



CHRISTMAS CHAOS

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Christmas Chaos

A Christmas Casualty
A Christmas Conspiracy
Christmas Chaos

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BEFORE THE MASK

“Be A WINNeR - 10 million Christmas Jackpot.”

Flashed on an intrusive neon sign. Dancing lights bordered the words, accompanied by a cheap rendition of “Jingle Bells.” Silver and red tinsel hung from the metal frame bordering the advertisement, and a 14-inch tall Christmas tree was perched atop the rectangle. A blue-haired woman in her late 60’s smacked a flashing red button on the machine’s face. She stared blankly at the screen, poised to feed more coins into the metal beast, all for the implied chances of “life-changing” money.

“Ah, dang it,” directly behind her, a young Afro-American man sat with his buddy, an Asian in a big cowboy hat. “I’m bust again!”

“Dealer stays at 17.” A young lady with a black vest adorned with a dark velvet Santa hat smiled warmly at the 20-somethings.

They both simultaneously downed their drinks.

“So sorry, guys,” she continued, “but if you stick with it, you never know; the deck can turn in your favor.”

Both young men stood, the AfroAmerican shaking his head, “I know when I’m beat,” he tossed the dealer a blue chip and walked off. They strode past the grandma, still feeding the beast. The African American shook his head in disapproval, but the Asian cowboy subtly waved his hand. Suddenly, the sounds of alarm bells and clanging metal filled the air. The blue-haired granny began screaming, “I’m a winner. I won! Finally, I won!”

As they walked through the casino, the taller of the two stared at the cowboy in disapproval. “I can’t believe you did that. How could you encourage that behavior?”

The Asian scoffed, “Really? You are going to shame me for giving that granny a few thousand bucks after you, Mr. High and Mighty, dropped three hundred dollars on blackjack?”

“Because that was a cover for my recon, I am here to blend. Since this is my show, you should respect my methods and rules. And one of my rules is: don’t feed the animals.”

The Asian walked with an air of sophistication, hands behind his back. He raised an eyebrow towards his accuser, “You called me for help, remember? Besides, if you are referring to our subjects as mere animals, I do not want to be near you the next time we report to the Boss.”

The taller companion waved away the comment dismissively, “I’m speaking about feeding addicts. Humans are great, but when they give in to their addiction like that, it’s more like dealing with an animal operating on very destructive instincts.”

“Hmph.” Cowboy hat smirked, “I happened to know something about Nancy, the elderly lady you accuse of ‘animal instincts.’ Although she spends a bit too much on slot machines and the lottery, she was never married and raised her brother’s kids as her own when he was in prison. Also, she cares for her neighbors better than most. Nancy deserves a modest windfall.” He took a breath, “So, to borrow the colloquialism, I’d appreciate you getting off my back about it. Your mission is not the only one that matters here, brother.”

The men stepped out of the casino into the bright light. They followed a long S-shaped hallway as they continued to debate. As they argued, their appearance morphed and grew into two entirely different beings.

“Oh, come on, here it is again; I am spoken of more, so you get jealous.” The Afro-American was now an impossibly tall blonde with a charming smile, blue eyes, wavy hair, and mocha-colored skin. He wore a tailored, pinstriped, soft grey suit and a baby blue tie, sporting brown loafers.

“No, but since you took the leadership position, you should act accordingly.” The Asian cowboy was now an even bigger man than his companion, with massive shoulders, silky dark straight hair down to his shoulders, and enormous hands the size of frying pans. He still wore the cowboy hat but with a brown leather coat, blue jeans, and black leather work boots.

“We’ve been arguing this to death for over five thousand years and have gotten nowhere, so...”

“Spoken like a being not wanting to be held accountable for his attitude.”

The argument continued through sliding glass doors into the sunlight. Their massive feet were treading on thickly varnished wooden decking.

“Let’s move on before we get into trouble again, please?” The blonde asked while keeping a wary eye on the sky.

“You said ‘please,’ so I shall abide.” The larger of the two agreed. “So why did you call me to this ‘palace,’ brother?”

The giant in the gray suit snapped into a serious and professional tone, speaking slowly and deliberately, “In precisely 34 hours, 22 minutes, and 18 seconds, armed assailants will take everyone you see hostage, killing several.”

The brunette in the leather coat seemed to perk up at this news, “Do our orders include direct engagement?” He rubbed his hands together, “I do enjoy direct action!”

“Yes, brother, we all know that. Unfortunately, negative,” replied the blonde. “Indirect, third party only.”

“Shoot! That would have been fun...fine, who’s the third party?” Dark-haired asked.

The blonde leaned against a large wooden handrail which was far too short for him. “That’s the rub, brother, and why you are here.” He flipped his head

back towards the doorway they had just come from. “The hellacious law firm strikes again.”

A tall waitress emerged through automatic doors, a tray full of drinks in her hand and an impossibly huge smile adorning her face as she floated across the wooden decking. The server was in her early thirties, her hair and makeup expertly done, her body thin and athletic, and her mannerisms practiced and appealing. Most of the men around, even the ones with other women, stopped to watch her walk by. By all human definitions, she was gorgeous, an incredible beauty.

The giant in the cowboy hat was horrified, “NOT HER! But why?” He turned away in disgust and gripped the handrail in frustration, “She’s the worst! Seriously the ugliest creature I have encountered, well, since...”

“Cleopatra?” Blonde offered.

The bigger giant shook his head, “Ok, let’s not go overboard; she’s no Jezebel.”

“Yeah, but to be a Jezebel, you must believe in something.”

Grey suit turned around, facing the same direction as his brother, “Oh, she believes in something all right.” He paused for effect, “Herself.”

Both giants stood in silence, staring off into the distance.

“That’s not the worst of it, brother.” The giant blonde added.

“You’ve got a she-devil, as your indirect, with multiple bogies inbound, on the least defensible structure ever...how could it get worse?”

The blonde chuckled, “She gets a ‘Stay’ option.”

“What! Her? For what? Being extra backstabby?”

“I don’t know, but someone at the office has to deal with - that,” the giant in the gray suit shuddered as he pointed at her, “...that, that...woman.”

The dark hair gentleman threw his hands up, “I’ll help you, here in this dimension, but this is your assignment, not mine! Plus, I saddled Pete with Marie Antoinette over 200 years ago, and he still won’t let me hear the end of it.”

The blonde grinned from ear to ear, “Oh, I know all this, brother. I’ve covered all that because we can use this to our advantage.”

“Color me intrigued,” the giant stroked his jawline and frowned, “Tell me more.”

“Many hands make light work.” The grey suit rubbed devious hands together, “It’s time we share this treasure trove of sadistic humans.”

“Who’d you have in mind?” Leather jacket asked. He leaned in closer to his brother.

Blonde’s grin grew, “Uriel.”

His massive brother burst into laughter, “Oh man, he’ll be mad at us for the next fifty years, but it shall be worth it!” He stopped briefly and glared,

“Besides, I owe him for convincing me to listen to you about that previous *Stay* option.”

Blonde held his hands up in surrender, “Let’s not get into that.”

“Fine.” The larger giant sighed.

“However, on Uriel, are we agreed?”

A Cheshire grin grew underneath the big man’s cowboy hat, “Yes, let Uriel have his turn.”

The giants shook hands and turned back to their view. A view enveloped by a setting sun over a sea-blue ocean expanse. They enjoyed this view from the deck of a massive commercial cruise liner in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

MAKE-UP MASK

My closet door swung open, and the belts hanging from hooks screwed onto the inside of the left door swung back and forth. I avoided the mirror mounted to the inside of the right door. I never looked into a mirror until I was ready to do battle. I glared into my tiny closet, staring at my options and listing them out loud. “White blouse, white blouse, white blouse, black vest, black tie, black skirt, black suit pants, black skirt and another pair of suit pants, or if I want to be bold,” I turned suddenly with a maroon scarf held up against my neck and posed for my audience, “I can go nuts with the world’s most borrring scarf?”

My audience barely glanced up at me; my roommates had their own rituals to complete before the workday began. (They were both Latina, Juanita and Isabel, something like that. I could care less.)

I turned back around and shrugged my shoulders. It was okay, they rarely spoke to me, and as usual, they were far too intimidated by me. They were not exactly thin; however, being Mexican, their skin was to DIE for, totally jelly of that! But with my education, incredible waistline, lean athletic build, high cheekbones, and graceful presence, who wouldn’t be intimidated?

In the background, I heard the ladies muttering something about a guy named ‘Loco’ and his companion ‘Todos?’ Poor ladies: the only thing worse than being a plain Jane is being one who does not speak proper American.

I put all that out of my head. My life may not be fair right now, and I was readying myself for a job I was far too good for. However, every strand of hair and stitch of make-up did need to be exquisite! I had a battle to win against a mess of stubborn hair and dry skin, and I had only 90 minutes to win it.

A knock on the door interrupted my ritual. “Susan, it’s for you.”

(One of my roommates did speak American! Who knew? I’ll never understand why she used Spanish around me, but whatever.)

I sighed, “Fine, I’ll be right there.”

I crossed our tiny employee quarters and swung open the door. It was Crystal, my boss. A hippie from New Jersey (I totally knew all Jersey girls, the most effortless accent in the world to identify: the ugliest). She was younger than I, but with the way she did nothing to her skin and refused makeup, you wouldn’t guess that. She seemed competent enough, and I didn’t know her, but still, I hoped to steal her job by Summer.

I pasted a fake smile on my head and asked, “What can I do for you, Crystal?”

“Jill is sick, and I need someone to take the lead with the servers in the main dining room. Can you handle it?” Crystal held her trusted black clipboard to her side.

I gasped and tried to put on my biggest excited voice, “What, me? How thoughtful. Thank you, sweetie. I am SO going to make you proud. Can we send some flowers to Jill? How long will she down for, do you know?” I hoped I didn’t come off patronizing, even though I totally was. I also wanted to know how long I had to prove I was better than Jill at her job.

Crystal rolled her eyes, “Just get it done, Susan, okay?”

I held my hands up, “You’ll never know Jill was missing. I’ve, like, totally got this.”

“Fine,” Crystal replied. As she turned to go, she made a note on her clipboard.

128 mins later, the stringed quartet was midway through “Joy to the World” (at one time, I was supposed to be a cellist; my mom thought it was elegant. I thought it was boring and gaudy - yuck). A 12-foot Christmas tree stood to their left. Under the tree were medium to large boxes, beautifully wrapped and totally empty. (I know; I checked. They are just air, totally lame.)

An oldish bald guy with a hat tucked under his arm barked at me as I walked past, “Susan, I need those dinners for our VIPs, now!” It was the Captain of the ship. “The Dutchess, a very important client of this cruise line, and a personal friend of mine, I might add, is counting on pristine service tonight.”

“I am on it, Sir, I promise.” I smiled, sweetie, with a slight wink. A trick I’d learned when tending bar on the weekends during law school.

“Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas.” One of the hosting department personnel, Bob or Rob, someone or other, completely decked out in a very realistic beard, black boots with gold buckles, and a red suit, complete with a prosthetic bouncing belly, stepped in front of me. He even had a prosthetic nose to help sell the costume, “Should I save a seat for you, Susan, on Santa’s lap?”

I fake giggled and smiled coyly as I walked past. “Not in your wildest

fantasies, loser.” I muttered under my breath. (Ugh, older men are disgusting, don’t you think?)

I swung through the traffic doors into the kitchen as the charming smile melted from my face. A wince betrayed me as I switched the serving tray to my left hand, shaking out my right shoulder, I screamed, “Chef, I need those veal parmesans for my VIPs, NOW!”

“And judging by those massive fake lips and gaudy jewelry, these were loaded VIPs.” I thought to myself.

(The band outside transitioned into “Winter Wonderland” an old and overplayed song that served no purpose whatsoever but to annoy.)

A middle-aged Brazilian cloaked in a black shirt trimmed with gold lace did not look up as he moaned back, “Susan, you can wait like everyone else! We had no idea that the entire guest list would order the same thing.”

“Orders up!” Sandy, the Su chef, shouted. She displayed a nose ring dangling from her nostrils, matching the left side of her red hair shaved to the scalp. The plates of food slid onto her workspace, a stainless steel island about 8 feet long and four feet wide.

I stomped around the big silver counter and massive stove hood, practically knocking a young man over, “Those are mine, Miguel...VIPs, remember! Besides, I’m the supervisor tonight, so deal with it, kid!”

Miguel rolled his eyes and sighed, “Yeah, every night you have ‘VIPs,’ whatever. I guess you can be the only one with a tip tonight, again, your highness.”

I smiled curtly at the comment and curtsied before I turned to the door and shouted, “Coming out!” and burst through the doors.

That oaf Johnny, the busboy, did not hear me. I guess he was in a hurry too, cause it was a busy night, but also I heard some other staff say an I.E.B. or some bomb thingy blew him up in Afghanistan and left the loser without most of the left side of his scalp and hearing. So now he has to stare at people’s lips... creepy! (Oops, I mean, I’m so grateful for his service, and he’s a hero - of course!) Anyways, he has had a run-in with the rest of the kitchen staff on more than one occasion, but this one was epic!

As I flew through the doorway, Johnny’s silver busboy cart stuffed itself into my guts, sucking the breath from my lungs and forcing the tray out just beyond my reach. But as a server, I was nothing if not dedicated, so I dove forward in an attempt to save the parmesan dish.

This did not go well.

I went face-first into the ground, with the valuable veal parmesan breaking my fall. Stunned silence swept through the dining area as I slowly stood. Pasting a smile over seething rage and with dinner dripping down my left cheek

onto my blouse, I quipped. “Oh, wow, this veal is so much better than it looks,” I teased at the onlooking gawkers before excusing myself to the back. I needed to find a nice place to curl up and die! (As I exited left, I heard the annoying band playing the last line of its overused song, “Walking in a Winter Wonderland.” BARF!)

BLUE MASK

I was on a cruise ship (did I mention that?). Anyways, it’s not the biggest ever; as a kid, I had been aboard much more prominent ships. I’d only been working this job for the past six months, the best job I could get since I finished my time at...well, never mind. Anyways, it had fourteen levels (which they apparently call decks).

The only deck I knew of before working at this place was a deck of cards from blackjack, which I played that one time in Vegas with this guy from an L.A. law firm.

Ok, fine, stop rolling your eyes at me. Geez, rude much? Anyways, fourteen decks and like a hundred rooms per deck. It would take way too long to get to the other side of the ship to my tiny little closet I shared with those two cows (I mean adorable, vertically challenged girls). The dinner rush would be over, and this was my first chance to act as the head server. I had to suffer through and make this work.

(Ah, who was I kidding? I couldn’t do this. My life was over, and it wasn’t fair. Only a couple of years ago, I was somebody, like-totally someone to be jelly of. I was a lawyer, completely on the rise! Then it all went wrong.)

Tears dripped down my cheeks as I scrubbed at my blouse. I had locked myself in a bathroom. A storage rack was stuffed into the rear, full of cleaning supplies and boxes of tissues.

A knock on the door caught my attention. “Susan, are you ok?”

It was Miguel. (That loser was trying to rub it in!) I sniffed and cleared my throat, then shouted, “Just go away, kid, ok?”

“Just want to make sure you are...”

I clawed the door open and snapped at him, “Listen here, you little Mexican perv, you’re not my type, and I don’t need you to be the ‘big’ strong, sensitive man to ‘help’ me with a shoulder to cry upon. So piss off, back to work, and I’ll join you shortly. Comprende, taquito?” My tirade took all my breath. So I had to suck air back into my still sore diaphragm. (Not very ladylike, but with this kid, I didn’t care).

