

Behind Door Four

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Groggily, Marcus came to the realization that his eyes were closed and someone was thumping him on the forehead with their finger. Opening his eyes he saw a thin man with dark hair leaning in the driver's side window of his car, grinning like someone five miles past crazy.

"Who the hell are you?"

"That's the first question you can come up with?" The man asked, and pulled his body back out of the car. "Look around Marcus. See anything interesting?"

Marcus glanced around. He'd just picked up his friend Erick after a date gone wrong, and Erick was still in the passenger seat. Only he wasn't moving at all; his eyes were frozen open. Looking out the windshield Marcus noticed that his car was in the middle of the road, but not moving. Nor were any of the cars coming the other direction on the freeway.

"What the hell?"

"You think that's neat? Check this shit out!" The lunatic outside the car said, and yanked open the driver's door. Marcus looked out and saw that the ground was further away than it should have been. Further inspection revealed that the two wheels on that side were raised slightly off the ground. "See? Isn't that neat? Step on out of the car my boy, we have a few things we need to discuss."

*Sure, why not?* Marcus thought, unbuckled his seat belt and stepped out

of the car. Whatever the hell was going on, there wasn't much he could do about it. *Better just take a page out of Erick's book and go with the flow, whatever it might be.*

"Now, I know your name, but you don't know mine, isn't that true? What do you think my name might be?"

"Based on the world's bumper sticker population, I'd guess Jesus or Satan," Marcus said.

"You do get witty when you've been drinking, don't you? Yes, I've been called both of those things, and more. Minerva. Hades. Nyarlathotep was one of my particular favorites. But you, you should just call me Death. Because that's what we're here to talk about tonight. Do you realize just how stupid you are? What were you doing? I'll give you a hint. Before I found you, you were completely fucking drunk."

*I remember having a few, but I certainly don't feel drunk...*

"No, of course you don't feel drunk," Death interrupted Marcus' thoughts. "One of the benefits of being as close to omnipotent as you're likely to be able to understand is that I can sober you up a lot quicker than coffee. You also passed out at the wheel. Complete lights out. Do you know how long I was thumping you on the head?"

*Long enough?* Marcus thought, but wasn't sure if he wanted to keep being a smart ass to a guy who could freeze time, read his mind, and called himself death. Instead he just said "No."

"Thirty seconds. I could have done a lot worse to wake you up, but what can I say, I'm having a good night." Death walked closer to Marcus and took a

seat on the hood of the brown Camry which was still mysteriously half hanging in mid air. Inside the car Erick continued to stare blankly into space, completely oblivious to the fact that his best friend was now going through a situation even weirder than the date Marcus had just rescued him from. Swinging his legs back and forth like a little kid, Death plowed on. "I saw you were less than a second away from flipping this car ass over teakettle, double-checked my list, and decided to step in. It just seemed wasteful."

"Wasteful?"

"Oh yes. You've got big things coming up Marcus. Big things. I'm here to offer you a deal."

*Oh, this is pleasant. A deal with the devil. Be careful what you wish for. How many other Goosebumps cliches can we crank out tonight? Maybe the deal is going to be that I have to carry around a camera that takes pictures of the future and is infested with a gremlin that likes to eat Monster Blood.*

"Maybe," Death said, reading Marcus' thoughts again. "But I'm not really in that kind of mood."

"So what, then?" Marcus asked.

"I've checked my calendar Marcus, and you're going to be in some big places soon. You've got a chance to do some great things! Now, being called Death and all, you might naturally assume that I'm just a plain old fashioned asshole, but I like to think I stand up for the little guy now and then. So, I'm here to offer you a choice. Several choices, actually."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Of course not! You're an idiot! But I'll explain. You see, Marcus, you're

going to die. Perhaps soon. However,” Death reached into one of his pockets and flipped out something that looked like a cross between a cellphone and a notepad. “it looks like there are three nice chances coming up for you to die in a slightly more poetic way than crushing yourself into a pile of gore while driving drunk. Hell, I’ll even be generous and toss in a fourth choice. Sound good?”

