

***The Mindsweeper Tales: A Creative and Critical Approach to
Reinventing the Medieval Framed Story-Collection as a Modern
Novel***

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Abstract

A widely used narrative form in medieval literature is the framed story-collection, where an external narrative frames a collection of interpolated tales. This practice-based PhD in Creative Writing addresses the absence of the medieval framed story-collection structure in modern literature through creative practice and critical enquiry. The project is comprised of two parts: the creative artefact, for which I have written a novel of roughly 100,000 words, and the accompanying critical exegesis of 30,000 words. By considering Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as a stylistic and structural model, I argue for the medieval framed story-collection structure's continued relevance in contemporary fiction by demonstrating its potential for reinvention in the form of a modern novel. This thesis presents a methodological framework that can be practically applied to creative writing, consisting of six essential components to consider when modernising the medieval form: the frame, the tellers, the tales, dramatic interplay, stylistic variety, and themes. In my creative component, *The Mindsweeper Tales*, I demonstrate the application of these components by reinventing Chaucer's pilgrimage in the form of a murder trial at the Old Bailey during the year 2030, in which the jurors become the narrators of the interpolated story collection. Further to this, I modernise Chaucer's stylistic variety by engaging alternative narrative forms beyond traditional prose, such as Surrealist text collage and poetic interludes. Finally, I address the importance of socio-political themes in both Chaucer's work and my own, demonstrating how the stylistic variety can be manipulated to represent the concerns of modern culture. This critical exegesis examines these Chaucerian elements alongside

my creative piece to demonstrate how they have been reconceptualised in the form of a modern novel.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. THE FRAME STRUCTURE	18
MEDIEVAL FRAMED STORY-COLLECTION: AN OVERVIEW	19
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN <i>THE CANTERBURY TALES</i>	21
AN OVERVIEW OF <i>THE MINDSWEEPER TALES</i>	25
CHARACTERS: PILGRIMS AND JURORS	32
PROGRESSION AND DISRUPTION	41
3. TELLER, TALES, AND DRAMATIC INTERPLAY	45
4. STYLISTIC VARIETY & THEMES	60
GENRES, STYLES, AND FORMS: AN OVERVIEW	63
DREAM-POETRY AND CHAUCER'S <i>HOUSE OF FAME</i>	67
SURREALIST TEXT COLLAGE	82
5. CONCLUSION	101
LIST OF TABLES	105
LIST OF FIGURES	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY	107

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines structural and stylistic elements of the fourteenth-century framed story-collection with the intention of establishing a methodological framework for reinventing them in a contemporary novel. My approach to this study has been through creative practice and concurrent critical enquiry, focusing on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as a design model for my creative component, *The Mindsweeper Tales*. My decision to concentrate on Chaucer's work as the primary model for *The Mindsweeper Tales* rather than a broad selection of framed story-collections is twofold. First, *The Canterbury Tales* offers significant narrative opportunities for being reconceptualised as a novel due to the artistic development, innovation, and complexity that distinguishes it from other works of the genre, something I address further in Chapter 2. Secondly, the turbulent political environment at the time Chaucer was writing, paired with his emphasis on social commentary in *The Canterbury Tales* are both relevant to my own treatment of socio-political themes in *The Mindsweeper Tales*. As such, I have structured this commentary as a comparative analysis of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales* to explore the underlying methods applied in my creative practice and the literary traditions and theory that informed it. By evaluating distinguishing features in *The Canterbury Tales* and demonstrating how I reimagined them in my own work to suit a modern literary form and contemporary concerns, I argue that *The Mindsweeper Tales* can be considered a modernised version of the medieval framed story-collection.

The framing device is a common narrative technique in medieval literature, an organising structure that consists of story layers where the external narrative frames an

internal narrative or a collection of interpolated tales. In most cases, the purpose of the external frame is to justify the intermittent story-collection and establish a context through which the shorter tales can be read and understood. Story-collections in various forms became prevalent in Europe during the twelfth century, including rudimentary versions of the frame narrative. By the fourteenth century, the framed story-collection reached the peak of its compositional development in *The Canterbury Tales*, arguably the most notable English work of the genre. After the Middle Ages, however, the particular design used in *The Canterbury Tales* – where the external frame presents a group of characters in the main narrative who then take turns telling a series of shorter narratives – saw a rapid decline in the literary corpus.

I was drawn to my main research question of how to modernise the medieval framed story-collection after observing a significant absence of its use in contemporary fiction. My interest furthered after discovering a subsequent gap in the critical literature investigating reasons for why this might be. While the scope of this study does not include an enquiry into reasons for the medieval frame structure's paucity in modern fiction, it is worth noting the gap as something warranting future consideration. In her study of the medieval frame tale and its earlier sources, Bonnie D. Irwin marks three characteristics that attributed to its reception by medieval authors and audiences:

First of all, the frame tale is almost infinitely flexible, enabling it to contain tales of many themes, lengths, and styles...Secondly, because of this inherent flexibility, a frame tale, particularly one with a looser structure, could carry traditional tales over time and space...Thirdly, because of this same flexibility, the frame tale could be adapted to a variety of linguistic and cultural contexts (1995, p. 33).

Why, then, with this amount of flexibility and adaptive possibility is the structure of Chaucer's framed story-collection virtually non-existent in today's literature? More importantly, why should it remain that way?

My approach to this project has been primarily inductive, beginning with my central research question: *how can the medieval framed story-collection be reimagined in the form of a contemporary novel?* However, before going further, it is worth defining what I mean by 'contemporary novel'. Regarding structure and form, I am simply referring to what is commonly considered the modern novel. M.H. Abrams defines *novel* in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as:

extended works of *fiction* written in prose. As an extended narrative, the novel is distinguished from the *short story*...its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of milieu, and more sustained exploration of character and motives than do the shorter, more concentrated modes. As a narrative written in prose, the novel is distinguished from the long narrative in verse of Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton... (1999, p. 190).

By this definition, the frame story in my creative piece is the extended narrative which satisfies these classifications of a modern novel, as it is the long form of the frame which allows for enhanced characterisation, greater complexity in the plot, and further narrative development. Of course, there is no definitive definition of what constitutes or qualifies as a novel, and the characteristics critics consider when attempting to formulate a precise description are plentiful. For instance, Maurice Z. Shroder has noted that, thematically, the novel 'records the passage from a state of innocence to a state of experience,' distinguishing appearance from reality or the movement from blissful

ignorance to revelation about how the world really works (1963, p. 292). However, this can be said about many literary forms and is not unique to the novel. In terms of action, he suggests that the novel is essentially a reworking of the 'monomyth' (1963, p. 293). The theory of the monomyth was introduced by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he identifies a common structural pattern and use of archetypal conventions across ancient myths (2008), marking out steps in narrative progression from the hero's call to action, the rising conflict, and the eventual resolution. However, I do not approach this commentary in terms of the monomyth, so I will not consider it further. My purpose is merely to identify the form of fiction that I am referring to when I use the term 'novel' or 'modern novel', which, in this case, refers to a generalised format of prose narrative that reaches a certain length. My use of the descriptor 'contemporary novel' deviates only slightly, in that I am specifically referring to a modern novel form with thematically contemporary concerns. That is not to say that the plot must be set in the present or limited to realism, only that, in the context of this commentary, a contemporary novel is one that reflects current socio-political and cultural concerns.

I approached the creative component of this project with a structural model in mind, developed using characteristics that I argue are defining to *The Canterbury Tales*. I explored ways of applying this literary model to a contemporary novel through my own creative practice, assessing and reflecting on how it functioned in a modernised context. There are six components of *The Canterbury Tales* which I argue are essential to consider when approaching a modern reconstruction. These components consist of the frame, the character-narrators, the tales, dramatic interplay, thematic patterning, and stylistic variety. Each of these individual components interlinks to form a narrative network that acts as the structural basis for *The Canterbury Tales*. In other words, these

are the six vital ingredients, each important and worthy of individual consideration, but it is the manner in which they function together to form the work as a whole that will be the emphasis in this study.

My approach to developing a model of the Chaucerian framed story-collection that could be considered alongside my creative practice takes into account the critical work of G.L. Kittredge and R.M. Lumiansky. Kittredge regards the Canterbury pilgrimage as a dramatic performance, likening it to a play or a 'Human Comedy' in which the pilgrims are *dramatis personae* (1915, p. 154-155). Viewing the pilgrimage this way highlights the individuality and extent of characterisation of each pilgrim, likening them to actors on a stage who develop and move the story via their dramatic interactions. Further to this, Kittredge introduced the idea of the 'Marriage Group': tales by the Wife of Bath, Clerk, Merchant, and Franklin that are told some distance apart within the pilgrimage but are linked by the theme of marriage and gender. Placing them in conversation with each other adds further dimension to teller, tale, and their function within the narrative as a whole. It also demonstrates that there are underlying methods for linking or grouping tales and tellers that go beyond their position in a fragment or chronological sequence; there are also connections through thematic patterning or common motifs. R.M. Lumiansky built upon Kittredge's theory of *dramatis personae*, conducting a detailed study of the coexistence between pilgrim and tale in *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales*, where he argues that the teller/tale relationship is fundamental to the dramatic method of the work. In other words, the teller and the tale can be considered separately, but each component offers important context for interpreting the other, and this relationship is central to a full understanding of their function in the narrative (1955, p. 18-19). Lumiansky proposes that the

teller/tale performances can be divided into 'three techniques of dramatic presentation':

- A. Simple suiting of tale and teller.
- B. Simple suiting of tale and teller, plus an externally motivated dramatic situation.
- C. Simple suiting of tale and teller, plus an externally motivated dramatic situation, plus internally motivated and extended self-revelation of which the teller is not fully aware (1955, p. 248).

He then applies these principles to a comprehensive analysis of each teller/tale relationship in *The Canterbury Tales*, demonstrating how the pilgrims and their tales are inherently linked to one another, as well as to the dramatic method of the frame.

The reason I chose to approach the teller/tale relationships in *The Mindsweeper Tales* from this angle, drawing upon the work of these earlier critics, rather than more recent criticism, is due to the foundational element of their work, the systematic nature of their interpretations, and the suitability of building on these theories in the context of modernisation. It can be argued that *The Canterbury Tales* is designed in a way that subverts systematic interpretation (Pearson, 2013, p. x), however, I would suggest that it is not only possible to apply some degree of systematic approach – as I intend to demonstrate – it is also beneficial in terms of developing a methodological framework for modernising the framed story-collection. Furthermore, approaching the pilgrims with consideration of Kittredge's *dramatic personae* highlights the extent of Chaucer's character development, thus demonstrating the pilgrims' potential to be reinterpreted in terms of modern characterisation. Therefore, I approach the teller/tale/link

relationships in my creative piece from these theoretical perspectives, which I discuss further in Chapter 3.

Further to this, the framed story-collection structure creates an opportunity for bringing a variety of literary styles together under the umbrella of the frame. Helen Cooper provides an assessment of Chaucer's stylistic variety in *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, suggesting the frame's organising role:

The story-collection never acquired a single set of rigid conventions. The very fact of gathering things together implies a miscellany, even a jumble. The various conventions of structural organisation are largely aimed at overcoming this problem, of imposing some kind of coherence or order, or both, on a mass of disparate material (1983, p. 8).

Chaucer brings together a multitude of different styles and literary material linking them together by means of the frame narrative. Furthermore, Katherine Gittes' study of ancient Eastern¹ frame traditions and their influence on the Chaucerian framed story-collection suggests that Eastern frame styles are characteristically flexible and loosely structured while Western ideals favoured 'unity, symmetry, and completeness' (1991, p. 2-3). She convincingly argues that Chaucer's innovative methodology for *The Canterbury Tales* is a culmination of these seemingly contrasting traditions, a point I address further in Chapter 2.

My general approach to *The Canterbury Tales* is as a work unified by the frame and the subtle interlinking of its disparate components, and as the 'Human Comedy'

¹ Gittes provides a context for the use of the broad terms 'Eastern' and 'Western.' She uses the term 'Eastern' to reference a 'strong, or even predominant, Arabic, Islamic, or perhaps Semintic component' while 'the term "Western" suggests predominantly Greek, Roman, and/or European components, which often include Christian elements' (1991, p. 6).

suggested by Kittredge, which incorporates the element of human irrationality and fallibility to subvert and interrupt, allowing for more narrative and structural flexibility. From these theoretical concepts, I developed a general model of the Chaucerian framed story-collection with which to approach my creative practice, which I eventually organised into the six fundamental components previously mentioned: frame, character-narrators, tales, dramatic interplay, thematic patterning, and stylistic variety. That is not to say that these are the only elements at work in *The Canterbury Tales*, only that these six components proved fundamental in my approach to creating a veritable reconstruction. To illustrate this claim and examine the relevance of these components in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*, I have organised this thesis in a way that allows me to address these points individually, as well as demonstrate how they interlink to form a narrative network that acts as the structural basis for both works.

Chapter 2: The Frame Structure considers the *frame* narratives of the pilgrimage and the trial in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales* respectively. I begin with a short introduction to the framed story-collection tradition, focusing on characterisation and the function of the frame in earlier literary forms. This is followed by a comparative overview of the narrative structures in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*. I focus on two key elements within the frame story: character portraits (pilgrims/jurors) followed by the progression and disruption of tales.

Building on the idea of dramatic episodes, I move to Chapter 3: Tellers, Tales, and Dramatic Interplay which explores the relationship between *tellers* and *tales* in terms of dramatic performance and *interplay*. Here, I aim to demonstrate how a teller's portrait provides context for reading their tale, and how the tale can serve to extend that portrait or reveal aspects of their character that may not have otherwise emerged. I

expand on the discussion in Chapter 2 regarding character portraits to examine the way in which the pilgrims and jurors' interactions and relationships serve to characterise them further, as well as to determine the direction of the overall narrative. By focusing on specific examples in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales* in terms of narrative voice and dramatic interaction, I argue that character portraits are essential in providing context for a reading of the tales, while the tales can further characterise their narrators. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the role of *character-narrators, tales, and dramatic interplay* as key components in my Chaucerian model.

Chapter 4: Stylistic Variety and Themes focuses on Chaucer's eclectic variation in narrative style throughout *The Canterbury Tales* which creates a sense of literary assemblage. First, I consider the scope of genres Chaucer incorporated in the tales, alongside my own attempt to experiment with genre in both my tales and Copycat Narratives². Then, I dedicate the remainder of the chapter to analysing style and form as this is where I made the most effort to recreate this sense of literary assemblage given that *The Mindsweeper Tales* only has ten tales compared to Chaucer's twenty-four.³ Here, I turn to two additional sources which influenced my creative practice regarding stylistic technique: medieval dream-poetry and Surrealist text collage. I approach these discussions through the context of significant themes in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*: the relationship between truth and fiction and the manipulation of language. First, I focus on Chaucer's dream poem *House of Fame*, particularly the scenes at the whirling wicker where words are volatile and chaotic, and Chaucer questions the reliability of language and textual dissemination. I place this in

² A full explanation of the Copycat Narratives is provided in Chapter 2 (p. 28-29).

³ My total of ten includes Spirella's tale, *House of Wigs*, which is a collage poem, and Jasper's tale, *Elucidation Radio*, which is cut off after 457 words. I include these short/unfinished 'tales' namely because of comparable examples in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as *The Cook's Tale* which breaks off after just fifty-eight lines.

conversation with the thematic elements in *The Mindsweeper Tales* concerning post-truth media culture. Then, I analyse the two text-collage collections in my creative piece, 'Woman's Sphere' and 'Modern Woman's Sphere', both in terms of aesthetic and thematic content. I examine how the manipulation of visual text functions in the narrative with consideration of the modern reader/viewer that I had in mind. I argue that this visual text can be considered a modern interpretation of Chaucer's eclectic stylistic and rhetorical approach, which he would have written, at least in part, using devices that lend themselves to oral reception. Then, I place the thematic content of the text collages in conversation with *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, by considering how both attempt to subvert textual culture that perpetuates oppressive gender norms.

In Chapter 5: Conclusion, I reiterate how the six components of focus throughout this commentary – the frame, character-narrators, tales, dramatic interplay, thematic patterning, and stylistic variety – work together in a way that is fundamental to the Chaucerian framed story-collection and are therefore necessary to address when applying this specific structure to a modern form. I consider aspects of the Chaucerian model that worked well, noting the broad scope of potential that its inherent flexibility ascribes it, as well as its limitations, reflecting on my own methods for addressing problems that arose, and the overall effect this type of structure has had on the process of composition and resulting creative piece. I conclude by suggesting ways that the methodological framework laid out in this commentary can be applied to creative practice.

One of the aims of this study is to provide an account based on my own practice which outlines the process, concerns, considerations, potentials, and limitations of modernising the framed story-collection structure into a contemporary novel. This is an account that will prove useful to writers who may want to consider using related forms

of the framing device in their own work, and potentially serve as a blueprint for one method of approach which could be built upon, altered, or intentionally stepped away from. Additionally, this account will prove useful to academics that may want to explore the reasons for the lack of the medieval framed story-collection structure in modern fiction. With this commentary, I provide a methodological framework for writing a specific type of novel, one that incorporates and reimagines critical components of the Chaucerian framed story-collection and places them into a contemporary context, which is something I have yet to come across in the existing corpus of modern fiction.

Chapter 2: The Frame Structure

This chapter examines the frame structure in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*. I argue that the frame story functions as an integral component in this type of narrative network and demonstrate through comparative analysis how I have reimagined essential aspects in my own creative work. I begin with a brief overview of the framed story-collection tradition to establish context and demonstrate my claim that Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* stands out from other works of the genre in a way that lends itself to a modern reimagining. This is followed by overviews of both *The Canterbury Tales* structure and *The Mindsweeper Tales* in which I discuss how I have reconsidered Chaucer's structural treatment to fit the modern context of *The Mindsweeper Tales*. Finally, I focus on two key elements within the frame story: character portraits (pilgrims/jurors) and links. I consider the pilgrims' portraits in the *General Prologue* alongside my own method of introducing the main group of narrators in Part I, Ch. 6 of *The Mindsweeper Tales*. Then, I examine the links, which is the term I will use to denote the dramatic episodes between tales, such as prologues, transitions, and interruptions. It is through the links that we gain a sense of how the frame imposes on and steers the direction of the narrative and nature of the tales. To illustrate this claim, I focus on the interaction between the Miller and the Host prior to *The Miller's Tale* which is a demonstration of how dramatic interplay between the pilgrims can subvert and redirect the progression of the narrative. Finally, I consider how I have reimagined this element in my creative component.

Medieval Framed Story-Collection: An Overview

In a basic sense, the fourteenth-century framed story-collection is the culmination of innovation and tradition. *The Canterbury Tales* is a demonstration of elaborate and artistically innovative design applied to a vast and wide-ranging corpus of traditional conventions. Chaucer is commonly considered to be a master of this particular literary form, with *The Canterbury Tales* being the most complex and advanced surviving example. H.B. Hinckley contends that:

when Chaucer decided to write a series of tales boxed in the frame of a Canterbury pilgrimage he essayed a form of literature already very ancient, though no previous writer had looked so far as he into the artistic possibilities of the type (1934, p. 69).

To effectively illustrate this point, it is worth briefly addressing the frame tradition Chaucer was building upon, which had its origins in ancient Eastern literature. Katherine Gittes examines the influence of Arabic frame narratives upon Western medieval works in her comprehensive study *Framing The Canterbury Tales: Chaucer and the Medieval Frame Narrative Tradition*. Among the earliest frame tales is *The Panchatantra*, an eighth-century Arabic translation of a group of stories originating in India. The frame story consists of a wise man narrating animal fables to three young princes in an effort to teach moral lessons, and Gittes suggests it was one of the first significant examples of a framing device enclosing a story-collection (1983, p. 237). Arguably the most famous frame narrative of Eastern origin to influence Western tradition is the *One Thousand and One Nights* which tells the story of Scheherazade being forced to marry a king who executes his brides the following morning and so, tells tales through the night as a way of prolonging her life. *The Seven Sages of Rome*,

translated into the Arabic form around the eight century (Campbell, 1907, p. xi), portrays seven wise men narrating tales about the wickedness of women for a king and a young prince while the queen responds to each tale with one of her own. Sadhana Naithani points out that a common plot point in these early frame stories is that they 'are built on the education of rulers' and they 'teach through the narration of stories' (2004, p. 275). If we consider that early examples of the frame narrative such as these tended to be didactic, favouring moral tales, wisdom themes, and proverbs (Hinckley, 1932, p. 70; Gittes, 1991) with plots that centred around bestowing wisdom through storytelling, we see frame stories that faithfully adhere to a convention and tend to have little impact on the progression or treatment of the tales. While the tales varied, there is often a single narrator, as in *One Thousand and One Nights*, and in the case of multiple narrators, the narrative voices were often indistinguishable, and the consistent wisdom theme left no need for attempts to match teller and tale.

Assessments of fourteenth-century frame tales in relation to their Eastern and Western roots have provided evidence for a number of ancient features that are still identifiable in the later works. Gittes argues that some of *The Canterbury Tales*' most prominent features, 'notably its open-endedness and its occasional randomness and arbitrary order' (1991, p. 83) are the lingering influence of the frame narrative's Eastern roots, which are characteristically flexible and loosely structured while Western literary ideals favour unity and symmetry (1991, p. 2-3). We can see these ideals in Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Marguerite de Navarre's *The Heptameron*, two of the most notable European framed story-collections. Both frame narratives share a similar scenario: a group of upper-class or privileged men and women are secluded from society and exchange tales to pass the time. The ten narrators of *The Decameron* go to the country to escape the plague, and the structure is arranged in a symmetrical, unified manner of one

tale told by each of the ten narrators per day, for a course of ten days. Similarly, in *The Heptameron* the narrators are stuck in a church for ten days waiting for a bridge to be built, thus providing a similar unified structure to Boccaccio.

I note these works because I consider it relevant to point out that while they are developed in their content and variety of tales, they are relatively limited in terms of their frame stories. What we see for the first time in *The Canterbury Tales* is a multitude of diversity in the narrators and the episodes linking the tales. Chaucer's frame is a dramatic performance that functions as far more than a simple structural device; it is as imperative to the work as the boxed story collection. Open-endedness represents life and people's authentic experience of it: arbitrary, imperfect, unpredictable, and at times, insubstantial or futile. This dichotomy of loose structure and symmetry, combined with a proposed intention of unity and order which is then discarded or disrupted is a defining feature of *The Canterbury Tales'* frame, and is, therefore, one of the methods I applied when constructing *The Mindsweeper Tales*. In terms of a modern novel, this flexibility was beneficial because it provides a means for avoiding a structure that is too rigid and predictable for a contemporary reader. For the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on exploring the structural make up of both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*, as well as the key elements of the character portraits and linking episodes.

Narrative Structure in The Canterbury Tales

The framework of *The Canterbury Tales* is built around a storytelling contest that takes place on a pilgrimage from London to Canterbury. Thirty pilgrims, including Chaucer-the-pilgrim, leave from the Tabard Inn with Harry Bailly, the Host and inn-keeper, who

presides as judge over the contest. In the *General Prologue*, Harry Bailly announces that the contest will have each pilgrim tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two tales on the way back to London (l. 791-794). This would make for a total of one hundred and twenty tales; however, Chaucer left his work unfinished without any instruction or indication about the order in which the tales should be read, and there are only twenty-four tales, some of which are incomplete. There is no official agreement on the order of the text as all surviving manuscripts are scribal copies, none of which are exactly the same. Still, critics have been able to situate certain parts into groups by analysing the linking episodes between tales. Robert W. Hanning, for example, writes that ‘what emerges from these and other manuscripts is that Chaucer gathered many of the tales into groups, or fragments, by means of interstitial dialogue between the pilgrims’ (2006, p. xx). It is generally agreed that there are ten distinctive fragments, deciphered according to indicative links between the tales: ‘bits of conversation or narrative that explicitly refer to a tale just told or to one that immediately follows’ (Benson, 2008, p. 5). R.M. Lumiansky asserts that these fragments are clearly defined, ‘within each of which the order of the tales is relatively stable’ (1955, p. 12); however, other than the first fragment,⁴ the sequence in which the fragments should be ordered is debated among critics. There are two primary sequences which editors consider when organising the fragments: the Chaucer Society Order, which is arranged by alphabetic grouping (Group A, B¹, B², C, etc.) and the Ellesmere Order, arranged by roman numeric fragments (Fragment I, II, III, etc.)⁵. Where the sequencing is relevant to this commentary, I will follow the Ellesmere Order.

⁴ *General Prologue, The Knight’s Tale, The Miller’s Tale, The Reeves Tale, The Cook’s Tale.*

⁵ Useful references regarding the order of fragments include W.W. Lawrence’s ‘The Sequence of the Tales’ in *Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales* (1950), R.M. Lumiansky’s *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales* (1955), and Robert A. Pratt (1951) ‘The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*’ *PMLA* 66 (6).

Admittedly, the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* appears like a collection of fragments strung together by loose linking devices with no critical consensus of order or linear progression. While this may be true to some degree, I would argue that upon closer inspection, it is the literary and thematic relationships between the disparate parts that hold the work together and essentially completes it. There have been numerous studies and theories into unifying devices, recurring themes, and related subject-matter for grouping the tales, such as G.L. Kittredge's 'Marriage Group,' (1912)⁶ or common motifs that place them in conversation with each other. For example, we see how the work functions as a complex network through the frame and the tales, how each narrative level provides a context for reading the other. Helen Cooper suggests that there are three structural principles that Chaucer used for articulating the tales:

dramatic interplay between characters who are not going to stay humbly in their social place, and literary interplay between adjacent tales. As the tales accumulate, a further principle develops, whereby similar themes, ideas, and plot motifs can be taken up by tales at some distance from each other (1996, p. 17).

An example of the social mobility of the pilgrimage is the interaction between the Miller and the Host prior to *The Miller's Tale* which I address in Chapter 3. Paul Ruggiers has emphasised that this relationship of parts to the whole can be used to approach and make sense of the structural network *The Canterbury Tales* is built on:

By maintaining a focus upon the relation between the parts and the whole, and upon the shaping of the structure towards a thematic unity, we may in some

⁶ The Marriage Group begins with *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and ends with *The Franklin's Tale*.

small way offset the view that the *Canterbury Tales* is only a collection of poems and not a single work with an intended design (1989, p. xviii).

In this sense, we can consider the frame as a structural matrix, holding the parts together through thematic unity and interrelating episodes expressed in the links. The frame is the 'real world' imposing on the smaller fictional worlds in the tales, conditioning the way in which we read them, while the tales, aside from being fictional constructs in their own right, also function as extensions of their tellers and events that occur in the real world of the frame. The dramatic episodes in the links demonstrate more than just progression of narrative, but also a sense of lived experience: arguments, vengeance, interruption, confessions, frustrated intentions, debate – all of which are artistic mechanisms tying the work together. Norman T. Harrington suggests that the link between frame and tales is two modes of reality, art and lived experience:

the links are perpetually bringing into dramatic juxtaposition two sorts of reality: the reality of this unfolding and intense felt experience...and the reality of literary artifacts—ordered, shaped, and completed as all art must be (1976, p. 191).

I believe this is an accurate assessment of *The Canterbury Tales* and may also apply to a modern recreation of the Chaucerian framed story-collection. Viewed this way, the Chaucerian framed story-collection is intentionally constructed by the author to have narrative circumstances that indicate a planned structure and order of events (i.e. a group of narrators taking turns telling stories) which is then subverted and redirected by the company of narrators in a demonstration of lifelike human experience and interaction.

An Overview of The Mindsweeper Tales

The external frame narrative in my creative piece is set in London in the year 2030. It is still recognisably London; however, the socio-political tensions in 2030 are increasingly heightened. The Traditional Freedom Party, a new alt-right political party, has recently won the parliament majority and the UK has left the European Convention on Human Rights. Changes have been made to UK policy, including the reintroduction of capital punishment and the issuing of firearms to all levels of law enforcement. The circulation of propaganda, fake news, clickbait, and general misinformation is at an all-time high, and the country has seen a significant rise in protests, riots, and violence. Essentially, it is the London we know, as imagined in its final moments before a decisive shift in social order brings it into a dystopian state.

The narrator, Adaline, is selected to serve on the jury for the high-profile murder trial of Jacob Lazarus who faces the death penalty if convicted. Jacob, a neuroscientist, is the developer of ground-breaking neurotechnology called the NeuroPath which enables Users to enter the world of their minds in an experience akin to virtual reality. Two of his research assistants are arrested for assassinating Traditional Freedom MPs at a political rally, and they accuse Jacob of using the NeuroPath to control their minds, forcing them to commit the murders. The jurors are sequestered and Part I takes place during the first few weeks of the trial. Eventually, it is decided that, in order for the jurors to fully understand the effects of the NeuroPath and examine its potential for mind-control, they will need to use it themselves. Part II covers the three day period in which the jurors use the NeuroPath and take turns being the Primary-User; that is, the one who hosts the other Users (in this case, the other jurors) inside the spatial manifestation of their mind.

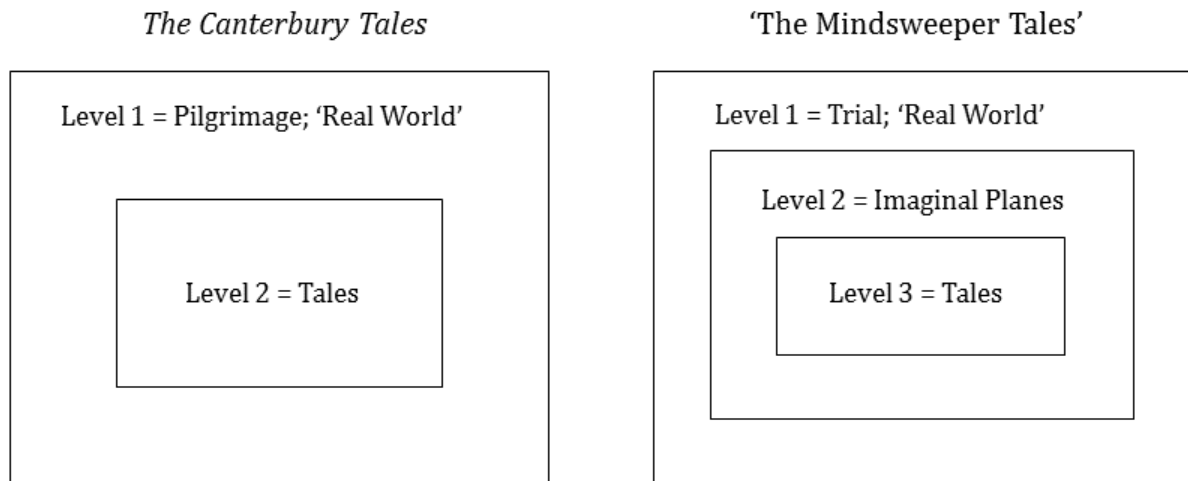
In terms of structure, *The Mindsweeper Tales* differs from *The Canterbury Tales* in that it has three main narrative levels rather than two. Between the external frame of the trial and the boxed story collection, there is the intermediate narrative level that takes place in the mindscapes, or Imaginal Planes, of the jurors after they agree to use the NeuroPath. The Imaginal Planes⁷ essentially bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious mind creating a surrealistic and jumbled landscape. During Jacob's testimony, he explains that Users are urged to make use of the suggested coping strategy when inside their Imaginal Planes to prevent the unconscious mind from overwhelming them:

“The Primary-User must tell a story. It forces the unconscious activity into an organised state of communication and use of mental characters. A story is the product of Ego and Id in harmony. Messages and ideas from the unconscious are contained and controlled. It provides structure. Forgo the coping technique, and the Plane becomes cavernous and chaotic like you're losing control. Because you are. The unconscious is taking over, and the Ego is disappearing inside of it.” (p. 79).

The second narrative level is essentially a tour across each juror's Imaginal Plane (referred to as a *4D-Trip*) as they take turns being the Primary-User and hosting the minds of the other jurors within their own. Each Primary-User then goes along with the recommended coping strategy of telling a story and this provides the framework for the interpolated story collection. Each juror narrates a tale from within their mind, hoping to communicate some valuable meaning or develop further understanding of the

⁷ In the critical component, I refer to this narrative level/concept using the full term *Imaginal Plane(s)* for the sake of clarity. I mention this because in *The Mindsweeper Tales* it is often shortened to *Plane(s)* or a specific character's *Plane* (i.e. *Rosalie's Plane*) and quotes from the creative component reflect that.

workings of the NeuroPath and Imaginal Planes in order to better evaluate the evidence demonstrated in the trial. The following diagrams demonstrate the difference in main narrative levels between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*:



Furthermore, like *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Mindsweeper Tales* is organised into discernible groupings, both structurally and thematically. In terms of structure, it is divided into days. Eleven jurors end up using the NeuroPath over the course of three days, with four jurors taking turns being Primary-User on Days 1 and 2, and the final three jurors on Day 3. Structurally, this organises the tales and tellers into the 'Day 1 Group', 'Day 2 Group', and 'Day 3 Group'. The following diagrams compare the structural divisions of *The Canterbury Tales*' first three fragments with *The Mindsweeper Tales* groupings:

The Canterbury Tales, Fragments I-III

Fragment I (A)	General Prologue The Knight's Tale The Miller's Tale The Reeve's Tale The Cook's Tale
Fragment II (B ¹)	The Man of Law's Tale
Fragment III (D)	The Wife of Bath's Prologue The Wife of Bath's Tale The Friar's Tale The Summoner's Tale

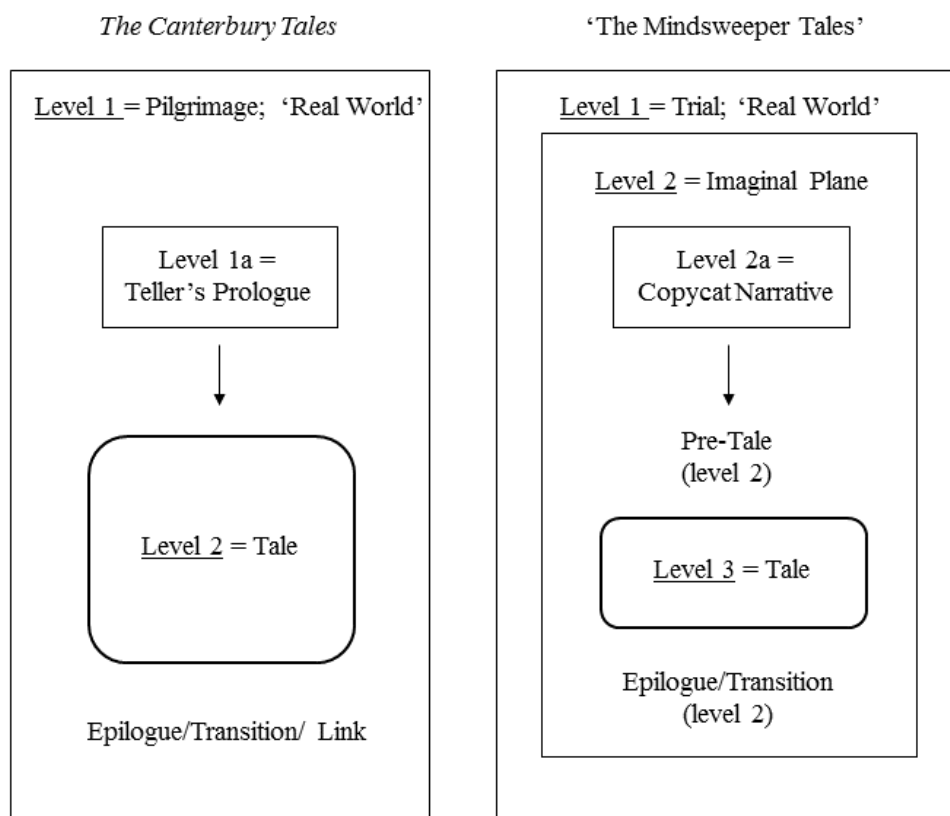
'The Mindsweeper Tales' Groupings

Day 1	Collective Plane Atticus's Plane & Tale Arlo's Plane & Tale Carney's Plane & Tale Petrus's Plane & Tale
Day 2	Callum's Plane & Tale Albert's Plane & Tale Rosalie's Plane & Tale Jasper's Plane & Tale
Day 3	Adaline's Plane & Tale Spirella's Plane & Tale

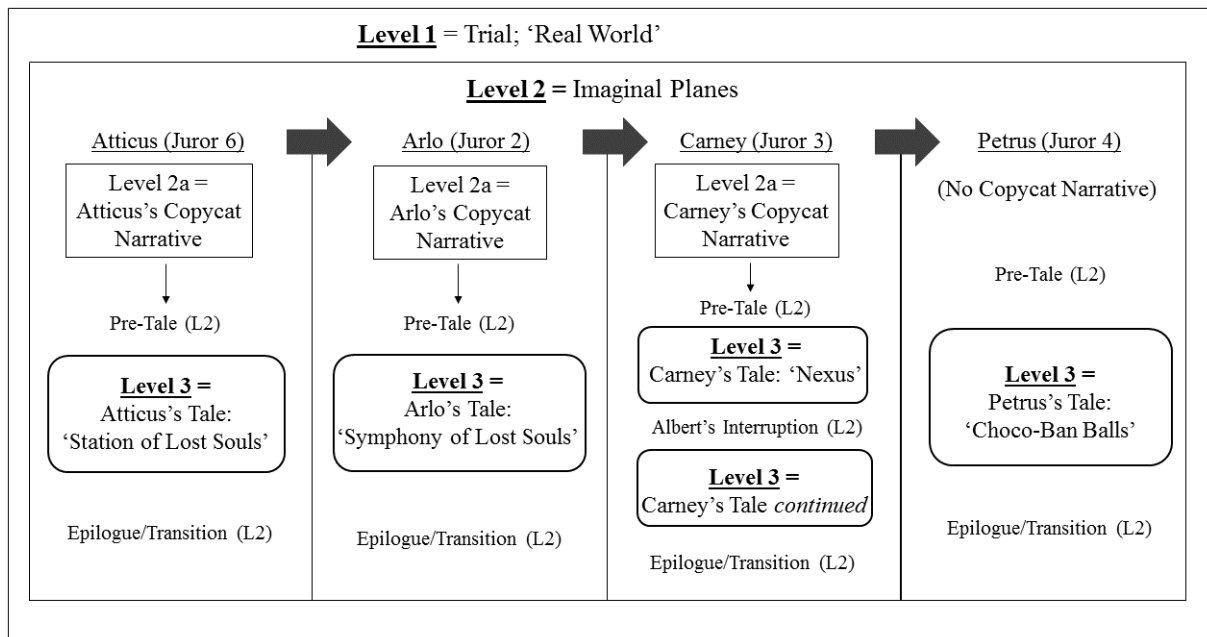
These groupings, like the examples in *The Canterbury Tales* diagram, are linked together through devices such as thematic patterning or dramatic episodes. For example, Fragment III works together through interstitial dialogue between the Wife, Friar, and Summoner, such as the Friar interrupting the Wife's Prologue and getting into an argument with the Summoner which results in both the Friar and Summoner telling tales aimed at insulting the other. The 'Day 2 Group' progresses in a similar way, with Albert taking Rosalie's turn in order to respond to Callum's misogynistic Imaginal Plane and story. An additional difference in *The Mindsweeper Tales* structure that is worth mentioning is the Copycat State, which Jacob again describes while testifying:

When we began testing the NeuroPath, we found that first-time Primary-Users all experienced something we've termed the *Copycat State*. What happens is the Primary-User's unconscious mind creates a false reality, like it does when we dream...All Users on the 4D-Trip are sucked into the Primary-User's narrative, believing the Copycat State to be real; but it's short-lived. Either something triggers the Primary-User out of the Copycat State, or they gradually regain awareness. It only seems to occur during a first-time entry and never again afterwards (p. 78).

The first three Imaginal Planes (Atticus, Arlo, and Carney) include a Copycat Narrative, which is essentially a mini-narrative that the jurors act out and believe is real until they are triggered back to awareness. For example, when they first enter Atticus’s Imaginal Plane, the jurors believe they are medical students and that Atticus is ‘The Surgeon’. The Surgeon proceeds to give a gory dissection demonstration before they are triggered out of the Copycat State. I discuss the reasons for including these Copycat Narratives further in Chapter 4 ‘Stylistic Variety and Themes’. The following is a more detailed diagram model comparing *The Canterbury Tales* frame levels with those of *The Mindsweeper Tales* that include a Copycat Narrative.



In *The Mindsweeper Tales* diagram, everything labelled as level 2 (or L2) is occurring within the Imaginal Plane. I have denoted the Copycat Narrative as Level 2a because it occurs within the Imaginal Plane but is still a distinctive narrative. The following is a full diagram of the ‘Day 1 Group’ modelled after the format above.



Shifting focus slightly from the purely structural, I will now address the plot points that I needed to consider with attempting to reimagine a Chaucerian-style frame story in the form of a contemporary novel. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the external frame narrative takes place in a 'real world' setting, where the pilgrims gather together to travel to Canterbury, and this gives credence to the inclusion of the tales. It is a believable scenario that in order to pass the time on their journey this group of strangers would engage in a storytelling competition, and this creates the opportunity for multiple inner story layers and narrative voices. A scenario such as this is not nearly as typical in contemporary society, and so, my first step was to come up with a situation that could plausibly happen today, in which a group of strangers with distinct identities and personality traits find themselves grouped together. I eventually settled on the group of narrators being members of a jury.

Once I had established a reason for these diverse individuals to be grouped together in a close-quarters situation, I needed to come up with a valid reason for the inclusion of the tales. In other words, how would I answer the question: *why are the*

jurors telling a series of fictional tales? Part of the methodology I employed to reinvent the medieval story exchange framework was considering the expectations of an imagined contemporary reader. It would be unlikely that a contemporary reader would relate to, or even accept at all, this storytelling-exchange scenario without legitimate justification for it, considering how unlikely it is for groups of people gathered together in contemporary London (or a recognisable near-future London) to take turns telling each other fictional stories.⁸

Conceiving the need to address this problem revealed a second and third aspect of the storytelling exchange that would require addressing. In addition to justification for the existence of a storytelling-exchange, were the problems of the jurors' motives for narrating stories and their ability to do so. Regarding motive, the question I asked myself was: *why tell stories at all when the jurors could be (and probably should be) focusing on the deliberation?* Even if a storytelling exchange were common practice today, in a scenario of trial and tales only, the jurors do not have a need for it. Unlike Chaucer's pilgrims, they are not travelling by foot and in need of amusement to pass the time; they have an immediate objective and task to be getting on with, which would presumably give them more than enough to talk about. Lastly, I needed to address the jurors' ability to narrate a functional story, considering how uncommon it is in today's society for someone to have to come up with or recall a fictional tale on the spot and then verbally communicate it to an audience. By setting the external frame story in a 'real world' setting, a juxtaposition to the clearly fictional nature of the tales, issues such

⁸ As a precedent, the nature of 'fictional stories' here relates to constructed tales of fiction that all participants are aware are constructed fictions, as opposed to a group of people exchanging lies, false accounts, or fictional stories (about themselves, their lives, the news etc.) under the guise of truth or without the whole group being in the know. While I'm sure it is obvious, I mention this to distinguish the scenario in question from circumstances that could be similarly described, such as the witness accounts during the trial in *The Mindsweeper Tales*, each of which is questionable in its validity and could therefore be considered a group of people gathered in contemporary London to take turns telling each other fictional stories.

as these would have to be justified to be believable. Chaucer's contemporary audience would have been familiar with the portrayal of an oral storytelling exchange, thus keeping the portrayed event in the realm of verisimilitude; however, to truly keep the external frame of my own novel similarly authentic, the storytelling exchange would need to be addressed and qualified. The problem then was how to justify the jurors' incentive, willingness, and ability to narrate the tales that would make up the interpolated collection.

I developed the intermediate narrative level of the Imaginal Planes while considering how to justify each of these elements. By having the storytelling event take place in the minds of the jurors, a situation made possible in the real-world setting through innovative neurotechnology, I felt as though I'd satisfied the following questions. *Why are the juror-characters telling stories at all?* Because storytelling is the suggested coping strategy for preventing the unconscious from taking over when inside the Imaginal Planes. *How are the jurors able to tell a complete, functional tale on the spot?* Because their creative abilities are enhanced within their Imaginal Plane – they have far more imagination and creative supply to work with than they do in exterior/material reality. By framing the storytelling event this way, it seemed less out of place and forced which is a risk when placing an oral storytelling event in a contemporary setting, as it is not something that typically occurs today.

Characters: Pilgrims and Jurors

In the *General Prologue* we are introduced to the pilgrims, a “compaignye/ of sondry folk” (l. 25), meaning they are comprised of individuals with varying professions, trades, and social statuses. They have come together by chance and, as Robert W. Hanning

points out, are 'united solely by their decision' to go on the pilgrimage and 'no ties of class solidarity and antecedent friendship or association bind them', making this 'mix of personalities and statuses...potentially volatile' (2006, p. xxii). Chaucer then goes through and introduces each of the pilgrims individually, providing us with their portraits. The pilgrimage narrative was a clever way of bringing together this diverse group of characters, who hold varying ranks and professions, and range in social status from peasants to nobles, laity, and clergy. Such a varied group of characters offered Chaucer a wide scope of narrative opportunities, setting the stage for a range of lively debates, comical interactions, juxtaposed personalities, lifestyles, conflicts, and perspectives which, in turn, creates the opportunity to include a vast collection of tales that differ in genre, theme, style, and narrative voice.

For this reason, a concern of central importance in constructing a fictional world based on this Chaucerian model is creating a situation in which diverse characters, each with distinguishable characteristics and personality traits, find themselves grouped together. It is preferable, in keeping with Chaucer's approach, that this group be comprised of people who would not otherwise find themselves in each other's company; this allows for a scope comparable to Chaucer's in terms of dynamic interaction, tension, debates, and varying roles in society, leading to a mixture of perspectives and viewpoints. Therefore, my initial considerations regarding the group of characters who would make up the narrators included: (1) a scenario that allows for a diverse range of people to be grouped together, and (2) that this scenario provides enough opportunity and justification for them to be telling tales.

Some of the possibilities I initially considered included a shipwreck or plane crash leaving a group of survivors stranded on a desert island; a bank hostage situation, in which the hostages exchange tales as coping mechanisms or to calm fellow hostages;

a group of research subjects that are grouped together in a room for an extended period of time to be observed, thus leading to a storytelling exchange. I chose to make my company members of a jury because I thought by placing them in a trial setting there would be more opportunity to maintain the momentum of the frame story, which was another consideration I faced initially: ensuring that my creative piece read like a novel, the form I was proposing to reconceptualise the medieval framed story-collection structure into. Therefore, I considered it important to incorporate a developed plot in the main narrative that consistently progressed and moved in a specific direction. I address this further in the following section 'Progression and Disruption'.

The company of narrators in *The Mindsweeper Tales* is initially comprised of twelve jurors. Part I, Chapter 6 provides a profile of each juror by establishing a meet-and-greet when they are first selected. I designed the chapter in the style of the *General Prologue*, with each juror introducing themselves in turn to the rest of the group while Adaline, the narrator, inserts her own impressions of them. In his study on characterisation, Ralph Baldwin identifies 'four descriptive categories which interest the mediaeval litterateur' in l. 38-41 of the *General Prologue*: 'condicioun', 'whiche', 'degree', and 'array' (1955, p. 36); Chaucer says that he will address each of these categories to describe the pilgrims and Baldwin asserts that 'a plenary characterization is conceived on this basis: the exterior, or physical; the interior, or moral portrayal; the social class, rank or profession; and the dress' (1955, p. 37). Describing each pilgrim by these attributes, Chaucer provides a detailed first impression of his company of narrators. Furthermore, he associates each pilgrim with a 'type', then proceeds to ascribe them individual characteristics that transcend them beyond their type. R.M. Lumiansky considers that 'a more exact way of describing this technique is to call it a

combination of the expected and the unexpected' (1913, p. 37). For example, we can approach the Prioress and detect this sense of the expected and the unexpected.

The Prioress is first introduced as someone working very hard to appear courtly and modest in her manner (l. 118-123), and we learn that she is meticulous in her dainty appearance and etiquette (l. 132-136). Eventually, Chaucer undercuts this behaviour, indicating it may be a façade:

But for to speken of hire conscience,
She was so charitable and so pitous
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed
(l. 142-147).

Here, we are shown contradictory aspects in her nature, namely that she is so soft-hearted and compassionate that she would weep over a dead mouse, and yet, she feeds her hounds delicacies of roasted meat, milk, and bread, indicating that she privileges her dogs over people when, as a nun, her concern should be feeding the poor. Individualistic traits such as these characterise the pilgrims beyond mere stock types.

In *The Mindsweeper Tales*, I attempt to create a similar sense of type and individualism, or expected and unexpected, in the juror profiles. For instance, during Spirella's introduction, Adaline starts by describing her as a 'mermaid or a fairy or a nymph. Some kind of magical creature cloaked in enchanting femininity', due to her colourful hair and makeup, while her voice is described as 'chirpy and upbeat, like a Disney-princess conversing with little birds and bunnies' (p. 24). After Jasper interrupts

Spirella to talk about himself, the tone of her introductory section changes, both in Adaline's description and in Spirella's voice:

"We get it," Spirella says, her voice no longer tuned for forest creatures...She places a manicured hand over her chest, long, pointy, red claws gleaming vividly against her mint green blouse. Five blood-dipped daggers and a blood-red smile (p. 25).

In this sense, like the Prioress, Spirella's character appears to be heading in one direction – a female type akin to a Disney princess or a mythical creature – but as soon as Jasper interrupts her, this persona shifts to reveal a more threatening nature underneath through language such as 'red claws' and 'blood-dipped daggers'.

Considering how to go about the juror profile chapter in the style of the *General Prologue* was one of the first challenges I faced while writing the creative piece because I knew a chapter like this was necessary – the jurors would need to be introduced, established, and distinguished in the reader's mind to have any effect on the reading of their tales or the broader plot of the frame – however, I considered how a narrative episode in the style of Chaucer's *General Prologue* could appear contrived when used in a novel. The constructed manner of introducing main characters by listing them out and providing a brief profile on them works effectively in *The Canterbury Tales*, and it is one of the most important features for establishing the direction the rest of the frame narrative will take. It familiarises the reader with the distinctive characteristics of each member in the eclectic company, and essentially, sets the stage for the story-collection to come. In a contemporary novel, however, this structured introduction of main characters risks seeming out of place and noticeably forced. For me, the mark of a well-written novel is one that introduces its main characters and their distinctive traits in a

way that causes the reader to care about those characters without even noticing. Rather than a breakdown of characteristics all at once, as though reading their online dating profile, readers learn about characters gradually, by the way they think, act, and interact in the narrative. On the other hand, I also recognised that the context of this novel meant it was essential for all the jurors to be introduced and given concrete, distinct identities from the start. Therefore, I needed to carefully consider how to incorporate a narrative episode which would effectively introduce and establish each juror, without it being overtly contrived, unnatural, or awkward.

One approach to resolving this problem was to formulate a way for the introductions to fit organically into the chronology of the narrative. I decided against the juror profiles being in the form of a prologue and instead, incorporated it as a scene in the natural progression of the narrative. I did, however, choose to signpost each juror's introduction with a section header. This was a method for creating an individualised focus on each of these characters to make them distinctive to the reader and emphasise their significance. Additionally, I chose to have the jurors introduce themselves in their own voices, rather than have Adaline narrate it entirely. I consciously chose to deviate from Chaucer's specific approach in this regard because I considered it more appropriate to the context of a modern novel, and the scenario of making verbal introductions. Furthermore, I wanted to create a circumstance for the dramatic interplay to begin straight away since the frame in *The Mindsweeper Tales* is not as focused or dependent on the character-narrators interactions for progressing the narrative as the Canterbury pilgrimage. In other words, the frame story in my creative piece is more plot heavy than Chaucer's frame, as befitting a novel, and though the juror's engagement with one another is a large part of it, there are other points of focus, such as exposition and events in the courtroom. For this reason, I wanted to depict the

dramatic interplay between the jurors from their first meeting to create a sense of the group dynamics that would form.

In the introductory section, some of the juror profiles are directly influenced by certain pilgrim portraits in the *General Prologue*, particularly in the way Chaucer represented certain types. A recognisable character type or trait, for example, is something a medieval reader (or listener) would pick up on, thus influencing the lens through which that character is received or attach subtext to their statements, actions, and behaviour that the medieval audience would associate with their own contemporary societal experience. For instance, a number of Chaucer's pilgrims can be seen adhering to well-known types derived from medieval traditions of literary portraiture. Larry D. Benson notes some of these types as 'the hypocritical friar, the hunting monk, the thieving miller', stating further that these:

representatives of various classes and occupations are portrayed with satiric emphasis on the vices peculiar to their stations in life...[and] each character well knows how to realize the potentialities of his or her occupation, whether for good or—far more often—for mischief. (2005, p. 5).

Benson considers these satirical types to still strike the mark today, since they 'represent more general types as well as their particular occupations' (2008, p. 5).

Below, I consider aspects of Jasper Sharpe's portrait in Part I, Chapter 6 of *The Mindsweeper Tales* (p. 22-23) alongside the Miller's portrait in the *General Prologue* (l. 545-566).

Chaucer introduces the Miller as a buffoon with a mouth as big as a furnace: 'His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys./ He was a jangler and a goliardeys,' (l. 559-560). There is an emphasis on his large size and strength, and 'Ther was no dore that he nolde

heve of hare/Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed (l. 550-551). The Miller's sketch is therefore of a large brutish man with a big mouth. Lumiansky suggests that the Miller's 'behavior is in keeping with his appearance' and that it doesn't take long for the Miller to reveal his 'disregard for good manners and of his liking for gossip and off-color stories' (1955, p. 70-71). This is in reference to the Miller's disruption of the social order following *The Knight's Tale*; however, I will consider this further in Chapter 3. Here, if we consider the Miller's portrait from the *General Prologue*, we can detect a recognisable type, in this case, where appearance and behaviour appear matched.

In *The Mindsweeper Tales*, Jasper Sharpe is Juror 8; however, he gets his first line during Carney's introduction, who is Juror 3:

"...and I got a peg leg." [Carney] pats his right knee and thumps his leg up and down, so it makes a thud on the floor. "Made of *a-loo-mini-yoom* metal," he says like it's a material warranting suspicion. He folds his arms after this, closed for questions.

"How'd you get it?" asks Juror 8, loudly. Everyone already knows his name.

Jasper Sharpe. He'd announced it, first chance he got. He likes to shout. To be heard (p. 17).

Although Adaline directly states that Jasper likes to shout, 'to be heard', it is also suggested by his actions when Carney indicates that he is 'closed for questions' and Jasper immediately disregards this to ask a question. This interaction points to Jasper Sharpe being a particular character-type, something that is demonstrated further during his own introduction:

Juror 8, Jasper Sharpe.

A burly man, patchy brown beard, thinning, grey-streaked hair. Perspiration gleams across his forehead, thick like Vaseline, and, as evidenced by the yellowing stains on his striped button-down, also gathers densely around his armpits.

When he leans forward, the shirt suffers, disappearing into the crease of rolling flesh between his chest and stomach. He has a brutish look and contentious manner, like a bulldog sniffing out a fight.

“Well, then,” Jasper shouts, pounding his fist on the table, alerting his audience that the main act is starting. “I work in radio, host of *The Sharpest Tool*, political commentary, news, all the hot topics—” (p. 23).

Like the Miller, Jasper Sharpe is loud and brutish, and by making him a contentious political pundit, I was likening him to a certain type of persona which I consider to be a fairly recognisable type in contemporary society. Additionally, the Miller can play the bagpipes, ‘A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne’, (l. 565). While I recognise that this means the Miller can actually play the bagpipes, I allude to this line after the juror introductions are over and they are having lunch in the jury café, as a way of further associating Jasper with the type of portrait demonstrated by the Miller: ‘I select a boring ham salad and join the others at a circular table, guided by Jasper’s bellowing bagpipes’ (p. 30). In this sense, I borrowed from Chaucer’s character sketches in terms of certain stock attributes and translated them into versions of identifiable types that would resonate with a contemporary audience.

Progression and Disruption

In *The Mindsweeper Tales*, the order of the 4D-Trip and subsequent tales initially appears to have a predetermined method for establishing turn order. To make things easy, they agree that turn order will be according to their juror numbers, that is, the order in which they were selected to be on the jury. This appears to be a clearly formed structure that will progress in the same order that they were introduced in the juror profiles (Part I, Chapter 6). Furthermore, considerations of the particular mechanisms of the 4D-Trip – that its progression across Primary-User Imaginal Planes is determined beforehand by a computer programme – indicate that the order of the 4D-Trip is relatively fixed. Divided into three days, the agreed upon plan is that Jurors 1-4 (Rosalie, Arlo, Carney, Petrus) will be Primary-Users on the first day, Jurors 5-8 on the second (Callum, Atticus, Albert, Jasper), and Jurors 9-11 on the final day (Spirella, Adaline, Max). The order in which the 4D-Trip actually occurs is: Day One, Jurors 6, 2, 3, 4 (Atticus, Arlo, Carney, Petrus); Day 2, Jurors 5, 7, 1, 8 (Callum, Albert, Rosalie, Jasper); Day 3, Jurors 10 and 9 (Adaline and Spirella).

In *The Canterbury Tales*, it is predominantly the characters' interactions and the Host that determine the progression of tales; however, in *The Mindsweeper Tales* it is a combination of character interaction and external factors. For example, Atticus offers to change places with Rosalie because she is uncomfortable going first. I purposefully moved Atticus to the starting spot because he and Arlo (Juror 2) share two parts of the same tale. This was mostly out of convenience for me, because I wanted to begin the stories by engaging the theme of alternate perspectives since that is essentially what a trial and a grouping of distinct jury members represents. Arlo responds to Atticus's tale by taking the point of view of Atticus's villain in his own story, after challenging Atticus on the holes in his protagonist's motives (p. 141-142).

Furthermore, Albert (Juror 7) takes Rosalie's new turn so he can respond to Callum's tale with his own. Jasper's tale, *Elucidation Radio*, is cut off by Lazarus for being impossible to follow, and the dialogue Lazarus uses in this scene is a direct allusion to the Host's interruption of Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* (l. 906-935). Adaline takes Spirella's starting spot on day three because Dr Eto wants to observe how the absorption of her ADHD medication affects her Imaginal Plane. These are examples of the characters determining the order of tales; however, as mentioned, there are also external factors that determine progression and subversion in *The Mindsweeper Tales*. I placed Adaline first on the third day so it would be during Adaline's Imaginal Plane that the 4D-Trip was improperly cut off by the security team, and so Adaline's tale, *Bureau of Blockage*, could break off abruptly on a cliff-hanger. The improper shutdown of the NeuroPath and the required fast track to the end of the programme make it so Spirella's tale is reduced to the short collage-poem *House of Wigs*, and Max's Imaginal Plane is fast-tracked⁹ entirely. These subverted and unfinished aspects of the novel can be linked back to *The Canterbury Tales* which similarly includes tales abandoned or disrupted, such as Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Cook's Tale*.

Conclusion

By examining the framing structure of *The Canterbury Tales* alongside the modern reimagining in my creative piece, it is possible to see how the frame narrative functions as an organising structure that provides context for reading the tales. My aim in this chapter was to emphasise the importance of developing the character-narrators in the

⁹ Following an incorrect shutdown of the NeuroPath during Adaline's Imaginal Plane, they are forced to reconnect and fast-track through the remaining Planes (Spirella and Max) to avoid neurological corruption.

frame, both through portraiture and dramatic interplay. By considering *The Canterbury Tales'* frame in contrast to earlier frame narratives and those of Chaucer's close contemporaries, we can see how effective Chaucer's character development is in setting his work apart from other framed story-collections. Furthermore, it is this element of lifelike, distinctive characters that makes *The Canterbury Tales* such a workable model to consider when reimagining this narrative format. In terms of introducing these characters, I chose to model my own reimagining after Chaucer's *General Prologue*. It could be argued that it is unnecessary to incorporate an introductory segment of this nature to a modern literary form, that the characters in a contemporary novel should have their natures revealed and developed gradually via characterisation, action, and interaction as the story progresses. I would argue, however, that it is beneficial to have this type of introduction when considering the Chaucerian framed story-collection because it provides a significant and emphasised presentation of the characters who are key components to this type of narrative form, as they will be the ones narrating the story exchange. Moreover, I would argue that this introductory section is less about a forced presentation of all the character-narrators and more a way of distinguishing them. Offering initial portraits – ones which point to potential stock types that readers can identify and associate with recognisable personalities in contemporary society – enhances that characters' relevance to the socio-political concerns treated in the novel.¹⁰ This provides an author with the opportunity to deconstruct or deviate from the initial type set up in the introductions, or even exaggerate a satirical type to their fullest potential. Lastly, I would argue that this is essentially what Chaucer does with his Canterbury pilgrims, in that he introduces them in the *General Prologue*, giving us a

¹⁰ Here, 'contemporary novel' refers to the context addressed in Chapter 1: a modern novel form with contemporary thematic concerns.

portrait that combines stock attributes with individualistic traits, and then, through dramatic interplay and tales, those portraits are developed further. In this sense, we can consider the frame and the character-narrators linked in terms of relevance. To apply the Chaucerian framed story-collection to a modern novel, therefore, both the structural and story aspect of the frame should be considered. In other words, there should be an external narrative enclosing a series of shorter, fictional tales. I would argue that my creative piece demonstrates that there is room to experiment with the number of narrative levels in between, but the structural format requires at least one external narrative framing a collection of shorter tales. Further to this, the shorter tales should be narrated by a group of distinctive characters in the outer frame story, thus providing context for the reading of the tale, as well as an extension of that character's portrait. The following chapter will consider this interrelationship in further detail.

