

KING LEAR'S DILEMMA

John Boston

Jen McKee was young, attractive, and tired of being poor. She didn't care what she did for a living, as long as it paid well. She had done the social media thing, the 9 to 5 thing, and even tried just not working at all. At the end of the day, she realized she needed money, just not the stress and headaches that go along with getting the money. She was broke and had to get back on her feet. She had been in the city for almost two years now and was finally beginning to get established when Covid hit. She was out of work for nearly six months. The eviction moratorium had spared her and her roommate from being out in the streets, but even in this Midwestern city, the cost of living was not cheap. She had bills to pay. Her roommate suggested that she sign up with the temp agency. It was a last resort. Her options were few and far between.

"So, what am I going to do?" she asked.

"Just be eye candy. That's what most men want." her roommate replied.

"You can make a living at that?"

"Sure.....as long as you're ok with that. I guess it depends on how far you're willing to go?"

"My bank account is almost zero. I guess I'm going to have to go pretty far." Jen replied.

Two weeks later, Jen was hired by the temp agency. Everything was done over her phone from text messages. One week she could be working in a lawyer's office, the next week, she could be working someplace else. Jen did work for a while as a paralegal and was very computer savvy. Most of all, she was drop-dead gorgeous and loved to flirt. She was the type of secretary that gave wives nightmares.

She was to report on Monday morning to a large office complex downtown. Her text message told her to report to Amanda at reception. Jen put on her best outfit. Not too revealing, not too much either. She wanted to look professional, but still let everyone know she was down for a good time after they clocked out for the day. She put her hair in a bun and drove downtown. She parked in the garage and walked into the building. It was quiet. Nice, but nothing extravagant. She didn't even know what the company did. Not that it mattered. She liked the idea of just being a temp. No permanent connections, no strings attached, but also, it meant she had a lot of learning to do very quickly. It allowed her to see the company and its people before she made a permanent commitment to them.

She found the receptionist's desk and walked over.

"Hi.....I'm Jen McKee. The agency sent me over. I'm supposed to find someone named Amanda?"

The receptionist just smiled and grabbed the phone. She pressed a button and spoke to someone for a minute.

"Okay. Take the elevator up to the third floor. Amanda's office is the first door on the right once you exit the elevator."

"Thanks," said Jen.

She took the elevator up to the third floor and found Amanda's office. Amanda nearly dropped what she was doing when she took a look at Jen. She knew the feeling. She got the same look from the men. Being a piece of eye candy is never easy. You just have to take what's thrown at you.

Lesbo much, Amanda? She thought to herself.

"Hi, I'm Jen," she said, extending out her hand.

Amanda shook her hand, almost caressing it.

"I'm Amanda. I run the office. Sorry, things are kind of chaotic here at the moment."

"Amanda, what is it you guys do here?"

"We're a brokerage firm."

"You mean like selling stocks?"

"Yes. At the moment, we're in kind of a crisis here."

"I thought the stock market was doing great," said Jen.

"It is. Our firm is not. We just had a major client cancel his account with us this morning. I'm not going to lie to you Jen, this is a very high-stress, pressure cooker type of environment here. It certainly isn't for everyone. If you can't tolerate people yelling and screaming all day, you might just want to pass on this one." said Amanda.

"Being homeless is pretty stressful too. Doesn't sound like it will be any worse than growing up in my dysfunctional household."

"Don't say I didn't warn you. Lunch is whenever you manage to get ten minutes to yourself. We start every morning at eight AM and leave at four. Don't be late. You will be the secretary for the entire floor. Whatever our brokers need, you give it to them. I hope you can type and use a computer. The last twat the agency sent over could barely count back change.

"Amanda, this isn't the normal type of environment for a temp agency. Last week, I worked at a towing company. Why do you guys use temps?"

"That's David's decision."

"Who's David?"

"David Lear. He owns this company. Lear Capital Investments. Do not ever go into his office unless you have prior authorization from me, is that understood?"

"Yeah sure, understood," said Jen.

Amanda showed her to her desk. Most of her time would be spent answering phone calls and directing them to agents.