The young man furrowed his brow and turned away with a face full of

amusement and shock. “Did she just manage to be racist, abusive, and harassing all at once? Wow.” He muttered as he walked away.

I slammed the door with frustration and cried even more. (Stop this nonsense, young lady - my mom would say - babies cry, but ladies put on a brave face and move forward to a greater purpose). Hmph,” I grunted, “My mom was an evil robot.” I muttered aloud and blew my nose.

After several deep breaths, I exhaled into the mirror and wiped the corner of my eyes with my pinkies. I forced a smile onto my face, “Brave face, greater purpose.”

I was just thinking that maybe my robotic mother’s advice might not be completely worthless when the ground beneath my feet shifted so hard I was flung into the wall, and a cold tingling across my scalp dropped me into a tunnel of darkness.

“Ouch! Fine, I’m done. Is that what you wanted? Ok, you asinine jerk!” I touched my scalp gingerly and was met by more pain and a crimson color left atop my fingertips. “Ouch,” I screamed again to whoever or whatever type of insensitive deity, universal karma force, or whatever might be listening. I really didn’t care or believe in any kind of ‘higher power,’ but at the moment, I just needed a body to scream at, and the big, angry bearded guy in the sky could be that one right now.

I was covered in plastic cleaning bottles and tissue boxes, sitting on the bathroom floor and leaning against the wall. “Ugh...O.M.G. Thank God I wore my slacks today and not my skirt.” I brushed my black uniform suit pants with my hands and grabbed the sink, pulling myself up onto wobbly legs. “What happened anyways, and what’s with the lights?” The bathroom light was no longer its usual soft glow. It now emanated an eerie red.

I opened the door and stepped onto the carpet into the off-white hallway. (Yuck, someone does need to redecorate, like this whole ship. Who has beige walls anymore?)

“Hello, anybody there?” Strangely, there was no one in the halls. “How long was I out? Um, I’m hurt. Can someone help me?” No answer.

I made my way back to the main dining room. As I neared the kitchen, something really didn’t feel right, but I couldn’t quite place my finger on it.

I turned left into the side kitchen door just before the dining room opened up. I began speaking as I entered. “Wow, something weird is going on out there, guys!”

Chef, Miguel, Johnny, and Sandy, the Su chef, were all sitting on the ground. (Now, this is the funny part; they were like, literally, sitting on their hands! Hahaha, isn’t that so funny?) Anyways, I figured someone was playing a game,

so I told them so. “Guys, I seriously am not in the mood since old crap for brains over there,” I shot an accusatory glance at the busboy with half a face, “threw me into a pile of hot food, and then I was like, attacked, by a heavy can of something that cracked my skull.” No one budged; they only stared back at me from the ground with even wider and crazier eyes than before. “Guys, hello, are you even listening? And where’s the rest of the staff, and why’s it so quiet out there? Dinner can’t be over.”

I continued walking deeper into the ship’s galley. As I turned the corner of the big stainless steel food prep island, I stopped short and stared in confusion. A large masked figure glared back at me from behind a blue ski mask. I smirked, “First off, why a ski mask? It’s not that cold outside. Secondly, that color scheme, kid, is not doing you any favors.”

The masked man stepped forward, “Sit on hands. Now!”

“It’s YOUR hands. Or, are you one of those guys who’s gotten afraid of personal pronoun usage?” I leaned in and waved a hand in agreement, “I totally get that; it’s like, how are you even supposed to know what to call someone anymore?”

I shut up quickly as he screamed, “Schnell!” and stuffed a black metallic object into my face.

Yet again, and I’m being dead serious when I say this. My mouth was just working faster than my brain (as you’ll discover later, my head was still bleeding, and apparently, blood loss can make you do some really loopy things). “Is that even real?” I asked as I peered around the gun. The bad man grunted and rolled his eyes just as I spied an interesting button on the weapon. I felt a big hand on my shoulder and the bad guy making cuckoo sounds, shaking his head at me. Overwhelmed by curiosity, I pressed the button. Was it one of those big guns in a rap video? Well, the rectangle part that stuck to the bottom fell off, probably because I pressed the button.

Blue ski mask dude was pissed! “I’m so sorry; let me get that for you.” I bent down quickly and snatched up the metallic box, and as I stood up quickly, I went super woozy and knocked the crown of my head into something hard. The cut’s impact on my head was too much for me, and I blacked out...again.

“Susan, Susan, wake up; we have to get out of here!” Fuzzy images came in and out of focus, hovering over me.

“Daddy, Is that you? How did you get your skin so tan? It’s lovely!”

“No, this ain’t your dad. And thank you, I guess. But wake up!” Chef hissed at me.

“Nah, I think I’m gonna keep sleeping.” I closed my eyes and began drifting back. A slapping sound coming from the direction of my face snapped me

out of it. I sat up quickly, “Ouch, that freaking hurt!” I shouted, rubbing my cheek.

Sandy shrugged her shoulders and smiled as she rubbed her hands together, “Merry Christmas to me. Besides, you said we gotta move.”

Chef motioned toward my head, “Even so, head injury, hello!”

I smirked, “Head injury, what? I’m fine, just a little bump on my head.”

“Are you serious, Susan?” Miguel held up my blouse; it was lathered in my blood.

I rubbed my belly, “Then what did you put on me?” I looked down. I was aghast! The blood loss did not concern me nearly as much as what was covering my torso. “How dare you put this thing on me!” I motioned at the spare chef coat they had clothed me in. “This is SO unflattering. Do you have any idea what this THANG does to my figure?”

“Wait, what?” Miguel totally didn’t get it; such an ignorant boy. “Listen, Susan, we have to get out of here and hide before that bad guy’s friends get here and find out what you did?”

I stared into space, recollecting what happened, “Oh yeah, where is that guy...he was way too serious - B.T.W.”

“Dead! Muertos!” Miguel hissed as the rest of the group glared down at me. “And how long does it take to say: ‘by the way?’ Seriously, just speak properly.”

“Why are you mad at me? What did I do? I passed out, remember?”

Chef sighed, “Because, kiddo, when you bent down to pick up the nice terrorist’s magazine that you ejected from his Uzi, you stood up suddenly and rammed your skull into his weapon. The gun fired off accidentally since there was still a bullet in the chamber. It bounced around the kitchen until it found a home in the mean, masked man’s skull!” Chef finished by pointing over at a pair of black boots, toes up, poking out from around the corner of the stove.

I winced, “Oops, sorry. Is he gonna be ok?”

The entire group sighed at me, “Seriously...Such an idiot. I can’t believe this!”

“Yeah, he’s dead.”

“Ew, dead guy in the room? You should have led with that people. Let’s roll!” I commanded and tried to stand, but the room began to spin. So I sat back down.

A big hand thrust a clear plastic glass of orange juice into my face. Like any thin lady, I declined, “Ah, pure sugar, no thank you! I’d rather die thin than survive as a fatty!” I looked up at the owner of the big rough hand. Johnny’s scared, sullen face met me. He clenched his jaw and grunted.

“Fine, but under protest.” I snatched the glass away and took a sip.

Dissatisfied, the mute man grunted again.

I rolled my eyes and gulped most of it down. “Now I have a taste for juice, and I’ll probably never be happy until I’m 300 pounds and can’t even get off the couch; you happy?”

Johnny grinned back at me and nodded, turned, and walked off. I noticed that he now carried the bad guy’s gun slung over his right shoulder. And a black backward baseball cap kept longish dirty blonde hair out of his face.

Miguel offered me a hand, “Can I help you up if it’s not too pervy of me, highness?”

“Sure,” I took his hand and stood, feeling much better. “I’m feeling generous; you’re welcome, kid.” I patted him on the shoulder as I fell in line behind Sandy and Johnny.

Miguel was aghast. “It’s like she’s a cartoon mean girl from a teen soap...”

“I don’t care, Mike; let’s just move.” Chef pushed the young man along.

The five of us headed single file into the hallways, away from the dining room, and into the luckiest disaster never conceived of by man.

MASK MADE OF LIGHT

“Miss Susan, you do know that I don’t need, nor care, about all these mundane details. I only need to finish this form, recording why you believe you are standing here.”

The young brunette ran her hands down her body and exclaimed, “Wow, these dresses are incredible! I can’t imagine how good I look right now. What are they made out of again?”

“Spun light, only available to those no longer among the living, dear.”

“Well, is there a manager I can talk to about taking one of these home with me?”

“Miss, you are dead! That is why you can be clothed in light.”

“Oh, so you’re like, letting me into heaven in one of these? I do hope you have a red carpet available for my arrival because I feel I am looking the part.”

The man behind a large gold desk had been trying to do his job with this new upstart for the past forty earth minutes, and although he technically had no time limit per documentation, he had promised to meet Pete for horseshoes, a surprisingly popular game for the higher-ups. Thank the Maker; he now had access to limitless patience. “Miss Susan.”

“What’s with the miss? Are you like a hundred years old? Just call me Susan.”

“Actually, to your standards, I am ‘like’ thousands of years old,” The heavenly clerk copied her tone for a microsecond, just flirting with mockery. “This is the weigh station, and you can’t go to heaven. You are not on the list.”

Susan pursed her lips and leaned in seductively, "Are you sure, sweetie, that I am not on that boring old list...please?"

"This isn't a nightclub, Miss." The clerk crossed his arms, not amused.

"Why not?" Susan whined and stomped a foot, then stamped again and again.

The clerk chuckled, amused, "Yes, you can't do anything out of anger here, not even stomp your foot. The truth is, Susan, I have no idea why you are here and not already downstairs."

"What's downstairs like? Is that the coach class? Honestly, I don't need first class, but I need to be in at least business class, ok?"

"No, I mean, WAY down the stairs."

Susan furrowed her brow, "In the back of the plane, next to the bathrooms?"

"Hell, ok, in hell! I don't know why you aren't in hell already!"

"Whoa, no need to get nasty."

The Clerk sighed and gritted his teeth, "I'm sorry, let's just continue with the story. And hopefully, we will be done sometime this millennium."

RED MASK

(Ok, where was I? Ok, yeah) The five of us crept through the hallways in silence. We were heading towards the staff quarters, presumably, because we all knew those sections the best and wanted somewhere familiar. As we walked, the others filled me in on the situation.

While I was passed out in the bathroom, five gunmen burst into the dining room, made a mess, and herded everyone out. The group I had run into had hidden but were caught when they came out of hiding by the blue-masked dead man, which was when I came strutting in, as only I could, and saved the day. (Don't look at me like that. It might have been an accident, but I was still responsible!)

At the end of one corridor, I spied a mirror on the edge of the L shape turn. I passed it and made a horrible discovery. "Oh no!" I exclaimed in disgust.

Everyone plastered their bodies against the wall, "What's wrong? What did you see?" Sandy whispered.

"My hair and face, it's disgusting!" I was so angry and embarrassed. I can't tell you how long it had been since I'd been seen in public looking that ghastly. Probably never!

Of course, those four savages I was traveling with moaned at me.

"Just go, I'll catch up, but I'm not going to be caught dead looking like

this.” That was probably a poor choice of words cause after everyone continued on with their usual level of derision and jelly. (For anyone like over the age of 40, ‘jelly’ is just short for jealous; kinda like you are now cause you’re way too old to know the importance of phrases like that.) I thought I heard something behind me. I looked back but didn’t see anything. I went back to work on my face and hair. Moments later, I heard it again, like metal and creaking, maybe... I turned again, but this time I was too late.

A strong forearm pinned me against the wall. A pistol dangled from its hand. A red balaclava hid his face, “Hello darling, what are you doing out a yer cage?”

“You’re American!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, Maam, I am.” He said with a slight southern drawl.

“Dang, I was just hoping this was all Euro trash’s fault.”

“No, sweetie, we are an international affair. Today, the UN is the bad guy!”

“But, the UN is always the bad guy.” I mused.

“Don’t tell me a yuppie Kardashian wanna be like you is a conspiracy nut?”

“What?” I scoffed, “Of course not, and if I look like one of those Kardashian skanks, please shoot me now!”

“Oh, then why?” The terrorist chuckled. “This outta be good.”

“Uh, duh, the UN is evil because all those flags do nothing but clash. Then there is their color scheme! Don’t get me started. It’s actually worse than the garbage colors you and your terrorist robber team or group, whatever you call yourself, are wearing. And you have a red mask, and your friend back there had a blue mask. So if your horrible choices in colors are worse than the UN, then you must be super evil...”

He pressed the big handgun against the side of my head, “Just shut up, cupcake...My word! Who the hell put a nickel in yer slot?”

“Sorry, since this whole thing began, I just can’t stop talking, and it’s really annoying,” I whined. “Don’t shoot me.”

“Nobodies gonna...wait, you said a blue mask?”

“Yes”

“You saw Henrick! What happened to him? Who killed em?”

I went white and blurted, “I’m so sorry. I pressed a button on his gun, and then a metal box thing came out. I tried to pick it up and Well, it was an accident. That happens, right? No harm, no foul.” I begged.

Red mask scoffed, “Sure, a former KSK spec ops guy let a little tramp like you get the drop on him; not a chance.”

I was aghast at the insinuation, “Hey, whoa, tough guy, is name-calling necessary? You don’t see me calling you toothless hillbilly in love with his cousin

or something like that, do you?”

“Shut up!” he growled, “Now tell me, who else is out here and helping you?” He stuffed his gun back into my face. I gulped hard and threw my hands up to apologize. But history repeated itself... again.

I threw up my hands and began to say sorry just as his weapon reached my face. My raising hand smacked the smaller bone under his arm, wrenching the gun free. It flopped to the ground and the bad man dove for it.

“Ugh, I’m so sorry. Don’t know what’s wrong with me today!” I stepped in to help him retrieve his gun but only managed to step on his hand with my mid-high heel. A sickening crunch made me back up. “Oops!”

(Well, then he lost what little respect I had for him, as he called me a female dog, you know, the B word. So rude! And that made me a bit angry. I was taught that real power and control require sophisticated language. Cursing and cheap insults are NOT sophisticated.)

He opened his mouth to say something else very insulting, I’m sure, so I used all of my plastic-toed safe platform shoe to shut his mouth with a swift kick to his teeth.

“Jim, Jim!” A heard a shout followed by a cracking noise and splintering chunks of vinyl smacking my face.

“Ouch, you guys are so rude!” I screamed as I turned around the corner and ran, picking bits of wallpaper from my eye. I glimpsed my group at the end of the hallway sneaking around the next corner. “Move, move! Bullet things, guns, bad men!” Was all I could get out as I ran as fast as my pantsuit would carry me.”

“*Crack, crack, crack.*” They were still chasing me and shooting at me. How dare they! “They are shooting!” I screamed as I neared Johnny, who was readying his weapon to return fire.

“No crap, Sherlock!” Miguel screamed over his shoulder.

Johnny trotted backward, spraying short spurts of bullets at the oncoming bad guy, allowing us to escape. As we rounded the corner, we passed something that gave me an idea. I grabbed a new weapon from a red wheel mounted against the right wall and hefted it into my arms. “Man, these things are so heavy; no wonder I had a boy do this for me last time.” I thought allowed.

“Johnny, out of the way.” He glanced at me, my arms full of synthetic fiber, and grinned his approval. The vet backed up and shot several times down the hallway and nodded. I stepped around the corner and threw a glob of nylon material around the corner, and jumped back, falling onto my bum as more bullets popped into the wall near where my head was.

Johnny helped me up, and we turned to run, but first, I cranked the firehouse to full pressure. A fire hose that I had just set up as a trap. Then we ran like heck!