Chapter 3: Tellers, Tales, and Dramatic Interplay

This chapter explores the relationship between tellers and tales in terms of dramatic performance. I aim to demonstrate how a teller's literary portrait provides context for reading their tale, and how the tale can serve to extend characterisation or reveal aspects of their character that may not have otherwise emerged. I expand on the discussion in Chapter 1 regarding character types to examine the way in which the pilgrims and jurors' interactions and relationships also serve to develop their natures further, as well as to determine the direction of the overall narrative. By focusing on specific examples in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales* in terms of narrative voice and dramatic interaction, I argue that character portraits are essential in providing context for a reading of the tales, while the tales can further characterise their narrators. First, I consider the parallels between the Knight and the Miller alongside Arlo and Callum in *The Mindsweeper Tales* to demonstrate suitability between teller and tale. Then, I consider the antagonism between the Friar and the Summoner alongside the conflicts between Albert and Callum in *The Mindsweeper Tales*.

The importance of interplay in a literary work like *The Canterbury Tales* cannot be understated. There are varying debates amongst scholars about whether the tales exist for the sake of the tellers or the tellers for the tales, but it is evident that all parts of the work (the frame story, pilgrims, tales, prologues, connecting links) have an important role in interlacing and establishing the literary bricolage that is *The Canterbury Tales*. G.L. Kittredge argues that 'the Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the stories, but *vice versa*' (1915, p. 155), and R.M. Lumiansky claims that the tales, 'rather than being ends in themselves, are meant to be taken as complementary to the portraits

and actions of their individual tellers...that the stories should be read in context' (1955, p. 4). It is from this angle and by these ideas that I chose to approach the teller/tale relationship in *The Mindsweeper Tales*.

While the tales themselves, with the exception of Jasper's tale, are mostly holistic enough to be read independently of the frame, they would not function well as stories in their own right. Callum's tale, *Yucani Valley*, for example, would not function effectively without the contextual aspects provided by the frame and his character portrait, because the viewpoints of its narrator are imperative for a full scope of understanding. Without the context of Callum as its teller, the story would be inexplicably sexist. Spirella's interruptions of Callum's tale serve to highlight and acknowledge particularly stereotyped or gendered rhetoric, characterisation, and imagery, as well as to open a dialogue between narrator and fictional-audience, lending further context to the reading of the tale. Similarly, without the context of Carney's character and Albert's interruption, Carney's tale, *Nexus*, would be somewhat clumsy in its establishment of the fictional universe. However, with the context of Carney as narrator, and Albert's interruption to point out the initial discrepancies and the confusing nature of the fictional world, it becomes clearer why the tale may appear inconsistent or careless at times. Albert's tale, *The Timepiece Trials of Freak Week*, would lose the entire parodic dimension of the Supreme-Hero and Villain characters being renditions of the jurors. While these are some of the more noteworthy examples, all of the tales would lose important aspects of their narrative without the context of the frame, and this includes the manner in which they represent and say something about their specific narrator.

For example, Atticus is the only one who could tell his tale for a number of reasons that I will briefly address. First, Atticus is a retired surgeon with two residences, one in the city (making him liable to be called for jury service in London)

and 'a little cottage outside of London' (p. 29) so it can be assumed that he is well-off financially. Secondly, he was recently diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and forced into early retirement. These two aspects of his character are relevant in explaining his choice of narrator and protagonist: an affluent gentleman in Victorian London called Moral who struggles with ennui and artistic mediocrity. Atticus states that he will tell a story about someone who is desperate for fulfilment or purpose and he paints Moral as a vulnerable victim; however, it is apparent that Moral is not a vulnerable victim, but rather too self-centred and spoiled to comprehend what the actual problems are. Atticus, on the other hand, is not an unlikeable character which is why it is relevant to have the context of his situation when reading the tale. By considering Moral in the context of Atticus, it is possible that he relates to Moral's feelings of ennui due to his forced retirement, and so, presumably an unwanted retirement, and for this reason, doesn't appear to question his choice of protagonist or be aware of how unsympathetic Moral really is. Here, we can consider Lumiansky's 'three dramatic techniques of presentation', mentioned in Chapter 1:

- A. Simple suiting of tale and teller.
- B. Simple suiting of tale and teller, plus an externally motivated dramatic situation.
- C. Simple suiting of tale and teller, plus an externally motivated dramatic situation, plus internally motivated and extended self-revelation of which the teller is not fully aware (1955, p. 248).

Atticus's tale can be viewed in terms of the third technique, 'internally motivated and extended self-revelation of which the teller is not fully aware' (1955, p. 248), in that it reveals an aspect of his character that may be out of touch with what constitutes

victimhood or a position of vulnerability, not in terms of his own situation, but how he portrays it through Moral. Furthermore, Gittes points out that 'some tales unintentionally reveal tellers' weaknesses', citing the Merchant's attempt to illustrate the wiliness of women, only highlights the 'ridiculous romantic behaviour of men like himself' (1997, p. 131).

By considering the Canterbury pilgrimage as a dramatic performance, we can examine the individuality of each pilgrim, as well as the extent of their characterisation. Kittredge likens the pilgrimage to a play or a 'Human Comedy' in which the pilgrims are *dramatis personae* (1915, p. 154) comparable to actors on a stage who develop and move the story via their dramatic interactions. In this case, the pilgrims are not merely tropes or singular types according to their profession or class or gender etc.; they are dynamic characters and, as Kittredge puts it, 'are not static: they move and live' (1915, p. 154). The pilgrims engage in discourse, debates, and competition; they interrupt each other, cut tales short, and argue. They use their tales to poke fun at each other or insult each other, which garners reactive tales as a form of vengeance. In this sense, the tales function as extensions of the discourse and dramatic interplay that occur between the tellers in the linking sections of the frame, which is caused by their dynamic personalities and interactive relationships. In her study of unifying motifs in Fragment A, Emily Jensen considers the parallel tales of the Knight and the Miller, told in opposing styles befitting of their narrators (*The Knight's Tale* is a courtly romance; *The Miller's Tale*, a fabliau). She uses this example to emphasise the importance of the links between tales:

the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*—we know we are being introduced to two critical aspects of the fictional experience...we may expect to encounter a wide

range of human experience and attitudes in the tales; and we must employ a method of reading that continually reassesses each tale in the light of what precedes and follows it (1990, p. 320).

By viewing the tellers and tales in this light, we can gain a sense of how the tales reflect the portrait of their teller, or even extend it, as well as how the tellers and their dramatic interactions before, during, and after the tales can provide additional context to its reading. To examine this further, I will consider the teller/tale relationship and dramatic interplay between the Miller and the Host, and the contrasts between *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*. I place these episodes in conversation with *The Mindsweeper Tales* by considering examples from Arlo's tale *Symphony of Lost Souls* and Callum's tale, *Yucani Valley*. I will also briefly consider the antagonism between the Friar and the Summoner, using this as a comparative context for addressing a similar antagonism between Callum and Albert.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Harry Bailly sets out a plan for each pilgrim to tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. He also decides that they will draw lots to determine the turn order, essentially leaving it up to chance (l. 834-835); however, it is the Knight who draws the shortest cut, indicating the tales will progress in order of social rank. After the Knight finishes his tale, the group agrees it was a 'noble storie' (l. 3111) and, in keeping with the progression of social hierarchy, the Host asks the Monk to tell the next tale, 'now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne, somewhat to quite with the Knyghtes' (l. 3118-3119). However, the sense of order is suddenly disrupted when the drunken Miller declares:

By armes, and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,

With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale

(l. 3125-3127).

Here, we see a member of the lower class breach the social hierarchy. The Host, seeing that the Miller is drunk, insists that 'som better man shal telle us first another' (l. 3130), but the Miller belligerently insists on telling his tale right then, and the Host reluctantly agrees: 'Tel on, a devel way! Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome' (l. 3134-3135). Here, we see both the obstruction of social order and the undermining of authority, considering the Host was meant to be presiding over the storytelling contest as the judge. If we consider the politically-charged environment at the time Chaucer was writing, just after the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, the Miller's boisterous disruption can be viewed in terms of growing class consciousness, his interruption a challenge to traditional power dynamics (Mann, 1987, p. 7).

Furthermore, Chaucer has determined that the pilgrimage will not be dictated by rank.

In addition to the subversion of social order, we see in the Miller's outburst the first indication that tales and turn order will at times be determined in terms of 'quite' or by direct response to a preceding teller/tale. The Miller announces he will 'quite' the Knight's tale and does so by using the same plot in his own tale – two men going after the same woman – but turning it into a fabliau. This juxtaposes the idealised style of chivalric romance, which focus on exulting aristocratic characters and idealised love, with the low style of fabliau, a form of parody that ridicules lower classes and focuses on sex and grotesque humour. While the Knight is a 'worthy man' (l. 43) who told a 'noble storie' (l. 3111), the Miller will tell a 'cherles tale' (l. 3169) because the 'Millere is a cherle' (l. 3182).

A comparable example of contrasting character-portraits in *The Mindsweeper Tales* is in Adaline's description of Arlo and Callum during the juror introductions (Pt. I, Ch. 6). The portrayal of these two characters sets them up as opposing types and indicates the manner in which they eventually approach their tales:

Juror 2, Arlo Newton.

A thirtyish aged black man. Handsome, graceful, tall, unmissable. His smile is white like ivory and kind like Christmas (p. 16).

Juror 5, Callum Spencer.

An Armani model sort. Perfectly-proportioned. Good looks so blatant, they're more fact than opinion, the kind that begin to look waxy, like something from Madame Tussauds. It's a different aesthetic to Arlo Newton, whose handsome is graceful and charming like someone from a 1920's-themed musical; Callum's is sex. It oozes from his pores, slimy like cooking oil (p. 18-19).

The difference in the images raised between them suggests that Adaline may already have been given a sense of their respective characters, thus influencing her choice of language to relate their appearances in order to reflect what she knows of their nature. Arlo is given positive connotations, such as 'kind like Christmas' and musicals, while Callum's association with sex becomes negative when paired with images of wax figures and slimy cooking oil. While the Knight and the Miller are starkly contrasted by the oppressive hierarchy of social class in the middle ages, the character-foils in *The Mindsweeper Tales* relate more to contrasting socio-political ideologies, which in some cases does reflect class, but not as definitively as it did in the middle ages. Thus, the jurors in *The Mindsweeper Tales* aren't identified, first and foremost, by their rank and

profession, as is the case in *The Canterbury Tales*. Like the pilgrims, however, they can be associated with recognisable types in contemporary society.

The suitability of teller and tale can be explored further by considering examples of language used to describe female characters in the *blazon*¹¹ of *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, as well as in Arlo's tale and Callum's tale. In *The Knight's Tale*, Emelye is idealised. Palamon and Arcite both spy her walking in the garden from their prison window and instantly fall in love with her (l. 1096-110; l. 1112-1119). She is compared to the goddess Venus (l. 1101-1102), a heavenly angel (l. 1055), and flowers in May:

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the May with floures newe –
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
I noot which was the fyner of hem two –
(l. 1035-1039).

This courtly idealisation and noble language is befitting of the Knight, whom we know embodies the chivalric ideals of his station from his portrait in the *General Prologue*: 'he loved chivalrie/Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie (l. 45-46).

This can be likened to the language used to describe Yulana in Arlo's tale *Symphony of Lost Souls* by the protagonist, Alderano, which is similarly idealistic in its images of nature and spirituality:

Alderano sits on the floor and pulls the gold locket from under his collar,
studying Yulana's sweet face. He can almost hear her voice when he looks at it,

¹¹ 'A poetic catalogue of a woman's admirable physical features' (Baldick, 2008).

warm and fluttery, like wings. “Angel’s wings,” he says to the fire. Or the deep voice she put on when she made fun of his Latin, speaking gibberish, and laughing. Her laugh was a waterfall of rose petals. But it was nothing compared to when she sang. That voice was crystalline and ethereal. Raindrops and moonlight in spring (p. 158-159).

Here, I’ve used the same idealistic imagery typical of medieval romance, associating Yulana with angels, springtime flowers, and ethereal qualities. Additionally, like Emelye, Yulana’s character functions in the story as an ideal which may only be worshipped and loved from a distance. I would argue that these elements of courtly romance incorporated into Arlo’s tale are demonstrative of his character portrait, for although he is not a knight, he is an operatic tenor who plays numerous roles that elevate theatrical ideals of love, and, so it is reasonable that these sentiments would seep into his character. Moreover, he even acknowledges that his theatrical training affects his manner, stating that his vivacious expression is a ‘side effect of theatrical conditioning’ (p. 142).

On the other hand, Alisoun in *The Miller’s Tale* is sexualised, which is more befitting of the Miller and his fabliau. While Emelye was spiritualised and divine, Alisoun is likened to animals and flesh:

Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal
As any wezele hir body gent and smal.
A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk,
A barmcloth as whit as morne milk
Upon hir lendes, ful of many a goore.
(1. 3233-3237).

The description of Alisoun focuses on her body, the language oriented in physicality, a direct contrast to the idealistic, immaterial images drawn by the language describing Emelye. Alisoun's small and slender body is likened to a weasel, while Emelye is a lily on a green stalk. Alisoun's singing is compared to a swallow sitting on a barn (l. 3257), while Emelye's singing is like a heavenly angel (l. 1055). By contrasting these two blazons, we can see how the style and narratorial voice in each tale is an extension of their teller. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the high style of the Knight's romance with the low style of the Miller's fabliau, Chaucer is engaging with England's increasing class tensions and challenging the traditional social order.

Like the Miller, Callum's description of his female characters in *Yucani Valley* is sexualised and focused on the body:

Adrienne's already got a table outside. She's looking at her phone, arms bent on the table in a way that squeezes her large, tanned breasts together and pushes them forward, out of her low-cut sundress, giving bystanders a tiny peek at her lacy red bra. Louella approaches and Adrienne jumps up to embrace her, D-cups bouncing freely (p. 267).

By this point in *The Mindsweeper Tales*, enough of Callum's portrait has been revealed for this type of narration to be expected. His Imaginal Plane is highly sexualised and misogynistic, placed inside a cabaret lounge where the furniture is crafted using dismembered female body parts, and the beer taps are made of breasts, so it is predictable that his descriptions of women would focus on their breasts also. The chauvinism of his character is unquestionable by the time he tells his tale; therefore, it is suitable that he would focus on the physical when describing female characters. While the Miller's narratorial voice in his tale suits him in terms of social status and the genre

of fabliau, Callum's narratorial style is demonstrative of his views on women and gender which are ingrained with male chauvinism and sexism. By considering the parallels between the Knight and the Miller, we can see examples of the interlinking and interplay present in *The Canterbury Tales*. By reimagining this interplay in terms of the contemporary issue of gender and sexism, I contrasted two characters on those terms, while alluding to the parallels of courtly romantic ideals and fabliau-style physicality.

Another instance of interplay is through conflict. For example, after *The Miller's Tale*, the Reeve is angered by the Miller's depiction of a cuckolded carpenter, 'by cause he was of carpenteris craft' (l. 3861) and declares that he will pay him back by telling a tale that makes fun of millers: 'Thogh I answere, and somdeel sette his howve;/ For leveful is with force force of-showve' (l. 3911 – 3912). In the case of the Miller and the Reeve, we see the dramatic method playing out in their arguing, which results in the next tale also being a form of 'quite'. This can be linked to the rivalry between Callum and Albert that is present throughout *The Mindsweeper Tales*. After Callum's Imaginal Plane and Tale, Albert takes Rosalie's turn, so he can go next and respond to Callum. Once in his Imaginal Plane, Albert says that he wants to tell a tale about someone like Callum:

"You know, I wanted to tell a story about a guy like Callum. A big creep up his own arse who meets his well-deserved downfall—that sort of thing. I know it's not directly related to the trial, but hey, someone's gotta' point out that not all jurors are created equal. Some have minds that are literally made of rot-stinking sewers and sexism personified" (p. 287).

While Albert doesn't actually tell a story with the specific character described above, he still manages to insult Callum by parodying him as Spandex Man in *The Timepiece Trials*

of *Freak Week*. Albert announces his intentions for the tale by insulting Callum, which can be compared to the way the Friar announces that his tale will be about summoners:

“Pardee, ye mal wel knowe by the name
That of a somonour may no good be sayd;
I pray that noon of you be yvele apayd.
A somonour is a rennere up and doun
With mandementz for fornicacioun,”
(l. 1279-1284).

Here we see the Friar besmirch summoners as a profession infamous for their immoral and lecherous behaviour, which is a similar tone to Albert’s attack on Callum. This fuels the conflict between the Friar and the Summoner, with the latter responding that the Friar can do what he wants, but he’ll take his revenge through his own tale. Albert’s ‘quite’ of Callum is to turn him into a superhero caricature:

Spandex Man, a slimily handsome follower of the Shredded Gainz religion (or Swollists) in a skin-tight silver leotard, lounges on his diamond ottoman while the Lesser, Lower, and Hardly-At-Alls queue up to dribble on his shiny pointed shoes (p. 295).

This particular depiction of Callum is in response to a debate between him and Spirella over whether or not a female character would describe a male character as ‘shredded’ (p. 263-264), which leads me to my final example of dramatic interplay: debate and interruption.

We can consider how the tales serve to expand the characterisation of their teller by the way they invite interaction with another character, creating conflict and

disruption. The *General Prologue* gives us a first impression of the pilgrims, and as *The Canterbury Tales* proceeds, the characters acquire further dimension by the way they engage with their environment and the people in it. They are inconsistent, imperfect, and biased, as well as having varying outlooks and ways of communicating. We learn more about them by the subject they pontificate about in their prologues or epilogues, and through the tale they choose to tell, how they choose to tell it, and in what ways it establishes or clashes with the development of their character to that point. In this sense, the tales can be read as personal extensions of their tellers, allowing us further insight to their character that we may not have otherwise had. This can be linked back to the idea of the frame story as a dramatic performance. For example, Kittredge writes that the pilgrims ‘move by virtue of their inherent vitality, not as tale-telling-puppets, but as men and women’, and the tales:

are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly, the characters of the several persons...But they are not mere monologues, for each is addressed to all the other personages, and evokes reply and comment, being thus, in a real sense, a part of the conversation (1915, p. 155).

In *The Mindsweeper Tales*, there is an example of this in Callum’s tale, *Yucani Valley*. Callum is the first Primary-User on Day 2, and in the morning, while the jurors are waiting at Hexton Labs to be connected to the NeuroPath, Callum attempts to flirt with Spirella. When she shuts him down, he tells her ‘you’re going to regret that, Spirelly’ (p. 234). One of the ways Callum attempts to make true that promise is by simultaneously undercutting and exaggerating Spirella’s feminist ideology in his character Louella. While not a direct parody of Spirella, Callum depicts her from an angle of male chauvinism, building her into a conglomerate of antifeminist stock types and

characteristics. For example, in this scene, Callum characterises Louella as having stereotypical 'woman' interests which she desires her husband to share:

It's so nice having Malcam take an interest in things that matter to her, like baking and decorating the house...You'd actually think he *enjoyed* picking out curtain fabrics and matching them with paint colour swatches. He understood why it was essential to get the shade of coral right and wasn't impatient when she spent forty-five minutes going back and forth between two tones that looked exactly the same. It was— (p. 263).

At that point, Spirella interrupts Callum's tale to point out his misogyny, and they have a heated interchange over feminist/antifeminist issues. I mention it here to demonstrate how I have incorporated Kittredge's suggestion that the tales are addressed to the teller's audience and evoke comment. In the case of Callum's tale, there is no question that Louella carries with her an underlying antagonism directed at Spirella, which incorporates the tale into the ongoing gender debate between Spirella and Callum.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to analyse the interlinking between teller and tale, demonstrating further how the elements of the external frame provide a context for reading the tales, and how the tales serve to extend their teller's portrait. Further to this, I aimed to illustrate how dramatic interplay between the character-narrators can determine the progression and content of tales, as in cases of tales being a form of revenge or comment upon preceding tales. In this way, I have aimed to highlight the interlinking network that makes up *The Canterbury Tales* framing structure by focusing on four of the six essential components laid out in Chapter 1 – the frame, tellers, tales,

and dramatic interplay – demonstrating how I have reimagined these components in my creative piece. The following chapter considers the role of the final two components in this structural network: stylistic variety and themes.

Chapter 4: Stylistic Variety and Themes

The twenty-four tales that make up *The Canterbury Tales* cover an impressive variety of narrative styles, genres, and themes, creating a lengthy anthology of literary bricolage.

To clarify what I mean by 'literary bricolage', I include the following definition of *bricolage* taken from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

A French term for improvisation or a piece of makeshift handiwork. It is sometimes applied to artistic works in a sense similar to collage: an assemblage improvised from materials ready to hand, or the practice of transforming 'found' materials by incorporating them in a new work. *Verb: bricoler* (Baldick, 2015).

It is through this context that I view Chaucer's assemblage of various genres, rhetorical styles, forms, and themes, and because this stylistic variety is so essential to the work, I wanted to create a modernised literary bricolage of my own. In this chapter, I consider how an assemblage of juxtaposing stylistic choices function in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales* to emphasise three themes treated in both texts: the relationship between truth and fiction, the instability of language, and views on women in society. There are two additional narrative forms I address in this chapter which influenced the stylistic choices in my creative piece: Chaucer's dream-poem *House of Fame* and Surrealist text collage. Both artforms are concerned with the vulnerability and potential volatility of language and produce artistic deconstructions of textual meaning linked closely with contemporary socio-political statements. In *The Mindsweeper Tales* these themes are prevalent in 2030 London's post-truth culture, particularly in the populist, alt-right political regime, their misinformation campaign,

and the indistinguishable state of facts and lies in media culture. In *House of Fame*, Chaucer questions the reliability of authoritative textual tradition by considering the way truth and falsity are compounded as news travels and language becomes increasingly marred with each repetition until the original idea is lost completely. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer takes these ideas further by questioning the nature of language and fiction entirely, the relationship between the signifier and signified, interpretations that vary widely according to each specific listener or interpreter, all of which creates a wholly unreliable system of verbal and written communication.

Language's unreliability in accurately representing meaning creates artistic opportunities to deconstruct and subvert textual norms. I address this theme further in conjunction with views of women in society. I examine the gendered material culture in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*, placing *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* in conversation with the text collage collections 'Woman's Sphere' in Rosalie's Plane (p. 315-319) and 'Modern Woman's Sphere' in Spirella's Plane (p. 424-430). I consider the Wife's discussion of antifeminist authoritative texts in her Prologue alongside the text collages, which were formed using popular magazines aimed at women in both the 1940-50s and the last five years in order to demonstrate the persistence of sexist ideas in textual culture. By deconstructing this language, both in the form of Surrealist text-collage in *The Mindsweeper Tales* and the Wife's challenge of gender norms and authoritative texts in *The Canterbury Tales*, it is possible to expose the role material textual culture has in perpetuating oppressive norms and maintaining dominant ideologies. I argue that the Wife of Bath and Spirella (Juror 9) resist expectations imposed on them by their respective patriarchal cultures and demonstrate female sovereignty. On the other hand, I consider how these acts of rebellion, as well as

the distortion of textual language, can also serve to perpetuate the established ideologies they intend to subvert.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as an exploration of the literary bricolage in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*, demonstrating how I reimagined Chaucer's stylistic variety in order to engage with these social themes in a modern context. First, I provide a general overview of the stylistic variety in both works, focusing on genres, styles, and narrative forms. I address the variation in genre in Chaucer's tales, placing this in conversation with my own attempt to experiment with different genres. I follow this with a more detailed discussion of the socio-political thematic context through which I analyse the application and function of these literary styles. Then, I turn to medieval dream vision, briefly introducing the form and Chaucer's *House of Fame*, before moving to a comparative analysis of the thematic emphasis on truth and fiction in *House of Fame* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*.

Next, I consider Surrealist text collage, addressing the Surrealist movement's preoccupation with creating art that distorts and challenges norms, and reimages reality. I focus on the thematic aspects of the text collages 'Woman's Sphere' and 'Modern Woman's Sphere', placing this in conversation with *The Canterbury Tales* and the thematic content in *The Mindsweeper Tales*. Additionally, I consider the visual aspects of text collage alongside Chaucer's use of rhetorical devices which lent themselves to oral readings of the work and were intended for his listening audience. I liken this to my incorporation of visual narrative in my creative piece, demonstrating how I have reimagined this stylistic approach with a contemporary audience in mind by incorporating the juxtaposition of traditional prose with modern material-print culture to engage socio-political thematic concerns.

Genres, Styles, and Forms: An Overview

The twenty-four tales that make up *The Canterbury Tales* cover a vast range of narrative styles, genres, and themes. This eclectic coverage of styles and genres is one of the defining traits of *The Canterbury Tales*, and for this reason, I wanted to capture an essence of literary bricolage in my modernisation of the form. Genres covered in *The Canterbury Tales* include, but are not limited to romance, fabliau, folktale, myth, beast-fable, parody, satire, saint's lives, exemplum, sermon, tragedy, miracle, treatises, and histories. Many of these genres are used in combination and at times overlap and blur together. Furthermore, Chaucer includes a number of rhetorical styles. For example, Chaucer-the-pilgrim tells two tales; first, the '*Tale of Sir Thopas*' which is in tail-rhyme verse, marking a break from the decasyllable meter used throughout most of *The Canterbury Tales*. Then, the Host cuts Chaucer's tale short, declaring 'myne eres aken of thy drasty speche' (l. 923), and Chaucer tries again with the *Tale of Melibee*, a moral tale in prose. Table 1 classifies each of Chaucer's tales with some of their genres, styles, and themes to provide a visual of the variety.

Table 1. *The Canterbury Tales*: Genres, Themes, Styles.

Tale	Genre	Themes/Style
The Knight's Tale	Romance	Courtly Love; Chivalry
The Miller's Tale	Fabliau; Parody	Parody of 'KT'; sex; trickery
The Reeve's Tale	Fabliau	Revenge; trickery
The Cook's Tale	Fabliau ⁺	
The Man of Law's Tale	Romance; Saints' Life	Piety; Providence; 'Pitous tale' ⁺⁺⁺
The Wife of Bath's Tale	Arthurian Romance; Fairy tale; Folktale	Female sovereignty
The Friar's Tale	Exemplum; Satire	Corruption; the devil
The Summoner's Tale	Fabliau; Satire	
The Clerk's Tale	Exemplum; Folktale; Saints' Life	'Pitous tale'; Female virtue & obedience in marriage
The Merchant's Tale	Fabliau; Parody	Marriage; Adultery
The Squire's Tale	Romance	Love; Faithfulness, <i>gentillesse</i>
The Franklin's Tale	Breton lai	Folklore; romance
The Physician's Tale	Exemplum; Historical	Moral values; 'pitous tale'
The Pardoner's Tale	Sermon; Exemplum	Moral tale against sins
The Shipman's Tale	Fabliau	Money; trickery
The Prioress's Tale	Miracles of the Virgin	Divine power; evil; salvation
<i>The Tale of Sir Thopas</i>	Romance in verse	Tail-rhyme parody
<i>The Tale of Melibee</i>	Moral treatise in prose	Didactic; virtue; wise counsel
The Monk's Tale	Tragedy	Victims of Fortune; downfalls of great men
The Nun's Priest's Tale	Beast-fable	Flattery; women; dreams
The Second Nun's Tale	Saints' Life	Truth; martyrdom
The Canon Yeoman's Tale	Confessional; Fictional re-creation	Alchemy
The Manciple's Tale	<i>Pourquoi</i> ⁺⁺ ; moral tale	Antifeminism; dangers of lies
The Parson's Tale	Treatise on Penitence	Contrition; Confession; Satisfaction

⁺ 'The Cook's Tale' cuts off after 57 lines, however he announces in his Prologue that he will tell 'a litel jape' (l. 4343) which suggests similarity with fabliau. It is worth noting that the final 32 lines consist of proverbs and moral wisdom, which indicate that Chaucer could have potentially been taking the tale in another direction.

⁺⁺ Ovidian-style metamorphosis

⁺⁺⁺ 'Pitous tales' are tales of innocent suffering.

I began experimenting with various narrative forms in my creative piece and juxtaposing them in the text for different purposes and effects. Narrative forms in *The*

Mindsweeper Tales, aside from the traditional prose include poetic fragment (p. 237-238), free-verse (p. 249-250), prose-poem (p. 251), song lyrics (p. 107; p. 323), Surrealist text-collage (p. 315-319; p. 424-430), collage-poem (p. 432-435), narrative interludes (Copycat States), and visual interludes (p. 329-330). There are nine tales in *The Mindsweeper Tales* which attempt some range of genre, and at times, overlap.¹² Table 2 places the tales into their respective genres, styles, and themes (in general terms, without taking into consideration highly specified sub-genres, such as the many derivatives of cyberpunk).

The chart notes an example of interlinking between the tales by Carney, Albert, and Adaline with the parallel universe Earthworm. This refers to the variant of Earth that Carney creates after Albert interrupts his tale for not being able to follow Carney's fictional universe, which merges together gods and settings from different mythologies and pseudo-histories. Albert then uses Earthworm as the setting for his own tale, set thousands of years in the future from when Carney's tale took place. During Adaline's turn, Carney interrupts her to ask about her story's setting and when she replies, 'somewhere sort of like London, but not actually London' (p. 397), Carney responds, 'sounds like Earthworm to me...Now we got past, future, and present. Cracking on with some real world-building, we are' (p. 370). Therefore, this parallel universe is shared among Carney's tale, *Nexus*, Albert's tale, *The Timepiece Trials of Freak Week*, and Adaline's tale, *Bureau of Blockage*.

¹² This total includes Spirella's collage-poem *House of Wigs*, but does not include Jasper's, *Elucidation Radio*.

Table 2. *The Mindsweeper Tales*: Genres/Styles.

Teller/Tale	Genre/Style
Atticus, 'Station of Lost Souls'	Fantasy
Arlo, 'Symphony of Lost Souls'	Fantasy; Tragedy
Carney, 'Nexus'	Mythopoeic; Fantasy; Parody; Parallel Universe ^o
Petrus, 'Choco-Ban Balls'	Dystopia
Callum, 'Yucani Valley'	Satire+; Parody; Speculative; Sci-Fi
Albert, 'The Timepiece Trials of Freak Week'	Superhero-Fantasy; Parody; Satire; Social Commentary; Parallel Universe ^o
Rosalie, 'Funny Boy'	Flash Fiction
Adaline, 'Bureau of Blockage'	Satire; Dystopia; Parallel Universe ^o
Spirella, 'House of Wigs'	Visual; Collage-Poem

^oEarthworm

+Satire of teller

In addition to the varying genres in the tales, a number of the Imaginal Planes incorporate certain genre traits and styles, adding to the sense of literary bricolage. Table 3 demonstrates some of the more prominent genre and style elements in the

Imaginal Planes, which include the three Copycat Narratives of Atticus, Arlo, and Carney.

Table 3. Imaginal Planes in *The Mindsweeper Tales*

Imaginal Plane	Genre/Style/Theme
Atticus	Horror; Medical; Loss
Arlo	Surrealism; Socio-Political Allegory
Carney	Historical; Adventure; Sea Voyage
Callum	Horror; Body-Horror; Surrealism
Albert	Dying Earth/Post-Apocalyptic
Rosalie	Surrealism; Horror; Retro Arcade
Adaline	Surrealism; Mental Health

This variation in genre and style adds to the sense literary bricolage demonstrated by Chaucer. Since I only have nine tales compared to Chaucer’s twenty-four, I looked to other formats to enhance the sense of stylistic variation in *The Mindsweeper Tales*. One of these formats was medieval dream-poetry, Chaucer’s *House of Fame* in particular.

Dream Vision & Chaucer’s House of Fame

Fourteenth-century dream poetry is a literary form where the main narrative is framed as a dream account. I turned to dreamlike, surrealistic elements in my approach to the intermediate narrative level of the Imaginal Planes because of the opportunities these styles provided me. By focusing on thematic and stylistic choices made in these parts of *The Mindsweeper Tales*, I aim to demonstrate how particular elements of the creative component have been influenced by dream-poetry and Chaucer’s *House of Fame*. I consider this discussion in terms of the overall argument in this chapter, which focuses on examining my methods for approaching the stylistic variation in *The Canterbury*

Tales. By analysing specific examples in these texts, I aim to demonstrate how dream-poetry's influence on my writing contributes to the overall sense of literary bricolage in *The Mindsweeper Tales*.

I developed the premise for the intermediate narrative in *The Mindsweeper Tales* while anticipating how to justify the storytelling exchange within the trial setting. As I discussed in Chapter 2, this was largely to satisfy the general problem of why the jurors were telling stories (what was their incentive?), and the two more specified problems of why they were telling stories instead of what they were supposed to be doing (i.e. why was it more important for them to tell stories than focus on deliberating or analysing evidence etc?), and how they all had the ability to construct a fictional narrative on the spot and successfully convey it to an audience.

Incorporating the additional narrative level into *The Mindsweeper Tales* widened the scope of the plot and potential use of stylistic devices, which was something I considered necessary for creating a comparable sense of stylistic variation within the length of my creative piece, compared to Chaucer's much larger work. I anticipated that writing a novel with these added dimensions would be far more interesting and fun for me to write – which it was – although, far more challenging as well. The novel, organised to include all three major narrative levels, meant writing a concoction of mini narratives on multiple frame levels that would all somehow tie together in a holistic, contained text: one large, overarching story, a collection of distinctive short stories, and ten staunchly different mindscape narratives, some of which include their own short narratives (Copycats) or digression narratives, such as Callum's sewer (p. 237-246) or Rosalie's raspberry man interludes (p. 329-331).

That being said, designing the novel to include a narrative level that takes place in the characters' mindscapes is one of the reasons I turned to medieval dream-poetry,

and particularly, to Chaucer's *House of Fame*. The dream form provided medieval authors with an expanded universe in which to place their poems, where the rules of their rational waking world need not apply. In his study *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, A.C. Spearing summarises the wide-ranging possibilities that the dream frame offered a medieval author in the following:

Many of the themes, genres and conventions of medieval literature are non-realistic. They belong to the world of the mind, could not be part of anyone's objective experience, and might therefore appropriately be framed in dreams. In dreams we undergo experiences in which we are freed from the constraints of everyday possibility, and which we feel to have some hidden significance; and much of the content of medieval literature is of that kind too (1980, p. 2-3).

Once I began writing with the Imaginal Planes integrated as a narrative layer and core plot device, I began to recognise similarities between this aspect of my novel and the medieval dream poems I had studied. The jurors being able to narrate stories for an audience on the spot may have appeared questionable in the trial setting, but the Imaginal Planes are the world of the mind, and so, this way they are 'freed from the constraints of everyday possibility', (Spearing, 1980, p. 2-3) in a manner similar to the medieval dreamer-narrator. Furthermore, each Imaginal Plane is a spatial manifestation of one of the juror's minds, allowing for a wealth of hidden significance to be explored or revealed about the characters. In this sense, by including the additional narrative level, I provided myself with further opportunity to extend the character-portraits of the jurors and reveal hidden significance in the surrealistic representations of their psychologies, while simultaneously expanding the literary bricolage. It is worth noting that my choice to incorporate an intermediate narrative layer that takes place in

surrealistic settings does not mean I am suggesting that the only way to justify a Chaucerian type of story exchange in a contemporary setting is inclusion of the fantastic. While my preference was to incorporate surrealistic elements to widen the bounds of the narrative's 'possible' from what a purely realistic frame would allow, that does not mean a purely realistic narrative frame with a contemporary setting could not accomplish a justifiable story event.

For the purpose of context, the following briefly summarises Chaucer's *House of Fame*, which is divided into three books. Book I begins with a proem, in which Geoffrey, Chaucer's narrator, exasperatedly ruminates over the confusing classifications of medieval dream theory. The dream begins when Geoffrey-the-dreamer finds himself in a temple of glass where there are more images, statues, and portraits than he's ever seen (l. 120-128). After leaving the temple, Geoffrey ends up in a desert, and a massive gold eagle descends toward him. Book II begins with the eagle clutching Geoffrey in its talons and lifting him into the celestial spheres. The eagle serves Jupiter and informs Geoffrey that the god has taken pity on him after seeing him work so hard to write love poems in service to Cupid and Venus, without ever being rewarded by them. In light of this, Jupiter has sent the eagle to take Geoffrey to the House of Fame, where he promises that Geoffrey will hear love tidings (l. 672-680) – essentially, inspiration for his poetry. Book III takes place in Fame's Palace, a lavish hall filled with musicians and entertainers, and groups of people crowding around Fame, begging her favour in their quests for notoriety. Geoffrey meets an unnamed man who claims to know where to find love tidings and takes Geoffrey to the House of Rumour, a noisy, whirling, cage-like house, constructed of twigs where gossip, news, rumours, and tidings - both true and false - fly in and out constantly. Inside, Geoffrey witnesses how news travels as it is whispered from ear to ear, and how it is slightly altered with each retelling until the truth of the

original statement is completely lost. The poem breaks off when Geoffrey sees an unnamed 'man of gret auctorite...' (l. 2158). In terms of comparative analysis, I focus mainly on the scenes in the House of Rumour, linking the emphasis on truth and fiction to the thematic concerns in my creative piece. First, however, I address the dream-poem form more generally to demonstrate the way Chaucer questions established textual tradition.

In *House of Fame*, Chaucer examines the foundations of literary authority by engaging the conventional framework of dream-poetry. Fourteenth-century dream literature is a type of visionary narrative where a first-person narrator recounts a dream or vision that took them out of their waking reality and into a fantastic, metaphysical dreamscape. The dream-plot is often a visionary quest or spiritual adventure, the goal of which is to achieve some sort of enlightenment or transformation (Boitani, 1983, p. 71-72). It is typically a report of the narrator's experience and encounters with dream figures, such as authoritative guides and a variety of allegorical characters imparting wisdom or engaging in debates. I say 'typically' and 'often' based on the assumption that there is a recognisable generic formula that most fourteenth-century dream poems adhere to, at least in part, though such a formula is not obligatory or by any means binding. In *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form*, J. Stephen Russell lays out an initial assumption for what makes a poem a dream vision:

to be a dream vision (or to be a poem of any predefined kind), a poem must *both* contain certain motifs *and* be the product of a poet's intention to follow a tradition or imitate a generic model (1988, p. 2).

If we consider Chaucer's *House of Fame* in this context, it is possible to identify motifs which appear to abide by a literary formula, such as the eagle as an authoritative guide

and the celestial landscape. Furthermore, as with the framed story-collection, medieval dream poetry was a culmination of tradition and innovation. Dream-poets would have been familiar with the literary foundations they were building upon, as well as traditional dream science that classified dreams into hierarchical categories based on causes and legitimacy (truth). Macrobius, for example, was one of the leading authorities on dream lore in the middle ages and his five classifications of dreams according to their validity was one of the most well-known sections of his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (Macrobius and Stahl, 1990, p. 87). According to Macrobius, legitimacy was determined by the extent a dream provided the dreamer with some valid truth (prophetic, divine, philosophical etc.) (Macrobius and Stahl, 1990, pp. 87-91), and as mentioned, *House of Fame* begins with a proem in which Geoffrey exasperatedly ruminates over this ambiguous and confusing nature of dream classifications for determining truth and significance (l. 1-17). While it can be argued that the tradition of dream theorists, such as Macrobius, provide a context for reading dream poetry, Stephen Kruger has argued that too much dependence on dream lore for poetic interpretation can lead to distortions and oversimplification of literary complexities (1992, p. 123). Furthermore, Alison M. Peden has suggested that Chaucer's dream-poetry 'sprang principally from literary models and his own creative inspiration' (1985, p. 69). I will consider *House of Fame* from this perspective, namely Chaucer's thematic focus on the unreliability of language and the nature of truth and fiction. Spearing has noted that:

Dreams and poems are both types of fiction; and one thing that was lacking to medieval culture, whose intellectual roots were theological, was an adequate theory of fiction, and particularly a way of allowing some intrinsic value to the works of the human imagination. (1980, p. 74).

Considering this, I would argue that *House of Fame* demonstrates Chaucer's anxieties over the trustworthiness of language to communicate intended meaning over time, essentially questioning the reliability of authoritative textual traditions. In light of this, it is possible that Chaucer is subsequently considering the value of fiction written largely using literary sources and the creative imagination.

A central concern in *The Mindsweeper Tales* is also the ambiguous relationship between truth and fiction (or true and false; real and pretend). The fixed goal that drives the plot forward is essentially a quest to uncover the truth and differentiate fact from fiction. What occurs, however, is an inquiry into the very nature of true and false, and the idea of strict polarity is blurred. Truth and fiction are bound by duality, and this idea of double-nature is a prevalent theme in *The Mindsweeper Tales*. The most obvious demonstration of this is the literal split of Jacob Lazarus's mind, resulting in the traditional doppelgänger motif. This dichotomy seemed an appropriate theme to consider in this chapter since the driving force of the plot is, in a literal sense, a search for the truth that will lead to an accurate verdict. The whole premise of a murder trial is inherently linked with the issue of determining fact from within a complex network of misrepresentations, falsities, conflicting accounts of events, and lies. This judicial search for truth is a microcosm that sits within the wider, socio-political atmosphere of 2030 London, where actuality is consistently blurred with falsehood, to the point that they are barely distinguishable. Adaline laments over the exploitation of facts in political spheres, journalism, media, and the internet.¹³ Nested within the trial narrative are the Imaginal Planes, further examples of how truth and fiction can become obscured by the symbolic nature of the mindscape. Truth, in a psychological sense or otherwise, is veiled

¹³ Particularly in Part I, Chapter 5 (pp. 21-24).

by symbols and the disjointed, unfiltered nature of the unconscious mind which makes it difficult to decipher.

Likewise, in *House of Fame*, the nature between truth and fiction is a central concern. The whole premise of a dream at once questions this relationship, in a similar way to the Imaginal Planes. It is a middle ground between reality and fantasy.

Furthermore, Fame's House itself is the centre where all things that are spoken, both true and false, culminate:

“What?” quod I. “The grete soun,”
Quod he, “That rumbleth up and doun
In Fames Hous, full of tydynges,
Both of feir speche and chidynges,
And of fals and soth compound
(l. 1025 -1029).

Loud rumblings come from Fame's House which the eagle explains are the sounds of all things spoken, as it is there that all tidings - both true and false - compound. Once these spoken statements reach Fame's House, they become visible, material entities and are no longer invisible sound or, as the eagle states, 'nought but eyr ybroken' (l. 765). In Book III, Chaucer depicts the House of Rumour as a whirling wicker cage, constructed of twigs. Geoffrey likens it to a labyrinthic House of Daedalus (l. 1920-1936) and describes a great noise coming from it. Inside, the house is full of 'gygges' and 'chirkynges' (l. 1942-1943) ¹⁴ and has many entrances and doors that are always kept unlocked 'To leten wel the soun out goo' (l. 1950). It is here that tidings from all the world (l. 1932), on all subjects - gossip, war, peace, marriage, voyages, death, life, wisdom, folly, famine,

¹⁴ Squeaking and creaking.

kingdoms, power, misgovernment, to name a few – whirr in and out constantly (l. 1952-1976). As Geoffrey watches these tidings whirl about, he spots the eagle perched nearby and asks if he can go inside to investigate, to which the eagle responds:

That but I bringe the therinne,
Ne shalt thou never kunne gynne
To come into hyt, out of doute
So faste hit whirleth, lo, aboute
(l. 2003-2006).

Here, the eagle claims the tidings whirl about too quickly for Geoffrey to find his way around without the eagle's help. This gives us the sense that the words racing about are physical and relatively violent. This can be likened to the scene in *The Mindsweeper Tales* when Adaline is in Rosalie's 'Woman's Sphere' hallway, hands covering her ears, the words swirling about her aggressively, and in a comparable way to Geoffrey's eagle, Lazarus must be the one to guide her out, saying, 'you should step out of the little hallway, Adaline...your mind will suffocate in there' (p. 318). In this sense, Lazarus is comparable to the conventional authoritative guide in dream-poetry, like Geoffrey's eagle. Furthermore, there is a comparable sense of the aggressive physicality in the whirling words, made up of truths and fictions compounding in both cases. I consider the physical nature and volatility of these words further in the following section 'Surrealist Text Collage'.

Once inside the house, Geoffrey witnesses a scene of people whispering tidings in each other's ears, adding to or altering the news with each retelling (l. 2043-2080). In this scene, Chaucer depicts how original statements become distorted as they pass from person to person until eventually, the initial meaning is all but lost. It is an inventive

symbolic example of how truth and intention can be misrepresented, misconstrued, or lost entirely over time when each repetition comes with a slight variation. Furthermore, it appears that the people spreading the tidings do not care whether they are true or false and instead, embellish them or add their own take on them:

Wente every tydyng fro mouth to mouth,
And that encresing ever moo,
As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo
From a sparke spronge amys,
Til al a citee brent up ys.
(l. 2076-2080).

Chaucer ends the passage by likening the distribution of modified tidings – each version growing farther from the original news with every retelling – to the way a fire can rapidly spread from one spark blown amiss until the entire city burns. We can link this back to the scene at the whirling wicker, where Geoffrey spends fifteen lines listing all of the communications he sees whirling around, the final tiding being ‘Of fyr, and of dyvers accident’ (l. 1976)¹⁵. Considering that the House of Rumour is constructed of twigs, these ominous links are intentionally directed to emphasise the fragility and potential volatility of language, especially in a whirring network of increasingly tainted truths. V.A. Kolve notes that in the middle ages ‘tidings’ could mean any number of ways that information or news is transported and communicated. He goes on to state that news is linked to ‘shipmen and pilgrims as persons whose wallets are full of “lesinges, / Entremedled with tydynges” (lies mixed up with news—trustworthy news, presumably, because of the grammatical opposition)’ (1995, p. 482). Kolve’s assertion of news being

¹⁵ Of fire and diverse accident.

a mixture of trustworthy tidings and lies, something that is also the case today, is particularly relevant due to his emphasis on the idea that shipmen and *pilgrims* are the ones disseminating it. I will consider this link to *The Canterbury Tales* further; however, first I will address the thematic emphasis of truth and fiction in *The Mindsweeper Tales* as I reimagined it to reflect contemporary socio-political circumstances.

Chaucer's thematic concerns with truth and fiction were not difficult for me to reimagine in terms of contemporary ideas, such as 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts.' One does not need to take a political or ideological stance to recognise that two of the most important political turnouts in that last two years, Brexit and the Trump presidency, are largely the result of populist campaigns and lies.¹⁶ Further conditions of a post-truth environment can be seen in the blatant denial of scientific evidence (climate change; vaccines; evolution etc.), as well as the broadening scope of social media challenging traditional media as a source of information and news, creating a dangerous nexus for disseminating misinformation and lies (Harvey et al., 2017; Kata, 2012; Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017). This comes with a culture steeped in cognitive biases, which Lee McIntyre describes as 'the idea that feelings sometimes matter more than facts' and so, 'when a person's beliefs are threatened by an "inconvenient fact," sometimes it is preferable to challenge the fact' (2018, p. 13). In his volume of the MIT Press Essential Knowledge series, *Post-Truth*, McIntyre examines the cultural

¹⁶ Graham K. Wilson addresses the similarities between the Brexit and Trump campaigns, stating that 'the most startling was the willingness of both to disregard facts' (2017, p. 545). Among the long list of examples he provides is the Vote Leave campaign bus with the ad stating that EU membership cost the UK £350 million a week, Nigel Farage's campaign poster and false statements regarding Syrian refugees, Trump's claims that the US has the highest corporate tax rate in the world, 'that most murdered whites were killed by African-Americans and that the Mexican government encouraged criminals to cross the US-Mexico border' (2017, p. 545). Prof. Susan Banducci and Prof. Dan Stevens conference report *Myth Versus Fact: Are We Living in a Post-Factual Democracy?* analyses confirmation bias in the context of the misrepresented figure on the Vote Leave bus to answer the question of why people ignored corrections of this misleading information. Other useful studies into the prevalent misrepresentations, lies, and disregard for fact in these two campaigns are Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth* (2018), and Matthew D'Ancona's *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How To Fight Back* (2017).

environment of post-truth, tracing the ingredients and sources which contribute to it.

He writes:

post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination (2018, p. 13).

Setting *The Mindsweeper Tales* in the year 2030 explores this idea of post-truth as a 'recipe for political domination'. By taking into account the actual socio-political climate while writing (between the years 2016-2018) and envisioning the dystopian situation the post-truth recipe could produce, I recalled Chaucer's image in *House of Fame* of true and false tidings increasingly passed from mouth to mouth: 'From a sparke spronge amys/Til al a citee brent up ys' (l. 2079-2080). Adaline highlights this issue while lamenting over her wasted journalism degree in lieu of the rise of 'alternative facts' in media, resulting in a colossal decrease in legitimate news syndicates, and therefore little room for anyone to compete for positions. Furthermore, she acknowledges that attempting to stick to the FEDS (facts, evidence, data, sources) means someone would be inconvenienced by them and attempt to distort them:

Not that FEDS have much weight anymore. Even if I did fill a piece with facts, there would be some billionaire public figure out there who wouldn't like them, declare them fake. *FAKE NEWS. YOU'RE FAKE NEWS. AND YOU'RE FAKE NEWS TOO.* You can't discern facts and fiction anymore. Someone's always inconvenienced by facts, and it's easy to point fingers, call the facts fake. *FAKEFAKEFAKE.*

Some of it really is fake. A lot of it is, actually. But when you call enough things fake, even the stuff that's true, people give up trying to differentiate. They're not

going to expel effort sifting through a gazillion sources, fact-checking every fucking thing they read. They're just going to believe what they want. Whatever suits them the most (p. 26).

This passage is part of a recurring theme in *The Mindsweeper Tales*: the mounting tension between truth and fiction in what is meant to be strictly non-fiction, such as news publications and journalistic media. It is an overt comment on the contemporary relationship between fact and the misrepresentation or denial of fact, and by telling fictional tales, the idea of finding a form of truth through fiction is explored. However, in the real world of the novel, the socio-political state is one where fiction has paraded as fact so often and for so long, that the word 'fact' is no longer an appropriate signifier to represent the unstable and contradictory conditions it signifies. We see similar commentaries on the state of authoritative language and textual transmission in both *House of Fame* and *The Canterbury Tales*.

In *House of Fame*, Chaucer questions the solidity upon which the textual authorities of his time are mounted and considers how language has the potential to obscure textual intentions. If we consider the Whirling Wicker episode at the end of Book III, Chaucer questions the instability and disintegration of truth as it passes from person to person, each asserting it in a way that suits them until eventually the original message is lost (l. 2043-2080). Chaucer further questions the reliability of language in *The Canterbury Tales*. For example, the Wife of Bath artfully manipulates the ideas presented in numerous biblical texts as a way of supporting her argument against virginity and chastity (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue* l. 61-86). In addition, Chauntecleer and Pertelote debate over the correct interpretation of dream-theory in *The Nun's*

Priest's Tale, with each having various understandings. Eventually, their debate ends with Chauntecleer incorrectly translating Latin:

For al so siker as In principio,
Mulier est hominis confusio –
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.'
(l. 3163-3166).

Instead of 'woman is man's joy and all his bliss', the phrase actually translates to 'woman is the ruin of man', demonstrating the vulnerability of language to have its meaning misrepresented or lost completely. I incorporated small instances such as this into *The Mindsweeper Tales*, for example, Jasper Sharpe's misuse of the phrase 'don't ask, don't tell':

I'm tellin' you, that's what my source was saying, and this guy knows stuff, *underground* stuff. Not sure what kinda' business he's dealing in, ex-special forces maybe. Possibly MI-6. None of my business, really. Don't ask, don't tell, as they say (p. 30-31).

Jasper's tendency to misuse language and misrepresent information is a defining aspect of his character. As the host of 'The Sharpest Tool' radio show, which he considers to be 'political commentary, news, all the hot topics' (p. 23) but is actually about conspiracy theories, he is consistently fuelling the dissemination of misinformation and lies. In a similar manner to pilgrims such as the Summoner and the Friar, Jasper Sharpe is a hypocrite with too little self-awareness to see it. For example, the Friar insults the Summoner by asserting that all summoners are known for being fornicators (l. 1279-

1284) when in the *General Prologue* we learn of the Friar that ‘His tytet was ay farsed ful of knyves/ And pynnes, for to yeven faire wyves’ (l. 233-234). Considering then that the Friar also partakes in sexual behaviour that is immoral in his profession, it is ironic that he would be so quick to accuse the Summoner of the same actions.

Similarly, Jasper Sharpe is a satirical stock type that would be recognisable to a contemporary readership. He is loud, rude, brash, and overly self-assured despite the fact that he is full of nonsense and misinformation. In a scene that takes place the morning before Jacob Lazarus’s testimony, Jasper demonstrates comparable irony to the examples of the Friar and Summoner when he suggests that Lazarus is a liar for liking stories:

“I’ve no doubt he’s a clever little storyteller,” Jasper snorts, taking a bite of ketchup-covered sausage, “bet we’ll get a right earful. Likes stories, huh? ‘Course he does. Just another word for lies, innit?” (p. 70).

Here, Jasper makes no distinction between stories and lies. The irony in this statement is that Jasper’s portrait has been established by this point; he is someone who perpetuates conspiracy theories on the radio for a living, contributing to the post-truth culture. In this sense, he is a storyteller too, precisely the type who broadcasts fabricated tales, parades them as fact, and thus, turns fiction into lies. To explore these themes further, I will now turn to another method which I used to enhance the sense of stylistic variety in *The Mindsweeper Tales*: Surrealist text collage.

Surrealist Text Collage

In terms of rhetorical style, D.W. Robertson suggests that the conversational tone produced by Chaucer's 'free and rhetorically emphatic rhythms' in *The Canterbury Tales* allowed him to 'take constant advantage of the devices of oral rhetoric' (1969, p. 278). When we consider that much of Chaucer's audience would have been illiterate and therefore *hearing The Canterbury Tales* rather than reading the text, it is reasonable to assume that Chaucer would make use of rhetorical devices specifically geared toward oral reception and that these would have been more readily apparent to his contemporary audience than 'the modern "silent" reader' who is 'more easily impressed by visual than by auditory effects' (Robertson, 1969, p. 278). Robertson goes on to contend that the conversational tone of Chaucer's rhetorical style produces 'a pleasing variety which dispels monotony, and an enhanced atmosphere of immediacy' (1969, p. 278). There are two points in this interpretation that I address further. First, I would agree that Robertson's claim of a modern "silent" reader being more concerned with the visual than the auditory to be generally accurate, considering that most forms of writing today (and at the time Robertson made this statement in the 1960s) are written with this "silent" reader in mind. This assumption, combined with the sense of variety and immediacy produced by Chaucer's stylistic approaches, led me to consider further stylistic methods for reimagining these attributes for a modern visual reader.

One method for achieving this was through Surrealist text-collage and collage poem. By incorporating a rhetorical medium that is emphatically visual, I was in part aiming to juxtapose the traditional textual narrative with explicit stylistic variation without losing relevance to the narrative. Furthermore, I was looking to create stylistic variety for the modern reader/viewer. By inserting actual fragments of contemporary print culture into the world of the novel, once again blurring the line between the real

and the fictional, the reader/viewer is invited to reconsider the messages in the original content in a number of new contexts. In the same way Chaucer styled elements of his rhetorical verse for a listening audience, I formed this aspect of my creative piece with a contemporary readership in mind, one that would be familiar with mass print culture and therefore, pick up on the social criticism in the way it is re-presented in the 'Woman's Sphere' and 'Modern Woman's Sphere'.

In her study, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image*, Elza Adamowicz considers the scope of the Surrealists' innovative approach to narrative formation through collage, providing a comprehensive survey of the wide variety these textual forms can take. These new forms sought to question, redesign, deconstruct, and distort traditional narrative structures as a means of liberating creativity, art formation, and texts from the constraints of rationality and expectation. Surrealists used collage to rethink familiar narrative structures and create new, distorted forms of meaning. Collage is a method of cutting, compiling, and rearranging disparate pieces or sections of various artistic mediums to form a new whole, essentially, as a way of re-assembling reality. There are many forms of collage, including text-collage, text montage, photocollage, photomontage, pictorial collage etc. In Alastair Brotchie's *Surrealist Book of Games*, the "Text Montage" is when 'printed texts are taken from different sources and combined for different purposes' (Brotchie and Gooding, 2001, p. 65). In this section, I focus on the text-collage, a method used by Surrealists to manipulate existing signs. Further uses for this type of collage include:

various complementary or conflictual functions – critical, poetic, political...as a subversive act, it is an instrument of *detournement* of pre-formed messages...as a

creative act it involves the transformation of these messages (Adamowicz, 1998, p. 13).

In this sense, the collage alters and distorts the intention of the original message as a way of making some further statement about it. By reorganising and re-presenting content, cultural norms can be challenged. Bartholomew Brinkman states that ‘the collage techniques of the visual avant-garde would seem...to be the shining example for the verbal artist looking to subvert tradition and authority’ (Brinkman, p. 44). The ‘Woman’s Sphere’ text-collages demonstrate this assertion in that they are designed to deconstruct and expose the gendered social rhetoric and norms toward women, demonstrating through the medium of material culture how little these ideas have changed. In this sense, the collage seeks to subvert tradition and authority by exposing it.

The “Woman’s Sphere” collection of text montages in Rosalie’s Imaginal Plane are designed to produce a number of effects, both in terms of surrealistic approach to narrative style and structure, as well as adding dimension to the thematic content. On a literal level, within the context of the story, they emphasise the ‘feeling words’ episodes that are prevalent in the Imaginal Plane narratives, which are essentially the sensation of invisible signifiers whirling around, similar to the whirling tidings in *House of Fame*. Adaline experiences the whirling words in the following:

Sense. Rhymes with *Dense*.

Dense, Commence, Common-sen...

I push the words away, literally push out with my hands. It feels like moving thick, heavy air as though the words are a form swirling around me.

Common-sense. Rhymes with *nonsen*—

Push. (p. 111-112).

These episodes link to broader themes that address our relationship with language in the information age and the blurring of truth and fiction.

There are three main reasons I chose to formulate the 'Woman's Sphere' episode as a surrealist text collage. First, my intention was to create a narrative device that emphasised the literal aspects of the setting, Rosalie's Imaginal Plane, manifesting visually in the form of vintage print media, that is, mid-twentieth century magazines, newspapers, and advertisements, as well as the Woman's Sphere hallway, with walls covered in magazine clippings (p. 315). Adaline distinguishes the visual manifestation of Rosalie's Imaginal Plane as being in the form of a literal print-medium collage, as opposed to the other Imaginal Planes, which she recognises are essentially collages, but not organised in the same literal way:

It's a collage. As a whole, the house comes together, but individual pieces are disparate. Dislocated bits of a Home & Architecture Magazine. Reality reassembled. Reimagined. Then again, isn't every Plane a collage? An assemblage of discordant images from the Primary-User's unconscious. Arlo's dancing scissors and manikins. Carney's dragon-ship. Albert's comic-book-jungle.

Rosalie's Plane is just more obvious about it. More literal (p. 314).

