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118,670 words

Sorcha: Enchantment and the Curse

by

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Great Britain

Shiggaion Tash woke with a start. Her eyes flew open. Her mouth tasted vile and bitter like bile and chemicals. She tried to swallow the taste away, but her throat felt bone dry. Bright light shone all around her. She tried to raise her hand to cover her eyes, but her arms wouldn't move. She tried her legs. They wouldn't move either. She attempted to wrench her body around, but without any success. She could move her head—at least that part of her didn't seem to be completely immobilized.

At first, the light appeared so bright, she couldn't make out anything. Gradually, her eyes adjusted. That seemed to take longer than usual. She sniffed. Her nose felt stuffed up. Her mind couldn't stop, never stopped evaluating. She put together everything she knew about drugs and anesthetics...and came up short. Cocaine and other amphetamines caused some of these symptoms, but they weren't anesthetics—they were stimulants. What was the last thing she could remember?

The last event happened to be the hostage training exercise. At the time, she fumbled her pistol and accidentally shot one of the hostages...whoops. That would be another looming black mark on her ledger. In her own records that made eight now. Nine if you counted the accident during the Oxford laboratory lecture. That one wasn't entirely her fault. She couldn't review her classified records, so she didn't know if they counted that one or not.

Ah, she remembered, right after she accidentally shot the hostage, she felt a sharp pain in her left buttocks. They weren't using real bullets, only laser gunfire trackers. She sniffed and felt slightly miffed. They shouldn't get their panties in a wad about a little accident like that. Well enough self-scrutiny—Shiggaion took a good look around.

She lay on a hard but padded surface. A thin sheet lay over her, and she felt naked underneath. That seemed slightly odd. As she gained awareness, she felt a stinging on her left buttocks. She cursed under her breath—they really didn't have to knock her out for that slight infraction. No one told her the evaluators were wielding tranq guns.

Shiggaion realized something like straps immobilized her arms and legs, but she couldn't see them even if she depressed her head as far as it would go. She lay in a very bright room. The walls looked metallic white and very clean. The room appeared smaller than she imagined at first. The ceiling seemed to rise to a normal height. The walls were close, but provided enough space to allow a couple of people to work around them. Two walls looked like they held doors—also metal. What was this place...a battleship? One wall appeared too shimmery to be metal, but it was the same color as the rest of the walls. Uh oh, Shiggaion knew what that meant—mirrored glass. That would be an observation area. Were they watching her? That made her feel uncomfortable, but then she really began to feel uncomfortable—she needed to go.

How long had she been out, and how long here? Where was here and why? Everything seemed a bit over the top for accidentally shooting a hostage. Admittedly, her classmates were becoming a little personal with their complaints and comments. Shiggaion couldn't help it if she was clumsy and a little slow about some things—in other things she excelled..., but she still had to go and bad.

Well whatever, she was here and for whatever reason, she knew the training protocol. Shiggaion opened her mouth wide and called...only nothing came out... at first. She swallowed a couple of times and tried it again. At first, her voice sounded very weak. It slowly grew in strength until she was finally able to yell, "Hello, is anyone there. I need to go." The first cry she got out sounded like a whisper. So she called again, and again, and again. Until her voice eventually reached a very acceptable scream. By that time, Shiggaion, was becoming desperate. She needed to go, and the room felt cold. She thrashed around on the table, but that didn't do any good at all. It wore her out, and stimulated her...um...going needs. Why wasn't anyone answering her?

Finally, she screamed, "Why isn't anyone coming? Why aren't you following the training protocol?"

She heard a very loud click, and the door in front of her feet burst open. A tall strawberry blond woman stood in it. She wore a costly sequin and lace blouse, but Shiggaion couldn't see any farther than that. The woman's face looked beautiful, like a model's. She wore makeup, but it was very finely applied. Her eyes looked large, the makeup accentuated that look. Her nose and mouth were small, and her face heart-shaped. Shiggaion thought the short hair didn't fit her at all. It made the woman's very lovely face look larger and less feminine.

The woman threw open the door and yelled, “Shut up, Shiggy. You’re disturbing my tea.”

In spite of the words, the woman sounded very aristocratic and Oxford.

In her own too Oxford accent, Shiggaion replied, “My name is Shiggaion, not Shiggy. I will not answer to such an abominable term.”

The woman laughed, “You’ll answer to whatever name I care to call you, Shiggy. You’re mine now—I bought you.”

“Release me immediately. I need to go.”

“I really should make you beg for the privilege.”

