

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 74
DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR ABRAXAS: CHAPTER 1
MEANWHILE, ACROSS TOWN

One week after the new normal begins, "Stupid fucking Master making me do stupid fucking housework because he stupid fucking can! This is not the fun kind of being property!" Carrie mutters to herself, clad in a high-end 'sexy maid' outfit, clinging black short sleeved top exposing her cleavage, with a frilly white apron, peaked headband and an abundance of frilly underskirts that barely reaches along her thighs. She scowls as she reaches up with a feather duster. "Stupid fucking Master." she repeats as she tries to tug her skirt back down in practice for an audience. "If he even tries to give me the accent..." The front door clicks unlocked. Her sense of 'person not on approved list' triggers and she vanishes in a puff of sparkly pink smoke.

"Right, 'Arry me lad, still got it." the door opens, filled for a moment with DCI Abraxas' wide frame. "Anyone 't'ome? No? Good."

In the cupboard, Carrie pushes at the exact wording of her instructions, stretching her spherical form to become human again, pressing her ear to the door. "What is he doing here?"

"Now, if h'I was h'evidence, where would h'I be 'iding?" he sniffs, moving surprisingly stealthily around the apartment. "Where h'are you? H'I know h'it's h'around 'ere somewhere." He stops at the cupboard door, sniffing. Carrie steps back and the ball she becomes falls to the floor in the cloud of smoke as it opens. "H'ahhh, no, it's just the problem child. H'enjoy yourself like this, lass. You'll 'ave a powerful long time to get used to h'it."

He closes the door and resumes his searching. Carrie fumes silently as she rocks back and forth before she can restore herself. "Oh, it's like that is it? Well, DCI Abraxas, let's see what you're up to." she eases the door open to hear better.

"H'I 'ate dealing with the h'old families. H'absolutely h'everything sets off my sinuses. More magic than h'anyone h'outside bloody h'Atlantis, aha, 'ere h'it h'is." he reaches the warehouse door.

Carrie hears a sizzle and some highly valuable, wide-ranging and historically-inclined curses that cast doubt on the parentage of Peter Stafford, his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, "Well, h'if you're tryin' so 'ard to keep me h'out, let's see what you've got behind door number two." more cursing comes until the door opens. Abraxas whistles. "Well, this h'is an h'Aladdin's cave h'and no mistake." he sneezes. Thunder rolls.

"Who dares to...oh, it's you. What do you want, Abraxas?"

"Oh, beggin' your pardon, h'I'm so sure, your Lordship. H'I h'am conducting h'enquiries. H'into the death of one Steven h'Osbourne. H'and it's Detective Chief h'Inspector, h'if you don't mind."

"And you are here in the course of those inquiries?"

"That h'is correct. My current prime suspect lives attached to this space h'and so h'I h'am h'inquiring."

"With a warrant from the Keeper, of course, Detective Chief Inspector?" the thunder replies, sounding rather amused.

Carrie peers through the gap, just in time to see Abraxas stiffen. "H'in capital matters, h'I 'ave considerable latitude, h'as you well know."

"Of course. So, why do you suspect him?"

"H'official matter, h'I'm h'afraid. But, 'e 'ad means, h'opportunity h'and motive."

"Motive? You're reaching Abraxas. Peter may not have liked Osbourne but who really did? The little shit bred enemies like they were weeds."

"H'I can't rightly say to that, sir. But, recently, 'e 'ad taken up an 'arrassment campaign against one Lisa McCagherty 'oom h'I believe young Master Stafford h'is quite h'attached to, h'along wiv 'is h'old friends, the Keeper and missus."

"Seems to me, that the Keeper or his wife should be suspects, then."

"Well, sir, that would be quite an h'accusation to make, wouldn't you say? A bloke would want a great deal of h'evidence before 'e went around makin' that sort of thought widely known."

"Yes, I imagine you would."

"Me, sir? An 'umble whasisname h'accusin' the Keeper 'issel h'of such an 'einous crime? H'oh, no, sir, h'I think h'I'll leave that to much more h'august personages 'ere present."

"I think not."

"As you say, sir. 'Owever, it strikes my memory, that you're no fan of the deceased yourself. 'A little shit that breeds h'enemies like weeds', wasn't it? H'and, if h'I recall, you and young Stafford 'ave remarkably similar auras for the h'obvious reasons. You wouldn't 'appen to want to 'elp an h'old policeman h'out h'and let me know where you were h'on the night in question?"

"Are you just going to accuse everyone you question, Abraxas?"

"Those that meet the limited criteria h'I 'ave." he stands up straighter, adjusting his bowler hat, "H'and h'it h'is Detective Chief h'Inspector H'Abraxas..." he pauses significantly, "...sir. So?" he takes out his notepad, licking the tip of his stubby pencil.

Carrie glimpses the dark cloud floating in the doorway. It's red eyes flick over her and the cupboard door slams quickly and firmly shut in her face as she bounces on the floor.

