**Erin Insists Her Show Must Go On!**

By LuckyDave1066

*She refuses to let an embarassing situation stop her!*

Even nearly a year and a half since that amazing night when she'd allowed her friend Maya to photograph her in the nude, Erin sometimes felt more like the events of that night were some kind of dream than her real life! Miscommunication had led Erin to expect to be posing fully clothed that night, and at first she was shocked that Maya could think she would even consider posing in the nude! She almost walked out on Maya, but eventually some previously unknown side of herself emerged, resulting in her agreeing to be photographed not just naked, but also naked with a man she'd just met!

Looking back on her photo session after some time had passed, Erin was both amazed and grateful that she'd been able to go so far beyond her previous comfort zone. "Way, way, way beyond it," she thought, "so out of character that even when it was happening it almost felt like it wasn't!"

Thinking about how her life had changed since that night, she often felt like the woman who left after the photo session was a very different person than the one who had walked into the studio just a couple of hours earlier; she couldn't prove doing something so extreme was behind the changes in her, but there was definitely something of a divide between her life before posing nude and after. She didn't end up doing any more nude modeling, despite being asked to several times. Surprising herself, she was a bit interested, but she restricted herself to posing for other students while wearing clothes, never in anything skimpier than a fairly conservative bikini.

The more important changes in Erin had nothing to do with her occasional modeling gig. She was generally more confident, outgoing, and willing to try new things. The semester after her nudes were exhibited, she was far more impressive in auditions and began getting some small parts in the Theatre department's productions; no big roles, but a distinct improvement over her first three semesters.

The following summer she took the advice of her faculty advisor and tried out several jobs to get a better sense of how people different from her lived and acted in real life. She spent a month in each of the three jobs she worked back in her hometown; first as an intern at a law office, then as a cashier in a supermarket, and finally as a waitress in a local strip club.

Neither her Dad nor Jeff, her boyfriend, were wild about her choice of where to do waitressing, but she assured them that her research didn't involve anything more exotic than delivering drinks to the patrons. She didn't mention being asked daily by the owner, "So, when do we get to see you on the stage?" She DEFINITELY didn't tell her Dad that she'd seriously considered giving it a try one quiet Tuesday night! She was surprised at how positively Jeff reacted to hearing that she'd almost allowed herself to be talked into making her debut as a stripper. Far from disapproving of her trying it out, he just asked her to let him be there if she ever decided to actually do anything like that!

Coming back to college in the fall of her junior year, Erin was more excited by the major she'd chosen than any time since the first few weeks of her Freshman year. Her new confidence showed in classes, including an Improv class she had steered clear of until that semester, as well in her now more frequent roles in the Theatre department's fall schedule. By the time the spring semester started she felt like she was ready to take on a major role, possibly even a lead!

A few weeks into the spring semester, Erin was cast in the next production, "Noises Off", a farce about a touring production of a (fictional) farce. The play within a play required her to play two roles, one with a British accent; both roles were prominent, giving her the biggest challenge yet. One of her roles called for her to portray a sexy but ditzy actress, while her other character was described as a sly tax department employee investigating one of the characters.

Between most of the cast playing dual roles, the rapid fire dialog, and the actors coming and going quickly via one of eight doors entering onto the set, there were more than a few screw-ups. Some cast members briefly lost track of which character they were supposed to be, came onstage or left via the wrong door. One low point came when an actor who was meant to confront another with a gun, eventually shooting it, somehow managed to go on stage without the prop! The mortified and unarmed aggressor held his hand out, pretending it was a pistol for a few seconds before the faculty advisor backstage improvised a passable gunshot sound by slapping a piece of wood against the floor.

During their post-performance discussion the faculty advisor, Dr Namen described the gun gaffe as "somewhat painful, but a learning experience." He told the tired cast and crew, "Never forget, in a live production there are no do-overs! Whatever goes wrong, unless someone on stage is in dire need of medical help, ALWAYS carry on and do whatever you can to keep going. Your audience actually wants you to get out of whatever predicament you find yourself in, but if you just stop and freeze you'll lose them, and good luck getting them back!"

Erin was relieved that she hadn't provided any bad examples for discussion, and was delighted to be singled out for managing to not only do a good job with her two characters, but also for not getting sidetracked when the set door she'd just entered through fell down right behind her. It had taken her a long time to be seen as anything more than a dumb blonde, and for the first time she felt like she was moving beyond the stereotype. To the extent that the classic dumb blondes often seemed to be sexier than their supposedly smarter brunette companions, Erin DID fit the mold well; she was almost shockingly attractive, tall and fit with a classic hourglass figure, a pretty face, blue eyes, and light strawberry blonde hair.

