

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 75
SUFFICIENTLY ADVANCED
by Paul Watson

Lisa shoves the door to the flat open. "What a dayyyy!" she moans, arms filled with folders, bumping the door closed. She sniffs. "What's that? Spaghetti? Magic Boy, you're a lifesaver. How did you know I'd be back right this..."

"Magic. How else?"

"How else, indeed." she replies, too tired to even be annoyed at the evasive answer. The folders clatter onto the table. "Have I mentioned how much I love after-work meetings? Especially with bloody SORM?"

"Just a couple of times. Maybe." he comes out of the small kitchen, bearing plates piled with steaming pasta, covered in red sauce and mince, a dusting of parmesan over the top.

"Mmmmm. If that looks as good as it smells..."

Peter sets the plates down. "Only one way to find out."

Several forkfuls later, "Mmmmmm, that tastes divine. I thought you couldn't cook."

"I cheated. I made it with Carrie."

"And then locked her in the cupboard rather than letting her enjoy? Cruel, Magic Boy. Very...hang on, how? Carrie can't cook even more than you can't. She could burn salad."

Peter twirls the pasta around his fork and chews. "I told you, I made it with Carrie."

"That doesn't...wait, when you said you made it 'with Carrie'...you didn't mean 'with Carrie's assistance', did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"You meant 'with Carrie as...'"

"The ingredients, yes."

"I'm eating my sister?!! You...I...she...I feel sick." she leaps up, racing to the bathroom, heaving and retching sounds emerging.

Some uncomfortable minutes later, she emerges wiping her mouth, "Ugh. You could have told me." she accuses, "I mean..." she blinks, "...I can accept that, to you, that made sense and I..." she blinks again, "accept it's not *that* bad, but...tell me next time?"

"You're going to let there be a next time?"

"No, of course...well, maybe...in a while, a long while...when I've got used to...I mean...it...she did taste really good."

Peter smiles.

"Don't give me that look."

"Of course not. I wouldn't dream of it. We're having visitors tomorrow, by the way."

"We are? Who?"

"Some people Sarah's asked to look into Carrie."

"Look into...?"

"The magic sponge situation. She wants that resolved. Like yesterday. And we haven't got anywhere with it."

"I...guess. She could have asked rather than just...I'm going to give her a piece of my mind."

"Well, at least you'd be talking then."

"Watch it. Or you'll be wearing your dinner...Carrie...you know what I mean!"

Late the next morning, a man and woman stand outside the block of flats, "Doesn't look like much, does it, Dr Black?" the man asks, standing nearly a foot taller than his companion, sandy brown hair swept meticulously across his forehead, a twinkle in his green eyes, a black suit tailored around his broad-shouldered frame.

"Appearances can deceive, Mr Stone." she replies, her black hair is cut short in a bob, a fringe you could use as a ruler above her thin glasses. She wears a cream jacket over her red blouse and black skirt. "That's rather our stock in trade, after all."

"Quite so. Shall we go and see what all the fuss is about?"

"That would seem sensible given it's what we're here for."

"You always take things so seriously, Hishiko."

"And you always take them too frivolously, Simeon."

"Which is why we work so well together." he smiles, putting his arm around her shoulder. She shakes him off and walks towards the door.

Several flights of stairs later, they knock on the door, "Not even a lift? Why it's positively barbaric.

And in London, too. You expect such things in the wilds like Liverpool."

"Do try to be serious. We don't want to leave a bad..." the door opens, "...impression. Good morning. I am Dr Black. This is Mr Stone. Am I addressing Ms Lisa McCagherty?"

"Yes. What's..."

"We are from SAT. I believe your partner was informed that we'd be here today."

"He...oh, you're the people Sarah sent. About Carrie?"

"We've been contracted by the Keeper. I wouldn't put it as dismissively as that his wife just 'sent' us. And..."

"Yes. That would be us." Dr Black replies. "May we come in?"

"I guess." They walk past her. There's a light haze of pink smoke, smelling slightly sweet, in the main room. Peter gets up off the couch to shake their hands.

"Mr Stafford? We're here to discuss your new magical article."

"Magic article?" Lisa folds her arms, "You mean my sister?"

Black shrugs, "If you prefer, although that sort of sentimentality will complicate things."

"Sentimentality? Complicate?!!"

"Bugger, forgot you'd probably be as immune as he is. Getting far too lazy and relying on the charms rather than charm, anyway."

"Or, you could just be quiet." Dr Black suggests mildly. "Anyway, yes, we are here to discuss your...sister, and how we can best determine what's affected it. May I ask where it is?"

"Carrie's privacy protocol activated and..."

"Privacy protocol?"

"When there's someone except us, or the Keeper around, she shunts herself into the closet to keep things secret."

"I see."

"I'll get her." he walks out the room, leaving Lisa to look darkly at Mr Stone.

Peter returns shortly into the frosty silence, carrying a smooth pink sphere.

"That's it? It looks almost like..."

He hands over a list. "We've been trying to figure out what we know she's capable of and what the source is."

"Source? What do you...?"

"Most of the effects seem somewhat connected to magic she's participated in. She's mimicking the effects."

"I see. Well, that's most helpful, if I may." she looks down the list, "Ah, that makes it clearer. Drone collar. What version was it?"

"Seven, I think."

"The regular, advanced or premium version?"

"Premium, I think. It was a gift from Sarah..."