The second reason for placing this episode in the form of a text collage was to accentuate the oppressiveness of these words, distinguishing this episode from the standard 'feeling words' experience. When I wrote it, the image I had in mind was that of a person walking onto Brighton beach with a hamburger in their hand and the seagulls laying siege. The episode was meant to stand out as more enclosing, swarming,

pressing, and invasive than others, and so, to demonstrate that I organised the text collages in ways to create visual fluidity and textual mobility, with an aesthetic that is jarring or disorienting. The third reason that I chose to incorporate the text collage to this section was as a means of visually deconstructing dated views of women and gender roles, a primary thematic concern in Rosalie's Imaginal Plane, in order to highlight how elements of these views are still pervasive today. Figure 1, 'How Do You Look at First Glance?' (p. 315) represents the words as Adaline first experiences them:

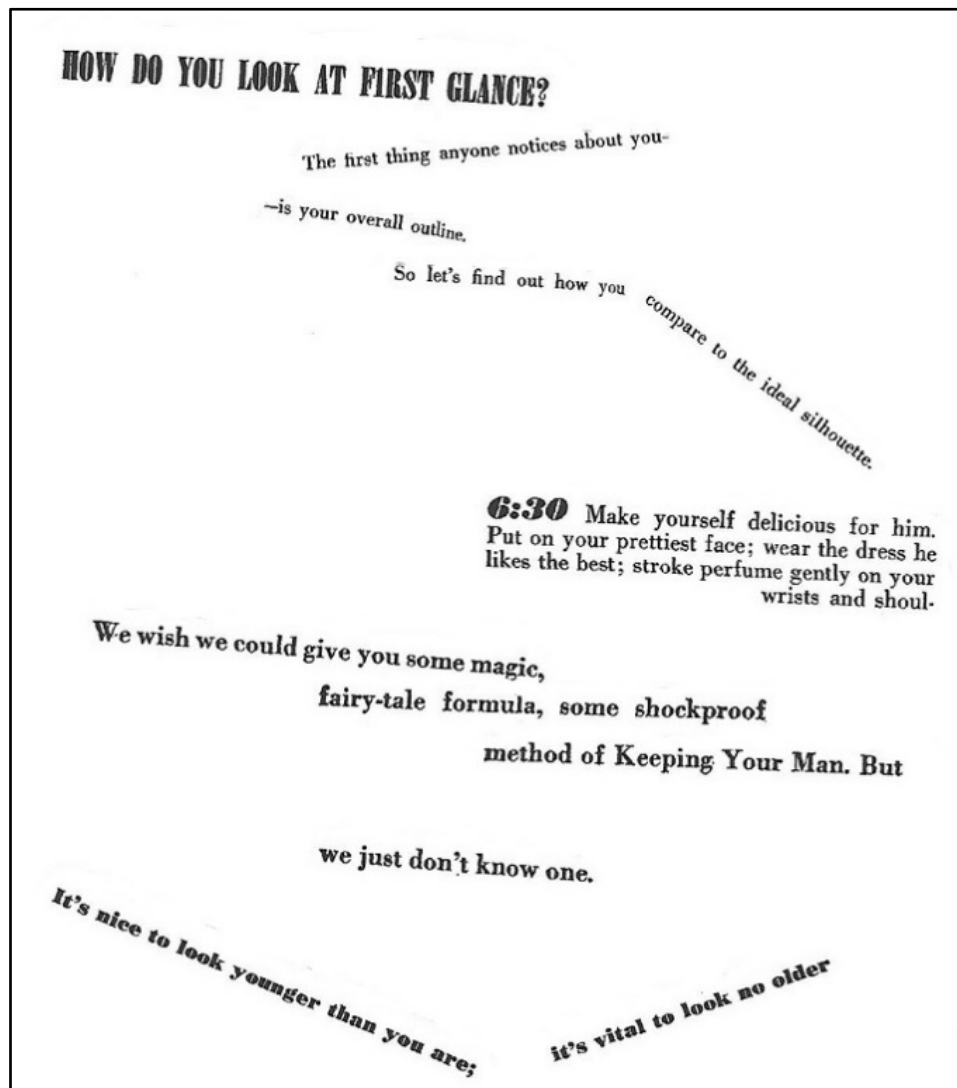


Figure 1. 'How Do You Look At First Glance?'

This marks an evident change in narrative experience from the traditional structure of the text surrounding it, and so, like the narrator, the reader is faced with a new experience, in their case, textual. Despite being an obvious change from the previous manner in which readers were engaging the text, Figure 1 is still relatively organised and structured in terms of readability. The sentences are evenly spaced and, while not all linear, they do not overlap, and they progress in a seemingly sensible pattern that prompts readers to approach the sentences from top to bottom and left to right. Of course, every reader is different and would experience the text in various ways; however, that being said, my intention for the particular construction of Figure 1 was to convey a sense of chattering, as though there are multiple speakers, approaching from various angles, verbally conveying their particular information to you. It is not to the point that it is overwhelming, just perhaps a little dizzying. Adaline describes the words as flying at her ‘from all directions, pushy and entitled’ (p. 316). In a sense, Figure 1 is the first stage of an escalating textual onslaught.

Figure 2, ‘He Suffered from Menstrual Cramps’ (p. 316)¹⁷ is more compact, incorporating more lines of text into the same amount of space, and so appearing slightly more oppressive and claustrophobic than the previous image:

¹⁷ I used the pronoun ‘He’ in the title despite the boldened words in the image saying ‘I’ to highlight what becomes clear after reading the text: that the speaker of the central phrase is the husband of the woman who is actually suffering from menstrual cramps.

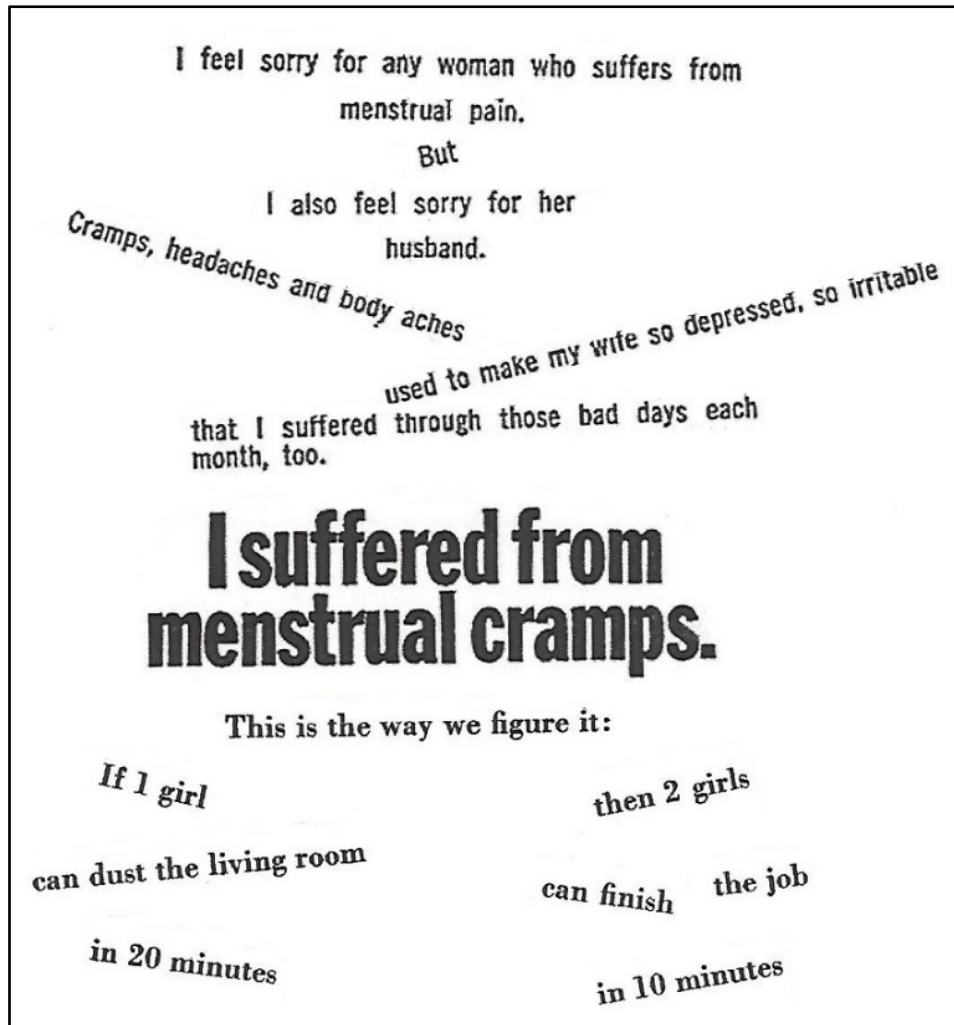


Figure 2. 'He Suffered From Menstrual Cramps'

I address the thematic content within the montages and how that may impact its reception in more detail later in the discussion, but in terms of visual form, it is important to note that Figure 2 still has some sense of chronological reading order. It is slightly more chaotic, and in terms of associative image, it may come across as though the verbal speakers are growing in number, and with that, their fervor for communicating their messages increases. Adaline describes the words as 'Swirling. Swarming' (p. 316) before Figure 2, which effectively introduces it in a certain narrative context, an escalation from the previous context of 'pushy.' Furthermore, the reader's eye will be drawn first to the centre of the page, to the large bold text, 'I suffered from

menstrual cramps' (p. 316). This requires the reader to reassess where they are meant to start reading, which creates an initial sense of spatial uneasiness or disorientation. Still, once the assessment is made, it becomes apparent that the logical starting point is the top line, to be read from top to bottom, left to right. Figure 3, 'Maybe He Does Know Best' (p. 317) marks the climax of the visual and textual onslaught:

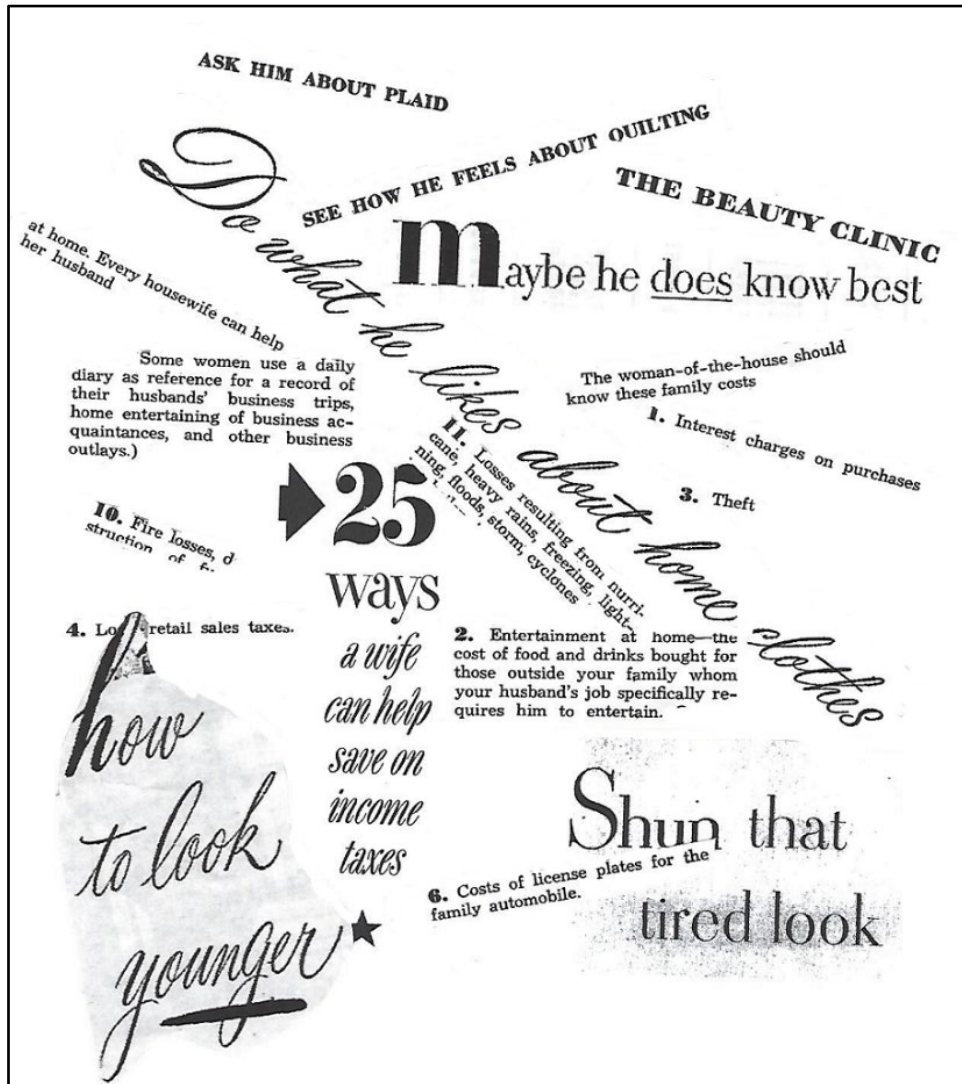


Figure 3. 'Maybe He Does Know Best'

No longer is there any indication of structural organisation or logical chronology. The figure is visually chaotic and jarring, with overlapping phrases and no fixed starting point or standout feature to draw the eye. The reader must simply navigate the text

themselves or give up and skip over it. This is the point when the imagined verbal speakers have started fighting and climbing over one another to communicate their information (an idea that plays out literally in Jasper's Imaginal Plane, p. 342-344). In terms of a cluster of phrase fragments competing for the reader's eye, Figure 3 is a visual representation of the crowded, overwhelming network of messages, cues, information, instructions, and ideas that are constantly thrown at us and which we engage on a daily basis. It is not only a *woman's-sphere* but also representative of an *information-sphere*, a *cyber-sphere*, a *media-sphere*, where cultural and societal messages are in constant motion, whirling about aggressively, and intrusively vying for your attention. Adaline describes her experience immediately prior to Figure 3: 'These words are more than felt. They're heard, absorbed, digested. They're forcing me to swallow them. *Eat them.*' (p. 317). The language here expresses violation, with connotations of harassment and assault. In terms of the literal scene, this onslaught of messages and propaganda is an aggressive violation of Adaline's will, which links it to the wider idea of unwanted and uninvited messages swarming us constantly.

In her collage-poem *House of Wigs*, Spirella purposefully reimagines the material provided on the wall and successfully subverts its oppressive authority. She attempts to quiet the words of the 'Modern Woman's Sphere' text-collage collection as they bombard her in her Imaginal Plane. In her first two attempts to stop the attack, she engages the words directly, and is unsuccessful:

Spirella tears a big chunk off the wall.

For a moment, the words quiet. A slow breath. We wait, glancing at one another. Could it really be so simple?

HaAahHAahAhaa. Nope.

We wish we could give you some magic,
fairy-tale formula, some shockproof
method of Keeping Your Man.

What do **YOU** want
the code of seduction for men **VS.** your guide to the male brain
Male Order

Spirella responds to the words by jumbling them.

9 out of 10 women preferred
menstrual cramps.

The words don't care. They have other offers, other ideas, other ways of forcing themselves down your oesophagus (p. 428-429).

First, she tears them off in an attempt to silence them, and when that is unsuccessful, she 'responds to the words by jumbling them,' (p. 429), which is, again, unsuccessful.

The emphasis on 'responds to the words' indicates that her attempts to directly counter or silence them doesn't work because the words don't care; they will continue to push their message regardless. That is to say, these ideas are still prevalent in women's magazines today, feeding a continuation of outdated ideas that a woman's value is largely (if not, solely) dependent on looks and the way she is viewed by men.

Furthermore, Spirella is unsuccessful because responding lets the words in, an idea emphasised in Adaline's comment that they are like a disease (p. 425) and so exposure makes one vulnerable to contamination, even if that accessibility is for the purpose of

refuting. In essence, engaging these words and the ideas presented in sources like these magazines both fuels or validates their continuation and exposes the reader to unconscious absorption of the ideas behind them. Attempts to undermine repressive social norms can also be seen in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* in *The Canterbury Tales* when Alisoun seeks to subvert patriarchal tradition by engaging with textual authorities, namely biblical sources that were used to dictate the behaviour of women. For example, she defends her right to have had five husbands and to continue marrying after each husband dies by distorting the established biblical interpretations to suit her own narrative:

The dart is set up for virginitee;
Cacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see.
But this word is nat taken of every wight,
But ther as God lust gyve it of his myght.
I woot wel that th' apostel was a mayde;
But nathelees, thogh that he wroot and sayde
He wolde that every wight were swich as he,
Al nys but conseil to virginitee.
And for to been a wyf he yaf me leve
Of indulgence; so nys it no repreve
To wedde me, if that my make dye,
Withouten excepcion of bigamy.

(l. 75-86)

Here, the Wife counters the biblical institution that all women should be virgins when marrying, claiming that virginity is advised by God rather than strictly decreed. In this

way, she is reinterpreting and challenging established religious views to support her open approach to sexuality, and by changing the narrative of the biblical authorities, the Wife is demonstrating subversion to the dominant patriarchal culture.

On the other hand, we can see fictional representations of indoctrinated ideology in both the character of the Wife and Rosalie, each demonstrating how a culture's oppressive language can penetrate a person's psychology. For example, the Wife of Bath expresses her views on sex for pleasure, something condemned by the Christian church. She appears to be subverting the traditional gender role of medieval women by asserting that sex can be purely for pleasure, rather than for the fulfilment of wifely duty or for procreation, as the authorities state (l. 37-38). Yet, as David Aers (1980) points out, that when she fails 'to distinguish the different potentials of sexual organs and labels them members 'of generation' (l. 116)' she essentially reveals 'the power of 'auctoritee' in moulding her perceptions and reasoning about her 'experience'" (p. 148). This is an example of how prominent ideologies or textual authorities still manage to frame the way a person interprets their experience, even when they are trying to subvert or dissent. I attempted to illustrate a similar idea in the 'Woman's Sphere' text collages in Rosalie's Plane by collecting, cutting, and reorganising articles and advertisement from 1940-1960s issues of *Good Housekeeping* and *Women's Home Companion*, two of the most widely circulated magazines in America at the time (Walker, 1998, p. 1-2). Rosalie's Imaginal Plane is a twilight zone where the mid-twentieth century views of women and their role in the American 'nuclear family' are resurrected, and so, the 'Woman's Sphere' text collages are demonstrative of the unrealistic expectations forced upon women by society, both on a macro and micro level. The particular magazines I used were significant at the time of their production because they would have been a woman's primary source of media. Nancy Walker, in

her introduction to *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Role and Popular Press*, discusses how impactful these publications were in shaping women's lives – far more than magazines today – namely because it was a society where 'the only two technological links between the average American home and the larger culture were the telephone and the radio', as televisions were not household items until the late 1950s (1998, p. 1). Article titles and advertisements in these magazines tend to use imperatives, for example, 'Shun that tired look,' 'Do What He Likes About Home Clothes,' or frame titles as questions that women should be asking themselves, such as, 'How do you look at first glance?' (Figure 1; Walker, 1998, p. 9). The articles then provide their female readership with unrealistic standards they should aspire to, such as, 'the ideal silhouette' (Fig. 1), and the various methods readers can take to achieving these ideals. Considering these magazines were women's primary sources of media during the 1940s-1960s, they can be considered in a comparable context to the textual authorities that would have indoctrinated medieval women, even those that sought to subvert this authority, such as the fictional example we see represented in the Wife. In other words, I attempt to demonstrate a similar fictional example of this type of indoctrination through Rosalie and the outdated ideals portrayed in her text collages and Imaginal Plane.

By taking language and ideas from mid-twentieth century women's magazines and incorporating them into the 'Woman's Sphere' text collages, I aimed to highlight how a number of these values are still evident or familiar in today's print culture. Some of the fragments cut from the 1940-1960s magazines use language that may seem exaggerated and alien when we consider how our views about women and gender roles has progressed; however, by jumbling the fragments from these dated publications with pieces taken from contemporary magazines, it becomes evident that the same

oppressive language and unreasonable standards for women are still prevalent in textual culture today. For this reason, I included the second collection of text collages in Spirella's Imaginal Plane called the 'Modern Woman's Sphere' which functions to deconstruct these decades-old views and reorganise them in a way that exposes their lingering impact on contemporary women. My approach to creating the 'Modern Woman's Sphere' was to take elements from the text collages in Rosalie's Imaginal Plane and merge them with fragments cut from modern magazines, such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *In-Style*, and *Allure*. In other words, the 'Modern Woman's Sphere' illustrates the prevalence of dated ideas aimed at women by organising modern content that expresses virtually identical messages to the older content into a similar visual arrangement as the 'Woman's Sphere' in Rosalie's Imaginal Plane, essentially functioning as its modern counterpart.

By shifting focus back to the text collages as structural mechanisms in the narrative, it is possible to consider their function on both a literal and figurative level. In the narrative itself, the inclusion of this type of visual format enhances the jarring and overwhelming nature of the 'feeling words' experiences that occur throughout the plot, while on a figurative level, the text collages' presentation points to the dizzying, disorienting atmosphere of contemporary culture, in which we are constantly exposed and bombarded with messages on how to think, look, act, dress, and feel. Each of these aspects - the aggressiveness of the 'feeling words' onslaught described by Adaline in the scene, images that disrupt the continuity of the standard narrative, and the jumbled, disorienting organisation of the text collages themselves - go hand-in-hand with the visual narrative, that is, what the words in each text montage actually say. In addition to being appropriate representations of Rosalie's nature, and so, her Imaginal Plane, by portraying these words as an attack, I was aiming to capture in a figurative sense, the

relationship between women and the messages that are constantly thrown at them by society – messages filled with sexism, unrealistic ideals, and unsolicited advice. Sometimes it can feel like an unescapable attack, and so, I likened it to a literal attack in the text. Likewise, in Spirella's Imaginal Plane, there are images on the walls which commit an onslaught comparable to Adaline's experience in Rosalie's 'Woman's Sphere.' As previously mentioned, the text collages in Spirella's Imaginal Plane combine *Good Housekeeping* sources with modern magazines, such as *Allure* and *Cosmopolitan*. I refer to the collage section in Spirella's Imaginal Plane as the 'Modern Woman's Sphere' because, by combining the dated sources from Rosalie's Plane with the modern sources in Spirella's, it demonstrates how the language aimed at women by certain types of media hasn't changed in almost seventy years. For example, 'What to Do This 5PM' are fragments taken from a 1950 issue of *Good Housekeeping* that appear in Rosalie's 'Woman's Sphere' collection of text collages. These fragments appear again in Spirella's 'Modern Woman's Sphere' with a side-by-side comparison to 'It's 5 O'Clock,' (Figure 4; p. 427) taken from a 2013 issue of *Cosmopolitan*. The side-by-side presentation of these text-collages is to emphasise the comparable language between a woman's magazine from 1950 and a more recent one from 2013.

Another example of the two text-collage collections working in conversation with one another can be seen in 'Maybe He Does Know Best', appearing in Rosalie's Imaginal Plane (p. 317) and 'Our Social Network' in Spirella's Imaginal Plane (Figure 5; p. 428). I mention these two specifically because they mirror each other in terms of visual format and specific placement of parallel ideas. For example, the titular text-image in 'Maybe He Does Know Best' is positioned in the top right-hand corner, a cut-out taken from *Good Housekeeping*, 1948, while the image in the same corner of 'Our Social Network' displays the text 'Fathers KNOWS BEST', taken from *InStyle*, 2013.

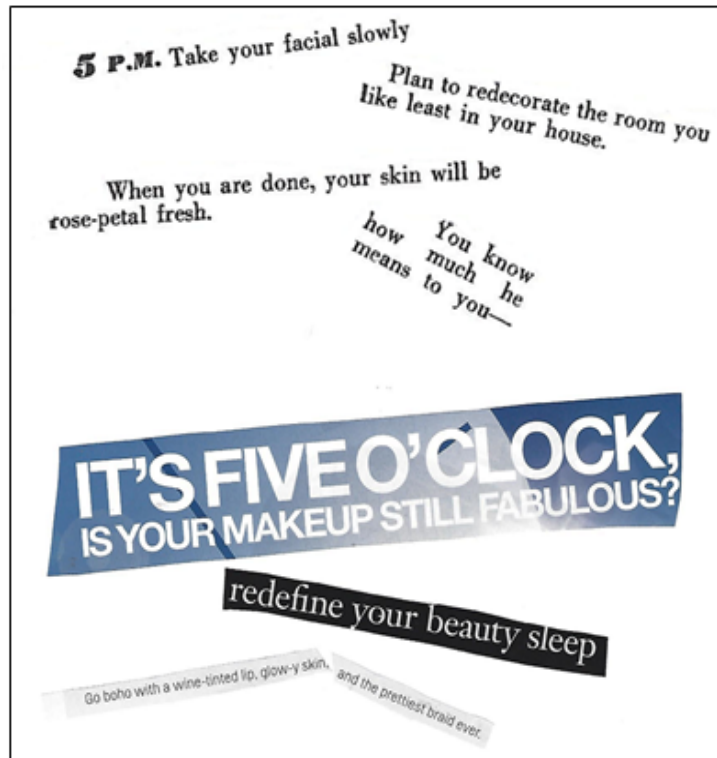


Figure 4. 'It's 5 O'Clock'



Figure 5. 'Our Social Network'

The parallel positioning of these text-images is to emphasise their shared sentiment, which is to implicitly tell their female readership that she does not know what is best for herself by explicitly telling her that it is a *he* who knows best, whether it be an ambiguous *he* or a specific one, that is the *Father*. Furthermore, by returning to the text collage 'Maybe He Does Know Best' that occurs in Rosalie's Imaginal Plane (Figure 3, p. 88), it is possible to observe the comparable presentation in 'Our Social Network', which occurs in Spirella's Imaginal Plane. First, the fragments in the bottom right corners of both text-images use similar language, with '*shun that tired look*' in Figure 3, and '*step up your look*' in Figure 5. Secondly, there are comparable fragments in the bottom left corners, with '*how to look younger*' in Figure 3, and '*COMBAT 8 SIGNS OF AGING*' and '*LOOK HOT TONIGHT!*' in Figure 5. The analogous placement of related messages and ideas in these two collections of text collages ('Woman's Sphere' and 'Modern Woman's Sphere') illustrate the pervasiveness of unrealistic societal standards and expectations set for women through these popular magazines.

Further emphasis on the lack of change in the language from different periods is highlighted when considering that both text-collage collections are specifically oriented to and representative of the character whose Imaginal Plane they exist in. For example, Rosalie is the older, more traditional of the two, quiet and reserved, and demonstrative of the 'goodly wife' persona, and so 'Woman's Sphere' uses vintage magazines which perpetuated this stereotype, speaking specifically to the concerns of wives and mothers, and are presented in black and white on the page. Spirella is the younger, more modern woman, a feminist portrait who is outspoken and creative, involved in social media and blogging, and so 'Modern Woman's Sphere' combines the older magazines with modern ones that address the concerns of contemporary women, such as online-dating, social networking, and binge-watching TV programmes, and is displayed in colour. Despite the

difference in source material and the two distinctive women which the collections are linked to, the language and messages remain the same in both: women must aim toward impossible beauty standards and be concerned with remaining youthful and attractive, as their value lies in their appearance and ability to attract romantic partners, namely men.

On the other hand, Spirella's final engagement with the words in the 'Modern Woman's Sphere' is successful. Rather than trying to silence them or jumble them in a way to directly refute them, which inevitably lets them in/fuels them, she rearranges them to suit her own narrative, creating the collage-poem 'House of Wigs.' Spirella's act of reorganising the words doesn't silence or stop them from existing, but it redefines their message and interpretation. As a comparison, it can be argued that the Wife reimagines her own reality in the sheer fact that she wants and attempts to resist a patriarchal culture so deeply embedded in medieval life. While it may be impossible to disengage from every authoritative idea that has been indoctrinated in her, she is aware enough of the oppression to preach for female sovereignty, and in this way, she is reimagining her reality outside of traditional norms.

Conclusion

This chapter emphasises the wealth of disparate and interlinking genres that come together to form a work like *The Canterbury Tales*, demonstrating that there is far more to consider than simply frame narrative, tellers, and tales. The literary bricolage in Chaucer's work functions at multiple narrative levels and brings together a wide range of forms and styles which can initially make the work feel as though it is about to fly apart. However, Chaucer manages to string together these seemingly disparate parts

into an interconnected network with a sense of cohesion by weaving the stylistic variety and thematic patterns together with the frame narrative and the dramatic interplay between tellers and tales. The distinctions between Chaucer's pilgrims allows for a variety of genres and styles in their tales. I attempted to recreate this aspect of *The Canterbury Tales* in the genres of my own tales, as well as by incorporating variety in the Copycat Narratives and each juror's Imaginal Plane. Furthermore, I attempt to enhance this sense of literary assemblage in *The Mindsweeper Tales* by considering two additional sources of stylistic technique: medieval dream-poetry and Surrealist text collage through the context of shared themes in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Mindsweeper Tales*: the relationship between truth and fiction and the manipulation of language. Chaucer's dream poem *House of Fame* questions the reliability of language and textual dissemination in a comparable manner to Adaline's concerns with post-truth media culture in *The Mindsweeper Tales*. The two text-collage collections, 'Woman's Sphere' and 'Modern Woman's Sphere', enhance the stylistic variety in my creative piece by interrupting the standard prose narrative with visual content. Thematically, the text collages can be linked to *The Canterbury Tales* in their attempt to subvert oppressive textual sources aimed at women, a comparable theme in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Therefore, I argue that these approaches to my creative practice can be considered modern interpretations of Chaucer's eclectic stylistic methods and thematic concerns.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated how my creative piece *The Mindsweeper Tales* has engaged and reimagined six essential components of the Chaucerian framed story-collection – frame, tellers, tales, dramatic interplay, stylistic variety, and themes – each of which plays a significant role in the complex network that makes up this literary form. By developing a creative component on the precedent of modernising this specific literary type into a novel and producing an account of the creative process and critical investigation that went into its construction – including, considerations of the potentialities and limitations of such an approach, reflections on its successes and failures, and a critical evaluation of the creative component against relevant literary models – I have provided a theoretical framework for writing a specific type of novel, one which I have yet to come across in the existing corpus of modern fiction.

One significant limitation I encountered during this project came down to length constraints. Understandably, attempting a project that seeks to apply the framed story-collection structure used by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* to a modern novel requires consideration of many different components to create the body of the novel. Again, understandably, a PhD thesis must have a word limit. Although my creative component is not my first piece of writing, it is the first novel I have written to completion, and what I discovered as I progressed further in the project was that I did not have an accurate conception of how long (or short) 100,000 words is. This was completely my own miscalculation; however, it did not occur to me until I had created a detailed plan of the novel, which included all twelve original jurors participating in the 4D-Trip, experiencing a Copycat Narrative, and telling some form of a tale. Furthermore, the

original plan for the novel included a more detailed back story for the narrator, Adaline, greater exposition of the socio-political situation, including more information about the Traditional Freedom Party and the student shooters, Buryakov and Lang, further characterisation of each juror, a tale by Dr. Eto, two tales by Lazarus, and more frequent returns to the real-world setting. It was ambitious and impossible to achieve within 100,000 words. By the time I recognised this, I had written a little over half of the novel, much of which had to be cut because, first and foremost, I was creating a novel that contributed new knowledge by reimagining the Chaucerian framed story-collection according to the specific model I was proposing.

While this was a setback, it forced me to narrow my focus on the aspects of the novel that were inherent to the Chaucerian structure and style, as well as those elements that were imperative to modernising them efficiently. After discussions with my supervisors and reflecting on the structural and stylistic necessities, I reconciled with the fact that much of my plan for the novel, including a number of the jurors' tales and Imaginal Planes would need to be cut. Reflecting on *The Mindsweeper Tales* in its final form, I have compiled a list of elements that I considered indispensable to achieving the Chaucerian framed story-collection structure and style in the form of a modern novel:

1. There should be enough tellers/tales to emphasise distinctiveness between narrators, allow for some aspect of variety in the tales, and provide enough links for dramatic interplay.
2. The plot in the overarching frame story should be substantial enough or imperative enough to keep the story moving in a direction or towards a fixed goal. The main narrative should have enough relevance or suspense to keep a

reader interested in where the novel is heading and how the narrative levels and tales will fit into it, rather than the tales appearing like unnecessary or forced diversions.

3. The character-narrators that would remain in the novel would need to be significant, not merely convenient. In other words, each character-narrator should add something worthwhile to the story that would be noticeably missing otherwise. This includes characters with standout personalities or particularly strong viewpoints who tend to influence the direction of the dramatic interplay, such as Jasper, Spirella, or Callum, as well as characters with hidden depths, that can only be revealed through their participation in the 4D-Trip, such as Rosalie, Atticus, Arlo, and Max.

4. There should be enough variation in the narrative style, form, and tales to contribute to the overlying sense of literary bricolage and complex network of interlacing, as well as to engage in contemporary thematic concerns in a multitude of ways.

This commentary attempts to answer the question *how can the medieval framed story-collection be reimagined in the form of a contemporary novel?* I aimed to demonstrate why the six components I used as my model to reinvent the Chaucerian framed story-collection were essential to consider. The frame structure and story are instrumental because this is the entire basis of the form. In terms of reinventing Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the structure should consist of an external frame level and a boxed collection of fictional stories. Moreover, the story collection must be narrated by a group

of distinctive characters that exist in the external frame story, and whose portraits effect or influence the context in which the tales are read. In this sense, the relationship between teller and tale is crucial and indispensable. While they can be considered separately, in this particular format, teller and tale are set up to be read in the context of one another. Further to this, the relationship between tellers should influence the progression of the narrative in terms of dramatic interplay. As such, the frame, tellers, and tales are all interlinked through contextual and dramatic interlinking, demonstrating that each is an essential component to consider when modernising the form. The sense of literary bricolage created by a narrative that is built on the interlinking of disparate parts cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, it provides creative opportunities to experiment with narrative genres, styles, and forms. Chaucer covers a wide range of genres in his story collection, as well as incorporating various rhetorical devices and language styles. Approaching this stylistic variety by considering contemporary thematic concerns and using them as a guide, it is possible to determine effective methods for incorporating eclectic narrative forms specifically for a modern readership and current concerns.

Hopefully, this account can prove useful to writers who may want to consider using related forms of the framing device in their own work, and potentially serve as a blueprint for one method of approach which could be built upon, altered, or intentionally stepped away from. Ultimately, this critical commentary is a reference that presents a methodological framework for modernising the Chaucerian framed story-collection and highlights the creative process of that particular endeavour. The following creative component, *The Mindsweeper Tales*, is an example of the framework applied to creative practice.

Tables

Table 1. The Canterbury Tales: Genres, Themes, Styles.	64
Table 2. <i>The Mindsweeper Tales</i> : Genres/Styles.....	66
Table 3. Imaginal Planes in <i>The Mindsweeper Tales</i>	67

Figures

Figure 1. 'How Do You Look At First Glance?'	86
--	----

(1949). How Do You Look at First Glance? *Good Housekeeping*, 128(3), p. 72.

Murrin, R. (1950). How to Look Younger, *Good Housekeeping*, 130(2), p. 175

— What to Do This Afternoon. *Good Housekeeping*, 131(5), p. 110.

Wright, H. (1949). How to Tie A Beau. *Good Housekeeping*, 128(2), p. 12.

Figure 2. 'He Suffered From Menstrual Cramps'	88
---	----

(1968) Femicin Ad. [online] <http://www.revelist.com/wellness/100-years-period-ads/11613/1968-now-its-the-man-whos-truly-suffering-from-the-menstrual-cycle/6> [Accessed 31 March 2018]

Wright, H. (1950). Life Can Be Dutiful. *Good Housekeeping*, 130 (3), p. 12.

Figure 3. 'Maybe He Does Know Best'	89
---	----

(1948). Do What He Likes About Home Clothes. *Good Housekeeping*, 127(6), p. 56.

Lasser, J.K. (1950). 25 Ways A Wife Can Help Save On Income Taxes. *Good Housekeeping*, 130(3), p. 44.

Murrin, R. (1949). Shun That Tired Look. *Good Housekeeping*, 128(2), p. 165.

Figure 4. 'It's 5 O'Clock'	97
----------------------------------	----

Coles, J. ed. (2013). *Cosmopolitan*, September 2013.

Murrin, R. (1950). What to Do This Afternoon. *Good Housekeeping*, 131(5), p. 110.

Figure 5. 'Our Social Network' 97

Coles, J. ed. (2013). *Cosmopolitan*, September 2013.

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The Mindsweeper Tales

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I	5
THE SUMMONING	6
THE TRIAL	37
HEXTON LABS	89
PART II	
☞ DAY ONE	106
COLLECTIVE PLANE	107
♦ ATTICUS	120
ATTICUS'S COPYCAT	121
ATTICUS'S TALE: STATION OF LOST SOULS	130
ATTICUS POST-TALE	141
♦ ARLO	144
ARLO'S COPYCAT	145
ARLO'S TALE: SYMPHONY OF LOST SOULS	156
ARLO POST-TALE	167
♦ CARNEY	169
CARNEY'S COPYCAT	170
CARNEY'S TALE: NEXUS	181
CARNEY POST-TALE	198
♦ PETRUS	200
PETRUS'S TALE: CHOCO-BAN BALLS	208
PETRUS POST-TALE	221
EDENBRIDGE	225
☞ DAY TWO	230
HEXTON LABS	231
♦ CALLUM	236
CALLUM'S TALE: YUCANI VALLEY	259
CALLUM POST-TALE	279
♦ ALBERT	281
ALBERT'S TALE: THE TIMEPIECE TRIALS OF FREAK WEEK	288
ALBERT POST-TALE	310
♦ ROSALIE	312
ROSALIE'S TALE: FUNNY BOY	336
ROSALIE POST-TALE	339
♦ JASPER	340

JASPER’S TALE: ELUCIDATION RADIO	346
JASPER POST-TALE	348
EDENBRIDGE	351
∞ DAY THREE	355
<hr/>	
HEXTON LABS	358
◆ ADALINE	361
ADALINE’S TALE: BUREAU OF BLOCKAGE	369
PART III	389
<hr/>	
EDENBRIDGE	390
MIDDLE PLANE	406
◆ ADALINE	418
◆ SPIRELLA	422
SPIRELLA’S TALE: HOUSE OF WIGS	432
THE VERDICT	439

PART I.

*When will you pay me?
Say the bells of Old Bailey*

*Here comes a candle to light you to bed
Here comes a chopper to chop off your head
Chip chop, chip chop, the last man is dead*



THE SUMMONING



1.

Monday, March 4th, 2030, 9:00am, I'm summoned to the Old Bailey for jury service.

Most people moan about it, but I'm eager for a day without editors tossing manuscripts onto my desk, whisking past with a quick, "*need that by the end of the week, cheers Adaline.*" They pretend they can't see the mountain of A4 bundles already there which I could never get through *by the end of the week, cheers.* But I'm the only reader left at InterSpeck. Anaya's on maternity leave, Brett was fired for sexual harassment, and Lisa married a banker. I realise that InterSpeck is an independent publishing house, but no readers mean no manuscripts means no books. No books and it's just a house, so fucks sake, hire another reader.

Today, however, the bells of Old Bailey call and I get a tiny reprieve. Stepping out of St. Paul's station is stepping into crisp morning and misty dribble. It makes the forecasted eight degrees feel colder, and I zip my coat to my chin before heading down Newgate Street. The air is smoke and espresso. Car exhaust, quick bursts of aftershave, greasy breakfasts, buttery pastries, chimneys, damp pigeon. Smells of London. Pairs well with the noise. Car horns and hissing bus doors, flustered footsteps, mobile-phone-talkers, flapping brollies, sour-morning-moaners. Comforting background noise. Familiarity. Unnoticed unless disrupted.

I'm approaching the Old Bailey when I hear it. The noise of a crowd. Shouting, chanting. Sounds of outrage, of demand.

The front of the courthouse is swarmed. Protesters and news crews, police sirens flashing. It's an oddly familiar scene. I recognise it from TV, from videos shared across social media, news articles, even from memory, a dismissive passer-by, too busy and unaffected to give it a conscious thought. Two girls brush past me, tourists presumably, cameras ready, chattering about how they were hoping to catch 'one of the London protests.' I suppose, with enough consistency, deviation becomes norm before you've even had a chance to notice. The comforting background noise of 2030s London: car horns, hurried footsteps, brollies—and a discordant symphony of voices, demanding to be heard.

I watch from the corner and feel stupid. Like a self-satisfied fuck who knows all about what civic duty entails. *Oh, I'll just show up to the courthouse, faff about for a few hours, and get dismissed. Earn an afternoon at home. Worst case scenario, I lose the roulette—miss a couple days of work serving on a jury tasked with deciding whether some dope-selling teen should get the low fine or the high fine.*

I'm surprised by my surprise. Why wouldn't I expect this? Protests have become as frequent as rain since the Traditional Freedom Party took power four years ago. That came as a shock, a far-right party winning the parliament majority. Now there's always something in need of protest, to be said in a voice loud enough to be heard. It's got to be screamed, wailed, cried, shouted. It'll still be ignored, but at least no one can pretend they didn't hear you. And as long as people are out here screaming for their rights and demanding to be heard, London is still London, the place that I know. Because there's no such thing as a silent London. Silence is for graveyards. For winding round headstones and treading on ashes.

I steer through the protesters. The main entrance is a shit-show. Half of it is blocked off by police so court officials can get through. The rest has been taken over by the press. I head for a side entrance and look back.

There's an increase in volume, people in the crowd pushing and shoving. Any minute now, a punch will be thrown. A brawl could erupt. The mix of heightened tension and fury could push this past the point of protest. Police are getting antsy for it, like chained dogs, catching a whiff of dinner. It's happened before.

The 2026 Westminster Riots, when Derrick Rapier was elected the first TFP Prime Minister. The 2028 Gun Riots, when legislation passed that armed all ranks of British law enforcement with guns, and protests in Manchester, Birmingham, and Reading, developed into riots. The 2029 University Riots, when two UCL students fatally shot three Traditional-Freedom MPs at a rally. Two months later, their former professor, an outspoken critic of the TFP, was arrested as a suspect in the murders, with no information or reasons for suspicion released to the public. Soon after, the TFP shutdown all BRAINpunk factions across the country (some uni political club that the two shooters were members of). Any further association with BRAINpunk became a *felony*. Riots broke out in response to this, and the professor's arrest, which some suspected was government silencing of TFP opponents. Finally, the 2029 Southampton Riots, when police shot and killed two football fans leaving a Portsmouth v. Southampton match, and a video went viral showing them on their knees, hands behind their heads, when it happened. Two football fans executed, two officers swiftly acquitted. Two *black* football fans—but you knew that.

What was it Martin Luther King said about riots? Something about them being the language of the unheard. I steal another glance at the protesting crowd and wonder

what's happening at the Old Bailey today that brought them here. Who isn't hearing them this time?

2.

Queue for security's a nightmare, and everyone's outraged by it, groaning and sighing, in true British fashion. There's a woman behind me who's been moaning into her phone for ages...*it's just so disorganised, Jerry, absolute bedlam...*

Eventually, justice is served, and she's cut-off by an overly-flustered clerk, gyrating his arm at the 'no-phones' sign on the wall. He gives her an exasperated look which translates to *ARE YOU FUCKING BLIND?*

I watch him huff away down the queue, stopping to scold someone for reading a newspaper. Then I catch sight of the headline.

Day One of the Lazarus Trial: All You Need to Know About the Man, the Mind-Control Machines, and the Death Sentence.

I stare a moment, internally sighing. *Mind-control machines?* The man folds up the paper, and I wonder if he's a Space-Head. That would explain why he's got his nose in a publication that parades science-fiction as fact. Maybe he saw it on a bench and picked it up for a laugh. That's probably what I'd do.

I sat next to a couple of Space-Heads on a train once. I could only tell because they were wearing EAE t-shirts. Otherwise, they seemed entirely reasonable. EAE is Earth's Army to Eradicate, a surprisingly large organisation that pops up at various rallies and public forums, proclaiming that Earth's governing bodies are being infected by alien invaders attempting to gradually socialise human beings into slavery. A case of

disillusionment and austerity breeding ultimate justification—or maybe, they're just crazy.

No, that's too easy. No one's ever *just* crazy.

When the clerk's out of sight, the bloke disappears behind the paper again. I squint to see which one it is. *London Times*. Now, that annoys me. Why is the *London Times* promoting Space-Head smut? What is happening to the world?

3.

After security, I receive a lavish Edwardian welcome from the Old Bailey's grand hall. Baroque arches, neo-classical statues, a sweeping marble staircase. Then I'm sent to a disappointingly bland room to fill out forms, to a queue in another room to hand in the forms, another queue for more forms, another waiting room, and finally, I'm sorted into an extensive jury selection room with bare grey walls, the colour of numbness and suicide. I spend another hour there, reading a published novel (*not* a manuscript) and faffing about like I'd planned.

Original plan goes to shit when my name is called, and I'm re-christened Juror Ten. An usher takes me to Courtroom One, blushing excited like she's just been appointed serving girl to the Mother of Dragons. *Only the most important trials are in Courtroom One*, she tells me like we're giggling sisters sharing secrets. *Take a seat with the others on the bench; His Lordship will be in shortly.*

The others.

I step into the courtroom, and nine sets of eyes fixate on me, silently following each of my steps, making me overly aware of them. Apart from the nine other jurors, the only person in the room is a scowling clerk, aggressively swiping around a HyPrix-Pro

screen. My steps are the only sound. Claps of thunder as I cross the threshold and take my place on the jury.

I sit next to a sea of colourful hair and receive a smile from the woman underneath. A pink-painted message that seems to ask, *how awkward is this?* I smile back, a nude-painted message that hopefully conveys my sincerest feeling: *the most awkward*.

The eleventh juror pushes through the door, a fortyish man, followed by a caboodle of dreadlocks, flecked with grey, and I become a part of those piercing eyes, curiously watching the newest member's approach. He doesn't seem to notice the silent tension. When his flashy red trainers squeak across the floor, he cracks a grin and manoeuvres his way into the box with a hearty laugh. It's enough to make the clerk snap his neck up from the HyPrix, eyes screaming, *have you no shame?!*

Apparently not. Juror Eleven leans over and holds his hand out to me.

"Max Dumah," he says. "I have a feeling we'll be spending quite a bit of time together. Strangers no more, eh?"

He speaks with an SW postcode mixed with something else—West African, I think—a culture merge that comes across in the way he introduces himself. It's so un-English of him to invite interaction before the time at which he'd be required by law. His grin seems to acknowledge this, pleased at the opportunity to puncture such cherished, unspoken rules. Typically, this would catch me off guard and cause me to start stumbling, but something in his carefree manner rubs off.

"Adaline," I say, shaking his hand.

"Spirella," adds the rainbow-haired woman, offering hers also.

By this time, the final juror has made it to the box.

And then, we were twelve.

4.

At the moment of jury completion, a loud thud comes from the doorway, followed by a snort. “Blast—chair—Ana, do something about this, would you? Christ-sake.” Another small crash and a rosy-cheeked judge bustles in. There’s a whoosh of deep red as he passes, fully clad in his formal robes.

“Well, that’s one way to make an entrance!” he bellows, clapping his hands together, commanding attention as he shuffles onto the judge’s bench.

High Court Judges are sometimes called *red judges*. I saw that on a television programme. It’s funny what your brain can dig up in response to the right trigger. *Red judges*.

The clerk maintains his scowl as he hurries over to the judge and hands him the HyPrix.

“For God’s sake man, be of better cheer,” the judge snaps, shooing the clerk away like a gnat. He repositions his glasses, glances at the screen, and looks back at us.

“Now’ve we got twelve of you? One, two, three, four—yes, good. Right, morning everyone, I’m Justice Peregrine Solstus, and you, as you well know, are here because you’ve been selected for jury service. Now, hopefully, you were paying attention at the preliminary selection when they announced that there was a chance of being chosen for an extended length trial, minimum six months, yes? Everyone here is fully aware of that, yes?”

There’s nodding on either side of me, so I nod along with them, doing my best not to seem perturbed by this new information. The judge grunts in approval. “Good. Now, this isn’t the normal procedure. In most cases, you’d only have to deal with me when the court is in session, possibly during your deliberation—BUT, this isn’t a normal trial. In

fact, it'll be the first of its kind in many ways. The justice system *rolling with the times*, as they say. New-breeding-new. Society develops a certain way; the law must develop along with it. I'm sure by now you've all heard the name Jacob Lazarus, yes?"

We exchange glances, as though to say, *are you hearing what I'm hearing?* Justice Solstus waits a moment, peering over his glasses.

"I'll take that to mean you have. If you haven't, you surely will. You're his jury."

Another pause and Justice Solstus peruses the HyPrix with more care than before, swiping digital pages, pursing his lips. "If you *have* heard any of the details about this case—in the news or wherever—then you may know that it is of particular significance, not only for its bizarre circumstances but because Jacob Lazarus is the first person to be tried with the newly-reinstated capital punishment."

The room stiffens when he says this.

"*As you know*, Britain fully withdrew from the Council of Europe two years ago. Now, amongst other things, this released it from the European Convention on Human Rights, and subsequently, protocol 6, which abolished the death penalty." He takes a moment to sniff and shoots another look down at the screen. Then, he clasps his hands and leans forward.

"I fully realise the controversial circumstances surrounding this trial, but my hands are tied. Our esteemed leaders believe that reintroducing capital punishment is an effective step in reducing crime rates. Now, I think they're wrong. You may think they're right. This trial, however, doesn't care a lick what any of us thinks about it. The Crown *will* seek the death penalty in the case of a guilty verdict." His tone shifts as he says this. A hint of regret.

"I want to assure you, we'll put everything in place to ensure your anonymity and safety during this process." He looks at the HyPrix and, as though reciting from it, says,

“it is important to remember that, as the jury, your job is to determine, through careful examination of the evidence, whether a man is guilty or not guilty. That is all. You are *not* here deciding whether a man lives or dies.”

There’s an uneasy shifting in the jury box. Not even the red judge sounds convinced. Reality is, we’re here to decide whether a man lives or dies.

“Chip chop,” Max whispers.

5.

I should have been keeping up with the news.

If I had, I’d have known the most recent story to break the top of cyber-trend towers. The week’s media frenzy. I would have known the reason for the protestors, and possibly, just how significant a trial I was being assigned to when my giggly usher friend led me to Courtroom One, *most important of courts*.

Jacob Lazarus. *Professor* Jacob Lazarus, the one arrested last year for some mysterious association to the students who shot up the TFP rally at University College London. And the *death penalty*?

The Sun must be frothing at the mouth. That’s partly why I’m not up-to-date. It’s why I have a degree in journalism and a job in Indie publishing. Jeune-journalism, I like to call it. To myself, in my head. Like a real smug fuck.

Maybe I’m just bitter because career climbing in journalism is slim pickings these days unless you’re willing to write political fiction with an assigned agenda or philosophical think-pieces about baking. We’ve called facts lies and lies facts for so long that no one even cares anymore. That gets to me. When did we become so acclimatised

to bullshit? When did we start putting *The Daily Mail* in the same category as the *BBC*? When did the British majority tip *that way*? When did this become *Triumph of the Will*?

I know the answers, but I'll get to them later. I have enough to think about at the minute now that I'm Juror Ten in *R v. Lazarus*. I need to concentrate on this yellow binder laying on the table in front of me stuffed with info packets, schedules, agendas, persons of importance profiles, witness lists, photos, maps, records. It's called a Juror Bundle. We're each handed one by the head usher after being shuffled into a conference room and seated around a long oak table (this is the fancy conference room—*only for the most important juries*). So, this is where my focus needs to be, and as you know, my focus is limited.

Actually, no, you don't know, because I haven't told you. Another thing I'll have to get into later. Distractions are my downfall. Truly. I'm medicated for it.

I open the binder to more forms and guidelines.

Blarg.

My thoughts re-direct to that fresh burst of jejune-journalism ten months ago, right after the shooting happened. Speculation storm of the century. The students—what were their names again? I shuffle through the binder, persons-of-importance profiles—oh right.

Alex Buryakov and Rebekah Lang.

Police kept most details about the case covert. 'Under continuing investigation' for the rest of time apparently, so, of course, conspiracy theorists were red in the face from spit-shouting on podcasts, and *Click-Bait Gazettes* oozed headlines through cyberspace like a poisonous gas leak. LONDON REELING AFTER MASS-SCALE TERROR ATTACK AT TFP RALLY. People fed on that shit like heroin. A national audience glued to their phones, eyes dripping blood. SHOCKWAVES ACROSS THE UK. GOVERNMENT TARGETED.

IS ANYBODY SAFE? Trickling down their faces. Staining their hands. PANIC. FEAR. A NEW WAVE OF TERROR BEGINS. More. They want more. Give them what they want. LONDON OVERTHROWN. EXTREMIST TOLERANCE BREEDS EXTREMIST ACTIONS.

Every performer needs an audience, and every audience expects a show.

How can respectable news sources compete? STUDENT SHOOTERS TARGET TRADITIONAL FREEDOM PARTY, THREE DEAD. Who's going to click boring crap like that when they could click LEFTIST IMMIGRANT INVADERS? No one wants to read an article containing the minimal amount of confirmed information. People want drama, excitement, embellishment, action. They want a story. Good guys and bad guys, heroes and villains, a side to root for, another to vilify. Most of all, they want to be reinforced. Told they're on the winning team. Subjective truths that feel so good.

6.

The head usher is a proper dandy of a man called Condall Darber, who takes himself inflexibly seriously, and considers it an *utterly unexpected honour* to have been the one assigned to *this* trial and jury (though, I have a feeling it's the kind of unexpected honour one expects regularly). He explains that his face is likely to be the one we see the most during our sequestration, calls himself our 'go-to guy,' then purses his lips at the bitter taste of colloquialism.

"Look at the faces around the table. You're going to be working closely with one another over the coming months. We might as well make some introductions."

Juror 1, Rosalie Watson.

A middle-aged woman sitting rigidly in her chair as though struggling under a heavy weight of expectation and propriety. She waves her hand timidly, hoping to be noticed without having to speak. She has golden hair, cut to perfection, curling at her chin, and a pale blue dress that appears tailored to her frame, petite and feminine, with long sleeves and a lace collar. Despite the trimmings, her face is lifeless, the vacuous gaze of a Stepford wife. She lowers her eyes, rubbing her hands across her lap, straightening the creases in her dress. When she looks back up, she wears a fresh smile, pulled out of her handbag, applied like lipstick.

“I’m Rosalie,” she says, still straining to smile, “I’m from Richmond and...I live there...with my wonderful husband and two lovely girls, one eleven, one fifteen...um, my husband works for Wells Fargo...a Senior Risks Management Consultant. My main priority is the girls...” she pauses to make sure her smile is still intact before giving a nervous look around the room, “and, well, yes, that’s about it.”

Juror 2, Arlo Newton.

A thirtyish aged black man. Handsome, graceful, tall, unmissable. His smile is white like ivory and kind like Christmas.

“I’m Arlo,” he says, “I’m an operatic tenor, part of a travelling company centred around the works of Verdi. We were doing a tour in the States when I was called for jury service and had to fly back. I would’ve put my name forward to get an excused withdrawal, but I was getting a bit sick of Verdi, to be honest, so this comes as a welcomed break.”

Condall chuckles like he knows all about getting tired of singing Verdi every night. All refined souls do, after all.

Juror 3, Conor Carney.

An older, disgruntled man. Wild, unkempt grey-white hair, like Einstein, and a frown etched in wrinkles.

“Names Carney, never Conor,” he grunts. “I’m from Cornwall, somehow ended up in Hackney, and I got a peg leg.” He pats his right knee and thumps his leg up and down, so it makes a thud on the floor. “Made of *a-loo-mini-yoom* metal,” he says like it’s a material warranting suspicion. He folds his arms after this, closed for questions.

“How’d you get it?” asks Juror 8, loudly. Everyone already knows his name. Jasper Sharpe. He’d announced it, first chance he got. He likes to shout. To be heard.

“Get it?” Carney snorts. “How’d you know I wasn’t one of them ugly fuckers born with it missing? That my mum didn’t look at my pruney little body and hand me back to the doctor, ‘*think he’s missing something, Doc, try again, shall we?*’”

Jasper Sharpe shrugs. “Okay, so you were born with it, then? Or...*without* it,” and he laughs.

“Course I wasn’t,” Carney snaps, “I was fully functional, thank you. Lost it in the Troubles.” He crosses his arms again, conversation over; however, this time, he puffs up. *That’s right, British army, doin’ you all a favour.*

Juror 4, Petrus De Groot.

A small, dark-haired boy. I say *boy*, but he’s obviously at least eighteen, or he wouldn’t be here; however, *man* doesn’t feel right either. If I had to guess, I would put my money on him being fresh out of college, and twice the money on him being no more than twenty—the youngest of us by far. So maybe *young man*? That isn’t right either. I’m not a deputy headmistress. Let’s stick with *bloke* for now—that’s pretty age neutral.

A small, dark-haired *bloke*.

“I’m Petrus,” he says, giving a meek wave, running his eyes over our faces. “I’m an architectural engineer in London,” he pauses and shakes his head, realising his location should be obvious, “in *Vauxhall*,” he corrects himself, “I...um...I mainly work in urban planning—it was the topic of my master’s thesis, so that’s probably why they hired me,” he laughs self-consciously (and I lose all my hypothetical money. A masters, really? Must’ve been one of those baby geniuses), “and, um...well, my mum’s Polynesian, my dad’s Dutch, hence *De Groot*.” Another awkward laugh. He seems relieved when there are a few other chuckles from around the table. “I’m also interested in graphic design,” he continues, “comics, graphic novels. I’m also...” he trails off, as though considering whether he’s over-sharing and the ‘all-about-me’ requirements are meant to consist of name, location, and job—the things that matter, “...a fan of science fiction.” He ends abruptly with a shrug and busies himself with some papers in his Bundle.

Juror 5, Callum Spencer.

An Armani model sort. Perfectly-proportioned. Good looks so blatant, they’re more fact than opinion, the kind that begin to look waxy, like something from Madame Tussauds. It’s a different aesthetic to Arlo Newton, whose handsome is graceful and charming like someone from a 1920’s-themed musical; Callum’s is sex. It oozes from his pores, slimy like cooking oil. He’s factory-made, based on a prototype: the Open-Shirted-Male-Model, fragrance division.

He faces the table with a cocky grin. “Hello all, I’m Callum. I work in Development, organising charity events and such, helping the needy, making a difference, that sort of thing. Have a degree in marketing, so I’ve acquired the necessary skills for assessing data and conceptualising information. I believe I’ll make an excellent contribution to this team. I’m looking forward to working with you all on this important project,

determining truth and justice for those who have been wronged. Should be very exciting, looking very forward to getting to know you all better. Especially the four beautiful ladies, what a blessing.” He motions at us. The four beautiful ladies of the jury. Each of us is rewarded with a flashy smile or a wink for being a quarter of the four beautiful ladies.

Juror 6, Atticus Venderson.

An older man with a smooth bald head, glimmering like a fortune teller’s crystal ball. He turns to face us, the eyes of a sad cartoon, slanted downward at the outer corners. Two see-saws and the uneven weight of age.

I start thinking about magic and druids.

Atticus Venderson is a master druid in a dark forest, wearing a deep red cloak, the colour of dried blood, waiting, his bald head reflecting moonlight and containing so much druid wisdom that it amounts to magic. A character in an Arthurian tale I read in the sixth form. We were reading the lines aloud in class. I was distracted by the imagery when my turn came, and I didn’t know what sentence to read. *Pay attention.* I was skipped over, the person next to me reading what would have been my line. *The druid smiled sadly, heavy under the weight of life eternal and wisdom endless, powerless to change his fate.* Come on, Adaline, pay attention.

Pay attention.

“...grew up in the States—Pennsylvania—so that’s the reason for the accent...”

Atticus Venderson speaks with an American accent. I hadn’t even noticed. Apparently, it’s time for a top-up.

I slip my hand down the side of my chair, into my bag on the floor, which I always keep unzipped—open and accessible—for this very reason.

“...carpentry, mainly furniture. I’ve worked with my hands my whole life, so I make the most of...”

I feel around the cavernous terrain of my bag, pushing aside used tissues and crumpled receipts. Fortunately, I don’t need to look down; I know the exact proportions of what I’m feeling for, the shape, texture, weight. This isn’t my first dig. I reach down into the side pocket. The silver medicine box feels familiar in my hand. My bag is its permanent home, always filled with an adequate travel stash, in case I forget to pack my meds.

I crack it open, one-handed (like I said, not my first dig), and move my fingers over three different tablet shapes. Adernal 20mg, 10mg, and Amphetedrine 5mg, the one I’m after. It’s more of a mini-boost than a full dose, something to help reaffirm my concentration without eliminating all other possibilities. Social interaction, for example. While the Adernal is more effective, it occasionally comes with basement-scientist-syndrome, a dishevelled and manic disregard for all but the object of focus, like a mad scientist, crouched in their basement-lab day and night, not noticing the weeks turn into months or their family moving in with the grandparents. It’s not an appropriate time for that.

Feeling the four sharp ridges that distinguish the Amphetedrine from the Adernal, I take the pill in my fingers and snap the box shut.

“...a little cottage outside of London. When you’re retired, it’s nice to get away from the bustle for a bit...”

Glancing around to make sure that everyone else’s naturally-induced focus is still on Atticus Venderson, I pop the pill in my mouth. After a long swig of coffee from the paper cup that I almost forgot about, to give it a push, I mentally rejoin the others in the room. Fifteen minutes, and I should feel those first trickles of clarity.

“Retired from what?” Jasper Sharpe is asking. “Carpentry?”

Atticus shifts uncomfortably (or is that my imagination? I’m not sure, I haven’t been paying attention, so I have little-to-no context).

“Surgery,” Atticus says quietly. “Orthopaedics.” He follows this with a warm smile and pats his Juror Bundle as a concluding gesture. Another one closed for questions.

Juror 7, Albert Rayhawk.

A tall, lanky fellow with straw-coloured hair, black-rimmed glasses, and a pale yellow, short-sleeved button-down, with a pen clipped in the pocket square. Callum’s smirking at him, looking him up and down, like the queen bee in an American high school. A beautiful bully. How clichéd.

“Something funny you’d like to share with the class, *Calvin?*” Albert asks, leaning so far back in his chair that it seems like he might plunk his feet up on the table, “or just cracking a smile for the beautiful ladies?”

Spirella, one-quarter of the four beautiful ladies (and perhaps, the most stunning) snorts into her coffee which seems to please Albert.

Callum doesn’t appear to have expected a direct response, and for a moment, his cocky demeanour falls, though it’s quickly revived. “The floor is yours,” he responds, “just quickly though, you wouldn’t happen to have a pen I could borrow, would you?” Another smirk.