After only running like 10 feet, I tripped and took Johnny with me. We totally ate it, but it was a good thing cause some punk, finally in the correct color ski mask (which is black, of course!), shot at us, and we narrowly missed it cause of my clunky shoes and tired feet (speaking of, I am in SO much need of a pedi; you have NO idea!). Well, Johnny and I were on top of each other in a heap, and both looked up to see the bad guy aim again. Johnny jumped on me, covering me with his body (Even though he didn't smell half bad. Ok, fine, he smelt incredible! But now, I was still really pissed off. My make-up was smudged again!)

Hissing noises and screams made us turn and look up, my trap had been sprung, and the fire hose was dishing out punishment and whipping around like a crazy, confused anaconda. I clapped my hands and squealed in delight, "Yeah!" But that buzz kill Johnny didn't let me have any time to enjoy my victory. He grabbed my arm and pulled me along. I rolled my eyes, and we were on the move again.

Still standing behind his ultra-white desk, the clerk snarked, "So you would have me believe you are John Rambo with a manicure?"

"Um, I'd be such a super hot Rambo, and I'm just telling you the story you asked me to, Mr. Judgy-much. Besides, it was a lot of work, ok, I can't tell you how many nails I broke or chipped through this nightmare." Susan held out her hands to show the clerk; he rolled his eyes at her. "Well, that's incredible; my nails are all better and amazing looking. A little short, and I think they could definitely use some color. How about gold?"

"How about you tell me what you were thinking about when you were doing all this?"

"Thinking about? I was thinking about none-a-yah!"

"Noneah? Is that a perfume line or something?"

"Nonee-ah business, old man!"

"This is why Peter talked me into switching shifts today," the clerk shook his head, "Someone tipped him off." He snapped his fingers, "Gabriel! He said he'd get me back for the Penny, New York assignment disaster I assigned him. I told him I only delivered the roaster, but no! Every chance for a prank. Not this time, I'm going straight to John, and we are taking those two down once and for all!"

"Um, hello, whatever your name is."

"Uriel"

"Urinal? Really, your mom named you Urinal? I'm sorry."

"URIEL!" The clerk growled, "Keeper of wisdom!"

"Whoa, chill, big guy, I just misheard."

Uriel calmed back down to his desk chair and went back to his writing,

yet quipped, "Yeah, you miss a lot, human!" The clerk stopped and furrowed his brow. He suddenly bent down, muttering, "No, no, no...not this group of wackos!" He rifled through his desk drawers, eventually pulling out an impossibly huge ledger. It was about 6 feet long and 4 feet wide; it fell open with little effort and exploded with color and imagery; each page projected a two-foot hologram. Uriel flipped through the incredibly thin pages until he reached his target,

"I'm the one missing something, aren't I? Where are you, 2010, 2011...and there, Penny... Associate..." The clerk frantically shifted through the holographic screen until his fear was realized, "You are not just Susan, but THE Susan, who was at that evil New York City law firm with Penelope, AKA Penny, and that Jock, Mark!"

"Hey, I know her. She's not here, is she? I mean, we made up and became friends." Susan leaned in, "But seriously, she went a bit cuckoo and became some crazy hippie lawyer. But Mark, I'm not really allowed to talk about that, legally, I mean." She winced, "Plus, we kinda had a falling out!"

Uriel sighed, "Gabrial and Michael brought me in on one of their childish feuds; the Boss will hear of this...No, wait." The clerk bent an elbow onto the table and mused aloud, "Eternity is a very long time, and this world does still have some time. So... Hmmm." He stared off for a second. "I will wait and bide my time, and then when they least expect it...Never mind!" The clerk snapped back to the task at hand, shaking his head, "We are here to determine your level of guilt."

"So, do I get a trial?" Susan pressed.

"No."

"Ah, come one." Susan was agast, "Your boss seriously doesn't believe in due process?"

Uriel chuckled aloud, "Of course He does. The Boss invented due process. Your life is your trial, and you chose that time to use the advantages of your wealthy family and good looks to advance only yourself."

Susan was now in even more shock and fought hard to find another angle to work, but all she could muster was, "So then, Urinal." She purposely mispronounced his name, "What is the point of this charade?"

Uriel sighed and peered down at his paper, "Childish quips at my name are not enough to try my patience, child." The clerk looked back up at Susan, "Much worse have tried, including some very disagreeable Turkish fellows just over a 100 years ago. Oh, then there was that puffed-up calvary man almost 150 years ago," Uriel leaned on the desk and mused aloud with a hand waving through the white misty air as he recollected, "Oh, and don't forget the first 'VIP,' I was saddled with. This queen from Egypt...must have been...oh, 2000 - 2100 years ago, something like that." He chuckled, "Oh boy, she was a piece of work."

That evil brat made you look like Mother Theresa! Talked almost as much too.”

Susan’s plan backfired as she snapped, “Then what the shepherd am I doing here?”

Uriel put a hand up, “Whoa dear, that language is strictly prohibited here at the weigh station.”

“The smell it is.” Susan paused and pressed a trembling hand to her mouth.

The Clerk grinned, “Yes, and your language will be altered appropriately.”

“Don’t you monsters believe in freedom of speech!?”

“Of course we do, and you had an entire lifetime to enjoy it. But now, you are in the realm of the Boss.” Uriel smiled curtly, “And to answer your question, think of this as a stay of execution while we hold a hearing before your summary execution.” He looked down to sort through the paper on his desk once more before muttering under his breath, “Not that I have any desire to discuss this with yet another annoying lawyer.”

“Former.”

“What was that?” The clerk pretended not to hear.

So Susan rolled her eyes and spoke twice as loud and leaned in sarcastically as if speaking to a grandmother who had forgotten to insert her hearing aid, “I am a former attorney. I had my license revoked.”

Uriel shrugged as he looked up and began scrolling through Susan’s information projected onto the air. “I know you did, I see it in your file, but I am instructed to allow you to share what you wish.”

The ex-lawyer crossed her arms and looked away, and clenched her teeth, “Do you wanna know why?”

He peered at Susan, “Do you want to tell me why?”

ANGRY MASK

(Continuing on...Mr. Nosy! But don’t get ahead of the story.) My distraction with the firehose had worked. Or so I thought. Two hallways and another L turn later, we slowed to catch our breath. Johnny walked twenty feet back down the hall to keep watch.

“How’d you get away from that guy without being shot?” Sandy demanded with hands on her knees, panting. Apparently, they saw me get taken and hid. However, Johnny was on his way to try and rescue me when I ran into him. (That ‘like’ totally irked me cause now I was in his debt.)

I rolled my eyes, “OMG people, this dude, seriously, kept sticking that gross oily gun into my face and insulting me. He called me a Kardashian; can you

believe that?”

“Yes.” Miguel and Sandy retorted in unison.

“Ah!” I was appalled at the insult but continued, “Anyways, I kept trying to put my hands up and surrender, but he just kept boring me with lame questions and rude insults. Finally, the last time I put my hands up, I knocked the gun out of his hand, which was a terrible mistake!”

Chef rolled his eyes, “I know I’m gonna regret asking this. Why, Susan?”

I held up my hands and whined, “I broke another nail.”

The boys rolled their eyes.

“Hey man, it hurts; that’s why I don’t keep nails,” Sandy defended me.

“Thank you! And I totally get you now, like no judgment.” I paused, “Well, maybe not all of you. You should seriously take that ring from your nose. It’s just NOT flattering at all, sweetie.”

“One nice word ends with me wanting to smash that fake little nose in,” Sandy growled.

Out of instinct, I hid my nose with my right hand, “Ah, who told?” I was so embarrassed. “You know, where I come from, no woman and most men don’t have their original noses!”

“Just finish. What happened?” Chef knocked us back on track.

“Well, I tried to pick up the gun for him, but he dove for it, and I accidentally stepped on his hand. Well, that made him really, really mad. That bad guy has serious issues cause he said some really nasty things. Honestly, that made me tots angry, so I kicked his teeth in and ran.”

“You kicked a guy’s teeth in?” Miguel was not convinced.

“Yeah, I am wearing the company-recommended hard-toed safety shoes.” I raised my right platform up. A red streak glistened in the neon hallway lights. “Oh, gross! His blood is on my shoe! Get it off my foot.” I shook my foot hard, hoping the blood would come off.

“God help us.” Miguel mused.

“Apparently, God is busy, kid.” I retorted as I reached down to take off my bloodied shoe. “And he’s been way too busy for the likes of me for a long time.”

“I don’t know about that comment.” The Chef said, “Either God’s been looking out for you, Susan, or you are just the luckiest person around.”

I sneered at the middle-aged Brazilian while working my shoe off. “Lucky? Me? Lucky? Let me tell you about my luck, Sweetie...”

But before I could finish my thought or finish getting my shoe off, a whistle from a sprinting Johnny had us running. Sandy, Miguel, and Chef took off down the hall, but my shoe wouldn’t go back on. It was stuck. Johnny ran past, but I was hot on his heels with a flopping shoe when the group of three ahead of me stopped short; two more bad guys were also waiting for us at that end of the

hall. We were trapped!

“Here!” Sandy opened a small door to her right, and three of them piled in.

Johnny grabbed my shoulder and pushed me past him in the direction of the door, and he took a defensive stance with his weapon ready. I ran as fast as I could, my shoe still flopping with every step as it was only half on. I made it to the door and drove my shoulder into it.

Well, apparently, the group had piled into the laundry room, and a mop and bucket fell over as they stumbled in. As it turns out, mops are really good locks because when I jumped into that door, it did not budge at all! I bounced like a ping-pong ball against the door and into the opposite wall...yeah, Like soooo embarrassing (And so super painful, you have no idea. My shoulder hurts just thinking about it.)

Well, with my current head injury, I kinda passed out again. But I think it was only for a few minutes. Cause when I woke up, Johnny was still alive, but he was in trouble.

“Oh, a badass Devil Dog, huh?” *Crack.*

“Ugly mute boy gets to learn a harsh lesson about trying to be a hero!”

Crack

It took me a while to figure out what was going on, but eventually, my blurry vision focused on a group of figures standing around a heap on the ground, taking turns hitting and kicking it. It was Johnny! They were beating him to death. I tried to stand, but a strong arm held me down with a hand in my hair. A familiar, angry voice instructed me to stay put, “Wait here, Kardashian. You and I have a score to settle.” It was red mask guy. And his voice was a little less southern and a lot more lispy.

Crack Crack Crack, the beating continued with jeers and laughter. I gritted my teeth and growled. (Keep in mind that I had no death wish, nor have I ever wanted to be a hero or some saint, but I owed Johnny: twice! Plus, this Jackweed was putting his hands where they did not belong!)

“Hey cupcake, you know the worse mistake you can make when holding down a ‘Kardashian’ is?” I asked in a mockingly high-pitched, sweet tone.

“What’s that, princess?” Red mask replied with a sneer.

My tone turned to a deep growl. “Touching her hair!”

In one motion, I gripped his hand with mine, spun 180 degrees onto my back, and kicked his shins out from under him. His gun arm and throat fell right into my legs, which I turned into a pair of very thin (And well-shaved, as always, I might add) but very strong scissors. I locked my right leg under my left knee and my left leg under his body. I had him wrapped up into a deep triangle choke. As the lights went out in his terrified and shocked eyes, I grinned, “Unless invited,

never, ever touch a woman's hair again, cupcake...nighty-night!"

After he was asleep, "I snatched up his weapon and did a backward roll-up. I turned to the three masked men still beating on Johnny. He was in a fetal position, fending off their blows as much as possible.

I chose the guy on the left because his mask was yellow, super bright yellow, so disgusting! I don't know guns, but I know clubs. I flipped the black piece of metal around in my hand, gripped it by the barrel, and smacked the ugly yellow mask right in the side of the head. Yellow was in the middle of raising a foot to stomp at Johnny again when he suddenly froze, slumped against the hallway wall, and slid to the ground. The other two spun on me quickly.

But I knew what to do; I stepped left to the next guy in line, so the two bad men had to face me one at a time, unable to surround me. I tossed the gun to the ground next to Johnny, hoping he'd snap out of his daze and use it. I then went to work on the pink mask. (Seriously, this idiot was wearing a hot pink mask. Unless you are a ballerina, running in a breast cancer awareness race, or a girl under the age of 10, then do not wear pink!)

Pinkie tried to backhand me. What a moron. I leaned back and allowed his swipe to miss me. I stepped forward with my shoe still flopping against my right foot, lifted my left platform shoe into the air, and stomped it hard into Pinkie's left knee. His joint buckled, and so did he. The bad man bent down to grab his knee in pain, only to meet my knee in his face. With two painful injuries, he was easy to push off to the side and take on Purple mask. (I know, I know, it's like I'm making these guys up! The ogre was literally wearing a purple mask! Ugh.)

Barney, the dinosaur terrorist, was suddenly a bit less sure about subduing me with bare hands. So he pulled a gun out from his waistband, but a quick roundhouse kick smacked it away.

"Who the hell are you, lady?" The bad guy grabbed at his wrist in pain.

I gritted my teeth as I growled out, "I'm a woman who had all her nails chipped or broken, her hair made blood stained and make-up smudged...plus your friends keep shooting at me! I'm a woman who's pissed," I straightened up, placing a hand on my hip, "and I do not use that word likely!"

"Pissed?" The purple bad guy was confused.

"No!" I snapped back angrily, "Smudged!"

I was about to attack when strong arms wrapped me up in a bear hug. "Nope, I am not done!" I shouted as I jumped and picked my knees up high into my chest. I lifted all my body weight as high as I could into the air, then I suddenly thrust my center of gravity to the ground. This was supposed to make my attacker let go, but instead, he held on for dear life, resulting in us both crashing into a thinly carpeted metal floor. The bad guy took the worst of it, slamming his head into the deck. His body landed atop my head, messing my hair even more! (At this

point, I was thinking about shaving it all off and starting over. Honestly, it was SO gross!)

I stood in a daze facing the wall away from the purple-masked bad guy. He had observed the entire bear hug debacle but only chose to act now. As I peered over my shoulder out of habit, I saw him make a move for his gun. I spun hard and fast with a right-footed spinning heel kick. My floppy shoe lined up perfectly as I made contact, my thin heel impaling his guts.

I winced in disgust and jumped back a step. I was about to apologize when purple mask screamed, "Ow, you hag! That hurts..."

"Hag?" I snapped back at him, shocked. I then spun again, repeating the same kick, hammering the shoe deeper into his guts. He passed out from the pain and slumped to the ground as I shouted, "With that ugly mask on, you should be more polite!"

I was going to see about Johnny when something exploded next to my head, and bits of the wall sprinkled into my right eye, followed by a sharp SNAP. "Oh great, the one place my makeup still looked decent."

"Crack. Crack. Crack!" Someone was shooting at me...again! "You guys really suck!" I screamed, frustrated. (And again, I do not condone that language, not very ladylike at all.)

"Don't move, or you're dead." A voice shouted at me as I was fighting to get the junk out of my eye.

"Crack. Crack. Crack!" I dropped to my knees at the sound of more gunshots, still unable to see very well. A hand squeezed my shoulder. I reacted by trying to snap one of the fingers, but the owner of the hand expertly twisted out of it and wrapped a big arm around me, forcing me to face him.

"Oh, Johnny, sorry, I couldn't see it was you."

He smiled down at me motioned his head where he had been beaten, and mouthed the words, "Thank you!"

"Hold up, hold up, you are telling me that you fought and defeated four terrorists twice your size?"

Susan rolled her eyes, "Duh, they messed with my hair. Besides, it's not that hard because men don't like to hit pretty girls. If you haven't noticed yet, Mr. Clerk, I'm hot."

He rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, "Yet, not nearly as hot as you think you are."

"Do you want to hear the rest of the story?" Susan asked.

"By all means, your highness, please continue." Uriel went back to scribbling notes down on his desk and muttered under his breath, "Besides, I don't think I have much of a choice."

"I am only speaking the truth, Clerk!"

"Do you know what the word narcissism is?"

"Um, yeah! I'm not a moron!"

Uriel reached to the other side of his desk and hefted a large book shimmering in shades of velvet. He shook it in with emphasis. "I could enter you as the definition of narcissism in the dictionary of eternity."

Susan furrowed her brow, "I don't get it; what are you trying to say?"

Uriel dropped the book onto the desk and slumped his head, moaning. "Ok, fine, just continuing with..." He didn't bother finishing his sentence but plopped down once again at his desk in resignation.

(Like I was saying!) After I reached the closet where the others were hiding, Johnny went back to collect more weapons. The other three eased out of the closet one at a time, desperate to find out what had happened.

Chef observed the carnage, "Johnny, did you do all this?" Four men were on the ground, moaning and bleeding, with Johnny holding a gun on them.

Johnny handed a weapon to the Chef and shook his head, and motioned to me.

"Susan, you did this to these men?" Chef exclaimed.

"Let me guess, you bent over to paint your toenails but somehow managed to kick everyone accidentally." Sandy quipped.

"First off, those two dead ones down the hall, was soldier boy over here, okay? Mine are alive."

"But how?" Miguel was shocked and acted a little scared of me.

I shrugged, "A combination of Jiu Jitsu, Tae-kwon-do, and street fighting."

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Chef asked as he and Johnny tied the hands and feet of all the terrorists still breathing.

I sat on the ground, finally having the time to put my shoe back on, which Johnny retrieved from the guts of the purple-headed bad guy. The others winced as he tore it from the bad man's unconscious body.

I took it from Johnny, sat down against the ugly wall, and spoke while fighting with the stubborn platform heel. "Tae-kwon-do I've practiced since I was ten, my dad was a golden gloves boxer, so in my family, we all had to learn to fight; even my mom can kick and punch." Snap! My shoe finally popped on, "The street fighting technique I learned from federal prison." I popped up onto my feet. "Are we ready to go?" Everyone stared awkwardly, looking even more shocked than before. Even Johnny took a moment to look up at me with his good eyebrow raised in curiosity.

I rolled my eyes and shrugged, "I was a lawyer at a big firm in New York, and I tried to set up a rival associate for sharing confidential files with an outside

firm. He didn't deserve the promotion, it should have been mine, so I took control of the situation," I sighed and shrugged my shoulders, "Anyways, it was my boss's idea. What I didn't know was my idiot boss was being blackmailed by the mob, and the 'info' was locations of key witnesses against the mafia." I noticed even Johnny stopped puttering around with the bad men who were tied up, as everyone's eyes were on me. To be honest, the silence was not nice, like it was almost loud and hurt something inside my chest. "So, I was in prison for three years, ok! Not that big of a deal. I lost my license to practice law and got stuck on this God-forsaken boat with *you* people cause it's the only job I could get. There, now you know, and I don't like talking about it."

UNMASKED

"Hold up, hold up." Uriel put a hand up. "You told them about prison? How'd they react?"

Susan scoffed, "Does it matter what the 'normals' think?" Susan leaned her hands onto the clerk's desk, "Look, I think those four are super nice people and good folks, and yaddaa-freaken-da, but nobody does something great or becomes successful on a cruise line job as a nice guy. I mean, I'm a convicted felon and was forced to work with them. But they chose to live a life of mediocrity. That lame job was chosen for me." She stood tall, "So, who cares what they think? I surely don't."

"Wrong," Uriel scribbled some notes as he responded.

"Oh, excuse me," Susan wrung her hands in the air and rolled her eyes, "I'm supposed to be sympathetic because they are nice."

"No. You are wrong because you claim this job was forced on you, but in fact, YOU chose this life, didn't you? You broke the law."

"What does that matter?"

Uriel shrugged, "I'm merely pointing out the facts of your due process. You had an incredible job, everything going for you in life and only needed to wait," Uriel brought up a separate smaller holographic touch screen from his massive, magical book and scrolled down until he found his answer, "Fifteen months after you tried to steal a promotion, the next senior partner, Helen, would have been standing where you are right now. Fifteen months and you could have made partner without breaking the law."

"You mean Helen would be standing up there, on top of the desk," Susan chuckled, "or you wouldn't have seen the little hobbit."

Uriel clicked his tongue and sighed, "Yes, she was only 4'10."

Susan burst into tears, "Yeah, we called her Frodo behind her back..."

The clerk looked back up and leaned back on his heels, and cut Susan off. Literally, her voice box went mute, and words stopped projecting from her mouth mid-sentence, allowing Uriel to continue. “Yet, young lady, at her tiny size, HER name, was on THE list. Therefore, I’d show a little respect.”

“Ah! You little troll, how dare you take away my voi...”

Uriel rolled his eyes and shook his head as Susan’s voice evaporated mid-sentence, muting again. “Miss Susan, I have quite literally unlimited amounts of time to do this.”

Susan shut her mouth, with a hand across her throat, as she stared daggers through the clerk.

Uriel continued. “Now, until you get a hold of yourself and stop mocking others, we will not be speaking any time soon.”

Susan glared back.

“I need confirmation on my terms.” The clerk demanded.

Susan nodded.

Ok, then,” Uriel smiled pleasantly, “let us continue with your tale of accidental heroism and very purposeful narcissism.”

Susan rolled her eyes and growled, “Fine,” but complied.

Well, apparently, I had said something to hurt all the precious princesses’ feelings, because everyone stopped talking to me. Eventually, they began arguing about what to do. (These losers bored me to no end, if you have something to do, just do it.) I rolled my eyes, picked up one of the guns that Johnny had piled up from the dead or tied up bad guys, and stomped over to my old friend Jim: the red mask guy. He was leaning against the wall with his hands tied behind his back. I don’t know guns or like them (as I said before, they are greasy and very uncouth), but they make great tools in other ways.

“Hey, moron, wake up.” I tore his mask off and stuffed the barrel of the gun under his nose, and pushed up. I have to say, I was disappointed. Jim had no face tattoos, fairly short-cropped hair, and did not look like an ogre. He was actually kind of hot. “Spill the beans!” I demanded.

“Go to hel...”

I didn’t let him finish, instead, I used the butt of the pistol to pop him in the jaw.

“Ouch!” He squealed.

I pressed the gun barrel up into the cartilage of his nose again and repeated my demand. I hissed at him, “You grabbed my hair on a bad hair day! You shot at me and insulted me with names like Kardashian and princess.” I pressed his nose harder, “I feel dirty, frustrated, and very, very angry, so speak!”

“I think you busted a tooth, you heartless wench!” Jim was not going to

comply.

I repeated my strike motion, but this time across a kneecap. “And every nail on my hand is broken or chipped! I do not go into public with chipped nails!”

“Bite me, you b...”

Then the side of the head, “Would you like to hear about my makeup?” After that, the other side of his jaw, then the other kneecap (I have to say, enhanced interrogation, torture, or whatever, is exhausting!)

The others were all just staring at me, unsure whether to help or stop me. I didn’t care, I was mad, and we needed answers.

I was about to start breaking fingers when Johnny stepped in. He took the gun from me, loaded it for me, showed me the safety, then pointed to a few spots on his body. The calf muscle, and the shoulders. Places I could shoot without killing him.

I winced just thinking about it, “But I’ll get his blood all over me.” I whined at Johnny.

Johnny shrugged but nodded his head.

I sighed. “Fine, let’s go with the left calf.”

“You wouldn’t. You don’t got the stones!”

“Ah, you disgusting pig, I’m a lady. Don’t speak to me like that!” I pressed the gun hard against his leg and pulled the trigger. But, it was very anticlimactic. All I heard was a click. “Huh, is the bullet expired or something?” I shook the gun next to my head, “Is it, like, out of batteries or something?”

“You tried to shoot me, you crazy psycho,” Jim was muttering under his breath.

Johnny snatched the weapon away from me, grinning from ear to ear. He tapped himself on the side of his head and rolled his eyes as if he had made a silly error. He opened up the long metal top part. He then bent down low, so the gun was right in the bad guy’s face, and loaded one single bullet inches from his eyeballs. Johnny winked at Jim, pressed something on the gun that slammed the chamber thingy shut, and handed it back to me. Then cocked the tiny hammer back. (I think Johnny had done this before.)

I sighed, “Ok, let’s try again.”

“It’s a heist, ok. It’s a heist. We’re stealing a bunch of diamonds!” Jim’s voice soared several octaves higher.

“How many of you are there?” I asked while pressing the gun against his leg.

“Twenty, ok, twenty!”

“That’s a lot of guys and trouble to take a cruise ship a hundred miles off the coast for a few diamonds,” Chef spoke up.

“Yeah, but they’re worth like 70 mill., some dutchess has her collection

with her for some fancy clients her country is entertaining. Something to do with getting new factories for her tiny country in Europe.”

I snickered, “I knew her lips were fake but had no idea those massive rocks were real.” I mused aloud.

“Whose lips?” Miguel piped in.

“Remember my VIPs? That must be who it was. This woman was layered in diamonds.”

“So, why not a smash-and-grab? Why are you still here?” Chef demanded.

“I don’t know, man, it was supposed to be a 45-minute job, in and out. Something must have gone wrong.” Jim cried; slobber dripped down his face and nose.

“Dude, calm down. I thought you were supposed to be a tough guy.” Sandy scoffed at the defrocked loser.

“I’m sorry, it’s just this psycho killer Barbie has a loaded gun with a bullet in the chamber, finger on the trigger, pointed at my manhood.” He looked up at Johnny with a terrified eyes and begged, “Please, tell her to stop?”

“Oops,” I had forgotten I was still holding the gun, but since it was working. “Escape plan!” I demanded, “Or I’ll make you a soprano for life!”

“We have a sub!” He claimed while trying to back his rear closer to the wall and further from the gun.

“And...” I had cross-examined enough lying witnesses to know when someone was holding out.

But this answer was different; Jim winced and sounded a bit sincere. “It wasn’t my idea; please don’t hurt me.” His eyes went wild.

“Whose idea was it? What are you talking about?” Sandy asked.

“Speak!” I pressed the gun against the seam of his blue jeans.

Jim closed his eyes and winced hard. “After we escape, we will scuttle the ship...no witnesses.” He blubbered, tears streaming down his face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know until we got on the boat; just don’t let her shoot me!”

“That it?”

“Just that the guy running the job is a real psycho! We thought we would be in and out, no one could find us, but he tells us, on the way here, that he’s sinking the ship!”

“How?” Chef stepped closer.

“C4 planted in the right spots along the hull and...” Jim trailed off.

“And where.”

He shrugged, then whined out, “The fuel tank.”

SUSAN’S MASK

“This doesn’t make sense!” Miguel felt he had something intelligent to say.

“What’s that, son?” Chef asked.

“How did the bad guys get on board so quickly, and how would they get off the ship with the diamonds before being blown up with the rest of us?”

I was handing the gun back to Johnny when I noticed the thief’s hesitation; I stopped short and brought the weapon down atop the lousy man’s head, “Hey, waste of a pretty face, answer!”

He winced sheepishly, shrugging his shoulders as much as his tied-up hands would allow, “I was already on board, and the other part, I don’t know. Like I said, a submarine or something like that.”

I raised the metallic club over his head, eager to pistol whip the answer out of him again (I don’t like it when I don’t get the answer I like).

“I don’t know! I swear, ok!” He burst into tears. Then blubbered, “The boss would tell us when it was time and where to go.” He sunk his head into his chest in shame, “I swear, that’s all I know; just get her away from, please.

I noticed Sandy drifting away from the group, eyes glazed and staring blankly, “1 million gallons!”

“What?” I asked.

Sandy turned back towards me and began nibbling on a nail nervously, “In the employee orientation, remember? They said that this ship carries over a million gallons of fuel.”

I smacked her hand’s hand away from her mouth, “Don’t chew your nails, dear, it’s undignified,” (I will not even go into how disgusting nail chewing is, especially from a woman...ok! And yes, I sounded just like that robot I call a mother, so what?) Anyways, I pushed her further, “What are you trying to say?”

Sandy shrugged, “What about all the marine wildlife we will poison?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know? The dolphins and fish.” She stopped, and her eyes grew to the size of saucers, “What if there are whales around, I couldn’t live with myself if...”

“What is she on about?” I stepped back, confused. “I don’t care about flipper or stupid Shamoo; I care about me and getting off this oversized, tacky boat alive!”

“Can’t you see she’s in shock?” Chef stepped in and wrapped an arm around Sandy, “It’s all just a bit too much for her to handle.”

“Yeah,” I rolled my eyes, “I can see that.” I stepped up to her and smacked her across the face. “Snap out of it, Sandy!”

This did nothing but make her recoil in pain and burst into tears.

“What is wrong with you, Susan?” Chef pulled her away from me.

I shrugged, “She smacked me earlier, and it worked; I thought I’d return the favor.” I replied smugly.

“Some people just aren’t as strong, ok? We all need to be patient.”

“No, Chef, we need to survive!” I pointed a finger at the formally tough su chef, “And if the nose-ringed pansy over there can’t keep it together or keep up, I am not waiting around for her so that I can die in a fireball a hundred miles off the coast of Mexico.”

Chef smirked at me, “So this whole time, I gave you the benefit of the doubt, thinking you were a former model with no brain, but you are smart and capable. Just another New Yorker with no heart: A tin man.”

I sneered back at the ‘old’ man, “A tin woman. Besides, you can’t hurt what’s not there! OK?”

“What’s wrong?” Uriel asked with practiced stoicism, “Why did you stop?”

“Psst,” Susan waved a hand, “Something in my eye.” She turned around and pretended to dig at her eyelid.

“That was a very uncharacteristically honest thing to say to the chef,” Uriel observed aloud.

She shrugged, “Huh, as I said, I just don’t care what these losers think.”

“That was quite a bit of emotion shown by someone that did not care.”

“He was getting on my nerves, and I was feeling a bit stressed.”

“So you agree with his insult?”

“I did not agree...” Her voice trailed off as Susan gulped hard. She frantically fanned at her face as a frown deepened across her lips.

Uriel stood from his desk quickly, “Oh boy, this is a problem, and why I keep telling admin upstairs, we need to have a separate space for these occasional hearings.” Uriel floated around from behind the desk to place a gentle arm across Susan’s shoulder.

“Somethings wrong, it’s like I need to cry, but I can’t.” Susan pleaded. “I feel like I might explode!”

“Yes, I know, there are no tears in this realm, but you have some obvious issues, so I just sent word to programming, and they are in the middle of making some adjustments so that you can be an exception.” The clerk tapped his ear with a finger, nodding, “Ok, there you go, now you can cry.”

Susan let out a wail, “But, I don’t have any issues,” followed by a flood of tears so powerful a sprinkling of them splashed upon Uriel’s pure light robes.

The clerk was incredulous, “Disgusting human fluids.” He reached over the desk into an open drawer and yanked out a light hankie, “This is why I do not go down to earth; fluids everywhere!” He used the cloth to brush tears from

his robes, then offered it to Susan, who immediately buried her face into the handkerchief.

Uriel rolled his eyes, "There, there - you are alright now." He tried to sound sincere, but his lack of experience was apparent. He started to turn back to his seat when he heard a sound the clerk would have nightmares about for decades to come: Susan blew her nose. The clerk gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, "Michael...You and your knuckle-dragging brother will pay for this!"

