

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 31

THE WITCHING HOUR

“Any luck?”

“No. Mark's been talking, so everyone knows about it. It's quite a draw, apparently. A lot of people want to see something scandalously illegal. Plus you've got Mark's reputation and my family history and...”

“So we're stuck.”

“We're very stuck.”

“What will happen?”

“I don't know. Mark'll decide what sort of skill contest he wants. But until we start, we won't have a clue what it is.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. Next time just say no.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Lise, not to start a fight, but that doesn't matter at the moment. If we lose, you'll be a whole lot sorrier.”

“So don't lose.”

“That was the plan. It'd suck to have to get another girlfriend.”

“Not funny, Peter.”

He leans down, kissing her forehead, gently. “Neither's finding out you've got a duel with someone who hates you for your girlfriend.”

“I know, I know, I get it. Carrie's been bitching non-stop since it happened.”

“Yeah. And you should listen to her.”

“What?”

“She understands how this stuff works and, quite frankly, you don't. She warned you but you just went barrelling ahead and got caught out. If we win, you're going to have to listen to her, and me, a lot.”

“And if we lose?”

“Then it doesn't matter. You won't be in a fit state to appreciate the advice.”

“Oh, that's comforting.”

“It's not meant to be. That's the situation. We win, or don't. Not winning is a very bad option, especially for you.”

“Great.”

A clock chimes 12, each chime heard even above the cheers and the chink of glasses. The atmosphere shifts slightly, the air taking on a slightly surreal quality. Lisa feels her hairs stand on end, feeling a prickling across her skin.

“What's going...”

“Shhh.”

Stuart stands up, his robotic costume replaced by a heavy robe, large scales woven into it, glittering in the soft light. The cowl is thrown back, pooling on his shoulders. He walks slowly to the front of the crowd, everyone turning to watch him. “The Witching Hour is upon us. The year turns and we are in a time of transition. The past year has seen some few pass from us, and on this day that the spirits of those who have gone are with us, we give thanks for their lives, and the memories that keep them immortal within us all.” he bows his head, pale lights flickering behind him, swirling about through the crowd, “Yet, the year has also brought new blood into our midst: Lisa Joanne McCagherty, partner to Peter Samuel Stafford, has entered our community from the mundane world;” there's a brief ripple in the crowd as a spotlight shines down on her before blinking off as suddenly as it came, “and the line of succession extends as my daughter, Grace Christine Drake, enters the world.”

Slowly Sarah walks through the crowd, Grace cradled in her arm, wrapped in a gleaming white towel.

“World, I present to you my daughter,” there's a brief ripple of sound around the room, “Grace, this is your world. Look after each other.”

Grace gurgles, reaching up as firelights flickers across the ceiling, her pudgy fingers playing in the shifting light. A growl like distant thunder rolls across the room. The murmurs in the crowd die, as the white towel seems to glow red.

“And that concludes the formalities for the evening.” He drops the cloak from his golden shoulders, replacing the mask, “Have a good evening, sirs and madams.”

“What was that all about?” Lisa finally gets out.

“What?”

“You could have told me I was being welcomed into the community in public!”

“It was supposed to be a surprise. And I have had other things on my mind for the past couple of hours.”

“Yeah. So, when does the trouble start?”

“No idea. That's very much up to Mark. Hopefully, he'll leave it too late and the hour will run out.”

“You really think so?”

“No. But we can hope.”

“Friends, Romans and countrymen, lend me your ears!”

Peter sighs as Mark climbs up onto the raised stage. “Then again, maybe not.”

“As most of you know, I have long had grievance with Peter Stafford. He has taken a precious jewel from me. He has impugned my talent. He has impugned my honour! Tonight, he has agreed to give me satisfaction! We will duel before you, skill against skill.”

“Let's get moving. We'll want to be at the front soon.” He takes Lisa's hand, pushing through the crowd.

Mark continues, raising his gladius, “The challenge between us is simple. Each will conduct three performances for you. Each time, we will be judged by your good selves, as judged by our fair hosts.” Stuart and Sarah stand in the centre of the room, a slight scowl on her face, his still unreadable behind the mask.

“Ok, now we know the challenge, at least.”

“Should you find in my favour, the newest member of our fair community has agreed to submit herself to wearing my Proteus Collar.” a collective gasp sounds, “Should you find favour with my opponent, I have agreed to relinquish my Tabby from the very same collar!”

