

**DIE FOR
FREE**

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DIE FOR FREE

Another day is coming to an end at this bullshit excuse for a job. I swipe my ID card quickly through the scanner before starting my nightly walk home. Of course, as soon as I step outside, I feel little rain sprinkles dropping on my face. Tiny trickles rapidly become a downpour over my head. I am so sick of this. My life never once has a moment of pleasure, something of pure bliss. I was physically abused from the first day I can remember. It's really all I remember about being a child, in bits and pieces that play through my head daily as I try to live this desolate life.

My face cringes as I recall lying on the floor, being kicked in the stomach by my father. All because I accidentally clogged the toilet, and he had to plunge it. He was a drunkard, but I don't blame him much. I'm not much better with my ongoing heroin addiction. I'm a lowlife like everyone else; I just don't try to hide it.

I finally reach my front door, pull out my keys to unlock the knob, and step inside. The place is a total mess. I never get much cleaning done. It's just too much to think about when I'd rather die every waking moment. Yet, for some stupid reason, I keep living. Thinking about the only pet I ever had as a child, I reach for my good old tourniquet to start my nightly ritual. As I tie the band around my bicep

and prep my arm for shooting, a quick memory of my old dog comes to mind.

I was lying on the floor, crying because my father had just beaten me to a pulp for spilling a half gallon of milk. After he stumbled away, my dog, Trip, ran up and started licking the tears off my face. He was the only being on this earth that was ever good to me. However, my dad decided to take him away when I was just 10. He dragged Trip and I to the backyard where he shot Trip and made me watch. I don't remember why it happened; I just remember something inside me switched off, and I was never the same again.

The memory slowly fades as the heavenly heroin enters my veins. My head leans back, and I take a deep breath, my entire body slipping into a state of nothingness. I lied; this is the one true moment of bliss I get to feel in this torturous life. To experience absolutely nothing is a blessing. Every problem vanishes, every tormenting memory flies out of my mind. It's like the Pink Floyd song, "Comfortably Numb." My eyes close as I start to drift out of consciousness. Now I don't have to think about a single damn thing as the heroin prevents me from dreaming, thank God.

My eyes open wide as sunlight beams through the crack in my curtains, warming my face. It's almost pleasant, but disappointment quickly sets in as I realize I'm completely dry. I need more of the good stuff before I have to work again tonight. I have just enough cash for the bus ride across town and for a small baggie that will last me through the next day or two. I pull out my phone and text my dealer. He promptly replies with an address. I put on a clean shirt and some

deodorant in an attempt to look “well-kept.” I slip on my shoes and head out the door.

It's now later on, and I walk away from my dealer, realizing I miscalculated. I don't have enough money for the bus to get home, so now I have to walk across the city for about an hour. I hate myself for being so fucking stupid. I feel completely screwed. I take a deep breath and sigh audibly, dreading the trek back home. I can't even enjoy the heroin without risking getting robbed in an alley. Frustration grips me as I think about how long it will be until I can find peace again. The thought of ending it all with one final heroin dose when I get home crosses my mind. It would be quick and painless, and I'd never have to feel anything again. It's a comforting thought.

The sun is no longer shining like it was earlier in the afternoon. It's now obscured by a mix of light and dark grey clouds. A gentle wind blows through my shaggy black hair, driving me crazy. I'm thinking I'll get a trim when I get home; I'm tired of trying to maintain it. About halfway home, I stop in my tracks as something catches my eye in my peripheral vision. I see a bright red piece of paper posted on a brick building in the alley to my right. For some strange reason, I feel oddly drawn to it. Amidst the grime of everything else, its cleanliness stands out, as if it was just recently placed there.

I walk over to the red paper, pick it up, and turn it over. It reads “Die For Free” in spaced-out white font with black shadowing. Below the text is a number that's out of my area code. My stomach knots as I finish reading the paper. Die for free? What kind of ad is this? I shrug to myself, fold the paper in half, and tuck it into my inside coat pocket. Deep down, I know I probably lack the courage, but something inside me feels like this might come in handy, and probably soon.

I eventually find myself at my front door, remembering that I left it unlocked, thinking the trip would be quicker. I hurry to my bed—a

mattress lying directly on the floor without a bed frame or box spring. Dirty cups and plates are stacked around the stained cushion. I was living like a king over here. Trying to clear my mind, I quickly pull out my little baggie and do what I do best: get high.

I don't shoot up enough to nod off like I did the night before; I take just enough to relax and close my eyes. As I remove my jacket to get more comfortable, the red paper falls out of my pocket. I start reading it again, just to make sure I didn't imagine that absurd ad earlier. There it is in bright white letters: "Die For Free," written on the red paper right in front of me. I begin to ponder my life. I'm stuck in a dead-end job at a call center with no real family. My parents disowned me long ago for coming out as bisexual. I don't know what I did to deserve this life. I feel cursed, doomed from the start. I've never experienced a romantic relationship and probably never will. I'm too awkward and repulsive for most people. People rarely keep their gaze on me for more than a second as I walk by them. Thinking I'm destined to be alone forever, I glance back at the paper.