After several moments, Susan stepped forward and offered the hankie back, "Thank you, Uriel."

The clerk sighed, "Well, you did use my name properly, so I do appreciate that slight improvement; however, please hang on to that cloth...um, forever, as it's now yours." Uriel winced.

Susan did not notice, "I suppose the stress of being *HERE* and the attack on the ship is," she shrugged and tried to play it cool as she toyed with the handkerchief in her hand, "Just a little bit much, but I appreciate your patience with my outburst."

Uriel rolled his eyes, "Well, as much as I would like to say fine and finish up as quickly as possible to get your fluid-spewing corpse to its final destination," he sat up and winced, "I do have a job to do. So, in that spirit, I say," he paused and thought for a moment, "Bull pucky!"

"Huh?" Susan was confused.

"Horse excrement."

Susan smirked.

"Kangaroo droppings?" Uriel tried again.

Susan shook her head.

The clerk held up a finger and flipped through some pages on a smaller book at the edge of his massive desk and, after a moment, said, "Aha, bull shed!" Then he stopped, "Oh, I suppose that is not allowed."

"No, shlep Sherlock." Susan sneered. "They're your stupid rules. Why wouldn't you know that? Don't you know everything?"

"Don't be obtuse. Of course, I do not know everything," he smirked, "I am not that old nor that large." He stifled amusing laughter but then steadied himself by staring back at Susan. "Still, the point remains that your lying to yourself may have served you in the past, but no more. And as just stated, I have a job to do," The clerk stood and placed massive hands on the desk and grew to an impossibly huge size. He towered over the 30-something brunette whose eyes grew larger with every inch the clerk gained in size. His voice boomed, resonating throughout her being, "So you will tell me the truth!"

Susan couldn't speak, not because she was muted again, but because she was terrified. It was the first time in her life she felt 100% powerless, small,

insignificant...or was it something more? "You're right, ok?" She finally managed to force from quivering lips.

Uriel returned to her level and sat neatly, picking up pen and paper again, "Oh, you don't say," His voice betrayed only a hint of sarcasm, "Please continue."

She shrugged, "I just don't have emotions like other people."

"Nope, wrong; please try again."

"Ah, rude. I am trying to be open here."

"Listen, lady, I am not a therapist, ok. I am THE clerk." Uriel pointed to his desk, "I write down truth, gather and then compile wisdom, and I've been doing that for more than five thousand years." He sighed, "Now, please try again."

In frustration, Susan threw her hands out, "I don't know what you want from me!"

"Stop whining!" Smack! A ruler hit Susan on the hand. "A lady complies or asks sophisticated questions."

"Mother? What are you doing here?" Susan stared up at her mother, shocked that she was there and her mother was so tall. "Or wait, am I this short?" She thought, "What is going on?"

"Are you not paying attention, again?" Smack! The ruler wrapped itself across the thick upper part of Susan's arm.

"No, Mother." Susan snapped back into her habitual childhood training, pulling her shoulders back, chin up, and posture perfect. She felt something soft and small in her hand; it was a cross-stitch. "I made you something, Mother." She presented the cloth to her mother, as a jeweler would professionally present precious stones to a client, with impeccable manners.

The 'mother' rolled her eyes but took the cloth from Susan and looked the piece over, "You are a young woman now, so frivolity no longer has any meaning except to slow you down from your real goals. Do you understand?"

Susan sucked in all her feelings and swallowed them hard, "Yes, Mother."

The older woman raised an eyebrow, "Besides, the stitching is off right here." She pointed out a tiny discrepancy, "You can do better." Now, get back to work.

Susan smiled tenuously, "Yes, Mother, and thank you for your feedback."

"You are welcome, child."

The scene melted away until Susan found herself standing at the weigh station in front of the clerk again. "So, you still want to claim that you were born a complete psychopath?"

Susan stiffened her upper lip, "My mother made me strong: who I am today."

"I don't have time for this," Uriel muttered under his breath, motioned with his hand, and flicked his head to the left.

"Unacceptable!" 'Mother' was back.

Susan turned around to see her mom dressed in a white designer suit, meant only for summer, of course, with her favorite hairstyle done specially for the occasion.

Susan touched her head to feel she was wearing a square hat and looked down to see herself draped in a royal blue robe. It was her high school graduation.

Susan fell right into the scene. "I am salutatorian! Second out of a class of over 400 in the most prestigious school in the state!"

"We do not care about excuses. This family is only the best." Mother motioned behind her towards Susan's brother and father. As per usual, they were faking a conveniently deep conversation facing the other direction. They usually did their best to hide in case they too found themselves the target of mother's wrath.

"The guy was a clinical genius on a grant from India and is a year older than I am."

Mother smiled curtly and straightened up, "I hear excuses but not solutions, Susan."

"You know I don't like that name. I prefer..."

Mother cut Susan off with a harsh "Shush." She stopped and looked around, remembering that they were in public. The 'mother' tactfully took her daughter by the arm and escorted her back towards her father and brother. She spoke with an even, gentle tone a first-grade teacher may use to address a confused student, "Well, maybe if you didn't worry so much about what you liked, you would be valedictorian, not just salutatorian. Besides, we both decided your middle name, Susan, is much more suited for a career and can be taken seriously. Correct, my dear?"

The term 'dear' hung in the air between mother and daughter like a room full of propane, stale, misused, and begging for an explosion. But none came.

"Yes, Mother." Susan complied.

"Now, today was not a total loss," The mother switched arms to Susan's dad as she 'announced' to the family, "As I think we can all agree, Susan was the prettiest of all the girls."

"Of course, my daughter was," The father smiled and nodded stately.

"Yes, you were, sis." The brother agreed.

Susan swallowed hard, desperately choking the compliment down to her soul. She knew her mother only offered morsels of encouragement, leftovers if you will. 'Mother' was intelligent, a renowned psychologist and professor at

a major university. She knew that without at least a tiny finger-sized carrot to her ridged and unfeeling stick, her children would lose all interest. Even though Susan had figured this out years early, it did not matter. She was still Susan's mother, and the young lady would suck up any leftover morsel of praise her mother would offer.

Susan blushed slightly, "Why, thank you, Mother."

Mother stuffed her nose into the air and took the father's arm; as she walked away, she quipped, "Let's pretend like we have received a compliment before, shall we, Susan?"

And just like that, the happy moment was gone: both from any good feelings and the memory, which again melted away back to the soft but brilliant light of the clerk and his weigh station.

Susan bit her lower lip and tried to play everything off as if it meant nothing, yet she was obviously shaken, "My mother was tough but very wise in shaping me into the lady I had to be."

"You had to be, or she forced you to be?" Uriel asked while scribbling more notes into his giant logbook.

"She never forced me to be anything."

"How about being good enough at anything?"

"Tsst." Susan waved a hand, "Your argument is flawed. How does tough love force me into anything? It merely allows me to improve." She waved her arms wide to emphasize her point, trying to convince herself more than Uriel.

"I am simply to ask questions, but since I'm in a hurry and you are still arguing..." Uriel glared, then growled in a low tone, "Let's compromise, shall we?"

Susan furrowed an eyebrow, "I don't like the sound of that."

The clerk tapped his desk three times in rapid succession. A small wooden panel slid back, revealing a large flashing red button, "Bon Voyage," Uriel smiled dryly and smacked the button.

Wind pulled on Susan's robes. She turned to see what it was, just in time to be sucked into a black swirling vortex. She screamed, but no sound would escape her lips, she begged for help, looking back toward Uriel, but she could only see a fading, tiny, white light. Flying through the darkness, lights appeared ahead, which grew in size as she drew closer. Eventually, the lights defined themselves as shapes, rectangles, to be precise. The shapes were a hundred feet tall and two hundred feet wide. And they weren't lights but full of static. They looked like giant cinema screens showing only white snow. One by one, they stacked themselves on top of one another, but at a slight angle, so that the last screen in place shaped the massive movie screens into a giant wheel.

Susan gasped in fright as the screens flickered and then went black.

Giant number 10's flashed in unison, then 9's, then 8's, then 7's, all the way down to 1's. At the 1's, the screens all turned into a variety of home movies; all centered around Susan's life, from every age until now.

At age one, 'mother' was arguing with her mother-in-law that any birthday cake at this age would put her daughter on the road to obesity and mediocrity.

"Merry Christmas, sis," her brother handed her a plastic purple, glamor purse Susan had fond memories of owning.

"Thank your brother for being thoughtful, dear," Mother said.

Susan smiled. Her mother was being nice; however, the one-woman cinema audience sighed because she also remembered that 'mother' was not done, "But, daughter, next time ask for something that will last, such as a leather purse, like mine, ok?"

Five-year-old Susan's eyes went wide - soul crushed, "Yes, mother, I will do better."

At ten, she was acting in a rendition of 'Romeo and Juliet.' Even when the scene began, Susan already remembered the ending and the critique from her robotic caretaker, "I didn't see why a standing ovation was necessary since you did not even read from the original language."

"Dear, please, she is ten! I think she did great." Susan smiled, remembering that this was one of the few times her father had stood up to her. Mother did not speak to her father for a week after that, and Susan did not recall her father standing up to mother on her behalf, ever again.

Susan spun in the black void. The scenes changed to fresh reminders of her manipulated childhood. Breaking her down and rebuilding her into her mother's sick, robotic sense of emotionless perfection.

Seventh grade: 1st place in a Tai-Kwon-do tournament, but she should have defeated the last opponent quicker.

Middle school: Team took 2nd in debate at the state championship. Even though they were a team of 6, Susan was to blame for not winning first.

She was not elected junior class president - Besides the necessities and general politeness, 'mother' ignored her for the rest of the month.

Susan spun faster and faster as the memories flashed quicker and quicker.

"Not grateful, not quite right, did not work hard enough, did not focus, allowed others to win," and the biggest of all accusations and outbursts from mother: "Lazy! Because all this family wants to do is have fun and 'feel' good!"

The cinema screens crescendoed into a spinning, flashing nightmare of Susan's life. Just as she thought her brain would pop, they all suddenly went black. For five seconds, there was a deathly, eerie silence. Then a new home

video began, counting down from 5 to 1. The screen lit up, but the colors were different. The definition was off. It was older, maybe from the 70s?

“Mother?” Susan mouthed the words in shock. Her mom couldn’t have been more than seven, but it wasn’t seeing her as a child that shocked Susan; instead, it was where she was. The little child played in what looked like a small mobile home living room. Beer cans, old food wrappers, and cigarette butts were strewn about everywhere. But around her 7-year-old mother was a clean circle; from what it looked like, the only place in the house that was clean. She sat, facing a blank wall, playing with a mismatched set of dolls, all missing clothes, limbs, or eyes, but all clean—her own ‘normal,’ little family.

“Little princess over there, always gotta be so clean, don’t she?” The scene followed the sound of the voice until it focused on a woman in a bathrobe. She was drinking a beer and sitting on a filthy sofa, a sofa that was piled high with magazines. Three cats were sprawled out on top of the magazines and trash next to a large ashtray full of cigarette butts. “Well, little princes can clean all she wants on the outside, but it still won’t change what you and I are on the inside.” A stream of white smoke chased grandmother’s words. She sucked in another drag before continuing, “Trash..that’s all we are, child, trash! That’s why your dad left us. That’s why your dad left you!”

The view switched back to the young mother just as a single tear formed in the corner of her eye. She wiped at it but continued playing with her doll family, trying to ignore the comment.

“It’s ok, little one.” Grandma leaned back and took another swig from her beer can. She swallowed and continued, “Cry all you want. Trash is allowed to cry. Trash can do anything it wants, as long as it just lays down to rot.”

“No!” The seven-year-old scowled; gathering her dolls into her arms. She stood with her back to the drunken smoker. She stomped her foot and screamed, “I’ll never be trash, and you’ll see! Daddy will come back; I’ll make him come back!” With that, she stormed outside.

“Woo-hoo, ladee fricken da,” The drunk mocked. She shouted after the escaping child, “Go get him, girly, go get ‘em, my little trash princess.”

The scene faded to black as Susan’s grandma guzzled the rest of the beer and muttered to herself in a stupor over and over again, “Trash, all just trash...just accept it...”

Susan swallowed hard, then shook her head, “This makes no sense,” She thought to herself, “Mother said grandmother died when she was a baby.”

“Well, in a way, your grandmother did die the day her husband walked out on her and a 14-month-old baby girl, your mom.” It was Uriel, who was now lecturing Susan from one of the giant cinema screens.

“What’s going on? What are you talking about?” Susan spoke again, but

still, nothing came out of her mouth.

“Please, don’t try to speak. First, this is a memory constructor with one purpose: to show a client their past life circumstances, decisions, and choices that lead them to this point in time. It has no gravity, air, and illumination except what the viewers provide; hence you float and can’t speak or see anything until shown to you. Secondly, this is not video chat but a pre-recording, so please, just listen for once in your life or what’s left of your wasted life.”

“Wow, uncalled for.” Susan thought.

After your grandfather walked out, your grandma did try. She worked hard for nearly five years, but her depression, exhaustion, and habitual drinking eventually won out. That made her rude, uncaring, unclean, and lazy.

“All the things mother cannot stand,” Susan mused.

Uriel sighed, “And since you are not the stupidest human I have met, I’m sure you can figure out how that connects to why your mother is the way she is. However, that still begs the question of why you are the way you are?”

The scene switched to Susan as an adult, sitting behind a desk, marking notes fervently while cross-referencing on a laptop with speed and precision. She was a hotshot attorney in a massive NYC law firm: A rising star.

Knock knock knock, “Come!” Susan commanded.

“Do you have a moment, Susan?” It was Mr. Hoskins, a senior partner and chairman of the board. The boss.

“Of course, of course, please come in. Can I have Sally, my assistant, bring you anything?”

“No, that won’t be necessary, but discretion will be.” He smiled curtly.

Susan smiled back and nodded, “Of course.” She picked up her phone, “Sally, hold all calls, and no one enters.” She put the phone down without waiting for a reply. “Now, how can I help you?”

“You will not be named partner at this week’s meeting.” Hoskins did not beat around the bush.

Susan sucked in a slight gasp, but she forced her pasted smile to remain on her lips. “Who then? Johnson? Because he has been here longer?”

“Don’t make me laugh. Of course not. Johnson can’t offer anything more than hard work, like every other lawyer here. It will be Mark. His mother is a partner at a West coast juggernaut we need to merge with in order to take things to the next level, here, in New York.”

“That little surfing weasel,” Susan muttered under her breath but managed to maintain a pleasant, all-be-it-plastic smile, “Well, good for him, and I appreciate you coming all this way to tell me in person.”

“Well, that is not exactly why I am here.”

“Oh?” Susan raised an eyebrow.

"I think we might be able to turn this new partnership of Mark's in our favor. 'Have our cake and eat it too,' so to speak."

"I'm listening," Susan prodded.

"I have some information I need to obtain from the firm, which cannot be traced back to me. Needless to say, I will not specify why I need this information. Now, say this information was traceable back to Mark, well then I would guarantee you a partnership in his place."

"Mr. Hoskins," Susan was coy, "If you need something so delicate, why not do it yourself?"

"As Chairman, I am under extra scrutiny, plus I do not have the necessary skills. And I will not hire out this sensitive matter to someone who can be turned against me."

Susan completed his thought, "And since I would have so much to gain as well, and I would be an accomplice, I could not be so easily turned. Also, I am sure that my first two years at college doubling as a computer major had something to do with you coming to me?"

"That and you are a pragmatist and will go far. You remind me of myself at your age: ambitious, smart, and hard-working."