Peter and Lisa push through to the front of the crowd, a circular space clearing almost of its own accord.

“And now that my adversary has deigned to make his appearance, let the challenge begin!” he bows to Peter, smiling mockingly, “After you.”

ROUND ONE

Peter draws in his breath, “Ok, deep end, here we go.” He walks forward, drawing the scimitar from his sash as he does so, the witchlights glimmering along the blade curved blade. “Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you a true marvel of the swordsmith's art. This blade, forged from the finest Assyrian steel and smelted in the City of Brass itself, is so sharp,” he spins around, the blade swiping through Lisa's waist, “that it can cut through anything, without leaving a mark.” He walks over to Lisa, lifting up her black top to show her unmarked skin, “But still cut cleanly.” He lifts her up, setting her newly separated torso onto the floor.

“Hey! Peter!!”

The blade flashes out again and Lisa's severed head joins her body.

“So sharp,” he continues, moving to stand behind her as she folds her arms across her chest, “that it can cut and even gravity will not notice.” The sword flashes in a cross through the air and...nothing happens. The crowd starts to murmur. “Until its attention is drawn to it.” He taps Lisa's arms, left then right, with the point of the sword and slowly they fall to the floor in a flutter of black sleeves.

“But that is not all. This sword is so sharp it can even cut through cloth without disturbing the

weave to sever what lies beneath.”

“Don't you dare!”

The blade sweeps in a figure eight, the tip passing through Lisa's hips. Peter reaches down, lifting up her hips, her dress coming with them leaving her bare legs standing alone on the floor. Peter whirls the sword around his head and casually shoves it back through his sash. “Thank you for your time, gentle audience.” He bows extravagantly, before carefully putting Lisa together and leaving the stage to a round of applause.

“You could have warned me!”

“In the three seconds I had? Be reasonable. Now, shhh. We need to see how bad this is going to get.”

Lisa folds her arms, scowling as Mark walks onto the stage pulling a wood chipper behind him. He looks around the room and smiles, “I may not have any Assyrian steel to hand, but I think eight pieces is a little low, don't you?”

There's a laugh and a general sound of approval from the audience.

“Tabby, where've you got to?”

Tabby pads forward on all fours, hissing as she passes Lisa, her tail flicking up. She sits down besides Mark, purring as she nuzzles against him. Mark smiles indulgently, stroking her hair. “Do you think we can do better than that, Tab?”

She nods enthusiastically, standing up on her hind legs, the feline pads fading to a more normal arrangement of hands and feet, although she keeps her coat of soft fur and the twitching tail, her whiskers moving back and forth.

“Want to show what you can do?”

Again she nods, slinking over to the chipper with a silky feline grace. She leans down onto her hands and casually flexes her legs upwards, walking until her back is against the entrance. She pulls her legs straight out into the splits as Mark starts the chipper's engine, the motor juddering into action. Mark walks up to the large exhaust and opens a large black plastic sack, holding it by the funnel.

“Ready, Tab?”

In response she brings her legs together, curls them down and slides her feet into the hole. The pitch of the engine changes, juddering a little as the blades inside rip her feet apart, bloody chunks of flesh and bone rattling through to spew out of the funnel in a crimson arc, landing in the sack.

Undaunted by this, and biting her lips with her fangs, she continues to push her legs into the hole, taking a moment as her thighs slip in to flip herself so that she's sitting on the lip as the machine minces her legs. With a purr she swings her body inside, the blades devouring her an inch at a time as the chipper chews her up, spitting the remains into Mark's sack. Breathing hard, she slides herself further and further in. Her hips vanish inside, followed by her stomach, her chest, swollen breasts shredding inside and then she pauses, waving to the audience as she pulls her shoulders, arms and head inside, a howl of pleasure almost heard over the noise of the chipper consuming her.

The stream of pieces continues for several long seconds, flashes of her platinum hair visible amidst the chunks of flesh but eventually the rain of pieces stops. Mark shakes the sack, turning off the engine. “I don't know if anyone wants to do a proper count, but I figure that beats eight.” he pulls the lid off the chipper, revealing it to be empty inside, and upends the sack. Instead of a torrent of bloody pieces, one piece emerges, lands on the stage on her butt with a soft 'ooof' and beams at the audience, her body no longer covered in fur, or indeed anything else.

“Ta-daaaaaaa!” she gushes, holding her arms out.

Mark takes her hands, jerking her up to her feet.