Shiggaion became a little desperate. She’d almost forgotten how badly she needed to go, and that very uncomfortable feeling came back full force. “This isn’t allowed in the training protocol at all. You must allow a trainee basic human amenities—the toilet is one of those.”

“Miss prissy pants, I know you have the training protocol memorized. You’ve mentioned it over one hundred times in your many complaints during training. I do not follow the training protocol. As I said, you belong to me.”

“You mentioned that already. In any case, if you don’t let me use the toilet, I shall have an accident right here. That is obviously a breach of human rights as well as the training protocol.”

The woman smiled, “Would you like me to tickle you a bit?”

“What about basic human decency?”

“Human decency doesn’t apply to you at all. If you soil my linens, table, or floor, I shall make you lay in it until your excrement dries. Then you shall clean it all with your tongue.”

Tears leaked down the sides of Shiggaion’s face, “I shall endeavor to not soil anything, but I do need to go.”

“Then you must beg me for the privilege.”

“I’ve never begged for anything from anyone in my life.”

The woman leaned over Shiggaion. Her face hovered just above Shiggaion’s. Shiggaion thought for one moment about spitting in that smug face. She quickly drowned that thought. The woman touched Shiggaion’s lips, “You were thinking, you’d really like to spit in my face. I told you, you belong to me. You are my slave. You must comply with my wishes. If you don’t, I have leave to treat you in any way I please. If you do, I have leave to treat you in any way I please. Would you like me to tickle you?”

“If you do that, Ma’am, I will not be able to stop from wetting myself. I shall accidentally soil your linens, your table, and your floor.”

“Accidents are your specialty, aren’t they Shiggy?”

Shiggaion bit her tongue, and almost wet herself.

The woman placed her hand on Shiggaion’s stomach, “Just a little tickle, Shiggy...the consequences will not be pleasant. I know you can imagine them in excruciating detail. You think that way all the time. You can imagine having to clean my floor and table with your tongue, can’t you. I’ll insist you clean the linens the same way.”

Shiggaion took out her weapon of last resort, “You can’t make me.”

The woman smiled pleasantly, “But I can make you. I can do anything I wish to you. I can switch you or beat you or whip you to my heart’s content. I know you don’t do well with pain, physical or otherwise. That’s one of the reasons I selected you.”

Shiggaion pressed her lips together and tightened her abdominal muscles, “What must I do to be released and be allowed to go to the water closet?”

“That’s a much better approach. You aren’t stupid Shiggy. I already told you, but your records do indicate over and over your obstinate and offensive behavior. Let me spell it out for

you. Beg me to release you and to allow you to use the water closet. Answer to Shiggy. You know the consequences if you don't—you already imagined them. Now, use your excellent mind to formulate the exact words you will say to me and then say them.”

Shiggy swallowed. Tears stung her eyes, “Please, ma’am. I beg you to allow me, Shiggy to use the water closet.”

“Well said.”

Shiggy felt the bands on her feet and hands loosen. As soon as she was free, she slid off the table to the left away from the woman. She stood trembling for a moment. The floor felt like metal. It was freezing. She felt cold. And she was naked. Her voice shook, “Clothing?”

The woman shrugged.

Almost at the end of her control, Shiggy asked, “Where’s the water closet?”

“Beg.”

“Please, ma’am. Shiggy would like to know where to find the nearest water closet.”

“I should probably make you beg on your knees, but perhaps next time. Through the door, left, it’s at the end of the hall.”

Shiggy grabbed the sheet off the table and threw it around her shoulders. She ran through the door and turned left. Behind her the woman cried, “I didn’t say you could take the sheet.”

Shiggy ignored her. The hallway outside the door appeared like a direct contrast to the room she had been in. Her first step through the opening struck hardwood. This floor felt warm. The hall felt warm. Wood formed the walls—thick, light, beautiful hardwood. She noted doors in the hall, but didn’t take the time to inspect any of them. She thought for one moment, she should have locked that nasty woman in the room and then escaped, but her need to go overcame everything.

She reached the end of the hall at an awkward run. She turned the door handle, and it happily opened to her. She spied the porcelain throne and launched herself at it. She slammed the door shut and noted it had no lock on it. She pulled the toilet open, and too late realized she also raised the seat. She sat anyway...and sat...and sat...and sat. She'd held it so long, she couldn't get anything to come out. She held her gut. Finally, with tears of joy in her eyes, she heard a trickle and felt some slight relief. Full relief took a long time. She sat there...dribbling and thinking. At first thinking of how good relief felt...then what kind of weapon she could make from what she found in the water closet. Unfortunately, this was only a water closet—it didn't possess a shower or bath. It held hand towels on a bar near the sink. She might wrench the bar from the wall. A hand towel could be used as a garrote. If she took apart the toilet...