In the remainder of the spring semester the Theatre majors were split into several small groups, with each working on a different one act play. The groups all performed their plays two nights near the end of the semester. Seeing the other groups performing, Erin was sure her group was by far the most polished. Though there wasn't any public statement about how the groups were rated, she realized she had been placed in the top fifth of the department's students. She could hardly believe how much her standing in the department had changed; early in her Sophomore year she was sure the faculty members who knew her at all were trying to gently tell her that however pretty she was, she might be better off pursuing a different career!

In the summer before her senior year Erin once again tried several jobs for the variety of experiences. She worked at a day care center, then did a few weeks in a call center, then tried out being a farm laborer, easily the most physically demanding work of her whole summer. She tended bar the last couple of weeks before classes resumed, one week in an upscale pub and one week back at the strip club where she'd waitressed the previous year. The owner never let a night go by without at least briefly reminding her that she'd make a lot more money on the stage than behind the bar. Considering the new dress code for bartenders and waitresses consisted of nothing but bikini bottoms and an outrageously cropped t-shirt, Erin was seriously tempted, but skimpy as her uniform was, it was a whole lot more respectable than how the club's dancers ended up their sets, totally nude!

A few weeks into the fall semester, a notice was posted announcing auditions for the next major production to be put on by the Theatre department, a nearly 2,000 year old play, only recently rediscovered, which had only been performed a handful of times for 21st century audiences.

The notice included a vaguely worded mention of the play being a drama with adult themes, making Erin nervously wonder if she might have been wise to add exotic dancer to her list of summer roles after all! The warnings on the notice gave her pause, but she wasn't about to miss an opportunity. She signed up to at least go to an audition, and received an email the next day with a list of speaking roles, text of a scene, and a brief summary of the play.

Title: "The Mother"

Author: Seneca

Summary:

The play (lost since the 2nd century, A.D.) is centered on the relationships between Julia Livia, Widow of the previous Roman Emperor, Ursinus Gracci, brother and murderer of the late Emperor, and Julia's son, Lucius Publius.

Lucius is the heir to the throne, but was only 8 years old when his father was killed in a coup two years before the events in this play. Ursinus has married Julia, not for love, but to gain power by acting as a Regent, controlling the government in Lucius' name.

Ursinus has isolated Lucius, sending him to a remote villa, supposedly for the boy's protection, but actually intending to have him killed before he reaches adulthood, then claiming the throne for himself.

Julia learns of Ursinus's part in the murder of her first husband and realizes he won't let her son survive. She confronts Ursinus, telling him she knows about his crimes and will expose him.

Ursinus attacks Julia, they wrestle. Ursinus subdues her and is about to kill her with her own dagger. He offers her a deal, one day more of life for Lucius for each day she performs fellatio on him. Humiliated but desperate, she agrees.

Realizing Ursinus was not going to let Lucius live no matter how often she pleasured him, she fights back with the only weapons she has left, even though she expects him to stab her to death before he succumbs.

Monologue by Julia's ghost.

Erin read the summary several times. When she finally set it down she thought, "well they weren't kidding about the play having adult themes. I was thinking it might mean there was violence, and maybe some partial nudity, but I wasn't expecting a simulated blow job!" She was sure that the faculty advisors would stage the action as discreetly as possible, but as she pictured how it could be arranged in the Theatre department's small auditorium there didn't seem to be any way the audience wouldn't see enough to be shocked, even knowing the act was being simulated.

She signed up the next morning. Checking in with her advisor a week later, she asked how the audition scheduling was going. "You want to know how much competition you're going to have," Maria chuckled, "Truthfully, the numbers are down a bit; we're not getting the usual handful of students we normally get from outside of the department who are just giving being in a play a try."

"But the usual people from inside the department?" Erin prodded.

"You want to know who else beside you wants to play Julia. So far it's just a freshman who is not even close to being ready for this, you, and Hannah."

"Oh, I assumed Hannah would be going for it," Erin said casually, but was thinking, "Fuck! Hannah gets the lead in everything she tries for! I'll end up being second concubine from the left or something!"

Seeing Erin's barely hidden disappointment, Maria encouraged her, "you've come a long way in the last year. Don't waste your time worrying about anybody else, just focus on doing the best job you're capable of and you'll be fine!"

Walking back to her dorm, Erin couldn't make herself follow Maria's advice. Though most objective people would say Erin was prettier than Hannah, Hannah had way more experience than every other student in the department. Erin had looked her up online once and saw over a dozen credits for various parts going back to a year on a sitcom when she was only 7 years old! Now that Erin was starting to get noticed and praised for her work in small roles, she was hoping to get leading roles, but so far she had always found herself blocked by Hannah.

Auditions were held the first week of October; Erin's worst fear for how the casting would play out were realized, as Hannah was cast in the lead. Erin consoled herself with the fact that she was cast as one of a small handful of other female characters with more than a couple of lines. Her character was Flavia, a palace slave who warns Julia about the role Ursinus played in killing her first husband, as well as the danger to Lucius. "Not the lead," she thought, "but she does advance the plot, and she gets killed on stage, which I've never had to do before!"