“Ok, thank you both. We'll take a few minutes break to gather feedback. And then we can come back again. Mark, you'll start next time.” he opens his mouth to protest, “Won't you?”

He nods, “Ok, love. No problem.”

INTERMISSION

“That was disgusting.”

“Yeah. I figure Mark’s trying to rattle us.”

“Rattle us? By torturing Tabby?”

“Well, yeah. After all, if he beats us, that’s you up there.”

“Oh. Oh! Oh, shit! Shit! Shit!”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“We can beat him, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve got some ideas, but, well, they’re not exactly within your comfort zone.”

“Like what?”

“Some inanimate, although not for long. Turning you into a frog for a bit.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then Mark keeps on putting Tabby through who knows what and it looks much better than what we do.”

“And we lose.”

“And we lose.”

“Great.”

“Lise, do you trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then trust me. I have ideas. And I’ll need your help to make them work. There’s no way I can beat Mark by going over the top. He’s got a compliant plaything who’ll love whatever he does to her. I can’t treat you like that.”

“Got that right.”

“So, here’s what I think we need to do...”

ROUND TWO

A bell chimes, “And we have the results for the first round. For a very impressive and visually stunning piece of magic,” she pauses, “Mark wins the first round.”

Mark smirks over at them. Tabby turns, sticking her tongue out.

“And so, let’s start round 2! Mark?”

“Sure thing, love.” He grabs Tabby, pulling her into a deep passionate kiss, dipping her down like a tango dancer. Tabby responds, her arms thrown around his neck, one leg bent under her, the other kicked up, quivering with pleasure. Mark pulls back, letting Tabby up. Her chest rises and falls with each fluttering breath.

“Oooooooh...” And then the moan of pleasure stops, her lips frozen open in a round ‘O’. A slight sheen of plastic spreads across her face. Her bright blue eyes shift to flat plastic discs, lashes turning into polyester. The change spreads up, her white blonde hair turning into a nylon wig secured into her scalp. The change spreads over her body, seams appearing along her arms, her chest stopping its exertions, her nipples twisting into hardened nubs in the plastic. Her fingers fuse together into mitten-like hands, holding them open in a weird embrace. A stem forms in her navel as the plastic tide sweeps past her waist, her lower lips pulling open into a plastic hole as her knees bend slightly, her whole body now just an air-filled plastic sex toy. There’s muted applause. Mark looks across at Lisa, smiles and stabs the Tabby doll with a pin. There’s an almighty bang and scraps of plastic flutter down to the stage floor, disappearing in fizzles of sparks as they touch the lacquered wood.

“Your turn.”

Lisa looks over at Peter, “He’s not going to restore her?”

“Doesn’t seem so. Ready?”

“No. Does it matter?”

“No.” He kisses her forehead and leads them out onto the stage. “Now, my opponent has, I’m afraid, misled you good people, quite inadvertently, I’m sure. You see, he didn’t challenge me, he challenged my partner. As she was involved in the challenge, she feels she should play a slightly more active role in resolving matters. Especially given what’s at stake.” There’s a murmur from the audience at this, but Peter presses on, “Apart from being beautiful,” he looks at the green skin and long, hooked nose, “normally,” Which gets a laugh, “but she’s also a sword swallower and would

like to demonstrate for you good people.”

Lisa steps forward, her heart beating so fast and so loud she’s sure everyone can hear it. She reaches out a hand towards Peter, only trembling a little and takes the surprisingly warm hilt of the scimitar from him. She looks up at the audience and starts to lean her head back. She stops, plucking the witches hat off her head and tossing it towards Peter. “Catch.” She smiles, leaning her head back and opens her mouth wide. She raises the sword up, staring down the gleaming blade, the point looking very sharp, the whole thing far too big to ever fit into her mouth never mind her throat. *It’ll be fine. It will all be fine.* She slowly slides the tip of the sword into her mouth. She keeps pushing it down, feeling the cold metal sliding over her tongue, the wide blade impossibly sliding between her lips. It continues down her throat, somehow, feeling more like a cool drink than a length of steel, but she’s still finding it hard to breathe only through her nose as it fills her throat and slides smoothly down. And then she can feel the hilt up against her mouth. She removes her hands, letting the hilt rest there and slowly turns around, to a muted applause.

She feels Peter step up behind her, his hand on her shoulder. “And as Lisa has now swallowed the sword, I think it’s only fair that we let the sword swallow Lisa.”

