

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 69

BURNING THE CANDLE

Lisa crushes the black ball, squashing it between her fingers. She digs her nails into it, deforming the shiny surface but never breaking it. At least until the ball shouts out “Sunstone!” and suddenly expands. She's forced to drop it, leaving Carrie sitting on the floor as the shiny surface retreats over her into the collar.

“Jesus, what is with you? That was rough!” she pushes herself up.

“What?”

Carrie checks herself over, taking off the collar, “I said that was rough.” reassured there are no finger imprints left, “Is everything, you know, all right with you?”

“I'm fine.”

“Are you sure? That was...”

“I said I was fine!”

“Yeah, you're clearly just fine.”

“Stop being weird.”

“Weird? I'm being weird?! You're the one trying to kill me.”

“Don't be so melodramatic.”

“Melodramatic?! Me?! I'm being melodramatic?!?”

Lisa gives her a look.

“Fine. I'll be back for my turn when you're in a better mood.” she grabs her things, the door slamming on her way out.

“Fine!” Lisa replies to the closed door.

At work, Lisa stabs her fingers onto the keys, trying to make the report make sense, and be clear enough for everyone to understand. “Lisa?”

She stops typing, her shoulders tensing. “Yes, Margaret. What can I do for you?” She replies with a forced politeness that Margaret typically doesn't notice, only turning around after she's finished what she's doing. Margaret doesn't take the hint.

“I'm just sorting out things for the Christmas party.” Lisa's teeth grind, “and as you and Peter were so successful last year, I thought...”

“No.”

“I'm sorry?”

“No. You've already asked Peter and he said no and now you're asking me thinking we don't talk to each other or something. He said no, I'm saying no, I have far too much on already without preparing another show that will eat up every spare second I have!” he grip on the chair turns her knuckles white.

“Well, I wouldn't ask if...”

“Yes, yes you would! You can never take no for an answer. You always have to get your way! Well, not on this one. The answer's 'no'.”

“But...”

“No.”

“What if...”

“Which part of 'no' do you not understand?! It's a two letter word! Children can get this, Margaret, why can't you? No. Enn ohh. NO!”

“I'll put you down as a...”

“You'll put me down as a 'no'. Won't you?”

“Well...”

“You'll put me down as a 'no'! And leave me the Hell alone.”

“Right. I'll...put you down as a 'no' then.” She walks off, “Sorry to have troubled you.”

Lisa snarls to herself as she goes back to the recalcitrant report and resumes her key stabbing.

“Lisa, can I have a word, please?”

Lisa rolls her eyes as she locks the computer and walks into Lorraine's small office. "Yes?"

"Is everything alright?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You were a little...abrupt with Margaret there."

"I have a lot on and you know Margaret can't take no for an answer."

"Even so, maybe you could apol..."

"Apologise?! For protecting my free time? Margaret should apologise for being a demanding...colleague."

"I think you should."

"Is that a manager's 'I think you should'?" she asks dangerously.

"Does it need to be?"

"No. But I'm still not saying yes to her."

"Not even if I..."

"Oh, no. You won't suggest that. You respect me too much."

"...but of course I wouldn't do that, I respect you too much."

"Can I get back to work now?"

"Make sure you apologise to..."

"Yeah, sure, fine."

Evening, "So, you wanna talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"Margaret."

"Ugh! I dealt with it. She won't bother us any more."

"So I heard."

"I know that voice. What else did you hear?"

"That you got carpeted by Lorraine and had to apologise."

"I...did apologise, yes."

"And?"

"And I apologised. She's still accepting being told no so it's all sorted. No problems."

"That doesn't sound like Margaret."

"What do you want me to say, Magic Boy?! Yes, I used magic to get her to leave me the fuck alone! You said that was all right! You're not going to say I shouldn't have done that now, are you?!"

"I'm not saying that."

"Good. What are you saying?!"

"That you had a rough day at work and might want to destress about it."

"Oh, if only, but I haven't got time. I've got to look through all these broom cupboards your uncle's found for me in the back of beyond."

"That bad?"

"I haven't got the budget for anything bigger, have I?! I'm lucky it's not a shoebox. How did Penny and Jean do this?"

"Have you asked them?"

