

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

“But...”

Paul sighs, “For the tenth time, no! No, no, no, no, no, not a chance, never, not until Satan skates to work, NO!!!! Is that clear enough? I am not turning Sam into toilet paper no matter how much you beg!”

“Why? After what she did...”

“One, because she did that as part of your punishment for stealing the van. Now, she did go over the top, but she was allowed to do that.”

“The others...”

“Two, the others all lost to you at poker. That means they had a debt to work off. Sam hasn’t. No debt, no opportunity for you to have your fun.”

“But...”

“Three, you are not exactly Sam’s favourite person to begin with. If you did something like that to her, I’d lose an assistant or spend all my time keeping you two from killing each other.”

“But...”

“Four, because turning her into toilet paper is far too nasty, humiliating and generally disgusting for me to go along with it.”

“But...”

“And five, because I say so.”

“But...”

“Not another word, Dell. I mean it. Case closed. Done deal.”

“But it’s not fair. She...”

“Life sucks. Get over it.”

“God, even my Dad wasn’t this...” the door slams.

Paul sighs, “I’m starting to have a great deal more sympathy for her Dad than I did.”

Dell's door slams shut, bouncing open slightly as she lets out a string of curses that Ray Christian would swear his daughter wouldn't know at her age, and that she's been using for over a year. She flops onto the bed, staring up at the immobile blue lava lamp that used to be Petra. “On!” the lamp glows, bubbling away happily, casting the shelves of soft plush toys with a soft azure light. Dell scowls. “It is not fair. I mean, I know I wanted to get you all back, but she, she...” she growls, grinding her teeth, “It's not like I'm asking for too much here! She shredded me and threw me all over the fucking church! That demands justice!” the lamp doesn't answer her. “Bah! Well, if the bitch queen thinks she's got away with it, she's in for a surprise.”

The lamp doesn't answer, standing as still as she had when Dell erected the shelves and cupboards adorning the walls, or when she loaded them with clothes that wouldn't fit her now that she was wearing Zilvara's body, which seemed to be the clothes as well. Petra wondered if she could persuade Zil to let her wear her for a bit, or at least persuade Paul to let her, or stuffed toys. Lots and lots of stuffed toys. More than Petra had ever seen before. But, being a lamp, she couldn't say anything, just think, and wait until Dell turned her on, and the thrill that sent through her. She pulls her attention back to the present and Dell’s continued grumbling about the unfairness of life, and what she’s going to do about it. *Oh, this is going to be fun.* Petra smiles inside. *I wonder who'll end up keeping me company, her or Sam.*

Later that week, Paul stands in the McCarran International Airport parking garage, next to a battered dark blue van, talking to its driver. It is not going well. “But why do I have to...”

“Dell, we've been through this.” *Many times.* “If Sam sees you, she'll freak. I'd rather that didn't happen in the airport. I can do a lot, but stopping bullets from homeland security isn't really my idea of a fun time, ok?”

“But...”

“Dell, let's put it this way. You're staying in the van. Whether you stay in the van or stay **in** the van

is your choice. Capiçe?”

Dell folds her arms over her chest, sinking into the chair and pouting heavily. “Yeah, I understand.” “Good.” he turns, striding across the concrete towards the terminal.

Dell scowls after him, “Wouldn't that be a shame. 'No, Dell, you can't come out, Sam will freak.' 'No, you can't play with Sam, she'll freak.' No one cared if I freaked.” her eyes narrow, “They haven't seen freaked yet. But she will.”

“This has disaster written all over it.” Paul mutters, “I know it was my idea, mostly, but I'm going to blame Jaks anyway. She'll forgive me. Eventually. Probably sooner than Sam will. No, be brave, she won't do anything. Not here in public anyway. I hope.” He spots Marcel in the small crowd of passengers, standing head and shoulders above everyone else, and with a pronounced gap around him, but no sign of Samantha. “Hey, Marcel! Over here!” Marcel twists slightly, changing course, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, one that Paul got for him and big enough inside to move house with. The crowd flows around him, parting like a river around a rock as he walks over. “Where's Sam?”

