."

Carrie leans forward, batting her eyelids, "Please? I'll be ever so grateful."

"Well, I suppose you did pay for them before you left, but I'm still not sure..."

"Pleeeeeeeeeeease? Pretty please?"

Mike pulls his hand away from the box, which Carrie take up, almost snatches, giving it a shake. "Doesn't rattle." she pouts, digging her fingernails under the lid, pulling it up.

"How did she pay you off?"

Mike looks up, "Ah, let me guess, you must be Lisa, and that means that's my godson hiding in the shadows."

"That's him."

"Uhm, won't you come in, I'd hate to give myself a crick in the neck switching between two beautiful women."

"Don't bother with the charm, Mike. Sis is immune."

"Truly a tragedy."

"Ooooooh." Carrie pulls a black bra out of the box, feeling the cups, as Peter and Lisa try to find chairs, Peter eventually just sitting down on the air, "Hey! Are you trying to tell me something, Mike?"

"What? It looks like your size to me."

"And how would you know, sis? Anyway, this is an inflatable bra. You blow in your thumb and poof, Jessica Rabbit. Someone thinks I'm not big enough?"

"You complained about being overshadowed by Andi. I can take it back if..."

"No, that's fine." she pushes it back into the box.

The ball of fur in Mike's lap meows plaintively, stretching out. Tiny hands reach up, wrapping around his arm, pulling it down. "Not stroking."

Mike looks down, "Sorry, Rachel."

"Don't be sorry, be stroking." the voice replies. Mike reaches down and the purring resumes.

"Better."

"Glad you approve."

Rachel purrs in response, nuzzling her head against his hand. "Approve."

Lisa leans forward, starting to push out of her chair, "Hey, cool!" and stops as Carrie pulls out a pair of black thong panties from the box, a Soviet flag on the crotch.

"What are those?"

"What made Anne the underwear she is today." Carrie replies, "Soviet Edible Panties."

"What?"

“Yakov Smirnoff joke.” Mike explains, to a blank look. He drops his voice, adding the hint of some kind of Slavic accent, slowing his words down to increase the portentousness, “In the decadent West, you eat edible panties. In Soviet Russia, edible panties eat you.”

“Eat you?”

“Just a figure of speech. They absorb you into the cloth.”

“And just like Anne you become the design on the front. All you do is put them on and...” she makes a slurping sound, running her tongue over her lips. “Great when there's two of you.”

“Why?”

“What's the fun of being a pair of panties if no one's going to wear you? Honestly, sis, you are dense sometimes. What else is in here?”

“A few odds and ends.”

Carrie looks up, “Tab?”

“All paid off. Some are gifts.”

“Cool. I'll have to leave you more often.”

“I would have to take you back first.”

“Well, yes, but I'm sure I could persuade you.” she bats her eyelids, leaning forward.

Lisa looks over at her, “How, exactly, did you pay for those things, Carrie?”

Carrie's face darkens, as she leans back in the chair, her arms folded, “I'm not sure I like where that question is going, Lisa. Are you implying some kind of payment for services rendered?”

“You're the one who can't resist telling me about what you got up to, with your magician and his wandering hands.”

“My what?”

“What was I supposed to think? It's not like you've ever been flush with money.”

“Oh, I see. I couldn't possibly have afforded it. So you think I fucked my way here? Is that it?”

“No, I think you got the job because of your charming personality! I'm sure the fact that you let strangers grope you didn't enter into it at all!”

“Actually, that doesn't usually...”

“And, of course, no inappropriate touching went on when you were doing your life modelling, did it, sis? Apart from Steve. And John. And Steph. Several times.”

“I wasn't getting paid to get felt up!”

“Technically, the girls only get...”

“So you were doing it just because you enjoyed it? Same here. The money's not good enough to make it a motivating factor.”

“Oh, I am so glad you're naturally Wonder Slut and not because you're getting paid for it. Makes it soooo much better!”

“Wonder what?”