A knock came at the door, "Listen, Shiggy, you have another ten seconds to finish in there. I know you are thinking about making a weapon. I'm ready for tea and to review your records. I have an ash switch with me. I will use it on your bottom once for every second later than ten that you remain inside the water closet...starting now."

Shiggy gave up any more thoughts about making a weapon. She wiped and stood. She yelled through the door, "What about clothing?"

"Six seconds."

Shiggy shrugged the sheet back over her shoulders. It was a little bit sparse, but it covered her most delicate parts. She opened the door.

"Eleven seconds."

"I don't think that was a fair count."

"Twelve seconds, you are still not outside the water closet."

Shiggy jumped through the doorway, "Yes, ma'am."

“Close the door, turn around, and bend over.”

Shiggy thought for only a second about disobeying. She closed the door, turned around, and bent over. The woman lifted the sheet and applied two heavy swats against her left bare buttocks. Shiggy let out a yelp. Then a louder one—that’s what they taught her in training. Only, she wasn’t faking—her buttocks really stung badly.

The woman laughed, “I’ll hit harder next time.”

Shiggy smoothed the sheet over her bare bottom and turned back to the woman. Tears of pain and mortification blurred her sight.

The woman lifted her chin. She crossed her arms. One hand still held the slightly willowy and yet very substantial ash switch, “Follow me.”

Shiggy pulled the sheet tighter around her body and followed.

The woman led her to an open door at the other end of the hallway. Shiggy couldn’t tell where the door to the initial metal room lay. All the doors on this side looked the same and like wood. The two of them turned left into another hallway about twenty feet long without any doors. At the end stood a very substantial oaken door. The wood looked dark with age. A substantial latch lay on the left. The woman opened the door, and they entered into a small kitchen. She closed the door. When it closed, on that wall behind them appeared to be no door at all. It looked like an old wood-paneled wall. Shiggy couldn’t tell where the door began and the panel ended. She couldn’t spot any latch on this side either.

Inside the kitchen, on the left lay a counter, sink, range, oven, and fridge. On the right, stood a small wooden table with four chairs. A large glass-paned window opened above the table to a forest. At the front of the kitchen lay a large bay window with padded window seats and pillows. It also looked out on forest. The woodwork everywhere appeared exquisite. It was alternating

dark and light, but with more light wood so the room owned a very cheery feel. It lifted Shiggy's feelings a little—she didn't feel cheery at all.

The woman pointed toward one of the wooden chairs. Shiggy felt a little obstinate and almost sat in the window seat, but she changed her mind at the last moment. The woman tapped her ash wand against her thigh and glared at Shiggy until she sat.

The woman glanced at her watch, "Ah, just in time. If you ruined my tea, I would have switched you again."

Shiggy pressed her lips together. She wanted to respond, but everything in her cogent thoughts told her to shut up.

The woman brought two teacups to the table. She placed one to the side out of Shiggy's reach. The other, she placed in front of herself. She went back and brought milk and sugar along with a full teapot. She poured a cup of tea for herself, placed in a cube of sugar, and a dash of milk. With a smug look, she took a generous sip of tea. Very deliberately, she lifted her ash wand up and placed it on the table between the empty cup and Shiggy, "Now, let's talk."

Shiggy's stomach growled.

The woman smiled, "Place your hands on the table where I can see them."

Shiggy put her hands on the top of the table.

The woman nodded, "Good. No delay that time. First, introductions. My name is really immaterial to you, but I will tell you, it is Sorcha Davis. I go by Claire to my friends and associates—Sorcha to my very intimate friends. You were Shiggaion Tash. Why your British parents gave you such a silly appellation, we will never know, but they did. I will call you Shiggy. You will be known as Shig to others."

Shiggy looked down, "Why Shig and Shiggy?"

As quick as lightning, Sorcha grabbed the ash wand and slapped it against Shiggy's knuckles.

Shiggy let out a cry and clasped her hands together off the table.

Sorcha raised the rod, "Shiggy. Immediately place your hands on the top of this table. I did not give you leave to remove them."

With an involuntary whimper, Shiggy placed her hands on the table again. A red mark lifted along her knuckles.

"Unless I instruct you otherwise, you will always address me as ma'am no matter who is present or where we are. You will begin every sentence with that title."