"If you have any questions, just give me a call. I'm extension 232," said Amanda as she walked away. That was the extent of Jen's training. Clearly, Amanda didn't think she would last very long. Jen put on her headset and dove right in. Within an hour, she was directing calls to clients. Most of the clients were upset, angry, and nervous. She quickly realized that something had gone horribly wrong at this company. Everyone was acting like passengers on the Titanic as it was sinking.

Jen realized the reason she was here was to field calls from clients. The brokers and agents responsible for their money did not want their clients to have their cell numbers where they could be reached at any time. To say it was stressful would be an understatement. She had never seen people so angry and upset.

Jen could have had more fun in a cemetery than in this place.

For the next five hours, she did nothing but take calls and answer emails. She got one break, to use the bathroom, then back at it. She had no idea what she was doing, but *fake it till you make it* was the motto she lived by.

A few guys passed by her and smiled. One even introduced himself. Hans something or other. Cute, definitely bangable, but nothing top shelf. The big problem with being a temp is that once you get settled in and used to a place, you get yanked out and have to start all over. She was so busy answering the phone, she didn't even realize that someone was standing right in front of her. She looked up and a well-dressed middle-aged man was staring at her.

"Hi!" she said, sounding exasperated.

"Hi, I'm David. I can't find Amanda. I need these documents faxed over to the SEC right away, number is on the top page." he said and handed them to her.

Wait.....was that the David? The dude who runs this whole show?

Amanda found the fax machine and sent over the documents. A few men had leaned over to check her out. She smiled at all of them. She thought about playing dumb and asking one of them how to use a fax machine. At most of her previous employers, it would have gone off without a hitch, but this place was different. Everyone seemed so preoccupied with whatever the hell it was they were doing, they didn't even bother to ask. She sat down at her desk and her phone lit up. It was line 1.

"Hi, this is David. Did you send over those papers?"

"Sure did. Do you want the confirmation fax?" she asked.

"Yeah, may as well, bring it up to my office, please," he said and hung up.

She still did not know if it was the same guy who owned the company, but she figured if he has his own office and not just a cubicle, he must be high up on the food chain.....way high up.

She figured it was too late to inform Amanda. She would just have to take her chances and deal with the fallout later. After all, David had asked her to come up to his office.

She took the elevator up to the fourth floor. His office door was open. He could see a few people running to and fro all over the place. She knocked on the large door.

"Got the fax," she said, holding it up. She walked in and laid it down on his desk.

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"You wouldn't happen to have a spare fifty million dollars laying around, would you?"

"Don't even have a spare five dollars hanging around.....that's a very interesting painting you have there, David," she said looking up at the strange canvas above his desk.

"Oh that. My grandmother bought it years ago in Italy. It's kind of a family heirloom. It's called *Medusa's Crossing*. Do you like art?"

"I guess I like the strange and unusual. That painting is certainly strange and unusual."

David looked up from his desk. Jen was nervous but did her best not to let it show. She could tell David was intrigued by her.

"Here I thought you were just another pretty face," he said

"I'm happy to have disappointed you," she said, cracking a smile.

"You better get back downstairs before Amanda realizes you're gone," he said.

"Of course. Nice to have met you."

"You too. Don't be a stranger."

Yeah, we'll be banging soon, Mr. David She thought to herself as she left his office. A girl like Jen doesn't have time to waste in the minor leagues. She was aiming for the big leagues.

The next week was more controlled chaos at the office. The mood could only be described as *tense. Very tense*. She knew these types of companies were pressure cookers, but this was something else. Something was very wrong here. Everyone kept calling David *King Lear*. Jen was educated well enough to know it was a play by Shakespeare but failed to see how it tied into

this situation. Everyone was waiting for something called *King Lear's Predictions*. None of it made any sense to her. Her roommate Ivy had worked in the building about six months before she did. She figured it was time to be brought up to speed on what was happening behind the scenes in the building. She used what little money she had to buy some weed and lattes. Ivy had quite a thing for both of them. It didn't take too long for her to open up about what was going on in Lear Capital.