"But not from the right gene pool, apparently." Susan's jab allowed her fake smile to fade ever so slightly.

"Be it as it may, we are here now. Can I count on your support in this matter?"

Susan's instinct was to play for time, then report this to the other partners, cover herself with an internal memo signed by witnesses, and possibly speak to the District Attorney's office. Then, she could leverage her inside information to a rival firm with a partnership opening. And yet...a little condescending voice in her head said something different, "In this family, daughter, we are winners!"

She stood and extended her hand, "We have a deal."

Susan winced as images of the conspiracy she had a part in creating streamed through her head. It had blown up in her face, sinking Hoskins's career and taking hers down with it. The three and a half years wasted in a woman's federal prison, with nothing but bland food, the occasional fistfight, and her thoughts to keep her company. She admitted to no one that the only part of prison that really hurt and still haunted her at night was that not one friend visited. And only her brother would occasionally come by and accept her calls once a week. Susan's mom still wouldn't speak to her.

Still spinning in the darkness, with only the cinema scenes to light up the expanse, a lone tear streaked Susan's face. "Frankenstien could not handle the monster she created."

Another scene flashed onto the scene in front of her. A figure with a dark hooded sweatshirt and dark glasses was sitting on an ugly orange-padded wooden bench. The hooded figure sat in the very back corner of a room. A room that looked very familiar. Panning forward, Susan caught sight of herself, dressed in orange, ready for the prison transport. It was a courtroom, and this was Susan's sentencing.

"Five years in federal prison, with the possibility of parole after forty months." The gavel came down, and that was that. Susan knew the sentence ahead ahead of time, so she had little reaction other than to look to her bailiff for instructions.

The scene swept back to the dark figure in the hoodie and sunglasses. The figure stayed hidden in the corner, staring at Susan, watching until the last second, she disappeared out the back of the courtroom. After the prisoner was out of sight, the hooded figure stood and headed out to the hall and straight into the ladies' bathroom.

She stumbled through the bathroom door and clambered to open a toilet stall. The scene swept to an ariel view.

"This is really awkward." Susan thought to herself.

But the woman just plopped down atop the toilet lid, tore her sunglasses from her face, buried her face into her hands, and burst into tears. The scene zoomed in. Her wailing became louder as the picture became closer. "My baby, oh my poor baby girl, what have I done? I'm so sorry! What have I done?" After several moments of anguish, the woman pushed the hood from her head and wiped tears from her eyes.

"Mother!?" Susan gasped as the scene froze. Susan had never seen her mother cry, much less cry over her...or anyone for that matter. Susan reached out to the screen, a momentary feeling from her childhood bubbling to the surface, compelling her to crawl into the woman's lap. "Mommy?"

"After all her manipulation and shaping, you became her worst nightmare: Trash - just another common criminal. What's worse, after it was too late, your mother realized that much of it was her fault." It was Uriel again, his giant imposing head lobbing truth, dead on target. "When you run from your problems and rely on imposing your will on others through ambition and manipulation to hide from your issues, then your problems will eventually find you and your family. What follows are issues that are often much larger and more destructive than the original problem could ever have been."

"However," the clerk began slowly, "When you react by facing your problems head-on, with the right attitude, there's no telling what good might come from a bad situation."

Click! The screen above and below the viewer hosting Uriel's face

flipped on. It was a series of security videos from the cruise ship, and they were following Susan down the corridor.

“Ah, Harmen Sparkles!” Susan swore in her mind, but even her nasty thoughts were censored, “I really don’t want to see this.”

Uriel smirked, “I’m sure you see where this video is going, but just so we cross all our ‘Ts’ and dot the ‘I’s,’ let’s go ahead and turn up the volume and see what happens. Shall we?”

“Smug little troll.” Susan glared.

The video zoomed in on Susan on the cruise ship. She was clothed in an oversized chef shirt and dark pants suit, running down corridor after corridor, descending stairs, and then through more doors until she finally made her way to the bottom hold of the ship. Several times she noticed but ignored brown blocks wrapped in wax paper stacked against fuel lines or parts of the hull. Tiny red lights set on top of the brown bricks flashed, ready for the order to send a quick electoral current to the plastique, then explode. But the half dozen bombs Susan noticed only made her run faster. Eventually, she made it to the lowest deck of the massive floating city. One by one, she opened every door and checked every hatch.

She was about halfway through the deck, pulling up access doors and looking behind massive water-cooling pipes muttering to herself. “Come on, where are you? I know you are around here somewhere.”

She was interrupted when suddenly a big hand gripped her shoulder and spun her around. Susan responded with a whirling backhand...right across Johnny’s face.

Smack!

“Ew, sorry there, buddy.” Susan laughed, “I didn’t get the good ear did I?”

Johnny smirked but said nothing. He nodded past her and held his hands up with curiosity.

Susan rolled her eyes, “I’m getting out of here; these idiot thugs have a sub or boat somewhere ready to go. Down here must be the only place you can keep it hidden, and I’m not waiting around to be blown up.”

Johnny stared for a minute but then flicked his head back in the direction he came, raising his good eyebrow.

Susan sighed, “Look, if they get here in time, fine, we all go; if not, then it’s you and me. Let’s be smart and get out while we can.”

Johnny shook his head and pointed up.

“What? You think their escape boat is top side?”

He shook his head and pointed up again, then whirled his finger around in a circular motion.

“HUH?” Susan exclaimed, “Save everyone? Are you nuts? There’s still like

15 guys with guns.” Susan shook her head, “And C4 scattered all about, in case you didn’t see that! Even if we defeat the bad guys, we will still get blown up.”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders but nodded.

“Well, you may be a hero with a death wish, but I’m a pragmatist. I’m gonna live!”

Susan turned to leave when a voice made them both freeze, “Hey, who’s there? Stop! Put your hands up, or I’ll shoot!”

Susan spun around next to Johnny to see her options, but as she did, she stubbed a toe against a metal post welded into the ground. “NO! Not the pedicure too!” Susan whined as she instinctively grabbed the toe in pain and bounced up and down on her right foot. It was tough to balance on the gangway. She fell to one side in front of Johnny. As she did, the strongest backheel kick she’d ever felt crushed her sternum. Or so she thought,

“Thunk! Bang!”

As Susan found herself awkwardly strewn atop the metal walkway, with a crimson stain growing across her chest, she remembered thinking, “I felt the bullet before I heard the shot...weird!”

Johnny stood over her dying body returning fire. Satisfied he had hit the bad guy, he knelt down and raised Susan’s head onto his legs, supporting her neck.

Susan grinned, color draining from her face. She said, “You know what, kid, I feel fine. Just help me up...” just as her eyes began to close.

Johnny leaned low into her ear and whispered. His voice was low, gravely, and almost impossible to hear, “Don’t let her end like this. Please, give her one more chance?”

With that, the scene went black, and Uriel was back on.

Susan swallowed hard and choked back tears. “Why?” Susan demanded. “Why would he care?”

For the first time in a long time, Susan admitted that to herself that she did not understand. “What would make someone like him care about how I ended? Did he know about this place, this weigh station?”

The thoughts of her past life, her choices, actions, and inactions, swirled through her head. Her mom had it rough, abandoned, and left to her own devices, but she made something of herself. She became respected as a wife, mother, and doctor. But she obsessed over proving her mother’s words wrong. This led to a similar outcome, worse even: shame, heartache, and a criminal.

But Susan was no pushover, and she knew it. Although pushed to her breaking point by a robotic, unfeeling mother, she was always taught to be a lady. Polite, conscientious, and above all, respectable. Breaking the law was on Susan; that was her choice. Her buried emotions and hatred of her mother

had created a killer instinct within Susan. Those instincts made her into the one person she had vowed never to emulate: her killer, robotic mom.

Therefore, three generations of women determined to prove the previous generation wrong had all failed spectacularly. And at the end of the chaos lay the worst of the lot, an unfeeling, selfish shark, trolling the waters of life, looking for nothing but her next meal.

Then, there was Johnny. The epitome of selflessness. A war hero. Humble and quiet, working a menial job but doing so with enormous effort. As if that was not enough, he took an interest in Susan. Not her talents or beauty, but her soul. The shark couldn't understand why, but digesting all this information made her feel: Dirty!? Shame, frustration...a general sense of not being good enough floated up from the depths of her soul, drowning out confidence, arrogance, even the will to survive.

Susan shook her head and chuckled nervously, practically choking on her own words: "I'm...doomed." She mouthed the words out loud, frantically, "I don't deserve another chance, Uriel. Can you hear me? Mr. Clerk, just let me go! I'm sorry I've wasted your time. I wish, I wish....I'm sorry." She laughed nervously, "This is dumb. I don't need to beg, you know already, don't you?" This time she looked up and addressed someone much bigger and scarier than Uriel. Someone she hadn't try to speak to since she was 10.

Tears flooded her eyes, "Just don't torture me anymore with these horrid films; I get it! I'm a witch; I called others losers and trolls, but I'm the loser. I'm the monster!" She sobbed into her chest, "Just do what you have to. You're right." She shook her head, "I'm done."

Susan did not notice that Uriel had stopped talking. She did not notice that he had left the screen or that all the viewers showed was his empty desk, and she did not see him come back and sit back down with a very uncomfortable smile plastered across his face.

"I ruined everything. I ruined everything," Susan sobbed into her hands, "What did I do?"

"Ehem?" Uriel cleared his throat.

Susan sniffed and looked up.

"Ok, now that you are paying attention, I am happy to FINALLY be able to give you the final decision."

Susan wiped her face as she attempted to grasp what was happening.

"You are most definitely guilty and have few redeeming qualities, as I'm sure you finally admitted to yourself. But since it took a trip to the afterlife weigh station to see all that - for lack of a better term - it does not count."

"Huh?" Susan did not understand.

"But the reason you got this hearing was threefold:

“Firstly, you took a bullet for a good man. Not on purpose, mind you, since you tripped into the bullet’s projectile path after stubbing your toe while obsessing over your...” He flipped through a report, *“Um, yes - your pedicure.”* Uriel shared a quick chuckle to himself, *“However, rules are rules, so it does count for something.”*

“Secondly, your mother’s upbringing, therefore, your childhood trauma. This made it very difficult to make other choices in life. That was a factor.

“Thirdly, and most importantly, due to the interceding third party.” The clerk looked down at his paper, *“A one: John Allen Bearman - AKA: Johnny.”* Uriel skipped down to the bottom of the page, *“Who has been asking for special consideration on your behalf for the past five months.”*

“Wait, five months? He’s been....that makes no sense,” Susan furrowed her brow, trying to understand, *“I didn’t even give him the time of day and barely said a word to him until today. I wouldn’t, with long hair and scars on his face. I’m too ...pretty...”* Susan took a breath and swallowed, *“Sorry, I mean that I am too self-centered to be nice to someone like that. Why would he care about what happens to me?”*

Magically, Uriel answered Susan’s thoughts, “I’ve been told by upstairs to state that,” Uriel took a breath then read verbatim, *“All the war wounds and scars Mr. Bearman carries on the outside of his body, he could see on the inside of yours.”*

“No wonder he wanted to try to save everyone on the ship. The guy is obsessed with lost causes,” Susan mused to herself.

“So, it has been decided against all other protocol or reason... and those were my words, not upstairs speaking.” Uriel cleared his throat and continued, *“You will be given one more chance at life, but with a very, very short leash.”*

Susan held her breath, not knowing what to say or how to react, especially since she technically couldn’t speak at all.

The clerk put down the paper and looked into the viewer, “And on a personal note, young lady. Let me just say this.” He cleared her throat before continuing. *“Life is precious, but not nearly as precious as your soul. Better to live a short life of love and purpose than die wealthy, successful, and alone.”* Uriel smiled warmly, *“Fairwell, child, and good luck.”*

The screen clicked, as everything when black.

MASKING UP

Susan gasped and sat up, vaguely aware that something was behind her. *“UGH!”* Something metallic and cold was in the back of her throat. She gagged

it up and spat it onto the cold metal floor she sat on. It was a bullet. "What?" She ran her hands down her body and back up under her shirt. She felt the wet spot from blood, but there was no coinciding wound. She stood and looked down at the chef's shirt she still wore, but now it was wet with blood. She stuck her finger through a hole just left of her sternum. As she did, something dropped to the floor from her other sleeve: a folded baby blue sticky note. She bent over and picked it up. Its edges glowed with rainbow colors as she read the words, written in sparkling silver: "No, it was not a dream. Remember what I said - The Clerk". The note self-destructed by fading into her hand until it was completely gone. Susan swallowed hard; the shock of being shot, coming back from the dead, and a total life epiphany swam in her brain like too much water in a potted plant. It all had to go somewhere, but there wasn't space for it....not yet.

"OK," she thought aloud. "Before I freak out and let the bad guys know I am alive, let's just deal later...for now, I have a ship full of people to save and not a lot of time to do it." The thoughts of the past several hours of her behavior made her wince. "And I'm gonna need some help from those folks I told to their face were beneath me...ugh, this is going to be so awkward."

She stood and shook her hands out, "It's ok, Susan, you can do this, just be nice and remember, even though they're better people than you, they still need your help, so it's a win-win. Right?"

In frustration, Susan threw her hands up in the air and looked up, "I don't know how to do this." She plopped down onto the cold floor, rested her arms atop her knees, and wept, her face buried in her arms.

After several minutes, she sat up suddenly and back up. "Who's there?" Suddenly, she crab-walked back against the opposite wall, "Who's there? Who's talking to me?" She peered around, fist clenched, ready to fight. "I'll calm down when you reveal yourself." She glared, "What do you mean you already did?" The answer was more than she expected; her face dropped. She swallowed hard, "I'm sorry, I did not know." Again tears began to flow, "But I don't know what you want from me or how to do this. I don't even know where to begin." Wiping tears from her cheeks, she asked again, "Wait, what did you mean? Back to the name you picked for me....what name?"

After several moments she spoke again, "Hello? Mr. Bossman? Where did you go?" But there was no response. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, "What the hell..." She winced, "I mean heck, I mean.." a sudden thought stopped her excuses short, "Oh, that name. But how will that help me?" She shook her head and absentmindedly stuffed a hand into her pocket; to her surprise, something was in it. Yanking it out, she immediately recognized it as another note from the clerk's desk.

It read: "PS. When the Boss speaks, move! - Uriel."

Susan exhaled and shrugged, “Fine, here goes nothing.”

MASK MADE MARY

“All this feels a bit familiar and depressing.” Miguel mused aloud.

“Yes, well, it’s not over yet. Let’s keep our cool and see what happens.” The chef stated calmly.

“Boy, what I wouldn’t give for a narcissistic ninja obsessed with her nails right about now.” Sandy chuckled to the others.

“Shut it, or I’ll end ya!” A thick British accent commanded.

Chef, Sandy, and Miguel were tied up and back in the galley where they had started. After Susan took off during Sandy’s episode, they waited for a while until Sandy felt better, but it was too late. Four gunmen had come looking for their associates and happened upon the trio. After a few minutes of running, the masked bad guys cornered the kitchen staff, tied them up, and marched them back to the galley.

As their guard drifted to the kitchen door to check outside, the chef whispered back. “Yeah, well..we all overheard what the guy said. They shot a pretty woman in a chef’s coat through the heart.” He shrugged, “Besides, even if she were alive, she’s long gone, saving her own neck.”

A gargling noise, chased by a distinct SNAP, grabbed the group’s attention. They craned their necks to the right, trying to see what had happened. “Now what?” Miguel complained.

“Now we get out of here!”