With everything swirling in my head, I decide to look up the number on the internet. To my surprise, nothing pops up. I muster the courage to text the number. I'm not going anywhere with my life, and I truly have nothing to live for. I'm a nobody—no one would even notice if I were gone, so why not? I type out a simple "Hello?" and send the message, then wait for a reply. When nothing happens, I brush it off as a sick joke and start tying a tourniquet around my arm for the millionth time. As I prep the vein, my phone dings. I look down to see a text from the mysterious number.

"Are you sure?" is the only reply. I answer, "Yes," and wait for another response. After lingering for another ten minutes, I decide to shoot up once more. Just then, my phone chimes again. This time, the text asks for my name. I reply, "Findley," and stand by once again.

After 25 minutes with no response, I shift my attention to a weird indie horror movie I found on a bootleg website, trying to forget that I have to go to work in an hour. The high wears off sooner than I'd like, as always. I lazily get up to brush my rotting teeth before heading out the door, but I don't receive another text from that number.

I'm halfway through my night shift now, dealing with a very enraged customer over a simple issue that even a toddler could solve. As I consider just hanging up and walking away from this shitty job, I get a text on my phone. I finish the call with the frustrating woman and check my device. The message is from a different number than the one that texted earlier.

"Go outside," is all the message says. I push my computer chair back from my desk and ask my boss for a quick smoke break. With his permission, I head out the back door and scan the street with caution. I don't see anything nearby, just a single light illuminating the brick building behind me above the door. I take another look around, and then I spot someone. Across the street, a man in a long beige trench coat emerges from behind the brush and begins walking towards me. "How fitting," I think to myself, "and super original." A textbook creep is coming my way. I start to tense up as he crosses the street to approach me, and the worst scenarios begin playing through my mind.

"Please, no! Not like this!" I scream at him, my voice trembling with fear. "I need to be unaware of it, I don't want to see it coming!" I beg, my heart racing uncontrollably. The man keeps advancing, slipping his hand inside his coat. I'm paralyzed with dread, convinced he's about to pull out a weapon and end my demise. I feel a surge of panic, and

the fear is so intense I'm on the verge of losing control of my bladder. I start to hyperventilate as he stops right in front of me and slowly pulls out a small package from his coat pocket.

"Calm the fuck down," he sneers, holding the package out towards me. "Take this and shut up."

I hesitantly reach for the package and examine it closely. The side facing me has "Do Not Open" stamped in large, red letters. I flip the package over to investigate further and notice land coordinates written on it. The coordinates point to a location in the next town over. I stare at the package, bewildered, only to realize the strange man is already walking away from me.

The man ignores me, his back disappearing into the shadows as he walks away. I look down at the package, feeling a chill of unease. What could be so important about this package, and why am I the one who has to deliver it? With curiosity running through my head, I head back into work. I carefully place the cryptic package in my locker, alongside my other belongings. I try to focus on finishing the rest of my shift, but the mystery of the package lingers in the back of my mind.

A chime from my phone jolts me awake the next morning. It's around 9 a.m., and I'm never up this early. Groaning, I rub my eyes and fumble to find my phone. I open the text to read, "It's time to deliver. Don't be late." Unease settles in as I question the chain of events that led to this moment. What do they mean by "don't be late"? How late is too late? I shake my head, realizing with concern that I don't even have a car. I consider myself fortunate to have a place to live, but a car was out of reach with my meager salary. It's either

rent or transportation with this low-paying job. Everything in town is within walking distance, so I opted for the roof over my head. I never anticipated needing to leave town. I start to question the whole situation and wonder what could happen if I simply ignore it. I just want to die; I don't want to be doing someone else's dirty work. Why can't it be as simple as someone sneaking up behind me and ending it all with a bullet? I ponder this as I get dressed and head out the front door.

The sun filters through the trees as I glance up, and the birds are chirping away, their songs a reminder of their mating rituals. It always amuses me how people romanticize their calls, despite their true purpose. I pull out the package, a cold chill running through me as I enter the coordinates into my phone and start walking. The GPS estimates the location to be about an hour away. I can only hope that fits within their time frame for delivery. If not, I guess I'll find out what happens. What could be worse than being killed, though? The thought of being tortured makes me shudder uncontrollably, my mind racing with horrifying scenarios as I quicken my pace.

