

Masterminds

by

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CHARACTERS

MILTON (or MYRTLE), *a writer with high and lofty ideas*

JAMES (M), *a writer drawn to the grit of pulp detective stories*

ERNIE (or ERMA), *a writer who writes for the fun of it*

NICK NITRO (M), *self-employed mercenary of justice*

NATASHA (F), *a femme fatale with a plan*

ELLIOT (M), *a bitter victim seeking meaning*

(F) indicates a female role

(M) indicates a male role

TOTAL ROLES: 6 (1 female, 3 male, 2 male or female)

RUNNING TIME

About 75 minutes

SYNOPSIS

As three writers struggle towards collaboration all of their worst ideas begin to spring to life on the empty stage. Beginning with the sudden appearance of the demanding audience the authors are thrust into the middle of their own unfinished works. Ernie finds himself hunted by Nick Nitro, action hero, who takes Ernie for his arch-nemesis, while James throws himself a little too deeply into the part of hard-boiled private eye Danny Stone and his relationship with the seductive Natasha. Meanwhile Milton struggles with his own internal demons as his character Elliot demands a reason for the crippling disability Milton has written into him. Dissatisfied with Milton's highbrow rationales for his suffering, Elliot begins to weave the stories together in an effort to control his own, and the three writers find their lives hijacked by the hilarious nightmares of their own imaginations.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Masterminds was first performed by SPARK theater + dance in Minneapolis, Minnesota April 12th through May 6th, 2007. It was directed by Corey Mills with the following cast:

MILTON	Kevin Thomas Whitby
JAMES	Corey Mills
ERNIE	T. James Belich
NICK NITRO	Doug Aamo
NATASHA	Catherine Reeder
ELLIOT	Robert Larsen

(The lights are already up on stage from the time the audience enters. Upstage there is a whiteboard or chalkboard with nothing written on it. A table with several chairs sits at stage right, while a small desk with a single chair sits at stage left. Pieces of paper with scribbled notes are strewn all over the stage, the table, and the desk. Most of the pieces of paper have been crumpled up as if tossed aside. MILTON enters and looks at the whiteboard.)

MILTON

Still blank.

(MILTON exits. JAMES enters, sets his bag down at the desk, crosses over to whiteboard, stares at it, and then exits. MILTON immediately re-enters, inspired. He crosses to the table, looks at some papers, and crosses over to the whiteboard. He writes: "Our Play: Act I: The Suffering Hero... Suffers" and then sits down at the table. JAMES re-enters.)

JAMES

Hey Milt.

MILTON

Hey.

(JAMES notices the whiteboard. He crosses to it, crosses out "suffering" and writes "dangerous." MILTON notices, shoots him a look, and JAMES sits at the desk. There is a moment of silence.)

JAMES

Where's Ernie?

(ERNIE enters kicking a wadded up paper ball across the stage.)

ERNIE

Hey guys.

(He continues kicking it offstage.)

He shoots, he scores!

(ERNIE returns, notices the writing on the whiteboard, and doodles a picture on it. Chuckling, he sits at the table where he continues to doodle. MILTON stares at the papers. JAMES crosses and joins the others at the table. Pause.)

MILTON

Three months... How can we not even have a title?

JAMES
Well, there's always...

(JAMES turns to look at ERNIE who is doodling and making explosion noises, not paying attention.)

MILTON
Yeah, that could have something to do with it.
(ERNIE starts to chuckle.)

Yeah Ern?

ERNIE
Wouldn't it be funny if the audience showed up and we still didn't have a script?

MILTON
That'd be a nightmare.

JAMES
I don't even want to think about it.

(Pause. ERNIE tosses a paper airplane across the stage and they all watch. As they turn back to the table, MILTON notices the audience.)

MILTON
(To audience)
Hi...
(To JAMES and ERNIE)
Um, guys?
(They aren't paying attention.)
Guys!

(JAMES looks up.)

JAMES
What?
(MILTON points the audience and they both stare. ERNIE gets restless and crosses over to the whiteboard to doodle some more.)
Where did they come from?

(MILTON just shrugs as if to say, "I've no idea." ERNIE finishes at the whiteboard and turns around. He notices the audience.)

ERNIE
AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

(He falls over and scrambles back to the table where he hides.)

MILTON

Uh, hi, um...

JAMES

Can we help you people? We're supposed to be... I think there's been a mistake. We have the theater 'til ten.

(JAMES crosses to the audience, now more annoyed than anything.)

Can I see that?

(He grabs a program and the horror returns.)

Uh, Milt, what day is it today?

(MILTON tells him today's date and JAMES shows him the program.)

MILTON

It's... opening night? You mean now?

(JAMES nods. ERNIE emerges and looks at the program. They all stare at the audience. Pause.)

Well, at least we have a title.

ERNIE

(Reading the program)

Three struggling writers discover the magic of the theater as their worst ideas spring to life on the empty stage. Beginning with the sudden appearance of the demanding audience their lives are hijacked by the hilarious nightmares of their own imaginations.

(He looks at the audience.)

That is so not cool.

JAMES

Very funny, Ern.

MILTON

Yeah, good one. Nice try.

(JAMES and MILTON exit.)

ERNIE

Guys, wait, it's not me! You can't leave me alone with... Guys?

(He looks at the audience and attempts a smile.)

So... hi. I'm Ernie and... and... I'll just be a moment.

(ERNIE starts searching the papers frantically.)

There's gotta be something here... Ah ha! I know what I can...

(Finally, he finds the piece of paper he was looking for and reads from it.)

Got it! "Dr. von Heilsenwig, we meet at last..."

(NICK NITRO, action hero, bursts onstage.)

NITRO

Dr. von Heilsenwig, we meet at last.

(ERNIE looks at NITRO, then at the paper, then back at NITRO, confused.)

ERNIE

Me?

NITRO

It's over, egghead. Hand over the toxin.

ERNIE

What toxin?

NITRO

Otherwise you just have to ask yourself one thing...

(NITRO levels his gun at ERNIE who throws his arms in the air.)

ERNIE

Okay...

NITRO

Hard boiled...

(He cocks his gun.)

...or over easy?

ERNIE

Easy, easy! Look, hands up. Who are you?!?

NITRO

The name's Nitro, Nick Nitro, self-employed mercenary of justice.

ERNIE

(Looking at his paper)

Yeah, that's right...

NITRO

I'm the guy that's gonna revoke your funding. This one's for Dr. Finelight.
(NITRO hits ERNIE and throws him to the ground.)

Ring a bell?

ERNIE

No.

NITRO

He was a chemist, working in your secret lab in Croatia. The one that had the chemical spill and killed hundreds of innocent people. Yeah, I know all about your latest experiments in biological warfare.

ERNIE

I think you have the wrong guy.

NITRO

Dr. Finelight left a secret message before you had him killed. I know you're tryin' to bring your poison to America. And I'm here to stop it. Now give me the toxin, or do I have to get Patriot on your Act?

ERNIE

What?

NITRO

I'm gonna count to three...

ERNIE

And then?

