

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 60
THE ONE RING

Ola drops her bag onto the pub chair with a huff, “Ok, L, what is oh so important that you want to see me on my lunch...”

Lisa holds up her hand, fingers splayed. The light glints off the slim band around her finger.

“...is that...?”

She nods.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Lisa waggles her finger in her ear, “Owwww. A little warning next time.”

“Ok, ok. When did this happen?”

“Yesterday.”

“And you waited ‘til now to tell me?”

“Yesterday!”

“Exactly. A whole day?!”

“I told you first!”

“First?”

“I haven’t even told my mother yet, you self-centred, over-dramatic ham!”

“Oh. Really? Warning.”

“Warning?”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Are you going to keep doing that?”

“Ok, ok, I’m done, I’m done, I’m calm.”

“Really?”

“For me, I’m calm.” She replies with a face-splitting grin, “No more screaming. Unless you tell me he had to marry you for old school reasons, in which case I reserve the right to reconsider.”

“Old school reasons?”

“Having a baby and not wanting the little tyke born out of wedlock, of course.”

“We are not having a baby.”

“Do you...”

“No, we do not need any help, and, if this keeps up, I’ll be reconsidering who gets to be maid of honour.”

Ola sits back, looking comically subdued, drawing a halo around her head. “That’s harsh, L, I’m just happy for you.”

“I know, I know.”

“So, I’m still maid of honour?”

“You’re still on the shortlist.”

“You’re just saying that so I’ll behave, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you think that’ll work?”

“Maybe.”

Later that afternoon, at a pub off Chancery Lane, “Congratulations.” Tabitha smiles, her hair fiercely tied back, fiddling with her glasses, “I hope you’re both very happy.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you have anything planned yet?”

“He only asked me yesterday.”

“And?”

“Not everyone has their life planned out, you know.”

“Oh, believe me, I know that better than anyone.”

“Oh, crap, of course you do, I’m sorry.”

“No problem. It’s easy for everyone else to forget. It’s just Peter strikes me as the planning type.”

"You have a point there. I'll have to add it to the pile of things to talk about."

"Still, this does make your little private project a whole lot easier."

"Oh?"

"Marriage is a contract, and precedent says it's pretty high up the list of things to honour. So, I'd have to look into it more thoroughly to be sure, but I think it could act as a shield for any of the really serious mistakes. Unless you're making those mistakes with Peter, in which case, it probably shields those more. So a bit two-edged."

"I see."

"And only applies to you, and I get the impression this is much more than an 'ensuring my safety' thing."

"Probably. And I'm not marrying everyone just to protect them."

"Well, legally you cou..." she catches Lisa's look, "That's a no then, got it. Still, it gives me something else to confirm and it's a starting point."

"Thanks."

"Have you got vows written?"

"Yesterday!"

"Think about them carefully. It's a contract. And you know how people around here feel about those."

"Meaning?"

"Don't leave 'honour and obey' in unless you really mean it."

"I'm going to have to get a lawyer to check my wedding vows?!"

"I have very reasonable rates."

"I'll add it to the pile of things to talk about."

"How big a pile is that so far?"

Lisa holds her hand up to her shoulder.

"Sounds about right. You wouldn't believe how many divorces have got their start at the wedding."

"Thanks for that, Tab. Really helpful."

Even later, sitting in the backrooms of Mister E's, "Congratulations. It's a very nice ring. Have you checked it in a fire yet?"

"A fire?"

"Peter does like his little jokes."

"No. Not yet."

"And you've got a venue for the reception sorted?"

"Why does everyone think I've got it all sorted?! I only got engaged yesterday night!!"

"Because you're obviously the sort of girl with her shit together and we all just assume...not buying it?"

"Nope."

"Can't say I blame you. If it helps make things easier, I'm sure you can use here."

"Here?!"

"Don't say it like I suggested you use a plague hospital! It was meant as a genuine offer."

"Really?"

"Of course. But if you'd rather not..."

"Ok. What's the catch?"

"Why would there be a catch?" she catches Lisa's raised eyebrow, "Ok, that's fair. No catch. Ok, maybe Stuart and I won't get you an actual gift if you use E's instead."

"And what's the weirdness level going to be?"

"Mundane. No magic except as part of an act. Nothing more perverted than an act. And a few free drinks. It's a favour to old friends. Of course, if you want to stick around for a real party once your family goes home, well, then I can't promise anything..."

"Oh, I bet you could."