Albert places his hand over the pen clipped in his pocket and smiles in return. “Sorry mate, fresh out,” he says, and turns to the rest of us. “Name’s Albert. Thirty-two ’til first of April, work over at Kew Gardens, assistant lab technician in biodiversity. I’m also interested in graphic novels, comics, sci-fi,” he motions to Petrus with a smile, “like

comic-cons and all that. And...yeah, that's pretty much it, I 'spose." He leans casually back in his chair.

"What's bido...divisity?" Carney rumbles, his Einstein hair twitching with his forehead.

Callum and Jasper Sharpe snigger, but Albert, unfazed, responds, "just a whole buncha' plants, mate."

"So, a gardener?" Carney asks, furrowing his eyebrows, shooting Callum and Jasper a crinkly glare.

"Sure," Albert replies, "except the garden's a lab."

Carney grunts, seemingly satisfied. "S'what I thought."

"Anyone else?" Albert asks, looking directly at Callum.

Callum must sense that he's no match for Albert in wit and sticks to contorting his pretty face into a wide range of smirks and eyerolls.

Juror 8, Jasper Sharpe.

A burly man, patchy brown beard, thinning, grey-streaked hair. Perspiration gleams across his forehead, thick like Vaseline, and, as evidenced by the yellowing stains on his striped button-down, also gathers densely around his armpits. When he leans forward, the shirt suffers, disappearing into the crease of rolling flesh between his chest and stomach. He has a brutish look and contentious manner, like a bulldog sniffing out a fight.

"Well, then," Jasper shouts, pounding his fist on the table, alerting his audience that the main act is starting. "I work in radio, host of *The Sharpest Tool*, political commentary, news, all the hot topics—"

"*Sharpest Tool?*" Albert cuts in, throwing Callum a snide glance.

“You’re a listener, then?” Jasper responds, “not surprised, really. We’ve got quite a cult-following, y’know. Our listeners are fiercely loyal, *fiercely*. They really love it. We have the best listeners, the best kind of people. Trust me on this, these people are really, *really* great, smart people. The smartest people. They know where to get their news from. The real news, y’know? None of that fake news the mainstream media is spewing. That’s why we say it, y’know? The slogan. *YOU’VE JUST BEEN SHARPENED!* The mind, see? We sharpen your mind right up. You come to us for the truth and leave a much sharper tool for it. That’s the Jasper Sharpe way. Making minds *Sharpe* again. Every morning, six to eleven, Radio 51. *Now, I’ll tell you lot a thing or two—*”

“Maybe just the one,” Condall cuts in, tapping his watch, eyeing the clock on the wall like a nervous rabbit. “Bit of a thrifty schedule, I’m afraid.”

“Well if it’s one thing, I’ll tell you one thing. Get ready, ‘cause summa’ the stuff I know—lotsa’ top secret sources, *mums the word*—but summa’ this stuff, well it’s gonna blow your brains right outta’ your head.”

“And that’s one,” Albert says, turning and pointing to Spirella. “Next.”

Juror 9, Spirella Panagopoulos.

A mermaid or a fairy or a nymph. Some kind of magical creature cloaked in enchanting femininity. Her hair is a long wavy sea of electric blue and turquoise and fuchsia, reaching mid-way down her torso. She has full, red lips and black eyeliner, drawn to produce an effect on her eyes that make them seem bigger, rounder, almost anime-like.

“I’m Spirella,” she says, her voice chirpy and upbeat, like a Disney-princess conversing with little birds and bunnies. “My work is hair, surprise, surprise,” she fluffs her mermaid mane proudly, “however, I’ve recently cut back from salon work to focus

on my style blog, which sort of, took off in the last couple months, so that's been a blast—“

“Took off? How d'you mean?” Jasper demands.

“Well, I gained a rush of followers after they featured my colouring work on Style Network. You'd be amazed how much attention you can get from a two-minute stint on the telly—“

“Numbers, darling,” says Jasper. “Figures. What are we talking here?”

“Well...I had around 6k before Style Network,” she replies (to which Jasper gives a sardonic smile), “then, after the feature, I was getting, like, a thousand new followers a day! I have something like 400k now. It's crazy!”

Jasper's face falls.

“I'm sure that doesn't seem like much compared to your loyal listeners,” she adds.

“What are *your* figures?”

“Ah, who can say?” Jasper spits. “I don't deal with that sorta thing. I *employ* people to crunch the numbers. My job is to sharpen the minds of listeners and—“

“We get it,” Spirella says, her voice no longer tuned for forest creatures. “As I was saying. I'm involved in social media and blogging, as well as using the human head as a canvas to share my art. So, if anyone's looking to spice their style—please, this one's on me.” She places a manicured hand over her chest, long, pointy, red claws gleaming vividly against her mint green blouse. Five blood-dipped daggers and a blood-red smile.

Juror 10, Adaline Tour

What to tell them about myself? I could start with...

I'm not a journalist. I'm no good at it. I'm better than all of them at it though. I have a degree in it.

I suppose, on paper, I could be better than anyone at anything. I'd just have to write it down. That's the beauty of writing, isn't it? Throw some convincing words together, claim I'm an expert, flash my three-year Journalism degree, and you'll believe me.

Want to know the 6 miracle herbs that experts are claiming can cause your body to produce 200% more natural collagen, the equivalent of 3 Botox sessions? I bet you do. Let me write it all out for you. Compose an agreeable fiction.

What about the 10 simple changes to your daily routine that will land you that dream career? Not to worry. Here's a list. Quick, convenient jejune-journalism.

Want someone who can write headlines with a kick and garner those clicks? A six-word title that hits 'em with a bang? Gets shared over and over? A viral sensation?

Who cares what the article says? Most people won't read it.

Who cares what type of people those six words reinforce, or sway, or misinform? They should know better. Haven't they been told not to believe everything they read?

There's no room left for the kind of journalist I wanted to be. Not in the media-centric world of 2030. Truth, merit, sources, facts—that's so ten years ago. That type of journalism is critically endangered, if not extinct. Positions with respectable journalistic agencies are too high up the career ladder for me to reach. Not without sacrificing my values first. *But we all have to start somewhere; you've got to climb from the bottom to reach the top.* I know. But by the time I graduated from university, beginning with respectability was a closed portal. Jejune-journalism was the new bottom. That's where I'd be starting if I ever wanted to write real pieces, ones that matter, that don't regularly stoop to petty, derogatory levels to sell an issue. Pieces that insist on accurate presentation of the FEDS (facts, evidence, data, sources), even if it means a dip in sales.

Not that FEDS have much weight anymore. Even if I did fill a piece with facts, there would be some billionaire public figure out there who wouldn't like them, declare them

fake. *FAKE NEWS. YOU'RE FAKE NEWS. AND YOU'RE FAKE NEWS TOO.* You can't discern facts and fiction anymore. Someone's always inconvenienced by facts, and it's easy to point fingers, call the facts fake. *FAKEFAKEFAKE.*

Some of it really is fake. A lot of it is, actually. But when you call enough things fake, even the stuff that's true, people give up trying to differentiate. They're not going to expel effort sifting through a gazillion sources, fact-checking every fucking thing they read. They're just going to believe what they want. Whatever suits them the most.

My point is, I have a degree in journalism, but I'm not a journalist. I'm a reader at InterSpeck. I write a three-book review segment for the *InterSpeck eJournal* called 'Adaline Tour's Tour-of-the-Month,' but I don't write jejune-think-pieces. I don't swindle people or embellish stories in a fight for clicks, and I have no desire to make a fool of you.

Society may have crushed my journalistic dreams, but that's only half the story. Sure, I could have gone out there, given my all competing for those rare positions in genuine news agencies, but I would have lost. Truth is, I don't have what it takes. I struggle with specifics. Names, dates, eye colours—not my strong suit. I lack the required acuity and patience for detail that a good journalist needs to have, day or night, and be able to tap into at the drop of a terrorist's bomb. Unfortunately, my brain doesn't function properly *au naturel*. I need the drugs.

This half of the story belongs to my lifelong melee with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Living on a daily cocktail of stimulant meds is my only armour against complete and utter dysfunction, but even drugs have their limits. I've learned to live with the fact that my brain has a maximum capacity for focus. It starts to wane when the subject doesn't immensely grasp my interest and runs out entirely when the Adernal does.

That being said, when something *does* interest me, it consumes me. *Hyperfocus*. Combine that with a happy, daily dose of the necessary amphetamines and the rest of the world falls away. I suspect this might be my brain, filtering out excess information to make shelf space for my present concentration—every detail, every specific. Basement-scientist-syndrome.

I decide not to tell my fellow jurors all of this. They've probably made up their minds about me, anyway. All we have are first impressions at this point, and I can guess how I'm being interpreted. Quiet, sullen, moody. Black clothes, glass blue eyes under thick dark eyebrows (the blend of a Swedish mum and Spanish dad), and hair cut bluntly at my neck make me a tossup between emo-Evanescence-fan and Parisian-fashion-snob. If this were a teen fiction, I'd be a vampire.

Hopefully, that Amphetedrine kicks in soon. My thoughts could use some reigning in.

For the jurors, I keep it simple. Name is Adaline, this, that, live in Wimbledon, this, and that. Another tale of unexceptional normality.

Callum pretends to mishear my name. "Did you say *Marilyn*?" His eyes flicker hungrily, and I suddenly feel protective of my white-blonde hair.

"Jesus, give it a rest, would you?" Spirella groans.

"*Smile*, love," Callum replies, "it's just a joke."

Juror 11, Maxwell Dumah

Deep laugh lines, chestnut eyes. Style that's effortless. A black, high-neck sports jacket with gold zippers, dark denim jeans, and bright red trainers—the trendy kind that look like the shoelaces are undone. There's a small book of brainteasers on the table next to his hand, open to a game of Sudoku, half-filled in with pencil.

“The quick version,” he says, straightening up, “I moved from Nigeria when I was sixteen, so...twenty-five years ago now, *hell*. Been down Brixton ends the last fifteen years. Work as a private-hire driver for rich folk. And there you have it, the whole of me, all that is Max Dumah.”

“So, that’s allowed, then? For him to be Nigerian?” Jasper asks, looking between Max and Condall.

“Say again?” Max leans forward. A cautioning smile.

“To serve on the jury, I mean. Thought we all had to be UK citizens? EU, at least.”

“Ah!” says Max, digging in the back pocket of his jeans. “Your concern for upholding the authenticity of our justice system is outstanding. Not all heroes wear capes, eh, topboy?”

Max pulls out a dark blue passport and twirls it in his fingers so that it faces forward.

Despite the recognisable cover design, lion and unicorn grappling with the crown jewels, Jasper leans forward and mouths the words *British Passport, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*.

“Need a look at the photo page?” Max asks.

Jasper waves the offer away. “Nah, we can put it down to trust.”

“Gracious, too,” says Max, flashing me a grin and giving the blue passport another twirl so that it faces him. “Remember the days of burgundy?” he says. “Long gone, they are. Gutted.”

Juror 12, Portia Menell-Lake

A petite woman of mixed race, with a pretty face that appears kind or stern, depending on how the light hits her. Her hair is short, cut close to the scalp, mostly

white, though it doesn't age her, possibly because her skin is enviably youthful. When she smiles, you can tell she means it. She's not going to falsely appease you.

"I'm from Blackheath, instructor of Yoga at the Hillsbury Centre, and assistant director of the music ministry at Christ Methodist, where my wife's a pastor. I've got a twelve-year-old daughter, Dalia, and that about sums me up."

"So, they're allowing lady pastors now, are they?" Jasper booms. "And lady pastors married to ladies?" Before Portia can respond, he plunks his elbows on the table and continues. "I only ask, 'cause I had this bishop or cardinal or something on the show once, very high up in his religion, greatly respected and all that. Could've been pope—dead now. Heard they might make him a saint. Anyway, he's explaining the rules on-air, right? How only men can be priests, and ladies...nuns, is it? And how this new-wave feminism—I call 'em *feminazis*—ain't gonna change centuries-old doctrine, and any churches that do are fake-churches."

Albert laughs loudly. "One religious institution calling another religious institution *fake*? I've never heard of such a thing..."

Jasper nods resolutely and points a finger at Albert. "You've just been sharpened."

"Well, for one, you were speaking with a Catholic, not a Methodist," Portia responds patiently. "Regardless, churches vary, Jasper. Not all believe in a Jesus with conditions."

Jasper's hands go up. "None of my business. I ain't agreeing or disagreeing, just repeating what was said by a guest, and those're the facts. At Sharp—"

"You know what I think?" Max says, "I think it's our good fortune to have a Blackheath woman on our jury. I think you're our lucky charm, Portia."

Portia laughs. "Why is that?"

“Well, if I’m not mistaken, Blackheath’s a borough of Lewisham. And do you know Lewisham’s official motto? *Salus Populi Suprema Lex*. ‘The welfare of the people is the highest law.’ And as long as you’re on this jury, I think it will be.”

7.

At 11 we’re escorted to Old Bailey’s jury café by Condall and two armed guards. Twelve herded goats, a trained collie, and two shepherds with AR-15s. The café’s deserted, other than staff. Condall explains that the usual juror lunch hour is 1-2, but due to the high status of our case, we’d take lunch at 11:15 to avoid security risks. The doors close behind us with the guards remaining on the other side.

I select a boring ham salad and join the others at a circular table, guided by Jasper’s bellowing bagpipes.

“...I’m tellin’ you, I’ve got a treasury of loyal sources, well-connected ones. Got a knack for people too, can spot a source with serious info from a weasel lookin’ to spin a tale like nobody’s business. No time for rubbish at Sharpest Tool, we’re reporting the true story, the one they don’t want you to know. And I’m tellin’ you, that’s what my source was saying, and this guy knows stuff, *underground* stuff. Not sure what kinda’ business he’s dealing in, ex-special forces maybe. Possibly MI-6. None of my business, really. Don’t ask, don’t tell, as they say. Serious stuff, anyhow, and that’s what he was saying—cult leader, can you imagine? You send your kids to uni, expect ‘em to be in the hands of respectable educators, and instead, they’re brainwashed by some fanatic cult leader. Shameful, really, totally unacceptable...”

Max sits next to me, balancing the chair on its rear legs. His dreadlocks drape over the back, swaying as he rocks back and forth, a light thump each time they hit the seatback. “You on about Jacob Lazarus, then?” he asks.

“Course I am,” Jasper grunts, “know any other cult leaders that convinced a bunch of students to go ‘round shooting MPs?”

“Two students, three MPs,” Max informs him and just as Jasper’s expression falls, he adds, “and you’ve got an inside man, yeah?” to which Jasper’s sweaty, plum face inflates with pride. “Did he tell you anything about the machines?”

“Machines? *Machines?* What machines?”

“The mind-control machines,” Max replies, grinning.

This turns Jasper’s face an angry shade of scarlet and induces such an explosive wave of emotion that he chokes on his words and is sent into a heaving fit. A few pounds to the chest and he resumes.

“Mind-control machines, you say?” He eyes Max, threading him out, seemingly deciphering if he’s a full-of-shit Space-Head or onto something, and Jacob Lazarus *does* have something to do with mind-control machines, information which he must pontificate to knowing all along. “Where do you get your information, Mr...” He’s forgotten already.

“Max. No point calling each other Mr and Mrs, Lord and Lady for the next six months, is there?” He pauses, resting his chair back on all fours. “I can’t claim to get info from MI-6, but I got a job that’s about the art of killing time: hanging about in the car, waiting for rich folks to need a lift. Hours of paid waiting, innit? Gotta’ make the killing count. So, I’ve always got a good reading stash on hand, and I kept up with the Lazarus story. I read his books, read ‘em *waaay* before all the shit went down. Liked ‘em too. *Patterns and Harmony. We Blind Minds.* Man’s got serious spinners.” Max taps his temple. “Even

read the latest one. *Stories of the Fourth Dimension*. Wasn't released officially when he was arrested, but there was a PDF on the UCL website until about two weeks ago. All you needed was a student login to get it. Not exactly a Millennium Prize problem. It's gone now, though. Publishers must've decided their best bet was to lock-n-key it awhile, hold off 'til the trial-hype gets full swing, then *BAM! Getch'yer copy, riide'ere. Man o' the hour's final book*—y'know, if his chances are lookin' grim. Anyway, cult leader would seem a logical conclusion to make based on the info released after Buryakov—the kid who shot two of the MPs—made his accusatory statement. But yesterday a full transcript of Buryakov's statement came out online, and did you know, he accused Lazarus of using a machine to control his mind? Called it the 'Mindsweeper.' I remember 'cause it's sorta like that old computer game Minesweeper. Remember that game? You click on the little squares and some have bombs under 'em, and you hafta'—“

“—so the media finally caught on about the machines, then?” Jasper cuts in, giving a knowing chuckle and shaking his head. “If it were up to me, I would've just—“

But we never have to hear how things would be if they were up to Jasper because the café doors swing open and Condall motions for us to follow him.

8.

Once we're settled back in the jury room, Condall holds up a stapled packet titled '*R v. Lazarus: An Introduction*.' “You should have one of these in your Bundles. Now, if you'll turn with me to page...”

Condall spends the rest of the afternoon going over the process of sequestration and the particulars of the trial. There's a summary page in the Jury Bundle with an overview of the events that led up to Jacob Lazarus's arrest. Apparently, he'd resigned from UCL

two years before the shootings after founding the NeuroPath Project, where he worked full time developing some sort of neurotechnology called a 4D NeuroPath. Our packet describes the NeuroPath as a three-in-one system, combining a Neurotransmission Scanner, a Mental-Topography Simulator, and an Inter-Dimensional Projector to induce holistic consciousness in Users and effectively produce their cognitive landscape by projecting neural activity into four-dimensional space.

Okay.

Condall doesn't appear to fully understand either but reiterates how Jacob's attorney explained it to him. "Basically, it's like a virtual reality machine, except the Users go inside their own minds, like a mental reality, which is in the Fourth Dimension, apparently. They call it 'Imaginal Plane'—so, I guess, it's like being inside your own imagination...?" He glances at his notes. "So, it says here that the NeuroPath brings the User's conscious mind together with their unconscious mind—"

"What a load of Freudian shite," Jasper snorts. "What's the unconscious 'spose to be again? Repressed desires for your mum? Dream symbols? Horoscopes? Tosh."

Condall's too busy shuffling papers to respond. "Upon its completion, the targeted buyer for the 4D NeuroPath was the mental health sector..."

He explains that Jacob and his team believed the NeuroPath could play a role in the future of mental health treatment, enabling researchers and psychiatrists, as well as individuals suffering from mental illness to explore the mind's terrain.

"I've got a quote here from the original grant proposal," says Condall, skimming the page. "*Experts in neurosciences, cognitive psychology, and psychiatrics may be able to recognise traits and patterns of certain psychological conditions by the way they manifest in the Imaginal Plane of a User, providing new opportunities for making diagnoses and developing treatment methods...*"

After this general introduction, Condall has us turn to the next section in our packets titled 'BRAINpunk.'

"I assume you've all heard of the militant group BRAIN?"

There are a few tentative nods. Half sure. Some surer. *Actually, now that you mention it...*

"British Resistance Against Illiberal Nationalism." Max knows it. He shrugs and grins.

"I told you, I keep up."

"I'm sure the rest of you have caught them on the news at some point, wreaking havoc against all things Traditional Freedomist." Condall purses his lips as though BRAIN's behaviour is simply distasteful. "And of course, you know BRAINpunk, the faction of BRAIN that developed in the universities. The group the shooters belonged to that stormed the TFP rally."

"I've always wondered why they're called BRAINpunk," says Albert. "Why the 'punk'?"

"Kids of the night," Spirella responds. "Remember uni students demonstrating outside Parliament about government-funded education? Derrick Rapier's official response was, *'irresponsible kids of the night are not the responsibility of the government.'* Basically, saying they blow all their money partying."

"Riiight—I remember that. What a prick."

Spirella nods fervently. "Anyway, that's where 'punk' comes from. Poor Uni Night Kids." She smirks, and they laugh with each other across the table.

Condall re-directs the discussion back to the two shooters, Alex Buryakov and Rebekah Lang, members of BRAINpunk, and what it has to do with Jacob Lazarus. "They were both doing neuroscience masters at UCL," he says, flitting his eyes across his notes,

“when Dr Lazarus left to start the NeuroPath Project, they signed on as Research Assistants...”

He covers how Jacob Lazarus is a prominent, outspoken critic of the TFP, with several appearances on news channels, published articles, even a book. *We Blind Minds: Confines of Thought in Traditional Freedom*. So, it's assumed that Buryakov and Lang were members of BRAINpunk due to Lazarus's influence. It brings me back to when news of his arrest first broke, the accusations that it was a move by the TFP to silence their critics. What if there's truth to it? What if Jacob Lazarus's biggest mistake was voicing dissent and making them hear him?

I should pay less attention to conspiracy theories and more to Condall. For now, at least.

I tune back in. Condall's explaining that, because it's a high-security trial, we'll be sequestered under 24-hour guard surveillance. And because of the Buryakov transcript leaking online, they're sequestering us early.

“...this Wednesday evening two officers will collect you from your residences and drive you to the Gold Olympus Hotel, where you'll spend the extent...”

Max leans over and whispers, “*Who killed Cock Robin?*”

I look at him, confused.

“The sparrow, Adaline. The sparrow killed Cock Robin.” He taps his head. “We gotta' stay sharp, y'know?” He glances at Jasper, Condall, the guards, all around the table, then back at me. He taps his head again. “Only one thing sharper than the sparrow's arrow.”

THE TRIAL



9.

R. v Lazarus, Day 1
11 March 2030

SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHH

Rain and outcry bang against my window. The heavy sound of rushing water hammering on glass—and voices. Low, muffled voices, shouting, chanting, as though fighting to be heard from underneath a pillow and prevailing. Thwarting what tries to suffocate them. Or am I dreaming?

Sliding out of bed, I walk over to the window. The voices grow louder as I approach, but when I look, I see only splattered raindrops and grey. Still, I hear them. Voices beneath the rain, enough to be heard despite it.

I stare out the window. I'm not sure how long. To an observer, it might look like I'm willing the fog to shift. That I think if I give it an audience it'll draw apart like stage curtains. But I'm just thinking; empty views can do that to me. Colourless and drab, the perfect place to park my eyes and let my thoughts run free.

I'm thinking about Jacob Lazarus. I can't help it. Today I'll see him for the first time after hour-upon-empty-hour with nothing to do but build a fanciful, egocentric version of him in my head. Humans aren't meant to exist in a vacuum. I can say that from

experience now. When we have nothing to occupy ourselves with, we're in danger of losing perspective, of being swallowed by our minds.

In my mind, Jacob Lazarus is an eerie headshot, a man half visible, half in shadows, tinted blue. He's a stoic expression, lips slightly parted like there's something to be said, something you'll want to consider, unravel, not take at face value. Riddles and games. But not to taunt you. To challenge you. To make you think.

I can't take credit for that image though. It belongs to the court, reaching inside my mind, neatly placing it there. A photo in the Juror Bundle. No context or explanation. Just blank information given to a group of minds sequestered in a blank of time. Subtle brainwashing, mind-control. Filling in blanks. Another grey area.

The only other photo of our trial's namesake offered in the Bundle is his mugshot. We've been sequestered for four days now, all of our technology removed, no phones, computers, TV, music—nothing. Desert. Mind cleansing. And these are the two images the court decided to stick us with during our pre-trial quarantine, a vulnerable period with a high-risk of stir-crazies. Maybe it's the cabin fever talking, but it gives me the leery-feels. Like someone in that courthouse wanted us to associate Jacob Lazarus with criminals and blue-shadows from the outset. Because, as we all know, mugshots are to criminals, as shadows are to secrets. Juries to sequestration, minds to interpellation.

Do you hear it? Stir-crazy.

Either way, Jacob's mugshot is a misstep if incrimination's the goal. I remember first taking it out, silver eyes staring back at me, alive and alert. Nothing like those stereotypical mugshots you always see on TV. Gang members with black teardrop tattoos, storied scars, and gold teeth, disturbed teens or dirty old men, dishevelled drunk drivers with puffy red eyes, glazed and unfocused. No, Jacob's eyes are

unclouded. Bright silver lucidity. There's also a white forelock in his brown hair, like a missing strip of wallpaper or a Rothko painting. A frost-covered path in the desert.

I glance at the Juror Bundle laying open on the polished mahogany desk. Behind it are my jelly-medusas, brought from home to this polished mahogany hotel room. Four Moon jellyfish illuminated in a tall, cylindrical tank. Neon blobs blubbing melodically up and down. Another place to park my eyes, to watch them do nothing. Blub, blub, blub. Next to the tank are three different pill bottles lined up in order of height. Tall green, medium orange, small white. I don't know why I did that. I don't usually. Boredom, I suppose. Vacancy. Filling in blanks.

I move off the bed and pick up the white bottle. Amphetedrine for the morning. Allows me to retain most of my personality. Going without meds isn't an option. It may allow for full-personality, but it would be completely untamed. My thoughts would either be disconnected and unmanageable, like a thousand bouncy balls in an enclosed room, or they'd be thin and airy and impossible. A jar of fog. With the meds, my thoughts seem to find me and find each other. Words add up. Pop a pill, and half an hour later my brain is organised and connected, clarity attained.

I swallow two pills with water from the mini-fridge. Then I set aside two more bottles and a Bounty in preparation for the dry mouth and occasional dip in blood sugar. All magic comes with a price, just like all medication comes with a long list of potential side effects. No one can escape them all. In this case, the price is well worth the magic. Needing the loo and a snack every half hour is nothing when the alternative is having bubble bath for brains.

After dealing with my neurotransmitters, I pull on some black leggings and a black jumper, reach for the Bundle, and sink back onto the bed. On top is the photo of Jacob

Lazarus, half man in blue shadows. I stare at him, silently asking, *did you do it?* And if you did, *how? How did you manage to do the impossible?*

I sift through the folder until I glance at the clock and see 07:37. Breakfast is set up in the common area at seven and left out until nine-ish. I might as well head over. Amphetedrine's kicking in, so I can think properly now. I can focus. I won't be caught parking my eyes in the empty window, the others watching, whispering.

Look at that freak. Isn't she strange?

10.

Stepping out of my room is stepping onto a runway of armed guards. Gargoyles lining a Baroque hallway, cradling big, metal machine guns. All for us. The jury. To keep us secure, uncontaminated, after public interest in the Lazarus trial spread like seismic waves and we became interesting. Another security effort by the court, in addition to booking the entire fifteenth floor of the Gold Olympus Hotel. Just for us. It requires a special key card in the lift to gain access. No unauthorised persons permitted. A members-only club.

The hallway's entirely devoid of life save for the guards' silent eyes and a nod from the one assigned to my door. Empty—yet, full. Crowded with grandeur, the style of a French chateau. There's a champagne aisle runner across the oak flooring, presumably to cushion genteel feet. I tread lightly. In my head, I'm a French duchess, and I belong here. If I don't pretend, I'm too aware of following eyes, and emptiness, and strange displacement. Then the excessive opulence starts to melt, dribbling down, down, all of it, squelching like paint, weeping to the floor, leaving bare stone walls in its place. Prison walls, enclosing and suffocating as their façade drip-drip-drips away. I avoid the guards'

eyes. If I don't pretend I belong here, the guards feel less like protection and more like prevention. Decorating the halls of a five-star hotel, preventing the prisoners' escape.

The common area is bright and airy, illuminated by a conga line of chandeliers and tall floor lamps, arched over like crystal willow trees. It almost feels sunny despite the bleak morning lingering on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The smell of English breakfast steams out from the buffet table along the wall, filling the room.

Arlo, Petrus, and Spirella are face-pressed against the windows to the left of the door. I can guess why. That side has a view of the Old Bailey. They're hoping to catch a glimpse of Jacob Lazarus being escorted in. It won't happen for hours though. I guess it's a case of firsts, like Americans queuing up overnight to be the first in the shops on Black Friday to get the best deals. First to the window earns the best view. Black Monday. Most likely, it's due to vacancy. What else is there to do? There isn't even a view, anyway. Only grey.

Spirella's changed her hair. She must have coloured it last night after we all went to bed because last I saw her, she still had a long mane of bright, electric colours. Now, it's lavender and board straight, like a soft, pastel scarf. Each day this week she's had a full face of flawless makeup, and today she's added tiny jewelled clusters in the corner of each eye, placed carefully around wings of black liner. I wonder how early she has to wake up to put it all in place, how long it takes to transform into a fairy queen with all her petals.

I move to the buffet. Rosalie's hovering like a wraith, not serving herself, but straightening out dishes and returning serving spoons to their proper place. She, too, appears immaculate each day. This morning is a canary-yellow blouse tucked into white chiffon trousers, her wrists, fingers, neck, all adorned in delicate gold jewellery. Every day she gets a bowl of plain yoghurt and a pile of raspberries for breakfast and spends

an eternity squashing the raspberries with the back of her spoon, concentrating immensely on this activity until she's achieved a lumpy red mush. Then she mixes a tiny spoonful into the yoghurt, eats it, and throws most of the raspberry slop in the bin.

After filling my plate, I move past the long dining table in the centre of the room. There, Callum and Jasper sit in fiery conversation, presumably about something they agree on, verbally patting each other on the back while they slander opposing viewpoints, safe from debate. On Selection Day, I was quick to judge Callum as a typical inflated-ego-type who believed his Adonic looks validated his stupid opinions. But I was hasty, and Callum surprised me. As the week progressed, I noticed that most of what Callum did and said was what Jasper did and said. Like he picked the loudest, most volatile, and ossified member of the group, misunderstood these qualities to be signs of strength or leadership and pledged his fealty—a pretty parrot on his captain's shoulder.

I move past them toward the sitting area, a square arrangement of cabriole settees and Antoinette loveseats centred around a gold-plated fireplace. All this fancy plush seating and I'd still choose my OfficeCloud6000. That's the reclining chair I have at InterSpeck. It's the latest one, complete with three massage and heat settings, free-floating back tilt, *and* Shiatsu massage. I'd never have afforded it myself, but after a day with a particularly tall manuscript mountain, I snapped at my editor, and he called me a *miserable moaner*. To vent my frustration, I slipped an emotionally-articulated comment in the Editor-in-Chief's suggestion box. *If InterSpeck provided their readers with OfficeCloud chairs, there'd be far fewer miserable moaners crouched over their keyboards, transforming into crunchy hunchbacks while expected to read ALL of the agents' shitty manuscripts on their own.*

Two weeks later, a brand new OfficeCloud6000 was waiting at my desk. No one could say where it came from and the Editor-in-Chief never said a word. But it had to

have been her. Right? The comment was anonymous, but as I'm the only reader left, that narrows it down.

The dull background noise of the distant crowd increases suddenly, violently.

"An armoured vehicle," Arlo says, tapping the window excitedly, "it's stopping in front of the courthouse. Crowd's gone ballistic."

"That's early," says Atticus, eyeing his watch.

We cluster at the window, clambering for a glimpse outside. From this distance, they're just tiny figures, but it doesn't matter. We've got box seats to the arrival of Jacob Lazarus. We are, after all, his most important audience.

11.

Condall comes in as we're huddled at the window, clears his throat like he has something to say, then says nothing. A royal announcement. Ushers are some of the few people that we're allowed to have contact with while sequestered, so he knows his visits interest us. There's two more behind him, a Scottish girl called Jalis and Condall's lackey, Pierce Pierson, a freckled beansprout who responds to those amused by his name with, "but will you ever forget it?"

They wheel in a gold clothes rail like a couple of bellboys, which is a fitting description because they wear these blue uniforms that make them look like bellboys and royal navy officers combined. Hanging on the rail is a row of gloomy black gowns. Condall snaps his fingers to a place near the door, and they hurriedly manoeuvre toward it.

Condall's uniform comes with distinctive gold lining and shoulder tassels and a face that's smug in a harmless way. He'd be a shoo-in for the butler-of-a-stately-manor role

in a BBC period piece, haughty and proud as the lord whom he serves. But what do I know? Maybe, Head Usher of the Old Bailey Crown Court is a terribly distinguished position. Maybe he walks so proudly because he alone, of all the ushers, has an Edwardian-style office with an oak desk, where he sits upon a cushioned OfficeCloud 6000, king among ushers. Those golden tassels are his crown because hierarchy is everywhere.

Albert motions to the rail. "Somebody graduating, then?"

"We all have our role, Mr Rayhawk," Condall replies, "and each, its designated uniform."

Black cloaks with hoods. They do look a bit like graduation robes, but more like Death. You know the one. Jalis lifts a cardboard box from beneath the gowns and places it on the dining table.

"Facial coverings," Condall says, reaching into the box.

"Halloween masks," Albert translates as Condall reveals a black, pentagonal mask.

Ignoring him, Condall moves to the rail. "Robes, gloves, hoods—all items should be worn at all times when off the hotel's premises to ensure complete anonymity. Only security and selected court officials have any information regarding your identity, including race, gender, age, hair colour, *everything*, and we'd like to keep it that way."

The mask triggers an image of Venetian Carnevale, what it might look like in the pre-stages. Condall's holding a mask-makers canvas. Blank, colourless, void, waiting to be created, transformed into a face. All different faces, festive and macabre, dancing hauntingly through the streets of Venice.

But not these masks. They never made it to the mask-makers workshop. They're the faces of a different parade.

We're told to meet back in the common room in an hour, fully robed in our juror uniforms and from there, security will escort us downstairs and out the staff exit at the back. There, three SUVs will be waiting to drive us over to the Old Bailey. Four jurors, two guards, one usher per car.

All twelve of us are back in the common area before the hour's up, and for roughly ten minutes, it's just us. The jury. Black cloaks with hoods, black gloves, black masks. Grim Reapers. Twelve faceless-faces in a Black Monday parade.

The cars drive like a funeral procession, and it still takes less than ten minutes. Security's prepared for our arrival, barring the crowd and press with ropes and bright orange cones, augmenting a clear path for the vehicles to stop directly in front of the entrance. I'm in the third car with Spirella, Max, Portia, Pierce Pierson, and two guards that I recognise from the hallway.

The crowd erupts with shouts when the doors of the first vehicle open and the first set of cloaked jurors step out. Energy increases with the next car. By the time our doors open, the ropes separating us from the rest of the world seem to be wearing thin. Reporters clutch mics, waving them wildly at us as camera crews shove their way to the best shot. Protesters chant, flapping signs with eager furore.

I turn my masked face toward them to receive the messages that they consider so important. I know what it's like to go unheard. My eyes land on a giant poster of a corpse hanging from a noose, *'to be or knot to be'* written across. Beyond it, signs abound. Contradictory messages span the horizon.

'Execute justice, not people!' 'Life rights are human rights!' 'An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind!'

'Let the punishment match the crime!' 'How do you teach a killer a lesson? Speak his language!' 'Once a killer, always a killer – unless, the killer is killed.'

Inside, we're guided to our jury room and wait in the corridor while security does a check. Across the hall is a small break room, door ajar. Someone's watching the news inside, so I discreetly shuffle near enough to peer through the crack. A group of ushers are watching live coverage of the scene outside on a propped-up HyPrix. Another arrival. Another eerie disguise.

The figure moves through the crowd, hooded in red and black, face concealed behind an ivory *medico della peste*—the beaked mask of the plague doctor. Another face in the Black Monday parade.

12.

We enter the courtroom from a side door next to the jury box, instead of the main entrance. The rows of benches on either side of the central aisle are already filled. Press on the left; court staff, witnesses, legal representation on the right. The public gallery is a floor above. A sold-out show.

Twenty minutes later, a clerk gives the 'all rise', and we're back on our feet. The plague doctor walks in through the same door, now richly adorned in official red robes and a curly white wig. He moves onto the bench, gives us a beaked nod in solidarity, then he's gone, transformed into Justice Solstus, tossing the mask aside and waving for us to be seated.

Another twenty minutes and two armed guards come in through the main entrance. This causes a stir. People turn all the way around, lean into the aisle, reach their necks wherever they can to catch a glimpse of what's happening.

I'm tall enough to arch my neck up slightly and see over Max's head. The guards face each other at the edge of the aisle, rifles in arm, another two in the doorframe looking out. We the court, a single-body, hold our breath as the guards in the doorway reach out, and another set of guards pass them a person. A human-baton in a silent relay. Silent...silent...

SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHH

A scream tears through my brain. Another shakes us from our deep, silent, collective state. No longer an all, but an *each*. Not *we*, back to *me* and *them*. Except for us. We the jury.

The guards' reaction speed is inhuman. I've barely taken a breath when there's eight of them, rifles pointed in the direction of the upset. The public gallery.

Justice Solstus gestures sharply, and the guards lower their rifles, some grinning, some disappointed. "Christ-sake," says Solstus, staring up at a bird perched on the chandelier after fluttering its way through the gallery. "For a bloody pigeon."

"Not a pigeon, a *maggie*," Max whispers. "One for sorrow."

I look at him, mask to mask, and Max motions over his shoulder. In the doorway is Jacob Lazarus, hands cuffed in front of him, a guard on each side. They lead him down the aisle, and the courtroom is back to a hush. He's in a black suit, hair pulled back into a neat ponytail emphasising the white lock. His eyes stay forward, never once flitting to the observers on either side of him. When he passes the jury box, however, he turns and looks at us before he's led up the steps to the defendant's dock. Silver eyes like the blade

of a knife and an understated smile for the twelve faceless figures, deciders of his fate. Tellers of his tale.

13.

Appearing for the crown is Ernest Flint KC, a stony-faced barrister with wide shoulders, as though propped by a crowbar, and eyes so black the iris is indistinguishable from the pupil. He moves like his bones are steel. Slow, calculated, mechanical, never once touching his podium or compromising his height leaning toward the mic. A brick tower with a voice that carries across the room.

Jacob's defence is led by Imelda King, a youthful barrister of Filipino-German descent (according to her Bundle profile), who smiles widely with pearly teeth. When she's not smiling, her eyes are laughing, and not in a nice way. In a way that coaxes and breeds uneasiness.

I hear Jasper whisper, "*in-ter-esting* choice on Jacob's part," causing Spirella to snap her masked face around, irritation penetrating the plastic. Spirella is a self-proclaimed Fury in the fight against the patriarchy and what she terms, 'its sexist sub-types.' She was the first to point out that there are only four women on the jury. "Luck of the draw," Jasper had responded, and subsequently drew a target on his back.

"Looks ripe s'all I meant," Jasper whispers, "freshly barred, I'd say—woulda' thought he'd hire someone more experienced, is all."

"So, he likes a looker more than a lifesaver," Callum says, "can't fault him for that."

They snigger and splutter and use coughs as disguises.

"Bell-ends," Spirella mutters beside me, and I can almost read her thoughts. Why is it always a woman with something to prove?

“Nah, he knows what he’s doing. She’s highly sought after, apparently,” Max whispers to us. “Never lost a case.”

“How do you know?” Spirella asks.

“Looked it up, didn’t I?”

“But—”

“We had a whole day to fill up on all the world wide web had to offer before being sequestered. What were you doing?”

Spirella shrugs and faces forward. “Jacob must’ve been making a hefty sum with his NeuroPath to afford her.”

“Made sod all. You’ve got copies of his bank statements right there in your Bundle. Makes less than I do and trust me, ain’t nothing hefty ‘bout me ‘cept my bin bags.”

“Then, how...?”

“How, indeed.”

Ernest Flint begins by formally addressing *His Lordship* (Solstus) and the common folk of the plebery (us), introduces himself, and ticks off a long list of junior barristers appearing for the Crown, whom he refers to as ‘learned friends,’ and my focus drifts. I wonder how this emotionless drone managed to climb his way to the top of the trial pile, which I assume requires a certain amount of skill in penetrating juror-hearts. My attention’s reclaimed when he speaks to us directly, an expression of appreciation, mutual understanding, and I have my answer. He’s going to play this like we’re a team. Like he’s not a silky-gowned, *Tally-Ho-Old-Boy*, wig-wearer, and we’re not a mob of unwashed riffraff. Like we’re the same. All of us, heads on our shoulders, going over details of the obvious. His words are droll, practised. It’s through his face that he speaks to us, saying *we’re all intelligent, here. You’re not fooled—thanks for making my job so*

easy. But just for kicks, lets humour this judge over here, go over some of the proceedings, shall we?

But he can't read our faces. No bouncing off our expressions, bending and amending to our reactions. Not with a faceless jury. A reach for our heartstrings is a reach in the dark. Nothing. Twelve faceless no ones.

"I'd like to tell you a story," says Ernest Flint. It's directed at us, but Jacob leans forward like he likes a good story.

Flint spends the next twenty minutes telling a fluff-filled piece about Alex Buryakov and Rebekah Lang, the delightful children they were, star students throughout school, pinnacles of excellence personally, academically. Social activists, humanitarians, animal lovers, steps away from sainthood. I'll admit, Flint can spin a tale. I try to stay sharp, lest I forget, these two paragons of humanity shot dead three MPs in the middle of a crowded rally. As it currently stands, they're murderers. Right?

Flint moves on to part two of his tale: the MPs, their generous and heroic deeds, their importance to their families, friends, communities. The build-up to his main point. The exposition, to make sure we know who the good guys are, the characters deserving of our love, the ones to root for. Only once the heroes have been established can he introduce the villain.

"Jacob Lazarus and the 4D NeuroPath, a technology that allows its wearer to consciously enter the landscape of their mind, 'a projectional reality in four-dimensional space.' The perfect breeding ground for invasive cognitive manipulation. That's right, *mind-control...*"

"...because they were his lab assistants, guinea pigs, test subjects. They opened their mental landscapes to this technology, allowing Dr Lazarus into their minds. Is it not curious, then, that during this phase of initial testing, these two individuals committed a

crime so incredibly inconsistent with their characters, yet, almost perfectly accordant with views publicly expressed by Dr Lazarus? Would it be that outlandish to suggest, based on this evidence, that Dr Lazarus and his NeuroPath have the ability to not only access these mental landscapes but modify them? Bend them to his will..."

"...the victims can never get their lives back, but by finding the defendant guilty, we can achieve justice for them. Alex and Rebekah *can* get their lives back. By determining, through careful examination of the evidence, that their minds were infected by Jacob Lazarus and this invasive technology, they can be acquitted of crimes they did not, themselves, intend to commit, want to commit, *choose* to commit. Their freedom of choice was taken from them, forcing them to be the faces of one man's political uprising." Flint points affirmatively to the defendant's dock. "By the end of this trial, the evidence will show beyond a reasonable doubt, that Jacob Lazarus is guilty of first-degree murder and first-degree cognitive control on all accounts."

14.

R. v Lazarus, Day 11
25 March 2030

When I was little, I used to have a nightmare about a man with a pig's head, the way a pig's head looks rotating on a spit. Dead, empty eyes. Crisp, oily skin. Coming for me. The pig-man never appeared until the end. I say, 'the end,' because I'd wake up seconds after he showed up. Fear, I suppose. But he never got me. I always woke up. Sometimes, I'd even remind myself inside the dream, semi-lucid, *he can't hurt you*. I'd tell my dream-self, *it isn't real. You'll wake up. He'll never get you*.

That's what I tell myself now. It doesn't shift the fear. Walking through the halls of the Gold Olympus. Elongating halls. Longer and longer with every step. Guards on each side. Guards in a line. More and more. Longer and longer. He's coming.

The pig-man. I sense him. And I can sense him sense me. Somewhere in these halls. In these blue shadows. *It isn't real.*

Drip...drip...drip...

I look to my right.

Drip...drip...drip...

The guard. Crushing raspberries in his palm. Red-guts squelching through his fingers onto the champagne carpet. *Drip, drip...*

Why is he doing that? Why?

Why?

He'll hear you.

He's coming.

Or is it just a dream? A dream.

Only a dream.

Drip, drip...

SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHH

I cringe. The sound is so many clichés, so many revulsions. Nails on a chalkboard. Tongue-biting. Blood and dizziness. Amputation. Electrocution. A bad trip. Paranoia. Nightmares. Pig-men.

The hotel's telephone.

Why does it shriek like that? Like a thousand glass shards shot by a firing squad, slicing my dream. Pig-man and blue shadows crumbling away.

I scramble across the bed to grab it, to end the brain-stabbing. I'm greeted by a recording, the same chirpy man that wakes me every morning. *Again and again and again.*

"Good morning! This is your *six o'clock* wake-up call. If you require any of our services, please listen to the following options. For reception, press—"

I hang up. The time, 'six o'clock,' is inserted by a woman and I wonder if she was hired by the Gold Olympus to recite every hour and minute of the twenty-four-hour clock. Maybe she was a juror. Maybe the Gold Olympus has accommodated sequestered juries before. I would jump at the chance to recite 'o'clocks' for hours and hours. It'd be a nice change from binge-watching the ceiling.

I swallow an Adernal, 20mgs. Strong enough to wake me when it's kicking in. No need for another defibrillator call. I drift back to sleep.

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

I wake up fully alert, 6:33am, to the sound of the tap. *Drip, drip, drip.* Water Torture. That's what I've heard it called.

I head to breakfast through the empty-full hallway. A nod from the guard at my door. Every morning. I smile in return, remembering my first night sequestered, how he'd introduced himself as Buzzard and called his shift partner Vulture. Every morning, I remember. Every morning, I think, *those are strange names.* Every morning. My new routine.

The common area is the same. Glitz, glamour, English breakfast, fellow jurors, grey London on the other side of a window.

Arlo and Rosalie hover around the buffet. Albert reads a fat book, his foot crossed over his knee. Carney guzzles a plate of baked beans and sausages. Callum and Jasper snigger at the table. Atticus sits a few chairs down, hidden behind *The Evening Standard*. I glance at the headline as I go by...hold on.

Farewell to King George the Fifth **The Great Silence of London as the Procession Goes By**

How did Atticus get hold of a paper? Part of the reason for our sequestration is to keep our judgement of the case untainted by media influence. The court is so adamant about it that I'm surprised a newspaper breaching the walls hasn't triggered a panic alarm. It's funny how some things are so familiar that it takes King George dying on the front page to remind you that it's out of place and you're lost somewhere in time. It's comforting in a way, seeing a newspaper. The imitation of normality. Comforting like a shadow.

Atticus must sense me staring. He folds down the paper, removes his glasses, and looks at me like he anticipates a question, and I'd better get on with it.

"How'd you manage that?" I ask, motioning to the paper.

"I wondered when someone would notice." He smiles. "Archives at the Old Bailey. It's full of old records, including these outdated papers. They wouldn't have offered the info voluntarily, I'm sure," he eyes Condall vibrantly explaining something to Pierce Pierson, "more work for them but it *is* in the juror handbook. We're allowed to request reading material from the archives, as long as it's pre-approved and far enough back in time."

“You read the handbook?” Honestly, I’m impressed. It’s basically a rules and regulations encyclopaedia.

“Didn’t have to. Remembered the rule from ten years ago. I had dealings at the Old Bailey for a medical lawsuit. Big pain, but I needed access to particular articles about a medical procedure that I refused to perform, to prove it was outdated and dangerous. Anyway, I recalled ushers coming in and out, whinging about being ‘newspaper delivery boys’ for some sequestered jury.” He gives the paper a fond pat.

I gather a plate of pastries and head to an empty settee. Carney’s in the armchair to my right, squinting over his Bundle. He sporadically loses his temper and reshuffles the papers so aggressively that he knocks the black walking stick resting against the chair and has to scramble to catch it. I eat my pastries and wait for the walking stick to smash the coffee table.

After a few more groans and close-calls, Albert smacks his book shut. “You need glasses, mate. Maybe, a Valium.”

“Rubbish,” Carney grumbles, “managed to live this long without ‘em. Too dependent on stuff, you lot. Not me. I tough it out. Think cavemen were worried about reading the top line?”

“That’s the aim, then? Cavemen?”

“Self-sufficient’s the aim, friend,” Carney says. “Can you change the tire of a boat?”

Albert gives me a funny look. I shrug in return.

“If you can’t change the tire of a boat, it’s time to see what you can change.”

“Can’t see anything without my glasses, mate,” Albert says and picks up his book.

I think about my Amphetamine top-ups, the way the tiny white pills look cupped in my palm. Gulped down with water, they become mind-glasses.

Max arrives, breakfast plate in hand, and a new brainteaser book poking out of his back pocket. He grins as he sits down next to me, leaning back in the sofa cushions, peeling a clementine. "First Crown witness today."

"'Bout bloody time," Carney says, "was beginning to wonder if I'd have to cash in all m'toes to see the end of this trial."

Albert shoots him a quizzical look and Carney adds, "*die.*"

"Still might, then."

"Nah, I can hold on another month," he grunts.

"A month?" says Max, popping a slice in his mouth. "I wouldn't fancy your chances, then."

"You callin' me old?"

Max grins. "Crowns got over a hundred witnesses, fam. You start cashing in toes after a month, you'll be out before the start pistol." He leans forward. "All I'm saying is this shit's just kickin' off, so I'd get comfortable here, y'know? Hold onto those toes."

"You've only got five," Albert adds.

15.

Day 11. The Crown calls its first witness, Brandon Sobles, a youngish guy with oversized glasses and a bowler hat. Flint starts by asking how he knows Jacob.

"I was Director of Cybernetics for the NeuroPath Project."

The moment he says it there's a slump in the jury box, other than Petrus and Atticus, who lean forward eagerly like a couple of science-groupies. I ready my pen for a long campaign of notetaking, silently praising my past-self for taking a full dose of Adernal.

Flint asks Sobles for a brief explanation of his duties as Cybernetics Director, and he responds with something like, “oh, well, I suppose you could say I’m the regulatory-systems-guy. Basically, I study the intercommunication between living organisms and machines. For the NeuroPath specifically, my team designed the mechanical blueprint. *Simply put*, our job was to develop technological mechanisms that would support a programme linking neurological systems to subsequent projectional space.”

There you have it. Simply put by the director of haptitudinal-blargargle-phenomena-jibjab-android-googleplex-lightsabreology. Spirella’s scribbling away, so I nosily side-eye her notebook and find:

Science hipster – Brandon Sopells? – cyberdynamics director of?



I side-eye the other way. Max has managed:

Brandon Sobel, cyberkinetics director

regulatory systems guy

live org. & machines, blueprints

tech. to link ~~neurology~~ neuro systematics & projecting space

4+1=20

0+3=0

6+2=48

2+7=???

In my notes I write: *request jelly food refill – check amt. of meds left – make appointment w/ court doc for refill script (Dr Muffin?) – ask s/o about cyber-dynamics (?) cyber-kinetics (?) Brandon S.*

Max nudges me, tapping his pencil at his notes. I look again.

$$4+1=20$$

$$0+3=0$$

$$6+2=48$$

$$2+7=18$$

There's always a pattern.

Day 12. Brandon Sobles, take-two. Another whirlwind of techno-babble. Following a particularly wordy tangent about the technicalities of correct wiring, Flint aptly senses that it's time for a shift in topic.

"Tell me about the name *4D NeuroPath*. '4D' refers to four dimensions, correct?"

"Yes. Four-dimensional *space*. Not to be confused with Einstein's space-time model, which combines three-dimensional space with a single dimension of *time* into a four-dimensional continuum. The Fourth Dimension, capitalised, is a spatial plane, measured by an additional coordinate axis."

"So, the Fourth Dimension... as opposed to our current position in the Third Dimension?"

"Correct. Our spatial perception can be measured by three orthogonal—er, *perpendicular*—coordinate axes, yeah? *x, y, z*. Height, width, depth. Altitude, longitude, latitude. So, in four-dimensional space, there's an extra perpendicular coordinate which we can't naturally perceive: *w*. So, in the Fourth Dimension, you've got altitude, longitude, latitude, and the fourth coordinate, *spissitude*."

“Could you explain the relationship between the 4D NeuroPath and the Fourth Dimension?”

“Jacob’s theory—the Mindsweeper Theory—is that the mind is four-dimensional and manifests spatially in the Fourth Dimension. So, in a way, we’re each connected to this higher reality via our minds. Think of dreams. When you dream, you sort of, enter the world of your mind, right? Walking and talking and existing in some alternate reality with recognisable physical properties and qualities. Then we wake up and realise most of it was bizarre, things that could never happen in real life, but it’s fine. It was just a dream. A jumble of images from our unconscious mind. Well, the Mindsweeper Theory is that the world of our mind is an actual spatial plane—the Imaginal Plane—and each of us has our own Imaginal Plane, a mindscape, which exists in the Fourth Dimension. So, dreaming is like partial access to the Imaginal Plane. A window, sort of...” He shifts in his seat, losing track of the question.

“And the NeuroPath comes in...?” Flint prompts him.

“Right—so, we can’t access the Fourth Dimension with our three-dimensional physical properties, obviously, so...think of it like a movie projector. Our physical bodies are the projector, projecting out an image. Our mind is projecting out an imaginal reality, the Imaginal Plane, and the Fourth Dimension is like the screen enabling that image to manifest. What the NeuroPath essentially does is forge a bridge between the first three dimensions and the Fourth. Users are induced into a semi-conscious bodily state, then the NeuroPath connects the Users’ conscious mind to their unconscious and projects a scan of this neural activity into the Fourth Dimension. There, the User’s Imaginal Plane manifests in a spatial form with altitude, longitude, latitude, and *spissitude*. It would be like stepping into the image projected on the screen.”

Flint raises his eyebrows at us. “A sensitive place, the mind. We wouldn’t want unwanted visitors stepping into the screen and moving things around, would we?”

Day 15. Acknowledging that we don’t speak blargargle, Justice Solstus brings in Dr Hiro Eto, a neuropsychologist from the University of California to be our Expert Consultant. After a brief introductory meeting, Dr Eto leaves for Edenbridge where he’ll spend a week assessing the NeuroPath. He’s given access to the NeuroPath Project’s lab records and data, including any placed into evidence and is approved to use the NeuroPath. When he returns, he’ll be *at our disposal* according to Condall. In other words, he’ll translate the jibjab. He’s got chin-length white hair, prompting Max to lean over during the meeting and whisper, “same barber as you, innit?” Spirella stifles a laugh behind her mask, but the room’s so quiet, even stifles are noticed. I suppose the masks do have some benefits.

Day 17. Ratna Amin, dark eyes and a striped blouse with the tags still on. One of the clerks discreetly tells her as she’s walking to the stand.

“Bravo, you’ve got eyes,” she says, turning sharply. She takes the stand and immediately announces, “I don’t own any court-appropriate clothes. This came from M&S on the way here and will be returned to M&S on the way back. Last time I checked, that’s not a crime.” She glares in the direction of the clerks, then directly at Flint, as though asking him to challenge her, which he does not.

Flint asks about her role on the NeuroPath Project, and she responds, “before you lot shut it down, you mean? I was Director of Software Engineering and Operating Systems Security. I designed the programme.”

“What does the programme do?”

“It determines the 4D-Trip. The NeuroPath connects to the Imaginal Plane of whoever is programmed as Primary-User, so in the case of multiple Users, they alternate between being Primary-User and Secondary-Users. Secondaries are essentially visitors in the Primary’s mind. So, let’s say, John, Sue, and Sally are our Users, and they decide Sally will be the first Primary, then John, then Sue. We write a three-session programme in that order, and that’s how the NeuroPath directs their 4D-Trip. The programme instructs the NeuroPath on the point of entry, the number and rotation of sessions, and the point at which to safely disconnect from the Fourth Dimension. It allows Users to preapprove the nature of their 4D-Trip and feel secure from external tampering while they’re connected and in a semi-conscious, vulnerable state. You see, once technicians have input the programme and the Users have gone under, there’s no way for anyone on the outside to alter the programme.”

Flint’s pacing back and forth like a coyote guarding venison. I want to laugh. Get this guy his Tony, already. “What do you mean by, *‘the point at which to safely disconnect?’* Is there an unsafe point?”

“It’s always unsafe to disconnect something improperly from an active computer system. You don’t yank a USB out of your laptop before the proper removal steps, or you risk corruption, so you *certainly* don’t yank someone’s brain out of an inter-dimensional neurotransmission system without proper removal steps. For security, we’ve coded into the NeuroPath that, upon entry to the Fourth Dimension, Users will find a multi-functional screen imprinted on their wrists. If at any point a User wishes to disconnect safely from the Fourth Dimension, they need only type a particular instruction code into the screen. The only two ways for Users to exit the programme and safely disengage their brains from the NeuroPath is to either let the programme run its course and it

does it automatically or to type the exit-code into the wrist-screen from within the programme.”

Flint asks Ratna for more detail about the wrist-screens.

“They’re the only manner of communication between the Users and the outside technicians, and they allow Users to alter the programme from within the session, change the turn order. In case of emergency, technicians can send a coded signal to the Users in the Fourth Dimension, via the wrist-screen, alerting them to safely exit the programme and return to the Physical—because, remember, the technicians can’t alter the programme from the outside.”

“Would technicians know if changes were made from within?” asks Flint.

“Yes,” Ratna replies. “It would show up on the computer.”

“And what risks do Users face if improperly disconnected?”

“Mental corruption. Users are required to sign a waiver that permits technicians to use their judgement in emergencies that could cause external bodily harm, like fires or floods, in which their initial signalling attempts didn’t result in Users disengaging from the programme themselves. By signing the waiver, Users are acknowledging that they’re aware this type of shutdown could corrupt the programme and have negative effects on their brains.”

“Could you give us an example of an improper disconnection from the NeuroPath?”

“Someone physically pulling the Users off the machine while they’re connected. Cutting the main power supply, turning off the generator and the two backup generators during an active session. It really would have to be intentional. A true emergency situation.”

Flint nods. “Has an incorrect shutdown ever occurred while Users were connected?”

“No,” Ratna says, “never.”

Flint glances briefly at the jury, hinting a smile. “We’ll see,” he says, smacking shut his notes. “Thank you, Dr Amin. No further questions.”

Ratna Amin looks concerned for the first time since she took the stand and peers over at the defendant’s dock. Jacob smiles at her and gives a reassuring nod.

Day 20. Terrence Nelson, student at UCL and fellow BRAINpunk member. He moves with the same gangly grace I’ve come to know in Pierce Pierson and stumbles, not once, but twice on his way to the stand. I imagine he’d make a good tour guide round Central London. He’s the height of a lamppost and has fiery ginger hair dangling over his eyes like a Komondor sheepdog. You couldn’t lose him if you tried.

Flint has Terrence confirm that he was a participating member of BRAINpunk alongside Alex Buryakov and Rebekah Lang, that he was present at the demonstration, and witnessed them assassinate the MPs.

“I witnessed Alex shoot Vernon Scholtz,” he says in a painfully posh accent that doesn’t seem to belong there. “I was standing just behind him at the time, a vantage point that gave me a clear view of who was shooting their gun and when one of the bullets hit Mr Scholtz. As you can imagine, it was chaos, people screaming, running, dropping to the ground. MPs on the stage were dropping too, and it was hard to tell whether they were taking cover or hit. I knew Alex was still shooting at the stage when I saw Linda Cunningham get shot—and definitely *shot* because she didn’t drop, just stood there in shock, looking down at her blouse as the red stain grew wider and wider. Ghastly sight. But I didn’t *see* that it was Alex who shot her. By that time, I could already hear the other gunshots—Rebekah’s—so I can’t say with certainty which of the two killed Linda Cunningham or Mark Rentham, only that it was one of the two.”

“But you all had guns, yes? All members of BRAINpunk participating in that protest?” asks Flint.

“Yes, but theirs were the only two loaded. We had no idea...”

“Why bring firearms at all?”

Terrence shakes his mop-hair from his eyes. “It was a scare tactic, a drastic demonstration against the TFP proposition to legalise personal gun ownership. We never for a second meant it to be real.”

“So, Mr Buryakov and Ms Lang loaded their firearms without the knowledge or consent of the others in the group?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely. We never saw it coming.”

16.

Day 21. Detective Inspector Dan Rodwell, in charge of Alex Buryakov’s case, called to provide the exact details of Buryakov’s accusations against Jacob: Exhibit 77, the taped interrogation from the night of Buryakov’s arrest, and Exhibit 78, the leaked transcript.

In the video, Buryakov looks clammy. When the interview begins, he’s unsure of himself, stumbling over words, struggling to gather thoughts.

Rodwell pauses the video. “If you have a look at Exhibit 78, you’ll see the transcript starts at this point in the interrogation. It’s here that the explicit accusation is made against Jacob.”

R. v Lazarus

Exhibit 78

A1 Det. Rodwell: I'm asking if it was premeditated. When did you decide to load your gun?

B1 Buryakov: That's what I'm trying to tell you. I never decided to. It was the NeuroPath.

A2 Det. Rodwell: The NeuroPath made you commit these murders?

B2 Buryakov: Yes. No. Not the machine. Lazarus. He used the NeuroPath to get in our heads. He lied and said he was going to use the NeuroPath for psychological treatments, but he was creating a mind-control machine, using us as lab rats, seeing what he could make us do. You've seen his essays, what he thinks. He hates the TFP. Read his book. You'll see. So, he used his mind-control machine to make us do the dirty work for him. Take the fall. He manipulated us - no, inserted instructions for us to kill those MPs directly into our brains. Like we were robots. He's your murderer. His ideas, his machine. He wanted TFP blood, just not on his own hands. And what better way to do it? Who's going to fucking believe us?

A3 Det. Rodwell: Could you specify how he inserted information into your brain?

B3 Buryakov: I already have! You're not listening. He used the NeuroPath.

A4 Det. Rodwell: Let me rephrase. Do you have any information that could lend further weight to your accusations? How Jacob used the NeuroPath to insert instructions into your brain which controlled your physical actions? Something that a specialist could examine the machines and discover?

