

MASKS

Or How to Really Screw with People's Heads

Community Service: Part 1

By pwatson1974

Dell sighs, heavily. "Fine. You've got yourself a plaything."

"Great." Paul holds out his hand, "Welcome to the team."

Dell tries to shake his hand, only to be stopped by the manacles. "Yeah, great. Can I get out of these stupid things now?"

"Just don't try running off."

"As if." Paul waves his hand with a flourish and the manacles snap open. Dell sits up, massaging her wrists. "Those were tight."

"You'll get used to it."

Dell shivers. "Like I'll get used to a talking tiger?"

Jackie chuffs, **"Oh, no, sweetness. I'm easy to get used to."**

"Yeah, right."

"No, she's right. Being a tiger is one of the more normal things I've left her as after a show."

Dell turns to look at him. "And you're going to do that sort of thing to me now?"

Paul smiles, "Don't be silly." He pulls at the red silk handkerchief in his pocket and continues to pull, unfolding a large red silk sheet, "We're saving the really weird stuff for you."

"What?!"

"Just kidding. New doesn't always mean Twilight Zone."

"Just mostly." Zilvara smiles with even more insincere innocence than normal.

Dell looks at the assistants gathering into a group, "This whole place is the Twilight Zone."

"Maybe a little." Paul flings the sheet out over the girls. Dell gives a little eep as the sheet settles flat on the floor.

"What'd you do to them?"

"Oh, they're fine." He raises the sheet, revealing perfect pictures of the four assistants, all fully restored to human shape, if not human thickness, on it. "See? All smiling." And indeed, they are all smiling, except for Samantha whose brilliant grin can best be described as beaming.

Dell shivers, "Yeah. They look really fine."

“They’re fine. Really. Want to hold them?”

“Me??? You want me to hold that? What’ll it do to me?”

“Nothing.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He crumples the sheet up into a creased ball. Dell shudders.

“That doesn’t hurt them, does it?”

“Of course not. Right now they’re probably having a blast.”

Dell looks very sceptical.

Paul tosses the sheet towards her, “You don’t trust me, do you?”

Dell yelps, catching the sheet. “Not really.” She sweeps the sheet over Paul, covering him completely, and runs for the door. She scrambles through the door, out of the stone chamber and into the back of the van. “Huh? How...” She looks back at the side panel of the van, the door conspicuous by its absence. She reaches out to touch the battered metal. “Weird.” She raps on the panel and gets a dull metallic sound back, “Really weird.” She steps back, still staring at the panel. “Jeez, play Harry Potter later, get out first!” she pushes on the door, shoving it open and steps out, stopping halfway through the door as the air thickens around her, trapping her like a fly in amber. She struggles forward, but the air is as unyielding as concrete. “What?!” she backs into the van and steps forward. Again she is blocked. “Jesus, what is wrong with this thing? I need to get out before he gets out from under that sheet.” She backs up and runs at the door, stopping dead in the doorway.

“Havin’ trouble, sweetness?” Dell feels her hairs stand on end. She recognises the voice, without it’s gruff, tiger growl on the consonants. She turns around very slowly, smiling weakly.

“Leaving so soon?”

“Well, you know, I just thought I’d pop out and...”

“Ok, this is clearly my fault. I should have been clearer. Part of your community service is van arrest.”

“What?”

“Like house arrest, but it means you can’t get out of the van without permission.”

“What??? You can’t do this!”

“Too late. You agreed to it.”

“So I can’t get out of the van for a whole month???”

“Not without permission. And as you’ve just tried to run off at the first opportunity, I don’t see that happening easily, do you?”

“You can’t do this!!”

“You said that already. The answer’s the same.”

“That sucks.”

“Yup. So does being thrown in jail for kidnapping.”

“Jesus, why are we being nice to her?” Samantha snaps, “She tried to rob us!!! She could have killed us!”

“With what?? You’re the ones with the freaky swords, not me!”

“She has got a point there, Sam.”

“Let’s just get out of here.”

“Well, driver?”

“What?”

“You are our driver. Something else you agreed to.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She moves to the door and stops dead. “Well? How am I supposed to get into the driver’s seat if I can’t get out?”

“You let me worry about that.” Paul takes out the sheet.

“Oh, no, keep that thing away from...” the sheet settles over her, slowly sinking onto the floor.

