

Lex Talionis

Written By: Flobo

Based on the short film "Lex Talions" and characters created by:

Kosforthreeinhockeythatsahattrick Productions

Julia was only a few weeks shy of her twelfth birthday when she saw her father's last breath. Leo, as his friends called him, died of the most natural of causes; or as natural as two bullets to the chest could have been. From her vantage point she could have pinpointed the exact moment Leo's spirit ascended to heaven. Leo was a good man, and heaven is where good men go when they die, especially when they die by the hand of another. That was what she was taught and that was what she believed.

The day started off innocently enough. After getting dressed and watching her favorite cartoon, Leo would walk her to St. Lazarus elementary school in the center of town. The distance wasn't far, and to be honest Leo didn't have to walk her himself, but he chose to. It was a warm spring day, and the first spring since Julia's mother had passed away due to an illness that to this day hadn't been diagnosed. He knew deep down that he couldn't replace a woman's hand in raising a child, but he worked at carrying a semblance of a nuclear family despite the missing maternal element. The walk to Julia's school was their time, a time to become one with the limited amount of nature a city neighborhood would allow. Sometimes they chatted and other times they walked without saying a word, but they did enjoy each other's company.

Leo took Julia into a small doughnut shop that was in a small shopping plaza that was flanked by a dry cleaners and a Mexican restaurant. It had become part of their daily routine. Leo, guided Julia through the doughnut shop by placing his hand by the small of her back, eased her up to the counter. Her eyes had free reign for only just a moment as she looked over the dozens of kinds of doughnuts and rolls that were primed for the taking. She took a deep breath through her nose, allowing the scent of coffee and confectioner's sugar to send her temporarily to a happier place. She squatted down, and on the second row of trays, she spotted a family of oversized chocolate doughnuts, dripping with the fresh icing that had been layered on some seconds prior.

"That one," Julia said, placing her finger on the glass counter.

"Good choice," Leo beamed. He spoke to the cashier. "Two chocolate doughnuts, a chocolate milk for the lady and a cup of Joe."

The attendant nodded and got to work filling their order. Julia let a smile escape from her face. She remembered the days when her mother and her would come to this very shop on a Saturday, buy a pair of the flavors-of-the-week, a couple of teas, and sit at one of the tables to have girl talk. Sure, mom's talk of her friends was simply no match for Julia's tales of recess and cafeteria gossip, but it was something they looked forward to during the week.

"Now Julia," Leo said snapping her from her daydream. "I got some business to take care of this afternoon, so I won't be able to pick you up after school. But if there is any trouble, just give me a call okay?"

"Sure Dad," Julia said.

When their order was ready, they took a bite of their doughnuts in unison, taking the time to revel in their chocolate-laden escape. They both smiled at each other, perhaps each relishing the massage of their taste buds in solidarity.

Leo usually worked at home in a dusty makeshift office in the dank basement of his two-bedroom home. It wasn't impressive by any means but it served him well. Leo sat at his desk in a rickety wooden chair for the better part of the day. He opened two large ledger books that were on the edge of the desk and gave them an once-over. He severely hated the term "bookie", as that was a word reserved for the savage old guard. People who wore Irish caps and lived by the harbor were bookies. Leo was a 'manager', an interpersonal communicator even. Betting on sports has been illegal for years in this country, and for obvious reasons. Because of this, organizations began springing up overseas to circumvent the law. A sort of McDonald's for compulsive gamblers, the problem with those companies was that due to their dubious nature, advertising was out of the question. Leo's job was that of a mediator; he took lines from the guys with more money than brains and wired it over to his 'grandmother' that lived in Costa Rica. If a bet paid out, Leo got a cut of it before it goes back to the mark. Things get complicated when a mark bites off more than he can chew and starts to lose more than he has. Now, a corporation that is five thousand miles away would be powerless to stop deadbeats skirting the rules, but Leo knew the muscle and the guys who could provide some 'collection services' in order to recover cash whenever needed. It was an unfortunate part of the business, beating or maiming a mark to ensure proper delivery of cash, but it had to be done. It was a job he had since birth; the heir apparent to his father's kingdom and Leo knew when to be benevolent and when to be...not so benevolent.

He put on his glasses and went through that day's records with a fine tooth comb. The local basketball team was in the playoffs, and so he had a higher volume of bets than usual but nothing particularly overwhelming. He had upwards of four thousand dollars to collect from marks throughout the city by midnight, and he had another slew of bets to collect tomorrow. Leo flicked on a nearby analog radio in order to hear that day's sports report. Actually, he was more interested in the sports injury report and how it would affect the odds. A torn hamstring could mean the difference between a sure thing and a second mortgage on the house.