B4 Buryakov: I told you. He put thoughts into our heads that were never there before. Maybe he coded it into the programme. Maybe he designed the machine to rearrange Users' brain chemicals. I don't know. He's the neuro-genius.

The transcript ends, but the video keeps playing. A greyish scene, Detective Rodwell with his elbows on the table, Buryakov on the other side, watching the wall.

"So, all you know is this machine—"

The door of the interrogation room opens, and another officer dips in her head. "Here you go," she says, handing Detective Rodwell two bottles of Coke, "no straws, though."

"Thanks, Pat," says Rodwell, placing one of the bottles across the table for Buryakov.

Buryakov keeps his eyes on the wall. "I need a straw."

“Tough tits.” Detective Rodwell opens his Coke and takes a gulp. “Tell me about this Imaginal Plane, then. You said you spoke with Dr Lazarus while in your Plane and that’s what caused you to commit the murders?”

“Yes. Thought insertion.”

“What exactly did he say?”

Silence.

Rodwell clears his throat. “I need you to face this way, Alex, and answer my questions.”

“What’s the point? They’re going to give me a psych evaluation, anyway.”

“Alex,” says Rodwell, “what did Dr Lazarus say inside the NeuroPath to make you murder two MPs?”

Buryakov turns to Rodwell. A blank stare. “What makes you angry, Detective?”

Rodwell watches him a moment, then abruptly pushes his chair out from the table. “If you’re not going to take this seriously, then yes, we’ll have to give you a psych evaluation.”

Buryakov smiles and turns back to the wall.

When the video ends, Flint turns to us. “Exhibit 80 is a photocopy of Mr Buryakov’s psychological evaluation given by a Doctor Kolczynski, who found nothing to indicate any psychological condition which could cause delusions or hallucinations of any kind.”

Rodwell frowns, shaking his head. “Kid’s madder than a Hatter. If he’s not crazy, he’s playing crazy—”

“Thank you, Detective. No further questions.”

“In my experience, someone playing crazy has an agenda—”

“Scratch that from the record,” Solstus shouts at the stenographer as guards approach to assist Detective Rodwell from the stand.

Flint looks directly at us. “Or perhaps he’s simply telling the truth.”

17.

R. v Lazarus, Day 26
Monday, 15 April 2030

SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHH

God, I hate that wake-up call.

I slide out of bed and stare out the window. Fog, rain, voices. Empty views to park my eyes and let my thoughts run free.

Except they’re never free here.

Again, I’m thinking about Jacob Lazarus. Again, I can’t help it. What else is there to think about? What else is there to occupy my mind? My own thoughts? Not here. I’m not my own anything here. My existence is an extension of Jacob Lazarus. Today, we’ll finally get to hear what he has to say. Today, he takes the stand.

The guard outside my door nods. I smile in return. Buzzard. Vulture. *Strange names.* French duchess. Glitz, glamour, English breakfast, fellow jurors, grey London on the other side of the window.

I sit next to Spirella on the settee. She’s filing her nails and convincing Carney that we’ve all had tracking devices inserted under our skin while we slept.

“...and they know how many times you use the toilet,” she’s saying.

“Bollocks!” says Carney. “If this is yer idea of a wind-up, Spirelly...” He’s been calling her this since day one, and she’s given up correcting him.

Albert’s nodding. “That explains how Kite always manages to thwart my escape. Swings the door open right as I’m straddling the window sill.”

Carney’s examining his wrists as Jasper plops into an armchair next to him, breakfast plate in-hand. “You two’ll be sorry when that’s true. Never underestimate a powerful system’s potential for conspiracy.”

Spirella rolls her eyes.

“Kite, did you say?” Max asks Albert. “What about his shift partner?”

Albert shrugs. “Never seen him, arrives after the 10pm curfew, gone before I get up. But, actually...yeah, Kite mentioned an Aziyo or something.”

“Asio,” says Max, pleased. He points to Spirella. “What about yours?”

“Hawk,” she says, returning to her nail-filing, “and...I dunno, some other bird. Flamingo...”

“Flamingo?” Max cries, straightening. “Surely not?”

“No?”

“Nah. Disturbs the pattern.”

“You see?” Jasper snorts, getting up again, mouth full of scrambled egg. “He gets it. Conspiracy.”

Atticus closes his newspaper, a 1941 *Daily Record* with the headline BRITAIN CUTS TIES AMID CRISIS. “What pattern?”

Max leans on the armrest. “Guards and their code names. What’re yours called?”

Atticus appears impressed. “Merlin and...Pallas.”

“Merlin—that’s a falcon. But Pallas...”

“Fish-eagle,” says Carney, “native to India.” When we all look surprised, he gives us a droopy frown. “Yeah. I know things, too,” he crosses his arms, “how many o’ you been stationed in India, eh? How many o’ you comin’ up with fish-eagle? Yeah, that’s right. Carney knows things, too.” He taps his crown.

“And you’ve helped further my theory.” Max credits him with a nod, and Carney puffs with pride. “My guards call themselves Otus—a type of owl—and Osprey.”

“So, all birds,” says Atticus.

“A flamingo’s a bird!” Spirella cries.

“Birds of *prey*,” says Max, and while everyone has their epiphany, adds, “everything has a pattern.”

“And every bacon has an egg, and every egg has a sausage,” Jasper shouts, dropping his second plate of food on the coffee table and plopping back into the chair. “We could jabber about patterns and universe mysteries all day, or we could chuck out the rubbish and worry about what’s ahead. This deranged fucker here.” He pulls a page from his Bundle and tosses it onto the table. It’s the eerie blue photo of Lazarus, half-man in the shadows.

“Jacob Lazarus likes patterns,” says Max, resting his head lazily on his arm, “but most of all, he likes stories. He wrote a book about it. *Stories of the Fourth Dimension*. I’ve read it.”

Jacob Lazarus likes harmony and patterns, but most of all he likes stories.

“I’ve no doubt he’s a clever little storyteller,” Jasper snorts, taking a bite of ketchup-covered sausage, “bet we’ll get a right earful. Likes stories, huh? ‘Course he does. Just another word for lies, innit?”

18.

At the Old Bailey, we wait in the jury room for Condall to come and lead us to the courtroom, as per routine. It's taking longer than usual, and anything unusual is something exciting. I sit at the table, mindlessly watching Spirella doodle little flowers on her mask with gel markers. Max appears to like the idea and nudges me in the side, taking a red pen to his mask and drawing a checkers board.

"Pretty sure you're not supposed to do that, Spirelly," Callum sneers from the other end of the table. Like Carney, he calls her Spirelly, except he does it as a form of punishment after she spurned his advances sometime in week two. Since then, his attitude toward her has vacillated between flirting and bullying, depending on his mood or how much attention she's paying him. Currently, her interest is zero, so he's watching her with a chiselled snarl.

"I like it," says Arlo, "it's less miserable. Hand me one of those."

Spirella gives him the silver marker, and he draws elegant music notes across the mask. Then he makes a jagged line down the centre, an upward curve on the right side of the mouth, and a downward curve on the left. Happy, sad. Smile, frown.

Max slides a gold pen across the table to me. I take it and stare at the empty face looking up at me. I doodle until I've created some sort of moth-winged jellyfish.

Callum rolls his eyes, nudging Jasper.

"Don't be surprised when they fine you for that," Jasper snorts.

Albert's colouring green circles around the tiny eye slits, like praying mantis eyes. He holds it up to Callum. "Vandalism of government property, innit? This is living."

“Oh, Bertie,” Callum says, the preamble to some cringe-worthy gibe, no doubt, but he’s interrupted by Condall’s arrival. Four burly security guards wait outside the door as Condall bursts in making his usual flapping gestures to get us moving.

“Masks on, cloaks up, hands-in-gloves,” he says, bustling around like a panicked C-3PO.

We walk in the same two-by-two line we always do, headed by Condall and Pierce Pierson, flanked by guards. Black Monday Parade. Condall does a double take as Arlo moves past him into the jury box. Horrified, he scrutinises the rest of us as we go by, eyes widening at Albert, audibly gasping at Spirella, mouth dropping at Max and me. It’s too late though. Once we’re in the jury box, we’re off limits, even to Condall. Property of the Red Judge.

Jacob is already in the defendant’s dock when we pile in, back in the suit he wore on day one. Most days, he wears his white prison uniform or jeans and a t-shirt. Condall can’t fathom why he’d ever wear the jumpsuit to court if remand prison gives the option of personal clothing. *A practised attorney knows better than to let their client wear those awful jumpsuits in the courtroom, he told us one morning, tut-tutting, makes them look guilty in the eyes of the jury.* Naturally, this revived the on-going debate between Jasper and Spirella regarding Imelda King’s qualifications versus her looks, but I think both Jacob and King know what they’re doing.

Jacob watches us, smiling. I suppose it’s nice to look up and see colour, instead of the usual faceless faces. Hints of people behind the masks. A touch of life in Death.

19.

The courtroom is quiet. Two armed guards ascend the staircase leading to the defendant's dock. After typing a long security code into a covered numeric pad, they slide open the glass door. Jacob stands and offers his handcuffed wrists. They lead him to the witness stand by his elbows. It's all a bit much. A pantomime. A scene from a Marvel film, the trial of an evil-genius-supervillain.

Ernest Flint sits at his bench, arms crossed, the two black holes in his head moving with the defendant. Jacob takes the oath, and his hand is cuffed to a rail on the inside of the stand. The guards secure the latch and position themselves on either side.

Flint stands and smiles at Jacob, as if to say, *you'll be my finest victory yet*. Flint wants to win. To be the conquering Crown. He doesn't care what it'll cost his opponent. In Flint's mind, the stakes are even. Win or lose. Win or die.

Flint paces back and forth like he's considering the detrimental importance of his job, which is to find the truth. Nothing is more important than the truth. This isn't about winning or losing, it's about the truth. The truth. I believe this posturing is for our benefit. Another mask for the masquerade. But I caught a face that cares more about winning than truth.

OBJECTION.

That was me, in my head. I've taken to objecting myself when I start projecting, and it's possible that I'm mass-projecting all over Ernest Flint. Perhaps I should cut him some slack. He's just doing his job, after all.

And who knows? Maybe Jacob *is* a mind-controlling evil-genius. We're still missing evidence for the mind-controlling, evil part. I'm still struggling with the technicalities of the NeuroPath and all the systematic-dimensionality blargargle, but I've heard enough

witnesses call it 'ground-breaking science' to convince me it's not all blargargle. Which begs the question...if a guy can do all of that, what's stopping him from inventing a device that can control minds and using it? Not ability. Not imagination or intelligence or opportunity. Only a sense of personal morality, I suppose. A sense of right and wrong. At least, the sense that taking away another person's autonomy isn't okay, especially if it's the means to an end which takes away three other people's lives. Even if those people *were* Traditional Freedomist...

That's not justification. We can't go around murdering people we disagree with. Even the ones promoting nativist Anglocentrism, furthering disillusionment, austerity, and insisting we *need* their far-right nationalism to keep us traditionally free. Free from the rest of the world, from immigrant invaders, from anything new or different or impure, free from problems. Because Traditional Freedom recognises that Britain's problems aren't British; they're other. None of *us* is to blame. It's *them*. Not *us* and *we*. *Them*. Traditional Freedom puts Britain first, and by God, we should be grateful.

Despite this mantra, we're not vigilantes. Then we'd be as bad as them, right? I mean, is it ever okay to kill? No. Unless... Unless, killing a particular person would save a ton of innocent people and leave the world a wholly better place, right? No, not even then. We can't go around playing God, deciding who we think is too evil to live. That would get way too messy. Right?

I don't know. Jury service is really tiring. It's doing a number on my brain.

I look over at Flint with fresh eyes, *tabula rasa*. What I see is a bull breathing smoke through his nostrils and pawing the ground. Hungry to win. That makes him dangerous. It's not projection when there's evidence.

I look at Jacob sitting in the seat that we've watched countless bottoms get in and out of every day for two months. Talking heads and an information dump pile. Another

consideration, another complication. Another story for the collection. Jacob is composed and placid, not afraid of the King's Counsellor who wants to kill him.

Maybe it's because he's dangerous too.

20.

Flint coils his fingers around the edge of his podium. "State your name for the members of the jury," he says.

I have to stop myself from sighing. What a stupid request. By the look on Jacob's face, he's thinking the same thing, but his lips move in response.

"You'll have to speak into the microphone, I'm afraid," says Flint, "we're not lipreaders."

Jacob smiles from behind his dishevelled mane, pulling loose strands behind his ears. He makes no move toward the microphone.

Flint taps his fingers impatiently. "Mr Lazarus, need I remind you that you are required by law to answer all questions posed by myself and the rest of the Crown?"

It's easy to forget that the answer we're all waiting for is his bloody name.

Jacob glances at King, and she nods. He leans down, mouth virtually touching the microphone, and the white streak falls forward.

"You need not remind me," he says. The closeness of his lips muffles the sound and the microphone screeches. Groans from the gallery. *Christsave* from Solstus. Flint keeps tapping.

"Jacob Lazarus," he says, returning to the mic. This time it picks up static interference.

"What the hell's wrong with the thing?" Solstus asks, looking to one of the clerks.

“Nothing’s wrong with it, My Lord,” Jacob responds loudly, so we can all hear without the mic. “Unfortunately, I don’t think the frequency of the microphone is compatible with my IIC.” He taps his left ear. “Might need to get a sound guy in here to lower the baseband frequency. Until then, I’ll try to speak up.”

Flint marches back to his table, whispering angrily at the team of prosecutors who all look terrified.

“Mr Lazarus,” he says, returning to the podium, “why did you not disclose your hearing aid to the medical examiner prior to your court date?”

“I did,” says Jacob.

“It’s not in your medical charts.”

Jacob shrugs. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

Flint’s lips tighten. “What is the nature of your hearing disability, Mr Lazarus?”

“Congenital sensorineural deafness of the left ear.”

“And was it caused, developed, or present from birth?”

“It was congenital.”

“Right.” Flint looks down at the notes on his podium, a tiny crack in composure.

“Sensorineural deafness,” he says, biding his time, “*sensorineural*. Could you explain to us, more specifically, what this entails?”

Jacob glances at King again. She waves him on, smiling.

“In my case, it’s damage to the cochlear nerve—so, the nerve that runs from the ear to the brain. It’s a common side effect of Type II Waardenburg Syndrome, which I also disclosed to the medical examiner.”

Flint shoots the junior-barristers a glare, and one of them comes running up, placing a file onto the podium. Flint peruses it, then looks back up like nothing happened.

“Waardenburg Syndrome, Type II. Are there any other side effects besides deafness?”

Jacob smiles and lifts the white streak of hair. “I hope no one thought this was a personal style choice.”

Laughs from the gallery.

“Right, and is that it?”

Jacob forms a V with his fingers and motions to his silver eyes.

21.

It doesn't take long for Flint to recognise that he's in tumbleweed territory. He swiftly forgoes enquiries into Jacob's medical conditions and plunges headfirst into the good stuff.

“Both Buryakov and Lang reported interacting with you inside their Imaginal Planes, correct?”

Jacob nods. “That's correct.”

“But you weren't physically connected to the NeuroPath at the time in question?”

“No.”

“Is the NeuroPath's operating system capable of producing simulations...” Flint looks down at his notes, pressing his lips. “Withdrawn.” He moves around the podium. “Is it possible for a seemingly sentient figure to be coded into the programme? To act as an avatar of some sort and communicate with Users in the Fourth Dimension?”

“Maybe—though Ratna could tell you more about the programme than me. The thing is, computer specialists and information security experts went through our system from top to bottom and didn't find any coding of that nature. Isn't that right?”

“Mr Lazarus, I'm the one who asks the questions, not you. And I asked, '*is it possible?*' not '*did it occur?*'”

Jacob leans back, left arm awkwardly pulled forward by the handcuffs. He thinks for a moment and returns to the mic. “When we began testing the NeuroPath, we found that first-time Primary-Users all experienced something we’ve termed the *Copycat State*. What happens is the Primary-User’s unconscious mind creates a false reality, like it does when we dream. We think it’s a coping mechanism because the false reality manifests in a way that’s uniquely significant to the Primary-User. All Users on the 4D-Trip are sucked into the Primary-User’s narrative, believing the Copycat State to be real; but it’s short-lived. Either something triggers the Primary-User out of the Copycat State, or they gradually regain awareness. It only seems to occur during a first-time entry and never again afterwards. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to complete testing into the Copycat States, but we’re fairly certain they’re aimed at familiarity. Therefore, to answer your question, *no*, nothing which could be construed as a ‘seemingly sentient figure’ can be coded into the programme; however, it’s possible that a User’s mind could produce a variant Copycat simulation, and that multiple Users’ minds could create a *collective* Copycat simulation. For example, multiple Users could collectively simulate a person that they all know. More to the point, two of my research assistants could produce a collective simulation of someone *familiar*, to help them navigate the landscape of their minds. An anchor, of sorts.”

Flint returns to the podium. “But this is hypothetical. As you’ve stated, testing into the Copycat States was never completed. Why is that?”

“Well, Mr Flint, I was arrested.”

Flint nods. “So, when Buryakov and Lang spoke to you in their Imaginal Planes, they were actually just speaking to themselves? As in, their minds decided to work together and create a character that looked like you?”

Jacob eyes him.

"I'll rephrase," says Flint. "Are you saying that your students were communicating with a mental character, created by their unconscious minds, and it looked like you?"

"Yes."

"So, using your likeness, they convinced themselves to commit the murders?"

Jacob opens his mouth, but Flint raises a hand. "Withdrawn. In the Imaginal Plane, is it standard for one's unconscious to communicate with them via mental characters?"

"Via anything and everything. The unconscious mind contains stores of information. Memories, emotions, convictions, images, the list is infinite. Bridging the gap between conscious and unconscious can be an overwhelming experience, an onslaught of information coming at you unchecked. This is why we have a coping technique in place, and all Users are briefed on the importance of using it before entry."

"And what is the coping technique?"

"The Primary-User must tell a story. It forces the unconscious activity into an organised state of communication and use of mental characters. A story is the product of Ego and Id in harmony. Messages and ideas from the unconscious are contained and controlled. It provides structure. Forgo the coping technique, and the Plane becomes cavernous and chaotic like you're losing control. Because you are. The unconscious is taking over, and the Ego is disappearing inside of it. You just press the Exit command on your wrist-screen if that happens, but what a waste of a trip."

Flint taps the podium. "So, Buryakov fails to tell a story in his Imaginal Plane and it turns him into a murderer? Withdrawn. Would it be accurate to say that the NeuroPath puts Users at high risk of psychological corruption or imbalance, even after they are properly disconnected? For example, if they forget to tell a story while inside and the unconscious takes over?"

Jacob rests his chin in his hand, becoming visibly impatient, handcuffs clanking against the rail. “No,” he replies. “I’m saying that Buryakov was so shocked by his own desire to murder members of the Traditional Freedom Party that he either convinced himself it was mind-control or he’s fully aware that I have nothing to do with it, that he wanted to murder those people, but didn’t want to spend life in prison.”

“Are you suggesting that Buryakov is—”

“Yes, I’m saying he’s lying.”

“And he’s saying the same of you. But, I think we’ve steered into the realm of speculation now—”

“Now?” Jacob cries, “*Now* we’re speculating?” He glances at Solstus. “My Lord, this entire case is built on speculation. I can describe the Imaginal Plane, the Fourth Dimension, I can give you my theories, but what does it prove? What evidence is there for me to provide when everything we’re discussing is outside of this dimension?”

Solstus consider this.

Flint smacks his podium. “What I’m trying to accomplish here, Mr Lazarus, is to provide our jury with an understanding of the NeuroPath, give them a sense of what is possible and what is not. Help them piece together the discordant information coming at them from witnesses. Aid them in their assessment of the evidence and the truth. Now, we can’t bring the jury into the Fourth Dimension, so for their benefit, and ours, could you please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge?”

“No.”

Flint looks at Solstus.

“I can’t,” says Jacob. “I can’t even begin to explain it. You say you can’t bring the jury into the Fourth Dimension, but if you want them to have all the facts, instead of

speculations and discordant information, you're going to have to. If you want your jury to *truly* understand, they're going to have to use the NeuroPath."

Flint scoffs. "What...and make them vulnerable to potential mind-control too?" He gives a pompous chuckle, glancing around the room before turning back to the stand.

Jacob doesn't answer. His eyes are on us. "There is no understanding without experience," he says. "Let them use the NeuroPath, My Lord. Let them see and assess for themselves the vulnerabilities and potentials."

For a moment, Solstus is silent. I can hear my beating heart. Not just feel it, *hear it*, a hollow drum pounding. Solstus turns to Flint.

Flint's mouth drops slightly, knuckles white from gripping the podium. "My Lord, please. You cannot seriously be—"

"Court is adjourned until further notice while I consider the defendant's proposal and its practicalities." Solstus stands. Flint strikes his podium and abruptly returns to his team. Imelda King wears a vulpine smile directed nowhere in particular.

I stay seated, watching Jacob. He's watching us. I catch his eyes, bright and quick. A flicker of light on a silver blade.

22.

Court is adjourned for two days. I spend them doing nothing in a variety of forms. Blurry boredom. A lot of lying in bed, staring up, willing my mind to project moving pictures onto the ceiling. Transform it into a window, glimpse my Imaginal Plane, touch the Fourth Dimension. I know it doesn't work like that, but there's enough blank time to try.

Nobody talks much about the NeuroPath. It's strange, everyone pretending there's nothing to say. Like no one wants to form a thought about it until Solstus does.

Max and I talk about it when it's just us. He's made up his mind. If the offer's there, he's taking it. *When will any of us get a chance like this again?*

"Aren't you scared it could mess with your mind?" I ask him on the second night. We're sitting on sofa cushions on the floor in front of the fireplace. It's past curfew, but Condall's not around, and the guards don't care because they're awake all night guarding us anyway.

"No," he says simply.

"You don't think he did it?"

"I didn't say that. Too soon, innit?" He leans into the fire, staccato fingers pinching the flames. "Even if he could use that machine to control Users' minds, how's he gonna do it from the pen? Sure, maybe he pre-programmed it to assess each User's mind and, being a supercomputer and all, it can detect *specifically* how each User's brain should be re-wired so that they'll perform whatever task Jacob would want them to. This theory also assumes the computer is super enough to predict *how* Jacob would want to control each User, what he'd want them doing. How'd you suppose it'd manage that? Ain't enough algorithms in the world, fam. Unless he's figured out some other way. Put a computer chip in his brain. Something that keeps him connected and in control of the NeuroPath from anywhere." Max faces me and grins. "I'm just spit-balling."

I shrug because Max only makes good points. "They scanned him for chips and things before the trial, remember? I don't see how he'd get away with that."

"Bet. They did scan him, didn't they?" Max nods thoughtfully and goes back to playing with the fire. "So, you see? The risk scenarios are largely outlandish, yeah? And if he *did* manage to invent a supercomputer that can control folks' minds *and* predict

how he'd want them controlled...then, fucking hell. Man's on route to some powerful A.I., inni? Almost like creating life. Our own Dr Frankenstein. Until it goes wrong. You'd always expect a thing like that to go wrong, wouldn't you?"

The next morning, we're sitting around the table in the jury room, waiting for the decision. Condall darts off to find out, assuring us he "won't be a minute!" after spending all of breakfast fussing and springing about like a peacock with a pan flute. *The amount of planning it would mean, well I just don't know...*

I think two days of built-up anticipation has made us all tense. It's been almost five minutes since he left, and people are getting antsy. No one's talking, which effectively amplifies all other noise. Carney grumbling under his breath. Callum sighing like an entitled boy-king. Albert munching his way through a bag of Quavers. Jasper tapping his fingers to the rhythm of the Grand Old Duke of York. Max's chair creaking as he rocks back and forth, back and forth. Spirella smacking her lips as she reapplies lip balm. Newspaper crinkling each time Atticus turns a page. Petrus's charcoal pencil flitting across sketch paper. I wonder if they can hear the screams in my head.

As Jasper sounds off Duke of York, verse five, Arlo snaps, "Nah, you've rinsed it," and smacks the table. Jasper forms a snarl, but before any words are said, the door opens and in walks Solstus. Condall scurries along behind and makes a melodramatic performance of closing the door.

"Jurors!" Solstus greets us, and I wonder if he knows any of our names or even that we're twelve individual people. It's the first time we've seen him without the wig, and he

looks like a distant version of himself. A photo of his father at that age. For some reason, I imagined him having stringy grey wisps under the horsehair curls, but he's got an impressive head of thick, black hair and suddenly looks Greek. Maybe, Albanian.

"I'll cut to the chase," he says, clapping his hands for attention. "I've thought about this NeuroPath business, done some investigating into the logistics of the thing, reached out to the NeuroPath project's former technicians, spoken with the head of security—all the busy work—and I've come to the decision that it would be beneficial for you to use the machine, partake in a...Condall, what's that they're calling it?"

"*4D-Trip*, My Lord," Condall replies with a courteous bow.

"That's the one," Solstus shouts, cheeks pinkening, presumably from the exertion of such thunderous voice projection. "Safety won't be an issue; we'll take every precaution in the book, bring in the most highly-skilled engineers, programmers, technicians, what-have-you, and they'll prep the thing for you. Still, when push comes to shove, we can't force you to do it. It's your choice. However," he clears his throat, "we don't need a unanimous decision. Law states, we only need nine of you to still have a legitimate jury. So, if a minimum of nine says yay, we're rolling. Do be aware that, in the case of nine *yeses*, any *no's* will forfeit their place on the primary jury and be reassigned as alternates, which'll mean relocating to the alternate jurors' accommodation." He arches his brows, insinuating that alternates don't live like primaries. "Point is, more important than having twelve jurors at the time of deliberation is having nine equally informed jurors. That means all evidence seen, heard, read, witnessed, *and experienced*."

He claps his hands again like it's a habit he's developed to keep people alert and attentive. A periodical reminder to look alive. An effort wasted on us. Our undivided attention was his before he even walked through the door. Property of the Red Judge.

“As you know, the NeuroPath currently has seven User-Links. Now, should we go forward with the *4D-Trip*, we’d need to have a minimum of two more built, potentially up to six in the case of unanimous involvement. And no—I haven’t got my maths wrong,” he looks around the room, “we’ve told the engineers that it could be up to six so Dr Eto can go with you as an impartial observer, someone who’s studied the NeuroPath and used it himself, but wasn’t involved with the project before the trial. Our own expert-eyes, if you will, able to pick up on anything that may be amiss—not that anything will be. We’ll have ensured that everything’s safe as safe can be.”

CLAP-CLAP-CLAP-CLAP-CLAP. He really captures the air in those claps. A mastered technique. Makes them sound like gunshots.

“Now, we’re going to give you time to think on it, of course, discuss it amongst yourselves. However, time is tight. We’ll need to inform the engineers how many additional User-Links need assembling as soon as possible, so we’ll need your decision by the end of the day. 6pm, let’s say. That gives you ...” Solstus shakes away the sleeve of his robe and looks at his watch, “‘bout seven and a half hours. Hell, that’s enough time to sleep on it.” He chortles, prompting Condall into a bootlicking fit of laughter.

“Right, I’ll leave you to it. But before I go, are there any questions?”

A blitzkrieg descends upon Solstus. It throws him, and his eyes grow wide. *Jurors with questions?! Opinions? Thoughts? Must be a faulty batch, we’ll need to get in touch with the factory...* It’s all a bit cartoonish. I want to ask how much time a 4D-Trip would extend our sequestration by, but it would just be added noise at this point. I glance over at Max. He’s not joining in either, just raises his eyebrows and grins, gives me a face that says, *well he’s got my vote.*

“Jurors—please—I...”

Solstus flings Condall a panicked look that I imagine men in the 1950s gave their wives every Saturday, out in the garden, kids closing in on them. *What do I do, Betty? What do they want? What's 'playing?' Please, Betty, I'm scared.*

Condall sees his moment, raising his chin with pride, prancing to Solstus's rescue. "Excuuuuse me," he cries, slamming his hands on the table, glaring all the way around. *The next person to speak out of turn will earn themselves a smacked-bottom, is that clear?*

He doesn't actually say that. But I see it in his eyes. He does manage to shut everyone up though. Except for Jasper, but that can hardly be held against him.

"I don't like it," Jasper growls. "Say we agree to it, what sorta disclosure you gonna expect us to sign? That we can't sue the court if our brains come out funny? If we come out shooting MPs, what then, huh? Death penalties all around? What rights 'ave we got? Where's *our* legal representation?"

Did Jasper just make a valuable point? A four-leaf clover in a field of weeds?

"Good questions, very good," says Solstus, rubbing his hands like he wasn't expecting to have to freestyle, "of course, if each of you wishes to consult your own legal representation, you have that right. I was thinking that, once we've drawn up a draft of the disclosures, we could all sit down together and discuss it before drawing up a finalised form. That would be in the next few days should you agree to go ahead."

"What about location?" asks Albert. "Will you bring the NeuroPath here?"

"Not possible," Solstus replies, "certainly not in the time we've been allotted, which is two weeks to make all the arrangements. We'd need to relocate you to a new secure accommodation in Edenbridge for the three days you would use the NeuroPath—four Primary-Users per day, assuming we have maximum participation. The NeuroPath is too big and expensive and technologically intricate for us to start moving it about or

attempting to re-create it. Certainly not in two weeks..." he frowns and turns to Condall.

"Are there not photos of it in the Bundle?"

Condall's lip quivers as he tries to remember.

"Nope," says Max, rocking in his chair.

"Get them some photos," Solstus says, and Condall nods exuberantly. Turning back to us, "we'd be using the original NeuroPath Project location. The Hexton World Labs Centre in Edenbridge."

There are a few more questions, but it seems the bulk of people's queries were covered in the first two and the interrogation simmers down. Solstus goes, and after ferociously flipping through the nearest Bundle, Condall also leaves, presumably to hire a professional photographer with a HyPrix-XL-HD camera to get us photos of the NeuroPath.

And once again, we were twelve.

23.

The decision results in eleven *yeses*, one *no*. Jasper kept saying things like "I don't like it. Don't trust the thing," but when it came down to it, said, "of course, I'm gonna bloody do it—can you imagine the material I'll get outta' this? Sharpest Tool'll be the hottest show on radio."

Portia's the *no*. She wants to be an alternate. They're only partially sequestered, and she misses her family. When she says this, I glance at Rosalie, wondering if she misses her family too. After all, it's the first thing she mentioned when introducing herself, but her expression remains perfectly unaffected.

When Solstus announces that our newly-instated eleven-member jury will be using the NeuroPath, Flint is a stone gargoyle, revealing nothing. From the dock, Jacob salutes us with his free hand. When the court is dismissed, Solstus puts on his plague mask and leaves, but the rest of us have to wait while the guards retrieve Jacob and walk him out. As they pass the jury box, Jacob looks over, silver eyes smiling.

“Safe travels,” he says and gets a shove from the guard.

HEXTON LABS



24.

Two weeks trapped in the Gold Olympus is purgatory within purgatory (within purgatory, within purg...you get it). A hotbox for stir-crazies. Drawn out days, endless and empty. We grow tired of each other's company. Too much uninterrupted time together. Too much of the same, always the same. Needless bickering and snide comments, loss of perspective, obsessing over minute case details, blowing things out of proportion. Anything to skew the boredom.

The first Friday we watch *Toy Story* twice, back-to-back, after Pierce Pierson, prat-extraordinaire, brings two of the same DVD instead of one being *Toy Story 2*. We spend the evening in hot debate over the psychological states of Buzz and Woody. Are they showing signs of schizophrenia? Dissociation? Any of the other buzz-words we can regurgitate from the various psych evaluations in evidence? *Pause that bit, rewind, how is that not a delusion of persecution? What about Woody's unwarranted suspicion? Buzz's disorganised reality? Where did all his programmed memories of Star Command come from? That's mind-control.*

Saturday morning a tailor comes and takes everyone's measurements. No one can tell us why, but he has an order signed by Solstus that's validated by the security team, so we let him take them. It gives us something to talk about for the rest of the day and

our consensus is that we're getting new juror uniforms because the press has become too familiar with Death.

Dr Eto arrives the following Monday to stay at the hotel for the remainder of the week and meet with us individually, alongside Muffin, the court psychologist. Supposedly, the sessions are to give us the opportunity to discuss the 4D-Trip in confidence, voice any concerns we may have, but I know a psych evaluation when I'm scheduled for one. They proceed in juror order, and all end up lasting longer than the hour designated, so three boring days pass before it's my turn. I don't think I've ever been so up for a psych exam. It's all relative, right? It's exciting compared to an afternoon of counting Twinings tea packets.

Dr Eto's set up in the fifteenth-floor conference room. When I go in, he's scribbling in a notepad as Muffin looks over his shoulder. He looks up when he hears me and smiles.

"Adaline," he says with convincing enthusiasm like he's actually interested in talking to me. He motions to the cluster of armchairs that he's squashed into the room. "The table's so impersonal," he explains, "makes it feel like an interview."

I sit down in a fancy blue recliner, eyeing Muffin, who's turned around, loudly blowing his potato nose into a tissue. When he turns back, it's an unhappy pink colour.

"Adaline's one of the ones that come to see me," he says, sniffing obtusely. He hands Dr Eto a chart.

Dr Eto peruses it, and I stare at Muffin, wondering why the man is still sniffing if he's just blown his nose.

"Adernal 20mg, three times daily," Dr Eto reads. "Amphexedrine 5 or 10mg up to four times daily, as needed."

"I don't usually need the full dose," I say. "It just depends on what's required of me that day."

Why do I always feel the need to explain myself?

Oh, right. Because of the looks I get when someone finds out that the medication I'm prescribed for my mental health is a stimulant. *You know Adernal is basically meth, right? Basically? Or is?* Because in the world of molecular compounds, *basically* is the difference between water and hydrogen peroxide.

Dr Eto waves his arm. "No, no, these dosages all look fine. In these cases, the patient tends to be the best assessor of their needs anyway." He pauses, glancing down at my chart again. "Adernal and Amphetedrine..." There's a hint of surprise in his voice. "It's just, I thought they stopped offering these in the UK, that it's only generic Vyvadol prescribed to treat ADHD now."

"That's NHS," Muffin says, reaching for another tissue.

"You don't use the National Health Service?" Dr Eto asks me.

I shake my head. "Not since they changed to the single option of generic Vyvadol. I had to go private. I've been on Adernal since I was sixteen, and Amphetedrine since I was twenty-three. That was after *years* of trial and error to find the right medication and dosage combination."

Dr Eto's nodding. "Of course, of course."

"When the switch happened, three years ago, I think" (Muffin nods) "I tried generic Vyvadol for a month, but it was horrible. I got headaches and nausea, and the focus felt...I don't know...itchy... frantic. It just didn't work for me." I shrug apologetically.

Dr Eto's still nodding. "I've had many patients describe similar sensations with Vyvadol. Like creepy crawlies up and down your legs and static in your head."

"Yes, exactly!" I say, welling with gratitude and love for Dr Eto. For hearing me.

“Well, as with all mental health treatments, what works for some, won’t work for others.” He writes in his notes. “So, you were forced to go private to retain your treatment regime? And for this dosage of Adernal, you must pay a fortune.”

I nod. “I couldn’t afford the house share I’d been in for five years anymore, so I moved back in with my parents last year. At twenty-eight. Still, it’s better than feeling useless and frustrated all the time. And at least I’ve got parents who’ll have me.”

Dr Eto sighs, glancing at Muffin. “It’s ridiculous, this one-drug-fits-all approach to mental health care. The human brain is the most complex instrument in existence. It’s not a bone; it’s never simply broken. To assume a single medication can address all strains of mental illness is...well, irresponsible. We’re dealing with a wide spectrum here...” He sighs. “I’ve digressed.”

“Isn’t the US entirely private healthcare now?” I ask, remembering that he’s from the University of California.

“Ah, the United States should not be anyone’s healthcare model. One of the many reasons California seceded.”

I suddenly feel stupid.

Dr Eto smiles. “Don’t worry. Sometimes I can’t quite believe it either, even after two years as our own republic.”

“The division of Texas was ratified not too long ago, yes?” Muffin says, peering out the window.

“In December. But I fear we’ve digressed again. All I was saying is that it’s disappointing to see a universal healthcare system stretched so thin, people are forced into a private sector they cannot afford. That they have to move out of their homes for.”

He gestures to me.

“It’s the TFP selling off portions of the NHS to private companies. The highest bidder,” Muffin says, sniffing, this time with disapproval. “Private companies bought out so much of the public sector, they’ve almost toppled the NHS. It’s understaffed, underfunded. But what do they care? Their pockets are full. And then, *then* they have the audacity to pass the one-generic-fits-all legislation, posturing that it’s to *benefit* the NHS, to make medications cheaper for patients. But what it really does—and they know this, full-well—it pushes patients into the private sector. One drug never fits all, and for those who don’t fit...well, Adaline’ll tell you. They’re forced to go private, pay three times as much. Who benefits? I’ll tell you. Private companies, pharmaceuticals, TFP. Not the public. Never the public. An absolute scandal if you ask me, but who’s asking NHS doctors anymore?”

Dr Eto pats Muffin’s hand. “Healthcare, mental health care, all of it should be treated as a human right, not merely declared as such.” He shakes his head a final time, then his eyes are on me. “To bring us back to topic, Adaline, how do you feel about the NeuroPath? Any questions? Concerns?”

“Should I take my meds on those days?”

“Yes, absolutely,” he says. “Take them as you normally would.” He thinks for a moment, then leans forward. “The day you’re scheduled to be a Primary-User, might I propose something that could prove rather interesting? An experiment, if you will?”

I nod, and Dr Eto checks his charts. “It looks like you’re the second Primary-User on the final day. Perhaps, Ms Panagopoulos won’t mind changing places with you so you can go first. Then, you could wait to take your dose of Adernal until moments before you connect to the machine. That way, when we enter your Imaginal Plane, we can witness the manifestation of your mind as it is in its untreated ADHD state, and then, what I’m thinking is, as the medication is absorbed, we’ll actually be able to see the changes to

your neurological processes in the nature of the Plane. It's just a theory, but could turn out to be quite an experience, don't you think?"

"I do think," I agree, nodding fervently.

"It is what the machine was created for, after all," Dr Eto adds.

"Supposedly," sniffs Muffin.

25.

The next morning, Condall struts into the common area waving his clipboard. "Your accommodation in Edenbridge has been secured," he announces, "and I bring updates on the lab preparations."

We gather around the table, air thickening with eagerness, apprehension, questions, concerns, restlessness. An excessive and sickly cocktail.

"The moment you've all been waiting for, I see," Condall says, smirking and taking his time organising the papers.

It crosses my mind that Condall may have had this information before now and chose to hold off telling us, all for the lusciousness of this moment, of feeling like a proper somebody. Whatever he felt, he'd better get on with it. Impatience outnumbered him eleven to one.

"The seven existing User-Links have been successfully tested," he begins, sensing his moment waning. "The information-security team and lab technicians each performed security sweeps and approved the NeuroPath's computer system and programming as secure. The security team even had the programme-lady take a look. You know, the witness..."

"Ratna Amin," Callum offers, biting into a buttered roll.

This unexpected recollection of detail earns him a few impressed looks, but it's short-lived.

"What?" he says, shrugging. "I never forget the name of a pretty face. Not 'til the morning after." He gives us a wink as he and Jasper devolve into meaty sniggers.

Condall stays taut. "All six new User-Links are assembled; three have been successfully attached to the main computer system. So, User-Links appear to be on schedule."

He clears his throat, a segue into the next matter of business. "A small team of court-selected technicians have been assembled, led by..." He consults his papers. "Dr Mina Weltz from the P.R. Johnson Neuroscience Centre in Dortmund...and...let's see...Dr Michael Fern from the Layne Lawrence Institute of Neurotechnology. They'll give you the most up-to-date, accurate briefings next Monday, so best to save any questions for them."

Condall eyes Carney, who's desperately waving his hand in the air.

"Just wondered if these machines could have any sorta interaction with *aloo-mini-yoom* materials like m'leg here." Carney brings his knee out from the table and gives it a pat.

"As I said, the technicians are the ones to ask about that. All I know is what's in these reports," Condall replies.

"And you're sure there's nothing about Carney's leg in there?" Albert asks.

"Only that leg-related questions should be directed to a technician."

"Unbelievable," Albert sighs, shaking his head at Carney, who nods in concurrence.

"And our accommodation?" Max asks.

"I think you're going to like this," says Condall.

"Is it Hever Castle?"

Condall deflates. “How did you know?”

“It’s Edenbridge, innit? Narrows it down a bit.”

There’s a squeal from Spirella. “A castle! We’re staying in a castle!”

“Well, no, not exactly. It’s the accommodation *just behind* the castle.” Condall makes a sweeping gesture with his hands, one over the other, indicating how close *just behind* really is. Spirella smirks.

“So...not *in* a castle, *just behind* it,” she repeats, imitating Condall’s gesture.

Condall’s lips tighten, fist clenched, papers crunched. “That’s right,” he says slowly, “not *in* the castle. *Just behind* it.” He demonstrates again, and I can see Spirella struggling not to laugh.

“Would’ve been nice to stay in a castle though, wouldn’t it?” she says to the rest of us.

“The castle is a museum!” Condall snaps, stamping his foot. “If you want to sleep on a three-hundred-year-old-bed frame, be my guest!” He gathers his papers and file-folder in a huff and abruptly leaves.

Spirella releases a half-hearted laugh. “God, I’m so bored.”

26.

We’re transported to Hever Castle in two black vans with no windows. It makes me feel like a secret. Black cloak, gloves, mask, and now, black windowless van. The only clue that we’ve reached the grounds is when the van slows, crunching over the gravelly terrain. We barely get a look before we’re whisked into the Astor Wing and shown straight to our assigned rooms. Condall flutters behind us, chanting, *drop your bags, meet back here, fifteen minutes, go, go!*

“You can enjoy the place tomorrow morning,” he tells us once we’re back in the vans heading to Hexton Labs. “Take a guard with you, go for a walk. I hear the gardens are quite picturesque.”

“More picturesque than a walk through your brain?” Callum asks.

“Certainly, *your* brain,” says Albert.

Condall sighs burdensomely, turning to look out the window and frowning when it isn’t there.

From outside, Hexton Labs looks like a rundown warehouse, not somewhere containing the world’s most advanced neurotechnology. It’s in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by fir tree forests and frosty farmland, a sight broken only by the road we came on and the iron gate encircling the area. The gate is strangely low to the ground for what I imagine must be a security measure, and I wonder if there’s something more to it. Maybe it shoots laser beams at intruders or electrocutes anything flying over it.

The door of the lab opens, and a greying man in a white coat steps out.

“Michael Fern,” he says, greeting us with a smile. “Welcome to Hexton Labs.”

He motions for us to follow him inside. “Chilly out there,” he says, rubbing his hands together for effect.

“Chilly in here,” says Albert.

“Minus two outside and this lot have the bloody aircon on,” Carney grumbles.

“Keeps the mind ripe like fruit in a fridge,” says Dr Fern merrily.

The inside of Hexton World Labs is far more impressive than the outside, like a spaceship disguised as a decrepit factory. Atticus enquires about the contrast between exterior and interior, and Fern explains that the building was used as a rice mill in the 1980s and hadn’t been knocked down or used since.

“The NeuroPath Project wasn’t awarded any government funding or research grants because it seemed too outlandish in the proposals. Dr Lazarus had to seek funding elsewhere.” He leads us through a sliding glass door into a room of pristine white lab tables and egg-shaped chairs that hover in the air by themselves.

“Sit anywhere,” he says, moving to the front of the room. I sit in an egg chair, and it bounces slightly under my weight before stiffening into place in the air.

“Eventually, the MIND Initiative offered supplemental funding,” Fern continues, “Mental Innovations through Neurotechnology Development. Unfortunately, they’re not a large enough organisation to support such an expensive project on their own. Honestly, the NeuroPath might have never been if the proposal hadn’t found its way to Hexton Labs.”

I squirm in the chair, trying to make it bounce again, but it might as well be nailed to the floor.

“The NeuroPath Project was rejected by countless organisations, but for whatever reason, Hexton Labs was interested. It was a done deal at that point. The project had all the money it was ever going to need.”

Dr Fern stands on his toes, peering out at the laboratory’s main floor through the glass doors. “Anyway,” he continues, “to jump right in, I’ll be happy to answer any questions—ah, here’s Dr Weltz.”

He motions to a staunch woman with a lion’s mane of yellow curls pushing a trolley toward the room. On the trolley is a manikin wearing an impressive bodysuit made of thick, rubbery material, navy blue and black, with a hard-shelled chest plate and scattered sockets, presumably for some type of wire attachments.

“Before we get to questions, we’ll just give you a basic briefing on the suits.”

Dr Weltz takes over, motioning to the manikin.

“These are protective suits you’ll wear when connected to the NeuroPath,” she tells us in a German accent.

“Protective from what?” Jasper shouts.

“Give me a chance, and I’ll tell you,” Dr Weltz replies, and I decide that I like her.

“The 4D NeuroPath is essentially a three-in-one system: Neurotransmission Scanner, Mental Topography Simulator, and Inter-Dimensional Projector. We use mostly magnetic resonance imaging for scanning and mind-mapping, but there will be instances of radiation exposure. That’s why we have protective apparel. Each suit has been designed by the measurements you provided, so sizing should be exact. They are highly advanced technologically. Four of the wires from the head-cap attach to these ports here,” she motions to sockets on each shoulder and thigh, “and from the head-cap, the suit detects the brain’s motion emissions and blocks the body from receiving them. Essentially, it works like a reverse-motion sensor suit to give the physical body the same stillness experienced when sleeping—so, when you’re walking or running around in a dream, the prefrontal cortex is in sleep mode, preventing your body from physically acting out these movements. Since you’ll actually be semi-conscious when linked to the NeuroPath, that part of your brain will be awake, hence, the need for the suits. You can move about your Imaginal Planes as you please and the suit will keep your physical body still.”

She moves aside, and Fern retakes the floor. “We’ll take you over to the NeuroPath Annexe in a minute, get you acquainted with the machines. But first, I’m sure you’ve got hundreds of questions, and that’s what I’m here for.” He rubs his hands eagerly. “Lay ‘em on me.”

When no one says anything, his grin falters. Seconds later it’s back, and he says, “right then, let’s introduce you to the NeuroPath.”

27.

Dr Fern leads us across the main floor to two pristine white doors on the other side of the laboratory. He opens a keypad, types in a code, and the doors slide open revealing a control centre packed with high-tech equipment. HyPrix-Millenia computers. HyPrix-Xenith tablets. Those new Slimscreen XD monitors that float in the air. HexPort lapscreens. And a plethora of stuff I've never seen before. There's a collective *oooo* as we step inside, eyes widening at each spectacular device.

Fern goes over to one of the translucent counter tops and draws a pattern on it with his finger. A luminescent blue hologram appears, a brain rotating like a showcased sports car. He immediately waves a hand through it, and it vanishes.

"Still getting to know my way around," he explains, chuckling. He tries another pattern, and a new hologram materialises. A chromatic Tesseract.

"That's the one," he says, moving it about like a 4D Rubik's Cube until it bursts into hundreds of specks and pours downward into oblivion like shimmering sand. "A fan of theatrics, Dr Lazarus," Fern adds with a laugh.

There's a loud click, and one of the walls splits down the middle and spreads apart, unveiling another room behind a transparent partition. Inside, twelve white bed-chairs are lined up facing us. Blue lights illuminate their surfaces like screensavers. Retro arcade games. A laser shooting back and forth, bouncing off the chair's edges: Snake. Neon blocks sliding down the chair's length, fitting together, forming a wall: Tetris. Flashing popcorns, floating, bursting: Asteroids. Pacman. Frogger. Hexxagon.

Holograms hover above them. Another brain. A weird wormhole-doughnut-shape. A whirling clock. And more I don't recognise. Symbols, numbers, mathematical formulas. The back wall of the room is a giant super-computer made up of lots of little screens

that light up with glowing charts, figures, x-ray images, and symbols resembling hieroglyphs.

Each bed has a curved facial panel extending over it, connected by a thin, silver arm from behind the headrest. Above the headrests are chrome helmets, all twelve attached to the super-computer and each other by a silver cord.

Fern has us gather in front of the partition. “The way the NeuroPath works is each User positions themselves on a blue-light bench and a technician secures the helmets. Once all Users are secure, the technicians exit and the Annexe is locked. Users indicate when they’re ready, and the technicians activate the pre-approved programme, launching the 4D-Trip. Lucidity imaging panels lower,” he motions to the facial panels, “and the Users fall into a semi-conscious state. Once this stage is complete, the User’s conscious brain activity is transferred into a synthetically simulated space which Dr Lazarus calls the Collective Plane. It’s a virtual reality he designed using the computer system.” He motions to the back of the room. “The Collective Plane acts as an anchor, a bridge between dimensions. A safety precaution, if you will. If at any point a User wishes to leave the programme, they type the exit code into their wrist-screens, and their mental activity is re-directed to the Collective Plane.”

Fern turns to us eagerly. “There must be questions this time.” His face brightens when a single hand goes up. “Yes! Mr...?”

“Carney, never Conor. I wanna’ ask you ‘bout *aloo-mini-yoom* metal...”

28.

After lunch, we're sent to private rooms so Dr Weltz can help us into our protective suits. Mine is hanging on a railing when I go in, and I move closer to examine it.

"You may touch," Dr Weltz says, closing the door behind her, "after all, you'll wear in a minute."

I run my fingers down the ridges on the right arm. The material is thick and heavy like a car tire. I'm expecting it to be hot and restricting, but once I slip into it and Dr Weltz connects it up at the back, it's so light I feel naked.

Dr Weltz hums as she hooks up cords and wires to the small round panels lining my calf. I stare at a calendar on the wall in front. It's from August 2028, a red desert with leafless white-barked trees climbing out of windswept dunes.

"That is no-where," Dr Weltz says, not taking her eyes from her task.

"It must be somewhere," I reply with a half-hearted smile because I hate small talk.

"Yes, that is the Namib Desert," she says. "It gave him inspiration for no-where."

"Gave who? What's no-where?"

"Lazarus. No-Where is Collective Plane they use for your programme. He designed three styles of Collective Plane before...well," she nods her head as if to say, *you know*.

"No-Where, Any-Place, and Other-Sphere."

I look back at the copper sands on the calendar, and Dr Weltz nods.

"You lot will get No-Where."

Once we're all suited up and back in the NeuroPath Annexe, we decide that turn order will be according to our juror number, so the four Primary-Users today are Rosalie, Arlo, Carney, and Petrus. The technicians attach our wires, cover our hair with

plastic caps, help us situate our helmets, then file out of the Annexe. There's a click as the doors lock behind them and they join Weltz and Fern on the other side of the partition.

And once again, we were twelve.

Not the same twelve, but twelve all the same.

"Alright Users, we'll go ahead and get started," says Dr Fern, speaking into a microphone on his HyPrix-Millenia and his voice reaches us in the Annexe. "We're going to dim the lights now to reduce the amount of interference received by your retinas. If you would, keep your eyes open and looking straight ahead."

The lights go out, and the technicians become shadowy outlines. There's a click above me, followed by a shifting.

"Facial panels lowering. Eyes straight ahead."

I focus on the back wall of the control centre where a digital clock glows green. 13:49:37. I watch the seconds. 41, 42, 43, 44. Five seconds from 13:50 and the numbers disappear behind the facial panel. It locks into position, and I stare into grey nothingness.

This is really happening.

A wave of sickness washes over me. I force myself to concentrate on something else. Anything else.

"We're going to do a countdown from ten now. On one, the programme will activate and redirect your brains' signals to the Collective Plane. Everybody ready? I need to see everyone's thumbs—okay, great. Here we go."

Ten... Nine... Eight...

The helmet feels cool against my forehead. The chair makes me feel weightless. It's complete comfort, as though contoured for my body exactly.

Seven... Six...

This must be the kind of chair that cushions one percenter bottoms while they receive French manicures and anti-wrinkle laser treatments. Minus the metal helmet and wire-tentacles. I can't begin to imagine how much a chair like this would cost for purely recreational purposes. A la' carte. NeuroPath sold separately.

Five... Four...

The facial panel illuminates. Vertical red lines. A barcode of laser beams. Twinging, flickering, widening, thinning. Bright, but not blinding.

Three... Two....

Fern's voice grows distant. The barcode lines fill. Solid red, then blue, then fading. A flash of white.

One.

PART II.

*And for to make yow the moore mury,
I wol myselven goodly with yow ryde,
Right at myn owene cost, and be youre gyde*

The Canterbury Tales, l. 802-804



DAY ONE



1.

*Birds flying high, you know how I feel
Sun in the sky, you know how I feel*

A floor beneath my feet. Solid. Moving upwards.

*It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life for me*

I can't see, but I can hear. Nina Simone. Her melodic crooning is a comfort in the blind unknown. A familiar song. An anchor to my own reality.

*And this old world
Is a new world
And a bold world for me*

Sight. An invisible curtain swept back. There it is.
No-Where.

And I'm feeling good.



Collective Plane, a.k.a,

No-Where

The desert from the calendar. A vast blend of orange and yellow and sunset gold. It's both empty and full. Dunes run along the horizon. Leafless trees claw out of the sand. Classical-style ruins scatter across the flatness like garnishes. Crumbling marble columns and broken entablature. Except for one. A stone wall. Medieval-looking. A fractured Norman fortress. Or a face from Easter Island.

I shut my eyes and re-open them. Look again.

Norman fortress.

Wait, no. Face.

A big stone face, chin wedged in the sand.

It could be both. It couldn't be both. Could it?

I breathe in, air filling my lungs, hot and dry and fresh.

Wait. Air?

I concentrate on my chest, expanding, receding, the same rhythmic way it usually does. What am I breathing? It feels like air. But it isn't air.

Is it?

I step further into the vastness and sense a door shut behind me. I'm suddenly overwhelmed. A feeling that comes in the form of a word.

Alone.

I'm completely alone here. There's nothing else. Nothing but empty tranquillity. Nothing but gaping unknown. Nothing but anything—or everything—or nothing. Nothing but nothing. No, everything. Paradoxes and calm chaos. Chaotic calm. And a chair.

A few yards to my right is an OfficeCloud 6000. Clean and new. Dazzling against the cloudy desert air.

Except, it's beyond that. Transcended. Levelled-up.

It's an OfficeCloud 7000.

I step toward it and sand crunches under my shoes. I look down. Black flats. The ones I wear in Court. Instead of the protective suit, I'm wearing black leggings and a jumper, the clothes I put on this morning in...real life? What was the term Jacob used?

"The Physical."

I turn and there he is. Jacob Lazarus in a white lab coat. It looks strangely familiar on him and accentuates his eyes in a way that's seraphic. *Silver*. Like a silver bullet, the most effective weapon against monsters. Monsters can't touch silver. *White*. Angels wear white. Brides. Saints. Represents purity, perfection, beatitude; a sign of surrender, parley, peace. White means innocence. It means Imelda King knows what she's doing when her client wears a white prison uniform in Court.

I stare at him. "Did you just read my mind?"

"Oh, but Adaline Nora Tour, age twenty-eight—you are your mind. And so am I."

"What'n the copper-cockhole is he doing here?" shouts Carney, crunching over on my left.

I feel the word *alone* leave me, evaporate away. It rhymes with *Unknown*.

Unknown, Shown, Overthrown, Radiotelephone.

My hands go to my ears. Jabbering thoughts whirl around me.

"You know what this looks like, don't you?" Carney continues, prodding at Lazarus.

"*Conspiracy*. You'n'the system in cahoots. Bet they paid millions for this thing," he circles his finger, "and what? We're the chumps you tricked into volunteering for mind-control? You think you're—*Jesus fucking Christ*, what's with the laughing track?" Carney swats

his hand around his head. "Tell me you hear this. It's like a bloody *Friends* episode in here. Nothing's funny," his voice steadily rises, "*NOTHING'S BLOODY FUNNY!*"

Unknown. It rhymes with *Zone*.

Zone, Bemoan, Dethrone, Hydrocortisone.

"Will it stop?" I ask Lazarus.

He shrugs. "It will when you do."

"When I do what?"

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

"What you're doing."

I stare at him. He smiles.

"And *you*." Lazarus turns to Carney, clasping his hands. "What a fantastic imagination you have. I see you brought something with you."

Carney's cradling a glossy model ship with dark green sails.

"Oh right, found it back there, nose pokin' outta' the ground. Look at 'er." He holds it up, beaming. "Ain't she a beaut? Sure ain't somethin' that belongs buried in sand, I tell yeh—*quit that laughing or I'll—*"

"How interesting, Conor Colan Carney, age sixty-nine. Do you collect model ships in the Physical?"

Carney's about to answer but catches himself. He crinkles his face and grunts instead. "Nuh-uh," he says, pressing the ship to his chest, wagging a finger, "don't you try'n psychoanalyse me, Carl Jugular—"

"I believe it's pronounced *yungular*," Lazarus responds, grinning.

Carney pauses, then grunts again. "Don't change the subject. You ain't gettin' outta' this one. And I don't like all that info you got on me either. What's that about?"

Lazarus circles him, round and round, saying, "*I am your mind. I am your mind. I am your mind.*"

This is a version of Lazarus I did not see in the courtroom.

"Dr Lazarus?" Atticus approaches from the same direction as Carney. I look over his shoulder to see where he came from but there's only desert.

"How?" Atticus continues, glancing at Carney and me. "He's not even connected."

"I don't need to be connected, Atticus Leeroy Venderson, age sixty-three," Lazarus replies. "I only need *you* to be connected."

"I knew it!" Carney cries.

"Right, you did, ole' boy," Jasper shouts, another entrance from nowhere. He gives Carney a firm slap on the back. It's how I imagine a Yankees baseball coach claps his players on a good home run. "Needn't bother with the rest of this little experiment. I think we can say with certainty that this here's a guilty man."

"That's premature," Atticus says as Lazarus stands behind him making exaggerated faces of shock. "We should see what Dr Eto says."

"You think I wanna' wait for some government-hired stooge and his psycho mumbo-jumbo to come and tell us everything's fine? All according to protocol. *Let us jump straight into your brains now.*"

"Where is our expert chaperone, anyway?" Callum asks, sidling up beside Jasper, again from nowhere.

I suppose coming into No-Where from out of nowhere makes a certain amount of sense. Maybe perfect sense. Or no sense. *Sense*. Rhymes with *Dense*.

Dense, Commence, Common-sen...

I push the words away, literally push out with my hands. It feels like moving thick, heavy air as though the words are a form swirling around me.

Common-sense. Rhymes with nonsen—

Push.

I check the others for weird looks—I am pushing away air, after all—but there are none. Likely, everyone’s dealing with their own brain issues.

“You know,” says Albert, suddenly on my right, “legend has it that Dr Eto appears if you say his name three times.”

“Or just the one,” Dr Eto says, strolling up next to him. Max, Arlo, and Spirella are close behind.

“Ah, Dr Eto, just in time,” Albert says. “Club Conspiracy-Theory is about to kick off. Today’s topic is *uninvited guests on your trip to the desert*. Is the government inside your brain? Have they been there all along? What do Space-Heads know that we don’t?”

Jasper’s nodding vehemently, pointing at Albert. “This one gets it. We gotta’ get you on Sharpest Tool. My base’ll love this.”

“Another thing,” Albert says, disregarding Jasper, “my brain seems to be going through a system overload. I’ve got the first paragraph of *David Copperfield* on repeat. Think I read two chapters in sixth form. Why my brain kept that sitting on a storage shelf...”

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life...

Do I have that stored on a brain-shelf too? Or can I hear...no, wait...*feel*...can I *feel* Albert’s thoughts? I look over at him, and he shrugs.

Dr Eto approaches Lazarus and peers into his face. “He must be an anchor.”

“An anchor,” Lazarus repeats like he’s reading a spooky book to children.

“You,” Dr Eto says, pointing at Spirella, “what’s in your hand? Flowers?”

Spirella holds up a spherical bouquet. "It was in the sand. Not growing...just connected in this ball shape."

Dr Eto glances at Lazarus who responds with overplayed interest.

"Forgive me for putting you on the spot," says Dr Eto, "but do you have any particular associations with flowers or bouquets? Flower-picking? Something related to that thing in the Physical?"

Spirella looks down at the flower ball. "Wigs," she says.

Callum smirks. "Not what he asked, Spirelly."

Spirella flips her head over, twists her lavender locks into a knot, and stuffs them into the flowers. When she straightens up, she has a flowery afro.

"Flora Fro," she says, twirling so we can better admire it. Albert and Arlo let their hands hover like they want to touch it.

"Go on, then." She bends forward. "It's one of my design projects. A wig collection that uses mediums other than hair. It's called Wig Haus."

"Good, yes. And you?" Dr Eto points at Petrus. "What've you got?"

Petrus holds up a tube of paper. He unrolls it, and a simulation shoots out. A cityscape with a jagged skyscraper horizon and floating roads looped around like planetary rings.

"What is it?" Dr Eto asks, edging closer. "Any connection to the Physical?"

Petrus fiddles with the corner. "Possibly my job? Architect...city planner..."

"Magnificent," Dr Eto says, examining the tiny city. "Look at the detail."

He straightens back up and casts us a glance. "I'm going to guess that each of you spotted something noteworthy once your mind completed its connection with the Collective Plane. Something relevant to you or your life in the Physical."