“Are you saying I’m going to die soon regardless?”

“Well, yes.”

“This doesn’t sound like much of a deal then,” Marcus said.

“Would you prefer I just put you back in the car, then? It’s no skin off my back. I think Erick might have a thing or two he’d like to say about it, but he’s not the one I’m interested in. The worst he’s going to get out of the accident is a broken arm anyway. I have it on good authority that he’s even going to use the cast to pick up women.”

“And these other options, I get to live longer? Will they be painful?”

“Maybe! But that gets into the deal. Would you like to hear it?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not particularly.”

“Then lay it on me,” Marcus said.

Looking down at his cellphone Death started to rub his finger on the screen as if making notes. “Okay, so, here we go. I will tell you your four choices of replacement deaths. You will pick one, and obviously only one, of the choices as the time you would rather die than now. Here’s the rub: it wouldn’t be fair to let you remember all of this, would it? Then you’d just spend all of your time trying to avoid the inevitable, and that’s no fun for anyone. I’m afraid to say that

anything in this conversation after you agree to hear the choices, you won't remember. You *will* remember the entirety of our little chat other than that, though. And you'll remember to die right when you're supposed to. I'll make sure of that.”

“And then what happens now?”

“Once you make your choice I put you back in your car, awake and sober, and set it back on solid ground. You drive off into the horizon to die another day, quite literally. Would you like to hear your choices?”

Looking at the empty air between his Camry and the ground, Marcus turned to the crazy looking man who was still kicking his legs through the air like a four year old on the playground. “Tell me the choices,” he said.

And just like that Marcus was back in control of the car, driving between the two lanes of the highway but more or less in control, just like nothing had ever happened. Erick was whistling some jaunty little tune from the passenger seat, the radio was on, and the entire world seemed to be in motion.

“Where to now? Anything exciting going on tonight?” Erick asked a few seconds later.

“Not that I can remember,” Marcus said.

One of the benefits of being infamous for partying from Friday to Sunday without sleep every weekend is that the chemicals imbibed tend to give the brain a ready excuse for almost anything. In the days and weeks following his experience the car Marcus drank, went to work, drank, went to work, drank some more, drank something else, inhaled a few interesting things, and then made love

to yet more liquor bottles. None of this was particularly out of the ordinary.

Marcus' mind turned to the creepy little bastard who called himself Death more than a few times, but the incident had taken on a dreamy quality that allowed it to be pushed aside as simply the result of falling asleep at the wheel and snapping awake before anything bad had happened. Almost like a fever dream. The average mix of chemicals occupying the campsites in Marcus' cerebral cortex made that not at all an unfamiliar sensation. Sometimes, usually while playing Flash games on the internet at the office, pretending to work, the delusional barriers would get thinner, but it was nothing a mind skilled at self-delusion couldn't handle in a heartbeat.

Three weeks after the incident even that stopped happening, and life had returned to nothing more than routine. Every weekday morning, rain or shine, hangover or just plain still drunk, Marcus crawled out of bed at the crack of midmorning, skipped showering and shrugged on clothes, weirdly he often liked to wash and iron clothes while stoned, and made his way to the accounting office where he worked. It was a sedate drive down twenty miles of rural interstate to a building in the middle of nowhere. A one grocery store town. No Wal-Mart. Hardly any traffic, and what there was consisted of old people annoyed at having to share their road with anyone.

On the Friday of the third week after saving Erick from The Crazy and apparently making a deal with Death, Marcus woke up early and annoyingly sober. Deciding it wasn't worth trying to go back to sleep, he threw on a white dress shirt and a pair of jeans, slipped on some flip flops, and started on his way.

He was already halfway to work when Marcus saw something off on the

interstate in front of him. At first it looked like a stalled car. He was approaching it too fast for it to still be moving. And then he realized he was approaching it *too fast*. Someone in a black SUV was driving the wrong way down the freeway, and by the time Marcus realized what was going on it was almost too late. He swerved over onto the shoulder at 70 miles per hour, not even thinking to brake, and the guy in the SUV flew past at at least 90, honking his horn the whole time.