Lisa takes a deep breath, knowing what’s coming before she feels the tug inside her. The audience watches, possibly trying to figure out what’s going on, as she feels her body melting inside, flowing inwards, sliding into the blade. The audience watches as she begins to get thinner, her body shrinking inwards until the last of her black dress sucks in. Peter swishes the blade around and holds it upright, turning it to show Lisa inside the blade, standing with her hands on her hips.

Peter lifts up her hat placing it over the sword, leaving her in darkness. “I don’t think I’d better leave Lisa in there too long. For my sake, if nothing else.” He lifts up the hat, revealing the sword shining bright and empty once more. “Now, where could she have got to?” He shakes the hat and a pair of feet emerges. “Oh, that’s where.” He places the hat on the ground and slowly raises it. Lisa struggles to keep still as she feels herself being poured out of the hat, her body assuming its rightful shape as the hat rises. As soon as her hands are free, she takes hold of the brim and pushes the hat up, faster than Peter had been doing until the hat rests on her head, a small smile on her face, and a round of applause in the air. She feels Peter’s hand on her back, pushing her forward gently and she joins him in a bow, one hand keeping the hat in place.

Sarah stops clapping, “And another five minute break. Peter, back to you to start, ok?”

He nods.

INTERMISSION

“You ok?”

“Yeah, Magic Boy, I’m fine. That wasn’t that bad. I might, stress might, let you do something like that to me again.”

“I’ll bear it in mind. Just need to go and grab Stuart. Make sure we’ve got all the props we’ll need.”

“Ok.”

“Hey, sis!”

“It looks like I’ll be busy anyway.”

“That was pretty cool.”

“Thanks. Hope it’s good enough.”

“Oh, that one will be. Mark lost a lot of ground with a lame doll trick. Especially not restoring Tabby afterwards. Très tacky.”

“That’s something.”

“Yeah. Just don’t blow it now. I don’t want to have a doll as a sister. Plus I’d have to explain to mum and dad and that I really don’t want to do. They’d make out it was my fault!”

“I’ll try very hard not to inconvenience you.”

“You’d better. Good luck, sis. I mean that. Knock ‘em dead.”

ROUND THREE

A bell chimes. The audience hushes. Lisa licks her lips nervously, crossing her fingers. “And we

have the audience's verdict on the second round. For a very entertaining and display of cooperation between magician and assistant, Peter and Lisa win round two."

Peter releases his held breath.

"And so, let's start the third, final and decisive round. Peter?"

He walks forward, "Ladies and gentlemen, for my next trick..."

"Hey, Magic Boy! Did you forget someone?"

Peter rolls his eyes, "Lisa, now really isn't the time."

"Oh, screw that. I've had it with you doing this to me!" she raises her hands, purple sparks dripping from her long green fingers.

Peter turns as the sparks leap towards him. Somehow, his scimitar is in hand and in the path of the purple bolt of lightning. The bolt crashes into the flat of the gleaming blade, reflecting back the way it came.

Lisa just has time to gasp out "Oh sh..." and her clothes collapse into a crumpled heap of black cloth on the floor.

"Oh, great. Now what am I going to do?" he walks over to the pile, poking it gently with the tip of his scimitar. The pile shifts. "Lisa?" No answer. He digs into the clothes, and pulls out a large, green frog.

"Riiii-bit."

"This is what happens when you try to hex a magician, you silly girl."

"Riiii-bit!"

"Well, if you're going to take that tone I won't fix you up."

"Riii-bit." The frog looks down at his hand.

"Apology accepted. I know I saw a mannequin around here somewhere. Ah, there it is." Carrie pushes in the pile of plastic limbs in a box labelled 'Mannequin parts' in big black letters. Peter quickly builds the mannequin, dressing it up in Lisa's costume and a long copper wig. The frog watches, croaking advice occasionally, especially when it looks like he'll be leaving out any of the costume. He lifts the lead up, placing the frog inside the plastic head. The mannequin blinks its eyes, slowly turning to look at Peter. Her mouth opens silently and she frowns, or frowns as much as a plastic face can manage. Peter leans in to kiss her. As his lips touch the plastic, there's a very loud croak from inside the head, sparkles of light drifting down in a Disneyesque curtain that fades to leave Lisa in his arms. She breaks the kiss with a smile.

"Flesh and blood is sooooo much better than plastic, don't you think?" she smirks across at Mark as they leave the stage, to a smattering of applause.