“She's in the bag. Wanted to cut down on the fare.”

“In the bag? That must have been a fun x-ray scan. How was the honeymoon?”

“Oh, it was good. Got something I need to show you though.”

“Oh? War wounds already?”

“Don't give up the day job, boss. A comedian, you are not.”

“So, what do you have to show me? A souvenir? You actually got out of the hotel?”

Marcel looks down, a sheepish smile on his face, “Not a souvenir. I'll show you back at the van.”

“Ok. About that...”

“You're going to tell me we've got an add-on, aren't you?”

“Well...”

“Paul, I've known you how long? You think I couldn't see you weighing her up? The only reason you let everyone go nuts on her was to see how she'd react.”

“I...”

“You telling me if she'd freaked after what Zil did you'd just have let everyone keep on having fun with her?”

“Well...”

“What I thought. How's she working out?”

“It's, tough to say at the moment.”

“And wasn't that a significant pause. The others playing nice enough?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of. You don't believe in answering questions directly, do you?”

“Dell cleaned them out at poker. They've still got a fortnight left.”

“She cleaned them out?” Paul nods, “And you let her?” and nods again, “And didn't do anything to help her clean them out?”

“Why does everyone think I helped her?”

“Let me guess, Jaks saw through you as well?” Paul gives him a long-suffering look, “Puh-lease, you think you can keep anything from your woman? Sam tells me things I do that I didn't know I do.”

“And if Jaks hears you call her 'my woman', Sam'll be helping you with walking again. Don't you think we should let her out, by the way? I mean, flight's over.”

Marcel looks around as they walk into the garage, “Remember that thing I have to show you?”

“Yeeeeeeah?”

“Well, the thing is, it's sorta Sam.”

“Sorta Sam? And you say I can't be direct.”

“Ha ha. Funny man.”

Dell watches them walking across the concrete and tarmac. “Hmmm. I see Paul and I see Marcel. So where's the queen bitch? Marcel can't have got tired of her already. He still had those puppy-

eyes whenever he looked at her.” she looks harder, “Doesn't seem too unhappy. Oh, she's in the bag. Why's she in the bag?” she smiles, “Heh, maybe Miss Moral Majority isn't quite as pure as she makes out. Maybe she likes Marcel treating her like she's an object. Or maybe it's something more interesting.” Paul and Marcel move past the van, opening the back door. “And I think I want to see what it is.” she grins, feeling herself slipping into the seat, sliding into the rusty darkness that comes with being in the van, sliding through wherever it is she is.

Marcel opens the bag and reaches in, pulling out a scroll tube. “Sam's in there?”

“Yup.”

“Well, that's certainly, well, that's not right.”

“Tell me something I don't know.” He pops the top off the tube, pulling Sam out, her paper-thin figure unrolling.

“You first. She's been like this how long?”

“Just since this morning this time.”

“This time? How often has it happened?”

“Last couple of days, she's been turning up like this. But when I turn back, or get the phone, she's back to normal and, well, energetic.”

“And you're sure you haven't got any war wounds?”

“Still not funny. Is she, you know, alright?”

“Oh, she's fine. Actually, as it's Sam, she's probably enjoying herself. Do you want the technical breakdown now or wait till she's back with us?”

“Uhm, she has been kind of horny when she turns back. You sure...”

“It'll be fine.” He gently takes Sam from Marcel's hands, holding her by the shoulders. He flips her out as if the paper-thin woman was a beach towel. She floats back to the floor as he lets go, smiling broadly, her body now fully restored to three dimensions.

“Oooooooh. That was nice.” she turns to Marcel, “Keep that tube handy, honey. We'll be using it again.” and then back to Paul, “Now, you, explain.”

“Well, it has been known for assistants who have been assistants for a long time,”

“Which I haven't.”

“or who have a lot of extra-curricular playtimes, which you most certainly do, can start to spontaneously use magic. It's usually uncontrolled, but doesn't last long.”