Then the world slowed down. Marcus' stomach lurched like he was on an amusement park free fall ride until the car, and the world outside it, slowed to a crawl.

“You do have the worst luck driving, don't you?” A familiar voice said from the passenger seat.

“Oh holy shit. Oh goddamn.”

“Do you remember?”

*Do I remember? Remember what?* Marcus asked himself, and nerved himself up enough to look at the other side of the car. Sitting there, dressed in a black suit, was the same gaunt man with the crazy grin and dead eyes he remembered. *Or am I baked out of my mind again?*

“You weren't high *the first time*, you idiot,” Death said. “Honestly, most people put up more of a fight the first time they meet me. Am I really going to have to go through the whole 'no, it can't be true!' bit with you the second go round? Because, and I'll be honest, it may be novel to you, but I've heard it all before, and I'm just bored with it. Now then, do you remember?”

“Remember what?” Marcus asked, out loud this time. But Death didn't even have to answer, instead...

“Choice number one!”

“Lay it on me,” Marcus said, for the second time.

“A few weeks from now, three or four, you're going to be driving to work one morning. If you so choose, you can die in a terrible, fiery accident. You won't leave a pretty corpse, oh no, but you'll make the news and everything. And not just the local news! How does that sound?”

“Horrible.”

“What if I told you that if you choose this death, you'll be saving a whole busload of people? No one important, of course. I have it on good authority that only one of the people on the bus is employed, and the rest spend most of their days playing video games and overeating. Basically a bunch of good-for-nothings. But, hey, they're people. What do you say?”

“Do I have to choose now, or can I wait until I hear the other options?”

“Oh, you can wait, of course,” Death said.

“Then go on.”

“I knew you'd remember! Of course, I may have had a hand in that.”

“A bus full of people...” Marcus said, back in the car. “And I said no.”

“Yeah, but they're a bunch of degenerates. Hey, would you like to see it happen?” Death sat bolt upright in the passenger seat and clapped his hands twice. “Let's go see!”

“Christ, no,” Marcus said. “Just let me get out of here.” The car lurked beneath him and starting to lift in the air. Death was apparently going to fly the

whole Camry to the site of the bus accident to get a good view. “I said no!”

A hand grabbed his face and yanked Marcus' head around to look at the passenger side of the car. Death was close enough that his nose was nearly touching Marcus'. Where there had been normal eyes seconds before there were now just too dark pits, filled with nothing, not even gore. “Did I ask your opinion? Did I say you had a choice? This is my fucking show, and you're going to like it. I've been nice to you, now you get to be nice to me. Sit down and shut up,” Death spat, and then threw Marcus' head backwards so hard it bounced off the glass of the driver's side window. “Check this shit out!”

The Camry was hovering about twenty feet in the air, but tilted forward so that the occupants could get a good view. Directly in front of the car Marcus could see the black Explorer that had nearly run over him. And directly in front of it, frozen in time two feet from collision, was a bright yellow Blue Bird school bus. The flying car was close enough that the look of dawning, final, fatal realization on the driver of the Explorer's face was plainly visible. Inside the bus Marcus could see the driver, a young man probably doing this as a part time job, probably his own age, yanking hard on the wheel of the bus while screaming. The kids were screaming too. Probably three dozen of them. All screaming, all terrified. All about to die.

“Oh god, no.”

“Too late now, I'm afraid. You made your choice.”

“You didn't say it was a school bus!”

“I told you that it was full of unemployed geeks,” Death said, “and it is. You think any of them work? I didn't think so.”

“Can I change my choice?”

“Too late for that now, I'm afraid. Besides, you don't even know what your other choices were. Maybe this was the least offensive one. I mean, really, you *did* say no the last time I gave you the choice.”

“You're a fucking bastard, you know that?”

“Nah, I'm just misunderstood,” Death said. “Now, on with the show!”