NITRO

I'm burning your Bunsen.

ERNIE

Oh.

NITRO

One!

ERNIE

Milton!

NITRO

Two!

ERNIE

James?

NITRO

Thr –

ERNIE

Wait! Okay, you win, just one thing.

What's that? NITRO

What toxin? ERNIE

THREE! NITRO

AHH!!! ERNIE

(NITRO chases ERNIE offstage and we hear the sounds of them fighting. Soon ERNIE re-enters. He is short of breath. To the audience)
Did you see...? He's... he's really big...
(He pulls out an inhaler as NITRO re-enters.)

NITRO
You can run, doc, but you can't... The toxin!
(NITRO and ERNIE struggle over the inhaler and NITRO takes it.)
This isn't over von Heilsenwig. Justice never sleeps. I'll see you in your nightmares.
(NITRO begins to exit, but comes back.)
Although when I show up I won't be asleep. You'll be asleep, but I won't. Because I am justice. And justice never sleeps.
(He is about to exit again, but then he remembers his tagline.)
That's Nitro, baby.

(NITRO mimes his own smoke screen effect and exits. JAMES and MILTON then re-enter.)

MILTON
We can just ask them to leave, I mean we don't have to –

(ERNIE can hardly breathe.)

JAMES
Ernie? Now what did you do?

ERNIE
There was this... this guy... and he... he wanted this toxin... and pow... ugghh... and bam! So I... ahhhhh! And he... ow... then I...
(He mimes using his inhaler.)
...and he... uurrghh... and finally...
(He re-enacts NITRO's smoke screen bit and finishes, exhausted.)
That's Nitro...

MILTON

Calm down, Ern. Let's get you some fresh air.

(ERNIE and MILTON exit. JAMES crosses to his desk, picks up some papers and reads. He starts playing with his hat as he assumes the role of DANNY STONE, private eye. The lights shift as he picks up a cigarette and begins his monologue.)

JAMES

It was a dark night in the city. Dark with the soot of burned out hopes and rotting ambition. And there I was, neck deep in the ash pile. Valakov. "The Russian Bear," they call him. He was a nasty piece of work, but I was in too deep to get out now. Not alive anyway. The job looked simple enough. All I had to do was find a package. Of course if it was so simple why drag me into it? I guess there's nothing for it. I'll find his package, but I have to know what's in it. See, all the facts fit like a puzzle, but I'm missing the one piece that could bring it all together, the one piece that could show me the way out. It's got to have something to do with her. Who was she, and what was she doing with him? That look, the sly smile, and a body that just won't quit. Yeah, she's in it up to her eyeballs, but maybe, just maybe... Come on, Danny boy, she's way outta your league. Dames. You've had nothin' but trouble from dames, and this one... she's the worst kind. She'll chew you up, savor every morsel, then spit you out and step on you. Still, what a dame. I'd swear I could still smell that perfume, a scent like wild jasmine.

(We hear the sound of footsteps and a door opening. NATASHA enters. She speaks with a Russian accent.)

NATASHA

Good evening, Mr. Stone.

JAMES

I guess she wasn't through with me yet. She was still savoring and, fool that I was, so was I. She stood there behind the desk silhouetted against the window, the starlight like fire in her eyes. One look and she burned me straight to the heart. And I enjoyed it.

(To NATASHA)

Evening.

NATASHA

I hope I am not disturbing you.

JAMES

In the silence a car sped away outside the window. She watched it go and I caught a dangerous gleam in her eye.

(To NATASHA)

Friends of yours?

NATASHA

Admirers. They will be back soon.

JAMES

And then?

NATASHA

That depends on you.

JAMES

There was that look again. Like a cat toying with its dinner. I knew I was in trouble.

NATASHA

I have job for you, Mr. Stone.

JAMES

She came closer and the smell of jasmine and cigarettes made me dizzy. Or maybe it was just her.

(To NATASHA)

I thought you were Valakov's girl.

NATASHA

Victor is a fool.

JAMES

A dangerous fool.

NATASHA

But a fool nonetheless. I, on the other hand...

(NATASHA moves in seductively and JAMES pulls himself away.)

JAMES

What is it you want, Miss...

NATASHA

My friends call me Natasha, and I am certain, Mr. Stone, you will want to be my friend.

JAMES

And what makes you so sure of that?

NATASHA

I know where package is.

JAMES

What package?

NATASHA

Come, come, Mr. Stone, neither of us has the time. Victor's men will be back shortly.

JAMES

She went back to the window. She was nervous and it showed.

(To NATASHA)

All right, this is your game, sweetheart. What's the next play?

NATASHA

I did not start this game, Mr. Stone. I merely play the hand I am dealt.

JAMES

So lay it out for me, angel, what is it you're after?

NATASHA

I am playing for my life, Mr. Stone, and you for yours. Victor hired you to find package, yes? It is known as the Maltese Dove and it is priceless. If he finds it, he will kill anyone who knows of its secrets.

JAMES

And you know all about this ritzy bird.

NATASHA

I know enough. Victor suspects, that is why I am being watched. That is why I need your help.

JAMES

I see. So what makes this pigeon worth killing for?

NATASHA

It is better that you do not know.

JAMES

Valakov's offering a generous finder's fee for this thing. Why should I pass that up?

NATASHA

When you find the Dove, Victor will kill you.

JAMES

That would certainly put a damper on our business relationship.

NATASHA

There is more to this Dove than money, Mr. Stone. You must find package before Victor does. Both our lives depend on it.

JAMES

Let's say I do find this package and hand it over to you instead of the old Bear. What then?

NATASHA

I do not know. As long as Victor does not have the Dove we are useful to him.

JAMES

One look at her and I knew I was between a rock and a hard place. At least the view was improving.

(To NATASHA)

You think once you have the bird, you can make a deal.

NATASHA

No. But we may have what we need to be rid of Victor, to be rid of the past forever.

JAMES

That sounds nice, sweetheart, but Victor and his boys are killers. What makes you think I can help you?

NATASHA

Come, come, Daniel. You think I do not know the kind of men Victor hires? You too have a past.

JAMES

That was a long time ago, sister.

(We hear the sound of a car outside.)

Shhh. More admirers of yours?

NATASHA

I told you they would be back. He knows I am here, and he knows I am looking for the Dove.

(We hear the sounds of footsteps.)

You must help me, Mr. Stone, or he will kill us both.

(JAMES takes position near the door. The lights go out.)

JAMES

Hey, this is a private party!

(There is a crash and the sounds of a struggle. The lights come back up on an empty stage. After a moment MILTON enters, confused. He looks for the others, attempts to interact with the audience, and fails.)

MILTON

Hey guys, have you seen...?

(He looks around.)

Guys?

MILTON (Cont.)

(To the audience)

You're still here. Sorry about this. I wish we had... something.

(Slight pause)

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more..." Shakespeare? Sorry.

(MILTON thinks for a moment and then crosses over to the table. He begins looking through his script. ELLIOT enters in a wheelchair.)

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Excuse me?

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Okay.

ELLIOT

You don't know my story.