“So I could turn flat at any moment?”

“Pretty much. Around me, it won't happen, but yeah.”

“Cool.”

“Not quite the response I was expecting. It might not just be flat. Given that that's pretty much all you want to do with yourself, it probably will be, but not necessarily. Could be anything, but it won't last more than a few minutes.”

“So how did I get back here in a tube?”

“If it had cancelled, you'd have been injured. Magic normally seems to protect people who use it. No one's sure why.”

“But it won't happen again?”

“Probably not while you're back here. Some assistants learn to control it. Actually, most do eventually.”

Sam beams at him, “So I'll be able to be flat anytime I like? I won't have to go through all that rigmarole with you?”

“Pretty much. Eventually.”

“How eventually?”

“It varies. Depends on a whole host of factors, most of which no one understands.”

“Awwwww. Never mind, it'll happen when it happens. Now, which door hides the kitchen these days? All that time rolled up was wonderfully sexy and relaxing, but I've got a powerful thirst.”

“Over there.”

“Great! Come on, Studly.” she leads Marcel off, a bulge appearing in the walls of the van budding

off.

"I presume you heard all that?"

"Oh, of course. You did tell me to be sneaky and eavesdrop." She looks down at her watch, "5."

"What are you..."

"4, just counting down, 3, why didn't you tell her about me, 2..."

"What the fuck?!"

"Hmmm. She walks faster than I thought."

"What?"

"What's in the fridge?"

"Just some beer and, shit..." he rushes through the door, to find Sam staring into the fridge.

"You put Jackie in the fridge???"

"Well, sort of."

"What do you mean sort of? She's in there. Well, most of her's in there anyway. And she's made of chocolate."

"Yes, but..."

"How long's she been like this?"

"Well, about..."

"Did she agree to it?"

"Well, she lost and..."

"And you made her into a chocolate snack and dumped her in the fridge. That's cruel, couldn't you have just stopped her melting?"

"It wasn't my decision."

"You mean she suggested it? Man, I knew she was weird, but..."

"She didn't suggest it."

"So who did? This isn't really Zil or Petra's style. And there isn't anyone else..."

"Awwww, did Flat Sam forget li'l ole me?"

Sam turns quickly, thrusting her finger at Dell, "What is she still doing here? I thought we were dumping the little thief!"

"They decided they just couldn't bear to part with me. I got a room and a job and everything."

"You gave her a job??? As what?"

"Driver."

"And trainee assistant."

"You what?? She's going to be in the shows with us? Are you nuts? She'll run off with half our body parts!"

"Why would I want your body parts? The ones I've got are younger and prettier."

"You..."

"Dell, stop making things worse. Sam, calm down."

"Calm down? After..."

"Sentence was served and completed. Time to rehabilitate her back into the community."

"But..."

"Everyone said yes. I was planning on telling you in the terminal but, well, we know what happened with that plan."

"Well, I don't say yes."

"Which is very bad news, but it's already agreed, contracts signed and Dell employed."

"Is that why you gave the little tart that body?"

Paul takes a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose, "Not exactly."

"And Zil does look good on me, doesn't she?"

"That's Zil? And you're responsible for chocolate Jackie? And where's Petra?"

"Oh, she's just standing around my room."

"I see. And what are you planning to do to me?"

Dell smiles, "Well..."

"It doesn't matter. The others owe her from poker. You don't."

Dell pouts, "Yet."

"You..."

"Hey, Paul, we got a show tonight? What time?" Marcel asks, "We got the stage set or not? Because we might have to boogie."

"Yeah, there's one tonight. Dell, would you mind getting us under way?"

Dell salutes, still smirking at Sam, "Right away, boss." and sinks into the floor, the engine starting up a moment later.

"And we need to get unpacked, everything set and you looking your best." he picks Sam up, sweeping her off her feet as he walks through the door, "And maybe find a better use for that excess energy. See you later, boss."