So that was *my* OfficeCloud 7000. I glance around for it, but it's gone.

The others are nodding, except for Jasper, who's shouting about seeing nothing but an old telly. "Like something straight outta' 1975, screen all smashed in, complete piece of junk. What's that got to do with me?" He folds his arms.

"But is that not the purpose of this 4D-Trip?" says Lazarus. "*Revelation.*" He wiggles his fingers like the word is magic.

Jasper looks furiously at Dr Eto. "Explain to me again what this jackass is doing here? What's a bloody anchor?"

"Right, an anchor. Each of you saw something, an item, somehow associated with you, yes? These are manifestations each of you created upon connection to the Collective Plane. It doesn't mean much other than the presence of each individual mind in this Plane. Jacob, however," he turns to Lazarus, "is not a bodily manifestation of the real Jacob's mind, the way we all are, but rather a manifestation of your collective minds. He's what you all have in common, the result of all your minds co-existing together in this Plane. Jacob spoke about it on the stand. Remember the stuff about the Copycat States? First-time Primary-Users all experienced a false reality when they initially entered their Imaginal Plane. And then Jacob suggested that the person Buryakov and Lang thought was him may actually have been a variant of the Copycat State, a collective creation in the likeness of someone familiar to them. An *anchor.*" He looks around hopefully. "I mean, I'm just repeating what you've already heard. Jacob called it an anchor because it anchors you all together. A shared familiarity..."

"Rings a bell," says Carney and there are a few half-hearted nods.

Dr Eto forces a smile. "Well, if you're ever not sure about something that's said on the stand, please do ask me. It's why I'm there." He motions to Lazarus. "Basically, this character is something your minds have created together. That is if Jacob's theory is correct."

“And true,” Lazarus adds, grinning.

“That’s for the jury to decide,” Dr Eto says. “I’ll give my opinion if asked.”

“What’s your opinion?” Albert asks.

“From the perspective of neuropsychology, it’s a sound theory. From a personal perspective, based on the evidence I’ve seen here so far, the significant items each of you found, it’s the most likely explanation. But, of course, we’re here to investigate. Minds open.”

“Yes, minds open,” Lazarus says, weaving through us. “Open wide.”

“If we made him up, can’t we get him to piss off?” Jasper growls.

Lazarus grins. “Sorry friend, but yours ain’t the only brain on the storytelling-train. Plus, this is my Plane. Well, *Jacob’s* plane. That makes me the host.”

Dr Eto turns to us. “Try to dissociate this Jacob from the real Jacob. As I said, it’s likely a concoction of the way each of you currently views the defendant. In any case, you’ve got to stay objective. Evidence-based conclusions. As it stands, there’s more evidence in favour of the Copycat theory than any other, so I’d advise against forming opinions about the defendant based on the behaviour of this version unless you have sufficient evidence to do so. In fact...” he pauses, “let’s not call him Jacob. We need to remember that he’s a manifestation in a Jacob costume.”

“You could call me Condall,” Lazarus offers.

“I don’t think it should be a name at all. Let’s simply call him ‘the host.’”

“Nah, best bet would be to change its face,” says Jasper. “If it’s a collaboration of all our brains, we should be able to fix it, right? Here—everyone concentrate. Who’s someone famous we can all picture? Winston Churchill?”

Nods. Groans. Overall, mixed reviews for Winston. Further deliberation tosses out Charlie Chaplin (Spirella can only picture Hitler), David Beckham (Petrus doesn’t know

what he looks like...which I didn't realise was possible), Allison Corsen (Jasper calls her a dodged bullet. *Last thing we need is another harpy in Number 10*), and King Charles (because of Carney's war-cry, "BAH! Torch the monarchy!").

Lazarus grins. "If you're that choked up about my face, I could always turn it the other way for you. That way you don't have to look at it. I'll just look in on my-Self, and you lot can look at the *in* of myself instead."

Then he pushes on his face, turning it like an open-closed shop sign. Now he's a wedge of skull bone squashed between muscles and squelchy tissue.

"Better?" he asks, voice muffled behind the face-casserole.

There's a chorus of groans and gagging.

"Let me get this straight," he says, spinning his face back to the front, "you do want a face, but not *Jacob's* face."

"I think I speak for the entire group when I say *yes*, we'd like you to have a face," says Albert.

Lazarus spins his head like a basketball, and when it stops, Callum is smiling back at us. "How's this? Such a pretty face, this one. Surely you can reach a unanimous verdict on this one?"

Callum loudly refuses.

"Ah, so no repeats?" Another spin and he's got the head of a bull. "Can't say there's anyone here who looks like this."

If no one speaks up, I'll be the veto. There are far too many pig-man overtones to win my vote.

Luckily, Spirella shares my sentiments. Too scary.

"You think this is scary?" Lazarus lifts off the bull's head, unveiling Ernest Flint.

"No way," Albert says. "I need a break from this guy."

Flint sighs and turns to Dr Eto. "I'm sorry, My Lord, but this jury is determined to be hung." He's got Flint's deep, posh voice exactly right. "Fortunately, this is a matter of no consequence, but should someone's life ever rest on their consensus, *well!* May Someone forever rest in peace."

Flint spins back into Lazarus, and a black mask appears in his hand. "This'll have to do." He places it over his face, and we're no longer looking at Lazarus but at ourselves.

"Juror Thirteen," he says, tapping the mask's forehead.

"Well, no," says Dr Eto, "I'm—"

"Oh, let him wear the stupid thing," Jasper says. "I'm sick of the head-switching. What's next, then? Or we gonna stand around here all day bargaining with a literal figment of our imaginations?"

"A fair point, Jasper Horace Sharpe, age fifty-four," says Lazarus, moving to the front of the group. "Now that I'm officially one of you," he taps the mask, "let the mindsweeping commence. Follow me. The roundtable is this way."

No one moves until Dr Eto gives the okay, then we follow him, trudging up the side of a sand dune.

Carney shuffles over to Lazarus. "Just wanna' say, I *do not* collect model ships in the Physical."

"What's the little ship about then?"

Carney shrugs.

"Well, it's a bit small for sailing. Might be why you've never managed to get back to Penzance."

Carney frowns and slows his walk, falling behind Lazarus, who maintains the same long strides that keep him at the head of the group. He fiddles with the boat, turning it over and reading a name along the bow. *The Penzance*. I glance at the others. Rosalie's

holding a knife and fork and Arlo's got a black ballet slipper sticking out of his back pocket. I wonder where my chair went.

Edging over to Max, I ask, "did you have an anchor?"

Max grins, digging in his pocket and pulling out a little toy robot. "An old thing my dad gave me."

The terrain changes from sand to grass and eventually, we reach a green meadow. There's a group of wooden chairs in the centre, arranged in a circle, the type of chairs you'd see on stage during a village Shakespeare company's production of Henry V. Tall backs, gold swirly designs along the border.

"Thirteen," says Lazarus, motioning to the chair circle. "A perfect number."

"For a perfect table, yeah?" says Albert, eyeing the empty space in the middle.

"Did I say table?" Lazarus shakes his head. "Silly me. I meant *roundtable*. A place to anchor ourselves in the Collective."

Albert throws the group a puzzled look. "Do you see a table?" he asks Spirella.

"There's no table."

"Give it time," says Lazarus.

Dr Eto sits first, typing into his wrist-screen, and a square hologram pops out. After scribbling on it with his finger, he taps another code, and it's sucked back inside. When he looks up, we're all watching. "My notes," he says, turning to Rosalie. "Juror one, you're up. Are you ready to re-direct the feed?"

Rosalie pales and mumbles that she's ready.

Seeing this, Atticus waves his arm. "If it's all the same to you, Rosalie, I'll happily take the first plunge. I'm sixth though, so if we change places, your turn wouldn't be until tomorrow..."

She gives Atticus a desperately grateful smile.

Lazarus stamps his feet with excitement. "To Atticus's house, we go!" and turning to Dr Eto, "*Go! Go!*"

Dr Eto raises a silencing hand. "Now, I know you've all been briefed, but I just want to remind everyone about the Copycat State. All of you will be absorbed by it before your mind comes to terms with the four-dimensional space." He looks around.

"Everyone ready?"

We nod. Lazarus claps. Dr Eto types another code into his wrist-screen and a few seconds pass, sitting in silence. Then there's a flash. Bright white. And a voice.

WAKE UP.

ATTICUS



2.

Class begins when the Surgeon walks in.

There are ten of us on this course. Medical interns. Terrified.

Dr Venderson crosses the room like we aren't there. It's a good thing. You don't want to be noticed by Dr Venderson.

An operating table is set up at the front of the theatre. Dr Venderson plops his leather pouch on top and unrolls it, displaying the dissecting tools inside. After considering them lovingly, he picks out a head mirror, scalpel, skull chisel, sternal saw, and toothed forceps. Then he looks forward. A vulpine smile.

"Hello, Interns."

The room tenses. He's what the onsite physician of a freakshow would look like. A mixer of strange elixirs. Executioner of secret surgical experiments. Wearer of smiley smiles. Everybody, please give a warm welcome to Dr Smiley, Surgeon of Strangeland.

"Hello, Dr Venderson," we respond in unison like children in a grammar school.

"I hope everyone's prepared for today's demonstration," he says, moving the surgical lamp over the table. "Dr Eto will be assisting us today." He motions to the supply lab at the back of the room, separated by a door of dangling plastic flaps. Hearing his cue, Dr Eto pops his head out and gives us a wave before disappearing back inside.

Without a word, Dr Venderson abruptly turns and disappears into the supply lab. I lean back, thankful for this unscheduled reprieve. My eyes drift along the walls of the theatre. They recently began the remodel, and the new design reminds me of wavy red coral in an underwater cavern. Of course, it's not coral. It's purely organic human muscle, locally farmed and grass-fed. In some places, you can still see the old panelling. The difference is prominent because the new muscles look like sashimi tuna and the old

ones look like spoilt steak. If you put your nose right up to the ageing parts, you can smell the rot. Move your nose away though, and it's back to death by lemon disinfectant.

On the left of the theatre is the organ wall. It's got examples of all the human organs hanging on it, each one still alive and functioning the same as it would inside the body. The dreamer in me hopes that Dr Venderson will leave the organ board up during exams, but the realist knows there isn't a chance.

The two doctors emerge from the supply lab wheeling a dissection tray on a trolley. There's a cadaver lying on top, visible from the neck down to the pelvis. The rest is covered by white sheets, but we can tell from the chest that it's male. Together, Dr Eto and Dr Venderson hoist the tray onto the main operating table.

A hand shoots up.

"Yes, Mr Rayhawk?"

"Cause of death?"

"Euthanasia. Now, who can tell me where to start?" The Surgeon studies his audience. "Note that I'll be carrying out the exact procedure in the diagram on page twenty-two of the reading." He waits. "Nothing? This is going to be a long class if none of you even know where to start."

Chest cavity.

The words feel audible in my brain. *Chest cavity.* Whispered by a ghost.

"Chest cavity," someone says.

"Thank you, Mr De Groot." Dr Venderson takes the scalpel and cuts a vertical incision down the middle of the cadaver's chest. "Chest cavity. And the length of incision?"

"Six to eight inches."

I look over. Callum's face is chuffed and pretty.

When Dr Venderson hesitates, Petrus speaks up. "Eight to ten inches."

This receives a hand gesture from the Surgeon. *That's the one.* A second glance at Callum finds him not-so-chuffed but just as pretty.

The demonstration continues this way. The Surgeon puts each step of the procedure to us and either acts on our responses or waits until we correct ourselves. At first, we're doing well. Chest cavity opened, eight-to-ten-inch incision, sternal saw to cut through the breastbone, apply latex gloves, plunge hands into chest to remove the heart.

The Surgeon lifts the rubbery red mass with two hands while Dr Eto snips away at thin vessels keeping it tied to the body. Then it's plopped into a metal bowl which Dr Eto hands to Arlo to pass around.

Meanwhile, the Surgeon moves on to the stomach and pelvic incisions, pulling out organs and plopping them into bowls. Our ability to name correct procedure steps decreases until it's in the same state of rigor mortis as the cadaver. I don't think we're very good doctors at all. By the time the Surgeon is dropping the left kidney into a bowl, he's stopped bothering with us altogether. Instead, he focuses intently on digging out organs, putting them into bowls, and passing them around for us to examine.

With so many bowls in circulation, we're nearing maximum capacity. The human body has a surprising number of organs, and as a medical intern, my surprise at that is also surprising. Balancing the right lung on my lap, I attempt to hand off the pancreas, but no one wants it. They've all got their hands full...of organs.

Dr Eto hurriedly motions for everyone to put their bowls on the ground and pay attention to the procedure. I forget about the lung on my lap but drop the pancreas. The cadaver is mostly emptied now, sprawled open, a tangled mess of intestines dangling like holiday tinsel down the sides of the table.

The Surgeon keeps digging, rummaging around, and I wonder if he lost something inside the body. Hopefully, his watch didn't slip off, or his wedding ring. We watch as he

meticulously analyses each section of tissue and cartilage, running his eyes along arteries, veins held up with forceps, noodles on chopsticks. Everyone leans forward, fascinated. That's how I know we all see it when his hand trembles. It's a tiny tremor, but that's all it takes to turn the most celebrated surgeon from practising to retired.

The room tenses again. Muscles contract. Hearts on the wall pulse faster. Nobody moves, nobody breathes; nobody wants him to know they've seen.

Dr Venderson continues as before. Only when both his hands shudder, causing the forceps to slip, does he look up. Dread fills the room. Thick, suffocating humidity. Another tremor and he loses grip on the forceps. They clatter to the floor, a metallic racket no one can pretend to have missed. Dr Venderson swoops down for them but stops when the floor trembles. His hand hovers over the forceps. The floor trembles again and this time, the muscles on the wall tremble with it.

Jerking his hand back, he moves away, eyeing the forceps like they're somehow responsible. Like it couldn't possibly be anything else. The hearts on the wall pulse, ticking like bombs.

Eventually, the whole room rumbles. Our chairs shake, the dissection tray jiggles, tools clatter, doctors sway, grasping for balance. The air keeps thickening, a mix of dread and despair. It's sticky like tree sap, and my throat tightens. Breathing becomes a struggle. Bowls crash. Dread and despair. Suffocation. Dizziness. And then

WAKE UP.



It stops. Everything's still. The air is air. I'm a juror.

There's a fucking lung in my lap.

I groan, shoving the pulmonary bowl. It's a thoughtless reaction. The bowl hits the floor, and the lung bounces out, squelching onto my feet. I kick it off and want to cry.

Looking around, I find mixed reactions. Petrus and Albert grinning eagerly, examining body parts then swapping them around. Jasper characteristically angry; Callum characteristically the same as Jasper. Carney's hunched over his bowl, shaking it about as though trying to bring the organ to life. Spirella's on her feet, peering up at the cadaver.

Max leans toward me. "Think he found what he was looking for in there?" He bobs his head at Atticus, who's speaking to Dr Eto, occasionally throwing glances at the cadaver.

"You thought that too?"

Max nods.

Suddenly, Jasper's up, face flushed like a cherry-bubblegum-balloon. Seeing this, Atticus sighs. "I get it. You want an explanation."

"Oh, we'll get to that. First, I wanna' know why no one's noticed that *somebody's* missing."

We look around. Eventually, Albert says, "Laza—the *host*."

Jasper's eyes bulge. "First he's tagging along, then he's nowhere to be seen. I don't like it, don't trust the thing. I wanna' know right now where that guilty motherfu—"

"Here I am!" cries the cadaver, popping upright. The white sheet falls away, unveiling Lazarus's wide plastered grin.

Half the room jumps. Petrus nearly falls out of his chair. Jasper still looks angry.

"Put your damn mask on," he says. "Those're the rules."

Lazarus swings his feet around, dangling them over the side of the table. He looks down at his hollowed out chest, running his fingers over intestines and entrails that hang from his torso like spilt spaghetti. “Bit grim, innit?” He looks up, still grinning. “Host’s running on empty, but at least everyone got a party favour outta’ me.”

I look at the lung lying in a puddle of its own juices under Petrus’s chair like a deflated aubergine and shudder.

“Right, then,” Jasper says, plopping himself back down, “now that everyone’s accounted for, let’s get the rundown on the whole psycho-doctor-land, shall we?”

“Well, it was a relatively standard dissection...” Atticus trails off, but Jasper bites.

“Oh, it’s standard to dig around people’s insides with your hands, is it? Just like planting a flower bed. *Christ*. Glad you’re not my GP.”

“I’m not anyone’s GP. I’m an orthopaedic surgeon.” Atticus frowns. “*Was*—I *was* an orthopaedic surgeon. Now I’m just a retired old man.” He shrugs. “I suppose, as you’ve all been forced to experience my rather carnally themed mind...uh, *Plane*—”

“Imaginal Plane,” Lazarus says, opening his arms like a circus ringleader.

“Right. Imaginal Plane. Well, I suppose I should share with you all that I retired from surgery, not by choice, but because I developed early signs of Parkinson’s.”

Carney stamps his metal leg on the floor and shouts, “Aha! That’s why you were droppin’ all yer tools about!”

Atticus humours him with a nod. “Yes, without a steady hand, a surgical theatre can become a slaughterhouse.”

“You’re telling me,” Jasper says.

“And what about this jumble-tumbled mess?” Lazarus asks, peering at his gory remains. “What was the endgame? Were you looking to empty me out ’til I was nought but a skin sack or were you simply *looking*? And if simply looking, was it more of a

browse or a specific endeavour? And if specific—what, *pray tell*, were the specifications? What do I have that you want?”

Max nudges me, nodding.

“Is it not obvious?” Atticus replies.

“Of course, it’s obvious,” says Lazarus, running his silver eyes over our faces, “*to me*. I know something they don’t know. I know your mind. I *am* your mind.” He laughs.

Loudly.

“You don’t know nothin’ we don’t know, yeh titterin’ string puppet,” says Carney.

“He was diggin’ round that body for the thing he’s lost in his own body, yeah?” Carney shrugs and looks at Atticus like it’s entirely clear.

Atticus ponders him curiously and nods.

“But what have you lost?” Lazarus asks.

“Well, I lost my job, didn’t I?” Atticus replies. “I lost an element of control over my own fate. The possibilities of my future have been greatly narrowed. Eventually, my body will fail me, my mind will follow, and that will be that.” He pauses and looks over us. “But that’s a long way away,” he continues as if he’s shared too much of his burden. “I was only recently diagnosed as stage one. And there’s plenty of medications and treatments and surgical options that really can significantly reduce the progression of symptoms, even reverse them. It’s not quite as dire as it once was.”

“Still gotta’ mourn, don’t yeh?” Carney says, shrugging again. “Like you do with anything that was a big part of yer life an’ is suddenly gone.” He thumps his prosthetic leg. “I tell yeh, after I got my leg blown to bits, gettin’ used to movin’ around on this *a-loo-mini-yoom* stick was one thing, but not havin’ my own calf’n’foot n’more? Well, that was a whole other dog race.” He looks around at all of us, pointing accusingly. “Don’t think about yer feet much, do yeh? Or yer toes. But cor, how yeh miss ‘em when they’re

gone. Like losin' a friend. But don't go feelin' sorry for Carney, I've had this here metal leg for longer than I ever had my foot. Can't even remember what it looked like anymore."

"I suspect, similar to the one you've got," says Albert.

Carney cracks a grin. "Similar's right, but not the same. Feet are brothers, but they ain't twins." He looks at Atticus. "I can see it on yeh. Still in mourning. No shame in that, I say."

Atticus smiles. "Thank you, Carney."

"Ain't nothin' but a leg thing."

Atticus sits in one of the vacant chairs and leans forward. "You know, another thing this place revived is a self-consciousness that I haven't felt since I was a med student. That desperation for approval when you're at the bottom of the ladder in your field. Well, it makes me wonder whether Buryakov and Lang were in a similar position. Imagine being at the lowest position in the field of neuroscience and working with Jacob Lazarus. You're young, impressionable, desperate to get your foot in the door, for the assurance that you're cut out to be in neuroscience. Now, I'm not suggesting a verdict, it just got me thinking about the potential for serious manipulation here. If Jacob *had* wanted to enact these political assassinations without pulling the trigger himself, well they'd be prime candidates. He's in a position of power, and if they're anything like I was, they're desperate for the approval of someone like him. It doesn't exonerate their crimes, but it could possibly shed some light on what made them so susceptible to manipulation, and what made them targets. All a manipulator has to do is find a vulnerable subject, figure out what they're yearning for, and provide it. Be the answer, hold the power."

"Especially if you've got a mind-control machine doin' all the work," Jasper says.

“Of course, but a skilled manipulator has all the tools they need in their words. They don’t need a machine. But imagine someone who says all the right things and who also possesses something akin to magic.” He gestures around. “The NeuroPath. Even if it functions exactly as it’s supposed to, it provides something incredible. Imagine being one of the select few offered to partake in an experience like this. Chances are, you’re going to take it, even if that chance comes at a price.”

“Go on then, tell us a story,” Lazarus cries, clapping his hands together gleefully.

“Right, my tale is about a young man named Moral, who was desperately lost, and desperately seeking to be found...”

As he speaks, a translucent image appears of a man in a long coat and a top hat. A Victorian gentleman.

“In the south of England, there’s a small town. Let’s call it Moth...” Atticus begins.

Wait, no—the gentleman begins. It’s the hologram that spoke. They both spoke.

“It’s very small, *very* unheard of...”

I see the coastline. I have an aerial view of Moth. Colours and lights and a shimmering Ferris wheel. But I’m still in the muscle lab with the others. I’m in both places. That can’t be possible. Can it?

The Ferris wheel glitters round and round. The hearts pulsate on the wall. Atticus stands in front of us, orating. The Victorian gentleman stands in front of us, orating. Who’s telling this story? Atticus or the gentleman? They both are. No, they can’t be. Can they?

Lazarus is silently clapping from atop the dissection table. “I love this part,” he whispers.

Atticus's Tale: ***Station of Lost Souls***

You'd give the devil your soul if he called you an aesthete. Then your aesth would really be in hete. HAhaHAhAHaHA.

A hilarious joke made by my father before I slammed the front door of his townhouse and tore down Fleet Street. It would be the last thing he'd ever say to me.

I was twenty-two when it happened, well-born, privileged, and with the audacity to be bored. It was 1890, and I lived in a flat paid for by my father, down the road from my father, from which my father was now threatening to evict me. Likely, this was because I didn't share his affinity for training foxhounds or sherry-cheeked evenings at White's Club; however, he claimed it was because I donated a quarter of my yearly income to a theatre that didn't exist. If he wanted to evict me, fine, but who would have the last laugh when the Théâtre D'Arnaque announced its grand opening? According to the man who collects donations, the debut performance was going to be Moliere's *Tartuffe* in English. A good thing too, because I don't speak French. My father insisted I study Latin at Cambridge in case I ever wanted to go into Law and Politics. A ghastly thought. I'm an aesthete down to my soul and always would be, even if it meant living on the cold streets of London with only my artistic passion warming me.

I told my father this. He responded with jokes, so I was forced to excuse myself from the house. As I trudged along Fleet Street, mulling over my troubles, I eventually surrendered myself to winding side roads and alleyways—*take me where you will, Fortuna*. Lady Fortuna was my muse. All aesthetes have one. I adopted the goddess who spins the wheel of fortune in Medieval tales. It was based on an error of understanding. I assumed she was the goddess

of fortune and therefore brought fortunate outcomes to those who served her. In actuality, she only spins the wheel. One's fortune, blessed or disastrous, is left to chance.

I kept Fortuna because, if I couldn't have fortunate circumstances guaranteed, I was willing to chance it. Artistic passion may keep me warm for a time, but it's artistic ability that would keep me warm for a longer time. And if that sentence tells you anything, I'm no Chaucer. Nor am I a Voltaire, Mozart, Da Vinci, or Moliere. I'm an aesthete who wants to be an artist, and who lacks any and all forms of artistic ability. Without Fortuna and her wheel, only one fate was guaranteed: mediocrity. If I could claim to be the best at anything, mediocrity was certainly it.

As chance would have it, twenty minutes after my big townhouse exit the sky flushed its giant toilet and unleashed a torrent of rain. Running wildly through the alleyways to protect my new velvet top hat and keep my rain cape dry was how I ended up at Roundabout Circus Railway Station.

Oh, you've never heard of it? Neither had I. This is why you shouldn't leave things up to chance.

You'll see.

A depressing place this mingy station shoved behind backstreets that I didn't know existed. But the material of my rain cape was expensive; it wasn't designed to withstand rain. I needed shelter.

Inside, crumpled newspaper covered the floor, rats clustered around waste bins, puddles formed in the corners and drops plodded from the roof. May passion keep me warm, I thought with a sigh and sunk onto the nearest bench resting my head in my hands.

"If the rain doesn't drown us, that crying surely will."

A few benches over was a man with a wide-brim hat, tossing a small ball up and down. I was about to retort (pardon me, but I am most certainly *not* crying) when the ball vanished in mid-air. *Poof*.

“How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

Shifting to face me, he revealed his brown eyepatch. A proper Fagin, this one. I admit it threw me, and I forgot what I’d asked.

Some awkward moments later, he said, “you have something of mine.”

Ah, so this was getting mugged, was it?

“Left pocket,” he said, motioning to my coat.

Wrong pocket. I considered telling him. Left pockets are for mints and cigarettes, *right* pockets are for wallets. Every civilised human knows that.

Rather than point out his incivility, I thought it best to just follow instructions. Keep it simple. Another thing every civilised human knows is that all gypsies keep bludgeons in their beards. Even the women.

I went into my left pocket, felt around for the cigarettes, and instead pulled out the ball.

“Sweltering Judas,” I said, looking back and forth between the ball in my hand and the man sitting three benches away from me. “How did you do that?”

“Just a trick.”

“Well done,” I said, going over and dropping the ball in his palm. I reached into my right pocket to pull out a few shillings for the amusement, but he shook his head.

“I don’t want your money.”

Of course, you do, I thought, *everyone wants my money*.

He smiled. “Are you not curious?”

“What?”

He shrugged and said nothing.

“The trick?” I pressed him.

Another shrug.

Another few awkward moments.

Eventually, “so you’re waiting for the train?”

I’d never been one for silences.

“You think this is a working station?” He laughed. The croaky gurgles of a swamp bogart. Grendel’s uncle comes up for air. Then he looked down at a watch-less wrist. “Because you’d be right. Not long now. I’m just waiting for someone.”

The rain had stopped by then, so I figured it was time for me to say my goodbyes to the strange gypsy man and be on my way.

As I stood to leave, the man said, “Moral Alexavier, I was waiting for you.”

This stopped me. “How do you know my name?”

The man held up my wallet.

After patting down my pockets, I snatched it from his hand and sifted through it to ensure all was in order. Then I gave him my sharpest look. “They say pickpockets are the craftiest breed of magician.”

“I’m neither thief nor magician.”

“No?” I said, waving my wallet.

“No. Are you curious yet?”

“About what?”

He shrugged, said nothing. Again.

Eventually, I said, “yes, I’m curious.”

“Good,” he said with a nod. “The train is almost here.”

Now, I’m going to save you some time, dear Listener, and skip over the part where I asked all the right questions. *What? Who? Where? How? When?* And get to the point. My new friend’s name was Lark Deacon, and he was not a thief nor a magician, but he worked for one. A magician and a thief. The greatest in the world apparently. He was waiting for the train to take him home to Moth, a small island where his master lived and performed.

Oh, you’ve never heard of it? Neither had I.

Then Lark Deacon invited me to join him in Moth for his master’s show that evening. Can you imagine? Well, let me save you some more time and skip the part where I considered this offer intensely, self-conflicted, heavy with inner-turmoil, and get straight to telling you what you’ve likely gathered for yourself. I boarded the train from Roundabout Circus Station and set off to Moth. What else was I going to do? Crawl back to my father and beg him to return the key to my flat? Please. I’m an aesthete with an invitation to travel to an obscure island and attend a performance by the greatest magician in the world. My father can keep the flat.



The train ride to Moth took far longer than I’d anticipated. A good three hours longer. But Lark entertained me with Mothien folk stories. The deranged architect that designed Moth’s unique architecture who locked himself in a room at the top of the tallest building, and no one’s been able to open it since. The (supposed) vampire-duke who commissioned the construction of the island’s fantastical castle, Carnaville, three-hundred years ago. The mysterious Mayor of Moth who lives in an elliptical building called The Shell and wears a mask in public, so no one’s ever seen her face. The Nutcracker Guards who protect the town,

day and night, some say, without ever resting. But most intriguing of Lark's tales were those about his master, Diabolus of Carnaville Castle. The greatest magician and thief in the world.

"Diabolus is an interesting name," I said, "the Latin for *devil*, yes? A stage name, surely."

"Surely. But it's the only name I know him by," Lark said, "if he's got another one, then it's buried out in the cemetery with the rest of Moth's secrets."

A cryptic bunch, I thought to myself.

"And what is it the greatest thief in the world steals?" I asked.

"Souls," Lark said, smiling.

I nodded, pleased. This was going to be an excellent performance.

Outside the station in Moth, a beautiful horse-drawn carriage was waiting for Lark's arrival.

"Bleedin' barouche," he growled when he saw it, giving it a kick. "The master must've sent it." Though with whom it was sent remains a mystery to this day, unless the black shire stallion called Viorel drives his own carriage and pours his own tea.

We rode through the centre of Moth, it's architecture reminiscent of a town made of candy and swirly ice cream cones. A Ferris wheel spun across the canvas of sky. Lively chatter and excited voices.

"A carnival?" I asked.

"Carnival Nocturnal. The master owns it. Open every night."

The familiar aroma of candy floss and chocolate swept the air as we drove through, followed by the happy chimes of music-box melodies. I kept my eyes on it, even as it grew smaller with distance. Then we were on the Carnaville grounds, a magnificent manor with gold bricks and colourful conical spires.

Lark showed me to a guest room as it had gotten so late. Complimentary nightwear and evening wear were laid out across the bed, all in my size and measurements, praise Fortuna. Lark left me to freshen up and returned at eight o'clock to collect me for the banquet before the show.

"First, a quick detour," he said and led me down a long hallway to some sort of mask museum. Glass cases covered the walls, hundreds of colourful faces displayed inside.

"What is this place?"

"Hall of Masks. The master has a rule when it comes to his banquets, that all who attend must be masked, their identities never revealed. No names, no faces."

"How delightful. Is it a game?"

Lark shrugged. "He says that by masking his guests, he's unmasking them. No longer identifiable by reputation, status, family name—whatever. With the mask, they cannot hide behind anything. They are nothing more than themselves."

After choosing a simple black mask for myself, we walked down to the banquet hall. Two nutcracker guards operated the doors, the very ones from Lark's train tales. They pulled them open, and music burst out like trapped water. Inside was an array of glamorous guests: masks and feathered costumes, tattoos, towering headdresses, exotic jewellery, oversized collars. One woman had powdered green hair, at least a foot tall, and a man was holding two Siberian tigers on a lead. The dining tables were set to perfection, china plates and crystal glasses, centrepieces formed of clocks or hourglasses or odd-shaped gems. The stage was to the left, red curtains drawn around it.

At one point, Lark went to the washroom and left me in the hands of a waiter, one of many dressed in clean white evening costumes with snowy owl masks. My eyes wandered around the room, admiring the colours and fantastical characters, eventually landing on a tall

figure, methodically weaving through the guests. His mask had three faces, white and gold. One in the centre looking straight, and the other two looking out on either side. I watched him a moment because it was where the eye was drawn. When I returned to my champagne glass, a long shadow darkened over me. It sounds clichéd and ominous, but that's how tall this man was, his shadow-length couldn't be helped.

"Moral Alexavier," he said. "I've been expecting you."

"Have you?" I asked, looking up at his three-faced head. "And...oh dear...I thought we weren't supposed to use names?"

"They're not," he replied, "but we can. You see, everyone here knows me, and no one here knows you. That makes us exceptions."

I'd never been an exception before. "Then, that would make you..."

"Yes," he said, "Diabolus. May I ask what made you choose your mask?"

I brought my hands to my face. "I didn't want to be too flashy or anything," I said, "wasn't quite sure what was expected."

My host looked off somewhere in the distance. "One should never concern themselves with what is expected, Moral Alexavier," he responded vaguely. "Be the unexpected."

Ah! A man with a maxim. That's how you know you're in the company of someone very important.

After a lavish dinner, the owl staff cleared our plates and led all guests to their seats in front of the stage. What followed was the most impressive magical performance. Diabolus was a puppet master, a fire bringer, a lighting caster. He brought masks to life, moved them through the air as though worn by invisible beings. With one jerk of his hand, fireworks burst above our heads, searing bolts that swirled in and out of sight as though weaving through an

invisible tunnel. For his finale, he created fire. All of the liquid in our glasses turned ablaze, and we were left holding champagne-flute-torches. Flames burned from each of his palms, and then he spun them into a ball of fire which hovered over him as he took a bow. The curtain dropped to a standing ovation.



I grew to know Diabolus more over the coming weeks. Following the night of his first performance, he invited me to a private dinner and when I praised his work, offered to tutor me in magic. *Me*, a magician's apprentice. I asked him about the secret to his performance, his fantastic illusions, but he said I wasn't ready to know that yet, and when I was, he would tell me. We worked on card tricks and pulling things from hats. Amateur ruses for amateur magicians. When three months went by, and he still hadn't shared his magical secrets with me, I became impatient. I wondered whether he ever intended to share them or if this was all an elaborate con to acquire a theurgist's assistant to work overtime for no pay. No *monetary* pay, at least. But rich in unfulfilled promises and collateral prestige.

As more time passed, I became desperate for the approval I needed to gain the secrets. I thought, perhaps if I worked harder, longer hours, sacrificing sleep and baths, I'd manage to reach the technical level required to become a member of the magical secrets club.

Eventually (*finally*), Diabolus approached me while I was writing a letter to my father, a defence, if you will, as to why he should continue paying the rent for my flat in London even if I wasn't currently living in it. In the middle of my scribbling, Diabolus plunked a large book onto the writing desk, opened to a page titled *Mephistopheles and Me: Your Guide to a Deal with the Devil*.

"You know of this?" he said, pointing to it.

“Deals with the devil? Certainly. An exhausted literary trope used by lazy writers. What of it?”

“I did it,” he replied. “That’s the magical secret.”

Sweltering Judas. How did I not see this coming?

“But I’m tired of this life now. I’ve been tired for many years. But the rules of my deal plainly state, I’m only able to transfer my gifts to a worthy heir. And I’ve got one try. If I get it wrong and attempt to make the exchange, I’m bound to this life for eternity. But you, Moral. *You*. I have no doubt that I’ve found a worthy heir.”

“Me?” I cried.

“Absolutely. Do you know why, Moral?”

“I can say with certainty, no.”

“Because you *want* it. You want the magic so badly. I have no doubt you would use it to accomplish magnificent things. I can see it now,” he swept his hands across the air, “*Moral the Magnificent*. Can you hear the applause? Can you hear it, Moral? They’re cheering for you!”

I wasn’t sure if we imagined the applause or if he could hear something I couldn’t, but either way, I was intrigued.

“Say I *was* interested, what’s the procedure? You transfer your magic to me, I become a magician and...what? You go back to live as a private citizen?”

“Exactly.”

“And what’s the devil’s role in all this?”

“The devil provides the magic. It all depends on how much you want it.”

“Oh, I certainly want it,” I said, shooting a glare at the letter to my father.

“How much?”

“Well, I don’t know. What’s the fine print?”

“No fine print. Pay the price, get the magic.”

“What sort of price are we talking?” I asked, wondering if I needed to borrow money from my father.

“The price is your soul, Moral,” said Diabolus. “I thought you knew how this worked? Tired literary trope and that.”

“Right, of course,” I said. “So, I give my soul, I get the magic, and you get your soul back, presumably?”

“Yes, that’s how transfers work.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know... If I’ve learned anything from tired literary tropes, giving your soul to the devil is typically a *bad* idea.”

“Then we write a new trope. Aesthetes with a vision. You and me.”

Had he just referred to me as a fellow aesthete? “Yes, let’s make a deal.”

Diabolus turned to a page in the book and tapped his finger on a line. “Sign here. When the devil takes your soul, he’ll take your mediocrity with it. You’ll be Moral the Magnificent, Magician of Moth. An aesthete who gave his soul for his art.”

And that’s when I took my quill—

“Oh, look at that. Ladida. Devil’s minion’s gonna steal a soul.”

Carney’s voice barks through the narrative.

SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHH

WAKE UP

“Can you let the man finish?” Albert asks.

“No, he’s right,” Atticus says, waving a hand. “This is heading a predictable way.”

“Wait—so Diabolus works for the devil?” Spirella asks, looking around, “like a demon?”

Atticus opens his mouth to reply, but Arlo quickly responds. “Alderano doesn’t work for the devil.”

“Alderano?”

“Is that not his name?” Arlo looks around. “Alderano Diabolus?”

“Just Diabolus,” says Atticus, shrugging. “Diabolus that works for the devil.”

Arlo shakes his head. “That’s one side of the story. Moral’s side. He’s going to fall into Diabolus’s sticky web of words, and voluntarily give away his soul.”

“Obviously,” says Callum, rolling his eyes. “Moral’s a naïve little baby whose life lacks purpose, so he’s an easy target. Diabolus knew it, so he did a few magic tricks, fed him some pretty words, and the result was, as you say, *predictable*. Diabolus says *jump*, Moral says, *how high?* Diabolus says *I’ll give you my magic show, you give me your soul*. Moral says, *I thought you’d never ask*.” Callum smirks. “I must say, sounds like you’re leaning toward a guilty verdict, Dr Venderson. Jacob says *shoot*, Buryakov says *who first?*”

“Not at all,” Atticus responds. “I’m not leaning any way, only highlighting the power of words and an offer of the fantastic. It’s far more likely that if Jacob’s guilty of

anything, it's manipulation. Not *mind-control*." He catches Dr Eto's eye and raises his hands. "I know, I know. Open minds."

"Moral of the story?" Lazarus says, grinning. "Don't be the Moral of the story."

"Don't be the *moron* of the story," Jasper cries, chortling and elbowing Callum's side.

"It's not as simple as that," says Arlo.

"Hey, I never said it wasn't a simple story," says Atticus. "I mean, the characters were literally called Moral, Diabolus, and Lark Deacon."

"Yes, but how was Moral moralistic? *A naïve little baby*, as Callum put it, but *moral*? What are his morals? He bemoans being lost in a quest for artistic purpose, a hole in his life that he can't seem to fill, despite all his wealth and privilege. He appears to recognise his mediocrity, so, *okay*, he isn't vain. But he isn't humble. He's self-centred and self-deprecating. He's judgemental and lofty and ungrateful. Obviously, he's not a villain, but he's hardly the embodiment of morality. He's a spoilt, self-involved, rich kid. Are we supposed to sympathise with him? And what about Alder—*Diabolus*? Were his motives diabolical? He just wanted to catch a soul for the devil? *C'mon*. If that were true, why would he care about getting his soul back? He could easily lose the magician sideshow and go on being the devil's soul-catcher without a soul. There has to be a reason he wants it back. And something about Moral that made him a prime candidate for the transaction."

"Tell us how you really feel," Lazarus says.

Arlo nods, laughing. "Vivacious expression. A side effect of theatrical conditioning. Still, in a situation like this, we must consider the importance of perspective. There are two sides to every story. What we got was Moral's side in his own words. An angle that conveniently depicts him as the victim and *Alderano* as the villain. But there's another side."

Lazarus grins. "There's always another side."

ARLO



3.

*What did thy song bode, lady?
Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan
And die in music*

*Juliana, Juliana, Juliana
Can you hear me?*

The audience in a queue. Chatter, excitement, smiles, frowns. Most of all, privilege.
The Performer would dance for us tonight.

*Juliana, Juliana, Juliana
Can you hear me?*

We stand still, the moving walkway carrying us along. A traveller. Moving while waiting. Waiting while moving.

A starry sky above, splashes of pink, purple, and blue. Celestial spheres. Far away galaxies. A 4D planetarium to amuse us while we wait. We are an audience after all, and an audience expects a show.

Scissors the height of a human. Blades pointing down, touching the star-scattered floor like legs. They *are* legs, the scissors' legs. It's wearing ballet slippers. Pink ribbons criss-cross up the blade. Two pairs of scissors now. Three. Four. They're dancing. Act II, No. 13 IV, *Danse des Petites Cygnes*. Swan Lake. Very famous.

They're joined by a beige manikin. Faceless, featureless, colourless, void. It dances alongside them. But it hasn't got the proper shoes. It hasn't got any shoes.

It doesn't need shoes. It has ballet feet, curved like slippers, featureless, blunted, unreal. Two manikins now. Three. Four. The fifth has the head of a fox; the sixth, a

hound. Finally, the seventh manikin. It has a long, arched neck. Pearl-white and graceful. The swan.

They're dancing. Act II, No. 13 III, *Danse des Cygnes*. Dance of the Swans. Scissors and manikins. Fox and hound. Swan. Dancing for us, all for us. They belong to us, the audience. It's all for us.

The final dancer. Another manikin, but not like the rest. This one is dark. Black like coal. Dancing. Act I, No. 5 III, *Pas de Deux*. Wearing a mask, a faceless black mask.

"Ah, the Black Swan. A classic imposter."

I glance at the person next to me, and I'm met by silver eyes. Silver like scissors. Silver like blades. They belong to a smart dresser, an equestrian type. Tweed coat, khaki trousers tucked neatly into Le Chameau wellies, a brown trilby hat. He rests his weight away from me, leaning on something.

I return to the dancers. The scissors and manikins. The Black Swan with the masked face. Dancing. Moving along with us as we move along the traveller.

Music occupies the space around us. Orchestral and satiating. Classical.

A classic imposter.

There's something in the background, beneath the music. The volume increases, filling the space further, expanding like a mushroom cloud. A mushroom cloud is created by a—Act IV, No. 27, *Danse des Petits Cygnes*. Swan Lake, very famous, very loud.

Not loud enough. I can still hear something muffled beneath. The orchestra grows louder, trying to cover it. But I hear it. Gunshots.

The orchestra increases again. A big and powerful mushroom-cloud-sound. A mushroom cloud is created by a—Act III, No. 17, *The Arrival of the Guests*.

"Welcome Audience! Welcome to this evening's performance!"

The traveller halts.

“We’re so excited for the special one-man show we have for you tonight. The Performer cannot wait to...well *dance*, of course. Step this way. Follow me. I’m the Performer’s manager and agent, Hiro Eto. I’m also his acting coach, director of the show, owner of the theatre. This way, please. I’m also the usher. Follow me to your seats. This way.”

The usher leads us through a majestic metal door tipped off its hinges, into a grand theatre fit for nobility, for an audience like us. The seats are fold-down, ageing brown leather, adorned with scratches, spills, and spectacular stains, decorative splits and tears, material innards foaming out like corn-coloured pus. The stage is constructed from gorgeous wood planks, darkened by dampness, from the drip, drip, drip. A leak in the ceiling above. Torches line the outer aisles, flames flicker into shadows, a ballet dance along the walls. There’s no electricity. Only for stage lighting. This place is no sell-out. It’s authentic. It has character. It has rats and mouldy smells. It has empty spray-paint cans that roll between seats, left behind by the midnight painters, those mystery volunteers who donate their art in the night. Truly a place for a noble crowd, an audience like us. I take my seat. Front row, of course.

Silence. Anticipation. Smiles and frowns. Footsteps on the stage. A spotlight. The curtain rising, revealing.

Applause.

The show’s about to begin.

Clap, clap.

Clap for the Performer. He’s working for you, performing for you. This is all for you, all about you. You’re everything to him, though he’s nothing to you. A dispenser of

fleeting amusement. The amusement you're owed, the amusement you paid for. You paid for this. This performance, this product. Not a person, a *product*. A pitiable performer. Clap for the product. It's all that he wants. To be fed. To be pitied. Clap for the product. You paid for the product. Clap, clap. Clap, and he'll dance. He'll dance to be fed. He'll dance and be pitied. You paid for this pity.

Applause.

The Performer steps onto the stage. A mime. Face painted white. Dark eyeliner and arched eyebrows, drawn in an expression of farcical surprise. He begins with a famous skit, one of the greats, to demonstrate his authority in the silent arts. The Mask Maker. It's about expression. First the sad mask, then the happy. Sad. Happy. Smile. Frown.

Laughter.

Such mastery of expression! Such a malleable face! So mouldable, conformable. So pliable, submissive.

Applause.

But something must go wrong, or it would cease to amuse. The happy mask gets stuck. The Performer pulls and pulls, but to no avail. It won't budge. That big, wide grin, stuck on his face. He tries everything. Running. Gripping. Twisting. Pleading. He tries to break free, but it's latched on too tight.

Laughter. Applause.

He finally does it! He finds a way out by peeling it off. Slowly, slowly—it's peeling away. From the chin going up, off comes the mask, revealing his face, the true face beneath. Slowly he peels, up and up, revealing his frown, the sad face beneath.

Silence.

Next skit—new skit! The Bucket, it's called. He walks up the stairs, invisible stairs, and peers out the window. The window upstairs with a tree just in front. On one of the branches—you guessed it—a bucket! A bucket of water. He reaches for it, leaning and stretching, but it's too far to reach. He tries with a ruler, leaning and stretching, but then wobbles and bobbles, almost tips off the edge.

Laughter.

He tries everything. Using his toes, tossing a lasso, walking a tightrope. Walking, balancing, wobbling along.

Laughter. Feed him.

Success! He grabs hold of the bucket, climbs down the tree, the invisible tree, and reaches the ground. The audience claps and claps. Laughs and laughs.

Take a bow, take a bow.

He dips a hand in the bucket and laps water on his face, wiping the paint. Then he holds up the bucket displaying his prize. Clap, clap. Laugh, laugh. It's so realistic. We can virtually see it right there in his hand. The bucket. We see it. It's there in his hand.

The Performer slams down the bucket. Water splatters the front row faces. Outrage is loud. *But it's only water. Only water. It could be worse. Something so much worse.*

No. They did not pay to be treated this way. The disrespect. Ungratefulness. The audience is here for the Performer out of pity. They allow him to amuse them. They paid him to amuse them. But they want their money back now.

"Enough!" says the Performer. "I'm not your court jester. I'll not be paid to go into the stocks, so you can throw vegetables and fruit in my face, and then say I should be grateful. The cost of your giving is humiliation and defeat; it's ridicule, enslavement, oppression, despair. You keep me in a prison of poverty and violence. You clap when I

do your bidding, keep on with the act, put on the show that *you* want to see, never threatening your position as audience, never asking questions. Silent. A mime. Why I ask you—why do you wish to keep me here? Why can't you see that I'm not a mime? That there's a person beneath this performance. A person and a voice."

No. The audience is outraged, shouting at the Performer. A shoe hurtles over our heads, onto the stage. The Performer dodges it gracefully. The audience boos. I join in because I'm one of them. Something else goes flying—a spray can. Again, the Performer evades it. More booing. Anger. Outrage.

The Performer watches us curiously, attempting to understand us. But he can't; he isn't one of us. Performers can never be part of the audience.

So, he kneels.

He will not stand and perform while we treat him this way. We wanted him silent, silent as a mime, so he's giving us silence. But this isn't silence. This is defiance.

"Hey, you!" A shout from the back. "When I pay for a show, I expect you to stand. Honour your audience. All the men and women here that shed ten quid a ticket. Honour our sacrifice. Stand up and dance."

I turn around with the rest of my row. The equestrian is up on his chair, towering above the blur of heads. Silver eyes. Antagonising grin. Is this part of the show? I glance at the others. They're wondering too.

"Now," says the equestrian, "are you gonna stop resisting? Or do I gotta' make this into a real show?"

"I will not dance," says the Performer.

The equestrian makes a noise with his mouth like a gameshow buzzer, then reaches down and lifts a shotgun from the chair beside him. Jerking it closed, he aims at the Performer. “You should have danced,” he says and shoots.

The audience erupts into chaos, front row sprayed red. Blood on their faces, blood on their hands. The Performer on his knees, looks down at his costume, darkened by crimson, drip, drip, drip—a leak from the hole in his chest.

The orchestra plays. A mushroom cloud sound. Gunshots. Louder and louder. A flurry of images. Silver eyes. Equestrian. No, *hunter*. Scissors and manikins. Fox and Hound. Swan. Pearl-white. Black. Black mask. Black Swan. *A classic imposter.*

WAKE UP



The theatre’s empty. Blurred faces of a single-bodied audience, gone. Hollow space remains. And us. We the jury. Once again—

Thirteen.

The air is thick. Crowded with questions. And I mean *crowded*. Taking up space. I feel them swimming around me. Invisible words.

Arlo examines his chest, touching where the bullet penetrated, staining his fingers scarlet.

Jasper’s on his feet, glaring at Lazarus. “What the fuck was that?”

“What?”

“*What? This!*” Arlo motions to his chest.

Lazarus laughs.

“Why do you have that?” Arlo says, pointing to the gun. “Do you *want* to look guilty?”

Lazarus jerks back at the sight of the gun, dropping it frightfully, and laughs again.

“You were losing your audience a bit at the end there. It was the scene’s natural next step. And I don’t care if I look guilty because I’m not real. You made me up, remember?

Everything’s imaginary. *No harm, no foul.*”

Arlo runs a finger over his wound again.

“You see? All pretend. A game of cops and robbers with your imaginary friend, Officer Lazarus.” He points two fingers at Arlo and pretends to shoot.

“Officer Nothing,” Jasper says. “Put your damn mask on and shut your hole.”

Lazarus sits back and tips the trilby hat over his face. “Pretend I’m not here.”

Arlo sits on the stage, feet dangling over the edge, ready to face his critics head-on.

The questions keep swimming, brushing against my arm, slithering past my neck. One of them is mine.

Who is Juliana?

Spirella puts a hand on my arm, nodding. She senses my question. *Our* question. It slides past her too. Swims out into the ether. Ultimately, it’s ignored. There are other questions. Arlo could never answer them all. He’ll have to pick at random. Draw them out like raffle tickets.

What does Swan Lake have to do with a mushroom cloud?

Max motions to himself, chuffed.

Nothing, Arlo tells us, but in his mind, the mushroom cloud means disaster. A mushroom cloud is created by an explosion. Inside the mushroom cloud is fear. Swan Lake is what saves Arlo from being inside the mushroom cloud. Eyes closed, symphony

sounding. Visions of staves and notes that dance over lines and under spaces. The mushroom cloud is far away, a dot in the sky of another world, another time, another life.

Inside the mushroom cloud is Hackney, just on the other side of his eyelids. Twelve years old. *Come'ere you little shit.* A hard grip on his shirt collar and he's thrown to the floor. *Get up.*

I said, GET UP.

He's up. *Now shut up and get in the fucking car. Time to be a man.*

Inside the mushroom cloud, the car's parked. It began as a stakeout. Now, Arlo's crouched next to the passenger door, eyes squeezed shut, fingers jammed in his ears. On the other side, Dillon and his mates are mugging a group of girls leaving a bar. *Don't look at me like that, you little shit,* Dillon spat as he got out the car, *they stay out this late, they're asking for it. Consider it a lesson only experience can teach 'em.* At first, Arlo can hear the girls crying, even with his ears plugged. Then he concentrates. Swan Lake, Act I, *Dance of the Swans.* Black music notes bob through his head. Ballet dancers and pearl-white swans. His mother. So graceful when she dances, so delicate. A porcelain silhouette. How could she stay with a guy like Dillon? *How could she?*

Arlo looks up at the hole in the ceiling. I follow his eyes and catch sight of Rosalie, white blouse speckled with Arlo's pretend blood. Because that's all it is, right? Pretend.

Why is the theatre in your Plane such a decrepit hole?

"Mine," Callum announces, smirking.

Juliana.

Spirella and I exchange glances. *You heard what I heard, right?* Not heard. *Felt.* You *felt* that word. That name. Spirella's nodding. Feeling words. The whole thing, this whole place, suddenly feels absurd. What are we even doing here?

Drip...drip...drip

"...I don't really want to get into the personal details right now..." Arlo's saying, glancing up at the ceiling, distracted by it "...maybe there are layers to it. Like it's not *just* about me, but also about society or something...or the trial?"

Drip...drip...drip

Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip

Dr Eto stands and peers at the ceiling.

"...here, it's like the true state of things, y'know? If you weren't so distracted by the showmanship and theatrics..."

Drip, drip, drip

Drip

Drip

Drip

Drip

Drip

Arlo stands to get a better look at the ceiling. A gooey black liquid is streaming down.

"What the hell is wrong with this place?" Callum says. "It's disgusting."

"I think...I'd better get on with my story," Arlo says, eyeing the ceiling.

Dr Eto's nodding.

"Arlo Aden Newton, age thirty-six, don't tell me you're afraid of your own mind?"

Lazarus says, now in the row directly behind us.

“Do you need a muzzle?” Jasper says, whipping around, fleshy layers twisting, wringing like a dish towel.

So not *everything* here is pretend.

Arlo frowns. “Not afraid, just—”

“Nuh-uh. Don’t explain yourself to him,” Jasper shouts. “Ignore him, and maybe he’ll go away. Just *poof*, disappear.”

“I won’t,” Lazarus says, sliding his face between the seats. “I’d never miss story hour.”

Arlo's Tale: ***Symphony of Lost Souls***

Obbligato violin. Orchestra? Strings. Harp? Maybe. Two oboes. Clarinets? Yes. And how about...a bassoon! Excellent. But what key? B \flat I think. Two trumpets. G and D. No, four trumpets. Or maybe...

"*One at a time,*" Alderano Diabolus shouts, slamming down his pen and shoving the sheet music from his desk. Lined pages flutter like butterflies to the floor.

He listens for voices, sounds, music, melodies—anything. But there's nothing. For now, he's alone. Pacing, he chews his nails until his left index finger bleeds. A knock at the door halts his racing thoughts.

"I see you've been feeding again," Lark says, bringing a hand to his mouth, indicating Alderano's appearance has turned vampiric. "You wanted to see me?"

Alderano keeps pacing. "I've located a new candidate."

"Where?"

"London. You've been there, haven't you, Lark?"

Lark thinks. "The one with the big clock?"

"Ben," says Alderano, almost shouting, "Ben. Big Ben. The big clock. Yes, Lark, with the big clock."

"Alright, alright," says Lark, leading him to his armchair. "Sounds like everyone's a bit excited."

Alderano lets himself be placed in the chair, before shoving Lark away. “No one’s here. Just me. They left in the middle of a session, just as we were choosing the orchestra.” He turns to Lark, smiling, green eyes lit with life. “But a candidate, Lark. A candidate!”

“Always nice to find a candidate. Don’t let your hopes shoot through the ceiling, though.”

“No, I *will* get my hopes up,” Alderano says, turning to the fire. “This one’s extremely suitable. Not like the others. This candidate...it’s why they bolted, the little spies,” he points to the ceiling, “scampered off so suddenly, didn’t you?” he looks up, shouting at the ceiling, then returns to Lark. “They’re concerned. Running to daddy. But there’s nothing he can do. A deal’s a deal.”

“Certainly is,” Lark says, slipping a pillow behind Alderano’s back, “’spose I’d better get ready. Where will I find...him? Her?”

“Him. You don’t have to find him. This one’s already lost. Just go and wait at the station. He’ll lose his way to you.”

Lark looks unconvinced. “Right...but maybe I should still go into the city. London, was it? Might be quicker if I set up there.”

“Lark! Listen to me!” Alderano cries, half standing, then dropping back down. “He’s getting closer, losing his way to the Roundabout as we speak.”

“Right, but—”

“Lark,” says Alderano, voice steadier. He stands and raises a finger. *Listen.*

They stand in silence. Lark can’t hear anything save the crackling fire, but Alderano listens intently.

"G minor," he says eventually, and nods. "Scurry off now," he shoos away the air, then flashes Lark a smile. Returning to the desk, Alderano writes a name on a piece of parchment and hands it to him. "Go to the Roundabout. He's lost his way."

Lark reads the name. "Ha! *Moral?* Gotta' love terrible irony." He turns to the door. "Send a horse to pick us up. Tell it I want the landau, *not* the barouche. Makes me green as peas, that bleedin' barouche."

Alderano's watching the fire again and doesn't respond. Lark shouts "landau!" and shuts the door.

Ten minutes later, Alderano dabs his quill, and writes, *send horse—Viorel—barouche, not landau.*

"Or was it landau, not barouche?" He scowls up at the ceiling. "Trust you? *HA!* Trust *me.* When Lark returns with Moral Alexavier our days together are numbered. You can sing your songs to *him*...what do you mean, *what will I do?* I'll go home. I'll be free."

Alderano looks into the fire, listens, and laughs. "Say what you will, but I *will* be free. A deal's a deal. Not even *he* can undo that." Alderano frowns. "*Enough! Don't you threaten her.*" He strikes his hands through the flames until they're pulsating, pink, and blistered.

For a moment, he doesn't move. Then, he slowly walks over to his pianoforte, kneels over a bucket on the floor beside it, and dips his burnt hands into cold water. Moments later, his hands are smooth and unscarred.

Alderano sits on the floor and pulls the gold locket from under his collar, studying Yulana's sweet face. He can almost hear her voice when he looks at it, warm and fluttery, like wings. "*Angel's wings,*" he says to the fire. Or the deep voice she put on when she made fun of his Latin, speaking gibberish, and laughing. Her laugh was a waterfall of rose petals. But it

was nothing compared to when she sang. That voice was crystalline and ethereal. Raindrops and moonlight in spring.

To hold Yulana in his arms again, Alderano Diabolus would do anything. He would live a symphony of eternal silence.

In fact, he *is* doing anything—anything and everything to anyone. This time, it will be Moral Alexavier, the petulant boy from London who refers to himself as an *aesthete* and throws tantrums when his father tries to teach him the value of money. The boy with the audacity to be bored in his privilege. He’s learned the ways of this candidate, his likes, dislikes, desires, pitfalls. Alderano failed with the other candidates, and there have been many, but he has a good feeling about this one. Moral could be the deal-breaker.

He snaps the locket shut and crawls to the fire, rising to his knees in front of it. Then, bowing his head and clasping his hands, Alderano Diabolus prays for his soul.

Preces meae non sunt dignae

Sed tu bonus fac benigne

Ne perenni cremer igne



Moral Alexavier sits in front of the stage where his host, the famous magician Alderano Diabolus, is soon to perform. In his hand is the evening’s programme:

Alderano Diabolus presents selections from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons,

- ♣ Concerto No. 4 in F minor, Op. 8, RV 297, “L'inverno" (Winter)
1st Movement, Allegro non molto (in F minor)
- ♣ Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 8, RV 315, "L'estate" (Summer)
3rd Movement, Presto (in G minor)

The curtains open and Alderano Diabolus stands at a podium. Set up behind him are the chairs of an empty orchestra, each with a mask and an instrument. Alderano taps the music stand with his baton and makes slow movements with his wrists. Each mask floats upwards, hovering where a musician's face should be. Red and gold, with sly grins and horns; an orchestra of devils for a conductor called Diabolus. The instruments follow the masks, shifting up and around, bows positioning themselves against violin and cello strings.

The room goes dark, revealing glowing outlines, silvery figures wearing the masks and holding the instruments. The bows slide across the strings producing the slow, pulsating start of Vivaldi's Winter. Momentum builds. Silvery forms speed their bows. The soloist steps forward, raising its violin, and when it plays, bursts of silver light explode from the sound.

Alderano directs them like a puppeteer as more sparks flash overhead until the entire stage is illuminated. A night sky splashed with multi-coloured stars. But even a vision such as this is nothing compared to the music, which is unlike any sound Moral has heard on this earth. After a spectacularly explosive finale, the audience is on its feet. Alderano takes a bow, then beckons the instruments over, pressing his hand against them. One by one, they burst into flame.



Weeks later, Moral lies awake in bed, listening to the same sombre melody that meanders through Carnaville Castle every night. Tonight, he finally decides to get out of bed and follow the sound. It leads him to a room where cobwebs hang like curtains. The walls are bare except for a single portrait of a bearded man with condescending eyes. To the left, a grand pianoforte shimmers against the bleak backdrop, its condition notably pristine.

Alderano is crouched by the fireplace, a mahogany violin floating next to him, the bow sweeping to the movement of his hand. He whispers the same words over and over.

Preces meae non sunt dignae

Sed tu bonus fac benigne

Ne perenni cremer igne

Finally, all that Latin Moral's father forced him to learn would be of use.

Worthless are my prayers and sighing

Yet please, good Lord, in grace complying

Rescue me from fires undying



He's coming. He's here. Hurry. The candidate. Quick. We must tell Father. Go, hurry. He's ever so lost. He could take the deal. Hurry. Tell Father.

Alderano smiles into the fire as the fiends scatter away. "Moral," he says, turning.

Moral Alexavier stands in the doorway of his studio. Such a spoiled, stupid boy.

"Do you know the piece?" Alderano asks, motioning to the violin. "*Lacrimosa* from the *Dies Irae* sequence of Mozart's *Requiem*. You're an admirer of Mozart, I assume?"

"Of course," Moral says, nodding eagerly. "Such genius and rare talent. Like you. The music you create is unlike any sound I've ever experienced. The floating instruments, the spectacle—it's all so enviable."