Mark walks onto the stage, Tabby bouncing along behind him, clearly suffering no ill effects from the explosive end to the last trick. "For your entertainment tonight, the MT Theatre Company will present Tabby and the Beanstalk. Tabby will be played by Tabby, which shouldn't be a stretching role, and the part of the giant and narrator will be played by yours truly. We start the story as Tabby hides in the giant's castle." Tabby tugs on his hand. "Oh, right. Of course, it can hardly be a story involving a giant if Tabby's the same size, can it?" Tabby dutifully shakes her head. Mark reaches over, placing his hand on top of her head. Tabby purrs a little as he ruffles her hair. He pushes down and Tabby giggles as her body shrinks. Down and down she goes, Mark's hand, and her head, passing his chest, stomach and waist. Tabby taps on the hand, looking up in mute appeal, but he shakes his head. She pouts but the hand continues to press down. Mark bends over a little as Tabby continues to dwindle to knee height. At that point Mark stops. He raises his foot, placing the sole of his boot on Tabby's head and continues to push down until Tabby stands only a scant few inches tall. "That makes things more appropriate, don't you think?"

He walks to the back of the stage, "But as Tabby explored the giant's castle, she heard terrible booming footsteps coming down the corridor." He starts to stamp slowly forward, Tabby scampering across the stage, searching for a place to hide. Mark pulls up a chair "The giant sat down and then, as Tabby searched desperately for a hiding place, he spoke. "Fee fie foe fum! I smell the blood of a little woman!" Tabby shrinks into the corner. Mark rises from the chair, "And be she live or be she dead," a stomp on the stage, "I'll gobble her up like a piece of bread!" Another

stomp, this one much closer to Tabby. She gives a scream, cowering as Mark reaches down, his hand closing around her."Got you! What a little mouse you are! Hardly a mouthful! All skin and bones." Tabby whimpers in his hand, "Still, I am feeling a little bit peckish. And you won't hurt my diet, I'm thinking!" He lets Tabby dangle between his thumb and forefinger, tilting his head back, his mouth opening beneath her. "Down the hatch!" He lets go. Tabby shrieks as she plunges down, vanishing into Mark's open mouth. He closes it, licking his lips and swallows.

A faint "Wheeeeeee!" is heard, "And that was the last anyone ever saw of Tabby. Not all tales have happy endings for those who trespass where they shouldn't, you see." He looks meaningfully across at Lisa.

"Aaaaand that's the end of the contest. Another five minute break and we'll be back with the results."

INTERMISSION

"No restoration, again. That's got to count in our favour."

"Some. But it was a lot better than the doll trick. Narrative is good."

"Yeah, but he ATE her!"

"Yeah, that'll go in his favour, too."

"What?!"

"What he did is harder technically than what we did."

"Great."

"It'll be ok, Lise."

"Yeah? You sure of that?"

"Hopeful."

"Great." She takes a long pull of the Brew, "I'm not sure I can be that confident. I mean, if we lose..."

"Don't think about it."

"Hah. Kind of hard not to now. I just think of all the things he did to Tabby, done to me." She shudders.

"Wellll, there might be a way out of that."

Lisa turns towards her, "What??? You could have mentioned this earlier, Carrie!"

"Might. But you didn't actually say when you'd be wearing the collar, did you?"

"I don't think so."

"Like I said, might. But it could go the other way, too. You didn't say how long Mark could make you wear it either."

"Thanks. I was almost feeling better."

"Sorry. It's worth a try. You never said you'd wear it today, after all. Keep putting it off until we can figure out what to do about it."

"Bit risky. That sort of thing only really works with faeries. And then only if they're cooperating."

"Well, yeah. But, if it's come to that, other options aren't exactly forthcoming."

"True. Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

CONCLUSION

A bell chimes. The audience hushes as Sarah steps onto the stage. "Well, we have the results for the third round. Can all participants please come to the front for the verdict?"

Peter squeezes Lisa's hand reassuringly as they walk through the crowd. "It'll be fine."

"Now, before I continue, let me make something very clear to all of you: Stuart and I do not approve of this sort of nonsense, especially when it disrupts what should have been a celebration. If anyone is dumb enough to do this again, they are barred until we decide to be lenient. And I think you all know how long that means. I don't care who you are or how good you are, this is not going to be tolerated. Is that clear and understood?" she waits, casting a cold glance around the audience until there's a muttered affirmative. "And as for the idiots who started this," she looks down at the three people in front of the stage, fixing each one in turn, "knock it off or I will be very unhappy."