During the second week of rehearsals the faculty advisor directing the play, Dr. Namen, pulled Erin aside, saying, "you're doing well, I know violent death scenes can be hard. But the real reason I wanted to talk with you was to ask if you could be an understudy for Hannah's part. We wanted to see how a few of you were doing before asking, and the faculty committee has agreed that you would be our best choice. I'm guessing you know all the lines, but you'd need to play Julia in a couple of rehearsals. We'll only have four actual performances, so the odds are good that you'll never actually need to step in, but we'd be taking a big risk if we didn't have a backup for Julia! Are you interested?"

Despite her lingering disappointment at not being cast as Julia, Erin agreed to prepare just in case Hannah ended up getting sick during the short run of the play. Over the next few days she tried, with limited success, to not wish some sort of short but debilitating illness on Hannah! Dr. Namen also recruited an understudy for the part of Ursinus, and the two understudies stayed to rehearse after the rest of the cast had knocked off most nights of the week leading up to the opening night. The backup Ursinius, Sean, was one of the few actors in the department noticeably taller than Erin, and was far better looking than Bret, the actor actually cast in the part. It took almost no time for Erin to see why Bret, not Sean, had the role. Bret was short, pudgy and often rude, but unlike Sean he could act!

The rehearsals went fairly smoothly, despite a few wardrobe problems. With the whole second act taking place in a bedchamber in Ursinus's villa, the director had planned on the actors wearing very light tunics, basically two plain rectangles, one in front and one in back, with a drawstring for a collar and a tie holding the two sheets together with small gaps at their sides. Beneath the two-piece tunic, they would wear simple undergarments, just a strip of cloth wrapped around their waists, and a second wrap around the breasts for the female cast members. Dr Namen explained that these garments were more historically correct than the togas usually seen in movies or plays set in ancient Rome, telling the cast that wearing togas in a bedchamber would be like wearing a suit and tie to bed today.

However historically correct the tunics and underwear might have been, during the first rehearsal where the cast tested out the tunics there were vocal complaints from most of the performers who were expected to wear them. They complained that the underwear felt awkward, like they might fall off at any moment, causing Dr Namen to tell them curtly that they needed to wear what he had designed or go without anything under their tunics! His declaration was answered with furious shouts refusing to go ahead with the play if they were going to have to wear his tunics without anything beneath the fairly sheer fabric.

He was forced to relent when Anna, one of the women playing a concubine, demonstrated the problem by reaching under her tunic and tugging off the band of fabric wrapped around her breasts. She let it drop to the floor and went about moving around the stage as she would during the performance, treating the assembled cast and crew to a more detailed look at her boobs than Dr Namen could possibly justify. Blushing deeply, he thought about the trouble he'd get into if he had a cast full of students on display as Anna was, with stage fully lit instead of being less than half that level, as it was then! He gave in, promising to have the fabric of the tunics replaced with something less revealing!

It wasn't until hours after the tunic protest had come and gone that Erin thought about how she'd been practically the only cast member, certainly the only female, who hadn't complained about the nearly see-through costume. It wasn't that she didn't know how exposed she would be if she wore it onstage; she'd tried the outfit both with and without anything underneath just a few minutes before the protest. Looking back on the controversy, she realized that if her castmates hadn't made a fuss about it she would have gone ahead with Dr. Namen's original outfit. She couldn't be sure if her willingness to be seen onstage practically nude was a sign of her being too eager to please the director, or, best case, that her experience posing naked, limited as it was, had made her confident enough to do this hard thing!

With the costume arguments settled, rehearsals proceeded smoothly. A clever crew member did research on how to make convincing stab wounds, bleeding and pooled blood, and found ways to conceal his handiwork from the view of the audience. By the time the one full dress rehearsal came, the cast and crew had gotten past the small goofs and technical glitches of the earlier rehearsals. Though appropriately nervous, everyone involved was pretty confident that they were ready for Wednesday and their first performance.

The first night went even more smoothly than Dr Namen had expected. The reviews in both the college newspaper and the local daily paper were full of praise, along with a carefully worded mention of the simulated oral sex as part of a warning in the local paper that the play's sex and violence might not be appropriate for children.

Erin sent links to the reviews to her parents, prompting a phone call from her Mom no more than 6 minutes after the email showed up in her inbox. Seeing her mother's phone number on her phone's screen, Erin braced herself for a bunch of questions about the sex and violence mentioned in the reviews. She was relieved to hear her Mom say, with obvious pride obviously proud say, "They mention you by name!"

"Yeah," Erin replied, "But I was just one of several cast members who were mentioned as 'capably supporting' the male and female leads. I guess it's better than not being mentioned at all."

"Of course it is," her Mom said, "and didn't you say you were the understudy to that Hannah who's the lead? You might get to do that part yet!"

"Not likely with only three more performances," Erin answered, "and even if I did, there won't be any new coverage in the paper, so..."