Leo could hear footsteps coming from the wooden staircase that lead upstairs to the house. It was the only way down into the basement, and frankly Leo preferred it that way. He slowly opened a desk drawer, revealing a .357 revolver, and quietly wrapped his fingers around it. If it was somebody with an axe to grind, and this happened often when you take people's money for a living, Leo had the clear tactical advantage. The footsteps belonged to Terry however, his brother eight years Leo's junior. Leo relented, let go of his gun, and closed the drawer. Terry, a

Marine Corps veteran, marched completely upright up to the desk. Without so much as a grunt, he placed an envelope on top of the open ledgers.

Leo opened the thick yellow envelope, counted the money that was inside-- seven hundred and fifty dollars -- and tossed three twenty dollar bills across the table back to Terry and buried his nose back into his work. Terry did not move, instead he folded his arms, and kept his gaze on his older brother.

"You're done here," Leo said. "Get goin'."

"You stiffed me on my cut," Terry growled.

Julia had made her way home from school and plodded through the front door. She had walked herself home before, a side effect of being an only child in a single parent home, but she was always on edge when she made it to her safe haven. The house was quiet, and a warm familiar odor of the premises gave her a sense of reprieve. She pulled off her brightly colored backpack and threw it next to the coat rack by the front door. If she was Sisyphus, the cloth backpack, filled with textbooks, school supplies, and her homework was her stone. She crossed the living room, her eyes and stomach heading to the kitchen for a snack. She passed by a white wooden door, stained brown, that led down to the basement. It was left ajar, something that Julia found odd. The basement was a space for her father and her father alone. It was always kept shut, and she wasn't allowed down there by any circumstances. Usually when Leo was deep into the abyss of the cellar, Julia would usually have to call downstairs to the private landline using the phone in the kitchen. Rather than leaving the door be and risk being blamed for having it open in the first place, she went to close it herself. She heard a large thud coming from the darkness that sat exactly thirteen steps below. Against her better judgment, she headed downstairs as gingerly as she could.

It was the sound of Terry's fist, leaving a dent in Leo's desk.

Terry seethed with rage. There was a moment in Terry's life when he tried to suppress his anger, but today that battle was already lost.

"You stiff me on every cut you son of a bitch," Terry snorted. "I've worked for you for six years Leo and you never give me my fair share. What's it going to take, a goddamned invitation for you to do the right thing?"

Julia was certain she wasn't seen but she didn't want waive the privilege either. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and crouched, seeing her father and her uncle through the pillars that supported the banister. She vowed to herself to move as little as possible, as the creaks from moving on the distressed wood would clearly give her away. Julia sat in awe of the spectacle in front of her. She couldn't remember anyone raising their voice at her father, let alone the man who would take her out for frozen yogurt after her school basketball games.

"You have a simple job," Leo said to Terry. "You go, and you collect money from the marks, bring it here and I give you whatever you deserve. If you're upset with what you're paid, that's not my problem, that's yours. Last week you got a guy with stage four liver cancer---twice your age---with two hundred dollars in the hole. Two hundred. I got that kind of money between the cushions in my couch. You could have given the guy a break, seeing he's not really going anywhere, but you decided to put the broad side of a Glock to his temple. You made a mess, an unnecessary one. Do you know how much it costs me to make the pigs look the other way in this

town? It's a lot more than two hundred dollars, Terry. If something goes sideways, I got guys who can take care of it. You don't have to."

"I can take care of it," Terry shot back. "But you already knew that, maybe even too well."

Leo looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not stupid," Terry said. "Our stake is equal, fifty-fifty and yet I'm doing less and less and having to answer to you more and more. I don't work for you."

"You're right," Leo said. "I'm working for *you*. Dad, rest his soul, told me on his deathbed to look out for you. Christ, you think I like this? You think I want to do this forever? I'm trying to wean us both off the business. Until we're out, I'm making sure you're not in the clink being passed around as fresh meat. I'm looking out for your best interests. Dad's orders."

Terry glared at Leo to gauge his sincerity. Julia looked on with her heart in her throat. She had half a mind to run over to her dad and uncle in maybe an ill-advised way to break up the argument but her legs wouldn't move. All she could do was blink.

"You're right," Terry's voice had downshifted to a whisper. "Dad did teach us to look out for our best interests."

Terry reached around to the back of his waist and brandished a semi-automatic pistol out of the darkness. Its chrome finish bounced off the light from the sole overhead lamp.

"And for once," Terry said. "I'm looking out for mine."

Leo's lips quivered, "Terry..."

Those would be Leo's last words.

Leo's body rocked back twice against the old wooden chair as the hot metal from the slugs sliced through Leo's flesh like a scalpel. He would have survived if Terry has pulled the trigger once, but the second bullet passed through the heart, killing Leo instantly.