He clapped his hands twice more and the world instantly jumped back into motion. The SUV plowed into the front of the bus. The bus, turning as hard as it could, flipped over and started to roll. There were broken windows and no seat belts. Marcus saw children barely old enough to be going to school thrown tens of feet through the air to land on the pavement. And the blood, oh the blood. Then the metal sounds stopped, the movement stopped, and sadly, so did the screaming. The world was a silent.

A second later the Camry was sitting on the shoulder a half a mile further up the road and Death was gone. In his rear view mirror Marcus could see the shape of the bus, but he didn't go back. He put his car into drive and floored it to the first exit, pulled off into the first gas station, opened his door, and threw up until it was just dry heaves. No amount of drinking was going to dull what he had just seen, or the fact that he had, to some degree, made it happen.

*God, what are the other three?* He thought, watching cops fly by the gas station and already hearing news helicopters. *What the fuck are the other three?*

Ten days later.

“Can you come in today and get your stuff?”

“Yeah, I suppose I can stop by,” Marcus mumbled into the phone. In the ten days since the bus accident he hadn't left the apartment or talked to anyone. Getting fired was a logical consequence of that sort of action, he supposed. *I'm not eating much either. Wouldn't that be a funny choice for number two? Choice number two: starve to death just for the fuck of it all because you're pissed off at yourself! Yeah, that's just what I'd choose.*

“...turn in your...”

“Wait, what did you say?”

“I said you'd have to turn in your ID card and password set, too.” His boss said from the phone. “Are you okay Marcus?”

“Yeah.” He said it because he knew there would be no more questions. Both of them knew he wasn't okay, but both also knew that guys don't question when another man says he's okay. It's against the rules. “I'll leave in a few minutes. See you in half an hour.” He hung up the phone without saying goodbye.

He hadn't bathed or shaved in ten days either, but Marcus allowed himself the small luxury of pretending the people in the cubicles around his desk didn't notice. His boss stopped by for all of thirty seconds to collect what he needed and then left, either in a hurry because of the smell or the awkwardness of seeing someone in this condition. Marcus didn't really care which. Seeing a few dozen kids die did wonders for developing your sociological apathy.

As he was placing a USB rocket launcher, one of his favorite cube toys, into a box along with his personal laptop and a few pictures of his family, the fire alarm went off with a piercing, banal scream. Marcus looked up and saw everyone else around him doing the same thing. There was no smoke, no acrid

smell of sparking electronics and ozone, not even the wonderful stench of someone burning popcorn in the break room. Nothing. Yet, the sound was causing his stomach to turn in knots.

*Fire alarm. Happens everyday, everywhere. There have been three in this building since you've worked here. You went through hundreds in school. Lighten the fuck up.*

*But, how many of those happened when you know you're supposed to die in a few weeks?* A second voice spat back in Marcus' head.

The noise continued. There was no movement from the cubicles. Most of the people had already gone back to work.

*Nothing, just like I said. Now let me get out of here in peace and I'll buy you a sandwich, then we can get back to...*

The sound that interrupted this thought was like the popping of grease on an oven, only a thousand times louder. Marcus' ears started ringing immediately. The sprinkler over his head burst into life along with all the others in the room, drenching everything almost immediately. Now his former coworkers took notice. A few shrieked with the popping sound, most simply jumped and ran for the nearest door, realizing that this fire alarm was probably serious. Marcus barely had time to think, *oh shit*, before his fight or flight reflex kicked in and he, too, barreled for the hallway to the outside exit.

In the hall there was smoke. The office was small and underpopulated, but there were still enough people trying to leave at once, and in a panic, that Marcus felt crushed by bodies before finally being forced out into daylight by the pressure of the mob behind him. As soon as his feet hit the tarmac of the parking lot he

looked back over his shoulder at the building and saw that the dark smoke that filled the hallway was rising in a small plume, but there were no flames. In fact, it looked like the smoke was already clearing out.

Tap, tap tap, tap.

*What the hell is that*, Marcus thought. A clicking noise, plastic on plastic, almost supernaturally loud, rose above the noise of the crowd of people. No one else seemed to notice.

Tap tap.

Tap.