"But good experience, right? You're trying to break into a tough business," her Mom interrupted, "You need to take any break you get. Including being ready to step in if an opportunity comes your way."

"You're right," Erin replied, "thanks for the pep talk!"

"I'm just sorry your Dad and I can't make it to any of the three performances left!"

"Really, Mom, my part is pretty small, I don't think it would have been worth your while to make the trip for this one!"

"Well, let us know when you think it WOULD be worth it, we haven't seen you on a stage since high school!"

"I will. Love you, bye!"

"Love you too, bye!"

The remaining three performances seemed to fly by; everyone had their part down pat, and with some coaching from a couple faculty advisors after the first couple of performances made a few adjustments. The mood at the closing night party was jubilant, if a little dejected by the experience coming to an end just as they were getting good at it.

A week after the final performance of "The Mother", Erin received an early morning text from Dr. Namen. She opened one eye and seeing who the text was from set the phone down, her hangover insisting she get at least two more hours of sleep before dealing with any faculty member at 7:30 on a Sunday morning. She only was able to get one more hour of rest before a flurry of texts demanded her attention. Sitting up and focusing on her text app she saw dozens of messages, a couple from Dr Namen but most from classmates she'd worked with on "The Mother."

Since Dr Namen seemed to be the source of this ill-timed excitement, Erin scrolled up to his most recent message to see what it was about. She had to read his text a few times before she could believe the news:

"Good morning, boys and girls! Sorry if I'm disturbing your Sunday morning, but I think you'll forgive me when you see why. A friend of mine manages a theater which is going to be dark between productions the same week you'll be on Thanksgiving break. Having been mounted only a handful of times since the fall of Rome, and NEVER in New York, the Theatre world there is very interested in seeing the play we just put on performed there. There's a lot of details to be worked out, but I wanted to get in touch with you all to see if enough of you are interested and available. I need to let my friend know by noon tomorrow, so please get back to me before then. An opportunity for a collegiate production like ours to play on Broadway doesn't come up every day, so I hope you make the most of it!

The responses from her fellow cast and crew mates bounced around all morning, with the general consensus being enthusiastic:

"Hell, yeah!

A week in New York? I'm in!

Why WOULDN'T I?

On Broadway at 19? Yes, please!"

A handful of people were more interested in sticking to their already plans, but not enough in prominent roles to be a problem. With the students on board, Dr Namen worked on the logistics; he worked out a deal with his friend and a hotel near the theater to cover student lodging backed on ticket sales. If the play attracted large enough ticket sales, the students would divide the amount above their bill at the hotel. The college covered the cost of charter bus travel. All the students needed to pay for was their meals and whatever shopping or sightseeing they did. It took until Thursday for Dr Namen to work it all out, so the cast was limited to one rehearsal before their 7:00 AM Saturday departure. It hadn't been all that long since the end of their production, so by the time they'd finished one rehearsal they felt like that was preparation enough.

Arriving as late as they did Saturday, the excited group simply settled in at their hotel. They ventured out just long enough to get some food and walk around Times Square. On Sunday they were a bit disappointed to not be able to at least have a look at the place they would be performing in a few days, waking up to see a text from Dr Namen telling them that if the management opened the theater, union rules would require them to bring in a full maintenance crew to work, all paid double for an 8 hour shift just for coming in on a Sunday. The students made the most of the situation, doing every touristy thing they could think of as long as they had a day in Manhattan with no other obligations.

When the students arrived at their theater Monday morning, they were met by Raymond, a very apologetic building manager who told them a transformer supplying power to the theater had died early that morning, meaning nothing but emergency lighting was working. He assured them that his electricians were already working on removing the dead unit and a replacement was going to be installed by sometime that evening. "Better it died today than when you're in the middle of your play, right?" Trying to make up for the disruption, he offered to treat the group to dinner that night. As full of attractions as New York is, the students found plenty of ways to make use of another free day, with many taking advantage of discounted admission at some museum or another.

Most of the group took Raymond up on his offer of dinner, which turned out to be at a modest Italian restaurant owned by Raymond's cousin. After a couple of days sightseeing, shopping, and paying for their own meals, a free dinner of almost any quality would have been fine with most of the group. Dinner was nothing fancy, but the food was actually pretty good. The students good mood got even better when Raymond asked if they would like to make a quick visit to the theater after dessert. "The electricians are still doing some testing, but I can give you a quick tour if you'd like."

The tour left them in awe and a little nervous; their soon-to-be stage was huge compared to the Theatre department auditorium, which was more of an oversized classroom with stadium seating than an actual purpose-built theater. The lighting equipment, several areas on the stage which appeared to be trap doors or elevators, and various curtains were far more involved than what they were used to. The sheer size of the seating area dwarfed their usual venue at their college; "almost 2,000 seats here," Dr Namen informed them, "compared to 350 at our campus!"