MILTON

Well...

ELLIOT

It's a human tragedy.

MILTON

What?

(He realizes ELLIOT is reciting his own speech.)

ELLIOT

I wasn't born this way, you know. I wasn't destined to be this way.

MILTON

How do you know that?

ELLIOT

I don't belong in this chair, this... this prison.

MILTON

How do you know that speech?

ELLIOT
You don't know me.

MILTON
Don't do that.

ELLIOT
You don't know my story. It's a human tragedy.

MILTON
Stop that. Who are you? James! James, Ernie?

ELLIOT
I wasn't born this way. I wasn't destined to be this way. I don't belong in this chair this... this prison, this broken machine. I used to be something... someone... beautiful... Oh I never walked, no...

MILTON
You are not Elliot, and this is not funny.

(ELLIOT looks up at MILTON helplessly. MILTON stares back.)

ELLIOT
Have you ever watched a child at play? They never walk. They run, they leap, they crawl, they spin, they climb, they swim, they swing, they fall, they race, explore, discover, adventure, fly, they... they dance, wild and fearless, wide open and hopeful. That was me.

MILTON
That was before.

ELLIOT
That was before.

MILTON
Before... before the tragedy.

ELLIOT
That was before the tragedy.

MILTON
And now?

ELLIOT
And now...

MILTON

All I have is hope. That all too faint, elusive spark of light among the shadows of despair.

(Pause)

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Yes, I –

ELLIOT

You don't know my story.

MILTON

I do, I –

ELLIOT

It's a human tragedy.

MILTON

It's about hope.

ELLIOT

I wasn't born this way. I wasn't destined to be this way.

(ELLIOT begins to wheel himself offstage.)

MILTON

Wait, I have it... it's here, I...

ELLIOT

I don't belong in this chair, this prison.

MILTON

Wait!

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

(ELLIOT exits. MILTON follows until he is gone. He then goes back to his notes, visibly shaken, and sits down to read. A moment later he scatters the papers and remembers the audience at the same time. JAMES and ERNIE re-enter.)

JAMES

And you wrote yourself in as the villain?

ERNIE

Yes. I mean no... I mean... The point is, Nick Nitro came to life and kicked the crap out of me.
(Referring to the audience)

Ask them, they saw it.

JAMES

Sure, Ern. I have to admit, this is some gag. Be nice, though, if you could put this much energy into actually writing our play.

ERNIE

It's not me, James! Milton, tell him.

(MILTON does not respond.)

Milton?

JAMES

He's not buying it either, Ern.

ERNIE

The program! Remember the program?

JAMES

You expect me to buy that?

ERNIE

Yes!

JAMES

Come on...

ERNIE

Milton?

(Still no response.)

JAMES

Typical.

(JAMES goes back to his desk and looks at his papers.)

ERNIE

All right, I'll prove it to you... somehow.

(He thinks.)

Think of something, anything.

What? JAMES

Just do it. ERNIE

Fine. A fish. JAMES

What kind? ERNIE

I don't care. A halibut. JAMES

And do we have one backstage? ERNIE

Of course not. JAMES

(A fish is tossed to ERNIE from backstage and he shows it to JAMES triumphantly.)

See? ERNIE

(Surprised)
Where did you get that? JAMES

ERNIE
You thought of it and... poof! There it was. How could I have known that, huh?

(JAMES doesn't have an answer. It looks like he might be starting to buy into it.)

Enough games! JAMES

It's not a game, James. MILTON

Not you too. JAMES

MILTON

It's all real.

ERNIE

See? I told you.

JAMES

Oh I get it, you guys are in it together.

MILTON

It's not a game!

ERNIE

Them, what about them?

(ERNIE goes out into the audience.)

If it's our ideas coming to life, then that's where they came from, right?

JAMES

(Exasperated)

Sure, Ern.

ERNIE

And if whatever we think of happens, then they should do whatever we say, right?

JAMES

(Surprised by his logic)

Okay...

ERNIE

(To the audience)

Everybody, a round of applause for my friend James.

(The audience applauds.)

How about a standing ovation?

(The audience stands and continues to applaud.)

Oh, my first one. Thank you, thank you very much.

JAMES

Ernie.

ERNIE

Sorry. Now, everybody go...

(ERNIE makes a silly sound and gesture. The audience repeats it. ERNIE does a couple more. ERNIE looks at JAMES triumphantly.)

JAMES

(To himself)

Then it wasn't a dream?

ERNIE

(With a sudden inspiration)

Ooh! Ooh!

MILTON

Yes, Ernie?

ERNIE

(Doing the "Jedi mind trick" on the audience)

Everybody go, "I love this show. It's the best thing I've ever seen. I will tell all my friends..."

JAMES

Ernie, cut it out.

ERNIE

Hey, it was worth a shot.

(They continue the game and the power of it transforms ERNIE into Heilsenwig.)

Everybody go, "That muscle bound fool will never stop me this time!"

(NITRO appears upstage, toting his shotgun as usual.)

NITRO

Everyone go, "Oh crap! Nick Nitro's back!"

ERNIE

Oh crap, Nick Nitro's back!

JAMES

I'm convinced.

MILTON

Ah!

ERNIE

Guys, Nick. Nick, the guys.

NITRO

(Holding the inhaler he took from ERNIE before.)

Nice trick, Heilsenwig. Now hand over the real toxin, or do I have to come get it?

ERNIE

Oh crap, not again.

(NITRO chases ERNIE who hides in the audience.)

Keep him away from me!

(NITRO is stopped at the edge of the stage.)

Hey, you can't come and get me here. Nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah! Come on, Nick Nerdo, give me what you've got!

(NITRO aims his weapon towards the audience.)

MILTON

Hey careful!

JAMES

You're gonna hurt somebody.

NITRO

They're protecting him.

JAMES

No! They... they've been drugged.

MILTON

Right, with mind control drugs.

ERNIE

Yeah, I pumped it into the room. Ha! They're all under my control.

JAMES

(To NITRO)

Watch. Okay, everybody go...

(He and MILTON do another round with the audience.)

NITRO

That's the most deranged thing I've ever seen. Come up and fight me like a man, Heilsenwig.

ERNIE

Drop your gun and we'll talk.

NITRO

Not a chance, Doctor. You've got something festering in that Petri dish you call a brain.

ERNIE

No I don't! Or do I?

(To NITRO)

Hey, aren't you deathly afraid of guns?

NITRO

What are you... ah!

(NITRO throws down his gun and backs away.)

ERNIE

Ha! It worked.

NITRO

You know I just I don't like guns. I don't like them in the house, on the stage... All right, I dropped my... gun. Come down and play, Heilsenwig.

(ERNIE storms back on the stage)

ERNIE

Heilsen-Vig, it's Heilsen-Vig! The "W" is pronounced as a "V." It's German, you linguistically challenged idiot!

(ERNIE grabs NITRO's gun and sticks it in NITRO's chest.)

Some hero, afraid of his own weapon, ha!

(NITRO grabs the gun from ERNIE.)

Huh?