MARK AND ANNE: CHAPTER 2 MEANWHILE, ACROSS TOWN: PART 2

The day after the new normal begins, Mark slugs back a shot of whisky, reaching for the femininely curved bottle to pour another very generous measure immediately. He swirls the smooth brown liquid around the glass, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, "To absent friends." he drains the glass and pours another, staring into it as if trying to divine a reason. The whiskey swirls on its own, rising up to rest it's slender arms and much less slender chest on the rim.

"You know, Master," Anne smiles playfully, "if you're going to make me into perfectly aged single malt, you might at least savour me."

Mark sets down the glass. "Not in the mood to savour. I'm toasting. In their memory."

"You're drinking yourself into a coma because you hurt, you mean."

"Aren't you supposed to be on my side? You know, as my property and all?"

"I am on your side, Master. That's why I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Sure thing. Just my luck I got a toy that thinks it's my conscience."

"Someone has to look after you. I bet you can't even stand up straight on your own"

Mark's bleary vision focuses on her, "Nonsense. I can do that easy-peasy." he remains resolutely seated, "I just don't want to"

"Of course not, Master. Maybe if you talked about..."

"Yeah, sure. That'll really help." he sneers, "He's fucking done it to me again!"

"Master?"

"You know who. Peter fucking Stafford. Three times. First he steals my girl and she's still the vegetable he turned her into. Then he murders my friend. And now, now he fucking owns my..." he stumbles, "my..."

"Bestie? Partner? Muse?"

"Yeah, that's it, my muse. Thieving, murdering scumbag! I..." he wipes his eyes again.

"She's not dead, though, Master."

"Might as well be. Can you see Lord high and mighty Stafford letting me use his toys? Hah! He is not the kind to share."

"I see. You still have me."

"Yeah, I still have you. But it's not the same. She was...she was special."

Anne pouts.

"Don't give me that look. I'm stating facts. You're you, and I love what you are, and how many ideas you have, but she was...she was fizzing, bursting with ideas that I could do in the show not just the afterparty. She made me...better. Not a better person, obviously, no one's that talented, but she made me think bigger. I could do better. And now..." he trails off.

"Now you have to be better on your own."

"Yeah. Sounds easy when you say it like that."

She shrugs, "Carrie's not a drug, Master. She doesn't suddenly give you unlimited creativity or anything."

"Yeah, but..."

"Tomorrow we start magic creativity boot camp."

"Nah. Tomorrow, I'm gonna meet up with...with...I don't know." tears start to flow down his cheeks, his body shaking with ugly sobs.

"Master? Are you alright?"

"Yeah. 'sniff' Course."

"Are you sure, Master? Because..."

"Yeah, yeah, no, I'm not all right. Course I'm not. But...you can pretend I am, right? I've got an image to maintain."

She smiles, "Of course, Master."

A week after the new normal begins, and Mark tugs at his collar. "Not so tight. You're strangling me."

His suit sighs, opening the top button and letting the tie slip. "Better, Master?"

"Yeah." he looks around the oak panels, the shelves filled with thick legal tomes, his hands creasing the red leather under him, "'S'not you. This place makes me edgy. Reminds me of court."

"Is my Master a naughty boy?"

"Your Master is still your Master, you cheeky thing. And I'll punish you if you don't knock it off."

"Oh, nooooo, Master. Anything but that." the suit replies with considerably less sincerity than Br'er Rabbit trying to avoid the briar patch.

A wooden door opens, "Mr. Slant will see you now, Mr. Atwell."

"Right, right." he stands up, the suit pulling his tie back into its proper place and Mark walks through the door. The office is cramped, a smell of old paper filling it. Mr. Slant looks up, his skin almost like aged parchment itself, his white hair swept back, his body hidden within a Saville Row suit that manages to put Mark's magical creation to shame for fit, his hands little more than bones held together within their liver-splotched skin.

"Ah, Mr. Atwell, ah, ah, and toy. Welcome to my office. Thank you for answering my letter so promptly. Young people today, rarely so, ah, ah, punctual with their affairs."

Mark eases him into the kind of chair you can vanish inside, feeling small as Mr. Slant's hooded black eyes bore into him.

"And I haven't, ah, ah, thanked you. Miss Weller is quite a remarkable worker, ah, ah. She may even make partner some day in the dim and distant future when a space becomes, ah, ah, available."

"Yeah, y'r welcome, I guess." Mark mumbles under that midnight stare.

"But, to business. You are here because our client, the late, lamented Steven Osbourne, named you as a beneficiary in his will and we..."

"Sorry. Could you repeat that bit?"

"Mr. Osbourne named you in his will. Nothing serious, I assure you, just here to deal with the particulars."

"Right, right. But why..."

"Mr, ah, ah, Atwell, this will go considerably, ah, ah, faster if you allow me to finish a thought."

