

7- Negotiations

Von Gravitas

Kapitel 3: Seto

This place makes you uncomfortable.

It's not that it isn't a good restaurant – the staff, the food, the wine, all are definitely up to the standards of the places you usually pick for your business meetings. They'd have to be, otherwise they could never afford such a prestigious location. It's just... the whole setup is so *cozy*. Way too familiar. It seems like the kind of place where the staff would greet you by name, and not because they recognize your face from some magazine.

What the hell was Anzu thinking? This is just way too *nice* for a business meeting. And not the kind of nice that comes with a price tag.

Then again, she usually knows what she's doing. Who knows, maybe Kita is the kind of person who likes this sort of place, and Anzu picked it on purpose. You wouldn't know, you've never met the woman. Hell, you wouldn't even be dealing with her personally if Anzu hadn't decided it was good for your image to be the face of Kaiba Corp's new line of educational software. Which apparently includes meeting with the people who run Domino's most prestigious preschools.

You have to admit it's been fun designing the games. As much as you like your usual work, you're always up for a challenge. And a product that gave you an excuse to learn a degree's worth of developmental psychology certainly counts as such.

Plus, Anzu was right, it definitely has made for some refreshingly positive press.

Talk of the devil. Just when the waiter has set down your wine and left, she bursts into the room, shoving her coat into some poor staff member's hands and fuming her way up to your table. "What the hell? Kita is going to be here any minute now, what are you doing?"

She just shoots you a contemptuous look and pulls out the chair across from you. "Relax. She's not coming. Your meeting is tomorrow. But apparently I need to tell you it's a business matter to have a full meal with you, so here we go."

That's when it dawns on you. "So is this still about this morning? I'm sure Mokuba would've made you a waffle to go if you'd asked him. What's the problem?"

You don't immediately get an answer, instead, she gestures at the waiter and snaps: "Gin and Tonic. Actually, skip the tonic. Just some cucumber and ice, please."

As soon as the man has left, her anger seems to leave her, too. Instead, she suddenly looks very tired, and slumps over the table, rubbing her temples, avoiding your gaze. It's only when she has her drink in front of her, and taken a sip or two – she's way too disciplined for gulps, though it seems like that's what she is going for – that she speaks again.

"Look, I'm done with this. I meant what I said this morning. I really like you. You know that. But either you start acting like we have some sort of relationship, or I start acting like we don't."

You consider this for a minute. It's not like it has never crossed your mind that having Anzu around... on a semi-permanent basis, at least, would be nice. Especially in the beginning, when you first started sleeping together. She's one of the closest things to a friend that you have. And one of the few people you actively try to spend time with, because you enjoy it. Oh, who are you kidding, the two of you are way beyond semi-permanent.

But. The two times you've actually tried balancing your job with a relationship, it ended in your girlfriends feeling like a weekend hobby, fights and accusations and never speaking to each other again. And there's something about Anzu that feels like you couldn't go through that with her. You're not entirely sure whether it's the knowledge that you like your life much better with her in it. Or the certainty that in a fight like that, she'd get in a few comments about your character that would be poison to your ego. And you're not even sure that you care to find out, because neither really supports the idea of yourself that you'd like to hold on to.

"What happened?" you finally ask. "I thought we agreed that this was the best arrangement for both of us – easy, no strings attached, and you won't even have to deal with my inability to live up to your standards of emotional commitment."

Maybe this was the wrong reaction. Suddenly, her anger is back, cheeks flushed as if the gin she just had was only waiting politely for an excuse to show its effects. Or maybe it wasn't that bad, because in a weird way, you kind of enjoy seeing her light up like that, even if it is in anger.