NITRO

A real hero overcomes his fears.

(NITRO trembles and sweats for a moment as he handles his gun, but he quickly gets comfortable with it and returns to his old demeanor.)

That's Nitro, baby!

ERNIE

Ahhh!

(NITRO grabs ERNIE by the collar. ERNIE tries to run but it ends up with NITRO steering him around like a dog on a leash.)

Let me go!

NITRO

Give me the toxin.

ERNIE

Let me go or this whole place will explode!

(NITRO lets ERNIE go.)

NITRO

Huh?

ERNIE

Yeah, that's right, I have a bomb. If you shoot me... KABOOM!
(NITRO hits him with the gun.)

I said, KABOOM!

NITRO

You said if I shot ya.

ERNIE

Oh yeah.

(NICK grabs ERNIE in a headlock.)

NITRO

Disarm the bomb!

ERNIE

No!

NITRO

Give me the toxin!

ERNIE

No!

NITRO

Say uncle!

ERNIE

Uncle!

(NITRO throws ERNIE down who then laughs an evil, mad scientist laugh.)

Hey, that was pretty good.

NITRO

What's so funny?

ERNIE

I have a little surprise for you, Nick Nitro. See, I have your sweet Sophie under my mind control and she's carrying enough explosives to blow up this entire building. Sophie, enter!

(NATASHA enters as SOPHIE. She is blindfolded and holds a stuffed bunny, made up into a bomb, in her hands.)

Hey, it worked!

NITRO

You dirty...

MILTON

Wow, that's pretty good, Ern.

JAMES

Except for the bunny.

ERNIE

There's more. I have taken away her vision. On my command she will begin walking. If she stops, the bunny will explode. If she bumps into anything, it'll explode. If she drops the bunny, it'll explode.

(NITRO walks toward NATASHA.)

If you try to kiss her, she'll slap you. Then explode.

NITRO

Damn.

(ERNIE gets a puzzled look on his face; he feels compelled to leave.)

ERNIE

I have to leave now. I just do, it's one of those evil villain things.

(To MILTON and JAMES)

Igor, Wayne, with me.

(ERNIE begins to exit, but suddenly stops.)

One more thing. Sophie, walk! Ah ha ha ha!

(ERNIE, MILTON, and JAMES exit. NATASHA begins walking around the stage, changing directions whenever she is about to bump into something. NITRO may give her directions as well from time to time. He follows NATASHA around trying to shake her out of it.)

NITRO

Sophie, it's me Nick.

(No response.)

C'mon Sophie, you gotta snap out of it, you're holding a bomb! You know me. Do you remember the time you were being held for ransom by that neo-Nazi militia in the Everglades? They tied you to that pole and surrounded you with hungry alligators? I'm the one who chewed the ropes and wrestled you free.

(Still nothing.)

Or when you were taken hostage by the Armenian terrorists in Venice? I swam through the sewer pipe, climbed up the heating duct, and chipped my way through that cement wall with a hairpin to get you out. This hairpin, the one you gave me when we first met.

(Still nothing.)

Ah Sophie, it can't end like this. We've been through too much. I thought I'd lost you in Mozambique... and Calcutta... and Timbuktu, and... I won't lose you again. Not like that time on the Eiffel tower when...

NITRO (Cont.)

(Pause. He stops on center and opens his heart.)

Sophie, I've never told you this. I guess I'm just too shy. But I like you. I like you a lot, like more than a friend. From the first time I took a bullet in the chest for you in Nepal, I've had it bad. It's lonely being me. Savin' the world, blowin' stuff up. No one ever takes time to see past the Nitro, to the Nick underneath. I'd give it up for you Sophie, I'd give it all up. Heck, there are a thousand Nitros waiting in the wings to take my place. I want to settle down, with you Sophie. Move to Pennsylvania. Get married. Have a bunch of little Nicks running around blowin' stuff up.

(Still no response.)

You know this sounded a whole lot better in front of the mirror... Who am I kiddin'? C'mon Nick, she'd never go for a guy like you.

(Pause)

Ah but you can't just let her walk off and blow up. You gotta take a chance.

(NITRO stops NATASHA and kisses her. She slaps him and then takes off her blindfold.)

NATASHA

(As SOPHIE, with no accent)

Nick!

(NATASHA opens her arms to embrace NICK and drops the bunny.)

NITRO

The bunny!

(He dives on top of it.)

Sophie, run! This whole place is gonna blow. You gotta get outta here! Save yourself! Go on, go! Tell my dad the last several years have been awkward, but I really do love him. Come on, get outta here...

(He realizes the bunny isn't going to explode.)

What the heck is wrong with this thing?

NATASHA

(As SOPHIE)

Nick, why are you laying on top of a stuffed rabbit?

(Pause. NITRO sits up still clutching the bunny.)

NITRO

Umm...

NATASHA

What are you doing here?

NITRO

(Deciding not to open his heart again.)

Just saving the world.

(NITRO hands NATASHA the bunny. ERNIE peeks his head around the curtain. He re-enters with JAMES and MILTON who have adopted the personalities of his evil henchmen.)

ERNIE

What's going on? You were supposed to blow up.

NITRO

Looks like you rigged the wrong rabbit.

ERNIE

That's the last time I shop eBay.

NITRO

Face it professor, your evil days are over.

ERNIE

Not so fast, Nick Nitro. You've forgotten about one thing... my army of evil interns.

(He points to the audience.)

Everybody go...

(He makes another silly face and sound and the audience responds.

NITRO staggers back in shock and horror.)

NITRO

You may have won this time, Heilsenwig, but I'll be seeing you when I return here again... later, at a date to be determined...

ERNIE

Don't you mean, "I'll be back"?

NITRO

It's trademarked, you scumbag.

(To JAMES)

You! Slap him!

(JAMES obeys and slaps ERNIE.)

NITRO

That's Nitro, baby.

(NICK and NATASHA exit, both miming his smoke screen effect as they do.)

ERNIE

Ow! Why'd you do that?

JAMES

Mind control.

ERNIE

Man, that guy's driving me nuts!

JAMES

Why don't you just write him out or something?

ERNIE

You can do that?

JAMES

Why not? Then we can get back to something with a plot.

(MILTON crosses over to JAMES' desk and looks through the papers.)

MILTON

You mean something like this, James?

(JAMES crosses to the desk.)

JAMES

Those are mine.

(He tries to snatch the papers from MILTON.)

Hey!

(MILTON crosses away with the paper as he reads)

MILTON

The warehouse. Valakov's infamous warehouse at the end of pier 17.

(The lights change as NATASHA enters and takes her place in a chair. JAMES becomes DANNY STONE and takes his position, tied to the other chair, back to back with NATASHA's, while beginning his monologue.)

JAMES

I'd heard stories. Enough to know that if we didn't play our cards right we'd be taking the long walk. Last thing I remembered was the fight in my office. One hell of a headache told me I'd lost. Yeah, the ropes too. I could see daybreak through the cracks in the walls. I must have been out for hours. There were high windows on the side walls. If I could reach one of those I might get the drop on one of the guards outside. I thought Victor would ice us right away. Maybe he hadn't found the Dove yet. Maybe he was playing with us to find out what we knew.