"Right, sorry."

"I understand. This is, I'm sure, quite a shock to you, especially given the, ah, ah, distressing manner of his departure."

"Yeah, somethin' like that."

"So, as the sole beneficiary of Mr. Osborne's..."

Mark opens his mouth but the black stare over the papers silences him.

"...you are now the proprietor of his magical supplies business, his real business, home, the, ah, ah, assets pertaining to those and the possessor of his not-inconsiderable fortune."

"Sole? Fortune?" Mark stammers out.

"Just so. Not as great as it once was, after his recent expenditures, and, ah, ah, of course, the damnable taxation levied on the estate, but still a very tidy sum. I have prepared a summary for you." he slides the sheet across the table. "This is only the top-line, you understand. There is considerable detail to his, ah, ah, assets that is fully available but..."

Mark takes the paper and scans it over. He blinks and looks again, counting the multiple commas in the figure. The suit almost gasps. "This is..."

"Indeed it is. There is just one, ah, ah, stipulation to comply with before the ownership is transferred."

"Stipu...? Oh, yeah, that sounds like Steveo. What's the catch?"

"The terms do state that you are not to work for 'the queen bitch', which we believe to mean the Keeper's wife. I understand your current employment is at the entertainment facility she and her husband run?"

"Yeah."

"That would prevent you inheriting if it were to be maintained. The will stipulates that should you be in her employ within the next, ah, ah, twenty years you will forfeit control of the assets inherited."

"Keepin' me on a tight leash beyond the grave, huh, Steveo?"

"I couldn't say. We simply fulfil our client's, ah, ah, wishes."

"Right. So to get Steveo's stuff, I need to not work at E's. Right. How soon after quitting does it kick in? 'Cause my place's tied in there."

"We, ah, ah, anticipated such a situation. We are prepared, as executors, to arrange lodgings should any, ah, ah, difficulties be encountered."

"Right, right. For a 'small' fee, right?"

"Sadly, such, ah, ah, considerations are a necessity of doing business."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll...I'll get back to you."

"Of course, Mr. Atwell. Do make another appointment when you've made your, ah, ah, decision. I bid you a very good day."

He rises from the chair, walking out of the office in a daze, still clutching the summary paper.

"Babes..." he murmurs, as his suit relaxes into something more comfortable, "I think I've just become filthy fucking rich."

SARAH AND STUART: CHAPTER 2 MEANWHILE, ACROSS TOWN: PART 3

Just over a week after the new normal begins, "Mark quit."

"Well, that's just what we need. Did he at least say why? He's not blaming us for the Carrie situation, is he?"

"He didn't say that directly, but, probably a bit."

"So why?"

"He's named in Osbourne's will. As the sole recipient. Of...everything. As long as he's not working for us. Well, you specifically, but I don't think Slant will let us finesse that."

"Steven fucking Osbourne managed to fuck us over even after he's dead. Gotta admit, that takes a real gift."

"You're taking this well."

"What am I going to do, Stuart? Dig him up to harangue him? That would be a bit dramatic, even for me. I can't blame Mark for taking an offer that I'd take in a heartbeat, even without the added motivation of being pissed about Carrie."

"We should talk about that, too."

"What now?"

"A Hellsing 'visited' today."

Sarah's head snaps up, "That is not a good sign."

“No. They have 'concerns'.”

“About Carrie.”

“About us.”

“Us?”

“Whether we are incompetent, stupid or actually know what we're doing.”

“That sounds serious. Why?”

“The escape clause. They are of the opinion that it should not exist. Of course, they also said that the limit was lenient in the first place.”

“Of course they think that. Their solution would be to remove the problem entirely, and, despite all this crap, I'm rather fond of the problem. And their reasoning on us is?”

“If we didn't know we were putting it in, we're incompetent. If we did, are we stupid in thinking someone won't figure it out before Carrie's served sufficient of her sentence?”

“Which would be...three centuries, I assume?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, it's a good thing we're neither stupid, nor incompetent, isn't it, dear?”

“I think expecting Peter to keep her on that tight a leash for three hundred years or more is pushing it.”

“Of course it is. But that's not the point. We knew the Bastards wouldn't like it. Tough. Unless we royally fuck it up, they won't want to depose a Keeper for exercising his authority within his demense. Sets a very worrying precedent for everyone else.”

“We'd better not fuck this up then.”

“I think we're safe, dear. The whole point is to make sure Carrie is kept under control until she no longer poses a risk. Which means fixing whatever is wrong with her first.”

“Which needs rather more investigation than we have.”

“True. Fortunately, we know some people who do.”

“I'll set that meeting up. What are we going to do about Mark?”

“What can we do? Look for a replacement headliner and wish him luck. He's unlikely to be as much of a pain in the arse as Osbourne.”

“Wouldn't Vlad the Impaler be less trouble than Osbourne?”

“Possibly, but he's not available, is he?”