I continue walking through the outer edges of town, drawing closer to the rundown areas. I pass by decaying homes and abandoned lots, with weeds overtaking everything in sight. Then, I spot a child-sized bike lying unattended in someone's yard. I glance around, making sure no one is watching, and nervously approach the bike. As I steal it, I feel a wave of guilt wash over me. This bike is some poor kid's property, and I'm taking it to shorten this grueling journey. I try to make a mental note of the address so maybe I could return it on my way home. Even as the bike cuts my walking time in half and helps me reach my destination sooner than expected, the shame lingers. I can't shake the feeling that I've crossed a line.

The coordinates on my phone's GPS lead me to a vast field of unkempt grass, stretching out alongside a highway that runs into the city. The area is eerily quiet, the only sound being the distant hum of traffic and the occasional rustle of wind through the tall grass. It's a strangely isolated spot, the kind of place you'd expect to find on the edge of nowhere. The landscape is dotted with patches of overgrown weeds and the occasional weathered fence, adding to the sense of abandonment. I can't help but feel uneasy about delivering something in such a desolate setting. The whole situation is disheartening and confusing, but I continue on, clinging to the hope that the worst outcome will be my own death. I regret not bringing my stash to pass the time as I sit in the middle of the field, waiting for God knows what.

That's when I hear footsteps approaching from behind me. I quickly turn around to see a man in all black, wearing reflective sunglasses, closing in on me. Without saying a word, he extends his hand, signaling for the package. Trembling, I cautiously hand it over. He flashes a brief smile as he opens the brown box, revealing a silver spray bottle inside. Confusion overtakes me as I try to make sense of the situation. Before I can ask any questions, he suddenly sprays a foul-smelling mist directly into my face.

****BLACKNESS****

I come to in a dim, unfamiliar space, my senses overwhelmed by the disorienting confinement. A coarse, blindfold-like cloth is wrapped tightly around my head, leaving me in darkness. I can feel the rough texture of a thick rope binding me to a chair, its pressure digging into

my skin. My hands are bound behind me, secured so tightly that they ache. A gag made from a wadded cloth is jammed into my mouth, making it nearly impossible to breathe or make a sound. As I struggle to make sense of my situation, a grim realization sinks in. This isn't just a kidnapping; it's a clichéd, textbook scenario of abduction and murder. If I weren't so terrified of what's coming next, I might find the sheer predictability of it almost absurd. It's the kind of scene a fifth-grader might pen as a dramatic plot twist.

I wait as patiently as I can, given the circumstances, feeling each minute stretch into what seems like hours. Finally, I hear footsteps inching closer from behind me. I remain as still as possible, paralyzed by my restraints. Suddenly, I feel a pair of hands gently yet ominously cover my eyes. I flinch at the unexpected touch, my heart racing in response to the unsettling sensation.

"Guess who?" a woman's voice suddenly pierces the silence, sending a jolt of shock through me. The realization that a woman is behind all of this adds a new layer of confusion. My mind races with dread—what's going to happen to me? What will my fate be in the next hour? I begin to squirm in my restraints, trying to shout, but my cries are muffled by the cloth gag. Every effort seems futile. I grapple with my own thoughts, questioning what I'm really expecting from this situation. It's as if I'm forgetting that this mess started because I wanted to escape my own misery, but was too cowardly to end it myself. Do I genuinely want to die, or am I just a masochist feeding off my own melancholia? My muffled cries persist as the woman starts to remove the gag, silencing me in the process.

"There's nothing to worry about right now," she whispers soothingly into my ear, her tone both calm and unsettling. "This is just a precaution to ensure you don't try anything reckless while we provide our services. After all, you did reach out to us for help, didn't you?"

This is exactly what you wanted. Why resist?" I can sense the smile in her voice, as if she's savoring every moment of this twisted encounter. I gasp for air, struggling to find the right words, while her attitude hints at a chilling familiarity beneath the mask of friendliness.

"What's going to happen to me?" I ask, my voice surprisingly calm despite the escalating situation. I'm taken aback by my own nonchalance. She's right, though—this is what I've been longing for.

"Well, that would spoil our surprise, wouldn't it?" she replies with a hint of delight. She replaces the gag in my mouth and begins to walk in slow circles around me. Her footsteps echo around me, creating a disorienting effect. As she moves, her hand grazes my shoulder in a way that feels almost seductive—an unfamiliar sensation I can't quite place. It's a feeling I've never experienced before, though I can only guess what it's meant to bring forth.

I hear a door creak open with a groan and slam shut, followed by heavy, deliberate footsteps. I can tell there are multiple people coming. I tense up as they draw closer to me.

"Here they are! Just in time," the woman announces with an unsettling cheerfulness. She starts to remove my blindfold, gradually revealing the place before me. The warehouse is a neglected ruin—rusted metal beams sag under the weight of decay, and broken windows let in shafts of dim, flickering light. The floor is littered with debris and shattered glass, with peeling paint and mold-speckled walls. The sight of this ugly place makes me cringe as the blindfold slips away.

