

CHAPTER 65

CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

Lisa stares at her image in the computer screen, eyes flashing to the clock. There's a cheery chime as Tabitha joins the call, the image of books behind her pixelating as she moves. "You're already here?"

"I don't like being late."

"My kind of client."

"Are you ready for this?"

"We'll find out, won't we?"

"That's not reassuring."

"We're prepped, we know what we want to do, so it's just a matter of listening to..."

The screen splits in half, a young Chinese woman appearing against a brightly lit white-walled, sandalwood floored home office. Her hair is pushed back by a white band, looking at something above the screen. "它在工作□ ?无用的□ □ □" she looks at the screen, "Oh, sorry. 它□ 在正在工作。□ □ 你□ Just talking to my tech guy. I have nooooo idea how this shit works. Give me a good old fashioned phone any day. Anyway, good to meet you, Lisa and Tabby, right?"

"Tabitha."

"Right, right. Tabitha." she looks down, making notes, "Got it, got it. So, first off, ladies, welcome to the fight. Good to have more of us here. Second off, I know Tabby...tha's in it for personal reasons so she's committed, just like Penny and Jean, or me. But you, you're not personally involved. So I need to know you're committed. Because this will be hard work."

"I know that."

"You think you do. But you're young, and still think you're unbeatable. This whole thing we're doing? It's going to make #MeToo look like a walk in the park. People like Arnie are all over the place and we can't shame them to the public without risking BiB intervention, so we're fighting with one hand behind our back. So, I really, really need to know if you're committed."

"Apparently, according to my supposed-friends, I need a dragon to fight or I turn into a bitch to everyone, so..." she smiles thinly, "let's go fight the dragon."

"That's good to hear. But we'll see..."

"I..."

"I know, I know, child. You're all set to fight the good fight, but Auntie Holli has stories that will curl your pretty red hair."

"Child? You're..."

"Honey, to me you're a child. Remember, I'm olllld, despite what I look like. Old enough to be your mother, if not your grandmother. That's me. A Tiger grandmother in an ingenue body that's seen some shit, thanks to dear old Arnie."

"I read the Fictionary."

"Good for you. Had to play some of it down, obviously..."

"Play it down? But..."

"Different times, honey, different times. You think now is bad? Well, you're right, obviously, but oh, the old days were so much worse. Anyways, we've got a lot to cover and I don't want to take up all your evening. So, to business..."

Later, after Holli's logged off, "Well, that went..."

"We are so not ready for this, are we?"

"Well..."

"Come on, we need a tech guy, and some promo and..."

"An office manager because your lawyer has better things to do"? Can't argue with that one. Especially once the contracts start."

"How are we going to pay for that? And how many office managers even are there in our 'community'?"

“Kinky assistants come from all backgrounds. Don't look at me like that. You're a marketing whizz, I'm a lawyer, what was our dear queen before she married up in the world?”
 “I...I have no idea. But there's no way we could afford her.”
 “She might be willing to be paid in your embarrassment...”
 “Like I said, we can't afford her.”
 “Why? There's practically an inexhaustible...”
 “I'm going now.”
 “Don't forget tomorrow...”
 “I know, I know, meeting with SORM. Be professional. I'll be good.”
 “Uh-huh. Try to last nine minutes seventeen seconds.”
 “Nine...why?”
 “That's what I have for the meltdown in the pool.”
 Lisa glowers and disconnects. “I cannot believe she said...”
 “I mean, it's not untrue, is it?”
 “Et tu, Magic Boy?”
 “Sarah does find it easy to fluster you.”
 “I know! That doesn't mean...” she turns towards him, “How long do you have?”
 “Huh? All night for you.”
 “No, I mean, how long do you have in the pool before I have a meltdown?”
 “Ah...”
 “That's not an 'No, Lisa, of course I wouldn't bet on that'.”
 “Guilty.”
 “So?”
 “Promise you won't get mad?”
 “Why would I make a promise I can't keep? Just tell me.”
 “I've gone out on a limb and saying you won't.”
 “Oh.”
 “I do have some faith in you.” he reaches out to ruffle her hair. Lisa purrs, leaning in and then jerks her head away.
 “No, no kitty Lisa stuff! I told you...not after I...I...”
 “Sorry, sorry...you know I...”
 “Yes, I know that. But I do! I ate you!”
 “And here I am, fine. Of course, if you wanted to make it up to me and reverse the favour...”
 “Sneaky, sneaky mousey boy, but not a chance.”
 “Worth a shot.”
 “I might be persuaded to let you do other tewwible, tewwible, tewwible things to me if it will make you feel better.”
 “We have work to do. And as fun as taking you up on that would be, I'm not letting you procrastinate.”
 “Bully.”
 “After we finish up, I promise to do terrible, terrible, terrible things with you.”
 “Fine, Magic Boy. I'll be responsible, as practice, but I'll hold you to that. Let's go through Tabitha's list so she can get it into legalese.”
 “Mind con...”
 “Hard no.”
 “Practice?”
 “Definitely. No tricks without trying them out. We're not good enough to be spontaneous on stage.”
 “Beating up your magician because you get angry?”
 “What? No. I'm not going to beat you up on stage, Magic Boy. And that's not on the list, is it?”
 “No, but it was worth a try. Pay?”
 “Equal shares, obviously.”
 “So not per hour?”