"Ah, yes, that will be the premium version. Simeon, remind me we need to upgrade her to the nine. Now, may I?" she holds out her hand, her fingers wrapped in long black gloves.

Peter hands the ball over. Dr Black turns it over, "HMMMM. This is skin, not latex. Interesting. Does it respond to the verbal commands?"

"It seems to." Peter replies.

Black puts Carrie on the floor. "Drone form." the ball uncurls, flowing upwards to stand, her features smoothed away. "Well, that is interesting. I wasn't expecting it to replicate the collar so closely. Most interesting."

"So, anyway, the main reason we're here is to make you an offer for it."

"An...offer?"

"It will be much simpler if its property of SAT. We don't want to waste time having to ask..."

"You want to buy my sister?!"

"See? I told you that kind of sentimentality would get in the way."

"Simeon, you are doing the opposite of helping here."

"The Keeper has asked us to investigate. It's not as if it's her property to..."

"Not. Helping." she repeats, "So, as buying it is clearly out of the question, how do we see this thing going? We'll need access if we're going to run tests and find the limits of this thing, and I'm not sure some of the equipment can be brought down here easily. Do you know the range of its ability to translocate?"

"A couple of miles seems to be it so far."

"That seems...risky with regards to secrecy."

"It's not like that. That was one of the...inciting incidents that led us here."

"Ah, yes, that makes more sense." she runs her finger down the list, "From that? Well, let's hope it didn't copy any more of that. Anyway, that makes that an impractical solution. Public transport is obviously out for security reasons and I don't want to waste time driving up and down on a regular basis. I don't suppose you'd let us install a portal?"

"In our flat?!" Lisa asks incredulously

"Yes. I didn't think that would..."

"Actually..."

"Yes?"

"Could we install a small one in the closet? Not big enough to walk through, but enough for you to pull Carrie out or put her back."

"Hmmm. That might be possible. A smaller portal would have lower mana needs. And we wouldn't need it running constantly. Do you have any pets?"

"No."

"Not always."

She raises an eyebrow.

"No." Lisa repeats, "We don't have any pets."

"I see. That's one problem eliminated. I'll be back in touch for an installation. Can I see the location?"

"Sure. Lise, could you..."

"Sure. This way. And you...don't agree to anything until I'm back."

"Of course not." as she walks out the room and the door swings shut, he turns towards Mr Stone,

"What are you playing at?"

"Sorry, sorry, I just forgot."

"She's never going to agree to this if you're provoking her."

"Good cop, bad cop routine?"

"Nice try. But Lisa doesn't do that. She just digs her heels in and will fight against any compromise solution."

"It will work. Her mental shields aren't that strong now that I know where..."

"No. No 'fluence. Not on her"

"You really do make this difficult, you know. I could put in a bonus, if you..."

"No..."

"I got you the first time."

"Good." the door opens.

"All good here?"

"Of course. What could possibly be wrong?" Stone replies to a withering stare.

"So, the good news is there isn't any reason why a small portal can't be installed. I'll arrange for that as soon as we can agree on terms."

"Which are?"

"We'll need access to the..."

"Carrie."

"To Carrie, then, for a large amount of time."

"Do you work weekends?"

"Not if I can bloody help it."

"Not usually. Why?"

"So if you had Carrie during the week..."

"...you would take it on weekends. That could work. We'd probably not want to be sending her back and forth every day."

"Why not?"

"It's just less efficient. Also, some of our experiments may run overnight and having to ask permission each time would get tiresome for all of us."

"Wouldn't want to inconvenience you." Lisa mutters.

"There's also the matter of ownership of any discoveries arising. Obviously, this would be a simple matter if we could get agreement on ownership..."

"No."

"...but that's not going to happen."

"SAT can have the ownership of discoveries, I don't care about those."

"Good, good. Now, before we come to that agreement, may I examine it?"

Peter glances at Lisa, "Sure."

Dr Black takes out a pair of thick glasses, a variety of lenses on arms around the frame. She wipes them on her shirt and replaces her thin glasses, "Now let's..." she squints, and rubs her eyes. She lowers dark lenses and tries again, "That can't be right." she walks around, pulling out her phone, "Initial observations: Aura is very strong, blindingly so. But it is shot through with grooves. Can you get it to make a change while I observe?"

"Carrie, headless." Carrie's faceless head melts away leaving a smooth stump behind.

"Continuing: When it activates one of its...abilities, some of the grooves are illuminated.

Speculation: This is a more extreme form of the aural carving that occurs with some assistants. The magic leaves grooves in the aura to allow even a novice with low magic skill to apply advanced effects. But I've never heard of it being so extensive. Still, a point of inquiry to begin with. Thank you." she puts the glasses away, "We'll send over a contract outlining our agreement before we install the portal. We'll also install a pedestal to support this in its ball form to make transfer easiest. If you could ensure that it remains in that form when you're not using it?"

"We might need Carrie occasionally. She's in our bridal party."

"Oh, obviously. Just let us know the dates and we'll organise that. Pleasure to meet you both. It really is a fascinating thing." she shakes their hands and the pair leave.

After they've closed the door, and before Carrie has her head back, "So, we're really going to do this?"

"It's a good idea. We don't have the facilities to..."

"They wanted to buy her. What's to say they won't..."

"They won't need to. It's a good thing, Lise. It's all under control."

Lisa blinks, "I guess I have to accept that, don't I?"