A few members of the cast tried out some of their lines with castmates stationed at various points in the seats, getting a feel for how much they would have to project their voices. Erin chose to try out a line or two from the role of Julia, Hannah's part, thinking her status as the understudy for that part justified her practicing with them. She drew a sharp look from Hannah, who seemed to be offended by having to hear her part, even a tiny bit of it, delivered by a rival.

By 10 AM Tuesday the crew was beginning to set up the backdrops and furniture they had managed to rescue from a dumpster behind the campus theater. Looking around backstage and in various storerooms most of the day, they managed to find some other items to help fill out the large stage.

The cast practiced their roles in the unfamiliar setup, gradually getting a feel for how they needed to adjust their volume of their voices, and also how their movements around the stage needed to be adjusted to the larger space. After a late lunch, they were ready for a full run through, in makeup and costumes.

One hitch was discovered when the costumes were unpacked; the gold braid collars tying the front and back panels of the tunics were missing, apparently taken by another group in the department for another upcoming production. Dr Namen was furious, but calmed down when he realized what a disaster it would have been to find out about the problem just before the curtain went up on opening night. He wasn't exactly happy with the solution suggested by a crew member, gold colored felt strips pinned together, but agreed that they didn't look too bad from the audience's vantage point.

There were a handful of technical adjustments to be made in response to problems discovered during the run through, mostly in the placement of props and small containers of fake blood used where violence was to be portrayed. Testing the staged bloodletting helped the crew revise their gore, but since they had no extra tunics, the crew was forced to launder a few of the bloodied outfits. Since Erin's role as Flavia, the doomed slave, was one of three calling for dramatic bleeding, once the cast was finished rehearsing and changed back into street clothes she handed it over to be laundered once the crew was satisfied with their work.

The time spent working out the kinks left no time for Erin and Sean to rehearse their parts, but since Hannah seemed to be in perfect health, Erin figured there wouldn't be any need for her to fill in anyway. As the cast split up to go find their dinner of choice, Erin looked at the theater's marquee, now lit up and featuring the name of her play! She immediately stopped moping about not playing the lead and felt grateful for the whole experience. She took a couple of photos and went in search of some cheap pizza.

Most of the cast slept late on Wednesday, all arriving at the theater between 1 and 3 PM. Dr Namen spent the afternoon giving the cast minor suggestions, but mostly went around to chat with each member of the cast to help them settle their nerves. The only cast member showing no sign of nervousness was Hannah, who went off by herself and made phone call after phone call. As much as Hannah's attitude of superiority could grate on her fellow student's nerves, they had to admit she was miles ahead of them when it came to being able to relax during these anxious hours.

At 6 PM Dr Namen told the cast to head to their dressing rooms and do their makeup and get into costume. Most of the cast felt at least a little bit jittery, but settled down as they helped each other work on their makeup. Erin studied her tunic before putting it on, thinking that the fabric looked a bit thinner than when she had handed it over to be washed. Now, preparing to appear onstage in front of, according to Dr Namen, around 1,140 people, she worried that her tunic might show more than she was comfortable with! Gone was the casual way she'd accepted how visible her body was when she tested the original ultra-lightweight tunic!

Only by comparing her tunic to those of a few castmates was Erin able to relax about how much she might be on display in an hour or so. Putting it on revealed another problem; the two fabric panels appeared to have shrunk. The gap of one inch between the front and back panels was now three inches wide; the ties were barely long enough to bridge the gap. Checking her appearance from several angles in a mirror, she sighed, thinking, "okay, not ideal, but it's probably too late to do anything about it for tonight's show. I'll just have to be careful about how I move, and accept that I might be showing a little bit of sideboob!"

With less than 20 minutes to go before show time, a stricken looking Dr Namen found Erin and asked, "Do you feel confident that you could play the part of Julia instead of Flavia? I mean tonight! I know it's a lot to ask on such short notice, but Hannah called me just a couple of minutes ago, saying she couldn't make it!"

"I don't understand," Erin asked, understandably nervous, "She was here less than an hour ago and looked fine, what happened?"

"It's not an illness," Dr Namen said angrily, "her agent set her up for a meeting and audition for a part, both to be done immediately. It's apparently a choice role in a movie starring Margot Robbie. She said she didn't know any of this was happening until a half hour ago, and that she couldn't get the time changed. I can understand her not being able to say no to such an opportunity, but the timing is atrocious! I know you didn't get much time rehearsing her part, but...

"None, actually, not here in New York," Erin interrupted, "and none back at the college since before the performances began. And never with Bret. But I'll do it; I mean, it doesn't seem like we have any other choice, does it?"

"You're already dressed for the second scene, where Flavia brings you the news of the threat to your son, I'll get you the cloak Julia wears in the first scene when she ventures out of the palace. You need to get together with Sam, the effects guy to make sure you know how to actuate the bleeding when the time comes. Make sure you get him to tell you where the props are hidden and how they work!"