"No. I don't want to think of it as a job per hour."

"So practice is included in our fee. Might have to talk to Sarah about raising our rates. Before or after costs?"

"Who determines costs?"

"Joint?"

"Sure. Equal split after jointly deciding costs."

"Show rating?"

"PG. Mayyyybe 15 for special performances. Definitely not 18 or higher."

"As if either of us would be doing that on stage. Exclusivity?"

"Exclusivity?"

"Do we use people from the audience? Or other assistants?"

"Hmmm. I don't think we're good enough to use the audience, really, are we? As for other assistants? We should probably at least allow the possibility in case we need to rope Carrie in again."

"Got it. We split equally between assistants?"

She nods, "Everyone gets a full share."

"Restoration?"

She gives him a look.

"I'll put that down as a strong yes, shall I?"

"And make sure it says after each trick."

"Of course."

"And immediately after, too."

"Curses foiled again. I guess I'll have to keep that sort of thing in private."

"You'd better."

"Anything we can't include? Must include?"

"I don't...think so. But we can change that later, right?"

"It's our agreement. As long as we agree, we can do what we like with it. If we do it too often, Tab might get pissed at us, though."

"And no one wants that."

"Definitely not."

"Anything else we need to add?"

"Don't think so."

"And do we want a contract for private use?"

"Do we really need one? It feels...weird. I trust you enough to keep to our agreements."

"Good. I trust you, too."

"So, Magic Boy, have I been a good enough girl to be punished?"

"I could be persuaded."

Lisa reaches across for her collar. "Good enough for me."

"You really like that, don't you?" he asks as the inky blackness slithers over her skin.

"Mmmmmmm. And don't give me any crap about it, either."

"Would I?"

"Yes." the mask slides into place, "So, Master, what are you going to do with me?"

"Testing a few things still."

Under the suit's featureless skin, Lisa rolls her eyes, "Of course, Master. I am your experimental test subject, after all."

"Glad you understand that. Embiggen."

"Really?"

"Just for that. Embiggen."

Lisa looks down at her now significant cleavage. "Some experiment."

"Just checking it works when you're full size."

"Right, Master. Of course you were." she stretches her arms up over her head, "And nothing to do with you being a pervert who wants your girlfriend to look like she's auditioning for page three,

right?"

"Maybe a little. But if it bothers you...cube."

Lisa melts down, feeling her body compacting down into the cubic form she's become quite familiar with. She feels Peter's giant fingers pressing against her sides, purring at the touch. He carries her into the kitchen, putting her on the counter top as he hunts through the cupboards.

"What are you looking for, Magic Boy?" A blender appears on the top beside her. "And just what do you think you're going to do with that?"

"Probably exactly what you think I am." He lifts the lid off, "So speak now or forever hold your peace, because I'll have to mute you once it's turned on."

"I...fine, go ahead, but I'm going to get you for this."

"Of course. I wouldn't expect anything less. Sensitivity 2. Mute."