"For fucks sake, Kaiba, I'm not asking you to marry me." It has to be years since she called you by your last name for anything other than business reasons. "I know you have that whole excuse memorized about how you can't deal with so many emotions at once, but you know what? I'm asking for a lunch here or there where I'm not only present because you need to butter up some German business partner. A toothbrush in your bathroom and breakfast together when I'm staying over. Maybe even for you to ditch that fancy place of yours once in a while to come over to mine. That shouldn't be so damn hard. I know you're not *incapable* of showing your emotions, and I'm getting really tired of your 'I can't sleep with you and work with you AND treat you like a person I like' rule. So unless there's something really glaring I'm overlooking here, I think you're just being a coward."

It's a testament how much, in spite of all your efforts, she has gotten under your skin, that you even so much as consider your next move. Let alone actually form the words. "Maybe I am."

Apparently, she doesn't know how to follow that up any more than you do, because you both stare at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds, before picking up your menus and hiding behind the necessity to decide between Moussaka and Souvlaki.

"I've missed you, you know." You finally volunteer. There were times when you wouldn't even have considered saying this, but as much as you are holding on to the persona you were when you first met Anzu, the last 15-odd years haven't left you completely unchanged. Mokuba has grown up into an adult who knows how to circumvent your passwords and fancy doors when you're trying to shut yourself away. You've actually gained something like a friend in Yugi, even if these days, you've gotten more into the habit of thinking of him as a second brother. Hell, even your disastrous relationships have done their part in making you open up about your feelings. And Anzu... Anzu was definitely one of the first people you felt comfortable enough around to do so. Of course, that was before you took every imaginable effort to pretend like whatever is between you can be calculated by adding sexual attraction to professional respect.

Still, it takes the rest of the Scotch you've ordered with your food to make you raise your eyes from your plate and look at her with a grin that probably looks more than just a little out of practice. "Even the annoying lectures."

At this, she finally cracks and smiles back at you. "Well, don't act like you didn't know what you signed up for later."

It makes your head spin a little to think of a 'later,' a future that is not just the endless repetition of what you already know. But you're not quite at the point where you'll admit that, yet.

"Oh, I probably will. See if Mokuba doesn't complain about that really quick. I imagine he's going to be glad, though."

She nods. Mokuba has definitely been at the forefront of lecturing the two of you about just making things official already. "And I'll be glad to get Mai off my back. Although... I guess we have to talk about this."

She sets down her glass and looks at you uneasily. "I'm not sure about you, but I'd like us to be exclusive." Well, sure. It's not like you'd be giving up anything you'll miss, though that is probably not the macho thing to say.

"I would have thought that goes without saying. Though I'm not sure how that is any of Kujaku's business. I don't ask who she and Katsuya are sleeping with on the side, either." At this, Anzu's face seems to take on a subtle shade of red, not exactly the angry flush from before, more... embarrassed. She opens her mouth, but it takes several attempts at clearing her throat before you can make out what she's saying.

"It is kind of their business, though. Because it means that I won't be sleeping with

them anymore.”

There’s an annoying humming sound suddenly filling your ears, and your entire surroundings seem to have taken a step back

to make room for the invisible sphere wrapping around you and separating you from what you just heard. Is she joking? Anzu is not the kind of person to drop a line like this and then wait for you to have a stroke while she is keeping a straight face.

“Are you kidding me?” you ask anyway. But really, there is no need to wait for an answer. You can read it on her face. “You’re giving me a lecture on not treating you like I’m serious about you, and this entire time you’ve been screwing Barbie and the mutt?” Up until this second, you thought you were almost over how much you disliked them. You’d even given up on calling them degrading nicknames. Which is probably why Anzu looks so shocked. Good, you don’t need her excuses anyway.

“You know what. This was a mistake.” Your insides feel like they’ve been liquefied, but it’s not like your years of perfecting a calm exterior are going to desert you now. “Maybe we SHOULD just put an end to this.” Slamming some cash on the table – you’re not going to be known as the guy who leaves his date with the bill, even if you didn’t technically know this was a date and you know perfectly well that she can afford it – you push back your chair and march out of the restaurant, barely stopping to pick up your coat.