Samantha whips up the sheet, looking at the blank sides. “Where is she?”

“She’s starting her community service.”

Elsewhere, Dell tries to breathe, but can’t. She feels cold all over, tasting rust, metal and oil as the strange dark world whips around her. She has a brief pause to wonder how she knows what rust tastes like before she feels her body changing, spreading out through the cold, metallic darkness. She panics as her heartbeat ceases its pounding, not just slowing down from its adrenaline-spiced beat, but gone completely. Slowly she feels her body going numb, a complete lack of feeling creeping over her. “*What is he doing to me? It’s like,*” she shudders, “*like he’s wiping me out. Will he bring me back? Can he?*” the numbness covers her totally.

The back of the van, “So what did you do to her?”

“I just put her in the van for now.”

“In the van? Aren’t we in the van?”

“For now?”

“We’re inside the van, Zil; she’s part of it. Should make her a better driver.” The van’s engine judders into life, “Back to the club, please, driver.”

A stream of muffled invective hurtles back, but the van slides smoothly forward.

Elsewhere, Dell feels her body returning with a sigh of relief, until she starts to notice that it doesn’t feel the same. She can feel the tarmac under her tyres, the asphalt pressing against her. She can feel the engine sitting cold and inert in her chest where her heart should be pumping. “*What has he done to me? He’s turned me into the van? How can he do that?*” she shivers, feeling the autumn air over her metal skin. She can feel parts of her corroding slowly, still solid but nibbled at by the warm red rust. She feels another change in the way her body feels, “*Now what?? What else is he going to do to me?*” Her body grows slowly out of the driver’s seat. She feels a flood of relief as she can see again, but it’s tempered as she tries to move and finds her back sealed into the faded covering. “*You really don’t trust me, do you?*” Her

arms rise, gripping the steering wheel. *“So, what am I supposed to do now? It’s not like I can turn the ignition if I can’t...”* she feels more than hears the ignition start, feels her engine-heart fired into life, shuddering as it warms up.

“Back to the club, please, driver.”

Dell curses for several minutes as she reaches for the gear stick, *“A manual??? How old is this piece of crap?”* Her hands refuse to move off the steering wheel, but the stick moves. She feels the gears shift within her and the van moves forward. She turns, the wheel turning, pulling her arms after it. *“This isn’t so bad, I suppose. At least they won’t do much to me while I’m their transport. But a whole month??? I’ll be talking Transformer before this is finished.”*

The back of the van, “It’s really not fair, y’ know.”

“What isn’t? We gave the little thief her choices, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, I know, an’ I’m not sayin’ we shouldn’t be punishin’ her, but we’re lettin’ the guy who’s dreamin’ this up off light, aren’ we?”

“What do you suggest, Jackie? Father-daughter sessions?”

“Nah. I don’t think he’d look as good in our stuff as his daughter.”

“Eeeeww. There’s an image I’m not going to be able to get out of my head for a long time. Eeeewwww.”

“Besides, I doubt we can bluff Ray Christian as easily.”

“What bluff?”

“Oh, come on, you don’t think we’d get away with making those sorts of threats against someone who had a clue what the law was, do you? Right now we’re on dodgy ground with Dell. Technically, we’ve got kidnapping, false imprisonment, threatening behaviour, with corruption of a minor to follow, knowing you four.”

“And you think he’ll know the law?”

“Oh, yeah. Ray Christian strikes me as someone who knows the law well enough, even if he doesn’t always actually obey it.”

“So, what are we going to do? I mean, I know he’s a sleazebag with wandering sweaty hands, but we can’t really do anything. I mean, he is paying us.”

“Maybe he should be paying a little more, sis.”

“What?”

“Well, I’m just thinking. He’s got a lot of money, hasn’t he?”

“Probably more than the IRS knows about, sure.”

“So, if some of that were to go missing he couldn’t really complain to the cops, could he?”

“‘Go missing’? You wouldn’t be proposing we steal it off him, would you, Zil?”

“Not much, just enough so he’s paying us a decent fee.”

“An’ how do you propose to get the money? Bash ‘im on the back of the head wi’ a shillelagh?”

“Don’t be dense. We’ll sneak it off him.”

“And how do you propose to do that? Let him fondle you for a bit to distract him?”

“Eeewww. No way! I’d have to burn whatever I was wearing and bath for a month. Couldn’t you just make me vanish?”