Lisa feels her skin tremble as his fingers touch her, her lips sealing over and then she's tumbling, the falling air caressing her to drive her crazy. She lands, already hazy with pleasure as the lid is closed. The waiting becomes interminable, metal pressing against her, slowly pushing into her pliable body. And then she hears a muffled switch flipped and her world starts to shake. The motor under her shudders into life and the metal she's resting on starts to turn. She feels it catching at her smooth surface, pulling and rubbing against her. The blades pick up enough speed that she doesn't bounce out of the way with each shuddering touch, cutting through her body. They speed up, the cuts coming faster and faster. She quickly loses track as she's sliced, torn and spun around, her body reduced down to a thick puree at the bottom of the blender. Her world goes white as her mind overloads on its pleasure.

Peter stops the blender, tipping it. The black, tarry liquid oozes along the plastic sides and stops. Strings of shiny black material cling to the blades as the gloop solidifies. "HMMMM. Very quick. Cube." the strings pull into the gloop, the cube tumbling out onto the countertop. "Sensitivity off. Sleep mode." He carries Lisa back to his desk, placing her down and returning to his work.

Next morning, as Peter sits at his desk, there's a knock on the door. He looks at the clock, "Shit." and goes to answer it.

"Morning." Tabitha smiles in a loose blouse, open black jacket and long skirt. "Is she ready?"

"Not...yet. Go on through, I'll get her for you." he moves to the bedroom as hurriedly as he dares, snatching up the small black cube. "Ok, Lise. Restore." The black cube melts, stretching up into a twice-embiggened figure in shiny black.

"Mmmmmm, morning, Master." she kisses him on the cheek.

"Tab's here."

"She's what?! It's not even...it's after nine! I'll get you for this, Magic Boy." she pulls off the collar, the black latex slithering back, "I can't go like this! And getting dressed will, wait, where is it? Aha!" she grabs the brass zipper off the dresser, presses it against her breastbone and unzips her body from last night, standing in a dark blue blazer suit, her hair done up. "Right. Let's go."

Peter lifts up her discarded skin, "Do you want me to wash this?"

"What? No. Would that be safe? No. I'll have a shower when I get back. And then I'll deal with you." She walks into the lounge, "Ok, Tab, we ready to go slay dragons?"

Tabitha straightens her skirt, "Did you get your contract details sorted out? It would be a little embarrassing to be talking about how important it is and..." Peter hands over a sheet of notes,

"Perfect. Well, we've got our professional armour on, we've got swords of argument, so I guess a-dragon slaying we shall go."

"Hi-ho, hi-ho..."

"Stuff it, Magic Boy."

A short tube ride, and one emergency coffee, later, "It looks like an office block."

"Because it is."

"I'm somewhat disappointed."

"Ha. You were expecting a gothic castle?"

“Something with more panache, certainly.”

They walk in, “Hi, Ms Weller and McCagherty to see Mr Dini at ten.”

The receptionist nods, as she checks her appointments list and nods them over to the just slightly too hard office sofa. And they settle down to wait.

And wait.

Ten o'clock comes and goes without incident.

Five more minutes pass before Lisa gets up, “Excuse me? Is Mr Dini...”

“I'm afraid Mr Dini is running a little late with his previous appointments. Can I get you some tea or coffee?”

Five more minutes pass, although at least with coffee, “Mr Dini will see you now.”

“Finally.” Lisa mutters. She walks to the door and steps through into a sumptuous office space.

Behind the desk that dwarfs him, a brass plaque for 'Harold H. Dini' prominently displayed, is a man in a dark grey suit, whose hair is long into its ascent.

“Ah, Ms McCagherty. I do apologise for keeping you. Where is your associate? Ms Weller, isn't it?”

Lisa looks around. “She was right behind me.”

“Oh? She shouldn't be able to get lost just between reception and my...”

His phone rings, “Mr Dini, Ms Weller seems unable to leave the reception. The doorway opens onto the supply closet.”

“Well, let's go and fetch her, shall we?”

Lisa grits her teeth as she follows him out of the door and back to reception.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“Well, you have your offices behind a magic doorway and magic rather infamously doesn't work for me.”

“Ah, yes, your condition. I do apologise, I quite forgot it wouldn't work on the doorways. Denise, is the mundane office available?”

“I'll just check, Mr Dini.” She scurries through another door.

“Well, this is an embarrassing start. I do apologise and hope this doesn't make you think the worse of us.”