There he was, leaning against a tree in one the dividers of the parking lot, tapping away at the device in his hand with a stylus, grinning like a mad bastard. Death saw him looking and waived. "Don't mind me, I have solitaire on here," he said.

"What just happened?" Marcus asked, knowing there was no sense in asking why he was here, since that was pretty obvious. There was a sharp burning pain at the back of his eyes and a ton of confused memories released themselves in a torrent as answer.

"Choice number two is a bit easier. A plain death, really. There's going to be a fire, and in the rush to escape you're going to pause for a second and get knocked down by the people behind you. They'll step on you and such, bad scene. Basically you'll be bludgeoned to death by feet and then suffocated," Death said.

"What happens if I don't pick this one?"

"A few other people die instead. Two, maybe three. Not a whole lot."

“Go on.”

“Nope, didn't pick this one either!” Death said, crossing the parking lot and clapping Marcus on the shoulder. “Don't worry, I said this one was pretty unimportant. It looks like you agreed with me, in the end. Do you want to see who died instead?”

The urge to vomit was already returning. “Do I have a choice?” Marcus asked.

“Not at all. It's good you learn so quickly. Come, let's rewind a bit so we can watch this properly.” Death snapped crossed his arms and blinked and everyone else in the parking lot was yanked back into the building in a split second. “Follow me! And don't worry, no one can see us. They'll pass right through us, actually.”

They walked back inside, Marcus' body responding to commands that his brain wasn't actually giving. When they reached the hallway he had just forced his way through a few minutes earlier Marcus could see that Death had stopped time again, this time just seconds before the sprinklers had gone off and the loud pop had happened. They were in front of the IT room, which was the size of a bedroom and stuffed with servers and working space for three techs, all of whom were inside.

“Do you know these guys, by any chance?” Death asked.

Marcus didn't answer. Couldn't answer. He already knew what was going to happen.

“Cat got your tongue? I guess I'll just ask your brain myself. Ah, yes, there

we are. The skinny black kid in the corner, he's new and you don't know his name. Just got married though. Pretty wife, little asian girl. What will they think of next? The chubby short white guy, he's Aaron. You ate a piece of his cake last month when he knocked up his wife. He's been here, oh, you think about two or three years. That kid with the purple and blue emo haircut up front though, you know him pretty well. Dustin, is it? He was at a party of yours earlier this year. Got real drunk. Felt up a few girls, ended up getting slapped by the first few before the fourth or fifth or whatever gave him a hand job in the bathroom of your apartment. You walked in on him and never invited him to a party after that. I think you told him that's what the cars in the parking lot were for. Your memory's not that good, though. Oh, and the girl came back the next way, because you're just sexist like that and she was hot. Any other thoughts?"

Still Marcus said nothing. He tried to move, tried to look away, but his body wasn't listening to his brain's commands at all. They were being intercepted on their way downstream, probably.

"Let's get this show rolling, then!" Death said. "Now, I don't want you to miss anything, so I'm going to run this half speed. It'll look a little weird, but you'll get more out of it." With that he snapped the fingers of both his hands with a dry crack and the world slowly spun back into a methodical sort of motion.

There was smoke rising from the power supply of one of the servers. I had triggered the fire alarm through the smoke detector, but not the heat alarm. Amazingly the server was still running and the IT guys were trying to shut it down safely. Then there was the huge pop, thanks to Death slowing down the world Marcus heard it this as a deep explosion worthy of the best THX theatre,

and a jet of flame shot out of the back of the case and all the screens connected to it went black. The flames did not subside. Some of the wiring must have caught, and it was hot enough that Marcus could already see the cabling behind the case starting to melt.

The heat sensors triggered. Outside of the IT room the sprinklers turned on and started to soak everyone and everything in the building. Inside the room where the three men had already started toward the door to get out, the Halon system went off.

And now Marcus really *did* understand exactly what was about to happen. Aaron reached the door first and yanked on it but it didn't budge. For some inexplicable reason the lock to the server room was external, and as a joke the people in the office would sometimes flip it as they walked by, trapping the techs inside to pound on the door until someone took pity on them and opened the door.