"Ma'am, yes."

Sorcha allowed herself a tight smile that turned grim very quickly. She tapped the wand against the table, "That kind of behavior is why you are here at this moment. Try again—I will not allow the use of stilted English. Judgement is your problem, Shiggy. My job is to teach you good judgement."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, why Shig and Shiggy. The reason should be obvious even to you. Your entire life, you have insisted on being called Shiggaion. This name is an abomination and hard for most English speakers to say—yet you are English. You have not answered to any nicknames or abbreviations—therefore, I have graced you with a couple of nicknames. I think both of these will be enough out of character for you that no one will ever guess your actual name. You will not use Tash. It is a common enough British name, but not for you anymore. You are not to identify yourself as such in the future. If you do, your value to me will go to zero, and your life will likely end. Do I make myself clear?"

Shiggy replied breathlessly, "Yes, ma'am. What if someone figures out who I am?"

“We can’t do anything about that. Your value to me means your life.”

“But, ma’am how can that be?”

Sorcha squinted at her, pondering if the question was legitimate or impertinent. She decided legitimate, “You are my slave. I bought you, and I own you.”

“But, ma’am. How can that be?”

Sorcha pulled a large folder from the chair on the other side of the table. Crestfallen, Shiggy noted it was her official government training record.

Sorcha grinned, “You recognize this folder.”

Shiggy didn’t look up, “Yes, ma’am.” The folder was at least ten times thicker than any other cadet in government training. The folder itself had been expanded with tape and cardboard at least three times. Shiggy muttered, “Why don’t they just use electronic forms? This is the Twenty-First Century.”

“That was a rhetorical question, but I heard it, and I will answer it. The reason is to keep these records away from our actual and potential enemies. An electronic form is convenient, but too easy to lose, hack, or abscond with. On the other hand, here is your complete record, and it is breathtaking.”

Shiggy looked up, “But...” She caught herself, “But...ma’am, why does that make me your slave?”

“Because dear Shiggy, no one else in the government would have you, and you are under a classified contract with the British Intelligence Service.” Sorcha opened the training folder and turned it around, “That is your signature, isn’t it?”

Shiggy didn’t need to look, “Yes...ma’am.” She continued quickly, “But, ma’am I didn’t imagine they would do this to me.”

“Look at this folder. You have been placed in training in seven branches of British Intelligence and one of the military. That alone gives you eighty years of accumulated service commitment...”

“But, Ma’am, I never graduated from any of them.”

Sorcha stared at Shiggy until she dropped her eyes.

Shiggy mumbled, “What about, Discharge as of Right?”

“DAOR? My dear, Shiggy, you are way past that point. Let’s review your record. Shall we?”

Shiggy didn’t look up.

Sorcha turned to the first section, “You attended some of the best British private schools in the country and matriculated from sixth form at the youthful age of fourteen. You graduated from Oxford with three degrees: chemistry, engineering, and astrophysics. Then went on to study for your master’s degree. You attained two and were on the track for a doctoral degree until the incident...”

“How could I know that producing radioactive substances was not allowed?”

Sorcha picked up her stick, and Shiggy cringed away. Her fingers on the table twitched, “...ma’am.”

Sorcha put down the stick, “I should really beat you for that statement, but I shall not...unless you say something as stupid as that again. How could you not know that making radioactive substances was forbidden—especially in a room full of students...your graduate students.”

Shiggy sniffled, “Ma’am. No one was hurt.”

“No one was immediately killed. The British government and Oxford University are ultimately responsible for your imbecilic behavior. It was radioactive, for goodness sakes.”

Sorcha turned the divider to the next section, “Because Oxford and the entire UK university system blacklisted you, you applied to the Military Intelligence structure. That’s when you signed this delicious little contract which gives me ownership over your body and soul.”

Shiggy mumbled, “Ma’am, I never intended to be made a slave.”

“Well let’s see what else you’ve done to deserve my attention. You applied to Sandhurst and were accepted—I assume through affirmative action.”

“Ma’am, that’s not fair. I meet every criteria. I even excelled in the program...”

“You excelled until you shot the kneecap off your pistol training instructor.”

“But, ma’am that was an accident.”

“You are horribly accident prone, aren’t you Shiggy. Listen, from this moment forward, I don’t want to hear a single ‘but’ from you, and the word ‘accident’ drops permanently out of your vocabulary.”

“But...”

The ash wand rose up and came down with a crack on Shiggy’s knuckles.