"Five years ago, David got some money from his grandmother after she died. I guess it was fifty thousand or something. Somehow, he manages to turn that fifty thousand into millions....like a lot of millions. Last year, his firm made over 100 million dollars for their clients, using David's picks. He always picks winners. I guess he was one of the top producing stockbrokers in the country." said Ivy between hits.

"So, why is everyone acting so weird in there? It's like a morgue," asked Jen, sipping her latte.

"Remember when Covid first hit and the markets were all melting down? Well, David put a bunch of put options on airline and cruise ship stocks. Didn't make any sense. Seemed like he was going to take a huge hit. Well, the company's he picked all got free loans and money from the government as part of their Covid rescue plan. The first thing they did was to buy back their own stock. All his picks had their stock price go up through the roof. David made 70 million on it. Nobody could believe it."

"Damn. Well, maybe he's just really smart," said Jen.

"Maybe.....or maybe it's something else. If you're around there long enough, you're bound to hear about it."

"What?"

"Insider trading. Somebody tipped off David before the loans went out. Somebody knew exactly who was going to get this money before the rest of us did. Not even the companies knew if they would get it or not. How the hell did David know?"

"How did he know?" asked Jen, taking a hit.

"Some people from the Securities and Exchange Commission showed up when I was temping there. There were FBI agents there as well. They thought somebody had tipped him off. They thought someone in the government had an account with David and they collaborated to use the information for financial gain. Apparently, that's a big no-no on Wall Street."

"So, what happened?"

"Nothing. They couldn't find anything to connect him to the loans. He told everybody he liked to bet against the tide. Some of his other picks were suspicious as well. He sold a bunch of stock in a shipping company three days before one of their oil tankers ran aground. He dumped stock in another company two days before their CEO was indicted for fraud. The list just keeps going on and on. I partied one night with one of the brokers in the firm. He told me everything that was

going on. Nobody can find anything on David. The FBI made him turn over all of his records and phone logs and they still couldn't find any dirt on him. I guess he was clean."

"Is that why everyone is acting so depressed around there?"

"Well. I heard something else from that guy I hooked up with. A few months ago, some of David's picks started to go south. He was picking losers. Just a few at first, but lately, it's been getting worse and worse. See, he used the money he made last year as collateral. He's spread pretty thin. A few more bad trades and the margin calls begin. The whole place could collapse in just a few days. Everyone who worked there was getting nervous when I left. I guess David isn't the genius everyone thought he was."

"Nature of the beast I guess. You can't win them all," said Jen.

"That's the problem Jen.....when you work in finance, you're expected to win them all.....all the time. The business is cutthroat as hell. It chews up people and spits them out in no time."

"Here I am, right in the middle of it."

"It could be worse.....you could be in David's shoes right now," said Ivy, taking another hit.

"Look, in a few weeks, I'll be gone and it will be someone else's problem. I'll just move on to the next shit job."

"I hear you girl, but the money that places make is insane. That dude I hooked up with, he made over five hundred thousand dollars last year just punching in orders from David. He didn't even have to do any selling or cold calling. If you got hired on a full time, you could be making ten times what you are now." said Ivy.

"Yeah, but I'd have ten times the headaches as well."

"It's all just a game with very high stakes. I kind of got hooked on it too. They showed me how to do day trading. It's really addicting, once you get into it. You should just pick five stocks and follow them for a few weeks, see what they do. You'll get into it, trust me."

"I don't have any money to invest."

"You don't have to. Just pick five stocks and follow them for a week. Imagine if you had invested a hundred thousand dollars in these stocks. At the end of the month, see how much you would have made or lost."

"I'm sure I would lose all my money. I can barely afford these lattes. We're terrible at shit like that. There's a reason they're all dudes in there."

"That's where you're wrong. Anyone can make money on stocks. It's just gambling, that's all it is. Chicks can gamble too." said Ivy, so stoned, she could barely see straight.