"Have I...Magic Boy, you are a genius! I'll just..."

"It's the middle of the night in Oz right now, don't forget."

"And then you go and ruin it! Fine. I'll ping them anyway. They can get in touch when they're awake. Until then..." she turns back to the broom cupboard list.

Lunch time the next day, still nothing from Australia, "Anyway, that's what I'm up to."

"Wow. I mean, wow, L. That's a lot of stuff."

"Tell me about it."

"So you're making some kind of assistants union? From, like, scratch? All by yourself? And working at your regular job?"

"Uh-huh."

“When do you sleep?! You are sleeping, aren't you?”
 “Yes, Mother, I'm getting sleep.”
 “A full night? Eight hours an' all?”
 “I said I'm getting sleep, ok?!”
 “Hey, don't have a go at me just 'cause you know I'm right.”
 “I didn't say that.”
 “You didn't have to. I so obviously am I'll say it for you. No need to thank me”
 “Fine, fine, oh glorious sleep specialist, I'll try to sleep better.”
 “Good. Now, why haven't you asked me to help? I mean, you're out here doing stuff and not sleeping and you don't think to call me? I'm genuinely hurt.”
 “O, I...”
 “No, I get it. You always have to do it all yourself. That's just who you are and why we love you so. But you need an intervention on this one before you burn too far in.”
 “An intervention?”
 “Not a big one. But, you know, now you know I'm here to help. So, what do I do?”
 “It's not that simple, O. It's...”
 “Oh, really? Well, explain it to me then.”
 “It's just...look, it's...it's that...”
 “Uh-huh. It's?”
 “Look, you're not part of the community and...”
 “Not part of? What the hell does that mean?”
 “O, don't be like...”
 “Don't be like what? Like I shouldn't get upset that you don't think I'm good enough for your new friends?!”
 “It's not that, it's com...”
 “Oh, I'm sure it is.”
 “O, I do not have time for you to...”
 “Me? Me?! Well, I don't want to get in the way of your important busy schedule for your important friends.”
 “Don't be dif...”
 “Yeah, no, I'm done. You've changed, L. Not for the better.” she pushes the chair back and flounces out of the coffee shop.
 “O, wait...” she looks down at the table, “Fine. I don't need your help, anyway.”

That evening, Lisa sits in front of the computer screen, on the other side of the Internet, Jean sits in her gaming chair, her pale skin glowing in the monitor light, headset in place, triangular furry ears twitching in her black hair, her tanned cleavage stretching out her top and threatening the keyboard in front of her. “Hi.” she waves, smiling to reveal cute little overbite fangs.

“Hi.” Lisa responds, her eyes drawn irresistibly downwards.

Jean giggles, “Hey, my eyes are up here...today anyway.”

Lisa blinks and looks upward. “Where's Penny?”

“Oh, you know...” Jean dimples, blushing only a little, as she rubs her chest, “She had a really hard day so wanted some quality time.”

“As your boobs?”

Jean's blush deepens, “She likes to be close and...oh God, I can't believe I'm having to say this to the Samhain Girl.”

“I thought I told you not to...”

“I know, I know, sorry, sorry. What do you need us for? I can't believe...”

“I'm just trying to get things set up and...” she takes a deep breath, “I need advice from someone who's done it. It's just, it's overwhelming.”

“And you're asking me?! The Samhain Girl is asking me for advice? Am I dreaming?!”

“I'd say you should pinch yourself, but you'd probably get Penny.”

"Hey. That is not necessary and probably true." she adjusts the top, "Ok. First, have you looked in Holli's advice pack. That was..."

"Advice pack? What advice pack?"

"You didn't talk to Holli about this?"

"We talked, but she didn't mention any advice pack."

"Oh, oh, I'll send you it. There's, like, a lot. It doesn't all work, different countries, different laws, you know, but it breaks down what you need to start with and that's just sooooo helpful when I'm panicking and rushing every which way. Penny had to blorb me for like three days to calm me down. I'll just...oh, bother, where is...no, I swore I put it there...Annie!" she calls out off screen, "Where's Holli's pack?!"

"Annie?"

"Oh, right, we didn't have her when you saw us. Annie, get over here."

A lightly tanned face with washed out blue eyes and wavy light brown hair falling to her shoulders enters the side of the screen. "You called?"