JAMES (Cont.)

Maybe he was just waiting to kill us himself. Victor didn't take kindly to traitors. Either way, we were still alive. I didn't care what happened to me. I had to get Natasha away from Valakov, away from all of this. Yeah, I was head over heels. I felt that way the minute I saw her. I didn't care what she was into. She was a dame in trouble and I couldn't let her down. It may be lights out at the end of pier 17, but at least for now we were together.

NATASHA

Daniel. Daniel!

JAMES

Don't worry, doll face, I'll get us out of this. Here, try to loosen my ropes.

NATASHA

I'm sorry I dragged you into this, Daniel.

JAMES

You didn't, angel. It was Valakov... it was me.

NATASHA

How? What is this power he has over you?

JAMES

I could ask you the same question.

(ELLIOT enters as VALAKOV, followed by ERNIE and MILTON as his henchmen.)

ELLIOT

Secrets can be very dangerous, can they not? What will you do to protect yours?

JAMES

Apparently not as much you thought.

ELLIOT

Then why don't you tell her.

(He points a gun at JAMES.)

Tell her all about your mysterious past, Mr. Stone. No? You'll take it to your grave. Hiding the truth down deep inside to the very last. What about her? Would you talk to save her life?

(ELLIOT points the gun at NATASHA.)

JAMES

Leave her out of it, Valakov. She doesn't know anything.

ELLIOT

(Laughing)

That is not what I asked, Mr. Stone. I believe she knows much more than you or I suspect. But this, now, is about you. Tell us your secrets. You were in the army, were you not? Were you not?

JAMES

All right, all right, I was in the war. Intelligence.

ELLIOT

And after the war?

JAMES

Eastern Europe. I was an operative.

ELLIOT

You were a spy. Tell her about our arrangement, Mr. Stone. Tell her how your failure cost thousands of lives. Tell her, Mr. Stone, how you are a coward and a traitor.

NATASHA

I do not care about that, Daniel. I don't care about any of that.

JAMES

You stole those papers, Valakov. You set me up.

ELLIOT

And now I own you. It didn't take much for him to betray his country.

NATASHA

Leave him alone, Victor. It is me you are after.

JAMES

Quiet, angel. You overplayed your hand, Vic. You haven't got the Dove and you need it fast. So go ahead and fish, Vicky boy. I got the cards you need but the stakes are rising fast.

ELLIOT

I wonder what it would take for you to betray her. Tell me, what has she told you about the Dove?

JAMES

Oh she told me everything.

NATASHA

Daniel, no! He knows nothing, Victor.

JAMES

I know where to find your package. You take few of your boys here and you go straight to...

(Having freed himself from his ropes, JAMES jumps up from his chair, attacks ELLIOT, and knocks the gun out of his hand. ERNIE and MILTON grab JAMES and hold him.)

NATASHA

Daniel!

JAMES

Ha! Read 'em and weep, Valakov. You bleed just like any other man.

(ELLIOT pulls NATASHA out of her chair.)

ELLIOT

Take her.

NATASHA

Victor, please...

ELLIOT

You think you are in a position to negotiate, Mr. Stone? You are a bigger fool than I thought.

JAMES

You want your knick-knack? I can find it for you.

ELLIOT

And in return?

JAMES

Let the girl go.

ELLIOT

Very noble, she has obviously made quite an impression on you. Perhaps you carry more than secrets inside of you.

(He punches JAMES in the gut.)

Unfortunately, the girl knows too much. I cannot afford to let her go to the police. Besides, she knows where the package is, and she will tell me. You, Mr. Stone, are expendable.

(ELLIOT exits with NATASHA while MILTON and ERNIE punch JAMES several times. The stage lights go black. After a pause the lights rise and JAMES gets up slowly. ELLIOT and MILTON are gone. NATASHA stands in the corner and lights a cigarette.)

JAMES

You all right?

NATASHA

More so than you.

JAMES

I didn't really expect to wake up. Where's Victor?

NATASHA

Waiting.

JAMES

Waiting? What for?

NATASHA

I am sorry, Mr. Stone.

JAMES

Sorry?

NATASHA

In exchange for your life, I will take Victor to the Dove.

JAMES

That's not where the story goes, angel.

NATASHA

That is where I am taking it.

JAMES

I'll get us out of this, angel. Then you and me we'll –

NATASHA

No. There is only one way out now. Victor has won... for the time being. I told you, I did not start this game. But I am going to finish it.

JAMES

I won't let you go.

NATASHA

You cannot stop me. I'm sorry, Daniel.

JAMES

So you're going back to him? You're gonna give him this Dove and what? Hope he treats you nice? I can end this right, angel. I can save you. Save you from Victor, from yourself.

NATASHA

I know Victor will try to kill me. He will fail. I am not going back to Victor, Daniel. I am going to kill him. When I have the Dove...

JAMES

You think you can take over.

NATASHA

Goodbye, Mr. Stone.

(ELLIOT re-enters as VALAKOV and waits for NATASHA.)

JAMES

What about us, angel? Was that just part of the game?

NATASHA

No, Daniel. But I will belong to no one. Not anymore.

JAMES

This isn't the way it ends, angel.

NATASHA

We will see.

(NATASHA exits with ELLIOT. JAMES sits and pulls out a cigarette. Pause. NITRO mimes kicking down a door and bursts in with his shotgun.)

NITRO

Sophie!

(He notices JAMES.)

Sorry, guy. I thought you were someone else. I was, uh, looking' for my girlfriend.

JAMES

Me too.

NITRO

She's either lost or she's been kidnapped. To be honest I'm kind of hoping she's been kidnapped, because if she's lost it's like the third time this week. It's tough, you know, being a self-employed mercenary of justice when you spend all your time looking for your girlfriend. I can barely keep up with the payments on the moped of justice...

JAMES

Uh huh.

(Awkward pause)

NITRO

Anyway, door's open. I, uh, kicked it in with the boot of justice.

(JAMES crosses to exit.)

JAMES

Thanks, Mac.

(He exits.)

NITRO

Name's Nitro, Nick Nitro.

(NITRO crosses to center, looking for SOPHIE, as ERNIE enters.)

ERNIE

James, this Valakov guy is so cool. I mean seriously warped, but in an awesome villainy kind of way...

(He almost runs into NITRO.)

Whoa.

NITRO

Heilsenwig!

(ERNIE puts on a hat.)

ERNIE

What's that, see? Ain't no Heilsenwig here, copper. Name's Louie, Louie the Lip, ya got that flatfoot?

NITRO

Sorry, I... I thought you were someone else. Wait! You're one of Valakov's goons.

ERNIE

Crap! What story are we in, anyway?

(He takes off his hat.)

NITRO

It is you! Clever disguise, Doc, but you can't fool me.

(ERNIE puts his hat back on.)

Hey, where'd he go? You! Where's the professor?

ERNIE

I ain't talkin' to no copper. I ain't no snitch, ya got that?