“Don't worry, it hasn't.”

They are soon, but not soon enough, ensconced in a far less ostentatious, and smaller, office around an off-white table, Lisa and Tabitha along one long side, Mr Dini on the other. “So,” his hands spread expansively, “what can I do for you?”

“We're here to discuss the IAG...”

“Ah, Holli Kim's little project. She's ruffled quite a few feathers in the US with that, you know.”

“I'm sure she has. We'd rather have a less confrontational approach.”

“Oh, that is good news. So, what are you proposing the IAG does and how can SORM assist?”

“For now, we're thinking of starting off small, while we're getting up and running...”

“Very wise, I'm sure.”

Ten...nine...eight... “...so we'd limit ourselves to providing contract services for assistants while we...”

“Contract services? I assure you that SoRM is quite capable of...”

Lisa takes another deep breath, *seven...six...* “I'm sure SoRM does provide them at the moment, but you are the Society of Real Magicians. Your focus is naturally on the magician. We'd simply be providing a similar service to the other half of the partnership.”

“I see. I hope you don't mind me being a little sceptical. Holli Kim has been traducing magicians and our good offices in her role.”

five...four... “Holli has some...challenges with how SoRM has handled her case, which naturally colours how she sees the relationship working out. As I said, we'd very much like a cooperative approach.”

“She's insinuated that we are tricking assistants into unfair contracts.”

“Her contract with Arnold does seem little one-sided, from a legal perspective.”

“Which she signed willingly.”

three...two...one. She sighs, and starts again from one hundred. “And there's the issue we're trying to address. Most of the time, the magician is steeped in the rules and mores of this community, but the assistants are less familiar with how seriously agreements and the like are taken.”

“Hardly...”

“So it can look like magicians are taking advantage of assistants inexperience.”

“Well, I...”

“And, as none of us want that sort of reputation, surely it's only sensible to make sure both parties enter into agreements with their eyes wide open so incidents like Holli's don't happen.”

“I see.”

“Naturally, as we get our feet fully under us we'd expand operations to helping assistants find suitable magicians.”

“Which we already...”

“So we'd have to be working together. Magicians seek assistants and assistants seek magicians. Eventually, we'd like to have progressed to giving new assistants some basic training and verification so that magicians know what they're working with.”

“Well, that does sound like a laudable aim, but for now, you appear to merely be offering to check that magicians aren't unscrupulously exploiting their assistants. And given Ms Weller's unfortunate experience, well, one can't help but wonder if ulterior motives abound.”

Lisa looks down to see Tabitha's knuckles whitening as she grips the edge of her leather-bound folder, her jaw tight, *twenty...nineteen...eighteen...* “Everyone has to start somewhere.”

“True, true. So what can SoRM do to help?”

“For now, we'd mostly need your blessing so that people know our organisations aren't confrontational.”

“I see.”

“The Keeper of London has committed to having the contracts of those acts directly working for her to be ...”

“Ah, you mean the Keeper's wife.”

fivefourthreetwoonethousandninehundredandninety-nine, nine hundred and ninety-eight “...to be verified so that they meet the desired openness and clarity within the next few months.”

“I see.”

“And until we've got our own back office set up, we might need to lean on SoRM's resources, if that's all right. Magically experienced office managers do not grow on trees.”

“So true, so true. Well, I shall certainly think about it and give you ladies my recommendations soon.”

“Thank you, Mr Dini.” Tabitha digs into her folder, “Here is a sample contract, so you can reassure yourself that we're not trying to do anything untoward or detrimental.”

“Quite so. Well, pleasure to meet you ladies, and may it be a pleasure doing business with you.”

“And with you.” she reaches across the table to shake hands.

Later, “I'm proud of you.”

“Why, thank you, Master.” she replies, leaning her head onto his chest as they relax on the couch.

“We made a couple of thousand, by the way, from your temper control.”

“Noice. I admit it wasn't easy, condescending pillock, and I was worried Tabitha would be the one to blow up when he was talking about what happened at Samhain. Like he couldn't understand why that might be a problem.”

“She's pretty good at control.”

“She is.”

“So are you.”

“When I have to be.”

“And I'm forgiven?”

“Not even close. You were supposed to let me out by eight!”