The lock was flipped now.

The fire suppression system filled the room with Halon, replacing all the oxygen and putting out the fires. The techs were already holding their breath and pounding on the door, trying to get someone to open it. Marcus saw himself run by, at this speed it was more of a quick walk, completely oblivious in his haste to the people dying less than a foot from his head. The fire alarm's shrill screaming covered the sound of their fists against the glass too well. No one even glanced.

The world paused completely again. No one moved.

“Would you like to see what would have happened if you'd chosen this as your dying day, Marcus? It's only a little interesting,” Death said.

Without waiting for an answer the people in the hallway rewound, and Marcus watched them walk by again, only this time he *did* notice the people beating on the door. His theoretical self flipped the lock and the people in the room ripped the door open immediately. The black kid and Dustin skirted past him as quickly as possible, but the fat guy was completely panicked and slammed into the other Marcus full force, knocking him off balance and straight to the floor. The people filing to get out stepped over and on him on their way past. It wasn't even a real fire, a true conflagration, and yet he was tramped anyway.

The world reset in an instant and the three IT doomed men were back in their little room. Out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw himself, his real past self, exit the building, still walking at half speed.

Everyone was outside in the parking lot, but the people in the IT room were still alive. In slow motion Marcus watched them literally claw for air. Watched them suffocate. When they moved no more Death still didn't let his body go. For almost a minute after the last of them, Dustin, had stopped moving Marcus still had to stand in that hallway, looking in the little window in the door at the fresh corpses on the floor.

And then it was over, and he was back outside in the parking lot at the exact instant he left. The people around him watched the smoke clear, but Marcus just crawled in the back seat of his car and curled up. He'd had all he could take. By the time the fire truck screamed into the parking lot he was asleep, his brain shutting itself off in self defense. He woke up for a few seconds to the sounds of people crying over what they now knew had just happened but just as quickly drifted off again. It was dark before he finally made his way home.

Her name was Nikki Franklin, and it was probably her worst attribute.

The problem with meeting someone in any sort of desperate situation is that the brain latches on to them immediately. Flaws are erased entirely. They can, within reason, do no wrong. All that matters is that they're there.

He'd always had something of a chick habit, although certainly not up to the standards of the three to four new girls per week of his best friend Erick, but Marcus had given them up with everything else after the bus accident. After watching his coworkers suffocate in front of him, he initially retreated even further. It was three weeks before he remembered to shower. The first two days he spent entirely in bed.

There were no nightmares. He didn't see the faces of the dead and dying when he slept, and he didn't wake up in the middle of the night jumping at shadows, thinking Death was in the room with him, tapping away on his PDA of doom. Rather than any creeping sense of terrible horror, the world simply went grey. Marcus was smart enough to realize that he wasn't afraid; he was depressed.

He tried to convince himself that there was nothing to be done about it anyway. The best thing to do would be to live life, like normal, and enjoy every last second of it before the lunatic who liked to do Barbara Eden impressions showed up again. But it was one thing to know it and another to do it. It wasn't even mind over matter; it was mind over mind.

Still, time has a way of curing all wounds, and boredom is more powerful than even fear and depression. By the fourth week the immediacy of the third choice had faded. How soon was soon, anyway? The fire at work was almost a

month gone. What if Death's idea of soon was that he was doing to die within the next year? The next two years? Would he really mope around his apartment that whole time?

The need to buy groceries so that he could at least keep eating drug Marcus out of the apartment. And once he was outside, he *did* get jumpy. Every strange noise made him glance around, looking for a guy playing solitaire too loudly. He twitched at every car that changed lanes on the interstate. But nothing happened. No freezers exploded while he was pulling out a month's supply of frozen pizza. No ceilings collapsed. No gas mains exploded. No bridges collapsed. There wasn't even a thunderstorm.

After the first trip out, things kept getting a little bit easier. After a month a half his friends successfully cojoked Marcus into coming to a poker game, and the week after that he went to his first party. He didn't drink anything, just the thought made his stomach turn sour, and he got uneasy whenever the room got too crowded and he couldn't see everyone in it, but he survived. What's more, he had fun. And the week after that, he went out again, and met Nikki.