The name of the company was called BENNET TECHNOLOGIES. They had only gone public a few months ago. They specialized in facial recognition software for attack drones used by the military. Lear Capital had invested heavily, literally betting the farm that the small software company with only twenty employees would land lucrative government contracts and their stock price would go up. It was a huge gamble. David wasn't supposed to have any knowledge of their contract status. Everyone in the firm was glued to their computer screens, just waiting to hear the news. If this stock were to tank, the company was going to be in big trouble.

They needed whales, very wealthy people who gave the firm money to buy stocks and make them more money. If the whales started walking away, they were done as well. As long as they had new investors coming in, they were fine, but several of their largest clients had gotten spooked by David's losing streak and others were beginning to get nervous. David spent most of his day trying to calm them down and pointing out that their return of investment over the last five years was nearly five hundred percent, better than any major Wall Street firm could boast. Jen was still a secretary but was beginning to make new friends. She had even been invited out to dinner with some of the boys. She knew exactly what that entailed. She had her sights set on something a little more lucrative, like David himself. She found out he wasn't married. He was a strange duck. Every time she spoke to him, he seemed very calm.....almost too calm. His company was going down in flames and he still made small talk with his employees. She figured someone in his position would be an alpha male asshole but he was just the opposite. His calm demeanor was doing wonders to keep the operation together. Everyone in the company had taken a major hit financially and the damage was getting worse.

"DOD just released their contract list for the next fiscal year!" shouted one of the employees.

There was total chaos for the next hour as everyone in the company raced to their cubicles and made frantic calls to clients. Turns out David had been right.....sort of. BENNET TECHNOLOGIES had indeed scored a major contract, but they had been bought out by a major defense contractor. Their stock price had gone up, but not enough, at least not yet. It would have to increase at nearly ten times its present level in order for the company to make a major profit off of it. The mood had gone from euphoric to very somber. The news was not what they wanted to hear. To make matters worse, the Federal Reserve had just announced that morning that they would no longer be pumping money into the stock market and were most likely going to raise interest rates at their next Governor's meeting next month, sending the market into a mini-crash. It was just one disaster after another.

The silver lining in all of this was that a newly hired broker from Taiwan, named John Ling, had ignored David's orders and had shorted the market heavily, betting the farm that all of his stock picks would go down in price very quickly. It was a major gamble, but it had paid off heavily. He had made a nearly seven hundred thousand dollar profit off it. It had saved the company, at least for now.

Everyone in the company was shocked at what the kid had done. Shocked, but also very grateful. He had come through for them big time when they needed it. Somehow, all of this had gotten by Amanda and David. They never actually checked his paperwork. There was going to be hell to

pay in that office. Instead of congratulating him, David immediately fired him, saying there was room in the company for someone like him. No one could understand it. David had sent a very clear and unmistakable message that no one was allowed to think outside the box.....*not while he was in charge.*

"Jesus David, this kid just saved our asses here. We'd be liquidating assets right now if it weren't for him!" said one broker on the phone.

"David, I know you're pissed right now, but you've got to be logical and logical says you don't can someone who just made us a shit ton of money." said another broker.

"David....I need to see you.....like now." said another broker.

An hour later, a ton of salt had just been poured on an open wound that was bleeding heavily. Two years ago, David's firm had purchased several hundred acres of beachfront property in Florida near Tallahassee. Florida was growing exponentially every year and it seemed like a sure bet. The company had paid almost five million dollars for the property. This morning, a law firm representing an Indian tribe had filed an injunction against his firm, stating the property was on a burial ground and belonged to them. It didn't mean it couldn't be developed, but it was going to be a very long and arduous process once it went through the federal court system. It could take years before it was resolved. David had purchased it using borrowed money, hoping to flip it within a year or two and make a nice profit. It looked now like he could lose his shirt on the investment. Things had just gone from bad to worse very quickly.

Jen had to take a stack of forms and papers up to David's office to get his signature. She would rather have stepped into a lion's cage than go into his office right now. She knocked on his door. She didn't say anything, just dropped the papers in his mailbox.

"Hey kid, what's up?" he said looking up from his desk.

"Amanda says this is in the important pile," said Jen nervously.