"Hi, this is Annie. She's our intern. We're just breaking her up."

"You mean breaking her in, right?"

Jean smirks, "Do I?" she grabs Annie's arm and pulls it into her lap. Annie looks down at her empty shoulder.

"I'm...I'm going to need that back, boss."

Jean pouts. "But it suits me so well. Oh, pooh, if you must." She hands the arm back and casually pulls one of hers off, pressing it to Annie's side. "She's having some trouble fitting in. Insists on only having two arms and legs."

"Can't have that, right?"

"I knew you'd get it. Annie, this is the Samhain Girl."

"Lisa, please."

Annie tears herself away from trying to manage three arms at once, "Oh, you're the one she's always talking about?"

Jean colours again, "I don't always talk about..."

"You're right. 50% of the time at most. Maybe 60. 75 at a push."

Jean bites her lip, looking down.

"Hey, hey, my eyes are up here." Lisa teases.

Jean jerks her eyes upwards, now glowing like a small star. "Yes, right, anyway, now that you're here, Annie, where did I put the advice pack? It's not..."

Annie leans over, practically resting on Penny, hiding Jean's face from the screen but not the inarticulate gurgles of pure pleasure, as she tries to use the mouse to scroll through the computer files. "There." she steps back. Jean wipes a little trickle of drool from her face and tries to compose herself.

"Y-y-yes, thanks, Annie. Anyway, that pack and the grant were really..."

"Grant?"

"Holli put some down payments together. No way could Pen and I afford shit. Not after just fighting a whole court case to get her re-personed and all."

"Advice packs. Grants." she mutters, "Holli's holding out on me. Ok, thanks for that. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, no problem, you're welcome, glad to help. Don't be a stranger, hey?" both move to close the call, Lisa just catching, "You're getting me into trouble, Pen" before it ends.

She takes a series of deep breaths and screams her frustration out.

A day later, a Chancery Road coffee shop, "...and then she stormed out."

"I see." Tabitha replies carefully, taking a deep interest in her cup.

"You see? What does that mean?"

"What do you think it means? You had fights with your sister, your colleague, your boss and now your best friend. " she counts them off on her fingers, "The common denominator there is you."

“What?!”

“You heard me. You're stressed and taking it out on everyone around you.”

“What?!”

“You're saying that a lot. Anyway, as I have literally no interest in being your emotional support punching bag, I thought I'd stop you early.”

“What?!”

“Can we try for at least a two-syllable word this time? Maybe a whole sentence?”

“You're being a bitch.”

“There we go. And I absolutely am.”

“What? Why?”

“Because when you've got yourself into high dudgeon, you need a metaphorical slap in the face to get you to stop and think. I'd have tried an actual slap in the face, but the Solicitor General frowns on that sort of behaviour.”

“I am not in...”

“Going to stop you there. Yes, you are. You're stressed out and your already famously short fuse is non-existent.”

“Short-fu...?”

“You're not going to pretend patience is one of your virtues, are you?”

“[Stop interrupting me.](#)”

Tabitha blinks slowly, setting down her coffee cup. “As you're stressed, I'll let that one go. But, to remind you, magic does not work on me. Despite that, I do not like people trying to use it on me. And I especially do not like people trying to manipulate my mind with it. And so, the next time you try that, stressed or not, when you wake up, your face will be several interesting shades of black and blue.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Yes. It is.”

“Noted.”

“Good. Now, why are you so stressed that you're raging at everyone?”

“I'm not...”

Tabitha's eyebrow raises.

“I'm not!”

“The alternative is that you're the sort of bitch that drives reasonable people away. And I'd have noticed that kind of toxic attitude before now.”

“I...it's just, there's so much! Employees and offices and...we haven't even started yet!”

“True. Setting things up is always a stressful situation. But handling it this way is precisely the wrong way.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Take a step back. Take advice. And most important, don't think you're the only one who has to do every single thing. That's why you have a team.”

“At the moment, you're the team.”

“And I'm all you need. What is the issue with the offices?”

“With our budget, all I can afford is a shoebox in the middle of nowhere.”

“Really? Have you actually confirmed the budget?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you actually talked with Sarah what our actual start-up budget is?”