He'd been through girls before. By his own count, Marcus had had twenty serious girlfriends in his four years of college. But this one was different, just slightly. And the second he agreed to go out on an actual date with her, Marcus could feel himself making a mistake. He was latching on to her for god knows what, and he could feel it. What's more, he knew she was doing the same thing. The slightly desperate type. The type that just wants someone to be kind to them and not leave them. The kind of girl he used to take advantage of all the time. Young, naïve. But for now it was exactly what he wanted, because he wanted

someone who wouldn't leave *him*.

*It's stupid, stupid stupid stupid FUCKING STUPID*, he thought after their fourth date, which happened less than a week after their first. *You're falling in love with a girl now? You're a dead man walking. Worse, she's a liability.* It all made sense, but it all meant nothing. He was desperate, in so many ways.

Two weeks after meeting her Marcus took Nikki on a trip to the mountains. There was no real reason behind it, other than it felt good to put some geographic distance between him and his demons, and it was good to be with her. A whole four days of doing absolutely nothing, something he'd become quite proficient at, but doing it with her.

The first two days were beautiful. Glorious. Happy. And the third was the same, right up until they were getting ready for bed. Nikki was reading a book on the balcony and Marcus was in the bathroom cleaning up when a pressure started to build up behind his eyes, like a terrible headache, coming on quickly. It felt like his head was bulging. He couldn't think straight. And then...

“Third choice,” Death said. “This one's pretty easy as well. Just one person is going to die this time. Now, I'll warn you, it's someone you know, but just an acquaintance. You meet them about two weeks before it happens. Your little buddy in the passenger seat is safe.”

“And how would I die?” Marcus asked.

But that was it. He couldn't remember. The memory stopped there.

His stomach lurched. The world felt like a freight elevator reaching its

stop. He opened his eyes and looked in the mirror and was surprised to see he wasn't the only one in the room anymore.

“What did I say? What did *you* say? Tell me!” The panic in his voice was raw, he wasn't even trying to hide it.

Death grinned. “If I asked you that now, would it matter? Would you die to save your new little lady friend?”

“Yes,” Marcus said, not even thinking. *Why?* Some part of him thought, obsessed with self preservation. *It's been two weeks buddy, you can't love her that much.*

*Shut the fuck up.*

*Maybe you just don't want to see her die?* A third voice suggested.

*Could be.* A fourth spoke.

*Can I play too?* This one was alien.

“Get the hell out of my head.”

“But it's so fun in there!”

“Why didn't you let me remember the whole thing?”

“Where's the fun in that?” Death asked. “But, come now Marcus, I promised you that *you'd* remember to die. Surely you can work that much out, yes?”

“You fucking bastard!” Marcus tried to jump at the scrawny, grinning little fuck next to him in the bathroom, his hysteria had progressed to a kind of frantic rage, but he couldn't move. The signals from his brain to his muscles had been interrupted again.

For a second the grin was gone and Marcus saw something entirely

different standing in front of him. Death's eyes were gone, and the dark empty sockets were back. What's more, he had somehow grown to tower over Marcus, and now stood at least eight feet tall. Then the grinning, crazy face was back, just like it had never been gone. "Come come, I didn't *make* you choose anything. I left it all up to you."

"You didn't tell me the truth!"

"You didn't tell me that people's value to you increased arbitrarily based on age or whether or not you've had sex with them. Really, how was I supposed to know?"

"Fuck you," Marcus said, unable to think of anything else.

"Maybe next time," Death said. "For now we have business. Let's mosey on in to the other room shall we?" He walked out the bathroom, but Marcus didn't follow. Couldn't follow, in fact, since his muscles were still frozen. After a second or two Death poked his head back in the door. "Oh, right, the me-stopping-you-from-moving-so-you-couldn't-waste-your-time-hitting-me thing. Here, I'll handle that."