Sarah's grin widens, "Oh, I so could, if I wasn't being nice."

"No orgy."

"Fine! I promise to be nice. No bacchanal. And nothing weird around the mundies. I'll even make everyone else be good...relatively."

"Thank you, my Queen."

"Talk to Peter and he'll talk to Stuart and they'll handle the boring details."

"Yes, my Queen."

"And you're getting better at that. I almost believe you're not being sarcastic."

"Almost."

"Oh, quite, I do know you, after all."

"Yes, my Queen."

Even later, back at home and on the phone, "...yes, Mum, I'm very grateful, but I don't need you to come down just yet. I'll let you know once we've got a date arranged...No, I know, but it has to be down here. Everyone I know is in London...We haven't talked about that, but I'll keep that in mind...Yes, Mum, I'll include Carrie in the party, I promise. If she promises to behave...No! I told you it's not about grandchildren yet!..Love you, too...Byeeeeee!" she puts the phone down, "Parents are a pain. Right, now for Carrie..." she dials, "Oh, hi, Tracy, is Carrie around?...You 'think' so?...Right. Fine. When she reappears, in a form able to hold a conversation, get her to call me...Thanks. Bye." she hangs up, "Disappeared in a cloud of purple smoke!" she shakes her head, "What are you up to now?"

"That's always a difficult one to answer, I've found."

Lisa jumps, looking up at the fairy-winged figure, "Oh, it's you."

"Apparently it is. Just little old me. And I see congratulations are in order."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Well, yes, I've rather taken to your exciting life. May I see it?"

Lisa holds out her finger.

"Very nice. You can always tell the workmanship that goes into a proper ring. And I see you're still wearing mine, too. Good. Wouldn't want it getting jealous on some ring tree somewhere."

"No, we wouldn't want that. How did you know?"

"A little bird told me."

"Uh-huh. Did this little bird have a shit-eating grin and a crown, by any chance?"

"You might very well think that, dear, I couldn't possibly comment."

"Right. Do you have any advice you need to impart, like everybody else on the planet?"

"Oh, no, dear, the last thing you need is people sticking their oar in. And you probably wouldn't heed it even if I did."

"Possibly not."

"Now, let me get a look at those rings again."

Lisa holds up her hand, "What are you looking for?"

"Just looking, dear, nothing to worry about."

"Saying that always makes me feel like there is."

"Nothing bad, I promise. I'm just checking the ring isn't doing anything strange like learning how to make wishes come true again."

"I haven't been wishing..."

The fairy flitters up, putting a tiny hand on Lisa's mouth. "Will you please stop saying the w-word?!"

"Sorry. I forgot..."

"Just be more careful. I don't want to have to listen to someone moaning on and on and onnnnn about having to rescue you as well as your sister."

"What do you..."

"Nothing important, dear, just kvetching."

"What are you looking for?"

"Making sure of some things, purely for my own satisfaction. Which I have now done. Rolled gold, 24 carat, no magic in its construction, nothing layered on, not that I really expected there to be, but never hurts to be careful."

"Careful?"

"Like I said, dear, just satisfying my curiosity, because I'd hate to have to give that boy the spanking of his life for screwing this up by being stupid at the last minute."

"Spanking of his life? You...I...I can't see how that would work."

"If you're good, dear, you'll never have to find out. Now, may I have the rings?"

"What ring?"

"The one I gave you and the one he did."

"I don't..."

"It's nothing to worry about. Just let me have them."

"I don't..."

"Look, just hand them over so I can..."

"No."

"I..."

"No. I am not handing over my engagement ring to you or anyone."

"But..."

"Or anyone."

The fairy looks nonplussed, putting her hands on her hips, "Don't you trust me or something?"

"No. Nothing personal, but...no."

"Excellent. There's hope for you yet. Don't give it away if you can help it. Bad juju."

"'Bad'...ok, I'm really confused now."

"Items with a strong emotional attachment make remote targeting magics easier, you know, scrying mostly, but you can put some nasty things through if you have a link."

"Right. Like I wasn't worried enough."

"Oh, don't worry about it, dear." She pats the giant hand reassuringly, "Just keep that ring close and it won't matter. Of course, if you want additional security, I could put some protections in place around it..."

"That sounds good." She pauses, "What's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"There's always a catch. No, don't tell me, let me guess...it'll be a shield, for everyone but you?"

"As it will be my magic doing it, naturally, it won't keep my magic out but I'd never..."