"I'll go see Sam right away," Erin said, "but if I'm going to play Julia, who's going to be Flavia?"

"I hadn't thought that far, do you think Cara could do it?"

"Flavia has just three lines," Erin replied, "I'm sure Cara can handle it, but you should go see her NOW to ask her and coach her on the lines; until now she hasn't had any reason to know those few!"

Dr Namen nodded, but before going to track down Cara he paused to remind Erin, "I hope that this sudden switch is the last bit of chaos we need to deal with tonight, but on opening night you have to be prepared for almost anything and remember what I've been telling you all semester...,"

"I remember," she interrupted, " ALWAYS carry on and do whatever you can to keep going!"

"Good," he replied, "and even though you've had the part for about 3 minutes, you're the lead now, so your castmates will look to you as, well, a leader!"

Erin raced around backstage looking for Sam, finally finding him at the controls for the lighting. "I need a 9 minute tutorial about everything Julia needs to do with fake blood and props," she said, trying to stay calm.

"But you're Flavia," Sam protested, "You get stabbed to death in the second act; Ursinus will appear to stab you in the heart with a collapsible dagger, which is loaded with our stage blood. You don't need to do anything but look and sound like you're being stabbed to death!"

"There's no time to explain," Erin grumbled, "I'm filling in for Hannah, and now we've only got 8 minutes left for you to explain how your stuff works and where it's stashed!"

Eleven minutes later, after a short address by Dr Namen about the historical significance of the play, the curtain rose on the first scene, set in an alley near the palace of the Emperor.

Erin tried to get over her nervousness, reminding herself that however suddenly she'd been switched to the lead role, she was exactly where she wanted to be! She delivered her first line, and felt her anxiety fade away; she WAS Julia now.

Various cast members milled about, with Julia looking for Flavia, having heard the servant might know details of her husband's murder. The two women meet and after much discussion Flavia tells Julia what she knows, naming Julia's new husband as one of the murderers of her first husband, and hints that another murder of someone else in her family may be about to happen.

Worried that her son may be in danger, Julia convinces Flavia to find out all she can and bring any news to her at the palace.

Alone on the stage at the end of the first act, Julia delivered a monologue, criticizing herself for marrying her first husband's killer in an attempt to keep her son safe, pleading with the gods to not allow him to be taken from her.

During the short break between scenes, Erin studied the stage direction notes to be sure she remembered Julia's movements. "You're doing well," Dr Namen told her as she headed to her mark, "keep it up and remember to carry on if there are any other glitches."

"What glitches," Erin thought, wondering if she was so focused on her own performance that she was oblivious to anything else happening on the stage!

As the second act began, Julia was at stage left; she greeted Flavia and asked what she had learned. Julia's worst nightmare was happening; her son Lucius was her husband's next target. With the unwilling Flavia in tow, Julia burst in on Ursinus in his bedchamber, finding him surrounded by concubines. Julia accused Ursinus of murder; he ordered the concubines and his bodyguards to leave. He listened patiently to all of her accusations, and casually admitted to them all.

Ursinus crossed the stage, stopping in front of Flavia, then casually killed her, stabbing her in her heart, soaking her tunic with stage blood. The unlucky servant collapsed, and dropped to the floor.

Before Julia could scream, he covered her mouth and warned her that he will blame her for Flavia's murder if she cries out.

"Her death will serve as a warning to any who spread rumors about me," Ursinus warned her, "You may be the granddaughter of one Emperor and widow of another, but you have no real power. Worst of all, you have cost me my companions for the evening! You will have to take their place!" He grabbed her arm and dragged her towards his bed, located at the center of the apron, close to the edge of the stage.

Julia pulled out a small dagger and waved it wildly at her husband and would-be-rapist. Ursinus was no champion wrestler, but as an ex-soldier he was easily able to disarm her, a small scratch on his left arm the only damage he had suffered. Smiling as he backed toward his bed, he pulled her along with him by her neck. "Have the gods no mercy to leave me to the whims of this monster?" she cried out. Julia struggled to break free, while Orsinus tried to keep a hold on her neck and shoulder.

Erin had never rehearsed this action with Bret, so neither of them were quite sure what the other one was going to do next, only that in the end he should end up leaning back on the bed behind him. When she took a step onto a slightly depressed stage elevator she hadn't noticed, she lost her balance and stumbled, taking an unplanned step forward. Since Julia had been trying to hold Ursinus back, her stiff arm against his upper chest shoved him backward as she stumbled forward. She stepped backward, trying to regain her balance. Each seeing their fellow actor seemingly about to fall down, both Bret and Erin reached out to help each other stay upright, grasping for something to stop them from falling.

Neither Bret nor Erin was able to get a grip on anything sturdy enough to break the other's fall, but in the end each managed to steady themselves after a few wobbly seconds. Just when they each felt stable, each realized that there was something unfamiliar in their hand.