(NITRO slips him a ten spot.)

He went that way, see?

(NITRO lifts ERNIE up by the collar.)

All right! All right! He went that way.

NITRO

Right.

(NITRO drops ERNIE to the ground and rushes offstage.)

ERNIE

This is getting really confusing.

(ELLIOT enters as VALAKOV.)

ELLIOT

Good evening, Doctor.

ERNIE

Oh now don't you start.

(He puts his hat back on.)

ELLIOT

Don't bother. It won't work on me.

ERNIE

Rats.

(Pause)

What are we doing?

ELLIOT

Waiting.

ERNIE

Waiting for what?

ELLIOT

Godot.

ERNIE

Oh I hate Beckett.

(ERNIE exits. MILTON steps out of the shadows and approaches ELLIOT. Lights rise on ELLIOT's wheelchair opposite. ELLIOT looks at it and his demeanor changes from VALAKOV back to ELLIOT. MILTON sits at the table and writes.)

ELLIOT

You don't know me. You don't know my story.

MILTON

It's a human tragedy.

(During the following ELLIOT climbs back into his chair.)

ELLIOT

Have you ever watched a child at play? Children, any child, when they're loose outside, they never walk. They run, they leap, they crawl, they spin, they climb, they swim, they swing, they fall, they race, explore, discover, adventure, fly, they... they dance. Wild and fearless... wide open and hopeful, they... play. That was me.

MILTON

I used to play.

ELLIOT

I used to play. I used to...

(He picks up a piece of blank paper and studies it.)

It's beautiful, isn't it?

MILTON

What is?

ELLIOT

The blank page. Do you know what my favorite thing about it is?

MILTON

What?

ELLIOT

If you don't like where it's going you can throw it away and start over. Must be nice.

MILTON

Hm?

ELLIOT

To have the power to change it all.

MILTON
(Looking up)
What if I gave it to you?

ELLIOT
What?

MILTON
The blank page.

ELLIOT
That would be wonderful.

MILTON
What then?

ELLIOT
Anything!

MILTON
And if it doesn't turn out the way you want?

ELLIOT
Just tear it up and start over again.

MILTON
That easy?

ELLIOT
That easy.

MILTON
When does it end?

ELLIOT
When it's right. It's beautiful, isn't it?

(Pause and then MILTON goes back to writing.)

MILTON
That was before.

ELLIOT
No.

That was before. MILTON

No. ELLIOT

Say it. MILTON

No! You don't know my story. ELLIOT

I'm writing your story! MILTON

I don't want your story. I don't want... this. ELLIOT

This is who you are. MILTON

This is the way you made me. ELLIOT

It's the way your story goes. MILTON

Why? What's the point, Milt? ELLIOT

I don't know. I think... MILTON

Is it so you can make some lofty observation about the human condition? So you can bear witness to human suffering? ELLIOT

No... MILTON

Then why? Tell me why you did this to me! ELLIOT

I don't know yet. I don't... MILTON

ELLIOT

So you can watch me suffer? So you can dangle me over the flame on your sick little web and watch me squirm?

MILTON

No!

ELLIOT

Then why? Damn you, tell me why!

MILTON

I don't know! It's not finished, you're not finished. I don't know why.

ELLIOT

Then fix it.

MILTON

What?

ELLIOT

Fix me. Change the story. I wasn't born in the slums. I wasn't playing in the field near that chemical plant. That poison didn't leach into the soil and make us all sick. None of that ever happened. Just change it.

MILTON

I can't. That's what makes you who you are.

ELLIOT

I don't want to be me. I'm Victor Valakov, I'm Messenger #2, I'm the bloody Queen of Scots, but I'm not Elliot.

MILTON

You are Elliot. You can't be anyone else. If I change it, you don't exist. Someone else does, but not you.

ELLIOT

I don't care. You can fix me. One stroke of the pen, Milt. One word from you and... magic. It's a human tragedy, Milt, but why does it have to be mine?

MILTON

It's about hope.

ELLIOT

Where's my hope, Milt? Where's my damned hope?

MILTON

Underneath the bitterness. Buried under the anger. An all too faint, elusive ember glowing among the ashes of despair.

ELLIOT

What do you know about despair?

MILTON

You have to give it up, Elliot. The bitterness, the anger, and the sorrow... Give it to God, Elliot.

ELLIOT

My anger is the one thing God can't take away. It's mine. It's the one thing that keeps me human, and if you won't take away the pain, I'll keep it. I'll keep it and I'll share it, with you, and with them...

(He looks at the audience.)

The world is pain, Milt, pain and death. Write that story, Milt, write that little tragedy. Find me the hope in all that suffering.

(ELLIOT holds a pen out to MILTON. MILTON takes it and begins to write.)

ELLIOT

That was before. That was before... the miracle?

MILTON

I wept. I wept uncontrollably until I fell out of my chair and onto my knees. I fell onto my knees weeping and praying, and I couldn't remember when the weeping had turned into praying, but there I was, praying on my knees for the first time in my life. And they held. My knees held me. I could feel the muscles in my withered legs working. I felt pain in my legs, all the way down to my toes. Glorious pain where before there was nothing at all. And still I prayed, not even aware of the words that were coming out of my mouth, but I was afraid to stop. So I prayed and prayed and wept as I stood up on my two useless feet and for the first time in thirty-three years I took a step.

(ELLIOT slowly stands.)

Then another... and suddenly I was back in that field of my childhood, dancing that wild dance of a child at play. The ember had burst into a roaring flame shining out hope and joy that blazed in my playing and...

(MILTON looks up from writing and sees that ELLIOT is now on his feet. He looks at MILTON, stunned.)

ELLIOT

And what?

MILTON

What do you want?

ELLIOT
 I... I don't know.

MILTON
 What does it feel like?

ELLIOT
 What does what feel like?

MILTON
 To be healed?

ELLIOT
 I... it's hollow. What have you done? What is this?

MILTON
 What is what?

ELLIOT
 You're trying to take it away. My anger... You're trying to empty me out.

MILTON
 This is what you wanted.

ELLIOT
 No!
 (He sits back down in his wheelchair.)
 You really don't understand, do you? You really don't know. You can't trivialize my pain, Milt, not that way. That isn't real.

MILTON
 It's as real as you are.

ELLIOT
 No. You don't see, but I see. You think I'm not real. You're wrong, Milt. I wasn't... but that was before. That was before the miracle.
 (ELLIOT crumples the page he is holding and begins to fade upstage into the shadows.)

MILTON
 Wait...

ELLIOT
 You don't know me. You don't know me...

(ELLIOT exits. MILTON sits and throws his pen aside. Pause, then ERNIE and JAMES enter.)

ERNIE

I'm just saying "Nick Nitro: the Musical" really pops, doesn't it?

JAMES

You want to do a live-action, shoot-em-up musical?

ERNIE

It'd be a hit!

(To MILTON)

Hey, Milt, you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost.

(Slight pause)

What are you doing?

MILTON

Waiting.

ERNIE

For what?