"Thanks....come on in, have a seat," he said.

Jen walked in and sat down in front of his desk.

"Tough day at the office dear?" she said jokingly.

"I guess I'm still breathing, I can be thankful for that. This day has been a nightmare, a total nightmare. My company is imploding and it's my fault. It's all my doing. I didn't want to have to fire John, but we have very strict policies here and he knowingly broke all of them."

Jen couldn't believe he was talking to her like this. Most of his brokers never even talk to him, let alone have a sit-down conversation with him. She had no idea what he was doing. Maybe he just needed to blow off some steam.

"You want a drink? I sure could use one," he asked

"I'll have whatever you're having."

David poured her a jack and coke. She figured someone like David was have a hundred dollars of scotch or bourbon, but he just made her a jack and coke. Clearly, David wasn't a big drinker.

He sat down at his desk. He was a broken man. She had seen the same look in her father's eyes growing up. To know you have given it your best and your best wasn't good enough. She figured the best thing she could do was just to keep her mouth shut and listen to him.

"Jen.....I'm not going to lie here. We're in big trouble.....like really big trouble. I have a meeting tomorrow with Moe Kravitz. He owns half the real estate in this city. This isn't going to be a fun meeting. If he closes his account with us, we're done. I'm in the hole to him for over a million dollars. The hell am I going to do?" he asked.

"David, even the best and most talented people go through rough patches. You aren't going to win all the time. He's got to understand that."

"When rich people see other rich people making tons of money and they're losing tons of money, they tend not to see things that way. In this business, you get one strike and you're out. We bought ourselves a little breathing room today, but it's not enough. We're still in deep shit and sinking deeper."

"David.....I'm not sure what you want me to say here. I know you're a winner. I know this because I come from an entire family of losers. I'm sure when a winner loses for the first time in their lives it can be devastating, but it doesn't mean you are a loser, it just means you're losing right now. You haven't come this far to just walk away. I mean you've done something here that hardly anyone on planet earth could ever do. You're a smart guy, you'll get out of this, I know you will. Most of all, you're not a quitter. You cut and run now, you're finished. I may be just a temp, but I'd hate for something like that to happen to you."

David looked at her and smiled. He sat back in his chair and sipped his drink.

"Jen, the reason I hire temps is that they're not like the rest of us. They're real people. Maybe not the most gifted but they're real. I like to be reminded of what real people are like. Everyone in here is a vulture, they just don't have their wings yet. My job is to keep a vulture from eating its dead prey. I have to keep people from being their true selves. It's not an easy job. Hey, would you join a few of us in a meeting tonight after hours? I could really use you."

"David, I don't know shit about this business," said Jen, shocked at his request.

"That's exactly why I need you here. Sometimes, the best advice in the world comes from a complete stranger who doesn't know anything about the situation. Please, it would mean a lot to me. I promise Amanda won't be there."

"Sure, if you think it will help."

"Great. Be here around seven tonight. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything to anyone about it either. The fate of this entire company is going to depend on this meeting. It's kind of important."

"Sure, I'll be here."

"I appreciate it. Don't be late."

"Seven o'clock, I'll be here and waiting."

"I'll tell Amanda I want you hired on full time. A girl like you shouldn't be tempting. It's beneath you and your ability."

"Um.....thanks," she said as she left his office.

What the hell just happened in there? She thought to herself as she stepped into the elevator.

I just got invited to the biggest party of the year and I'm just a freshman!

She arrived promptly at 6:45 PM and went up to the fourth floor. David and several of the shot callers in the company were all gathered in his office. They had ordered take-out and were all sitting down eating. His face lit up when he saw her.

"Jen, come on in. Hope you like Thai food," he said and offered her a plate.

"Jen, we're glad you're here. Let's get right to it. Well, Jen, this whole meeting is about you. We need to know that you are on board with us. We need to know how serious you are about working here." said David very seriously.

"David.....no offense but, I don't want to hitch my horse to a wagon that is about to go down in flames," she said, eating her meal.