"Oooh. Why, Mister Hill, whatever do you mean?" she giggles, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Well, Mrs Hill, I thought we could start by..." the door closes behind them. Paul walks up to the fridge.

"How did I ever let you talk me into letting her stay, Jaks?" he reaches in, breaking off a piece of her shoulder, "Alright, alright, I admit I might have thought about it before you suggested it, but it was a collective decision. Yes, I know I could have stopped it like that. But it was still a collective decision. Thanks for the advice, Jaks." he closes the door, the light above Jackie's head winking out, leaving her in darkness as she feels, dimly, Paul biting on her shoulder.

Later, "What do you mean she's doing the show?"

"I thought it was fairly clear. You and Dell will be my assistants in the show."

"If you think I'm working with her then..."

"Then I think you're a professional. Correct me if I'm wrong, please."

Sam stares at him, stopping in mid flow, her jaw dropping.

"Good. Then I expect you to act professionally. Back here, after the show, you can both go back to being Itchy and Scratchy, but out there, I expect you to do the job as well as you can." He turns to look at Dell, "And that means no tricks. I'm the only one who plays tricks on you on stage, clear?"

Dell looks down, seemingly contrite, "Yes, boss."

"Sam?"

"Fine." She replies, through gritted teeth.

"Good." he pulls on the mask, stooping slightly, "And smiles. Happy faces for the customers, yes?"

The show goes better than expected. Dell's evident relish as she secures Sam into the illusions clearly illustrated as she pulls the leather straps a notch too tight for comfort, leaving Sam to glare at her before the guillotine fell. Sam returns the favour, slamming swords through Dell from all angles with unaccustomed glee and gusto. To the audience, it's obviously an act, staged to make the whole show seem different, but they enjoy it nonetheless. To Paul, up on stage, and making sure nothing goes wrong, it feels like the other shoe is about to drop.

Paul almost breathes a sigh of relief as Dell brings on the mangle. *Almost there. Almost there. Everyone's still alive. This might actually work. Maybe they'll have got it out of their system and, hah, yeah, right.* "So," he pats the wrought-iron frame enclosing the two rollers, squinting out at the crowd, "not so many faces like mine. All too young to know what this is, yes?" the audience roars out, "Then listen and learn something as well as enjoy show, yes? Is a mangle. Before we had washing machines and dryers and combined same, had to dry clothes with this. You put the wet clothes in here." he touches the two rollers, "Like this." He picks up a towel from the metal tin basin, placing it in between the mangle rollers. "Then, you turn, like so." He takes hold of the handle, pushing and straining as he pulls on the handle. The handle turns slowly, reluctantly, the wet cloth pulling through, "See? And this why we now have washing machine, yes? Too much work, yes?" A ripple of laughter goes through the audience, "Now, squeezing clothes not much of a trick, yes? Squeezing beautiful assistant a trick, yes?" the audience roar their approval. "Now, for this trick, I need assistant. So..." he turns towards the back of the stage. Sam starts to step forward

before Dell gives her a push, turning the volunteer step into a stumble. Sam glares over her shoulder, as the audience laugh, before flashing her smile at the audience, and walking forward. “Is good when they do this without prompting, yes?” Sam continues to smile as Dell brings out a table, sloping down to mangle. Sam climbs up onto the table, still wearing her smile, although also managing to look daggers at Dell, as she settles down, her toes pointed towards the mangle. “Turn handle, yes? Younger, fitter, yes?” Dell pouts, but turns the handle, sashaying her body in time with the turns, smiling as she watches Sam pulled through. *Oy, that girl is going to get me in so much trouble. Especially with that body.* Sam's feet emerge, followed by her legs, pressed into a flat image on a bathtowel. Dell stops turning, taking up the towel, wiping her hands on it.

“HEY!!!”