Now, the results: despite impressive showings for both parties, someone has to be the winner. And so, owing to the technical challenge of the performance,” Lisa’s blood runs cold. Peter’s hand squeezes a little tighter. Mark smiles just a little, “and the impressive cooperation demonstrated in pulling off such a coordinated trick with no notice, I’m pleased to say that Peter and Lisa have been successful.”

“What?”

“We won??”

She smiles down, “You won. Be very happy. And if you are so stupid as to get into this much trouble again, I’ll take you over my knee.” She turns to Mark, “I believe that means you have to pay the forfeit.”

“Yeah, I do, don’t I?” he coughs, reaching into his mouth, pulling out a small loop of leather.

“There. Tabby is released from the collar.”

“Where is she, then?”

Mark belches, “She’s been released. That’s all you asked for.”

“You mean you...”

“Mark! You had better...”

“She’s been released. I’ve done my ARRRGH!” an arm sticks into his chest, sparks of lightning crawling around the edge where the arm meets his breastplate. Peter pulls his arm out, holding a tiny, trembling woman in his hand. A faint but warm desert breeze, carrying the hint of an approaching thunderstorm, drifts across the room.

“Are you all right?”

“No, that fucking hurt, you...”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“All right? All fucking right? Are you fucking kidding me? I’ve been a fucking sex slave for 18 months! And then the bastard eats me! And he pulls that bleeding collar off so I don’t know if he can bring me back or not! And not only am I tiny, but I’ve still got the fucking bimbo body he gave me! I am very far from being all fucking right!!”

“Mark! What were you thinking?!”

“Oh, for...I was joking. Jesus, Saz, what kind of guy do you think I am?”

“Joking? Joking?! You were fucking joking! I am going to kill you, you lying bastard!”

“So you’ll fix her up?”

“Sure, Saz I just need to put the collar on her and...”

“No fucking way! You come near me with that thing again and...”

“Tabby...”

“It’s Tabitha. Not Tabby.”

“Ok, Tabitha, without the collar, it’s going to be pretty difficult for you to get back to normal.”

“I don’t care! Last time he put that fucking thing on me it was supposed to just be a bit of fun. 18 months I’ve been wearing it, 18 fucking months! I’m not letting him do that to me again.”

“Ok. I’ll see what I can do.” He turns away, walking back towards Lisa, cupping Tabitha carefully in his hands. Tabitha looks up at her.

“Thank you for rescuing me. Everyone just did nothing about it. They all just left me like that!”

“You’re welcome.”

“But you did agree to wear the collar, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but only for a bit of role play. It was supposed to be a bit of fun. He even said it was just temporary. 18 months without being able to do anything but smile nice and do whatever he wanted is not temporary.”

“Well,” Peter says, “technically, it is temporary. Any time short of ever is temporary, but that’s not fair with someone who’s not used to the community rules.”

“You mean its ok? It’s ok to kidnap people like that? To turn their entire fucking world upside down? And that’s all ok?”

“Technically allowed. I never said anything about ok.”

“Great. Just great. Can we at least get me back to normal? I’ve had enough of being a teenage wank fantasy.”

“Ok. Stu? Can we use one of the side rooms?”

“Side rooms? You sure?” Peter nods, “Yeah. Use Henning. Don’t wreck it.”

“Do my best. Carrie, can you come with us?”

“Why?”

“Because you're connected to Lisa, and I might need help.”

“Help? Oh. Oh! You're going to do that???”

“If I have to.”

“What are you talking about?”

“How to get you back to your rightful self.”

“Ok.”

He backs into a brightly coloured door, and into the dark room behind. He nods and the lights flicker on, slowly warming up, to reveal tables and chairs pushed around the edges. The door closes.

“Ok. Now what?”

“Now I see if I can get this to work.” he places Tabitha gently in the middle of the room. “This might feel a bit strange.”

“Ha! After the last 18 months, I don't think anything will feel strange again.”

Peter closes his eyes, concentrating. The air around Tabitha shimmers in a heat haze. The desert breeze blows gently across the room. Nothing happens. He sighs.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. That's what I was afraid of.”

“What? What's wrong?”

“The Proteus Collar. It's a very powerful thing. It, oh, how to explain this, it rewrites reality. Whatever it does to you is the new reality.”

“Can't you just magic her into a different shape?”

“Sure. For a while. But eventually, reality wins out and Tabby...”

