

The Assignment

I fiddle with the small piece of paper that holds my call number, rolling it and unrolling it and rolling it back up again. I have no idea what's going to happen once these numbers thunder over the intercom.

There's a clown on my left. He's holding a deflated balloon animal. It used to be a dog, I think. On my right, there's a sleeping ventriloquist with a one-armed dummy. The dummy turns its head to look at me.

“What are you looking at, lady?”

Its owner is still out cold.

I have no idea who's throwing that voice.

“Uhhh...”

“One thousand three hundred forty-seven,” booms from the speakers. I look down at my curled slip: 1349.

Suddenly, the double doors swing open. A mime comes through, his hands bound behind his back in invisible cuffs. A half sheet of cardstock slips out of his hand as he walks past me. I reach down to pick it up.

ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Make small talk with coworkers at the water cooler.

For someone who spent his whole life not talking, that sounds like absolute torture.

I look up just in time to see the mime pushed through the big sliding doors that lead to nowhere good. Oh boy. This does not look promising.

The one-armed dummy must smell my fear because he's just sitting there, shaking his head and laughing.

"You don't know where we are, do you?" he asks in his stupid little high-pitched voice.

"Uh, can't say that I do. I am definitely not a fan though." With a flick of my wrist, I'm waving a fan in front of my face.

"Impressive," he says, saluting me with the one arm he does have.

"Says the talking doll, haha," I retort, mostly hoping it will inspire the owner to open his eyes and admit this is all a big joke.

He doesn't, for the record.

"I am not a doll, thank you very much." He turns away from me, fake nostrils flaring.

"My bad. So, where exactly are we, Mr. Not-a-Doll?"

"I don't think you're ready for me to answer that question."

The speakers fizzle back to life.

"Mil trescientos cuarenta y ocho."

This time, a sweet-looking old lady stands up and pushes her little push-cart towards the double doors. On the way, she's handing out free churros to anyone who will take them.

"I bet they're poisoned," says the dummy, shaking his head once more. "No, thank you. Watching my figure anyway." He laughs, rubbing his non-existent stomach.

I look down at my number again. My Spanish is pretty rusty, but I'm almost positive I'm going to be called next.

"What's your number, lady?" This little dude is starting to get on my nerves.

I show him my slip.

His wooden brown eyes go wide.

“You’re next. You poor soul. Not sure you’re going to trick yourself out of this one,” he says with a nod toward the briefcase at my side.

“Honestly, I’m still not sure why I’m here, wherever it is we are, exactly.”

“You know. Everyone here always knows what they did to get here. You’re just still in the denial stage. Give it some time. You’ll reach the acceptance stage soon enough.”

“How do you know so much anyway?”

He reaches over and slides a half sheet of paper out of his owner’s jacket pocket. He hands it to me.

ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Entertain the people in the waiting room.

“As you can see, my owner, Jeff, is currently in the ‘I don’t give a shit’ stage.”

The intercom crackles: “One thousand three hundred forty-nine.”

I hold my breath. Squeeze my eyes tight and make wishes to disappear. Abracadabra. Abracadabra. Abracadabra. Nothing works. The dummy’s right, my magic is no good here.

I wrap my fingers around the handle on my briefcase and force myself up out of the chair. I make my way over to the double doors.

A short man on tall stilts opens the large doors for me. They open into a short hallway. At the end of the hallway is a normal-sized door with “Assignment Room” posted above it.

I continue my pity party parade down the hallway, cursing myself for stealing all that money from my unsuspecting magic clients. I didn’t have a choice. The cancer was spreading, and believe it or not, street magicians don’t get medical insurance.

The door knob feels warm in my hand. I'm suddenly reminded of my manners and knock on the door first, before opening it.

No answer.

I turn the knob. The room is dark, except for a soft glow, emanating from a machine against the far wall. I step in and look around. There's just the machine. No judge. No panel. No chance for human empathy or redemption.

At about eye level, there's a keypad with scribbled instructions to type one's call number, followed by the pound key. I type 1-3-4-9-# and wait.

The machine whirs and rumbles and shakes.

It beeps, and then a half sheet pops into a tray at the bottom.

I fill my lungs with the room's stale air, wondering if it will be my last opportunity to do so. I hold it in for fifteen seconds, and then release it. I grab my half sheet, flip it over, and read:

ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Shuffle a deck of cards that always puts itself back in order.

I let out a sigh of relief. I suppose there are worse things to do for an eternity in hell.