“Ah!” The group gasped in unison, frightening their rescuer in turn. Susan fell backward onto her bum, “Shhhh, the bad guys will hear!” Susan reached around, untying Miguel.

“But Susan - the guard?” The chef motioned with his head towards the door.

“Oh, that guy’s asleep.”

“That gurgling and snapping noise we heard, Was that you choking him?”

“Yeah, why?” Susan asked innocently as she moved to untie Sandy.

Sandy spoke over her shoulder at Susan, “Cause I don’t think he’s sleeping, sweetie.

You snapped his neck.”

“Eww, yuck,” Susan stuck her tongue out, “Total accident. Poor guy.”

“Sure, we are all broken up about the murdering thief. I want to know why you came back for us?” Young Miguel asked. “I thought you had found a way off this boat.”

Susan grinned, "Well, as it turns out, I need you all a lot more than you need me. Plus, I apparently have a lot bigger problems than getting off this ship alive without being blown up or shot!"

"What does all that mean?" Sandy demanded.

Susan sighed, "What it means is...I'm sorry. I was a real tool...am... I am a real tool." She shrugged, "I'm a self-absorbed, selfish, type-A, competitive jerk, only on earth to help myself."

Chef frowned, "Oh, is that it?" He rubbed his wrist.

"Listen, I could try to explain, but it would only make you all think I was nuts or high, and maybe later, I will explain. For now, can we try to make it out of this situation alive, and maybe, if we don't get shot, a couple of you can come out as heroes."

"Susan, what are you saying?" Sandy asked.

"I'm saying let's take the ship back!" She stood and turned to lead the way but stopped short and turned back, smiling sheepishly. "And if at all possible, please call me by my real name: Mary."

"This is Black 2. All good in security." A man with a black mask and a 9mm pistol spoke into a microphone attached to his earpiece. "Copy, looking for him now," he responded to the command, sat back down in front of a bunch of computer monitors, and began scrolling through the various feeds looking for someone.

KNOCK. KNOCK. He turned at the sound of the knocks on the door behind him, gun raised. "Who is it?"

KNOCK. KNOCK.

He peered through the eyelet to see who it was and was surprised to see a man with a pink mask waiting outside the door.

"What are you doing here?" He asked as he lowered his weapon and opened the door. As the door opened, A mass of hands grabbed at the bad man, throwing him off balance and knocking him to the floor. He looked up to see a size ten men's tennis shoe smash down onto his face.

"Again, you have to stomp him again!" A female voice commanded.

"No, wait, I'm down, ok, I'm down...ouch!!" The guy tore his mask off. "Look, I'm just the tech guy, okay, a nerd. Please don't hurt me anymore?" A woman stood over him and cocked her head as she stared down at his bleeding nose. The evil tech guy gulped hard, "I heard you were dead."

She knelt down with her knee onto his sternum, stealing the terrified nerd's breath away. She leaned into his face and growled, "I was dead, but now I'm back. This time, I'm not gonna play so nice."

The tech nerd gasped for air, "Anything you want, lady, I'll tell you, promise." He forced out of a hoarse throat.

Mary-Sue stood tall and smiled, “That’s more like it!” She looked up, glared into the faces of her three comrades, and grinned. “Let’s end this!”

GREEN MASK

“Shut up!” A short, stocky thug in a green mask wielding an HK submachine gun screamed at a sobbing hostage. He pointed his weapon at her, “One more whimper or sound, and I start shooting kneecaps! Do you understand?”

The terrified lady nodded her head vigorously.

Money does strange things to intelligent, competent people. The hostages being threatened by a green-masked maniac were an eclectic group of VIPs from several different countries and social stations. Although they were politicians or vice presidents of Fortune 500 companies or dignitaries from small European powers, all were unified in the terror and uncertainty of the past nine hours. All were worth well over seven figures, and all were well-educated and intelligent individuals with the clarity and forethought to navigate most scandals, tense business negotiations, hostile takeovers, or failing markets. However, all had their days and weeks planned in advance for them by a team of assistants. Their every whim and need was taken care of: from car repairs to grocery shopping to hair styling and maintenance. Without the usual day-to-day worries, they had a laser focus on what was necessary to leap from strength the strength in their specific field. This created very unique niche tools, incredibly valuable in their one specific area yet utterly useless and clumsy in virtually all others.

After the terrorists had busted in on their luxury dining room, killing one bodyguard and wounding several others, they had herded the high-value targets into a side room. The assailants then proceeded to lock the rest of the guests and staff into several secured locations, such as the administration wing and hospitality quarters. All security and bodyguards were tied and gagged in the staff lounge. Stragglers were mopped up by roving goons, stuffing people into predetermined secured rooms on each level.

‘Management,’ the title the top thug had adopted, spent the first few hours of the heist calmly giving orders and assuring all hostages that if their demands were met and no one tried to be a hero, the VIPs would be going home “alive and unspoiled.” However, as the hours ticked on, his demeanor changed. At first, his irritation was caused by a small group of survivors evading his men, killing a few, and maiming others. But that irritation was gone. Management’s men had shot dead the group’s ringleader, a gorgeous brunette. Then, they captured their muscle, a wounded former marine with more heart than sense.

After capturing the jarhead, Green mask should have returned to his calm, controlled demeanor. However, with every ticking minute, he became angrier and more erratic. His men couldn't figure out why. After snapping at a few of them for very little reason and pointing his weapon at several of his own guys, the other thugs began keeping their distance. They found reasons to "check on hostages" or "go on patrol." Really, they just wanted to be anywhere he wasn't.

Management bent down, staring at his bleeding captured 'hero' through the eye holes of his green mask. He held a mini semi-auto 9mm modified HK in his right hand. In the left hand, he had a four-inch black cylinder with a red button, sealed by a transparent cover, hinged at the top. He stared down at his captured prize, playing with the clear cover, flipping it back and forth several times before stuffing the detonator into the front velcro pocket of his olive green tactical vest.

He leaned in close enough to his prisoner that his hot breath made Johnny wince, "I told you all, NO HEROES. But you broke the rules," he stood up and swiped the butt of his gun across the captive's jaw. Blood spewed from the left side of his mouth and splattered next to the group of whimpering VIPs. The green-masked goon stared down at his prisoner and sneered, "I thought Devil Dogs were supposed to be tough?"

Johnny's hands were tied behind his back, blood dripped from his good ear, nose, and mouth, and he had two cracked ribs. Still, he looked up into the eyes of Management, and through the pain of one swollen shut, he managed a slight smile and wink. A knee to the side of the head rewarded Johnny's effort. The old Marine didn't give up. He grinned even more and stared right back into the shifty little eyes hiding behind the olive mask.

"Fine," Management racked a bullet into the chamber of his gun, "You wanna die a hero, then your wish is my command, Devil Dog!" He placed the barrel against Johnny's head and squeezed the trigger.

CLICK! Management pulled on the guns action, ejecting the bullet and loading another. He pressed the barrel against the Devil Dog's skull and squeezed the trigger again. CLICK!

Management tossed the defective weapon to the corner of the room and knelt down. "You might think you're lucky, but that good fortune won't hold out." He pulled a massive five-inch lock blade knife from his pocket, opened it, pointed it at Johnny's throat, and thrust.

POP, POP, POP. "Contact left. Sentry two down."

Management stopped just as the blade tip touched his prisoner's throat.

"Moving..." A shout came from down the hall.

"Copy, moving!" Was the reply.

The top thug stood, went to the door, and opened it; he peered outside.

His men, thirsty for action, pursued the would-be attacker. Overeager, bored, and frustrated that the operation was taking too long, all of his men chased after the attackers.

The boss thug rolled his eyes, “Morons,” he shook his head and then shouted to a giant goon with massive bulging shoulders clinging to a comically small uzi, “Watch the hall.” The goon was the biggest and slowest at the back of the pack. He sighed through a baby blue mask and rumbled down the opposite hall to ensure it was clear.

The boss stormed back into the VIP hostage room and slammed the door, “Now, where was I?” Management looked down at his hand and noticed his knife, “That’s right, Jarhead over there was about to be stabbed in the neck.”

A sudden thud grabbed his attention. He swiveled his head back towards the door. A struggle ensued somewhere outside in the passageway. He pulled a nine-millimeter berretta from a holster attached to his hip. “Johnson, speak to me.” He shouted. No response. He loaded the weapon, pointed the gun at the VIPs for extra insurance, and snatched a walkie-talkie from his vest. “Sentries one and two, do you copy?”

STATIC

“Three, Four, come in - over!” Nothing but white noise. Management’s shifty eyes zoomed back and forth from the hostages to the door. “Disaster,” he muttered under his breath, “This entire operation, nothing but a complete, unmitigated disaster!”

“Sleigh bells ring...something glistening.”

The thug twisted his head to the faint sound of a song outside the door.

“In da land, snow’s glisten’n.”

“Who is that? Identify yourself, or I’ll start shooting hostages. Their blood will be on YOUR hands!” Management’s voice cracked through the words, shaky hands taking much of the sting from his threat.

The singing voice was undeterred. “It’s a beautiful site, as we blow along... walking in a winter...”

The masked man threw the door open and stuffed his gun into the face of the intruder. He stopped short, then backed up, exclaiming, “Santa? What the hell are you doing here?”

The jolly old bearded man raised a champagne bottle in the air and shook it back and forth a bit, sloshing around what little was left. “Santa was a bit tired,” he slurred into the bad man’s face, “So he took a nappy-nap, in a secret Santa spot,” he touched his nose with his white-fingered glove, “but when Santa got up, the party all gone, no more drinky-drink.”

Management looked past Santa, spying Johnson, his guard, splayed out on the floor, “Ok, ok, pops, but you better tell me who took out my guy or...” The

thug butted in, but Santa was not done.

“Blut don’t worry, folks,” he stumbled his way into the room as Santa continued his slurred exposition, “I found this bottle to have a little wake-up nip and surging...I mean surging...Oh, whatever, I was looking, yes, that I can say - looking for some good little girls and boys,” He sat down almost on top of Johnny as he continued, “But a roughian, knocked me over and bonked that gentle giant outside over the head.” He pointed through the door, “Poor bloke is bleeding out his head.”

“Shut up, Santa, or...” Green mask shook his hands in frustration, “or whatever your name is. Ok pops? Or I will shoot you in the face.”

“Jeez, who wants to be on the naughty list? This one. Right?” Santa nudged Johnny with his shoulder and hefted the bottle for another swig.

“Enough of that!” The thug was done with these shenanigans. He stood over Santa as he leaned against the wall next to Johnny. The green mask ripped the bottle away from Santa and leaned down into his face to scream that the old man needed to shut up and stop moving, but something gave him pause. Santa’s nose had a wrinkle in it; it wasn’t a wrinkle. It was a straight line and in a strange place. “Wait a minute, are you...?” He started to bring up his weapon, but he was too late.

Santa had taken a big swig from the bottle but hadn’t swallowed. His cheeks were full of liquor, and when he saw that the gig was up, he spewed the contents of his mouth into the beady eyes of the green mask man. “No, I’m not the real Santa!” A woman’s voice quipped from the old man’s face.

Management squealed from the sting of the liquor in his eyes and backed up, waving the gun and shooting widely, striking nothing at first. Santa pulled a knife from his pocket and cut Johnny loose, then he popped up and dove at the management, hitting him in the midsection just as the wild shooting struck the dutchess in the thigh.

Santa drove the green mask into the back wall, forcing the gun from his hand. However, the thug was lethal in close combat. He wrapped his arms around Santa’s head, driving his knee into Santa’s face. But Santa was smart too. He kept his head turned and held up a hand to block, minimizing the impact. He also drove his shoulder into the bad guy’s solar plexus repeatedly. This was getting neither fighter anywhere, so they momentarily disengaged. Facing off, they sized one another up.

The bad guy pulled out his massive lock blade from his pocket, “Listen here, Kringle, I don’t know what your deal is, but being a hero will only get you and others killed. Stop now, and I will only kill you.”

Santa grinned and pulled his hat off and a grey wig. He then peeled back a fake beard and tore off the prosthetic nose revealing a handsome brunette woman.

The eyes behind the green mask narrowed; he pointed the large lock-

blade knife at Mary Sue. “You! You...” The thug studded before finally finishing, “You’re supposed to be dead.”

Mary-Sue smiled and tossed her hat and beard aside. She kicked off the heavy black Santa boots, which were two sizes too big. “Yes, I’ve been getting that a lot.”

Management growled back, “I’ve never killed a woman,” Then he rolled his eyes, “On purpose, I mean. But you will be my exception! I’ll gut you and enjoy watching you bleed out!”

Susan stared blankly at him and said nothing for several long, tense moments. Finally, when she spoke, she did so with the precision of a viper as she bent down and stuffed her hands into the black boots and stood up to a crouch, holding them up as gloves on her hands, “You are a sad little man, a cliché of a cliché, desperate for power, but far too impotent to ever keep any.”

“Ahh!” He screamed and lunged at Susan. Jabbing his blade at Mary-Sue in a classic fencing style. But his opponent was ready for him. As soon as he pointed the weapon at her, Mary-Sue knew that he was a trained knife fighter. He gripped the weapon in his right hand, held lightly between his thumb and forefinger. Then the bad guy stepped his left foot back and right shoulder forward so the weapon could reach maximum distance. Susan never learned to knife fight, only defend against it. She knew to attack with bare hands would only end in a lot of bad cuts and blood everywhere. She did not care about the clothes she wore, but the scars would be incredibly difficult and time-consuming to conceal. So she chose to fight smart, not hard. Instead of bare-handed, she fought boot-handed.

Management jabbed forward, but the sole of Mary-Sue’s boot met his blade, deflecting it away as she took a half step back, he jabbed again and sliced, but both were easily deflected. Frustrated, he backed up and thrust again, Sue moved to deflect, but it was a fake. The bad man grabbed the left-handed boot, tore the black leather protection from her hand, and tossed it aside.

“Uh-oh!” Mary-Sue’s eyes went wide. With only one boot, the barrage of knife strikes forced her against the wall. She had to make her move before she was pinned to the wall, but it wasn’t enough. She kicked right, threw the boot into the bad guy’s face, and moved left.

Management was no one’s fool, and Mary Sue had met her match. He absorbed the right kick, ignored the boot to his face, and watched his prey move left. She side-stepped left, so he simply swept his left foot against hers, tripping her feet out from under her. Mary sue hit the ground hard with an “oomph.”

Green mask came down atop her, with a knife ready to plunge into her chest with a two-handed grip. Mary caught his arms just in time, holding onto his wrists, the blade inches from her chest. The bad guy drove down at her body with all of his weight.

Crazed angry eyes glared down at her, “Now, you die!”

MASKLESS

“Um... a little help here, guys,” Mary grunted out.

SMASH!

In response to her plea, champagne bottle glass showered Mary’s face. The attacker went limp, dropping his head into Mary-Sue’s chest. The knife bounced harmlessly against the short, patterned carpet.

Mary-Sue winced and shook her hands spastically as the realization that she was lying on the floor came flooding into her brain, “Ew, ew, this carpet is disgusting, somebody...”

Around her, a flood of security personnel, bodyguards, and the ship’s officers flooded into the room, all armed and led by the ship’s captain. The chef’s voice boomed out from the rear, debriefing the would-be rescuers about the current situation, “Captain, we locked the rest of the assailants on the fourth level in section two; they should be easy to disarm now.”

“Don’t worry, Chef; we’ve got it from here! We’ll take care of these punks.” The captain grinned, feeling tough now that he was once again in control of his ship.