Julia staggered back in horror. The sound of the gun had startled her and she knew she had to leave as quickly as possible. Turning to head back up the stairs, she tried to maintain her balance by placing her palm on one of the steps. In doing so, she inadvertently impaled her hand around a rusty nail, and it ripped the skin off her hand right below the little finger in a gash the size of a wine glass stem. The pain was immediate and excruciating but Julia kept running. She ran as if her life depended on it.

"Then what happened?" Dr. Marshall had finished scribbling the last of his notes in a big binder labeled with Julia's name. Dr. Marshall, a native of Boston by way of London, England sat across an adult Julia, with a steel table separating them. It was during the three years or so he lived across the pond where he learned to be an avid listener. Marshall believed everyone had a story; and it was the doctor's responsibility to ask the right questions to bring that story to the forefront. He studied Julia's eyes, looking for something out of the ordinary to document.

Julia rubbed her hand against the thirteen-year-old scar she got from that rusty nail in her basement that fateful day. She was dressed in a white gown, a common practice for all residents of the Mount Claire psychiatric hospital. Julia lowered her head and looked at the scar and sighed to herself.

"This cut," Julia said, whisking her long jet-black hair away from her eyes with her other hand. "It's never going to go away is it?"

Dr. Marshall shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"Good," Julia said. "Somebody told me once that time heals all wounds. That's bull."

She offered her disfigured hand over to Dr. Marshall.

"This is never going to heal and I'm never going to forget what my uncle did."

She retracted her hand as tears began to well up in her eyes. These were not tears of sadness, nor joy, nor weakness, but rather ones of renewal. As they rolled down her cheek, Julia didn't attempt to wipe them from her face.

"Thirteen years ago he took so much from me," she said. "I would visit my father's gravesite each and every week like clockwork, but did he ever show? Is that how blood treats blood?"

Dr. Marshall scribbled a bit more into his notebook. "Thirteen years is a long time to harbor hatred for someone, isn't it?"

"Not at all."

"I see," Dr. Marshall said. "You've told me about your hand. How about explaining the wound on your stomach, Julia."

She snapped her head up and eyed the doctor with a stern look riddled with aggression.

"My name is Jules," she barked.

It was a little after six in the evening when Jules arrived at the boxing gym. The smell was an amalgamation of sweat, vinyl, and blood but it was her sanctuary. Her musty sanctuary. Since she decided to drop out of college, the gym served as her sole institution of learning. It was a place where she could be alone in a crowd, training with other like-minded individuals who wanted to make their bodies and minds sharper. It was a cause she could easily get behind.

She had begun training with "Nightmare" Denny St. Croix for a little over two years now. Denny was the owner of the gym, but you wouldn't know that by judging how often he was there. Still at the tail end of his prime, Denny would attend the odd invitational and only taught between tournaments and when he did, there was a only a few students Denny chose to train with. Jules was a special case, she was his first female student and had the stamina of an Olympic fighter. In fact, in Jules' first training session, Denny purposely went as hard as possible in order to chase her away. When she didn't quit, and instead asked for more training sessions that were even *more* rigorous, he obliged with a discount.

They were in a middle of a sparring session when Denny spoke up.

"Hey listen," he said throwing a hook. "Things are getting a little hectic at the gym so I'll be only available to train you on the weekends."

Jules stopped. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah everything's fine," Denny said. "I'll set you up with Claude and you'll be good to go."

"I don't want Claude, I want to train with the best."

"What for?" Denny asked. "Every time I invite you to a tourney, you turn it down, even though you're good enough to make some real cash on the side."

"I don't want tourneys or the cash and I definitely don't want Claude."

"Fine," he said. "Saturdays and Sundays it is."

"Can't do Sundays," Jules said. "I got church."

Denny couldn't hold back his laughter, "Church? Are you serious?"

"I am," she said. "You got a problem with that?"

"Oh no," he said forcing himself not to smile. "You just don't strike me as the church going type."

"You'd be surprised at the type of person I am," she said. "I go twice a week. I rest all day Sunday and I attend mid-week mass every Wednesday."

"Wow," Denny said almost to himself. "You think you know someone then, bam."

"You can say that," Jules said as she shot a playful jab into Denny's chest.

By the time Jules got to St. Mark's church at the edge of town, mid-week mass had already concluded. However, such is customary with places like these, the grounds were open to the public all day as a community service. Jules often wondered about the people who would go to a church at odd hours of the night and devised that it really came down to two types of people: The really devout and the really guilty.

She dropped a five-dollar bill into the donation box, and dipped her forefingers in a stone dish of holy water before entering through the large wooden doors into the sea of pews and stone statues. She took her time walking to the altar, listening to every echoed plop her heels would make as they bounced off the walls. The few people who were occupying the pews didn't mind, it was almost a relief of theirs to see someone else there to worship at such an unorthodox time. When Jules got to the altar, she kneeled in front of a row of lit candles and lit one of her own for her father. She thought about him daily, and how he was resting with her mother and the other angels in heaven. She had only closed her eyes in prayer for but a second when she heard a familiar voice.