Death grabbed Marcus by his right bicep and picked him up off the ground, flipped him horizontal, and carried him into the other room using the arm as a handle. Even suspended in the air Marcus' limbs couldn't move. The pressure on his shoulder from having all of his weight supported by one arm in an impossibly awkward position was intense, and he nearly passed out from the pain in the thirty seconds or so it took Death to move him into the center of the room and put him back down on his feet.

Nikki was standing on the balcony, leaning over the railing looking at

something below. Her book sat open on one of the plastic lounge chairs. She must have seen or heard something right before time stopped.

“Why can't you take me instead?” Marcus asked.

“Because you used your only mulligan when I got you out of flipping your car.”

Death left Marcus standing in the middle of the room and stepped onto the balcony. “Aaaaand...time in!” He yelled, and in one smooth motion he kicked Nikki dead between the shoulder blades just as time accelerated back to normal. The kick was hard enough to snap bones; Marcus heard something in her back give way as she went over the railing. But she could still scream on the way down. All the way down.

Marcus screamed too, but he wasn't sure if it was in his head or out loud. He strained every single muscle as hard as he could, hard to rip some of them even though he still couldn't move an inch. “MOTHERFUCKER! COCKSUCKER! I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!”

“Why so upset?”

“You said these were things that were going to happen anyway! Things I could stop! You didn't say you were going to fucking kill people just for the hell of it!”

Death laughed. It sounded like a bag full of glass, stone, and finger bones being shaken back and forth rapidly. “I don't remember saying anything of the sort. Killing people for the hell of it is sort of my job, you know. Besides, how do you know I wouldn't have kicked her fat ass off the balcony if you weren't here?”

“She didn't do anything!” Marcus screamed.

“Maybe you shouldn't have dated her then. Maybe you should have picked up a total crack whore for me to knock off. You'd feel better.”

*He's just fucking with you. He's been fucking with you all along*, one of the many voices reported.

“Why?” Marcus asked, knowing that Death had heard it from his thoughts anyway.

“Because you're an asshole,” Death said. “Now then, it might be a good idea to get out of here. Choice number four is coming up, and by process of elimination it's time for you to remember to actually die. Unless you think it involved prison in some way, I'd skedaddle. They're going to figure out someone kicked her over the ledge, and quite frankly, I was never here.”

With a twitch of his nose Death disappeared into thin air, and Marcus could move again.

“If you pick this one, you accidentally fall over a balcony,” Death said. “If you don't pick this one, your little friend goes over the edge and makes pretty splatter patterns instead. Not a good way to go, but it *is* quick. I'd keep that in mind.”

“What's the fourth choice.”

“Are you sure you don't want to pick one of the others? They're pretty good.”

“Didn't you say I could hear all the choices before making my decision?” Marcus asked.

“Yep.”

“Then I'd like to hear the last one.”

“Fair enough. Door number four is the simplest of all. You live the longest.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. The fourth option is the one that let's you live longer than any of the others. Nothing else to it. You pick it, you save no one. You just die alone, sometime after all the above events.”

“That's the one.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Marcus said.

The last memory came two days later. At first Marcus thought he was still sleeping, but when it was over he could feel the throbbing pain in his temples and knew that he was awake. When he opened his eyes he saw he wasn't in his bed, but lying on the floor in his living room for some inexplicable reason. The voices in his head were going wild.

*Why would I pick that? Was I ever that bad a person? Really?*

*Yes.*

*No, no I wasn't. I was an asshole, sure, but...*

*These aren't our memories.*

*What?*

*They're not ours. We can't trust them.*

*But I remember...*

*I can't believe I made that choice.*

*Oh god I remember. I remembered. That means I'm about to...*

“Already have, I'm afraid,” a familiar voice said from behind him.

Marcus turned around and there he was, as always. “What do you mean?”

“You're dead, Marcus. It's over. I'm here to collect.”

“But that can't be.”

Death pointed toward the bedroom. “Go check for yourself,” he said.

He did. Marcus opened the bedroom door, looked inside, and saw himself.

What was left of it.

“Shotgun to the face. Nasty way to go,” Death whispered in his ear. “Did you enjoy your last two days?”

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