“You don’t think his roll of bills flying up would get noticed?”

“Yeah, yeah, so we need another way.” She brightens, “Got it. He’ll trust Dell, won’t he?”

“Probably. But I doubt she’ll cooperate.”

“She doesn’t have to. You can make me look like her, then I can get our money.”

“You couldn’t behave like her, Zil. Someone would notice.”

“Got a better idea?”

“Don’t I always?” Paul smiles.

“So what’s the idea? Come on, tell meeeeeee!”

“Patience, Grasshopper. When we get back, I’ll show you.”

“Why wait?”

“I can’t show you, all the props aren’t in place.”

“You’re making less sense than usual, boss.”

“Trust me.” He smiles.

“Uh-oh. He’s really up to something now. He’s onto the ‘trust’ stage.” Jackie murmurs, “You need me for this trick?”

“No, no, Jackie. I just need Zil, and a couple of other things.”

Zilvara raises her eyebrows. “Coooooooooooool.”

Later, the van pulls to a smooth stop in the underground garage opposite the theatre. *“Well, that wasn’t so bad. I wonder what happens to me now that I’ve stooooooooopped.”* Dell shudders as her body collapses back into the van’s metal frame, the engine idling to a stop in her chest. *“What now? Is he going to keep me stuck here when I’m not driving? God, I should have chosen the cops. At least I’d have been able to see.”* She blinks as she feels her heartbeat returning, hammering, sounding so loud, so erratic after the rumbling engine. “What, where?” she looks around. She knows she’s still on the van, but the room stretches out into darkness.

“Ah, so good of you to join us, Dell.”

“Like I had a choice.” She turns towards Paul, “So, what now?”

“Glad you asked. Zil?”

Zilvara pushes a black cabinet out of the shadows, grinning at Dell.

“Let me guess, you want me in there?”

“She’s a natural, boss.” Zilvara smiles, opening the door onto the padded interior.

“Very cosy.” Dell peers into the cabinet, “What’s it going to do to me?”

Zilvara shrugs. “No idea. He won’t tell me, either.”

“What??”

She shrugs again, “He doesn’t usually, not for the fun things. Now in you get, I want to see what he’s dreamed up.”

“Can I change my mind? Please?” Dell asks.

Zilvara giggles, “You’ll love it. Really. Well, probably. Eventually.”

“Gee, very reassuring.”

“You’d better get used to it. We’ve got you for a month.” She grins, “And I think we’re going to be keeping you verrrry busy.”

“Marvellous. Jail is sounding better and better all the time.” She climbs gingerly into the cabinet. “This isn’t going to hurt, is it?”

“It never hurts.” She winks as the door closes, “Usually just the opposite.”

“Huh? What...” the door closes, leaving Dell just the light shining through an oval hole near her face.

“Could you put your head through the hole, please, Dell?”

“Oh, yeah. Anything else I need to do?”

“Not this time.”

“Not even trust me?”

“Especially not trust me.” Paul grins, helping her fit into the hole.

“You’re insane.”

“You’re right, Zil. She is a natural.” He swings the door open and Dell screams as she feels something rubbing static all over her.

“W-w-what have you done?” she quavers, “I can’t feel anything!”

“Shhh. It’ll be fine. Really.” He reaches up and gently cups Dell’s face, removing it from the box.

“AAAAAAHHHH!!!!”

“Cooool. Very realistic, boss. Can I try her on?”

“What?”

“That’s the idea.”

“What??? What are you talking ab...”

Zilvara takes hold of Dell’s cheeks and raises her to her face, placing Dell’s face over her own. Dell’s voice vanishes as Zilvara vanishes, Dell standing in her place. “Did it work?” Paul holds up a hand mirror, “Wow! Hey, I even sound like her.”

“Of course. I’m a bit offended you could have thought otherwise.”

“Yeah, but how does this...” she pauses. “Can you hear that? I can hear someone. Sounds like they’re really pissed at something.”

“That’ll be Dell. She’s probably a teeny bit irritated that you’re wearing her body.”

“Well, yeah, I suppose, but why does she have to shout so much? I’ll give it back. But she’s distracting me.”

“Dell, I know you can hear me. Here’s the deal. Zil is going to be you for a while. Not too long, just long enough to get our own back on your Dad for trying to steal our van. So, if you help, it’ll be over quicker, ok?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Excellent.”