Mary-Sue, ever ‘the lady,’ with the assaulter still unconsciously sprawled atop her, blurted. “Oh, this cannot be a good look for me, people. Get him off me. I feel SO gross right now!” She grunted with a raised eyebrow, “Besides, this gentleman smells unpleasant. Like, help! Now, please?”

A camera flashed in response to her second request for help.

She glared up at the chef and Sandy. Next to them stood Miguel, taking photos with a smartphone and smiling down at her, “I’m sorry, I saw the phone on the table...memories, right? Now say QUESO.” Miguel chided, snapping more photos and grinning.

“Taquito, I’m gonna kill you when I get up!” Susan couldn’t help but chuckle a little bit as she rolled the miscreant off herself as Miguel and the chef burst into laughter. They helped Mary up. Upon standing, she noticed Sandy holding onto the neck of the broken champagne bottle. Mary-Sue nudged her on the shoulder, “Nice work, Sandy; we’ll make a killer out of you yet.”

Eyes wide, Sandy replied with a chuckle, “No more killing, please; I might go vegan after all this, just to avoid anything that might bleed.”

Mary Sue chuckled back, “I hear ya, sister,” she put an arm around Susan, “I think after all this disgusting mess is resolved, you and I deserve a full spa day. I foresee pedicures, manicures, and three-hour massages!”

Sandy closed her eyes and groaned, “Yes, I am so there, Susan...I mean Mary.”

“Ehem.” Chef cleared his throat, grabbing the ladies’ attention, so they could notice they were joined by a sore, bleeding, but coherent Johnny. He raised an eyebrow and mouthed the name ‘Mary’ as a question.

“Long story,” Mary-Sue began, “But short version, Susan was my middle name, Mary is my first, and after I’ve learned some rather hard lessons, thanks to some wonderful new friends,” Mary squeezed Sandy’s arm a bit as Miguel joined the group while she yanked the big fake Santa belly, still strapped to her neck off, she continued. “I decided it would be best to go back to Mary, my full name is: Mary Sue McClane.

The group went silent for a second and stared at the brunette, Santa’s red robes still dangling from her lean frame.

Miguel blurted, “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Mary Sue McClane furrowed her brow and shrugged her shoulders, “What?”

“Your name is Mary-Sue McClane?”

“Yeah, so?”

The group all burst into laughter,

“Why are you laughing,” Susan was a little hurt, “You think my name is funny?”

“No, sweetie,” Sandy finally managed to say, “But think about it. You just pulled off the impossible. Thwarting a hostage situation, as a ‘Mary-Sue.’”

“Fighting off bad guys dressed as Santa on a cruise ship,” Chef added.

“And your name is Mary-Sue McClane, as in John McClane!” Miguel chirped in.

Mary put a hand on her hip and smirked, “And I still don’t get it. Who’s John McClane?”

“Somewhere, somehow, there must be actual irony alarm bells ringing!” The chef said as he wrapped a fatherly arm around Susan. He added, “Menina, you are the most exquisite contradiction of terms I have ever met. I’m proud to have known you and happy we all lived through this.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that!” The room froze, all activity ceased; everyone slowly turned to the middle of the room.

In all of the chaos, everyone had assumed the green-masked boss was out for the count and that someone else would tie him up. But he had awoken and crawled to his feet without anyone noticing. In his hand was the black cylindrical object sporting a large red button.

“No, Chef,” Miguel quipped, “Now, the irony police have sounded the alarm!”

“After all this, I can’t believe I’m going to die an action movie cliché!” Sandy

whimpered.

“We all die.” He mashed the button down hard as everyone turned white and held their breath. Everyone that was, except Johnny. Johnny hobbled towards the bad guy calmly as everyone else waited to die. But death never came; instead, only a faint explosion somewhere in the distance answered the red button’s command.

Johnny smirked as he yanked something from his pocket. It was a wire with a small metal cylinder dangling from the end.

“No,” the green-masked goon growled. “You couldn’t have gotten all forty of them.” The bad man snorted.

“Forty-three,” Johnny’s low gravelly voice hissed. “And I put them on your escape sub hidden in the back of the ship and let it safely drift away.” He grinned, “An escape sub built for one!” Johnny swallowed hard from the discomfort in his throat and swollen jaw.

“One?” Green mask growled, yanking off his mask, revealing a sweating and frantic face capped by a mostly bald shaved head. “Fine, then, since I’ve been stabbed in the back, I won’t go down alone!” He shot an excusing glare to his right, “Will I, Captain?”

“Nobody move!” The captain saw his outing coming and stripped one of his guards of their weapon, pushing him over. He fired warning shots into the ceiling, then shouted, “I will kill all of you.”

The dutchess, whose leg was now wrapped and splinted, furrowed her brow, shocked, “But Captain, why? We’re friends!”

The captain rolled his eyes, “Friends? Us, friends? Come now, Dutchess!” His tone was sarcastic, “We both know I am merely a highly qualified servant. Another tool for you to move around when convenient for you and your REAL friends.” He glared, “I am sick of working for you spoiled, ungrateful, whining, overgrown children.” He placed a hand on his hip and forced his voice several octaves higher, mockingly, “Oh, Captain, I don’t like this type of five-star food; I want something else. Oh, Captain, the sea is so rough; make the storm go away.” His voice went back to normal, and he stabbed the gun forward toward her face. Two of her bodyguards covered her body with their own, “I should do the world a favor and kill you all, but I won’t!” He eased up and thought for a moment, “I will settle for the little bug of a man who ruined everything.”

“I’m happy I did! No one betrays me!” Former ‘Management’ blurted out as he spat on the floor.

“No, you moron,” the captain retorted, “The bus boy!” He turned right and straightened the pistol, aimed squarely at Johnny’s chest, and squeezed the trigger. “You die!”

MASKING

“Beep, Beep - Beep, Beep”

“Shut up!”

“Beep, Beep - Beep, Beep”

“Shut it off, or I will shut you off!” Susan growled as she got sight of a silhouette pressing a button, making the noise go away. “Finally, thank you, I just had the craziest dream, and I don’t think I slept at all!”

“So, child, it sounds as if you still need to work on that temper.” A familiar and powerful voice whispered.

Mary-Sue’s eyes opened wide to a dimly lit room as she frantically grabbed for a light switch. “Mr. clerk, Uriel, is that you?”

A light clicked on, and a tall looming being, dressed in a tan suit and baby blue tie sat in a chair far too small for him at her bedside. “Hello, human.” He grinned down at her, “How are you feeling?”

“I am so happy to see you!” She said with a big smile and started to sit up, but stopped short, “Ouch, but what happened? I feel like the victim of the worst plastic surgeon mishap ever or something,” She lay back, “Something really hurts.”

Uriel placed a massive, gentle hand on her shoulder, “Lie back and rest. You were shot again, remember?”

She rolled her eyes, “Not again...wait, I was?” Mary furrowed her brow, “I remember the first time I was shot and woke up arguing with you, but I don’t remember being shot again or it hurting this badly!”

Uriel laughed, “That’s because you died the first time, and we healed you immediately.” He pulled on Mary-Sue’s covers, straightening them out, as he commented, “And I like that you took up your first name again.” The clerk sat up, fluffed her pillow, and adjusted her head before helping her with a sip of water from a straw attached to a dull pink water jug. He continued, “Susan means lily or rose, but Mary,” he paused and smiled down at the much smaller human, “A lesser known meaning, in Latin is, ‘Star of the Sea.’ I am pleased to report that you proved me wrong and became just that. Today’s hero of the ocean.”

Mary Sue gulped down the water and then asked, “Be honest, Uriel, did I trip in front of the bullet again this time?”

“No! This was all you, jumping in front of Johnny, taking a bullet to the chest. Genuinely putting someone else’s life before your own. Something the old Susan would have never done.”

Mary-Sue furrowed her brow, digesting the news, “But then why am I not dead? There is no way I could survive that long at sea without surgery if shot in the chest.”

“You had a little bit of help.”

“Miguel?” Susan turned and smiled at the young man, “I can explain; I’m not crazy.” She was about to explain why she was conversing with air when the Latino boy turned towards Uriel and grinned, “Hey buddy, how you doing?”

Uriel glared back, “Michael, I hope you know that your little prank has given me recourse for a full audit.” He hissed, “An audit that will see you crushed!”

Miguel/Michael cocked his head back and let out a massive belly laugh, “Totally worth it,” he said while wiping tears from his eyes.

“Miguel, Taquito? What’s going on?” Mary Sue was confused. “What do you mean ‘I had help?’”

Michael stepped closer to Mary’s bed and smiled at her, “Chica, you seriously have to learn to be a bit more sensitive.”

Uriel rolled his eyes, “That’s the saint calling an angel lucky.”

“Anyways, I stepped in and ensured the bullet missed anything critical.” He smiled smugly and continued, “I even passed it between two ribs, so no bones were broken...you are welcome; however, twisting and sitting up will feel like being stabbed in the chest for several weeks.”

“But, Miguel, who are you?”

The young man smiled warmly as bright flames flashed through the iris of blue eyes. “I’m from the same place as Uriel. Speaking of, my brother.” He turned to the clerk, “I thought you hated coming down here; too many ‘fluids.’” Michael’s tone was slightly mocking.

Uriel shrugged his shoulders, “I am only being thorough with my assignment.”

“I knew it, you softy!”

“Whatever,” he looked down at Mary-Sue, “We have to go now.” Uriel smiled warmly. “But if you need anything, always ask the Boss, and He will let me know.”

A soldier in blue fatigues stuck his head in through the doorway, “Gentlemen, assignment complete; it’s time to go.”

“Gabe, chill, ok?” Miguel quipped.

Gabe, dressed as a marine, tapped a large wristwatch on his left hand, “Tick tock, gentlemen, the Boss has a new job for us.”

“Workaholics,” Uriel muttered under his breath as he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small flat box wrapped with golden ribbon. “Here, Merry Christmas, Mary.”

Mary-Sue was surprised, “You guys do presents?”

Uriel shrugged his shoulders, “It’s when you humans celebrate the Boss’s birthday, so why not?”

“She looked down at the impossibly white box and smiled, a tear streaking from the corner of her right eye. “This is the first Christmas present I have had in five years. Thank you!” She looked up and found herself alone.

After a moment, Mary looked back down, then gently pulled the ribbon apart and lifted the top from the flat box. Laying it aside, she pulled the content from velvet tissue paper. It was a handkerchief made of pure light. A note fell from the box. Mary flipped it over and softly read it aloud,

“As promised, this belongs to you now.
Let it serve as a reminder of who you once were.”

KNOCK, KNOCK!

A large bouquet of flowers took up most of the doorway, and behind them, a familiar face emerged. It was Johnny, face swollen, arm in a sling, a shy smile plastered across his face. He was dressed in military cargo pants and a US Marine's tee shirt. His hair was also cropped shorter, revealing more of the scarring on his scalp, but also high cheekbones and a square jaw.

Mary-Sue smiled back and motioned him inside.

The marine shuffled on a hobbled leg towards her bed.

As he approached the bed, a nurse dressed in blue fatigues came in to check on her patient, “Wow, those are some beautiful flowers. Can I take them, Ma'am, and find something to place them in?”

“Thank you.” Mary-Sue said, “By the way, where are we?”

The nurse opened a latch to release a drawer on a cabinet and took out a metal jug. She placed the flowers in the container as she answered, “The USS Mercy, a naval hospital ship, Ma'am. We were in the area when your cruiseliner was attacked.” She filled the jug half with water from a tiny sink in the corner and turned, handing them back to Johnny. “This will be the best we can do for now, Chief. I'll leave you two alone for a little while, but after that, our hero must have some rest.”

He nodded thanks as she turned to leave.

Mary-Sue looked up at Johnny and smiled coyly, “Chief?”

Johnny shrugged. As he dragged up a stool next to Mary's bed, “That was a long time ago.” He whispered softly.

“And hero? You and I both know I was far from a hero.” Mary-Sue chuckled at the notion.

Johnny shook his head, “Well, I owe you for my life, twice! So...”

Susan motioned for help to sit up. Johnny leaned forward and assisted her as she spoke, “The first time was an accident. I fell after stubbing my toe.” She searched Johnny's eyes feeling very vulnerable. However, Mary was very open to this man she had gone through so much with. He had done more for her than he would ever know.

“And the second?” Johnny asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“The second was because I owed you.”

Johnny didn't reply but just shrugged his shoulder and held his hands up in confusion.

"The first time I was shot, I..." Mary stopped, then started again, "When I was shot, I...well, let's just say, I was told that you had been asking 'the Boss' to look out for me ever since you and I began working together."

Johnny showed momentary confusion, then recognition. His eyes went wide as he pointed up, "You went..."

Mary smiled and nodded her head, "Yeah, I went up, but I couldn't go all the way up. But, apparently, because of a nosey wounded vet, I was given a second chance. So, here I am."

Johnny said nothing. He sat still and listened.

"I just want to know, why? Why me? I was so horrible to you." Tears began to flow.

The old marine moved in closer to Mary-Sue, so she could hear his low whisper of a voice, "I have no family, and after my surgeries from the explosion, I had to rehab for six months, alone. When I saw you," his big right hand brushed a stray lock of brown hair from her eyes, "I recognized another person alone, in a different type of rehab, who needed help." He wiped tears from her cheek and turned a bright shade of red, and winked, "Besides, you are very pretty."

He could barely get the words out of his mouth before Mary-Sue grabbed him by the collar and pulled the old marine down to her. Passion and her dominating personality took over, and she kissed him hard on his swollen lips. The kiss lasted only a few seconds, but that was more than enough. She let him go and settled back into her pillow and grinned like a naughty schoolgirl, as Johnny stared back at her, unsure as to what just happened, "Merry Christmas, Johnny."

A sly grin grew on Johnny's lips as he leaned in and gently kissed her back, then sat back up and whispered out, "And happy new year." He placed his large warm hand on hers and smiled down at her. "But let's not do that again for a while. My face is killing me."

Susan rolled her eyes and nodded her head in agreement, "I know, even though it was incredible, it had to be THE single most painful kiss ever!"

"I agree," Johnny said as they both chuckled but then winced.

"Laughing is so much worse," Mary exclaimed while grabbing for her chest and slowing her breathing. "So much worse!" This only released more excruciating chuckles.

"Do I hear laughter! Sounds like a party!" An unruly crowd of cruise ship employees began flooding into Mary-Sue's room with balloons, teddy bears, and flowers, led by Chef and Sandy.

"Make room, lover boy; we want to see our FAVORITE Mary-Sue!" Sandy chided.

“OMG, Sandy, you are too much,” Mary wiped tears from her eyes and accepted her kiss on the cheek.

Sandy shrugged and made room for the Chef to get his kiss in, “Well, being that we survived a real-life 80’s action movie plot, the chef and I decided we should end like one.”

After kissing Mary on the cheek and hugging Johnny, he stood up straight, still sporting a chef’s coat, “That’s right. And since it is Christmas,” he held up a glass of champagne and with a passable baritone voice bellowed out, “Sleigh bells ring, are you listening...”

The room all jumped in. Even the naval medical staff outside joined, “In a land, snow is glistening.” Throughout the ship, on every deck, the Christmas carol spread until the sound of Christmas music spread through all the halls of the USNS Mercy, “It’s a beautiful site, oh we’re happy tonight,”

The new and improved Susan shook her head and laughed to herself.

“Walking in a winter wonderland.”

Johnny leaned in and spoke as loud as his throat would allow, “Why are you laughing?”

“I hate this song SO much!” Susan chuckled.

Johnny chuckled, then whispered into Mary-Sue’s ear, “Then it’s the perfect song to a Christmas spent in chaos.”

THE END

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