"Fair enough. I guess I didn't really explain myself very well. See, I need to know how far you are willing to go for this company."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know exactly what I mean?"

Jen put her plate down and looked right at him.

"Jesus David. Come on. I'm not going to bang all you guys just so I can get a job here. If that's what you mean, then you can fuck off." she said angrily.

"No.....no, you misunderstood. That's not what I meant at all. I mean, sometimes in order to be successful, you have to kind of bend the rules a little bit, or in our case, a lot. I have a meeting with Moe Kravitz tomorrow morning. He is going to want all of his money back that he gave me. I don't have any of it. If I were to cash out and pay him, it would ruin us. See the dilemma I'm in?"

"What the hell do you want me to do?"

"Jen.....the reason this company exists is all because of this painting behind me. It runs everything."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean.....this is no ordinary painting. It's very, very unique. It was painted over three hundred years ago by an unknown artist. It's priceless. The painting talks to me. Tells me what stocks to buy and how to invest. All it demanded in return was um.....well. Let's just say I had to do some terrible things in order to make it happy. Six months ago when the SEC and FBI started snooping around here, we all got nervous. They couldn't figure out how all the major Wall Street firms were losing money and we were making a killing. We decided to start losing, just a little, to make it look like we were human and make mistakes. Medusa didn't like it. She went on strike. She hasn't said a word to me in six months.....nothing. Up until you showed up. She said she likes you. We need you to get her to talk to us again and tell us what to do. I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's where we're at. Please.....we're desperate."

Jen wasn't sure if they were high or just plain nuts. This was not at all what they were expecting.

"You want me to talk to the painting? You're serious?"

"Yes. We'll leave you two alone and let you get acquainted with one another. I know it's weird the first time you hear it talk. Scared the hell out of me too. Just go along with it. Whatever you do, don't piss her off."

"Ok.....I'll try."

"Here, have a jack and coke and just sit there and let her come to you. Don't try and force anything. Just let it happen." he said and poured her a giant jack and coke.

"Here, take this and just sit back and relax. Buy yourself something online if you want. We'll pay for it." said David.

"So, I just sit there and have a conversation with a painting. That's what you want?"

"Jen.....we made a lot of enemies on our way to the top. We pissed off some very powerful people with deep connections. Nothing we did was legal. If Moe Kravitz doesn't get us, the FBI will. We're in this thing deep. We'll all go to prison if we can't find a way out of this." said one of David's associates in the room.

"Jesus.....what the hell have I gotten myself into here?" she asked.

"Please Jen. We need a miracle and you're it." said David.

"Fine.....if you want me to talk to this painting, I'll talk to her."

"Thank you.....thank you. We'll be right outside. I don't know how long it will take, so just be patient."

The men left the room and it was just Jen and the weird painting. She downed her jack and coke and sat back in the chair. This was just too good to be true. She was sitting in the chair of the owner of the company, who was clearly bat shit crazy and would do whatever she told him to do. To think, she almost passed up on this job. She could tell these idiots anything and they would do it. Talk about a dream job.

"Well Medusa, what am I going to tell these idiots? I think we should get rid of Amanda. I don't like her. We should all get free massages too. I think that might help. Any other ideas?" she said looking at the painting.

Of course, Medusa said nothing. Jen just walked around David's office and began to look through his things. She sat back down at his desk and surfed online for a while. All at once, she seemed to get very sleepy. A minute later, she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. She knew she was in trouble. She got up from the chair and had a hard time standing. It was like every single molecule in her body was telling her to lie down and go to bed. She had her hand on the knob and tried to turn it, only to find out it was locked. She reached over for the phone, only to pick it up and hear nothing. She reached for her cell phone and was just about to hit 911 when she collapsed on the floor. When she opened her eyes, she could swear she saw that damn painting smiling at her.

When Jen finally did come to, she was zip-tied to a chair in front of the painting. Her head was throbbing and felt like vomiting. Dozens of people from the office were in the room, including Amanda. She was in and out of consciousness for a few minutes. When she finally did snap out of it, she could see she was surrounded by her office workers. Many of them had very worried looks on their faces.