"Ok. Can you teach me to put those protections on?"

"Of course, dear. Do you have a spare few years?"

"No."

"Well, then, that would be a challenge, wouldn't you say? But nothing worth doing comes easily."

"So I've heard." she looks down at her fingers, "Oh, well, I suppose I'll just have to use the w-word for it."

The fairy's eyes bulge out of her head in shock, "You wouldn't! Don't you understand how dangerous that is?!"

"Of course not. I haven't spent years learning about magic. Who knows what I'd do by mistake? Unless, of course, there's an alternative?"

"You're blackmailing me?!"

"No! Of course not. This is extortion. Technically. Is there an alternative way I can put some protections on this?"

"You could always ask your paramour, once I leave and he can notice this room again, of course."

"I thought you were a friend of the family?"

"I am. In a way. Just not in the way I want him to know I've been speaking to you so much. And neither of us want him to know I'm teaching you anything."

"An alternative to asking him?"

The fairy looks away, "Well, I suppose there might be a way, maybe."

"Uh-huh. And that would be?"

"You are a very rude, disrespectful and reckless young woman."

"Yes. So..."

"Alright, alright, just don't use the w-word for it! Goddess only knows what that would do."

"So?"

"I'm getting to it, I'm getting to it. A little patience for an old woman who's being threatened?" she straightens her dress, "Fine. I guess we're doing this. You can't conjure protections. You wouldn't have a clue what to protect against, or how to strengthen them. Don't give me that look, dear, it's not a criticism, just a statement of fact, this sort of thing is hardly as intuitive as what you're used to. So, we're going to do something more in your wheelhouse. Take off the ring I gave you."

"And give it to you?"

"No, no, you've made it quite clear how much you trust me, so we'll do things your way. Take the ring and push it down your ring finger until it's touching your engagement ring."

"Ok. Done."

"Good. Now push it into your ring."

"What?"

"Just push it into your ring, so they're the same thing. Then you've got an engagement ring with all the protections of the other..."

"No, how do I 'push it into my ring'?"

"It's your magic ring, dear, simply make it do what it's damn well told."

"That easy?"

"That simple, dear. I never said it was easy. But as you won't let me do the easy thing, it's what we're going with."

Lisa pushes the ring down. There's a clink as it touches her engagement ring. She keeps pushing, her ring digging into the webbing between her fingers.

"It's solid!"

"I would hope so. A liquid engagement ring doesn't sound like full commitment to me."

"Are you going to hover there and criticise?"

"Oh, yes, dear. As long as I'm here, Peter won't accidentally stumble through and ask what you're doing. I could leave if you like?"

"No, I don't think so."

"And you are forcing me to do this against my inclinations by threat, dear. I think I'm entitled to be a little prickly."

"Fine." she pushes on the ring again.

"Not like that, dear, don't force it. You've done worse to it. You were just doing it to your body as well. Or Peter was, but the ring remembers, whoever it was."

"Right." she replies sceptically.

"Don't give me that tone of look, young lady. You're thinking too mundanely. Of course, you can't push a ring into a ring the same size, that's just common sense. The magic is to do it anyway."

"Your point is?"

"You can't force it down with your fingers. It's impossible, so just pushing harder doesn't miraculously change the laws of physics. That's the magic."

"So?"

"So it's magic. You've done it in the past. Just do what you did then now."

"Simple." She sighs, and pushes on the ring again, trying to imagine what needs to happen. And nothing does. She scowls.

"Not so angry, dear. Just imagine it melting, flowing, merging together like you do whenever Peter decides to 'massage' you."

"You know about that? You've been watching that?!"

"Oh, no, dear. I can see quite enough of that sort of thing online. Or so I'm reliably informed. Just try it."

"Right. Not watching it, my arse." She concentrates on how the massage feels, trying to will the ring to react the same way. At first, she feels her finger soften, and then the ring oozes over her engagement ring, sinking into it. "It worked!"

"It did. Well, done, dear. Now, before I take my leave, just a word or two of advice."

"Oh?"

"If you ever threaten me like that again, you'll find out what a spanking I am capable of. And that's a damn promise." And she vanishes, just as the phone rings.

"Hello...Carrie? ...What? ...What do you mean 'stuck in the extractor fan'?! Oh, for... No, fine, I don't want to know... My news?" she looks down at her hand, her ring gleaming with a ruby glint that only she can see, and smiles to herself, "I'm engaged."