The unexpected things they were holding were long, thin strips of gold felt, carefully tied, but torn. The pieces of felt, former collar drawstrings, had been abruptly torn away from their place holding together the front and back cloth panels of their tunics. With the collars gone, there was nothing to keep what was left of the tunics from falling to the stage floor! Only a few seconds ago, they had been only a handful of minutes away from making it to the end of the play with no major gaffes; now both of the play's main characters were standing a few feet from the edge of the stage, stark naked other than some vaguely Roman sandals!

Brett looked like he was about to bolt off the stage, while Julia had only a brief moment of panic before she remembered Dr Namen's training. In spite of an off-the-chart level of embarassment, she looked Bret squarely in the eye and gave him a slight nod, practically willing him to deliver his next line!

"I may be a monster," Orsinus laughed, "but I will spare your son if you please me." Bret still looked a little shaky, but seemed calmer as Erin delivered her next line.

"Why would you let him live?" Julia asked; Erin tried to forget how many eyeballs were currently glued to her unexpected nudity!

Enjoying the villainous character he was playing, Bret was beginning to look almost comfortable!

"I would savor each day you freely let me take my pleasure with you, in whatever fashion I choose! On each such day I shall hold back the order to end his life. The day you refuse me is the day his fate will be sealed! Come, kneel before me!"

Erin paused a minute before approaching Bret, Julia's hesitation giving her a brief moment to think about what to do next. As it had been rehearsed, Ursinus held the edge of his tunic farthest from the audience up to make a sort of curtain, behind which Julia's head could be seen bobbing in an unseen but unmistakable depiction of a blowjob. With no tunic to shield the act, having Julia's head bobbing up and down on...nothing...would seem ridiculous. She couldn't think that this situation was what Dr Namen had in mind when he urged her to carry on no matter what!

But...

Erin knew that the Julia's story, her desperation and tragedy, the entire play, really, had been building up to this moment. She also saw a way to get to the conclusion of the play more or less following the script.

Julia shuffled over to Ursinus and knelt before him. She looked up at him and said simply, "As you command!" Leaning toward him, she reached out and wrapped her left hand around the base of his cock!

Bret realized they were heading for uncharted territory, but wasn't about to tell Erin to stop!

Erin heard several shocked gasps coming from the audience, as well as the sound of a handful of people leaving, but having come this far she was committed to seeing Julia through to the conclusion of her story.

After several strokes of Ursinus's cock, Julia leaned forward, her lips inches away from its tip. She paused, but only for a couple of seconds. She opened her mouth and took the head in, then dove down, taking the entire shaft in. She held it there, then began slowly pulling back, never completely releasing it, and plunging back down.

All Erin had to guide her was what Jeff liked when she went down on him, but judging by Bret's reactions she was doing well! She managed to not let herself get so swept up in what she was doing that she forgot what Julia still needed to do, using her right hand to feel around for the props the crew had taped to a part of the bed out of the audience's view. The crew members who worked on them had been bragging about the props; now their moments in the spotlight were about to happen! Erin continued bobbing up and down on Bret's now fully erect cock, but looked up to make eye contact with him, eventually getting his attention. She motioned with her eyes to the props in her right hand. He made a slight nod to signal that he knew what was about to happen.

Julia grasped the shaft of Ursinus's cock and held it steady. The audience saw her slide her left hand up, hiding the head and some of the shaft, then heard him screaming, his face contorted in pain. A second later they saw the cause of his agony.

Erin held the prop up high; the modified dildo had stage blood pouring out of its ragged base where Julia had just bitten Ursinus's cock, completely severing it. It also had been rigged with a small compartment toward the head which spurted a fairly realistic imitation semen when the dildo was squeezed!

Julia had only a brief moment of triumph, as Ursinus slashed her throat, the last act in his life before he bled to death. She dropped the severed cock and clutched at her throat!

Erin squeezed the pouch of fake blood still hidden in her right hand, sending a deep red stream down her neck and her chest.

Julia collapsed on the stage floor next to the bed; Ursinus lay dead on his bed, Bret was quick witted enough to drape an arm over his clearly still attached and functional cock. The stage lights dimmed, but did not go off; the New York theatre audience was sophisticated enough to recognize that the play wasn't over yet and didn't react. Half a minute later Julia slowly rose from the floor and turned to face the audience. Lit by a powerful spotlight, her fair skin looked appropriately pale to be Julia's ghost. As the narrow beam of light intensified the rest of the stage lighting was dimmed.

Erin had imagined herself delivering Julia's monologue often enough that she was able to make it through the two minute long speech despite the considerable awkwardness inherent in standing alone, embarrassed to her core, in front of a thousand or so strangers, completely naked, with fake blood still dripping from her breasts!

Julia's ghost explained that her killing of Ursinus was not an act of hatred, but one of love for her son, and how she would gladly be banished to the underworld to save him. She ended her speech with a challenge in the form of a question, asking any mothers hearing her voice, "Would you not do the same?"