“And you're so much better, aren't you, sis? Not like you didn't jump straight into Peter's pants when he showed you a few tricks.”

Peter's face burns a bright scarlet, “Lise, maybe...”

“And that doesn't even begin to cover how you treat him now. I mean, you treat the poor guy like dirt half the time. Jesus, what is it with you and having to be completely in control all the damn time?”

“As opposed to being a magic-addict who'll do anything for her next fix?”

“Welcome to the club, sis. At least I'm not in denial about my kinks.”

“You make it sound like wanting to be a helpless slut who'll let anyone do anything to her is a good thing.”

“Actually, they only...”

“And you disagree? Remember, sis, I've seen you with Peter. Despite all the screaming and shouting, you just love being in his power, don't you? At least I'm honest about it.”

“One person, who I trust, as opposed to all and sundry. Unlike some, I don't sleep with everyone who asks. Especially not all at once.”

“Neither do I. At least I'm nice to the people I'm sleeping with. Unless they don't want that, of course.”

“How can you remember who wants what in the middle of one of the magic orgies here?”

“The what??? Would somebody explain...”

“Oh, sis, you don't know what...”

“**QUIET!**” Mike thunders, slamming his hands onto the table, paper piles shaking, sheets sliding onto the floor. There's a thump and loud yowling yelp as Rachel tumbles to the floor. The words die in both women's throat.

“Owwwwwww.” Rachel yowls, padding out from under the table, rubbing her butt around her long twitching tail, her pointed ears flattened. “Going now. Hungry. Back when it's safe for your pet. When she won't be thrown around.” she glowers with narrowed, feral golden eyes at Carrie and Lisa, stalking out, adjusting the string bikini over her tabby fur, checking her collar's in place.

“You keep her as a pet?”

“She calls it that. It's just a bit of fussing and stroking.” Mike replies as Rachel slips into the corridor, her tabby body disappearing behind the door, “And like all the other backstage activity here, it's all voluntary.” he turns, focusing steely grey eyes between them, “Now, would somebody mind explaining all of that, paying special attention to the parts that make it sound like I run a house of ill repute?”

“The half-naked women running around, not to mention that bondage torture chamber outside do give that impression.”

Mike's slim eyebrows rise up his forehead, “I see. And might I inquire just where the implications that I accepted, shall we be polite and say, services from my assistants came from?”

Lisa casts a glance across at Carrie, who is looking down at the floor, hands in her lap.

“Well...”

“I see.” he shifts his gaze to Carrie, “And would you know anything about this?”

“I didn't tell her that.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“That you had good hands. And that the other girls tasted good. Oh, and about the time I woke up with Andi's hand playing with my...”

Mike holds up his hand, “Yes, yes, I see. So somehow, through no fault of yours at all, your sister has formed the opinion that I run a harem rather than a show? And that I am in the habit of sleeping with girls young enough to be my daughters whom I happen to employ and therefore have responsibilities to protect?”

Carrie smile sheepishly. “She seems to have got that impression from somewhere.”

“Quite so. Such an alarming amount of falsehoods.” He settles back in his chair, hands steepled together, “Perhaps you'd allow me my chance at rebuttal?” he spreads his hands and continues, “First, in the interests of complete honesty, I must admit to an old man's weakness for pretty young girls in various states of undress. But, I must stress, that is entirely of their own free will. Sandra remains entirely clothed throughout her performances, for example.”

“And everyone else?”

“They wear as much as seems appropriate.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning they tend to wear g-strings and bikinis.” he sighs, “Topless shows are late night, and cost extra. They're usually pretty busy.”

“And they pay extra, too.”

“I thought you were doing this for love?”

“Love doesn't pay rent. Although I suppose...”

“Never mind. I don't want to hear it.”

“Ladies, please, a little decorum? Or am I going to have to strongly request your cooperation once more? During the show, members of the audience are allowed to examine the assistant to ensure no foul play...”

“How closely?”

“As closely as allowed. With most, this is a visual inspection only. The restrictions are made quite clear beforehand.”