Shiggy screamed and pulled her hands back, but not quite off the table.

“Hands on the table Shiggy, or you’ll get another one. What did I just tell you?”

Shiggy sniffled, “Ma’am, I am not to use the word ‘but’ nor the word accident. That hurt.”

“It didn’t hurt nearly as much as losing your kneecap.” Sorcha smiled broadly, “You are supposed to be trainable. We’ll see if this little training sticks.” She turned to the next divider in the folder, “Sandhurst was done with you, so they suggested you move to the scientific

laboratories in MI6. Whoever suggested that might just be a traitor. Within your first month in the laboratory, you sent an entire floor to hospital.”

Shiggy just looked at her feet.

“Good. No lip from you—I suspect you’d like to tell me that you didn’t know organophosphorus compounds were nerve gas.”

Shiggy shook her head, “Ma’am, I knew. Who could imagine they had any in the lab...”

“You ditz. I should give you another crack on the knuckles for that.”

“Ma’am, please don’t.”

“Science sent you to Section VIII, Clandestine Communications. Why they thought that would be a good place for you, I have no idea. In Section VIII, you broadcast classified operational codes to over half of our enemies.”

“Ma’am, I just used the wrong mailing folder.”

Sorcha reached for the ash wand, and Shiggy cringed. Sorcha slowly put the wand down. Her voice softened, “Shiggy, don’t you get it...this problem is your problem. No one made you do any of these things. You’ve continued on and on committing disaster after disaster throughout our intelligence structure.”

“But...”

The wand rose and fell with a snap on Shiggy’s knuckles. Shiggy screamed. She sat staring at her red knuckles. Sorcha laid down the wand with a sigh and turned to the next section, “Communications sent you to Section V to work on counter-espionage reports from our overseas stations. You set up a new organizational database system that completely disorganized all the reports. C tells me they are still trying to rectify and get their reports back out of your system. You set my intelligence work personally back a good piece with that blunder.”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

Sorcha glanced at Shiggy, “A sorry now—that’s perhaps a little bit of progress.” She flipped to the next section, “Section V, immediately moved you to Section VII. What kind of trouble could you get into in economic intelligence?”

“Ma’am, I could lose contraband while making a necessary transfer from one classified station to another.”

Sorcha leaned back, “And how exactly did you accomplish that?”

Shiggy twitched her thumbs together, “I took a wrong turn and ended up in the Thames.”

Without another word, Sorcha turned to the next section, “Section VII sent you to Section N where we exploit the contents of foreign diplomatic bags. What did you do there, dear?”

“Ma’am, while in section N, I acc...” Sorcha reached for the wand. “I unintentionally placed incriminating evidence in another government’s diplomatic pouch and compromised the entire operation.”

Sorcha’s voice sounded bland, “I really should strike you for that—you simply used a synonym for accident.”

“Please don’t, ma’am. I shan’t do it again.”

“What did you leave in the diplomatic pouch?”

“My identification badge. Because I lost it, I couldn’t get back out of the building that evening, so I pulled the emergency alarm.”

Sorcha put her face in her hands, “What was the emergency?”

“I couldn’t get out of the building... ma’am.”

“What about the bag?”

“Ma’am, it had gone out with the normal operational mail flow that afternoon.”

“I’m certain they debriefed you. The bag was an emergency, you were not.”

“Ma’am, my ID was in it.”

“You really don’t get it, do you?”

Shiggy stuttered, “I can’t believe I made such a terrible mistake.”

Sorcha clapped the ash stick on the table, “But you did. You did make a terrible mistake. It was all your fault—every bit of it.”

Tears streamed down Shiggy’s cheeks, “Yes ma’am, it was all my fault—every bit of it.”

Sorcha flipped to the next section, “Section N for some reason thought you would be a better fit in Section D. Perhaps, they have a vendetta against Section D. I can see nothing but danger putting a person like you in an organization that conducts political covert actions and paramilitary operations. They obviously didn’t study your dossier.”

“Actually, ma’am, I think they received an expurgated dossier. The one I carried to them was much thinner than this one.”

“You didn’t expurgate it yourself, did you?”

Shiggy’s lips twitched, “Of course not. I’d never do something like that... ma’am.”

Sorcha flicked the very thick folder under Shiggy’s nose. She tapped the tip of Shiggy’s nose a couple of times, “Well luckily we have the whole of it right here, and I wouldn’t miss a single bit of it. What happened in Section D?”

“Well ma’am, you see...you see. I’ve always had a little problem with driving. I was driving an American SUV as part of a combat team and lost control in a turn. The vehicle rolled...”