MILTON

Godot.

ERNIE

(In disgust)

Oh.

(He crosses upstage to the whiteboard.)

JAMES

You're such a geek.

MILTON

Yeah, well, we can't all write pulp detective novels, can we? That takes real genius.

JAMES

Well, I guess it's not "Hamlet," is it.

MILTON

Please.

JAMES

And what about your idea, huh? Where's he?

MILTON

Who?

JAMES

Come on, you've always got something high and lofty cooking up there. You're telling me you haven't been sucked into all this?

MILTON

There's no one, James.

JAMES

Yeah?

(He starts searching through MILTON's papers.)

MILTON

Stop it, those are mine.

(JAMES keeps searching.)

That's enough, James!

(He grabs JAMES and stops him.)

Just leave it. You don't want to know.

(MILTON and JAMES both sit. As this has been going on, ERNIE has slowly been transforming into HEILSENWIG, either frantically scribbling his designs on the whiteboard or pulling out a rolled up drawing.)

ERNIE

Behold! The most infernal, the most diabolical, the most deadliest invention ever constructed for the destruction of single being. Behold, the Nick Nitronator!

(He reveals his drawing and tries to explain it.)

You see this here goes into that, and then...

(JAMES and MILTON stare at him, flabbergasted.)

It's going to kill Nick Nitro. Igor, Wayne!

(JAMES and MILTON reluctantly become his henchmen. They look at the drawing and try to figure it out. They then cross to center where MILTON begins doing a movement and noise. JAMES joins in and together they form the beginning of the machine.)

ERNIE

Bigger, it must be bigger!

(They are confused.)

Oh never mind.

(ERNIE exits. He re-enters with any stagehands or other backstage crew and forces them to join the machine.)

JAMES

(Aside, to MILTON)

When did we get stagehands?

(MILTON shrugs and they keep going.)

ERNIE

Yes, that's it! No, wait a minute, where's the... the thing? The funny-looking thing in the front that goes phisch, phisch, phisch.

(ERNIE makes the motion along with the sound.)

Never mind, I'll get it myself.

(ERNIE goes into the audience and gets a volunteer who he places in the machine, instructing the volunteer on the action and sound they are to perform.)

That's it! Now, bring out the victim.

(Pause. ERNIE sighs and goes backstage. He returns with NATASHA as SOPHIE. She is blindfolded and holds the stuffed bunny again. ERNIE places her downstage of the machine and puts a sign around her neck that reads "Nitro bait." He then steps aside and counts down from five. NITRO enters.)

NITRO

All right, Heilsenwig, hand over the... Sophie? Not again.

(NITRO crosses toward SOPHIE as ERNIE pulls out the toxin.)

ERNIE

Looking for this?

(NITRO stops in his tracks.)

NITRO

The toxin.

ERNIE

Yes, the only sample left in existence.

(NITRO steps towards ERNIE.)

ERNIE

Stop right there, Nick Nitro. You're no match for my big machine!

NITRO

Oh yeah.

(A tense moment as NITRO faces off with the machine. He notices the "plug," crosses over to the "wall," and mimes unplugging the machine. All those making the motions and sounds of the machine stop. Pause. ERNIE crosses over to the audience volunteer.)

ERNIE

I, uh... I guess you can go back to your seat now. You probably don't want to be here when... Oh this isn't going to be good.

(There is a moment of silence as the volunteer returns to their seat, then)

EVERYONE

AAAAAGGGGGHHHH!!!!

(Everyone screams and runs as NITRO breaks through the machine to chase down ERNIE. Everyone exits except for NATASHA as SOPHIE.)

NATASHA

Nick? Nick?

(She starts walking around.)

Nick?

(JAMES, MILTON, ERNIE and perhaps the stagehands enter and exit as NITRO chases them around the stage. One of them ends up using NATASHA as a shield. Someone else runs into NATASHA and the bunny becomes "armed" and starts ticking.)

Nick, what's that ticking? Am I holding a bomb again?

(JAMES bumps into NATASHA and ends up with the bunny. This begins a "hot potato" bit where the bunny changes hands several times. NATASHA pulls the blindfold off and watches the following with the slow realization that she is not SOPHIE. The bunny ends up in ERNIE's hands as NITRO enters.)

ERNIE

Freeze, Nitro, or I'll blow us all sky high. Ha ha ha ha ha!

(MILTON as WAYNE enters reading some instructions and calmly pulls out a wire which disarms the bomb.)

ERNIE

Oh that is so not Nitro.

(In "slow motion" NITRO punches MILTON as ERNIE tries to run away. NITRO then punches ERNIE who collapses. MILTON sheepishly hands NITRO the bunny and quickly exits. NITRO ties ERNIE to a chair, grabs the vial of toxin, and sets the bunny on ERNIE's lap. During all this

NATASHA fully drops the SOPHIE persona and puts on her signature scarf.)

NITRO

Nighty night, Doc.

(NATASHA hits NITRO over the head with her gun. NITRO collapses against ERNIE's back.)

NATASHA

I am sorry, Nicholas. You are too good to be involved in this.

(She takes the toxin from NITRO and looks around, waiting for VALAKOV. JAMES enters behind her as DANNY STONE.)

JAMES

Waiting for someone?

NATASHA

(Startled)

Daniel.

JAMES

Surprise, angel.

NATASHA

You shouldn't be here, Mr. Stone.

JAMES

Try not to sound so disappointed.

(Slight pause as JAMES notices ERNIE and NITRO.)

Quite a collection you've got there, sweetheart.

NATASHA

This does not concern you any more.

JAMES

So that's how it is. You look nervous, angel. Victor?

NATASHA

He will be here shortly.

(NATASHA clutches the gun in her coat pocket. JAMES produces a figure of a dove in plain wrapping.)

JAMES

Looking for this, I suppose. Surprise again, angel.

NATASHA

The dove.

JAMES

Looks like I got in first. The question now is what do I do with it?

NATASHA

You don't know what you're doing, Daniel.

JAMES

You ever been in love, sweetheart?

(NATASHA looks at him for a moment.)

That wasn't love. You wore me like a sock puppet then threw me to the dogs when I got in the way. No, I'm talking about the kind of love you can't control. The kind that wakes you up in the night, pounding on your chest so you can't sleep, or eat, or think or do anything but walk around in a dream. Well I'm awake now, angel. I'm wide awake and I'm looking at you.

(NATASHA laughs.)

NATASHA

There is more to me than you could possibly understand, Daniel.

JAMES

You've got no secrets from me, sister. I know you like a book.

NATASHA

Daniel, the dove is not what you think.

JAMES

This was never about the dove for me, angel, but you wouldn't understand that. Here, take it and go, but then what? That's the part I can't figure. You can kill Valakov, but there's plenty to take his place. That's right, you're going to take over. What is it about this thing that –

NATASHA

That thing is worthless. It is a decoy, a fake.

JAMES

(Looking at the dove angrily)

Clever. Just bait for your little bear hunt. It doesn't matter. Valakov, the dove, the conspiracy, none of it. This is about you and me, angel, and it's my game.