“Then it’s back to being stuck in the van, right?”

“More than likely. At least for now.”

“So, what are you going to do to my dad? I won’t let you hurt him.”

“You won’t? We’d better scratch that plan, Zil.”

“Don’t make fun of me! What are you going to do to him?”

“Get some of our money back. Lighten the load on his wallet a little.”

“What?? You turn me into a magical slave toy and he just gets his wallet lifted?? Are you serious? That is so not fair!”

“What would you suggest? After all, you were the one who actually made off with my girls.”

“Your girls?” Zilvara raises an eyebrow.

“Near as makes no difference, Zil. Any ideas? Or shall we start with this?”

“Yeah, yeah, ok.”

“Let’s go, then, backseat driver.”

“Not funny.”

Dell slips out of the van, looking around to make sure she’s not seen and walks towards the small theatre’s rear entrance. The door swings open just before she reaches it and Marcel looms in the doorway, supervising the removal of props.

“Eeep.”

Marcel turns, “Sorry, Miss Christian.” He rumbles, “Could you move back a bit, please? Your boys need a bit of space to shift this lot.”

“Sure, Marcel. See you later.” She steps back.

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, wonderful. What a great sneak you are.”

“Shut up.”

“Nope. I can’t do much like this, but...”

“I could always lose you, you know?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“If you’re good, you’ll never know.”

“Whatever. Are we going in the front, or waiting here for your thug to finish?”

“Thug? Thug???? Keep that up and I’ll lose you anyway.”

“He really works those poor guys hard.”

“Hard? He can barely get the lazy buggers to work at all. Marcel takes his work seriously. Shame you guys don’t.”

“Ooooh. Struck a nerve, did I? Are we waiting for him to finish or what?”

“Fine, fine. Round the front it is.”

“Unless you want to go in the private door. Go round the corner. There’s a fire door. The alarm doesn’t work on it anymore. Dad hasn’t found out I use it to sneak out yet, so be careful.”

“Why? It’s not like you’ll be back.”

“What???? As soon as this weird Hell of a month is over, I’m out of here.”

“That’s what you think now. We’ll see.” She reaches the door, but it doesn’t budge.

“You have to jiggle it. No, not like that. Gimme.” Zilvara feels her body reach out, wiggling the door slowly open and slipping inside.

“How’d you do that?”

“How should I know? I’m new to this. But it does make things interesting, doesn’t it?”

“No way. I’m in charge here. Now where do we go?”

“My room. I need to pick up some things before we get back.”

“No way! We need to get the money not...”

“No help me, no help you.”

“You are sooooo lost when I get that money.”

“Yeah, right. You only got me for a month. I don’t think your boss would be happy if you lost me. It ain’t gonna wash.”

“Fine, fine. Where’s your room?”

“I’ll take you there.” Zilvara feels the body move, walking calmly, if a bit stiffly, down the corridor.

“No. Just tell me.” She stops. She feels a tugging as Dell tries to get her arms to move, but pushes it back and takes her own steps forward.

“Alright. Up the stairs, both flights, then left. I’ve got a key.”

“You lock your door.”

“Yeah, I can’t let my Dad see what I’ve got in there.”

“Ok.” She scoots up the stairs to the door, quickly unlocking it and stepping inside. “This is your room?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, no.” She looks around the room. Almost every surface is covered in stuffed animals, overwhelmingly tigers.

“Go on, say it. I know you want to.”

“Say what?”

“I an hear you thinking it. Let me have control. I’ll be quick.”

“Ok...”

Dell grabs a small backpack, stuffing it with animals, piling in jeans and t-shirts, until it overflows with cloth, denim and fluffy limbs. “That should do. Now, how do plan on getting the money off my Dad and how much?”

Zilvara feels a gentle tingle creep over her as Dell lets her control fades away. “I dunno. We don’t want to leave him destitute.”

“That’s a relief.”

“But we do want it to hurt.”

“Oh, of course. And the how part?”

“Well, I’ll...”

“You didn’t think that far ahead, did you? Honestly. Some thief you are.”

“You’d do better, I suppose?”

“I can get \$500 from him without breaking a sweat.”

“How about a thousand?”

“\$600.”

“\$900.”

“\$750. *Final offer.*”

“Done. Bet you can’t.”