"David.....what the hell is going on?" she said slurring her speech.

"Jen.....Jen, I know this is difficult to accept, see Medusa is just like you and I. She needs to be fed. We have to offer her a sacrifice. I know this sucks, but you're it." said David.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? Get me out of here and I won't go to the cops," she said

"Jen, the cops don't care. No one cares. Just understand, this is an honor. Medusa chose you. She could have had anybody, but she chose you. You should be grateful.

"Holy shit, you people are all insane and you David, are like the king of the insane. People.....YOU KNOW THIS GUY IS OUT OF HIS MIND! YOU HAVE TO KNOW NONE OF THIS IS REAL!" she screamed.

"Jen, I know this is hard to accept but we're all going down. Not just lose our jobs and our houses, but go to prison. You don't want that do you?" asked Amanda.

"I DON'T GIVE A SHIT IF YOU GO TO PRISON. YOU IDIOTS DID ALL THIS TO YOURSELVES!" she screamed.

"Jen.....just try and see this from our perspective."

"TRY SEEING IT FROM MY PERSPECTIVE!" she screamed.

"Do you think you're just going to kill me and get away with it? I told a bunch of people where I was going tonight and even logged into my computer before I came up here. Good luck explaining that away." she said almost hysterically.

Everyone in the room looked right at David. They were all thinking the same thing but no one said it.

Um.....yeah.....just how in the hell are we going to explain that one away?

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there." said David.

"David.....Jesus.....I don't want to go to prison either, but this is insane." said one of the associates.

"You want to be somebody's prison bitch?" said another broker in the room.

"No, but, Jesus man, we're going to kill an innocent girl just so this painting can talk to David and tell him how to fix all this? This is fucking insane! She's right. We did this to ourselves. We all knew the risks and the rules, but we broke them anyway. We should be sacrificing one of us, instead of her." said the broker.

"That may be true, but it doesn't matter now, this is where we are. You're either in or you're out. None of you would be in this room right now if you didn't believe in the painting. None of you. You would have ratted me out a long time ago. So.....are you in, or you out?" asked David.

"Is there some other way?"

"No.....this is what Medusa wants. She wants us to kill Jen and smear her blood all over the painting. That's how it has to be!" said David pulling out a large filet knife.

"You're all just going to stand there and let this mad man kill me? Are you serious? How do you know one of you won't be next?" said Jen starting to sob.

"None of us want to be poor Jen. We all got a taste of the good life. There's no turning back now." said Amanda

"I hope you all rot in hell for what you're doing. There is no magic painting. David is schizophrenic. He's just a lucky schizophrenic, that's all and his luck has run out. Killing me won't change a damn thing. You're all fucked."

Jen saw the knife he was holding and started shaking. It was like she was caught up in a nightmare.....*only there wasn't going to be any waking up from this horrible nightmare.*

"David.....Jesus.....please, don't do this. My God.....please." she said, starting to weep.

"I'm sorry kid. There's no other way," he said, holding the knife in front of her.

Jen was hoping this was all some kind of very twisted joke. Just as David was going to plunge the knife into her, they would all start laughing hysterically and say....*welcome to the club!* Only there was no laughing. No one said a word. The room was so quiet, you could hear a heartbeat.

Shit was about to get very real in here, very quick.

David suddenly stopped in his tracks and walked over to the painting. He got down on his hands and knees and started weeping.

"I'm so sorry my love.....I hurt you and I'm sorry," he said, sobbing on the floor.

"Yes.....yes, you're right.....it would be a mistake. I understand. I just hope she will also." he said wiping away his tears.

"Yes, my love.....as you command. Thank you.....I could say it every single second for the rest of my life and it still wouldn't be enough. I won't ever hurt you again.....Amanda, I'm sorry. It wants you instead. She says Jen is too valuable."

"I'm sorry?" said Amanda

Amanda's face went as white as a ghost. She bolted for the door but was restrained and tackled by several men in the room. David walked calmly over to her and plunged the knife into her chest several times. Jen closed her eyes and tried to block out the horrible sound. It was the worst sound she had ever heard in her life.