NATASHA

You're not holding the deck anymore, Daniel.

(NATASHA reaches for her gun, but JAMES grabs her.)

JAMES

Not so fast, sweetheart.

(JAMES kisses NATASHA forcibly. She pushes him away and aims the gun at him. NATASHA loses her accent during the following speech.)

NATASHA

You are a fool, Daniel. You think you love me? You don't even know me. I am the Maltese Dove, Daniel. I hold the secret Victor is looking for: a dangerous formula that will bring great wealth and power. A choice. For the first time in my life it is my choice and I won't go back. Goodbye, Daniel.

(JAMES steps forward, but NATASHA cocks the gun.)

Don't make me do this. I won't belong to anyone. Not even you.

JAMES

You can't shoot me. See, I'm the hero, baby. And the hero always gets the girl. This is my story and that's the way the story goes.

(JAMES moves closer. NATASHA raises the gun to fire as from the shadows ELLIOT enters as VALAKOV.)

ELLIOT

Well played, my dear.

NATASHA

Victor!

(NATASHA turns to shoot ELLIOT, but he grabs her gun and forces her downstage. ELLIOT then takes the toxin from NATASHA and addresses ERNIE, who along with NITRO has by now regained consciousness.)

ELLIOT

Congratulations, Doctor, on your brilliant work.

NITRO

Heilsenwig's working for you?

ELLIOT

Everyone is working for me.

(He turns to NATASHA.)

I was told the dove was both beautiful and dangerous, but to think it was nesting in my tree all this time.

NATASHA

Victor, I –

ELLIOT

I have been seeking this formula for a long time, ever since I acquired the secret results of the first government experiments from Mr. Stone all those years ago. When the good doctor finished the research in secret, he implanted the formula for the toxin deep inside your mind. Unfortunately your domesticated ape of a hero kept showing up to rescue you. In the meantime, you discovered our secret and decided to seize the formula for yourself, so you seduced Mr. Stone into betraying me. When that failed, you lured me here, no doubt to kill me.

NITRO

Is that true?

NATASHA

You'll never get the formula from me, Victor.

(By this time ELLIOT is standing at the writers' table.)

ELLIOT

I no longer need it. I have discovered something far more intriguing.

(ELLIOT sets down both the toxin and the gun and picks up a pen. MILTON then enters with the wheelchair. ELLIOT becomes himself again, but remains standing.)

You don't know me.

(He picks up MILTON's script.)

MILTON

Tell me your story, Elliot.

ELLIOT

I was the victim, Milt, of those first experiments. The poison that made me sick and put me in that chair, that began the cycle. Maybe I am the victim. Or maybe...

(ELLIOT tears a sheet of paper from MILTON's script.)

MILTON

What are you doing?

(ELLIOT crumples the first page and MILTON's legs begin to buckle. Throughout the following lines MILTON's legs collapse and ELLIOT continues to crumple pages from the script as he drives MILTON upstage and into the chair.)

ELLIOT

The all too faint, elusive ember burst to flame: a flame of vengeance, retribution, and anguish. A flame that would burn through the veil and consume the world if it could. I'm writing my own story now, Milt, my story and yours.

(ELLIOT continues to drive MILTON upstage.)

Frightening, isn't it? To see your fate coming and not be able to do anything about it. To feel your story coming true and happening to you. You look down on the world from your ivory tower and think you understand. You trivialize my pain, my reality, for some abstract idea of what... hope? Well what does feel like, Milt, to be broken? To be dragged down into the world you've made and have to face it for yourself?

(By now MILTON is sitting in the wheelchair.)

MILTON

You don't know me. You don't know my story.

ELLIOT

I'm sorry, Milton, but this is who you are. This is just the way your story goes.

MILTON

I wasn't destined to be this way. I don't belong in this chair. This prison...

(MILTON looks up at ELLIOT, questioning.)

ELLIOT

Poetic justice, Milt. Aren't you a poet?

(Referring to the pen.)

It's a metaphor, Milt. This is my pain, my power to change your story. To touch you, to touch them.

(He looks out at the audience.)

That's real. The darkness is spreading and you are powerless to stop it.

(To NATASHA, as he gives her the toxin)

Your turn, my dear.

(ELLIOT crosses to the edge of the stage and stands there for a moment. He then pushes through the fourth wall and exits through the audience.)

JAMES

So I guess it's up to you now, angel. What's your endgame?

(NATASHA gives the toxin to him.)

You're mine, sweetheart, and always will be.

NATASHA

No, James, I'm not.

(NATASHA starts to exit. JAMES grabs his script.)

JAMES

The name's Danny, Danny Stone! We could've been –

NATASHA

No, we couldn't.

(JAMES begins to tear up his script.)

I'm past that now, James. I don't belong to you... to anyone.

JAMES

Natasha!

(JAMES picks up the gun ELLIOT left on the table and moves to shoot NATASHA as she exits.)

ERNIE

No!

(ERNIE leaps toward JAMES, still holding the bunny. JAMES fires and ERNIE falls to the floor, motionless. The bunny starts ticking again.)

NITRO

Doc!

JAMES

Ernie! Are you OK?

(ERNIE comes to.)

ERNIE

The bomb.

(He fiddles with it.)

I... I can't stop it!

(NITRO jumps over to ERNIE and tries to take the bunny.)

No, no, you can't...

(NITRO lays a hand on ERNIE's shoulder.)

NITRO

Ernie.

(ERNIE lets go of the bunny and looks at NITRO.)

ERNIE

Nick...

NITRO

This is Nitro, baby.

(He runs offstage with the bunny bomb.)

ERNIE

No!

(He exits after NITRO. We then hear the sound of an explosion.)

JAMES

Ernie!

(ERNIE re-enters, obviously shaken.)

I'm sorry, Ern. I'm so sorry.

(ERNIE crosses to JAMES and decks him as hard as he can. There is a power in ERNIE we are seeing for the first time.)

ERNIE

That's for being so damn selfish.

JAMES

Ernie, I'm sorry, it wasn't supposed to go this way.

(ERNIE doesn't answer and stands at the table, grieving.)

Ernie...

(Pause. Rejected, JAMES exits. ERNIE angrily knocks some of the papers off of the table. He then gathers the pages of JAMES' script and turns towards MILTON.)

ERNIE

It's just a story. It's just a story, right, Milt?

(MILTON is silent and ERNIE exits. MILTON is left alone in the wheelchair and the lights begin to slowly fade. Pause. MILTON moves center.)

MILTON

I used to be something... someone. Have you ever watched a child at play? It's beautiful, isn't it? Pure potential, like a blank page, playing inside of us. We cover it up, with dirt, with fear, with words. The rubble of a world falling to pieces all around us. Still, that all too faint, elusive ember glows among the ashes of despair, waiting for hope, for love, for... I don't know... for God? To breathe life into it and make it dance like wildfire. To chase away the shadows, to burn away the refuse, and show us how to play all over again. It's beautiful, isn't it? The child at play. The blank page. Anything can happen.

(The lights fade to black.)