"Jules," it whispered.

She opened her eyes to find Terry standing over her. He let out a toothy grin.

"I know I would find you here,"

Terry had raised Jules as one of his own ever since Leo's "accident", much to her chagrin. When she was old enough, Jules moved out, preferring to live on her own. Terry respected that, but still felt the need to do parent-like things like offer money or advice when needed. It was never needed.

"I know it's been a long time," Terry said. "Are you good?"

"Yes," Jules tried in vain to get back to her prayer.

Terry squatted down next to her and got close to her ear.

"Listen," he said. "I'm not getting any younger and I've been trying to contact you for months. The job with the family business is yours, all you have to do is say yes. I would love for you to carry on our legacy."

"You are not talking about the business here," she said through clenched teeth. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Terry nodded. "You're right, but I need an answer. I tell you what. Come by tomorrow morning and we'll talk about it. Sound okay?"

Jules said nothing. She closed her eyes once more and continued her prayer. She felt a warm air around her, filling her heart with an indescribable desire to be at peace. When she opened her eyes, Terry was gone.

Terry was busy fixing himself dinner in his kitchen when he heard a large crash. Dropping the knife he was using to cut raw carrots for the evenings beef stew, he spun around only to find Jules standing in front of him.

"Jesus Christ Jules," Terry said. "I thought we were meeting tomorrow."

"You thought wrong, Terry," she said. "There are some things that couldn't wait until tomorrow."

"Well, what is it?"

Jules drew out a gun, the very same revolver that lived in Leo's desk. It had been kept in impeccable condition despite not having been fired in over a decade.

"I was there Terry," Jules said.

"What?" Terry said. "Where?"

"The afternoon you killed my father, branded him with your bullets like he was livestock. My dad loved you and paid for it by dying for your sins."

"You got things wrong," Terry stammered.

"Do I?" she said. "You shot a man because he wouldn't give you a job in the 'family business'. The same job you're trying to unload onto me. Can't you see that what you, dad and grandpa did was a curse? Well, I can and I want no part of that anymore."

Terry trembled where he stood. The ghost of Leo had in fact come back to haunt him and he was destined to quash that notion as soon as possible. In one motion, he grabbed the kitchen knife and lunged towards Jules. She pulled the trigger of her gun in self-defense. The charge missed as Terry drove the knife into her belly. His face was tainted with malice, flashing his teeth as he pushed the knife further into Jules' system. She let out a blood-curdling scream as she tried to wriggle free. She could feel the knife inside of her, and her will to live was seeping from her flesh along with the stream of blood. Relying on instinct, she dropped her gun and laid a cross right hand to Terry's cheek, sending him down to the kitchen floor. Jules picked up the revolver from off the ground with her left hand and gingerly, and painstakingly removed the knife from her stomach with the right. The sound of the blood hitting the tiled floor sounded like a dog lapping a water bowl and it made her nauseous. She sauntered over to Terry, who had just now started to come to. Without so much as a moment of hesitation, she fired the gun three times. Once in Terry's stomach so he could feel her pain, once in his heart so he could feel Leo's

pain, and once in his head so he wouldn't feel much pain after that. She waited until Terry's body went limp and when he did she dropped the gun.

She noticed that the wound on the inside of her palm was reopened and it, along with her stomach were both bleeding profusely. She stumbled out of the kitchen and into the living room. She attempted to make it out of Terry's house but she was becoming lightheaded and was losing her balance. She collapsed onto the living room rug that was by Terry's white furniture, soiling everything with a deep shade of crimson.

"Then," Jules looked at Dr. Marshall. "I died."

Dr. Marshall took a moment to enter his latest round of notes into his notebook. He looked at his handiwork and sighed to himself.

"Then what happened?" he asked.

Jules gave no answer.

"I said, then what happened?" Jules once again responded in silence. She looked blankly at him with a world-weary thousand-yard stare.

Getting frustrated, Dr. Marshall snapped his fingers. Jules blinked, and had a series of short breaths almost as if she had been underwater.

"Do you know where you are?" He asked.

Jules shook her head.

"Of course," he mused. "You're in a state psychiatric facility. You're here under evaluation in regards to your insanity plea for your trial."

"Trial?"

"For the murder of Terry. Your uncle?"

Jules darted her eyes around the room. "Terry's dead?"

"I see your wound has healed nicely," Dr. Marshall said pointing at her hand.

"What is this?" Jules said looking at the scar in her palm. "Get me out of here."

"Now, calm down," Dr. Marshall said. "You'll be out of here soon, Jules."

"Jules?" she said. "My name is Julia."