Dell smiles, shimmies her way back to the side, and resumes turning. *Definitely get me into trouble. God, I hope her dad has had 'that talk' with here. Loco parentis only covers so much. Natural assistant, though. Which means natural trouble. And in her case natural jailbait. Why did I think this would be a good idea?*

Sam's head passes through the mangle and Faustus picks her up, showing her to the audience, flipping the towel around front and back to show she's imprinted on both sides. He folds her over his arm, and upends the basin with a clatter, showing it completely empty as it topples, rolling around the stage.

“And now, we are reaching show's close, yes?” he says, before walking across the stage to where what appears to be a frosted glass shower cubicle stands, suddenly illuminated by the spotlight. A towel rack floats in mid-air beside it, or on a black covered stand, depending on how suspended the audience's disbelief is. Dell walks around from behind the cubicle, opening the door, turning it on its castors so the audience can clearly see it's currently empty. Faustus lays Sam across the rail, a slightly shocked face looking out at the audience. He crosses in front of the cubicle, settling down in a rocking chair on the side of the stage. Dell turns the cubicle back, and climbs in, closing the door. Faustus starts to gently rock in the chair. The sounds of a shower comes from the cubicle, the stage lights dimming, a backlight framing the cubicle, a silhouette appearing on the glass. *Oh, no. I'd forgotten she was doing this part of the trick. Idiot!* The sounds of a shower emerge from the cubicle as Dell's costume flips over the edge of the cubicle. *Too late now, on with the trick. Just don't be so stupid again.* He keeps rocking, slowly, pulling a grey wig, pulled back into a bun, over his own grey hair, wrapping a shawl over his shoulders. Dell's silhouette continues her shower, apparently oblivious to the audience watching her every move as she appears to lather herself up, stroking along her arms, turning, her hands running over her chest and stomach. *I am going to have to have words with that girl. She's not as grown up as she thinks. And this is just going to lead to so much trouble.*

Faustus rises from the chair, stooping over, shuffling awkwardly towards the cubicle, a long gleaming carving knife in his hands as ominously familiar music begins to build. The audience watches the knife as he walks, glinting in the spotlights. The music continues to build as Dell's silhouette continues to wash herself, the audience's attention split between Dell's silhouette soaping her legs, and Faustus shuffling towards the cubicle, the knife shining, sending shards of light into the audience. *Wait for it, wait for it.* He reaches the towel rack, stooping over, the knife gripper tightly. The door swings open, a slim arm reaching out, taking the towel. The music reaches it's violent crescendo and he plunges the knife down, again and again. The silhouette falls back, the knife's shadow plunging into her with the music. The silhouette slumps down, pulling the arm in, dragging the towel with her. The music stops. The frosted walls of the cubicle open revealing it completely empty. No sign of Dell, or the towel. Faustus removes the wig and shawl, the knife mysteriously vanished as he bows slowly, “And that is end of show, yes? Is time to get drunk and have good time, yes? Applause, yes?” the audience applaud, raising their drinks.

Backstage in the van, Dell smiles, holding up the towel, grinning into Sam's face, “Well, that was fun.” she tugs at her costume, “But a lot of work. And having got all hot and sweaty with that pretend shower, I could do with a real one. Good thing I've got something to dry me off with.” she

grins even more broadly, flipping Sam over her shoulder as she walks towards the bathroom.

Faustus walks quickly around the backstage, “Marcel, pick up the money when everything's packed, would you? I need to get back pretty quick.”

“Uh, sure, but...”

“Because I left you're lovely wife as a towel and Dell's fully mobile. I want to stop a disaster that will make the Titanic look like a minor traffic accident.”

“You couldn't have just fixed things beforehand?”

He stops, “You're right. I'm an idiot.”

“Sometimes.”

“Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” he turns, “Over there.” directing the crew moving the props, “And be careful!”

Paul closes the door to his dressing room, pulls off the Faustus face and concentrates.

Meanwhile, Dell runs her hands under the shower, “Hmmm. Nice and warm. Oh, it's going to be good to get dry properly, Sammy.”

“Oh, is it?”

“What?!!” she looks up, to find Sam standing where she'd left her, only she'd left her as a towel rather than a very angry woman. “Ooohhhhhhhh, shit!”



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