“Tabitha, damnit! I might look like a braindead bimchette but I will not be talked about like one!”

“Sorry, Tabitha. But eventually, the magic wears off and Tabitha resets to the status quo.”

“Oh, fucking marvellous! So I'm stuck like this unless I let him put that fucking thing on me? I'm supposed to trust him? After what he did?”

“Well, either that or someone gets a really unique pet.”

“You WHAT?!”

“Smooth, Carrie. Very smooth.”

“What? It's true. If we can't sort this out, we might be able to enchant something to work temporarily, but at least all night, she's stuck at mouse sized. And if we can't do that, she's stuck like that for good. And at this size, there's no way anyone can live on their own.”

Tabitha goes quiet. “So this is it? This is my life?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Oh? What are you hiding now, Magic Boy?”

“We could try something else.”

“I know that tone. What's the 'but'?”

“But it's not exactly legal, or exactly illegal, for one. And for the other, it means you, me and Carrie will be brought really close together.”

“What do you mean 'close together'?”

“He means he's going to form a troika with us.”

“A what?”

“A troika. It means three of a kind. It's a union of magic that increases the power way beyond the sum of the parts. But it is three of a kind. The three effectively become one while it lasts. A soul merge. So I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.”

“But it's only temporary, right?”

“Yeah, but you're still letting me and Peter basically get a good look at your soul, and vice versa. That might have some effects. And he asked me along because we're already related and closeish, right? Less of a shock. Theoretically.”

“Theoretically.”

“Everyone has secrets, sis. Everyone sees the world a different way. Seeing through someone else's eyes can be pretty jarring. Couple that with semi-phenomenal, nearly cosmic power and, well, it shouldn't leave you nuts for too long.”

“And that's the only way to help?”

“Only way I can think of. And it might not work.”

“Ok. Hold it. Time out. No way am I asking you to do this. No way! You've already got me out of that mess. I'm not going to ask you to do anything dangerous! I'll, I'll let him put the collar on me.”

“Like hell you will. You are not going to ask that creep for anything.”

“Sis, this is risky. Don't do it because of Mark.”

“Ok. Are you going to do this?”

Carrie looks around the room, looking down at the tiny figure on the floor. “Yeah. I'm going to do it. Hang on a sec.” she pulls down her star-spangled panties, placing them carefully on one of the chairs.

“What on earth are you doing? This troika thing isn't a threesome, is it?”

“No. But we can try that later if you like.”

Lisa's eyes go wide.

“Joke. It's a troika. Three of a kind. You, me and Peter. That's three. Having Tra, uh, Panty Girl involved would put her at risk and wouldn't do any good.”

“Oh. So, what do we do?”

“Stand on the edges of the triangle.”

“What...” Peter whispers something and a triangle of silver light glows fitfully on the floor, gaining in strength as he steps onto one of the corners, “...triangle.”

Carrie steps onto another corner, reaching up, but not touching Peter's hand. “Come on, sis.”

Lisa steps onto the final triangle, the light glowing like the Moon at night. “Ok. Now what?”

“Join hands. It'll feel very, very strange. Do not let go. That would be bad. Very bad.”

“Very bad?”

“You'll have less brains than Paris Hilton and Jordan's secret love child.”

“Thanks for that image, Carrie.”

Slowly, she raises her hands up, clasping her sister with one hand, and her partner with the other. It seems to take forever before anything happens, but slowly she feels something flowing through her fingers, part of her swirling into them, part of them filling her up. She feels Peter's presence like a hug around her, strong, warm, safe, confident, just as always. Carrie feels like a fresh breeze, all motion and zest, but she can feel a solid bedrock underneath, amazed at how much love she can feel from her annoying little sister and how much it evokes in her. She wonders what she feels like to them.

They open their eyes together. Inside the triangle, the light builds up, shimmering, twisting, light bending and waving around. Their hair stands on end. The air smells a mix of ozone, woodsmoke and musk. She feels the power within her, power enough to do anything, but the tiny figure in front of her stays as immutable as a lump of iron.

Slowly, the power fades down, Tabitha still tiny. “It didn't work.”

“It didn't.” Peter says sadly.

“[I wish I could help. I really do.](#)” she feels a tug, the ring on her finger going icy cold, something inside her clenching up, the light within the triangle brightens as she feels everything flow out of her.

The door opens. “Ready to change your mind, Tabby?” Mark smirks, dangling the collar from his finger, “You...” he stares at them, bathed in the light. “what are you doing? Forming a troika?”