A few seconds after Erin finished the monologue the house and stage lights all came on. Before Erin had time to react the rest of the cast joined her to accept a standing ovation. After several bows, everyone except Cara and Bret had retreated backstage. Bret had found a towel to wrap himself with, but nobody had thought to have a robe or towel ready for Erin, so she took a few more bows in the nude before finally hustling backstage.

The mood backstage was practically euphoric, and everyone thanked Erin for saving the performance when it looked like it was going off the rails. Bret was teased mercilessly, with several students asking if Julia had left him anything. He was more than willing to be teased once Donna, who had played one of Ursinus's concubines, whispered in his ear that she'd like to check for herself later! The entire group got cleaned up and went out for a late dinner, leaving the theater by way of a back door.

After their dinner, The tired group headed back to their hotel; once there, Dr Namen settled down in a quiet corner of the lobby. He kept refreshing the Theatre section of the New York Times, hoping to see if their play had been mentioned. After an hour he was thrilled to see their production not only mentioned but receiving praise for its gritty and bold version of the play. The short article singled out Erin, "not only for being daring enough to take on a role with such graphic nudity, unexpected in a collegiate production, but also for making her powerful defense of her family believable."

"A mixed blessing," Dr Namen thought, "its a wonderful review, but now the audience will be expecting to see nudity during the rest of our performances!" He was about to go knock on Erin's door to see if she would even be willing to repeat the performance she'd delivered that evening when Hannah stumbled into the lobby. She plopped herself down on a chair across from him, whining that her audition hadn't gone well and that she wasn't being considered for the part.

Hannah seemed to assume that she could take the role of Julia back as if her abandonment of her group had never happened! It was obvious she'd been drinking. His earlier anger about the way she'd skipped out on her fellow students resurfaced and he told her, "I'm sorry, but Erin did phenomenal work in your absence, truly above and beyond. I don't see why I should give the role back to you!"

"Maybe because I'm better than her," the tipsy student slurred, and everybody knows it!"

Thinking about it for a minute he finally replied, "I'll reinstate you on three conditions. First, You can only have the role back if Erin agrees to let you have it. She very well might, tonight's performance was very demanding. Second, You will have to follow her lead, making the same adjustments exactly as she did tonight. Third, if you get her to agree to let you have the part and then fail to do the play as she did, you will be permanently removed from the Theatre department."

"No worries," she said haughtily as she got up and wobbled away, "I'll take that deal. I'm sure I'll be able to match whatever improvised bits she's come up with. I'll tell her I'm back tomorrow morning."

Dr Namen called Erin several times, each call going to her voicemail. He was determined to talk with her about his conversation with Hannah before Hannah did, so he went to Erin's room and knocked on her door. She opened the door with a towel wrapped around her and asked what he wanted. He explained his discussion with Hannah, assuring her, "As far as I'm concerned, the part is yours for the duration of our run, but if you would rather not have to repeat the amount of exposure you did tonight, Hannah could take it over." He explained that since the Times reporter had made a point of describing the nudity in the performance, the audiences going forward would expect it, and to eliminate it would be seen as a sort of "bait and switch" trick.

"And Hannah is okay with appearing naked?"

"She needs to be," he said, "if she still wants to finish her degree in our program! Her abandoning us less than hour before showtime is what caused all this chaos, so as far as I'm concerned she's brought this on herself. She'll be looking for you tomorrow morning, to ask you to let her play Julia the rest of the week!" He turned to leave, apologizing for disturbing her so late and mentioning her phone going straight to voicemail as his reason for showing up at her door uninvited.

"Oh," she replied, "I turned it off before our performance; in all the excitement I must have forgotten to turn it back on!"

"Ah, that explains it," he said, then asked, "So, should I assume you'll let Hannah have the part?"

"Maybe," she said, "would it be possible for me to keep the part for one more performance, on Saturday?"

"If that's what you'd like," he answered after a moment to think it over.

"I believe it is," she said, not mentioning her hope that Jeff could make it to New York by the weekend!

After Dr Namen had left, Erin turned on her phone to check her voicemail and texts before turning in. The twenty-six texts were mostly from friends, either complaining about how bored they were waiting for their family's Thanksgiving get together to take place or saying how much they were enjoying being home. She had four voicemails; the three from Dr Namen she deleted, but she saw that the one was from her Mom. Ever since her Dad had had a minor heart attack during her freshman year, messages from her Mom at odd hours always made her nervous, so she opened it immediately.

Her Mom's voice came over the phone's speaker, sounding excited but not upset, straining to be heard over some background noise, telling Erin, "I don't know if you'll even get this before your show, but we wanted to wish you luck...oh, that's wrong, I'm supposed to tell you to break a leg, aren't I? Anyway, we'll be rooting for you from row F. Your Dad insisted that there was no way he was going to miss his daughter's Broadway debut!"