“I...I...oh, shit, I'm a fucking idiot!”

“Find out the details first. Then figure out our plan.”

“What's the next step in our plan?”

“You've reached out to Penny and Jean. You could ask Holli for advice.”

“She didn't give us the help she gave...”

“You didn't ask for help. I didn't ask, either. We've bitten off huge chunk. Now we need to chew. And that might mean we eat humble pie and ask for help.”

"We?"

"We are in this thing together, remember? Joint enterprise."

"Isn't that when a bunch of people commit a murder? And they all get done because they can't prove which one actually did the killing?"

"Yes. Given what we intend to do, it seemed appropriate."

"Right. You're sure you don't want this job?"

"I am very sure. I wouldn't do even half as well as you."

"I thought I was crashing and burning at it?"

"Haven't crashed yet. Let's make it a 3 point landing."

"Out of how many?"

"See, you can enjoy this."

"I guess." her head sinks, "Shit. I have been such a bitch."

"I think I said that."

"I am going to have to apologise to so many people for the last few days."

"That's the truth. It'll be a full apology tour. At least they'll probably forgive you."

"Why?"

"Because they love you and you'll explain why."

"Hah. The problem with Ola is I can't tell her why. If I could, it would be a lot easier."

"I'll think on that. You think on how to put those bridges out."

That evening, "Feeling better?"

"Sure I love having my emotional well-being taken apart and slammed into my face. Fun, fun, fun."

"Well, at least you're making jokes and not threatening people."

"You could have said something, you know?"

"I could. But you don't listen to me when you're on a roll."

"You could always make me listen..."

"I value living too much to try that, Lise."

"I give you permission."

"Rea..."

"This time."

"There's the Lisa I know."

"Ha ha. Funny, Magic Boy."

"But you're..."

"Yes, I'm sure. I need something to relax me. Maybe get me closer to being human before I have to make the apology rounds."

"Oh, I think we're going in completely the other direction."

"Well, now I'm intrigued. I suppose I should get..." her clothes drift off in a multicoloured cloud to settle on the couch. "You are soooo predictable."

"Well, let's see if we can do something about that. Could you put your arms by your side?"

"Sure." she looks up at him, "What now, Master?"

"Now? Now the fun begins."

"That didn't begin when you stripped me? I'm almost insulted."

She stops, her skin feeling different, harder to move. The room around her stretches up as she shrinks down. She wants to say something sarcastic, to mask the nervous excitement, but her mouth doesn't work, her swallowed words tasting waxy. She feels her legs press together so tight they fuse, her arms becoming one with her sides. And then she feels something growing inside her, tickling, itchy, worming its way up and down her body, burrowing through her solid body until the black cord emerges at her head and feet. Peter reaches down, his hand fitting around most of her. She feels her body give slightly, his fingers leaving prints in her skin that stay there. He holds her up to the mirror. Her skin is glossy, shiny...waxy. She can see the wick poking out of the top of her head and the soles of her conjoined feet. She mentally blinks.

A candle? I'm a candle? She watches in the mirror as Peter places her in a small dish, feeling it

against her back. *Why am I lying down? Candles usually go upr...* She tries to gasp as heat flares just above her head, feeling the wick lighting, her sculpted hair and scalp starting to soften and melt. *This is different. Feels like I'm sweating away. And...* Another burst of heat flares by her feet, the other end of the wick catching. *Well that explains why I'm lying down, but why both...oh! I get it. 'Burning the candle at both ends'. Bit on the nose there, Magic Boy.* The heat inches along her body, feeling her waxy flesh melting, flowing down to cool in the bottom of the dish. She tries to smile as she feels her brain melting into the wax...*Mmmmmm, can't get more relaxing than that. No one expects a brainless candle to do anything but melt.* Her nose melts running over her cheeks as her vision briefly shimmers as her eyes drip down to the china. She doesn't really notice much after that, at least in detail, just the heat, the feeling of melting into its serenity and the slowness of solidifying into a streak of wax. She doesn't even notice when the melting is finished, the wick magically waiting until the flames melt in her middle to snuff themselves out. She also doesn't hear Peter leaving her there, going to bed with a promise to restore her in the morning, just sitting there slowly cooling in the air.