“Fuck off!” light arcs out from the triangle to the collar. “And die!” The smell of woodsmoke intensifies.

A noise partway between tearing cloth, breaking glass, rending metal and an inhuman scream tears through the room. “And go to Hell! And...” Tabitha stands in the middle of the triangle, naked, still blonde, her swollen breasts swinging. Lisa collapses, her body cold and shivering. Carrie and Peter slump bonelessly to the floor, eyes unfocused. Tabitha leaps over the edge of the triangle, now a jet back set of lines seared into the floor. Her fist catches Mark on the chin, knocking him to the floor as he stumbles out into the main room. Tabitha leaps on top of him, punching, kicking, clawing, screaming all the time until Anton and a blonde man in ring mail with a dragon-hilted sword thrust through the leather belt around his waist drag her off, still spitting curses at Mark as he lies curled on the floor.

“Ok, that's enough!”

“Enough?! It's not nearly enough!”

“I said, **that's enough!** Now, would you like to explain why you're beating the living shit out of Mark?”

“Because the fucking bastard deserves it! He's been keeping me as his plaything for a year-and-a-fucking-half!”

“Which you agreed to.”

“Did I bollocks! I'm a lawyer, I know what agreeing to things is like. Saying 'Sure' when the cute guy in your bed asks if you want to wear a collar for some slaveplay to 'spice things up a bit' is not an agreement. If you lot think that's acceptable, then you're in for a very rude lesson in what counts as informed consent when you get your arses sued off you!”

“That was the agreement? That's it?”

“The memory is burned into my head pretty fucking well given what happened. We'd had sex, pretty good sex at that. He was cute. He wanted to take more charge of things. Said the collar would be a bit of fun, a bit of slaveplay, nothing more. No mention of 'put this on and I own you for the rest of your life'. Nothing about 'You can't take it off or stop the arrangement in any way'. No mention of 'I can do literally whatever I want to you.' Those sort of things do have to be mentioned for a proper agreement.”

“Mark? True? Untrue?”

“Owww.”

“Oh, grow up you're wearing armour, I doubt Tabby...”

“Tabitha.”

Sarah looks back at her, “Sorry, Tabitha, but I doubt she really hurt you. Although not for lack of trying. I, on the other hand, am rapidly losing my patience and I would like an explanation. Now.”

“She agreed. I asked her the next day if she wanted out and she giggled, jumped me and said 'no! I am not the bad guy here!’”

“Did you?”

“My body did. But as it was under his control at the time, I can't see how that counts as me agreeing.”

“How was I supposed to know that? I asked, you agreed. Job done.”

“You asked someone under a Proteus Collar what they wanted? And you just took the answer? You didn't even remove the collar first?? Unbeeeeelievable.” she sighs, “Let her go. Tabby...”

“Tabitha!”

“Sorry. But, well, you look exactly the same. I've known....”

“I what?” she pulls a lock of white blonde hair in front of her face, “No.” she puts her hands to her face, feeling her full bee-stung lips, “No.” then she looks down, “Damn it!” she kicks at Mark, “I'm still not back to normal! Look what you've done to me! And I'm, oh, shit.” she blushes all over, and covers herself as best she can.

Sarah looks over her shoulder, “Stuart, get a gown. Use one of mine.” She casually pulls off her gown, draping it over Tabitha's shoulders, “Don't take too long, either. Now, let's get you...”

“Help!”

“Oh, now what?!” she sighs, running into the Henning Room to find a naked woman, kneeling by the prone forms of Peter, Lisa and Carrie, rubbing the back of Carrie's hand. She looks up, tear-rimmed eyes widening slightly at Sarah's lack of attire

“They won't wake up.”

“Oh, marvellous.” She kneels down, taking Lisa's cold and clammy hand. She sighs, “Double marvellous. Ok. You,” she points at the young woman, “go outside, grab Anton and Stephan and get them back in here to help me carry out the sleeping beauties. Tabitha, when Stuart gets back with that dress, get him to show you to the guest rooms. And then, all three of us are going to have a nice, cosy chat so I can understand exactly what happened during the last hour!” she sighs, lifting Lisa up, as the room empties, “You really have to stop making my life so exciting, Lisa. And if you die because of this, you'd better not haunt me for it.” The clocks strike twelve again, the surreal

quality of the air vanishing with a snap as time starts again. “Happy All Souls Day., Sarah” she mutters.



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