Alderano smiles. "It doesn't have to be." He motions to the violin again. "Would you like to know the secret of my magic?"

Moral nods desperately. It's what he's been waiting for all these weeks.

"Come then. Sit with me, and I shall tell you the story of how I made a deal with the devil."

Alderano points to the man in the portrait. “Chester Marsfield, my stepfather. I don’t remember my real father, he died when I was a baby. All I know is he was a musician: violin and piano. These were his,” he motions to the instruments. “My mother taught me to play the piano in honour of my father. When she married Chester Marsfield, he insisted I learn the violin too. An act to persuade my mother he was a caring man, one who understood the importance of keeping my father’s memory alive. But he was strict with my lessons, confining me to hours of practice, weekends filled with recitals, contests, shows. I didn’t get to be a child, only a musician, and it didn’t matter how many accolades I earned, I was never good enough. Yes, Chester Marsfield was domineering and controlling, but he was the only father I’d ever known. So, if he wanted me to be the best, I would be. I practised, worked, performed, but as I’m sure you can imagine, never earned his approval. It’s a story you’ve heard before. A tired trope for lazy writers, *you might say.*”

Alderano forces a smile at Moral.

“At seventeen, I received second place in a competition. My stepfather took me home and beat me, so I packed a bag, hung my father’s violin over my shoulder, bid the pianoforte adieu, and left. There was enough money from my winnings to last me a fortnight. I spent the next few nights in various towns, the days walking with no destination, only a purpose: to find a teacher or a miracle. Anything that would make me the best.”

Alderano pauses to light a cigarette, throwing a glance at the fire. “When I was almost out of money, I joined a travelling theatre troupe and ended up travelling with them for nearly a year when I finally found what I’d been looking for. It sounds a bit sinister saying it like that since we both know I’m referring to the devil. He approached me after a performance dressed as a nobleman, so of course, he had my full attention. Apparently, he

sensed my desire to be the best musician and said he could make it happen. I assumed he must be some renowned musician, which I suppose he is, despite losing that fiddle-playing contest in Georgia. I realised he was the devil when his eyes glowed red, so I knew the price of being the best. And I paid it. In exchange for my soul, the devil gave me what I desired. My mind works at speeds I didn't know possible. I can think twenty different thoughts at one time. Most significant, however, is a special ability which allows me to produce music no human ears have ever heard: the power to manipulate realities."

Alderano releases a stream of smoke. "I suppose now I should pause the story for a little lesson in the physics of sound. As I'm sure you're aware, sound travels in the form of a wave. Unlike light, it requires a medium through which to travel. Typically, the medium is air, though it can be other things too, water, certain solids. The sound that reaches our ear is produced by the vibration of an object, such as violin strings, which sends a wave of energy through a medium, and the disturbance of this medium as the wave travels through it is what creates the sound. With that said, you will be able to appreciate that the magical element the devil added to my nature was not only the ability to play multiple instruments with my mind but also the ability to manipulate the sound waves by changing the medium of our reality. In other words, I can open small doorways—pockets, if you will—to alternate dimensions and move the sound waves through them. These alternate worlds contain elements that don't exist in our universe; therefore, by briefly changing the medium, I manipulate the sound."

Moral's eyes widen. "Will you show me?"

"I can do better," Alderano says, "I can give it to you. The multiplicity of simultaneous thoughts and actions, playing instruments with your mind, and the ability to manipulate reality. It's real magic, Moral, as far from mediocrity as a mortal man can be."

Alderano takes a moment to silently congratulate himself. All the pieces have been perfectly played this time.

“I would exchange my soul and get the same gifts as you?” Moral says.

“You would get *my* gifts. There can only be one *best*.”

“Why would you give up your gifts after everything you did to acquire them?”

“Do you know what a soul is, Moral? It’s the truest thing in your life. For me, it’s music. But more specifically, the feel of my real father’s piano keys under my fingertips, his violin under my chin, bringing the bow across its strings. Producing the music which brought such joy to those around me. Your soul is a moment in which you touch true happiness, however fleeting it may be. Perhaps, for you, greatness is happiness. I thought greatness was mine, but it was music. It’s always been music.”

“But you have music,” Moral says.

Alderano looks into the fire. *Please, good Lord, in grace complying, rescue me from fires undying.* He goes and sits at the piano, hovering his fingers over the keys. Moral stands but Alderano waves him back. “Stay where you are.”

Alderano takes a deep breath and plays. After the first few notes, steam forms under his fingers. The smell of burning fills the room. A spark from the piano. Alderano grits his teeth but keeps playing until the entire piano is engulfed in flames, his hands and arms with it.

Moral bolts toward him.

“Stay back,” Alderano shouts, as he kneels over the bucket by the piano and immerses his arms in the water. When he pulls them out, there’s not a single burn. The rest of the water, he dumps over the piano. The fire recedes, and the piano is once again pristine.



Alderano stands outside of Yulana's house. He can hardly believe after all these years, all his efforts, he's finally done it. He's made the soul exchange. He's free.

Alderano didn't tell Moral everything, that music wasn't the sole love of his life. There's also Yulana. The woman who haunted him all these years. It was the music they could create together that was his soul. Their soul. Their symphony.

He was going to marry Yulana before the devil ruined his life. Before he took away Alderano's soul, making it so his touch would cause that which he loved most to burn. His instruments and Yulana. It's why he'd gone to Moth, the land of creatures that must live in the dark, the town of lost souls. Yulana deserved a real life with a husband who could love her properly; not the devil's soulless minion. But she never married. In every letter, she said she'd wait for him. She'd wait forever.

The light is on in the house, shadows moving. The only thing left standing between him and Yulana is that wooden door. Raising his father's red violin, Alderano plays Tchaikovsky's *Menuetto*. Yulana's favourite.

The door opens, and Yulana is more beautiful than he remembered. As she runs toward him, he tosses the violin, but the melody plays on. They embrace, and he holds her tightly. The music is all around them. Everything is in harmony. The music, louder and louder. He clings to her; he won't let her go again.

Then, he smells it. Burning.

He instantly releases her, but she's engorged by flames, a powerful fire illuminating the night. When the fire dies, Yulana dies with it, and Alderano is left clutching her lifeless body to his chest.

Yulana, Yulana, Yulana. Can you hear me?

“No one can hear you, Alderano,” says a man, standing over them. “Only me.”

Alderano looks up into the condescending red glow of his stepfather's eyes.

“The devil doesn’t care about fine print,” Arlo says, “there was never an out clause. It was all for nothing.”

“Then how come he could play his violin again?” Carney asks.

“Because he loved Yulana more. He said he’d live a symphony of silence if it meant he could hold her again. And that’s exactly what he got. Yulana’s dead, so once again, he can’t touch his music.” Arlo shrugs. “But that’s just how it goes sometimes. You can do everything right, exhaust every option, pay any amount of money, and you still lose. Some things you just cannot fight. So, you have to—”

He stops suddenly, staring behind us. We all twist around in our seats.

A woman dressed in a Brocade Italian ball gown is standing in the aisle, long caramel hair draped loosely over her shoulders.

“Hey, look. It’s Yulana,” says Carney. “She’s alive.”

Juliana.

I catch Spirella’s eye.

*Juliana, Juliana, Juliana
Can you hear me?*

Arlo’s off the stage. The woman receives him in her arms, and they embrace for what seems like ages. When they draw apart, they’re speaking, but we can’t hear them.

“*Juliana,*” Lazarus says, leaning between Spirella and me. “Guess she can hear him.”

We both look at Lazarus, neither of us asking who she is because we know it’s none of our business, both of us hoping he’ll tell us voluntarily.

“Alright, I will,” he says. “Let’s assess her profile.” He pretends to consult an invisible chart. “Juliana Newton. Operatic soprano. Met Arlo when they sang opposite one another in Verdi’s *La Traviata*, the costume from which can be seen on her now. Dated

four years. Married six. Died of breast cancer three years ago.” He folds up the invisible chart.

Surprisingly, no one says anything. Not even Jasper.

When Arlo returns to the stage, he sits on the edge like before. Our faces must reveal what we know because he smiles and says, “it’s okay. Really. I can talk about it without falling apart.” He pauses. “I never thought I’d see her again, though. I know it wasn’t real but...that felt real.”

“Jacob should make personal NeuroPaths,” Callum says. “Yeah—the target consumer could be anyone who wants to see a deceased loved one again. He’d make a fortune with that. I can already see the advertising campaign. Imagine this,” he sweeps his hand through the air. “*Gone, but never forgotten.*”

Spirella shakes her head. “You’re a real prick, aren’t you?”

CARNEY



4.

The Captain stands on the prow of *The Penzance*, gazing ahead as the narrow vessel glides easily through a turbulent sea. One hand rests on the ship's bow, the jewelled sea-dragon with amber eyes. A fierce and formidable monster of which he is master-and-commander.

Hiro, his second-in-command, observes the green sails that capture the breeze, curving out like shallow bowls, bringing *The Penzance* home. Assisting the sails are the oars, ten in all, five down each side, and us.

The oarsfolk. Born to row. *Made* to row. Not made as in forced; made as in *crafted*, from Irish Oak, same as the ship. When the builders finished constructing *The Penzance*, they forged us with the leftover timber. Part-human, part-wood. Partly ourselves, partly the ship. Pure, wholesome oarsfolk.

Misty rain sprinkles down. It's a welcomed shower. Hours pass without any break in our movements. Forwards, backwards, forwards, backwards. Our arms are fire. But we keep rowing. All of us rowing.

The Captain turns slightly from the bow, a tremor of anger.

"Why aren't you rowing?" he asks darkly.

I just said we're all rowing. I know this crew, we all pull our weight. We never stop rowing. We wouldn't dare.

Somehow, I find the energy to raise my head. A man is leaning against the starboard sheltered from the rain by a fabric bowl on a stick. He doesn't look like us. His dress is strange, and his manner. His eyes, too. Bright like polished silver. Like treasure.

The Captain veers around, his look as stormy as the seven seas. He stops when he sees the man. "How did you get aboard my ship?"

"I suppose...through *science*," the man replies, twirling his hands like a jester.

The Captain steps back. "A demon!" he cries, lowering his hand to the sword at his belt. "Begone, demon of *science*. Wōden strike you! Jupiter and Zeus and Thor and—"

"Spiderman and Wonder Woman and She-Hulk."

"She-Hulk?"

"From the films. Well, I suppose technically from the comics..."

"It speaks in riddles!" the Captain warns us. "Cover your ears!"

We drop our oars and cover our ears.

"No!" the Captain roars. "Never stop rowing! It's what the fiend wants. To prevent us from fulfilling our quest!"

We grab the oars and row. Always rowing.

"What's the quest?" asks the stranger.

"To Cornwall!" the Captain roars, drawing his sword and thrusting it in the air. We all cheer. *To Cornwall!*

The stranger laughs, giving his rain-contraption a spin, turning to us. "And *you* lot are what? Vikings? Pirates? Sea-faring Pinocchios?"

"Do not listen," the Captain orders, "the demon would lead you astray! Keep rowing."

"Yes, you better row or we might not make it to Cornwall before it sinks to the bottom of the sea," says the stranger.

The Captain's eyes widen. "You're a seer?"

"Just a figment of your imagination."

The Captain frowns. "Prove it. Tell me what I'm thinking."

"You're asking me to read your mind?" The stranger erupts laughing. Laughing, laughing, laughing. A deranged fiend inside a strange and silly man. When he's finished

laughing, he turns to the green shore, the rocky outcrops we're steadily approaching.

"Well, Captain Carney, you've finally made it home to Penzance."

WAKE UP



Carney turns, spots us, and barrels over laughing.

"Pleased about this, then?" Albert motions to his left leg, now a wooden stick.

We all have one. Peg-legs that look like they came from an Ikea dining table called Träben oak. Except for Carney. He's walking on pure flesh and bone. To top it off, we're all dressed like cheesy Halloween pirates.

Carney admires his legs, clicking his heels together, wiggling his feet. "This ole' think-ticker's a keeper." He taps his head, then spreads his arms. "Look at this place. And this ship? *Oooweee*, ain't she a beaut?"

Found it back there, nose pokin' outta' the ground...

I look up and around, expecting to see words circling me but there's nothing. Just feeling words again. Feeling words.

Sure ain't something that belongs buried under a blanket of sand.

"How fast are we moving?" Albert asks. He's leaning over the side, looking down at the water. I peer over the edge too. Jets of water fan around the ship like it's a motorboat.

Jasper looks over too and reddens. "All this time you've got us rowing and this thing's got bloody propellers?" he shouts.

Carney shrugs. "Quit yer sea-squawking. If she's got propellers, then bloody great. Musta' grown 'em herself, 'cause she didn't have 'em a minute ago."

“She’s not going to have anything in a minute,” Albert says, pointing forward.

The shore is growing rapidly closer. A jagged cliffside. *The Penzance* moving faster and faster.

“It seems *The Penzance* isn’t long for this world,” Lazarus says, sidling over to Carney’s side. “Just brace yourself, and try to remember,” he turns to the rest of us, “*it’s all in your head.*”

I attempt to channel my rational side, the one that knows, whatever happens, I’ll be fine. Arlo got shot, a big bloody hole through the chest, and he’s fine. *It’s all pretend.* My wooden leg. *Pretend.* This ship. *Pretend.* Smashing into a giant rock face. *Pretend.*

I’m going to pretend-die.

“Well? Time for the buttons?” Jasper shouts, motioning to his wrist-screen.

Carney’s shaking his head. “What do I do?” he asks Lazarus.

“Use your imagination.”

Carney snaps his neck sideways, glaring. “Do I look like a ten-year-old? Stupid bloody advice that is.”

Lazarus smiles and looks ahead. “Incoming.”

I close my eyes as the ship reaches the shore, telling myself *it won’t hurt, it won’t hurt, it won’t hurt.* There’s a loud shattering as the oars snap off against the cliffside. I wait for more. And wait. And—

I open my eyes and the ship’s...walking. Wooden legs, carved to match the sea-dragon on the bow, take *The Penzance* across the beach and up the side of the cliff to the green hills beyond.

“Everyone off,” Carney orders, after *The Penzance* settles its dragon-ship body down on the grass. We glance at each other as Carney hops over the side with ease, landing steadily on two feet. “Whatchya waiting for? C’mon, it’s story time.”

“We have a bit of a problem,” says Albert, sitting on the edge, patting his wooden leg.

“Bah,” Carney grunts, “get on with it. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“It’s true,” says Lazarus, standing on the side of the ship. “It’s an imaginary world.”

He steps off the edge as though the drop is no further than the next step on a staircase.

Once we’re all firmly on the ground, the bellowing begins. “You gonna provide some seating, then?” Jasper shouts, bulldozing through us to get to Carney. “Or you planning to keep us standing on sticks your entire story?” He gyrates his wooden leg. “Y’know, there’s spiteful, and then there’s *spiteful*.”

Carney’s busy admiring the Cornish landscape and replies, “yeah, go on.”

“HEY,” Jasper shouts, snapping under Carney’s nose. “Arlo had a theatre. I think you can manage some lawn chairs.”

Carney shoves his hand away. “Yeah? And I provided a holiday to Cornwall, ocean view’n’all. Look at all this green grass. Sit your arse down. There’s your lawn chair.”

Jasper’s lip trembles. Then, he plops himself down on the ground and crosses his arms. Callum sits next to him, and they exchange acknowledging nods. I wonder if it’s lonely down there on the high road.

Carney doesn’t care. “Gah—wouldya look at this place? Who’d ever wanna’ leave a place like this?”

“You, apparently,” says Lazarus.

Carney whips around. “Get outta’ my head, you—”

“I don’t need to be in your head. You’re a juror for a trial at the Old Bailey, so you must have a London address. Now, whether you actually live at this London address, and not, say, a second Cornish address...well, that’s anybody’s guess.” Lazarus grins. “As I’m an anybody, I venture my guess. You live in London, so *you* are a *who* that would leave a place like this.”

“Like a fool, I did,” Carney says, deflating, “but not ‘cause I wanted to. My wife—*ex-wife*—she woulda’ done anything to get outta’ Cornwall. Never understood it. Cornwall’s the only place that’s ever been good to me. Had it made there. Worked as a marine fitter. Good at it, too, even with m’stump here,” he thumps his leg. “Anyway, she gets this job in London, some fancy newspaper. ‘Course, she had to take it, but what the hell was I gonna do in London? ‘Specially with this thing.” Another thump. “You don’t know a nightmare ‘til you’ve had to get ‘round London with an *a-loo-mini-yoom* stick fer a leg. Tube at rush hour? World Cuppa’ faffs. Everybody minding the bloody gap; ain’t nobody minding the bloody leg. Not until they spot a chance fer a show, at least. Give ‘em an audience, and *ooh* they’re outta’ their seats like gazelles on a springboard. Never mind that they practically wedged me down into the tracks pushin’ their way onto the damn thing, they’re givin’ up their seat fer the old cripple now. Standing, staring vacantly into space like they ain’t givin’ it a second thought. Comes naturally to them, this charity. *Bah*. Chuffed-humblies, all of ‘em.”

“Oh, but Conor Colan Carney,” says Lazarus, waltzing around him theatrically, “why stay? What keeps you in Hackney when your heart is in Penzance?”

“My daughter, innit?” Carney grunts. “Wanna’ be around, not all the way in Cornwall. Wanna’ be her dad.”

“What a heart-warming tale,” says Lazarus.

“Nuh-uh, that ain’t my tale. I got somethin’ better’n that on the barby. You ain’t gonna big-boss me outta’ my turn with yer silver tongue. Not in my Plane. We get enough of that out there.”

“Enough of what?”

“Big bossin’ around. Them rich dumple-doons, sittin’ up there in parliament deciding how to organise the lives of the ordinary folk to best suit them, to keep themselves in power, their suits in a seat, bellies fulla’ crust-less sandwiches...”

“I hear ya’,” Jasper chimes in, giddy at the chance to demonstrate some talk radio skills, “but I tell you, I can stomach the rich twats, that’s a taste we’re all used to. It’s this new wave of *share this* and *share that* mentality, *let everybody have a chance*, as if they bloody don’t already, as if this somehow means equality. All I’m seeing is a bunch of bloody foreigners or women or whoever, coming in here and asking for some free cash to pay off their hurt feelings, a leg-up in job interviews because of these fake-news-talking-heads telling ‘em rubbish, like they haven’t got exactly the same chance as everybody else. Poor, little victims. Gah—do the work, earn the pay. I tell ya, the TFP couldn’t have come soon enough. No pandering to bullshit with them, is there? No *sir*.”

Next to me, Spirella rips grass out of the soil. “You’ve got to be fucking joking...” she says once he’s finished, but Carney’s soon speaking over her.

“Not sure about all that—politics, *eh*, touchy subject, innit? Never gonna agree on parties and all that, but if we’re talking about the shit each and every government has been made of, then let me jump back in. Look at the US, they booked themselves a one-way ticket to the shitter ten years ago, putting that brass monkey in office. *Twice*. And you thought that was bad? Look who they’ve got now. President Isaacs, the snow king

himself. Now if we're talking about big bosses, he's your guy. What's that song they sing about him?"

There was a white man, with a head of white hair, who wore a white hood, inside a white house...

"Y'know the one. And they wonder why Hawaii seceded."

"And California," Dr Eto adds.

"Point being, everything in this world's controlled by big bosses." Carney turns to Arlo. "Now, I know you were just tryin' to hammer home the whole *two-sides-to-every-coin* point with your lost-souls-part-two thing, but I'll tell yeh what I'm seeing. Same as this one over here," he motions to Atticus, "devil, devil, *devil*. Doesn't matter how you look at it. Both versions had a villain, yeah? The one behind the scenes, the one on top. And what it boils down to is them, the puppet master, the one actually stealing the souls and making a giant mess of everybody's life. Moral, Alderano; it don't matter. Now, this one happens to be the devil himself, but the world's full of 'em, these big bosses, looking down on us like gods from their balconies in the sky, watching as their little pawns squabble, bicker, trick, deceive, eventually destroying each other. A futile battle that ultimately ends with the big-boss getting what they're after. Devil or not, big bosses don't give a donkey's hoof-sock 'bout the mess they make of things, as long as they get what they came for. And seems to me, they always do. We can delude ourselves thinkin' that ain't the truth, act like we're walkin' around on our own terms an' them big bosses are doin' their jobs right, workin' fer the public good'n'all, but it's a loada' crock. Big bosses look after big bosses, and everyone is working for someone as a means of working for themselves."

“Right you are,” Jasper says, “but you gotta’ pick your bosses, right? I’d rather a poncey arse in parliament that actually gets things done, instead of spending all their time darting around PC bullshit. That’s Rapier. Say what you will about the party, but ever since he’s taken office, the bullshit-plague’s taken a big hit.”

“The bullshit-plague?” Albert asks.

“That’s right.”

“Oh, do tell.”

“Don’t tell,” Carney growls. “My Plane, my tellin’. He’ll get his turn.” He stops and thinks, rubbing his hands together. We wait.

And wait.

...and wait.

“Get on with it,” Albert groans.

“Alright, alright, listen,” says Carney. “Here’s where it starts. A two-faced lady—”

“Because all great stories begin with a two-faced lady,” Spirella sighs.

“Well, some of ‘em do. Buckle in, Spirelly, ‘cause yer about to hear one. Now, where was I?”

“Two-faced lady,” Callum calls out, smirking.

“Right. So, the two-faced lady, she’s got...well, she’s got one face on the front and another on the back, yeah?”

“How do they know who’s front and who’s back?” Albert asks.

“‘Cause she’s got a bum in the back, dun she?” Carney snaps. “Mitten-tit. *Now*, the two-faced lady’s called Fortuna—”

“Like in Atticus’s story?”

“Like in the bloody Roman gods, alright?” Carney cries. “Atticus didn’t trademark Fortuna. D’you wanna tell this story? So, the two-faced lady’s got two faces...”

Albert stifles a laugh; Spirella shoves him.

“...her front face, the right side’s painted black, the left side’s white; on the back—the side with her bum,” he glares at Albert, “it’s painted opposite...y’know, that’s not important...what you need to know is the two-faced lady’s sitting on the edge of a pool...more like a pond, and it’s indoors—did I say that already?”

“No,” Albert calls out, “but tell us more about the pool.”

“*Pond*. Now shut it, I’m tryna’ think.” Carney squeezes his eyes shut, furrowing his eyebrows, hair twitching, and then pops them open again. “Alrigh’. Let’s start again...two-faced lady sittin’ by the pool...err, *pond*...”

A large, circular room appears around us, overlapping the Plane. It has a border of ivory columns and a large wheel floating in the centre.

In Carney’s Plane, the air is fresh with morning and seaside. In the circular room, it’s musky and warm. I try to comprehend being in two places at once. In the Plane, Max sits on the grass to my left, Spirella to my right, and Albert just behind us. I can hear him whisper something in Spirella’s ear and she covers her mouth, giggling. In the circular room, the two-faced lady is in a long black gown, her front face looking down into the pond. Her back face looks directly at Spirella, a gaze that crosses Planes. Large, colourless eyes, ancient and threatening. It shuts Spirella up like a hard slap.

Carney’s still attempting to describe the pool-pond that we can already see.

“...like a pond, with rocks around it...indoors...hold on...”

“Just relinquish yourself to the story,” says Lazarus, swaying his arms like it’s a waltz. “Let it unravel. A spool of magical yarn...”

Carney nods, straightening himself up. "The two-faced lady sat on the side of a pool, whispering excitedly with herself..."

Carney's Tale: *Nexus*

The pool was their window, a way to watch the outside world from their secluded dwelling. We'll call it the Two-Faced Temple of Fortune. It was their only window. *Her* only window. The two-faced lady. Fortuna, controller of fortune and fate. A power so great even the gods feared it. And today, they were watching the gods.

"There's no humility in them," said Fortuna-Front. "No goodness or loyalty. They play with mortals like little toys."

"We cannot let this continue," replied Fortuna-Back. "The cosmos will suffer for it. Mortal prayers will lessen. *We* will suffer."

"No," said Fortuna-Front. "We won't let that happen. We must remind the gods that fortune favours no one. They think they can evade the Wheel?"

"Nothing evades the Wheel. Not even gods."

"They want to play a game with the mortals; let's give them a game."

"Yes, a game. The game of fortune. Shall we spin the Wheel?"

"Yes, the Wheel. We must spin it."

"Yes, spin it. Spin it."

Fortuna walks over to the wheel floating in the centre of the room.

"Spin it!" hisses Fortuna-Back.

She reaches up and spins the Wheel of Fortune.

"What does it say?"

"A board game."

“A board game?”

“Yes, a board game. With special rules. *Real* rules with *real* consequences. The gods play the game, the mortals feel it. Every move made on the board occurs on earth. Their game, *our* rules.”

“Yes, yes. A reminder that fortune can see them. To show them what happens when the mortals lose faith.”

“Yes, yes, for when mortals don’t believe, gods cease to be.”



The northern war was over. Britannia had conquered Diamolon, and King Andras was returning to the capital in triumph. Praise Jupiter, Thor, and Ares. There was an enormous celebration as the procession marched through the city, the champions of war strutting proudly, waving to the masses, tugging on the chains of their captives. King Andras and Queen Hafren stood upon a sizeable wheeled platform pulled by two elephants. All eyes were on the king. He was the hero. The one who refused to settle for a mediocre Britannia. It was his dream to expand it from a kingdom to an empire. If surrounding lands failed to put up a proper defence, then the natural order was inevitable. King Andras would make sure of that. Praise Jupiter, Thor, and Ares.



The gods lived on Mt. Utopius, a floating isle above the stars. Jupiter, god of justice and a long list of less important things, sat at the top of the immortal hierarchy. A step down the ladder was his sister-wife Juno, and his two brothers, Neptune, god of the sea, and Pluto, god of the dead. After the top four came sons and daughters, nieces, and nephews, *their* sons

and daughters, nieces, and nephews, all of whom overlapped as aunts and uncles, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, and so on. For that was the celestial way, all cascading vertically and horizontally across the cosmos like a scatter of incestuous stars.

Today the gods were feasting. This was not unusual. Pleasure was the first commandment on Mt. Utopius. Today they celebrated Jupiter's birthday and Apollo, god of poems and music and that, told the story of Jupiter's birth each year. The tale begins with the top gods' Titan father, Kronos, and his nasty ways: biting his nails, spitting when he spoke, and eating his children moments after birth. The day Jupiter was born, his mum, Rhea, decided she was sick of going through labour, having a much-needed sleep, and waking up to find Kronos had snuck in the nursery and eaten the baby. Therefore, on Jupiter's birthday, she put a rock in the nursery instead. Kronos ate the rock, was none the wiser, so Rhea did the same thing on Neptune's birthday. On Pluto's birthday, Kronos caught on, so they had no choice but to smash off his genitals with Thor's hammer and toss them into the sea. A war followed and ended with Kronos and his Titan cronies imprisoned in the deepest, depths of Tartarus, a place under the Underworld. A happy tale for a happy occasion; one which Apollo always told in expressive detail—

“Hold on, hold on...” Albert says. “Are these Roman gods? Or Norse? Is Mt. Utopius where the Roman gods meet up with their Greek parents? Also, while we're on the subject, what're these gods doing in Britannia, which I'm assuming is like Britain...? Is it Roman-occupied Britain? Because it sounds to me like Britannia is the conquering empire here. Is it some sort of pseudo-Arthurian Britain? And what time frame is this? Medieval? Classical? Or just some sort of fictional kerfuffle?”

“Alright, Professor Oxford,” Carney snaps, “maybe it ain’t all fittin’ pretty in yer scholar’s box, but I’m not some sorta folk-myth *falalore* expert, am I? Can only use what I’ve got floating around here.” He taps his head. “Kerfuffle it is. But if you’re really triggered, why don’t we say it’s happening *once upon a time* in a world like Earth, but not Earth. Let’s call it Earth...worm. Okay? *Once upon a time on a planet called Earthworm, there was a land called Britannia that went around conquering other lands until it became an empire, thanks to the kerfuffle gods they worshipped.* Happy?”

“Yes, actually,” Albert says, nodding. “In fact, I quite like it.”

“Well, it’s very clever,” Carney grunts. “Now, as I was saying...”

Venus was growing bored of vacuous pleasure. A yawn escaped her, and she sighed. Boredom was such a wretched emotion.

Lurking in a shadowy corner was Pluto. Not someone she’d typically consider good company, but he looked bored too, so she moved toward him.

“You’re missing a fine occasion,” she said.

“I’m waiting for it to conclude. These parties make me wish death were an option.”

Venus laughed. *Ta Ha Ha*. “Delightful! Would you like to play a game?”

Pluto frowned. “What sort of game?”

“A board game. A gift from Fortune. I just need someone to play with.”

Another frown. “Should you be playing Fortune’s games?”

“A game from the two-faced lady, you say?” Mars thundered around the corner, Jupiter close behind. “What’s the game?”

Venus shrugged. “She left it in my chambers.”

“Clearly, by mistake,” said Jupiter. “It must be my birthday present.”

Venus forced a smile.

“As fortune would have it,” he went on, “I’ve grown bored of this party, too. It’s the same every year. Who can gobble the most rock-baby potatoes? *I can.*”

“Then it’s time we engaged in some new pleasure,” said Venus, leading them toward her chambers.

And so, the king of the gods went with the goddess of love, the god of death, and the god of war to play a game with fortune. They arranged themselves around a circular table in Venus’s chambers and placed the folded board in the middle. Engraved on top was the word *NEXUS* in gold letters. Mars pulled it open and out flew a creaky old voice:

To the gods, we leave a gift and a cautionary word:

Consider with great care

What truly you intend

For once you start the game

You must play it to the end.

Consider with great care

If you value mortal love

Or if they’re only pawns

Controlled by those above.

Consider with great care

If it’s really worth the price

For once you start the game

Fortune rolls the dice.

The gods had a good laugh about this little poem and Fortuna's cryptic theatrics. Then Jupiter took out the rules and read them aloud.

Step 1: Spin Fortuna's Wheel to determine which earthly kingdom will be the setting of the game.

Step 2: Without looking, each player will draw one card from the stack of character cards to determine their pawn (the mortal that will be used as their game piece).

Step 3: Each player will roll the dice to determine turn order, with the highest roller going first.

Step 4: On your turn, roll the dice to determine the number of spaces your pawn will move across the board. Follow the instructions for the space you land on.

Character Cards: each character has a particular set of traits, skills, and weaknesses, which can be exploited and used to one's advantage.

Circumstance Cards, Three Categories:

I. Curse cards: negative circumstances that range from mild, such as losing a bet, to severe, such as losing a territory. Curse cards affect the drawer or can be given by the drawer to another player, depending on the instructions of the turn.

II. Charm cards: positive circumstances - see above.

III. Wild cards: circumstances that will affect all players.

Life Points: each pawn will begin the game with ten life points. They will lose or gain life points depending on circumstances and how they are handled. If a pawn reaches zero life points, their mortal dies and that player is eliminated.

The last one alive wins.



From the crowded steps of Albion Castle, Morlin watched the approaching parade with distaste. Given a choice, he would've preferred to spend the parade at the top of his tower with his curtains drawn, but the week before, King Andras's messenger arrived announcing his northern victory and return to Britannia. Among various orders for his arrival, Morlin's presence was requested. Of course. The king always wanted him around. Morlin was the royal mystic, second generation. His father had been the one and only...

Patrick.

Why? Who were you thinking?

Patrick was in the Moon Mystic Brotherhood and served as the royal mystic to Andras's father and grandfather. After the great mystic's death, Morlin had the legacy forced upon him and was expected to live up to it. Sometimes he wished people would just get over his father. What did Patrick do that Morlin couldn't? How was his father's mumbo-jumbo more convincing than his own?

Lost in bitter thoughts, Morlin didn't notice when a sharply dressed young boy strutted to his side.

"Hello there, sir," said the boy, causing Morlin to jump.

"Are you lost?" Morlin asked.

"No," replied the boy. "You're Morlin. I can tell because you're old and afraid. He said you'd be afraid. That's why he dressed me up all nice, so you wouldn't be afraid. I'm your new apprentice."

Morlin laughed. "My apprentice, you say? Then whoever *he* is was right. I'm very afraid."

"King Andras is he. The he who sent me."

The king? An apprentice? Certainly not! Why would the king think he needed an apprentice?

“When did he say this?” Morlin asked. “He’s only just arrived from the north.”

“I tended his horse there,” said the boy. “We spoke a few times. He once asked me what I would like to be when I’m grown if I could be anything.”

“And you said *mystic*?”

“I said, *king*.”

“Brave. You can be arrested for saying things like that.”

The boy shrugged. “He told me there already was a king, so I’d have to pick something else. I picked *god of the dead* because I’d like to be able to ride in Charon’s boat whenever I please.”

“Mm. That’s why you’re here then. Mention the gods and Andras will find a way to interpret a prophecy. Loves the things. Got him a prophecy ball a few years back, then he got sick off some bad tarp, asked it if the Black Death had come to claim his lands, and the ball said, ‘it is decidedly so.’ I won’t tell you what sort of palaver that created.”

Morlin thought for a moment, and panic struck. Could this be his *replacement*? He looked the boy up and down. A short, skinny scruff in pantaloons. Couldn’t be more than eleven. This comforted him. If the boy was his replacement, he was a long way from being ready.

“What is it they call you then? Or shall I go on calling you ‘boy’?”

“My name is Rhanobysiliantheis.”

“Boy it is then.”



The gods unpacked the game and situated the board. A mini Fortune's Wheel hovered in the air and Mars gave it a spin. When it stopped, they all peered into it.

"Britannia," Mars announced.

As soon as he spoke, a beam of light shot out from the game board and began spinning, spiralling downward like a cyclone, forming a three-dimensional model of the kingdom of Britannia. A narrow path divided into square spaces ran all throughout the model.

"Next, character cards," said Venus, shuffling the deck and laying them face down.

They all drew and examined their cards.

"Queen," said Jupiter, tossing it down. A small figure of Queen Hafren appeared on the 'start' space.

"Wizard," said Mars, holding up his card, an old man in a pointed hat, discharging purple lightning from his hands.

"King," said Venus, "Pluto?"

Pluto held up his card. "Joker."

"That's a wild card," said Jupiter, patting the rule book. "You get to draw again and keep your character's identity secret."

Pluto drew again and examined the card. On the board, next to King Andras, Queen Hafren, and Morlin the Mystic, a fourth figure appeared, hidden behind a hooded cloak.



Morlin watched bitterly from the ground below the royal platform as King Andras toasted his men and plopped down on the throne. Groaning, he shoved his way through sweaty

knights and soldiers, shout-singing like drunken ogres. One of them actually tried to involve Morlin in their jumping hug-circle by hollering down his ear, “*AND THEN I MET A PRETTY LASS, HER HAIR RED AS A ROSE, SHE TOLD ME IF I BENT HER DOWN, THAT SHE COULD TOUCH HER TOES,*” and spilling half an ale over his robes.

When Morlin finally ascended the platform, King Andras was shouting merrily.

“...and then he returned to camp the following morning—imagine this, Hafren—with the head of the same silver lion severed clean off! And that’s not even the best part. He does it without a single scratch! Can you imagine? Put us right to shame, he did.”

Laughing, Andras turned from the queen to face the handsome man who stood in front of them, the general of the Briton legions.

“Tell us then, Evander,” Queen Hafren squealed in that shrill voice which caused Morlin’s migraines. “What did you do with the head?”

“Yes, what *did* you do with it?” repeated the king.

Evander smiled. “Naturally I sent it off to the seamstress to be made into a headdress for your majesty.”

The queen squealed, stomping her feet in excitement. The king abruptly cut her off. “He means a headdress for me, dear.”

“Certainly not. You’d look like a jelly-bellied cross-dresser wearing something like that.”

“What are you talking about?” Andras cried. “You haven’t even seen the thing!”

Both turned to Evander.

“Well, it’s a new fashion from the Stone Islands,” he replied. “I believe they call it *unisex*.”

For a moment, neither the king nor queen spoke. Then the king erupted in a thunderous laugh.

“Unisex! Genius!”

When Evander left, the king leaned over to his wife and said, “I believe it’s a good thing we have no sons. I’ve a feeling I would’ve constantly compared him to Evander. How could I not?”

“That’s horrible,” replied the queen, “true, of course, but horrible. So, yes, praise Rhea, Freya, and Juno we have no sons.”

“I do need an heir though,” Andras said. “A fine heir he’d make.”

Hafren rolled her eyes. “I believe you have an heir.”

“Liliwen?” said Andras, as though he’d almost forgotten he had a daughter. “Well, of course, she’s next in line. I was thinking more about her husband, the next *king* of Britannia. You know...*my heir*.”

“Britannia would do just fine run by a queen. More than fine.”

“Woah-ho! Slow down there. Keep those slippers on,” cried the king, raising his burly arms. “Not all of us can keep up with your fire-chariot political views.” The queen eyed him.

“Of course,” he went on, “there are many things a woman can do better than a man.”

“I’m quite aware,” replied the queen. “What is your point?”

“Well, dear, I just don’t think being king is one of them.”

This sent Andras into a fit of laughter that caused him to spill his drink. Recovering, he turned back to the queen. “All I was trying to say is that Evander would make a good husband for Liliwen. I’d not object to that handsome marriage.”

“You know full well Liliwen wishes never to marry. You can continue to hope she’ll find someone who changes her mind but thrusting suitors at her will ossify her further. Best to just leave it.”

Andras stood up with the force of a giant. In fact, he almost was one. At this height, he was far more intimidating than he was sitting down.

“What if I’d just accepted Britannia as it was?” he boomed. “What if I’d just accepted the way my father left it, instead of building upon it? I’d be the king of a country, but now, I’m the king of an empire! I’ll be the king all future kings strive to be.”

“I think you mean you’re the emperor of an empire, my dear. Please sit down.”

“No,” snapped Andras, glancing around. The king’s eyes landed on Morlin. “Just the man I wanted to see! Three years and you look exactly the same. It’s like I never left.”

With a sigh, Morlin prepared to play the part of the mystic.

“Splendid, sire!” he replied, exaggerating his bow. “I’m sure I speak for all when I say how happy a day it is to see you alive and well, returning in such glory.”

“Let us not talk of war,” Andras replied. “Let’s talk of prophecy. Come. Stand by my throne, read the stars.”

Morlin wasn’t expecting the king to demand a prophecy right away and had nothing prepared. Very careless. Still, the majority of his life had been spent coming up with ‘prophecies’ to please the king, so he was sure he could fabricate one now. Occasionally, Morlin could detect signs in the stars and develop a true prophecy, but not on the many occasions he was required to. It did no good trying to explain to Andras that Fortune revealed prophecies when it suited her, not him.

Raising his eyes to the sky, he found only a few stars had emerged. A perfect excuse.

“Oh, majesty,” he said, raising his hands upward in the exaggerated manner of someone mystical and mysterious. “As you can see, the stars are not yet in position for a true prophecy. The gods send their desires by nightfall. I am but their humble interpreter.”

“Nonsense! I see plenty of stars. I wish to know about my heir. What do the stars say about that?”

“Like I said,” Morlin replied. “I’m unable to read them at this hour. They’ve not reached the position for that kind of prediction. Ask again in three days.”

Andras stared at him. “That’s a shame. I hope you’re not losing your touch, Morlin.” He glanced at Hafren, smirking.

Morlin stiffened. Quickly, he looked back up at the sky and found a few more twinkling stars. He attempted to connect them with invisible lines to see if he could detect any symbols. A cluster of faint stars caught his eye. He joined them with his invisible lines and couldn’t believe it. A true symbol. The seashell of Venus cut down the middle by a vertical line, the spear of Mars. It appeared like a quarrel between Venus and Mars, but Morlin knew Fortuna better than that. The two-faced lady would never be so covert with her celestial messages. No, this was something else.

“A game, perhaps,” Morlin whispered, glancing at Boy, who also gazed upward.

Boy nodded. “A dangerous one.”

“What’s that?” Andras demanded, looking from them to the sky. “What do you see? What does it say?”

Morlin wasn’t entirely sure what it said. A dangerous game played by the gods? Surely there was more to it than that for it to be painted across the heavens. True symbols only appeared when they carried the most vital messages. What sort of game was that? Perhaps he’d read it wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Regarding an heir...” Morlin was preparing to fabricate a tale; however, Boy stepped forward.

“The symbols of Mars and Venus,” he said, motioning with his hands. “They indicate an important union between male and female. The woman will be the embodiment of love and beauty, while the man will be a strong hero of battle. Together, they will be the continuation of a mighty dynasty.”

Dumbfounded, Morlin looked from the boy to the king, who looked absolutely delighted.

“You see,” said King Andras, returning to the queen, forgetting all about Morlin and Boy. “Evander and Liliwen and an heir for me.”

Morlin placed a hand on Boy’s shoulder. “I say, well done. How did you come up with that?”

“I didn’t really,” said Boy. “King Andras told us the tale he wanted to hear, so that’s the tale I told him. I don’t know a lot, but one thing I do know is that people can be bent any which way if they’re told what they want to hear. Truth is inconsequential.”

“Quite the trickster, aren’t you?” said Morlin, “surprisingly cunning for such a young person. How did you learn such things as a stable boy?”

“I was only working the king’s stables during the war. Before Diamalon was invaded, I worked at the court of a duke.”

“Oh yes? Doing what?”

“Tending the stables,” said Boy, grinning.

Morlin scoffed. “A joker too, I see. Perhaps, you should be the court fool.”

Boy smiled. “The joker is never the fool.”



That spring, Princess Liliwen hid tears behind a gold veil as she married General Evander. King Andras insisted the union was the will of the gods. Queen Hafren tried to dissuade him

from forcing their daughter into a marriage she didn't want, but the king wouldn't hear it.

Eventually, the queen was struck by royal wedding fever and forgot all about her daughter's feelings. One year later, Evander and Liliwen had a son, and King Andras had an heir.

Two points for Venus.

Six months later, tragedy struck. The young prince was snatched from his cradle, right under the nose of Queen Hafren who nodded off in a nearby rocking chair.

One point for Pluto.

Queen Hafren blamed herself for the boy's disappearance. The king blamed her too, and they became divided.

One point from Jupiter. One point from Venus.

When another six months passed and the prince was never found, Liliwen hanged herself from the beams of the wash closet and squandered any chance that King Andras had for another heir.

Two points from Venus.

To fill the void of losing his heir, King Andras spent many months obsessing over the Six Kingdoms of the Stone Islands. Morlin took note of this so that when the king asked him what the signs said about an invasion, he knew exactly what the king wished to hear. Invading the Stone Islands was written in the stars.

Two points for Mars.

Three years later, King Andras was killed in battle, and Britannia was defeated.

Venus is eliminated.

The high king of the Six Kingdoms travelled across the vast sea to Britannia to personally deliver the head of its former ruler and establish his own rule. Morlin was allowed to keep his position as a royal mystic; however, Queen Hafren was given as a whore to the soldiers.

Three points from Jupiter.

Morlin sympathised with Hafren's plea for a way to endure her suffering and had Boy deliver a special tonic to help numb her mind. One night, Boy took the wrong bottle from the shelf. Hemlock. Hafren was dead within minutes.

Jupiter is eliminated.

Mars and Pluto remain.



Three memories stood amongst Britannia's ruins. What had once been a formidable empire was now a wasteland, barely worthy of its title as the seventh Stone kingdom. And it was their fault. Jupiter, Venus, and Mars. They had destroyed the lives of the Briton mortals, caused the downfall of their people, and lost these lands to new gods from the Stone Islands. And without lands or subjects, they were no longer gods. No longer able to reach Mt. Utopius. They were old gods. Memories. And in time, all memory of them would cease to be.

Morlin's corpse lay strewn across the castle steps as his killer stepped over it and made his way to the Briton throne room. Inside, the little boy sat down on the broken throne and looked into the melancholy face of Pluto, the god of death.

"You won the game," said Rhanobysiliantheis. "You don't have to become a memory."

"You can't win the game," said Pluto, as the two-faced lady approached.

"Look around," said Fortuna-Front. "Without love and justice, we're left with war and death. The gods failed their people, so they were wiped out. You see, it is the mortals that

make gods what they are. Without mortal belief, gods cease to be. They become memories. They become something which fades. Perhaps, these gods are not really immortal after all.”

The two-faced lady stepped closer to the little boy on the throne. “I think you deserve a prize for being the winning piece. Don’t you think he deserves a prize, Pluto?”

“If you want,” said Pluto.

Fortuna gave him a two-faced smile. “What would you like?” she asked the boy. “Tell me the fortune you seek.”

Rhanobysiliantheis thought a moment. “I’d like to ride in Charon’s boat whenever I please,” he said, quickly adding, “for free.”

“Done,” said Fortuna. “What a clever request.”

“Was it?” Pluto asked. “Sounds rather boring.”

The two-faced lady turned both her faces toward the god of the dead, alternating them. “Charon’s boat is the only way in and out of the Underworld,” she said, “the boy can ride it whenever he pleases. What has he done, Pluto?”

Then Pluto understood.

He’s cheated death.

“That was cheery,” says Albert.

“That’s the human condition, for ya,” Carney replies, raising his eyebrows like a man thoroughly convinced of his own wisdom.

“He’s not wrong,” Jasper says, “it’s like I was saying, you just have to look at where we are today. London’s gone to shit. We got parties tryna’ fix the obvious, others gettin’ in their way, barking on with their PC bullshit. Meanwhile, London continues to sink lower and lower into shit. We got a name for it at Sharpest Tool—call it ‘the shit mountain that just won’t quit.’ Listeners hear us say that and they know it’s time to start ringing in the phone lines, sharing ways they’ve been personally shit on. Metaphorically, but still...”

“I thought the bullshit-plague had taken a hit with the TFP?” says Albert, “but now, London’s gone to shit?” He grins. “Radio’s finest...”

Before Jasper can respond, Carney cuts in with, “I say, torch the whole government and be done with it, and the phoney monarchy too. Anarchy is the real tits-mcgee.” He grins with self-approval. “Anyway, that’s going well beyond the point. What I’m saying is that, as human beings, we all share a certain nature, right? Human nature. And Human nature is being an asshole, thas’ what I always say. Like a mouldy stew. We’ll call it Arsehole Stew, and lemme’ tell yeh the ingredients,” he raises a hand and ticks off his fingers. “Selfish Arseholes, thas’ the main ingredient. Self-serving, egotistical, etc. We also got Greedy Arseholes. Power-greed, money-greed, pleasure-greed, you know, the works. Then, there are Callous Arseholes, goes hand-in-hand with greed. The more power an’ money you get, the less you care ‘bout how you get it and who you’re chucking in the dump. I could go on, but I think you get my point. Human nature is being an asshole, and big bosses got the most human nature of all.”

“What are you saying in our particular case, then?” Max asks. “That everyone in this trial is looking out for themselves, and so, everyone’s guilty?”

“Thas right,” says Carney. “Do I believe Jacob would invent a machine to get them kids to do his dirty work for him? Absolutely. Do I believe those kids would go off on their own stupid agenda, then try’n save their own arses by blaming Jacob? Absolutely.”

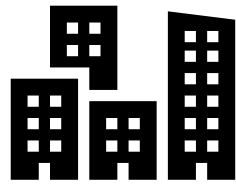
Max considers him. “So, if you had to vote for Jacob’s verdict right this moment, what would it be? Guilty or not?”

“Both,” says Carney, crossing his arms.

Albert scoffs. “You’ve only got one vote, mate.”

“Neither, then. I’d say, keep me out of it.”

PETRUS



5.

I'm nothing. Formless. Pure mind. *I think therefore I am.* I think so I exist. Right? Is that how it works? No body, but I know my name, who I am, why I'm here. *Adaline Nora Tour. Secondary-User. Juror.* Is that it? There has to be more. *Reader. Not journalist. OfficeCloud. Spanish. Swedish. Disconnected-brain. Neurotransmitters. Connect the dots. Dots. Pills. Organise. Hyperfocus. Medusas. Eels.*

Eels?

I am my mind. No form, no place. Real no-where. Not a computer-simulated Collective Plane. Not *No-Where*. Just...no-where.

But it isn't real, is it? It's all pretend.

I can see the pretend, as though I have eyes. Pretend eyes. Real sight.

A chromatic bolt sears across my vision. Thick, opalescent, lightning. A diving spear leaving a glittering trail, curving up and around and back down. A crystal roller coaster. It stands out against the backdrop of dark nothingness. Surging, whizzing, streaking, whirling, culminating into a knot, a sparkling loop, a cluster of brilliance. No-where and no-thing, no more.

Dark spaces in the loop start to fill, merging and reshaping, shifting, expanding. Forming. There's a rush of water, cyan and sapphire and aquamarine. It weaves through the metallic knot, lucid and glimmering, like malleable glass. Land and sea. Sea and land.

Giant orbs descend from the void above, spinning into freshly laid bodies of water. The knot flattens, forming a surface. Shards burst out, thousands of prismatic spikes, growing up and up, higher and higher like sharp, silvery trees. Bending, winding, connecting, growing. Tying together like ribbons. An assortment of shapes. Cubes,

spheres, cones, cylinders. Tall cubical shafts with nacreous dodecahedrons at their summits. Stained glass, gold panelling. Crowns that scrape the sky.

The birth of a city.

WAKE UP.

I lower my head, look through eyes, see arms, hands, legs, feet. My body. It's back— or I'm back in my body. My imaginal body. Either way, no longer a formless thought. Familiar again.

The city surrounds me. It envelops and overwhelms. I'm small here. A speck in a massive chrome labyrinth.

To my left, I see the orbs on the sea. Transparent, globe-shaped buildings, half submerged. The lower floors must be a walk through the ocean. In front is a horizon of skyscrapers, eclectic shapes, silver and white-gold plating, blue glass. Bridges and walkways wind through them, spiralling roadways, twirling roundabouts, all suspended in air. Spherical air-mobiles whiz around like humming-birds, in and out, over, under. Higher, above the roads and bridges, are floating buildings. Neon-coloured cubes. Rosebud-shaped pods. And a large, circular platform with more buildings. Its name comes to me. *Sky Isle*. The airborne city-centre.

I walk forward, momentarily unconcerned about the others or why the whole place is deserted. I wonder what it would be like to look down on the entire city from the edge of Sky Isle.

Imagine where you'll be, and you'll be where you imagine.

I glance around. Who said that? No one. I didn't hear anything. Still deserted. Still alone. Words unheard. Words felt.

I push out to get rid of them. It worked last time.

Yes, but last time they were your words.

“So, whose are they now?” I ask the air.

Mine.

Or in other words.

Yours.

“That’s helpful.”

Imagine where you’ll be, and you’ll be where you imagine.

“I don’t understand,” I say, searching for the words, feeling them spin and swirl.

Feeling words.

Stop feeling and start doing. Start imagining.

I consider the words. *Imagine where you’ll be...* I raise my eyes toward Sky Isle.

“I should imagine myself up there?”

For fuck’s sake, yes.

Well, there’s no need for that.

I close my eyes and think about being high above the buildings, higher than the floating bridges and hovering pods. I imagine standing on the edge of the floating isle, gazing over everything below. When I open them, I’m there, clouds swirling around my ankles, hundreds of shiny rooftops beneath, silver peaks glaring up like daggers.

It’s sickening.

I step backwards, dizzy, nauseous, and bump into someone behind me.

“A fear of heights strong enough to cross dimensions,” says Lazarus, wearing his stupid grin. “Interesting.”

“I don’t have a fear of heights,” I say, pushing past him to safer ground.

“Your enthusiasm for the edge of the isle would say otherwise.”

I try to glare, but the effort makes me dizzier. “Alright, take me back down.”

“I didn’t take you up.”

“Where are the others?”

“I believe they’re scattered around the city,” he replies, face full of smiley smiles.

Funny secrets. *hahHaaHAhAhhaa*. “Imagine where you’ll be, and you’ll be where you imagine.” Another smirk and he steps off the edge. Gone.

I sit on the floor and put my head in my hands, steadying my thoughts through the dizziness. I imagine myself in a place with the other jurors.

“Hey Adaline, you okay?”

I look up and Arlo’s bending over me. I stay still for a moment, waiting for nausea to flood. When it doesn’t, I breathe relief.

“Apparently, I’m afraid of heights,” I say, taking his hand, and he pulls me to my feet.

“You’re not going to like this then.” He motions over his shoulder to the tall, glass windows offering an expansive view of the sky.

I force myself to the window, bracing for the dizziness. The view is beautiful, the whole city before us. Sky Isle with its orbiting platforms and icicle towers, all at eye-level.

“I feel fine, actually,” I say, shrugging. “I knew I wasn’t afraid of heights.”

“Or maybe,” says Lazarus, sliding next to me, “you just don’t like *wobbly* heights.”

“It’s not wobbly,” says Petrus, hunched over a silver roundtable in the middle of the room, covered in papers and architectural models. “It’s working perfectly.”

“I see. Perhaps, Adaline is just particularly sensitive then,” Lazarus says, flashing me a look.

“Sensitive to what?” I ask.

“The imaginal mechanism of the central isle,” Petrus says, looking dreamily down at the blueprints laid out across the table. “It’s a torque. He’s suggesting that you’re sensitive to the torsion, but that would defeat the point.” He pauses a moment and decides to elaborate.

“Imagine a sort of ruler attached to a spinning top.” He takes some metal scraps on the table and attempts a visual, balancing a thin strip on top of a ball. “The radius is spinning at so fast a speed—faster than anything remotely possible in the Physical—that the empty space is filled, creating a solid surface. It’s not *actually* possible, I don’t think—”

“It *is* possible precisely *because* you think,” says Lazarus.

Petrus concedes with a nod. “I just meant, mathematically...”

“Mathematically, what?” Lazarus cries. “Is the Fourth Dimension not mathematically possible? The fifth, sixth, seventh? Twentieth?”

Petrus opens his mouth to reply, but Lazarus keeps going. “A question for the jury. What do the universe, a brain, and a city have in common?”

Max rubs his hand together, grinning because he loves deciphering patterns.

“They all function by a perfectly logical and intricate design.”

It’s Petrus who speaks.

“Well done,” says Lazarus, clapping loudly, slowly. *Smack...Smack...Smack*. Justice Solstus in slow motion. He looks around at the rest of us. “*They all have a perfectly logical and intricate design.*” He grins. “I believe Petri Dish has a tale to tell.”

Petrus’s face falls.

“Petri Dish?” asks Albert.

“It’s what my brothers call me,” Petrus answers quickly, “a nickname—because I’m small. We’re half Samoan. Mum comes from a family of massive men, and my three brothers got the genes. Natural giants. And, well, as you can see, I’m not. I’m small.”

Atticus glances out of the window at the labyrinthine cityscape, then back at Petrus. “I don’t know about your brothers, but nothing I see here is small.”

Bewilderment crosses Petrus’s face, and he seems unexpectedly touched.

“A perfectly logical and intricate design, you might say,” says Lazarus.

Atticus throws Lazarus a glance before turning back to Petrus. “Tell me, as someone skilled in this ‘perfectly logical and intricate design,’ do you believe that the invention of a mind-control machine is possible?”

For a moment, Petrus is quiet. “Yes,” he says eventually, “yes, I do believe it’s possible. In a way, I believe it exists already.”

Dr Eto motions for him to elaborate.

“Smartphones. Tablets. Social media. That new Slimscreen XV that hovers in the air. I hear you can programme them to follow you around. We’re constantly tuned in everywhere, plugged into every outlet. Like zombies, except instead of brains, we feed on data, media-driven stimulation coming at us from all angles.”

He gives us a knowing smile. “I know it’s been said a million times, and people roll their eyes because *you’ve got to move with the times*, and that’s fair enough. Trust me, I recognise that I’m hardly one to talk. I’ve never known a world without all this technology. All I’m saying is, a society that’s constantly plugged in, completely dependent on devices and cyber-communication, well, mind-control is practically easy. There’s nowhere the virus can’t reach you.”

Callum scoffs. “If you’re suggesting that acute marketing skills are a form of mind-control, then lock me up right next to Jacob.”

“Right you are,” says Jasper. “It just goes back to words being a form of manipulation and that being a form of mind-control. Playing the victim. Got anything new for us, huh?”

“What I’m talking about is more than just words,” Petrus says. “It’s images, videos, communication across platforms and countries being constantly at your fingertips, constantly flying at you like a swarm of bees. Something that you can never escape. It’s like having a harmful addiction to something that you can’t function in society without. Something that can become a virus of the mind in a society teeming with experts, specifically trained in the art of infection.”

HEY YOU.

I look around. Feeling words again. This time, everyone else is too.

“Who said that?” Callum asks.

“The virus in your mind,” says Lazarus, smiling.

Callum rolls his eyes. “If you’re seriously—”

HEY YOU.

I look again. The other’s look too, this way, that way, but the voice is all around us.

“Storytime,” Lazarus says, clapping, and a massive video screen explodes before us like a firework.

Petrus's Tale

Choco-Ban Balls

HEY YOU

“Yes, YOU. Sitting on that sofa there. Well, don't look so surprised!”

A scene comes into focus on the flat screen TV, and you're greeted by a man with a Cheshire cat smile.

You know this man. Everyone does. Today he wears a blush powdered wig, tall and stiff, like a French dandy. Like freshly swirled candy floss. Like a spiralling topiary. On the left side, a pin, a silk black rose. You know this man, this amaranth star. He's fuchsia skin and ruby lips, strawberry eyes and rouge apparel. The height of fashion.

The jacket. Origami Collection. Stiff around the torso like a plastic tube. Like an iron pipe fitting. Like a baton. It fans out at the hips in a triangular hem. Sleeves like conchiglie pasta. The height of fashion.

Each week, different high-end designers pay him millions to wear their clothes. This week, he wears Vivienne Rousseau and Ikuro Murakami. The shops will sell out. It's expected. A backorder will be ready. Busy hands, supply chain cuffs. The height of fashion. Labour paid in air. This will sell out too. Their profit will be plenteous. Millions and millions and millions.

HEY YOU

“Yes, YOU. It's ME, Tricky Bigwig. Boy, have I got an exciting show for YOU. We're diving deep into the history of foodstuffs to have a look at the turning point in our diet

culture, working culture, everything-culture! It's the present and the future. I think you know what I'm talking about. *Choco-Ban Balls.*"

You glance at the bowl of colourful little balls on your coffee table. You've eaten sixteen today, and that makes you a pig. But boy, does Tricksy Bigwig know what he's talking about. Without them, you would need a fridge. You would need a freezer! You would need a fully decked-out kitchen like they used to have in the old times, the Pre-Neo times. What is now your three-bed condominium in Cadre-Consumer Commorancy UK4-12 would have been a two-bed flat with a kitchen. But that's a problem of the past; kitchens are obsolete. This saves energy which saves the world and saves you money.

HEY YOU

"Yes, YOU. Check out the bottom of the screen. That's a code just for YOU. Use it to get twenty-five percent off at any Choco-Ban Bizness Bazaar. Tell your friends to tune in now to get a code of their own! Text them, Chirp them, DM them, Message them, Pop them, Gram them, Comment them, Word them, Peep them, Tag them, Hash them, Buzz them, Beep them, Poke them, Tick them, Fizz them, Whip them, Smack them, Kick them, Zap them, Pinch them, Choke them, Soak them, Stab them, Drown them, Burn them, Shoot them—whatever you have to do to reach them, do it now! Quickly! Something as important as this cannot wait! Do not be overlooked. Make yourself known. Make your voice heard. You have important things to say. Post them. Tag me, Tricksy Bigwig, along with the link at the bottom of the screen. Sing it with me now. I-P-P-I-I...G-R!"

You sing it because it's an uplifting reminder. Important people posting important information garners response.

“And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. If you’re watching this, I already know you’re an important person. Post and get the reactions you deserve.”

He’s right. It is important. And so are you. You’ll be competing with everyone else trying to reach everyone else. You better make sure you cover all CyberSphere and SocialSphere platforms or you might get lost in the influx. A line of text buried in the depths of an inbox. Overlooked. Unacknowledged. Forgotten. Left out. Dismissed. Deleted. Or worse. The direst thing of all. *Ignored*.

You better post the code publicly first, along with your important thoughts, and fast. Otherwise, you might not be seen. You might disappear. You better check in and check on and check out and—oh no.

Oh no, no, no, no, no. You’re not connected. Your arm, it’s *cordless*. Your hand, *empty*. How are you not dead?

Okay, don’t panic. Think. How long have you been cordlessly sitting on the sofa with empty hands? Look. On the table. There it is. Your CC-Connector. Your oblong heart, dark and drained and dying, cord dangling over the table edge attached to nothing. Breathe. You can fix this. Just reattach it. People do it all the time. Just pick a socket, how about the wrist? Good. Plug it in, and your brain will do the rest; you’ll be charged in no time. But hurry. And try not to think about how much living you lost.

You did it. You’re back. Thank the technocratic gods for Tricksy Bigwig, or it may have been too late before you realised. You might not have been able to come back. You could have missed too much. Don’t think about it. Post the code. Live.

“And we’re back talking about Choco-Ban Balls. Can you believe we’ll be celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Neo-Continental Confederation’s official Ban? That’s

twenty years since The Last Bite. Let's have a look at the Supreme Minister of Neo-Scandinavia taking that last bite of...does anyone remember? It was last week's Tricky Trivia answer...