“*Done. Let me back in. I won’t try anything.*”

“Al” “*right. Hey!!*”

“Sucker.” She shoulders the bag and walks down the stairs towards the main office behind its faded red door. She knocks.

“Yeah? Who is it?”

“Dad, it’s me, Dell. You busy in there?”

“Ardelle? Get in here.” She pushes through the door, shutting it behind her quickly. “Did you get rid of it?”

“Daaad, you know I hate that old lady name!”

“Sorry, sorry, Dell.” She hears the effort it takes to say it, “So, what happened?”

“I got the van.”

“Great. They’ll have to take me up on my generous offer now.” He smiles, rubbing his hands unconsciously.

“But...”

“But? You know I don’t like that word.”

“I got spotted. I don’t know how, but they found me. I got away, but I had to leave the van.”

“Did they see you?”

“Puh-lease, Dad. Even if they did, they’d only have seen me from a distance.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. You worry too much.” She pats him on the cheek.

“And you don’t worry enough. You’re sure they didn’t see you?” he asks, fingering his thick cigar.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s all fine.”

“I’m not sure.” He mutters, chewing on his cheek, sucking his teeth in thought.

“You’re going to send me to Mom, aren’t you?”

“I don’t want you involved...”

“You got me involved.”

“But they might have seen you. That means they might get the police in. No, you need to get away for a bit. They’ll be gone in a month.”

“Can’t. Mom’s in Paris, remember? Her and Daddy Two.”

His eyes narrow. “Don’t push me, Ardelle. You’re going. If you can’t go with her, you can go on your own. You’re old enough to cope for a month.”

Dell smiles winningly at him, “I haven’t got any money.”

Ray Christian rolls his eyes, and pulls out the roll of notes, “Here’s \$500. That should keep you out of trouble.”

“Yeah, if I wanted to live in a hovel.”

Mr Christian sucks his teeth loudly. He peels another note off the roll. “\$600.”

“Come onnnn, Dad.”

“Fine. Here’s \$800! And I don’t want to see you for a month.” Dell grabs the crumpled bills as she turns for the door.

“You won’t, Dad. I’ve got the perfect place to hide in.” Inside her mind, she hears Zilvara giggling.

“Just, just call me when you get there, ok? Let me know you’re ok?”

“Sure, sure, Dad.” The door shuts behind her. She throws the bag over her shoulder. She flicks through the bills. “Easy.”

“That doesn’t count. You didn’t steal them.”

“Never said I would, Zil.” She pauses, twisting the last word, “I just said I’d get it. Hey...” her voice fades away.

“That’s better. Now, be quiet, understand.”

“Be quiet?! I can’t talk, how can I be anything other than quiet?!!”

“I meant afterward, dopey.”

“After what? What are you going to do?”

Zilvara slips into the ladies’ and puts down the bag.

“What are you doing?” Zilvara reaches up to her face. *“What are you doing? Don’t!!!”* Zilvara pulls away her face, holding the Dell mask in her hand, as she stands in the cubicle.

“Gotcha. You know, I bet you’d flush really easily.”

“Don’t make threats you can’t carry out. You know Faustus won’t be happy if you...”

“Oh, I bet he could track you down. I mean, you’d be a bit messy, but I’m sure he could find you.”

“Eeeewwwww. You’re sick.”

“I would be. Now be quiet.” She carefully zips open the bag and pushes Dell’s face inside, slowly

struggling to zip it up. “And stay quiet. I’m sure Paul will put you back together when we get back to the van.” She shoulders the bag, hearing a muffled yelp from inside, “Well, almost sure.” She walks back to the van, swinging the bag from side to side, smiling at the yelps this causes.

“How’d it go?”

“Oh, great. We got \$750 off him.”

“And the bag?”

“Dell insisted. It’s just some of her personal effects.” The bag mumbles something, “And Dell.”

Paul rolls his eyes. “Fine. I hope you didn’t traumatise her too badly. Give.”

“Ohhh. Do I have to?” Zilvara pouts.

“Yes. You have to.” He takes the bag and unzips it. He pulls out the mask.

“I am soooo going to get you for that.”

“Maybe later.” He walks into the magic room, stepping through the wall and places Dell’s mask into the cabinet door before swinging it closed.

Dell sighs in relief as she pulls her face back and steps out. “Will every day be like this?”



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