“Yes, go on...the results.”

Yes, ma’am, the vehicle rolled and that sent five members of the team to hospital.”

“How many members were on the team?”

“Six...ma’am...I had my seatbelt on.”

Sorcha turned to the next folder section, “Section D decided to send you over to hostage recovery operations. I see they continued to allow you to carry firearms and operate machinery.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened just before you became my trainee?”

“Your trainee, ma’am?”

Sorcha leaned closer and grabbed Siggy’s long very blond hair. She gave Shiggy’s head a shake, “You are my slave, Shiggy and don’t you forget it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sorcha leaned back in her chair, “Tell me. I know anyway, but you might as well get it off your chest.”

“Well, ma’am, I was part of a hostage recovery group training. We assaulted the house where the hostages were being held. I was in the back and put away my weapon to disarm one of the terrorists. When I pulled my pistol back out, it fired and struck one of the hostages.”

Sorcha’s voice sounded droll, “So you shot one of the hostages?”

“It was a laser scored exercise. We didn’t carry live rounds. The laser recorded a hit from my weapon on the hostage. Then one of the instructors shot me in the buttocks with a tranq.” Shiggy looked like she wanted to rub her bottom where she had been shot. “I’m not sure why they did that...”

“They did it for me.”

“For you, ma’am?”

“I’ve been waiting for years to acquire someone just like you.”

“Like me?” Shiggy let out a trace of a smile.

Sorcha stood, “Let’s face it. You are a ditz and a klutz. You can’t be trusted to do anything that requires quick thinking or manual dexterity. You don’t work very well under pressure, and you have never been made to take responsibility for any of your actions.”

“That’s not exactly true or fair, ma’am.”

“What part isn’t true, Shiggy?”

Shiggy didn’t respond.

“Well it so happens, Miss Shiggy, at this instant, you are the most dangerous person to Britain on the face of the globe.”

Shiggy pouted, “That isn’t entirely true either, ma’am.”

Sorcha shook her head and grabbed Shiggy’s cheeks, “Don’t remove your hands from the table.”

Shiggy nodded.

Sorcha pinched Shiggy’s cheeks, “You really don’t get it. You have been in the bowels of MI6. You have seen and single-handedly compromised most of the British intelligence structure. What do you think we can do with you now? We don’t kill people anymore for being irresponsible or clumsy. You are both. You’ve sent more than a hundred of our people to hospital and none of the enemy. You do realize the purpose of our intelligence services is to make the bad guys die for their country, not our guys.”

“I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Yet,” Sorcha pinched Shiggy’s cheeks so hard, she couldn’t speak. “I have a job for you that will keep you safely out from underfoot. It will put to use your prodigious intellect, and not

put other people at risk. It will help me with my job—plus I now own my own slave. Can you cook?”

Shiggy nodded, yes.

“Can you clean?”

Another, yes.

“Can you think?”

Another nod.

Sorcha smiled, “If you please me and do as I ask, the world will be pleasant for you. If you do not, it will be hell. Do I make myself clear?”

Shiggy’s eyes bulged slightly from the pressure on her cheeks. She nodded.

Sorcha released her face, “Good.”

Shiggy fell back slightly. She barely kept her hands on the table.

Sorcha sat back down, “Now, whose fault was the shooting at Sandhurst.” She stared at Shiggy. She tapped her ash wand.

Shiggy couldn’t look her in the eye. She stuttered, “It was my fault, ma’am.”

“Whose, fault the nerve gas problem in science?”

“My fault, ma’am.”

“Who designed an organizational database system that did just the opposite?”

“I made it, ma’am.”

“Who lost contraband in the Thames?”

“I did, ma’am.”

“Who sent codes to our enemies?”

“I did, ma’am.”

“Whose ID found itself in a foreign country’s diplomatic pouch and caused an international incident?”

“Mine did, ma’am.”

“Who wrecked an SUV and sent five of her team members to hospital?”

“I did, ma’am.”

“Finally, who killed a hostage during a hostage recovery exercise?”

“It wasn’t a real kill, ma’am.”

Sorcha shook her head, “If it had been real, you would have killed a person, Shiggy.”

Shiggy sobbed, “I did it, ma’am. I did all of that.”

Sorcha smiled. She stood, grabbed a towel, wet it at the sink, and threw it to Shiggy, “Clean your face, and I’ll take you to your room. You can put on your clothing. For better or worse, you are now a member of Stela in the Organization.”