“So, all her talk about getting touched up was bollocks?”

“Not exactly. Sometimes physical inspection, even intimate, is permitted. Again, the assistant decides when this occurs. They pick out the volunteers to help, so as to ensure they are as content with the process as possible.”

“And after the show?”

“After the show is entirely their own affair. Jo has a partner who has a normal job, and expressed many of the same concerns you have. On occasion, volunteers have been 'loaned' an unrestored assistant, but only with the assistant's permission. Some are more eager than others.”

“And no orgies?”

“None organised by the management. As I said, what they do after the show finishes is their own affair.”

“So how does Carrie know how good your hands are?”

“Well,” he coughs, “an idea she suggested for the shows would cover that.” he looks at Carrie, who shrugs.

“She can't think any less of me.”

“A variant on pulling a rabbit out of a hat, replacing the hat with an assistant.”

“How does that...” she stops, her eyes widening, “Oh. I see. And they haven't got a problem with this?”

“If they did, I wouldn't use them for the trick. I do not pressure anyone to do anything they do not want to. I trust you are satisfied that I am not insisting on inappropriate behaviour among my staff?”

“You just recruit people who engage in a lot of it anyway?”

Mike shrugs, “I recruit people who will enjoy the work. That almost requires a certain personality type: adventurous, confident, comfortable with themselves,” he pauses, “exhibitionists, basically.”

“Exhibitionists?”

“Anyone who gets up on stage in front of strangers and lets their body get chopped into half a dozen pieces should probably be considered an exhibitionist, don't you think?”

“I suppose. Hold on, you let people take home unrestored assistants?”

“Sometimes. When they want to go.”

“Got that. But isn't that revealing magic?”

“Ah, I see. You mean the Conclave's commandment on secrecy. It does seem to present a problem, doesn't it? The solution is simple: no one remembers the details of their night, just the good time they had.”

“How do you...”

“Until they can cloud people's minds, the girls aren't allowed to be taken home.”

“So you train them?” she asks, looking suspiciously at Peter.

“In a manner of speaking. With exposure to magic, most assistants develop limited talents. Mentalism is the easiest discipline for most, so clouding minds is not terribly difficult.”

“So the more magic you do, the more the assistants can do?”

“Within limits. Sometimes magic will unlock an assistant's natural talent, but mostly they cannot use anything other than gaffs and gadgets.”

“What and gadgets?”

“My apologies. Technical terms. A gaff is a self-working trick. They tend to be very simple in effect and can be used by anyone regardless of ability. A gadget is one step removed from this and includes more complicated, although still limited tricks. Beyond those are props themselves which covers the vast multitude of effects. This, for example, is a prop.” he holds up a foot long black wand, the ends capped with white. “It's really just a channel and amplifier for a magician's natural talent and can accomplish a wide range of effects.”

“Such as?”

“Well, such as teaching people who spread scandalous rumours about me not to do so in future.” he point the wand at Carrie. Flames leap from the tip, shadows of darkness leaping within them. The flames coil around Carrie, drawing her into their depths before collapsing, diving in a stream for the open present box by her chair. The box lid snaps shut.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing serious, I assure you. In fact, she could probably extract herself fairly easily. And we can't have that, can we?” He walks around the desk, picking up the box. He taps it with the wand and it pulls inwards, shrinking to half it's original size, the sides turning a variety of colours. “Are you still a puzzle fan, Peter?” he asks politely, not waiting for a reply before twisting the box around and around, hopelessly jumbling up the sides. “Well, here you go. A new Rubik's Cube. Once you solve it, you can let her out. Shouldn't take you more than a couple of hours.”

“Hey! What did you do that for?!”

“I'm sorry? I was under the impression you were similarly displeased with her.”

“I'm allowed to be. She's my baby sister.”

“And she is perfectly fine. As chastisements go, this is fairly benign. And she'll still have all her presents when she's released.” he settles back in his chair, “Now, shall we discuss the show you intend to perform? I have a few suggestions, you may like to consider...”



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