"Are you ready... Findley?" she murmurs, speaking my name with alluring intent.

Three men in deep red robes approach me. Each robe is cinched with a light brown rope belt, with golden medallions hang from their necks. It's hard to make out what's embedded on the medallions, but it seems like maybe some sort of religious symbol. The uniformity

of their attire suggest a ritualistic significance. I glance at the woman who has been taunting me, her black robe contrasting sharply with the red of the men's garments. Her robe, too, is secured with a rope belt, marking her as the leader of the group. I realize that the people standing before me seem to be a cult.

One by one, each of the men reaches into a box on the ground and pulls out previously lit candles, as if this ritual has been performed before. The woman takes a lighter from inside her robe and begins to light each candle, one by one. Once all three are ignited, the men start humming low-toned melodies as they raise the candles above their heads. I start hearing what I assume is Latin pouring from the woman's mouth. I've never heard it before, but with all this seemingly Satanic stuff, I'm just putting two and two together. This nonsense continues for a few minutes before they all fall completely silent. I realize I'm not even scared at this point; I just want this weird scene to be over. The woman starts walking toward me, stopping right in front of me.

Yesterday, you indicated through our devices that you no longer wished to continue living," she states, pausing briefly. "Our small but humble group believes that everyone should have the right to choose: either to live as long as they can, or to end their life early if it is unsatisfactory." She bends down and places her hand on my shoulder. "That's where we come in, to help you end what you no longer wish to have." She removes her hand and turns to walk away, continuing her speech. "We will assist in ending your existence in a way that benefits us all. Unfortunately for you, it won't be very pleasant."

The woman turns around to face me again, throwing her hands into the air as if performing for a large audience.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, staring directly into her eyes. I feel no fear at this point. I'm so over it all. This is what I want; I just wish it would happen sooner and these jerk-offs would stop screwing

around with me. I feel like a mouse being toyed with by a cat. The woman chuckles at my question.

"Sit back, relax, and find out." she retorts, winking at me.

The tempting woman walks behind me, and I hear something rattling as she picks it up. She roams back into my view, holding a golden urn-like object with a long spout. She starts chanting in Latin again, moving closer until she is almost on top of me. The three men grab hands, forming a circle around my chair. They start rotating around me. The woman lifts the golden urn above my head and tilts it slightly, dousing me in a foul-smelling fluid. It doesn't smell like gasoline, though. I wonder what liquid could be coating me as I gag and choke on the stench. I open my mouth to cough, only for it to pour down my throat. I vomit on myself as the woman continues to drench me in the liquid, laughing the whole time.

I might be a total loser and have completely failed at life, but I am no idiot. At least, not one who is too dumb to figure out what is going to happen next. I am being covered in an awful-smelling liquid that I can only presume is ignitable. I start to freak out a little as I connect the dots. I don't want to be burned alive; I've read about that and it's one of the worst ways someone can go out. I wonder what their goal is by burning me. Why couldn't it be ANY other way? I would even consider drowning at this point. The stories I've read about drowning always say the victim feels a wave of calm and acceptance before taking their first breath of water. Fire—dying by fire—is just an awfully violent way to go.

I start taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm myself as I realize what is coming. My throat burns as I inhale the fumes of the liquid. There is no way out now, and I don't want to die crying like a baby. I am the one who asked for this. Maybe it's not how I expected it to be, but this is what I wanted and requested of these people. I have to

face it like a man. Hell, I even think I could be like those monks who set themselves on fire in a desperate protest against the violent world. That's the thought I'll cling to. This is how I'm going to die.

The men stop circling me, and all three of them lift their candles above their heads. They then slowly lower them, bringing the flames closer to ignite my clothing. As I'm engulfed in flames, I try to hold back my screams, but can only restrain myself for so long before erupting in a wail that echoes off the walls of the warehouse around me.

"For you, our dear Taranis!" the woman shouts, reveling in the chaos with a bright smile. Staring me down as her chosen sacrifice, she begins to laugh.

"We beseech you for ultimate power of this world! Hear us, we beg you!" she cries out to her god.

My body is completely consumed in flames, and I can feel my skin blistering and boiling under the intense heat. A pain beyond anything I could have imagined overwhelms me, a torment I hope no one else ever endures. I try to scream again, but my throat is so scorched that no sound emerges. I can smell my skin melting off of my muscle and bones. Everything around me starts to blur and fade. I am disconnecting from reality, slipping into a dark void.

"We beseech you! We beseech you! Hear us! Hear us!" echoes in my ears as I sink into darkness.

Swallowed by the void, all my suffering ceases entirely.