It was the sound of death. The sound of the soul leaving the body. She could live ten lifetimes and still never forget it.

Amanda was dead. Murdered in front of a room full of people. No one in the room said anything. Some of the men were crying. Some were sobbing. It was the most surreal, horrible thing Jen could have ever imagined.

"David?"

"What?"

"Could you please get me out of this goddamn chair?"

"Yeah.....sorry about all this. Medusa said you were too valuable to us to waste you. As much as she wanted to taste your blood, she said it wasn't your time yet. She has big plans for you. We're going to get out of this and take this company into the stratosphere." he said cutting the zip ties and freeing her.

Jen didn't really know what to do next. She looked around the room and realized she was a part of this group as well. She realized that she had a golden opportunity here, she couldn't waste it.

What she did next was going to define the rest of her life in one way or another.

"What are we going to do with her body?" she asked.

"We incinerate it, just like the others."

"Well, better get on it, before the cops show up. Who's going to clean up all the blood?" asked one of the men in the room.

"I'm not doing it again." said another man in the room.

"Just shut up and get it done. I expect everyone to be back at work Monday morning," said Jen.

"Who the hell put you in charge? You were about to be sacrificed just a minute ago." said one of the men in the room.

"That's not what Medusa wants, is it?" she asked.

"David, what are we supposed to do with her now?" asked someone next to her.

Jen walked over to him and smacked him across his face.

"Maybe next time it will be your wife or kids she wants. Do what I tell you," she said.

The men said nothing and just looked at David for guidance.

"Do what she says!" he barked

The men in the room went to work removing her body and trying to clean up the horrible mess.

"Medusa assures me she will take care of Mr. Kravitz. Let's just try and put all of this unpleasantness behind us and focus on getting back to work," said David.

"Thank you, Jen. I know that was horrible. I hate myself for what I had to do, but there was no other way. We all serve Medusa. It's no different now than it was in Roman times. We have to do what she commands." he said with tears in his eyes.

"I understand now. You need to get your head back in the game and get this company back on track. Can you do that?" asked Jen.

"Don't worry honey, with Medusa on our side, we can't lose," he said and threw his arms around her.

"Did you really mean that? Can you get back to your old self?"

"Baby, just sit back and watch. You ain't seen nothing yet," he said, cracking a smile.

Jen lit up a cigarette in the room as she helped the men clean up the mess in his office. It took them several hours, but it was spotless when they were finished. Jen knew that David was a dangerous, psychotic madman, but he could pick stocks like no other on this planet. For better or worse, she belonged to Medusa now, just like all the others. Cause even following a madman

could be done if there was enough money in it. She knew the day might come when Medusa would want her blood as well. It was the price to be paid because Jen was tired of being poor. It was a fate worse than death. Everyone in that room had made the same commitment, for life or death.

Three years after that horrible night, Lear Capitol had over three thousand employees. Jen was David's right-hand man, VP of accounts. She made over a million dollars last year and had a penthouse in a building financed by David for his employees. She didn't even pay rent. He was the star of this show and his star was only getting brighter by the day.

He was the most successful broker in the country. David wasn't just fabulously wealthy, he was pretty much on every network and had a small legion of fans and investors behind him. There was even talk of making him the next director of the NYSE. David had come from nothing and made a name for himself in a very crowded field.

Once in a while, she would come into his office and look at the painting. She knew what she had done and she was ok with it. There had been some others, they were lucky enough not to have been caught, but David's fame and power had bought them out of it. They were going to have to be much more careful from now on. Jen would audition girls in the office to meet David and to see if Medusa wanted any of them. Most of the time, she said nothing. No one but David could hear her. That's how she wanted it. She didn't care if the painting spoke to him or not, he thought it did and that was all that mattered. She was basically his pimp, luring unsuspecting girls to their deaths.

She knew eventually, Medusa would want her as well. She was ok with it. She too had tasted the good life.....and there was no turning back now.

Cause once you go rich, you never go back.....no matter what the costs.