"...If you said *cured-lamb's leg*, YOU'RE RIGHT. Let's get an image of that on the screen. Viewer discretion *is* advised. There he is, taking The Last Bite before Choco-Ban Balls became the official and only source of human sustenance. An iconic moment, however revolting pronged carcass might seem to us now. Just think, in the Pre-Neo times, when our Neo-Continental Territories were divided into *countries* and *cities*, they actually had a bidding war over which *country* got to host The Last Supper, and which Head of State would take The Last Bite. As we know, it took place in Territory N8 of Neo-Scandinavia, known as 'Oslo' at the time. What a strange time to be alive! A time when people in the Neo-Continental regions consumed and genetically modified animal carcass, and drank liquids produced by animal lactation. They consumed the pericarp of angiosperms, roots, bulbs, chemical compounds, hydrogenated oils, red dyes, yellow dyes, blue dyes, rainbow dyes, evaporated liquids. They wasted resources and money and energy on production, farming, manufacturing, cooking, and preparation of hundreds of thousands of various foodstuffs. And it didn't end there! Once harvested or manufactured or, yes, *slaughtered*, these foodstuffs were packaged and transported to a multi-commodity Bizness Bazaar (what they called *supermarket*). Then, the Bizness Bazaars displayed this disorienting variety of sustenance to people like YOU and ME."

Tricky makes an 'O' of astonishment with his rouge-tinted lips and brings his hands to his cheeks. Black velvet gloves with rubies sewn in swirly designs. Rings on each finger. Rose quartz and black diamond. Ritzy. Plush. The height of fashion.

HEY YOU.

“Yes, YOU. I’m talking about YOU. You would’ve had to go to the *supermarket* yourself and sort through all the foodstuffs. Then, you’d take it all home to *prepare* and *cook*. The variety of ways is excessive. Let’s get a few images on the screen. That, there. That’s a *microwave*. Pre-Neos used this appliance to heat foodstuffs quickly using electromagnetic radiation. Another one. Yes, look. An *oven*. It appears like a large microwave, but it’s actually a heated chamber box in the wall and could take *hours* to heat foodstuffs. Preposterous! One more, have a look. Yes, a *stovetop*. Pre-Neos would stand over this heated table surface, stirring and whipping and flipping and whisking, waiting for it to *cook* their foodstuffs. Can you imagine? It’s self-imposed slavery!

“But that’s enough history lessons for one episode, don’t you think? Let’s focus on better days, the now and the future! We don’t have to worry about Pre-Neo’s foodstuffs industry and self-imposed slavery thanks to Choco-Ban Balls. A single source of nutritional sustenance in a variety of flavours! No preparation, no labour, no self-slavery. Just quick, easy, satisfying sustenance. Mmmm-mmmm! Now we’ve got to take a break, so we’ll leave you with this week’s Tricky Trivia! If you know the answer, you know what to do! Post it, post it, post it. It doesn’t count if it isn’t posted. Are you ready? LET’S GO.”

You shift forward eagerly. Tricky Trivia is the highlight of your week. You always post the right answer. You garner lots of response. You feel alive.

HEY YOU

“Yes, YOU. Today’s Tricky Trivia question is...”

What TWO things do Choco-Ban Balls prevent Neo-Confederate Cadre-Consumers
from having to do?

You've got this. It's time to post, post, POST. Hurry, before too many correct answers are posted. You want to be as close to the top as possible. The top gets the most response. Go, GO.

Two things Choco-Ban Balls prevent Cadre-Consumers from having to do:

1. Disconnect
2. Break during their Corpo-Cadre service hours to consume *foodstuffs*

It's correct, you know it is. But you need to stand out. You've got to be noticeable if you want to be noticed. So, you add a parenthetical side note: *(any break in one's Corpo-Cadre service hours should be approved and spent consuming Corpo-Commodity, not sustenance.)*

It's perfect. And look, Tricky Bigwig's back with his Cheshire-cat smile.

HEY YOU

He's pointing at you. Yes, YOU. You, smarty-pants, you.

"And we're back to see how YOU fared in Tricky Trivia..."



...On the other side of the camera, miles and miles from where you are, is the Corpo-Control Centre in Territory UK1. The First Clinician is giving a lecture on Corpo-Control Through Technocratic Media to all Control Research Disciples. There's a guest speaker today.

The face of their very own institutional network, Corpo-Community TV. All CR Disciples know his face. He's very famous. Very, very famous. When he steps into the auditorium, there's a roar of applause.

Tricksy Bigwig reins in their adoration, plays it up, milks it. Puts a hand to his ear. *I can't hear you.* Louder they clap, louder they shout. He flaps his hands toward himself. *Keep it coming, keep it coming.* Finally, he spreads his arms, giving himself to them as a prize for their love.

Here he is, here he is. Fresh off the air. The face of Corpo-Control. The one and only, Tricksy Bigwig.

The First Clinician steps forward. "Catechism Three, Virus of Mind," he says, and hundreds of fingers begin hurriedly tapping on keyboards, *clck-clck-clck-clck-clck*. "There are six primary components to effectively execute Corpo-Control through Mind-Virus in technocratic media. First component," *clck-clck-clck-clck-clck*, "create memorable and charismatic Commercial-Character to use as a medium for administering 3C Process. Do we remember the 3C's...?"

"Convince, Condition, CONTAMINATE!" chime the Disciples.

Tricksy Bigwig swings his finger to the tune of their response. "And who are we infecting with the 3Cs?" Tricksy yells.

"The Neo-Continental Confederation Audience!" they yell back and break into cheers.

The First Clinician resumes his lecture. "Once you have convinced and conditioned NCC Audience that the Commercial-Character is a celebrity *for* the Corpo-Consumer, that he exists solely for them, you will be able to capably, comprehensively, and consistently administer viral mind-infections through all media outlets. This transitions the Commercial-Character

into a primary Contaminant, the medium through which you achieve character-contamination of Audience. As we know, character-contamination is one of five essences of control...”

After the lecture and a phenomenal encore by Tricksy Bigwig the Commercial-Character, the First Clinician and his celebrity creation retire to the Corpo-Control Executive Lounge. There, they sit at a marble table across from two others, the Corpo-Control Communications Expert and the recently-appointed Territory US3 Ambassador to Control.

A server comes to take their lunch order. The First Clinician orders beef stroganoff with pearl shallot and white mushroom sauce. Tricksy Bigwig orders fig and prosciutto stuffed quail with chips instead of rosemary potatoes. The Communications Expert orders mussels in white wine sauce. The US3 Ambassador orders an 8 oz. sirloin wrapped in hickory bacon and a potato-macaroni salad.

The Ambassador bemoans the First Clinician for not ordering the Texas grass-fed filet mignon.

“I don’t eat American beef,” is his response.

“This ain’t American beef, it’s *Texan* beef. Fine as boomtown silk. Us Texans, we know a thing or two ‘bout a cut o’ red meat. The whole supply comes straight from my ole’ pawpaw’s ranch on the outskirts o’ Dallas, so this ain’t my first rodeo. I’ll vouch for quality myself.”

“America. Texas. It is the same,” responds the First Clinician. “When in UK1, I eat Russian cuisine because I know it’s good. Fresh from Moscow. When in US3, I go to Dallas, and I eat grass-fed steaks, okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Just remember Texas is one of the only territories left breeding real, organic cows to manufacture beef. I think the only others are BR6, AR3 and 4, proolly New Mexico in

US4. Definitely not Russia. Last time there was a live animal in Russia, I was a babe on a teat.

Who knows what sorta beef they're using in that stroganoff."

The server returns with their meals.

"Tell me..." the Ambassador squints to read the server's nametag.

"CC Server Tito6, Ambassador," the server says.

"Tito6?" cries Tricksy Bigwig. "We're in the T's already?"

"Yes, Tito's 1-5 and I finished our training last month, Mr Bigwig, sir."

"We're really mowing through them, aren't we?"

"Tell me, Tito6," says the Ambassador, "you got any idea where they're getting the beef they use in the Russian dishes?"

"Beef, Ambassador? I beg your pardon, but I'm not sure I understand."

"We condition their brains not to retain any sensitive-terminology that they hear during their Corpo-Cadre service hours, and to process all food-stuffs as Choco-Ban Balls," explains the Communications Expert, "otherwise, we risk exposure."

"Ah! I hear ya.' Good thinking that," says the Ambassador, "so he thinks he's serving...what?"

Tricksy Bigwig flashes a strawberry grin. "Hey you. Tito6. What is it you're serving today?"

"Choco-Ban Balls, Compound 6, Mr Bigwig, sir," replies the server, adjusting his nametag.

Tricksy grins and the Ambassador rumbles with laughter. "So, he doesn't process this big ole' hunk o' steak I got here? Fires-o-hell! Excellent work you've done here," he says to the Communications Expert, "Choco-Ban Balls, HA! Not in *my* Confederation. Can you imagine being so simple and gullible? Cadre-Consumers, man, I just don't know."

“We all play our parts, Mr Ambassador,” says Tricksy Bigwig, motioning to his absurd clothes.

“Yes,” the First Clinician agrees. “Virus of Mind fourth component states that correct role distribution within systematic-network hierarchy is imperative for infecting NCC Audience.”

“Translation?” The Ambassador looks to Tricksy.

“We each play a necessary part in the Corpo-Control system, and that’s what makes it possible for us to control the Confederation masses.”

The First Clinician nods. “Yes. All control begins with infection of mind.”



HEY YOU.

There you are. Back on your sofa, scrolling through channels, waiting for the latest episode of Tricksy Bigwig. Scrolling and scrolling. Mindlessly scrolling. Hollowly scrolling.

There he is! Tricksy!

Hold on.

That’s not Corpo-Community TV. That’s...Wider World Network?

How odd to see Tricksy on WWN. He’s always saying what a snoozefest it is. The most tedious network in all the TeleSpheres.

A scene comes into focus. There he is; the man with the Cheshire cat smile. You stay on WWN because you know this man. Anything featuring Tricksy Bigwig deserves your attention.

You recognise the blush powdered wig he wore last week, tall and stiff, like a French dandy. Like freshly swirled candy floss. Like a spiralling topiary. Fuchsia skin, ruby lips, strawberry eyes, rouge apparel. Torso tube jacket, conchiglie sleeves, triangular hem. Origami Collection. Vivienne Rousseau. Ikuro Murakami. The height of fashion.

He's never repeated an ensemble before.

You increase the volume. He's sitting at a table with friends. What's he saying? Listen. Listen. Let's see what he's saying. Tricksy's large friend, the one with the old-timey cowboy hat and the bushy black beard, he's asking a question.

"...so he thinks he's serving...what?"

Tricksy turns to the camera with his Cheshire-cat grin.

HEY YOU.

He's looking at you. Is he talking to you?

"Hey you. Tito6. What is it you're serving today?"

There's an off-camera response. "Choco-Ban Balls, Compound 6, Mr Bigwig, sir."

COMPOUND 6???? How *dare* they serve Tricksy Bigwig the muck that is Compound 6? You wouldn't serve your greatest enemy the factory-recalled disaster that was Choco-Ban Compound 6.

The camera adjusts so that the shot is focused on Tricksy and his cowboy-hat friend. They laugh and laugh.

"So," says the cowboy hat, "he doesn't process this big ole' hunk o' steak I got here? Fires-o-hell! Excellent work you've done here. Choco-Ban Balls, HA! Not in *my* Confederation. Can you imagine being so simple and gullible? Cadre-Consumers, man, I just don't know..."

“We all play our parts, Mr Ambassador,” says Tricksy. He points out his divine Origami Collection ensemble.

The camera shifts to another of Tricksy’s friends. A gaunt-faced, grey-haired giant. “Yes, it is Virus of Mind, fourth component...”

You don’t understand what he says. It’s all technical terms and executive gargon. The cowboy doesn’t understand either. He needs Tricksy’s help (don’t we all?).

The camera zooms in on Tricksy Bigwig. “We each play a necessary part in the Corpo-Control system, and that’s what makes it possible for us to control the Confederation masses.”

The Corpo-what system? What is he talking about? What sort of episode is this? And on the Wider World Network? What’s going on?

HEY YOU.

“Yes, you,” says Tricksy, directly into the camera, “*you*, Tito6, hello? Is there a reason you’re still standing here?”

“My apologies, Mr Bigwig, sir,” says the same off-camera voice. “I just wanted to make sure there was nothing else you’d like to add?”

“To add?”

“Yes, to add...to your order, Mr Bigwig, sir?”

“Actually, yeah, bring me some ketchup.”

The camera backs away from Tricksy Bigwig until the whole table is in view. What are they eating? Those aren’t Choco-Ban Balls. That looks like...*animal carcass*. It can’t be. You live in a Banned Confederacy. It’s outlawed. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t.

Of course, he didn’t. This is Tricksy Bigwig.

Are you really going to believe some trash show on the Wider World Network? You've never even heard of this show. What's it called? Ah, yes, there in the corner. *Undercover Exposure*. Obviously, it's unauthorised fake news garbage. You're not falling for it. You've known Tricky all your life. You've grown up with him. He wouldn't lie to you.

You turn off the TV. In your hand is your heart, connected and fully charged. Go on, tune in. Lie back with a bowl of Choco-Ban Balls and free your mind.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Jasper says, shaking his head. “Another Gen-Z marshmallow crying over the cows. I hope you’re not suggesting we eat vitamin balls all day? That’s all we need.”

“How astutely you’ve grasped the point,” says Albert.

“It’s not about veganism or the meat-industry,” Petrus says. “It was an extreme example of a society built around a constant connection to technology. How masses can be controlled by powerful technocratic elites using systematic programmes to cultivate persuasive language and persistent outreach. It’s exaggerated, sure, but not totally unrecognisable.”

“Persuasive language is *not* mind-control,” Callum says. “The only thing you demonstrated was a clever marketing campaign.”

“Define marketing,” says Arlo.

Callum smirks. “Research, organisation, management, and processes involved in exchange relationships. Systematically determining, creating, and communicating to consumer expectation or requirement in a way that’s profitable.”

“Yeah, but they weren’t just selling Choco-Ban Balls, were they?” Arlo replies. “All other food sources were banned...kind of eliminated the consumers’ freedom of choice.”

“Right, but how did they get to that point in the first place? I’m going to assume through an exceptional marketing campaign that convinced consumers the food-stuffs ban was something they wanted, yeah? That Choco-Ban Balls being their only food option was a good thing. Look, I’m not saying it’s *right*, but we’re not here determining right from wrong, are we? We’re here to determine whether Buryakov and Lang were *mind-controlled*. How’re we gonna do that if we can’t even agree on what mind-control is? Here’s how I see it: buying into a genius marketing campaign doesn’t eliminate

freedom of choice. Those consumers didn't *have* to eat food balls all day. They didn't have a chip planted into their heads that controlled their movements without their say, did they? It's manipulation on the grandest level, perhaps. But it isn't mind-control."

"They did have to eat food balls all day because real food was banned," Petrus says.

"They didn't seem to mind."

"What about them servers, then?" Carney grunts. "Titos bein' brain-conditioned not to see real food? Sounds pretty mind-controlly to me."

Callum nods. "Sure, that could have been an example of mind-control. Did those servers have their brains altered? Were they microchipped? Cyborgs? What sort of 'conditioning' are we talking?"

"*Super* conditioning," Petrus responds. "Brainwashing, essentially."

"Okay, so not mind-control. They were somehow convinced that they weren't looking at real food or hearing words like *beef* and *stroganoff*? Not sure how that's possible, sounds like Titos are idiots, but it's your story, and if you say it's brainwashing, then it's brainwashing. It ain't mind-control."

"Here, here," Jasper grunts, nodding approvingly.

"So, you don't believe brainwashing is a form of a mind-control?" Atticus asks.

"Does it matter what I believe? Aren't we supposed to be looking at facts, here?"

Albert laughs. "What facts?"

"Shut up, Bertie."

Atticus leans on the roundtable. "We need to come to an understanding of what constitutes mind-control, or we'll never get anywhere. That might be something all of us should think about tonight. What constitutes mind-control to *us*? And while I disagree

with them in certain respects, I have to say, Callum and Jasper are the only two of us to have clearly and resolutely expressed a position at this point.”

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s the most singular, narrow position they could have,” Albert cries. “All they’ve done is find the bottom line. They’ve made something complex into something simple because that’s easy. There’s a lot more to consider for those of us actually approaching this critically.”

“Or, perhaps you’re overthinking it, Bertie,” Callum says. “Maybe, there simply has to be a bottom line.”

“I’ve got a feeling Cal’s gonna start us off right tomorrow,” Jasper shouts, slapping him on the back. “Now that we’ve got all this ninny-whinnying out the way, *was it manipulation or manipulation? Okay, so what sort of manipulation? WHO CARES? We ain’t here to speculate whether these kids were manipulated. We’re here to assess the machine for literal *mind-control*. Manipulation can happen inside the mind, outside the mind, behind the mind, under the mind—anywhere. That’s a whole other problem, maybe one that’ll come up later. But not *in here*. In here, we’re looking for *mind-control*.”*

“Well, Jurors,” Lazarus says, clapping, “you’ve reached the end of day one. Are you ever-so-much closer to understanding? To realising the potentials of NeuroPath? Are you one step closer to a verdict?”

Looks are exchanged, Jasper glares, Albert sighs. I consider the questions. Are we any closer to understanding...anything? When I think about the potential of this technology, I don’t know where to begin or what direction to go. Have we gotten anywhere with figuring out what this machine can do? The Fourth Dimension? Imaginal Planes, Anchors, Copycat States? Is mind-control even possible? It reminds me of

something Dr Weltz said. *You lot will get nowhere.* It's out of context. She meant *No-Where*, the Collective Plane. Except, it's not out of context. I think we have more questions now than we did going in. Perhaps, we really will get nowhere.

Lazarus breaks into a slippery smile. "Don't fret," he says, "it's only the first day. You *should* have more questions now than you did coming in. That means you are in fact closer to understanding. Before, you were limited to a three-dimensional world. Now you see the connection between that world and a new world. A world of possibilities. Now you realise the magnitude of the task you've been given: three days to unearth the mysteries of the NeuroPath." He laughs. "Well, *two* days."

"No pressure," Albert mumbles.

I study Lazarus, thinking about my own thinking, how I had been thinking the very same things he said aloud. Thinking about thinking...and wondering. Could he read my mind?

HahAhAHahahAAhAHHAaahaHa

Oh Adaline, I am your mind.

EDENBRIDGE



6.

That evening, I lie on my bed and stare up at the Tudor ceiling. White paint, dark wood rafters. I'm in the Tiger-Lily room, and it's everything royal and quaint. Shiny, mahogany panelling, an oval wall mirror with a gilded frame. An old-timey writing desk, built for parchment paper and letters in Latin. My bedding is deep scarlet with an assortment of purposely mismatched cushions, now a heap on the floor.

The room's beautiful, as is my room at the Gold Olympus. Beautiful and expensive. The opposite of disappointing; but tonight, I'm disappointed. My eyes gloss over intricate door carvings, elegant silk curtains, two armchairs in a breakfast nook by the window. I linger on the giant oil painting which I can tell has been hung in place of a telly. Some royal lady in a red-gold gown and one of those French hoods. So beautiful, lavish, ornate.

So ordinary.

None of it moves. There are no hidden surprises, no secrets. Nothing to discover, nothing that shocks, bewilders, wows. The colours are bland, stagnant. Everything's dull and predictable. Three-dimensional.

I fear I'm becoming a 4D snob.

In the living room, there's a fully stocked bookshelf, so I abandon my ordinary Tudor bedroom in favour of it. Atticus and Carney are there. Atticus is in a chair next to the shelf reading *Anna Karenina* and Carney's noncommittedly flipping through a Hever Castle souvenir book.

I head to the bookshelf, browsing the titles. *Sense and Sensibility*. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. *Ivanhoe*. *Treasure Island*. I'm reaching for a copy of *The Hobbit* when I spot a beautifully illustrated version of *The Canterbury Tales* with a smaller book wedged inside. Kafka's *The Trial*. I put it back. I'm at maximum capacity on the subject of trials.

I look down at *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* begins on the right page and on the left is a striking illustration, an illuminated manuscript depicting a poor beggar woman, framed by gold Latin lettering. I bring it with me to the sofa.

Carney smacks the souvenir book shut. "You think it'd bloody kill 'em to set up a telly in here? Give us a film night like they do in the Olympus? Hell, I'd watch any of that crap they were offerin'. The one with the dog'n'cat, Lilo-n-Oaty or summin'. Even whatsa-one, girl'n' green gables. Anything. Toy Story for the fourth time? Abso-fucking-lutely."

Atticus peers over *Anna Karenina*. "It's only three nights."

"What're we 'spose to do with ourselves?"

I point to the bookshelf.

Carney grunts, slumping in the armchair.

Atticus reaches down to the shelf, picks up the first book his fingers touch, and tosses it over to Carney. "There you go."

It's my rejected copy of *The Hobbit*.

Carney inspects the cover, a dragon, wings drawn, curving over mountaintops. He flips through the pages, frowning, and shoves it to me, bobbing his head for me to put it back. “Buncha’ fairy-goblin *falalore*. What am I gonna do with that?”

Atticus rests his book on his lap. “If Albert were here, I have a feeling he’d say, *read it.*”

Carney sinks lower into the armchair, wrinkles his frown further, and looks like a toad.

“*Falalore?*” I ask.

“Elves, pixies, wizards, faff.”

“Like the mythical gods in your story? The two-faced lady?”

“Hey,” Carney snaps, pointing a finger in my face, “what goes on in my Imaginal Plane’s got nothin’ to do with what goes on out here. Things’re different there. They just pop outta’ nowhere. The stories, I mean, the stuff and the people—everything. They’re just there. Like they’d been there all along, inside yer mind, waitin’ fer yeh to come’n visit, y’know? Readymade. Easy.”

“I know what you mean,” says Atticus. “Moral, Lark Deacon, Diabolus; they were just there. Being in my Plane was being in a world where everything was mine, but only half of it discovered. I knew, without a doubt, that every single thing in there was supposed to be there. Except, you all, of course. You were the only things in my Plane I could sense were foreign entities. Now, this is based solely on my own experience, but I honestly don’t think it would’ve been possible for something to come into my Plane, or be done in my Plane, that I wouldn’t know about. That I wouldn’t sense as *other*, the way I sensed all of you were essentially *others*. You weren’t mine. Am I making any sense...?”

Carney's nodding. "I understand yeh completely. Felt exactly that, I did. Exactly that. Ain't no one comin' up here and getting away with any mind-control trickery. No way. I'd've sensed that like a fire on my fur-trail."

"It's true. I hate to jump to early conclusions, but it *did* feel rather impossible, didn't it? Or at least, something you'd catch onto if someone were attempting it. But please, don't let that influence you, Adaline. We've still a ways to go. Minds open, right?"

"Minds open," Carney agrees, and for a moment, he's thoughtful. Then he sticks his hand out. "Lemme see that *falalore* again."

I give him *The Hobbit*, and he tosses it behind him. "Next!" he shouts, laughing wildly.

"What happened to *minds open*?" I say.

"I like what I like."

"And what's that?"

"Films," Carney shoots back, "TV series. Preferably with a murder'n a detective. Or summin' with a dose of barbaric bloodshed. Vikings. Pirates. Ships and steel weapons. I'm not a hard chap to please." He shifts his weight forward. "But don't go bringin' me Sherlock Holmes or any o' that drivel-draggy. I'll watch it on the telly without all the frills and drop-curls. Don't needa' read anymore uppity genteel-sirs moaning about *preposterous scoundrels*. Get enough o' that from Ernie Flint."

I get up and return to the bookshelf. By the end of my rummage, I'm between *Treasure Island* and *The Sword in the Stone*. The first is a relatively obvious choice. The second is less convincing since it almost certainly falls into the realms of *falalore*. But, it's King Arthur—a Cornish hero. Plus, it's better than *Treasure Island*, and that's a fact. Not my opinion.

I return with my offering.

“Magical story of young King Arthur. More falalore, then? Wizards and that?”

“Like the wizard in your story?” I can’t help myself.

“Watch it,” Carney says, pointing again.

“Fine but hear me out. Did you know King Arthur’s supposedly based on a real guy?”

Carney shifts again. “Who?”

“I don’t know exactly, some general in the middle ages.”

“Are the stories not based on Cornish legend, also?” says Atticus. “Celtic myth and folklore.”

“Yes, exactly!” I nod at Carney hopefully.

Carney’s holding the book like it’s a dirty sock but begrudgingly gives it another inspection. After turning it over and flipping through some pages, he smacks it on his knee and leans back.

“Right, let’s give it a go, then. But only so you two’ll get off my back—and ‘cause I’m bored as nails.” He throws me a telling look, *on your head be it*, then opens to the first page, muttering “Cornish folklore, is it?” and begins to read.

DAY TWO



HEXTON LABS



7.

The next day, we're driven to the lab at eight and immediately prepped for our second day on the NeuroPath. I'm feeling especially chatty because I accidentally took an extra dose of Amphetedrine this morning. Sometimes my automated routine—unscrew bottle, tablet on tongue, swallow with water, back to sleep—becomes so habitual, I don't process doing it and double dose. Not often, but when I do, it just means I get an additional boost I probably don't need.

Dr Wells is connecting the wiring system on my suit, and I'm bombarding her with my hypotheses about my own Copycat State. When I run out of steam, I reach for my granola bar on the table to spike my blood sugar. Dr Wells takes this opportunity to say, "don't be surprised if you have no Copycat."

"What?" I cry, far more dramatically than I would on a single dose.

"Stop jerking the wires." She tugs the cord on my calf. "I have a theory."

"Can I hear it?" I eventually ask when she doesn't elaborate.

"Mm," she nods, "first, tell me. How strong were the Copycats you experienced?"

"How strong?"

"How vivid, how elaborate, how deeply were you pulled in?"

"Very," I reply, thinking of Atticus on his organ bowl hunt. "I held a lung and thought I was a doctor."

“This was the first Plane?”

I nod.

“And second?”

“Pretty vivid too,” I say, remembering the mushroom-cloud-hiding-symphony and Lazarus blasting a hole through Arlo’s chest. “We watched a play with dancing scissors and miming, and then Arlo got shot.” Dr Wells keeps threading wires. “In the *chest*,” I add for effect, “his blood sprayed all over us.”

“And third?”

“We were on a ship...but actually...” I consider that maybe there *was* a difference in pull between Atticus’s Copycat and Carney’s. A slightly thinner veil, a less dramatic trigger.

“And fourth?” she asks, not interested in details.

I think of how I started in Petrus’s Plane. Aware of myself instantly. Although, I did spend some time watching the creation of the city before I ‘woke up.’ I wonder if I was actually watching Petrus’s mind create his Plane? If so, was there even a Copycat at all? Or maybe *that* was the Copycat. But I was already awake...

“I’ll assume that Copycats’ hold over your lucidity diminished with each entry.”

“You know, I think you’re right,” I say.

Dr Wells doesn’t seem to view this as a revelation.

“Yes, I’ve had this theory for a while. But too few of us have entered so many different Planes in such a short time span, I couldn’t conclusively assess whether Copycats’ strength diminished with each entry.”

“So, by the time we get to my Plane, I won’t even have a Copycat?” I ask and feel double-dose levels of disappointment.

“You’re last day? Then, no, quite unlikely.” Seeing the disenchantment on my face, she shrugs and continues wiring. “If it makes you feel better, you can take a peppermint.”

I look at the bowl of wrapped candies on the table.

She pats my leg. “That’s it, all done. Send Max.”

I’m looking for Max when I notice Albert and Spirella admiring a cylindrical 3D hologram projected from the floor. It changes on rotation; first, it’s an aquarium, then a solar system with comets and meteors whizzing around, then a stampede of dinosaurs fleeing from a T-Rex. Seconds before it changes into a hot air balloon festival, the T-Rex looks like it’s going to jump right out of the projection, jaws wide, ready to chomp down on bystanders. Spirella steps back reactively, already half-laughing at herself when she bumps into Callum walking past. I don’t hear what he says, but I can tell by the way he smirks it’s some cringe-worthy variant of *you’n’me, how ‘bout it?* I move around to another side of the projection, pretending to admire it, accepting that this makes me categorically snoopy.

“Can you not take a hint?” Spirella’s asking.

Callum sticks with the expression of a swaggering cunt, so clearly not. “I know birds like you,” he says. “You’re a type. *No means maybe. Maybe means yes.*”

Albert moves next to Spirella. “Dallying with the bounds of sexual harassment a bit, no?”

“Alright, stand down.”

“You’re a tool,” Spirella says.

“The sharpest tool,” Albert adds.

Spirella laughs loudly, and Albert looks well-chuffed. They turn back to the projector. Callum leers from the sideline like a handsome Disney villain, then snarls, “you’re gonna regret that, Spirelly,” before storming off like a trust fund prat late for an appointment at the tantrum centre.

I find Max in the technician’s break room, eating a jam doughnut and drumming a pencil on the table. The guard at the door doesn’t even look at me as I go in. Max has his brain teaser book open, but he’s staring into space. I sit across from him. “Dr Wells is ready for you.”

He nods thoughtfully, then says, “what do you think Lazarus—the host, Lazarus—meant in Atticus’s Plane when he said, *I love this part?* Right before Atticus started his story, remember?”

I shrug. “What does he ever mean?”

“Yeah, he spits a lotta’ rubbish, I know. But how did he know ‘he loved that part’—Atticus was the first story.”

I think for a moment. “Well, he knew our full names and ages. If he really is a collective creation of our minds, maybe certain things that each of us is feeling can be...I dunno, *expressed through him*. Does that make sense? Like, maybe someone was really excited to hear a story, and it came out through Lazarus.”

“Yeah, I get you.” He’s not convinced. “It’s coincidental that the real Jacob likes stories too, innit? Says so in the book jacket of *Stories of the Fourth Dimension*. He likes harmony and patterns, but most of all, he likes stories.”

“It’s a little weird...”

“Hey Adaline,” Max says, glancing at the guard, “*who killed Cock Robin?*”

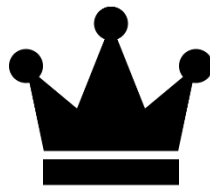
I laugh. "The sparrow."

"Aha!" Max cries, leaning back, grinning, "you're staying sharp. Good. We gotta' stay sharp. Sharper than the sparrow's arrow."

I hear the guard shift his gun over to the other arm and walk away. A few seconds later, a different guard takes his place.

"Better get suited up then," Max says, rising, "the mind of Callum Spencer awaits."

CALLUM



8.

Darkness.

Shadows that flit and fret against curved walls.

Echoing.

Hollow and ghostlike.

Alarm. Anxiety. Mistrust. Do you feel it?

Paranoia.

It flutters across and around, toward, through.

Disorienting. Violating.

Contaminating.

Don't let 'em take what's yours. Don't let 'em.

Don't let 'em hide in their sufferer's shawls,

hobbling and stumbling and pointing

at you.

Crooked fingers

at you. Screaming

PERSECUTOR.

Screaming and wailing.

PERSECUTOR.

Pointing at you. Blaming

you.

PERSECUTOR.

Persecuting YOU.

Don't let 'em take what's yours. Don't let 'em.

Don't let 'em make you a scapegoat,

because they were deceived, and you were not.

Bone of my bones. Flesh of my flesh. Screaming

PERSECUTOR.

Pointing at you. Blaming

you.

PERSECUTOR.

Persecuting YOU.

For hell hath no fury like a woman scorned

'Cept a movement of women with power.

*Angry and bold.
Pointing and blaming.
Screaming and wailing.
At you.
They think they can point at YOU?
Don't let 'em.
Don't let 'em take what's yours.*

Words crowd my mind, thoughts that aren't my own. They scream in my head.
PERSECUTOR. Frantic echoes passed between curved walls. Paranoia.

Heavy liquid sloshes over my feet. The air is putrid; the stink of rot. What is this place? A cavern or a tunnel or... There's an onset of tinkering squeals, tiny feet scampering across the rocks.

...a sewer?

I step forward, and something drags behind me. Sliding metal. I whip around. The darkness veils what's there, but my hands are at my neck, feeling the iron manacle around it, a looped chain binding me to the wall.

What the actual fuck is this place?

Callum's Imaginal Plane, right? I think the worst. That I'm lost in the rotten depths of Callum's mind, some hidden away perversion where he keeps his victims chained in an underground cesstunnel. The stuff of serial killers. Can you blame me?

Then I think...Callum. *Callum's* mind.

It occurs to me that my legs are bare. And my arms, shoulders, back. I bring my hands to my stomach, moving them over braided metal fabric. Some kind of skimpy chainmail dress. Maybe it's less of a murder thing and more of a sex thing. I don't know which is worse. Callum's sewer-self swinging a leather bullwhip or a machete.

Sewer-self. *Ha*. Can you have more than one self?

I finger the neck cuff again, attempting to pry it apart. It clicks open easily. Paranoia notices, pounces, hisses cryptic things. *That was too easy, too easy...as though, by design...*

I glance down the dark tunnels on either side. Maybe, this is a *Most Dangerous Game* situation, and it's time to start running. It wants me to. Paranoia. Winding around me. A black widow wrapping me in a silk spool, tighter and tighter, constricting my chest. This isn't panic. It's not a cyclone of bees. It's a dance. A lingering, serpentine dance.

P-A-R-A-N-O-I-A.

Run, it whispers, *he's coming*.

No, I tell myself, *he can't hurt you. It isn't real*.

He's coming. Run!

I can't be tricked by Paranoia because I know he'll never get me. I'll wake up. I always wake up.

Not this time.

Because I'm already awake.

Drip...drip...drip...

Water torture. There's a sudden pressure on my chest. The fear I get when the pig-man is coming. When I sense him, and I can sense him sense me. Somewhere in these tunnels. In the dark blue shadows.

Drip...drip...drip...

He's coming. Run!

I don't even know where to run.

RUN!

That Paranoia doesn't belong to me. It's somebody else's. Somebody wants me to run. But not me. I don't run from the pig-man. I wake up.

He's coming.

And someone is coming, running through the tunnel. Frantic footsteps loping through the stream. Louder, closer. He's coming.

Don't run.

That wasn't Paranoia. It wasn't me, either. There's a third silent voice here, thoughts intersecting. Feeling words.

He's coming.

My chest tightens again. What will I do if the pig-man appears and there's nowhere to go? I can't wake up.

The runner is closing on me. Plodding through the water. Nearer and nearer.

I should run.

Yes. Run.

Don't run.

I know I shouldn't listen to Paranoia, but it's curling around me. Tighter and tighter, compressing my chest, clutching my neck, strangling, smothering. I have to run. I have to get out of here. I can't wake up. If I don't run, I'll—

Find out who's in the blue shadows.

But, if the pig-man is coming—

You'll wake up.

I can't—

You can. You said it yourself. Paranoia can't trick you because you always wake up.

I remember the wrist-screen. My fingers find the blue square and rest on the keypad. It reminds me of walking home alone at night, phone pre-dialled to 9-9, a finger on the third. Mark from work laughed when I told him I did that, but he doesn't know what it's like to be a woman walking. A woman on her own. A woman in a city. At night. Or at home.

Home. It seems so far away. Separated by miles of time and space and worlds.

He's here.

A bedraggled man appears, clothes torn and dirty. I stiffen. He pulls a cigarette lighter from his pocket, producing a flame. It dashes the tunnel with low-light, revealing a bearded face, wild and frenzied, breathing heavily. Blood trickles down his temple, onto his cheek. *Drip...drip...drip*. He raises the lighter and the glow touches his forehead, a dark red gash.

I glance at my wrist-screen, ready to press it when he holds up a hand.

"Please." His voice is gravelly and desperate. "Please, wait." He hunches over to catch his breath.

I wait. Before any words can impress upon me. *My* decision. Paranoia disperses resentfully, smoke into the air. The other words remain. I feel them waiting with me.

The man straightens and pulls a newspaper from his fraying denim jacket.

It's right there in the paper.

"Look." He holds out *The Observer*. "It's right there in the paper." He edges with caution, like someone hoping to stroke a cat.

Eventually, I offer my hand, and he flips the pages, motioning to a small feature in the back.

Homeless Man Killed in Hit and Run Identified as Harold Lipton, 63

I look at him.

“It’s right there in the paper,” he says urgently.

It’s right there in the paper. It’s right there in the paper.

“You?” My voice cracks.

The man nods. “Harold Lipton,” he says, pointing to himself. “Harold Lipton.”

Harold Lipton. Harold Lipton. Harold Lipton.

“It’s right there in the paper.” He motions again, tapping his finger at the headline.

Homeless Man Killed in Hit and Run Identified as Harold Lipton, 63

Police are appealing for a witness following a fatal hit-and-run in Camden.

In the early hours of Tuesday, 01 January 2019, law enforcement responded to a call about a body found on Eton Road, NW1. Police discovered possessions in an alleyway near where the body was found which suggests the victim was homeless. The cause of death was determined to be two basilar skull fractures resulting from blunt trauma, indicating collision with an automobile—

The man snatches the paper, peering into the shadows behind me. A meerkat sensing a hawk. I turn as the glow from the cigarette lighter vanishes. Blue shadows devour.

Water shifts under each step as he backs away.

Someone’s coming.

Water plonks and splashes as he breaks into a run until he’s no more than echoes in the distance and I’m alone.

“Not alone,” says a voice behind me.

I turn, knowing who I’ll find.

“Just you?” I ask.

“Just me,” Lazarus replies, “just you.”

The murky water lights up. A silvery-blue glow, just bright enough to see the features which distinguish him. White stripe. Boring face and glittering eyes. Smiley smiles. *HaHaaAhaAHa*.

Cold sweeps through the tunnel and my skin prickles.

“Here.” Lazarus holds out his arm, and there’s a long coat draped over it. I don’t ask any questions before pulling it over myself. It looks like something a fairytale villain would wear, but it feels like warmth. Like closed curtains.

“Thank you,” I say. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They’re *around*. Trust me.”

It’s a strange request for an imaginary person to make. “How do you know?”

I know something you don’t know.

“The sewer is a figure eight,” he says, swirling his wrists. “I presume you know how two connective loops work.” I cross my arms, and he laughs. “Good, you’re wearing your mind glasses. Let’s see, what prescription are your lenses today? I’m sensing...Adernal. Yes, Adernal, 20mg dose, two hours old. But wait—there’s more! Amphexedrine. 5mg. One hour ago. What you would call a top-up, yes? And...hmm, a second Amphexedrine, 5mg. *Whoops-a-daisy*. Tell me, have your medications always cost you upward of five hundred pounds each month?”

“They’ve never been cheap.”

“But not always so steep. Still, you have the option to pay less for generic Vyvadol. Eighteen pounds flat, yes?”

“Yes, but—”

“It doesn’t work for you.” He waits. An invitation to elaborate. And I want to. I know it’s stupid. I’m possibly talking to myself, or a part of myself, blended up with parts of

everybody else. But who cares? There's someone who wants to listen. Actually, listen. And I want to be heard.

"It doesn't release evenly," I say, eyeing him. "Giant bursts in the morning. I'm itchy and frantic and productive for maybe three hours. The rest of the day I'm in a haze..."

And this is my brain, I want to say. I'm not going to fuck around with my brain. Especially after spending years figuring out the best combination and dosage of meds for *me*. Just to have it taken away by new legislation on mental health? As though ADHD brains are all the same and therefore, surely all responsive to time-release Vyvadol. Because brains are just squelchy pink balls sitting in our heads, all the same. The same. The same.

I don't say it because feels like a whinge.

Plus, I don't know what attributes of other peoples' minds he's got swimming in there. No point opening my mouth if I'm going to be cut off or talked over or laughed at, told to suck it up because *anything's better than nothing*.

Because it's not. If it doesn't treat your symptoms, you're not being medicated. If negative side effects are no longer on the side of anything, it's just a pill of negative effects. So my choices are either nothing or nothing. *No-treatment-nothing*, leading to regression, inability to collect my thoughts or conduct menial, everyday tasks (not to mention, my *job*), while others, with no sense of my experience, look in on my life and roll their eyes, saying things like *my generation didn't have 'ADHD,' we just had to pull our pants up and get on with things*. Or, *ineffective-treatment-nothing*, a pill to provide headaches, nausea, mood swings, anxiety, dry mouth, and insomnia, while leaving the ADHD well enough alone.

Really, there is no choice. So, I moved back with my parents, sold bits of furniture, work overtime three nights a week to pay for medication that allows me a productive, happy life. I'm *literally* the person the TFP was looking to create when they passed this legislation, the person with no option but to pump money into the string of pockets that start with private healthcare companies and end with Traditional Freedom.

But there's no point whinging about it, I suppose.

"Sure, there is," says Lazarus, circling me. "Adaline Nora Tour, age twenty-eight.

What drives your life?"

Waking up each day knowing that I have potential.

"Uh...waking—"

"Yes," he says, tapping his head. "Imagine if you could no longer afford to pay for that potential. Traditionally speaking, you would be free. No potential equals no debt."

"No potential equals no life."

"Or at least, nothing to drive your life. You would be stationary. Free." He stops.

"Another question. What makes you angry?"

Not being heard.

"Interesting," he says, circling again.

"Why?"

"Well, you stay quiet to avoid 'whinging,' yet you're angered by not being heard." He stops in front of me. "You must speak to be heard. Isn't that why you wanted to be a journalist once upon a time?"

Silver eyes strike me. They know me. I suddenly have the urge to touch him, to see if he's real. I suppose *real* isn't the right word. To see if he's...solid? Will my hand go straight through him? Is he a hologram? A simulation? Is he really a collective mental-

character created by our eleven minds? Is it possible that he's the actual Jacob Lazarus coded into the programme?

No. The court checked for that. And that's not even the main reason that's so unlikely. It's just...*too easy*. Too obvious. Jacob wouldn't suggest we use the NeuroPath if he coded the programme so blatantly. Right?

"Let me ask *you* something," I say.

Lazarus smiles. He thinks he knows my questions. "Please," he replies.

"Who is Harold Lipton?"

I know I could've asked anything, something more relevant to the trial, whether the words I feel are his when they're not my own, but my dusty journalism degree broke through, insisting I follow this lead. Lazarus peers at me like I've done something curious.

Someone's coming.

Footsteps down the tunnel. Voices.

"Next time," Lazarus says. Then he raises his hand and holds it out to me like a priest bestowing a blessing. I stare at him.

"Go on," he says, "see what's real."

I put my hand to his. It's solid, warm. Like a real hand.

But it's all pretend. All pretend.

"See you on the outside, Adaline Nora Tour," he says, backing away. "I do hope you'll continue thinking about the things we've been thinking about." The silver light fades with him, and I'm left in blue shadows.

HELLOOOO. ANYBODY DOWN THERE?

Dr Eto.

“Over here!” shouts Arlo.

I turn and just about make out the shadowy forms of Arlo and Albert.

“Where did you come from?” I ask.

“Down the tunnel,” Albert says, raising his hands to his mouth. “OVER HERE!”

“Did you see anyone else?” I ask.

“Just Albert. Why? Did you see someone?”

I consider telling him about Harold Lipton.

Don't.

I ought to tell someone.

Not yet.

Dr Eto reaches us, a few others plodding behind.

Arlo's still waiting, so I tell him it must have been a shadow. Why am I lying?

“There's a ladder this way,” says Callum, pushing his way forward.

“Thanks for this, by the way,” Albert says, motioning to his wet jeans.

Callum shoves past Albert, laughing snidely to show how sorry he is, and leads us down the tunnel. The ladder is bolted against the wall and goes up to a sinkhole overhead. When it's my turn to climb, I throw a final glance over my shoulder. But no one's there. Only darkness.

I pull myself onto a dirty, vibrating pavement. EDM plays in a building nearby, heavy bass pulsing like a heartbeat. My hands press against sticky liquids and broken glass. Throbbing, beating, repeating.

I get up and look down a road of illuminated signs. Neon pinks and poison green. Searing-white yellow. Nightclubs and strip clubs with marquee lettering. Places called

Indigo and Venu. Midnight Men's Club. Chandelier's Cabaret. Late night sex shops. Seedy bars with LED liquor logos. An electric cowboy perched on the horizon with a creaky arm and a Carlsberg. Lingerie-clad dolls moving mechanically in shop windows. Callum's personal Red-Light District. An over-ground underworld of wilful insomnia and itching night.

I turn, and the other jurors are mostly out of the sewer now. My eyes go straight to Spirella. She looks like a doll. Big round eyes, rosy circles painted on her cheeks, a little heart-shaped mouth. She reminds me of those Russian dolls that split in half and go inside one another.

Matryoshka.

The rest of her is squeezed into a vinyl catsuit, gleaming like a wet bin bag. But all of that is secondary to her hair, a crop of brown fuzz. Callum took Spirella's hair.

I feel myself get angry. It's not that it looks bad, I suspect Spirella could pull off anything; it's just the maliciousness of it.

Spirella made it known early on *she is her hair*. Her words, not mine. She told us at breakfast back in the Gold Olympus. There was a whole discussion. Callum called her vain; Spirella explained that it wasn't vanity, it was *creativity*.

"It's my canvas. Some artists use linen or fabric, some use walls, textiles, clay. I use human heads."

Callum huffed and puffed and scoffed and clucked, and eventually said, "so, you dye your hair a funny colour, and you're an artist?"

"Art is creative expression," Spirella told him, "the medium can be anything."

"Well, I coordinated my shirt and trousers this morning. 'Spose I'm an artist too."

"Fashion is art," Spirella said. "What you've done qualifies you as a ten-year-old."

More scoffs and huffs from Callum, eyes rolled a full 180 degrees, the first person to see the skin of their own eye sockets. Jasper chuckled and shook his head. The wise old centaur who's seen it all before. "A Pandora's Box you don't wanna' open," he told Callum. "Women and their clothes...might never get it to shut again." Sniggers.

Anyway, you get the point. Spirella is her hair, and it's unlikely to have slipped Callum's mind. Spirella's shaved head was the chain around my neck. Her catsuit, my chainmail dress. It's something stolen. The loss of identity, of self-ownership, volition. Stripped naked. It's vulnerability. Humiliation. Intimidation. A handsome, chiselled message about the order in this Plane, the rules, and the roles.

Callum's making his way to a place called *Kings' Cabaret* with a tacky light-up crown above the door. He and Jasper pause to snicker at the mechanical dolls in the display, then go inside. I spot Rosalie wearing a pinstriped dress, red and white, buttoned high at the neck. A thin, black belt to accentuate her small waist and a bell-shaped skirt. Golden hair wrapped around mint green rollers, tucked under a sheer bathing cap. It's not a completely outrageous look, not like Spirella and me, but it's dated, exaggerated. It's not her own. Messages crowd my mind again. This time, the thoughts are mine.

I think I understand this Plane now.

Here,
Spirella isn't Spirella,
Rosalie isn't Rosalie,

Here,
I'm not Adaline.
I'm Yours.

I'm Rib-Bone. Subordinate. Temptress. Second-Sex. Plaything. Witch
and Witch-hunter.
Here, I'm Persecutor. I call the persecuted, Persecutor.
I'm a liar.

I have many names here,
but not Adaline.
My name is Darling. Bitch.
 Slut and Sister,
 Daughter, Hoe.
 Cunt and Mother.

I'm Asking-For-It.

Sometimes they call me
Must-Be-That-Time-Of-The-Month.
Other times,
I'm Sweetheart.

I'm Crazy. Easy. Prude.
 I'm Beautiful. Ugly.
 Old and Young.

My name is Tits. Ass. Flat. Fat.
 Dyke. Shrew. Nasty. Nag.
 Needs-A-Dick. Damaged-Goods.
 Piece-Of-Ass. Good-For-A-Night.
 Must-Be-A-Lesbian. Slag.

I'm Overreacting.

I'm Bird,
Chick,
Cougar,
Kitten,
Dragon,
Pig,
and Dog.

My name is Disgusting Animal.
But you can call me *Smile*.

I know what it will be like, all of us together in Kings' Cabaret. Guys and girls. Guys and dolls. Guys and

Us.

The guys are regular people, and we're caricatures of ourselves. Some will talk amongst themselves, throw amused glances at us. Because it's all a kinda-funny-joke, don't you think? If we criticise, they'll call us sensitive. Roll their eyes, tell us to have a sense of humour. Because *it's just a joke*.

Or they'll be concerned, self-conscious. They'll start worrying about the line because they're good guys, they don't want to cross it. But they're not sure what to do.

Where, oh where, oh where is the line???

That pesky line.

What if they inadvertently cross it? How can they tell if they do? It's not like they can see it. They're genuine in their questions. They want to know how to treat us like we're regular people too. But they're not an *us*. They're a *them*.

There's the line.

No—they don't believe it. They can't believe it. Believing is seeing, they say. That's not the way they see it. They're staring up at clouds, but still they ask, *where, oh where, oh where is the line???*

The elusive, mysterious, ethereal line.

Look, we say, it's right there. You'll see it if you look. But they don't want to look. They want to stare at clouds. They want us to stop being so sensitive, stop making it so difficult. So, they name us.

You're Wrong, they say. *You're Emotional*. They want to help us understand. They know it's a hard thing for us to do. So, they explain. *You're Salty, be Sweet. You're Overreacting. Relax. You're Gloomy. Lighten up. You're Not Smiling. Smile*.

If you don't smile, you're Mad.

Mad Woman.

I must be. Here, I thought I was Adaline. But I'm not. Here, I'm Persecutor. I point and blame and scream and wail. I call the persecuted, Persecutor.

Who let all the Madwomen out of the attic? they cry. And more importantly,

Why aren't they smiling?

Smile, Mad Woman.

Smile.

The words pass through like ghosts. Thoughts that begin with me and end with another. Bleeding together because they're the same. Always the same.

I walk over to Spirella.

"How do I look?" I motion to my face. There's no need for segues at this point. Not when you're in a higher dimension, thoughts merging, dressed like Babushka-Catwoman and Metal-Cyborg-Girl.

Matryoshka-Catwoman.

Babushka-Catwoman.

"Like an Alexander McQueen collection." Spirella doesn't miss a beat. "*Cosmic Dungeon of Glass*. You don't have to tell me how I look. I've seen it."

She motions to a nearby sex-shop called Cheeky Peeperz that has a full-length mirror in the display. When I see my reflection, I don't recognise her. My face is powdery white, and my eyes are thick with black eyeshadow. My lips are black too, with silver shading that glistens in the light depending on how I turn.

Moments pass as we study our non-selves in the mirror.

"I'm just so angry," I eventually say, like it needs to be aired. Verbally, this time.

Spirella nods. "Me too."

Eventually, we head over to Kings' Cabaret, and it's not a cabaret at all. It's a freak show dressed up as the bar in *Casino Royale*. Shiny oak panelling, glass tables, crystal tumblers, dim lighting, and lady parts. Dismantled bodies. Female bricolage weaved into the décor and used to craft the furniture. The tables are held up by actual legs and feet with strappy stilettos. There's a bony naked woman at the entrance who has multiple arms like tree branches, coats and hats dangling from them. I notice her legs are

covered in cacophonous writing like the door of a public toilet. The dim lighting comes from human chandeliers; women strung to the ceiling, strapped by their wrists, silenced by ball gags. Each chandelier has four legs, elongated in the four cardinal directions, with cords and wires wrapped around them, dangling fairy lights and baubles that cast the mood-setting glow. Their eyes follow me as I walk, and it makes my skin prickle.

Spirella marches forward to where the others are gathered. Callum's leaning against the bar. "Looking good, Spirelly."

She smiles brusquely. "I'd love your interpretation of why your mind is so vile."

Callum rolls his eyes. "Like all the others, it's just a mixture of mind stuffs, okay. *Just pretend*. Not everything has an interpretation."

"I have a feeling this does." She motions to her head.

"Uh-oh," says Jasper. *You've stirred the hornets' nest, awakened the Fury.*

Spirella looks sharply at him. "Play your cards right, and in my Plane, that bloviating sweatknob of yours will be rearranged like a Picasso painting."

Jasper snorts dismissively, but Callum looks concerned by the thought of being distorted. For him, that must translate to *ugly*. And what God-given right would he have to sneer, smirk, and eyeroll at everything without his beautiful face?

A cyborg-doll-lady behind the bar hands Jasper a pint and I notice the bar lined with breasts like they've been hung out on a washing line. Doll-lady tips a pint glass up to a nipple and brown ale streams into the glass.

"What the actual fuck?" I say, watching the glass fill up to the rim.

Callum takes the beer and grins. "Think I should patent it?"

"Dismembered body parts as beer taps? *Yes*. Hurry before somebody else does it first."

“I think I’m done with this,” Spirella says, rolling up a leather sleeve to expose her wrist-screen.

“Oh, *c’mon*,” Callum sighs. “It’s not like I did it on purpose. It’s just pretend.”

Spirella starts typing her exit code.

Dr Eto stands, but Callum waves him away. “Look, you knew what you were signing up for when you agreed to jump into other people’s minds. You weren’t stropping over the peg-legs in Carney’s Plane. Give me a fucking break.”

Spirella stares at him, astonished.

“Alright, fine, go. There’s nothing I can do about the way I view you in my own mind. Ever consider that it might reflect how you present yourself? How you come across to others?” Callum steps back observing Spirella, making an exaggerated show of it. An artist contemplating his work. He does the same to Rosalie and me.

Jasper’s laughing. Carney’s wearing a grin that says, *give the guy a break, he’s just having a laugh. It’s harmless.*

Callum’s green eyes are on Spirella. “You prance around with your fluffy purple hair,” he practically spits the words, “your low-cut tops, tits hanging out, face painted like a Playboy bunny. Giggling and batting your lashes, desperate for adoration, to have every bloke in here by the balls. Ever think *that’s* why you look the way you do right now? Because that’s what you are. I think it’s why you’re throwing a fit—because I’ve held up the mirror and you’re exposed.”

“Woah, woah, okay,” says Dr Eto, getting up again.

Spirella’s whole body tenses.

Albert takes a step forward. “You’re out of line, mate.” Arlo moves forward too, but Spirella puts up a hand. She doesn’t need handlers. Still, she doesn’t speak. I watch her,

tight-lipped, round eyes revealing nothing. Dead-faced. Like a doll. I can't stand the silence.

I look around the room. Jasper laughing; Carney nodding, acknowledging that it was somewhat amusing, *but only because it was clearly a joke*. Albert and Arlo fuming in their white knight helmets. Dr Eto wearing his pensive face, considering the best way to approach the situation. Petrus feeling small, like me, wishing he felt big enough to put on a white knight helmet. Max eyeing Callum, frowning. He looks at me, shaking his head in a way that acknowledges, agrees, condemns. Thoughts merging. *Rudeboy oughta' be—*

Spirella clocks Callum in the face.

It's so sudden, I almost don't believe it's happened. There's a *craccckk*. Bones. Callum teeters down, dragging pint glasses with him. Beer splatters over him as he hits the ground.

Max leaps from his chair, laughing wildly. Pure glee. Albert and Arlo exchange glances. *Why didn't we think of that?* Carney mumbles, "bloody hell," and sips his ale. Spirella smiles. Jasper shouts that she's a psychopath, and Callum lies flat on the floor. It's like a scene from a Renaissance painting.

Eventually, Callum sits up, gently running a finger over his nose and winces. He looks at Spirella. "*You—*"

Spirella shrugs. "Oh c'mon. It's just pretend."

"Tell me, did it hurt?"

We turn, and Lazarus is behind us, grinning down at Callum.

"What do you bloody think?"

“Interesting.” Lazarus winds over to Arlo. “What about you? Did it hurt when I shot you?”

“No.”

“Well, I didn’t want it to.” He turns to Spirella.

“I did,” she says.

Lazarus grins. “Interesting. I’m so glad you decided to stay.”

Jasper gives Callum a hand up from the floor. Two fresh pints are waiting on the bar.

“You know,” says Lazarus, gazing around the room, “this place reminds me of an old myth—”

“Nuh-uh,” Callum says, slamming down his pint. “This is my Plane, I’m the one telling stories. But *first*,” he turns to Dr Eto, “I want her out.” He eyes Spirella.

Dr Eto frowns. “I’m afraid you relinquished the right to remove anyone from your Plane in the waiver you signed. Spirella may leave if she chooses, but you can’t force her to. You *do* have the right to end our time in your Plane, though. So, if you’d like to—”

“No way,” Callum says, glaring at Spirella. “We’re staying. You’re welcome to leave anytime, Spirelly.”

“Nah, I’ll stay.” She smiles and positions herself on a barstool.

“Wonderful!” Lazarus cries. “And now, story time! Will you be enlightening us with a tale of *true* mind-control?”

“Piss off and let me speak.” Callum sits on a bar stool, lightly pressing his nose. “*Alright*. Let’s focus. I gotta’ say, nothing’s jumped out at me yet that screams mind-control. But I recognise that this type of brain technology might make it possible because technology is the key. These things here,” he points to the bartender, “that’s mind-control.”

“Nope,” says Max, “that’s robot.”

“If we're technical,” Callum says. “What I’m saying is that mind-control—*true* mind-control—is when someone puts a device in your brain and controls you with it, like a remote-control car or a computer programme that overrides your autonomy.”

“That’s it?” says Albert. “Even in your Imaginal Plane, your imagination ends there?”

“No. You see, that’s the problem. Mind-control isn’t some debatable abstract concept. That’s manipulation. Manipulation doesn’t take away a person’s free will. Mind-control does. It’s external control of a person that removes their freedom to choose or dissent. Anything less is not *mind-control*. It’s exploitation, manipulation, brainwashing, whatever. It’s not *mind-control*. Not in the sense we’re talking here. Mind-control is using technology to control another person’s actions, completely removing their ability to not take those actions. Simple as that.”

“Simple, so simple,” says Lazarus, clapping. “He’s cracked it. Go on, Callum Rupert Spencer, age thirty. Tell us a tale of *real* mind-control.”

“Hey,” Callum snaps, pointing at Lazarus. “I’m going to, but not because you told me to.” He points around at the rest of us to take note.

Albert rubs his face frustratedly. “So...what? You do believe the NeuroPath can be used to control minds, or you don’t?”

“I don’t know yet, *Bertie*. Maybe give me a minute to explore my thoughts, tell my story, yeah?”

Albert slumps into a chair across from Max. “Let the fright fest begin.”

“Or an episode of criminal minds,” says Arlo.

“Or a porno with no relevance to the trial whatsoever,” adds Spirella.

Callum takes a swig of beer. "Right, everyone shut your mouths and let me tell my bleeding story."

Callum's Tale:

Yucani Valley

Welcome to Yucani Valley. We hope you enjoy your stay.



Cerulean skies meet a precipice skyline. Palm tree silhouettes and stucco houses tiered along the hills.

We're thrilled you've chosen Yucani Valley as your new home. The hilltop property we're going to view now is an eight-bed, six-bath in the Hillside Falls neighbourhood and sits 800 ft. up the hill. Let's start with the views. Follow me...

Up the ivory driveway and through the iron gate. A landscaped garden. Cultivated rock formations, scattered shrubs and desert flowers, sago palms, and assorted cacti. The grass eventually turns into quartz slab tiling bordering an oblong infinity pool. The water matches the cerulean sky and seems to fall over the side of the canyon.

As you can see, the Yucani Valley is directly in front, to the west we have El Dorado Hills, and there, to the east, a spectacular view of the Sierra Nevada mountains. You'll notice, of course, the infinity pool...

In front of the house, a handsome man with blond hair pushes a pram. From the other direction, another attractive man walks an amber Pomeranian. They cross paths, waving. Two twinkling chalcedony smiles.

“You mentioned you enjoy running,” says the realtor, joining Louella at the front window. Adrienne Woodwall came highly recommended, and Louella can see why. This neighbourhood is exactly what she was after. They peer out together as a third man walks past with an enormous bouquet of spring-coloured roses and a small Tiffany’s bag. He spots them in the window and waves, Tiffany’s bag swinging at his wrist. Another chalcedony smile.

“Would you like to see our famous running trail?” Adrienne asks. “It’s only a five-minute walk from the property.”

Louella agrees. “Why is it famous?” she asks.

“For the views, of course.”

After a short walk downhill to the park, Adrienne leads Louella to a hiking trail winding around the hillside. They stroll together, admiring the view of blue skies and misty mountains, until Adrienne motions to a hole in the wire fencing that encloses it.

“Through here,” she says, pointing to where the gravelly cliffside angles into a crevasse, “is a cavern with a mineral ceiling, blue azurite and malachite. It’s *stunning*. Of course, we’re not supposed to veer off the trail, but I’ll take you if you want a peek.”

Louella peers over the fencing at the rust-coloured terrain. The edge of the hillside is some ways away, nowhere near where they’d be going. “It *is* safe, though?”

“Absolutely.”

Louella follows Adrienne under the break in the fence. They turn around the angled cliffside, through the enclosure, under burnt orange archways that form an imperious natural fortress.

“Mind your step there.” They round a corner and Adrienne points to a steep downslide that drops into a bed of jagged rocks. It’s sudden, and Louella suspects someone turning that corner too quickly or carelessly could easily slip down it.

“Has anyone ever fallen?” Louella asks, wishing she hadn’t looked down.

“It happens,” Adrienne says, “but Yucani Valley has one of the best reconstructive surgeons in all of California. Dr Erin Yes. Her work is cutting-edge, nothing short of brilliance. So if the fall doesn’t kill you, she’ll fix you right up. It’ll be like it never happened.” Adrienne smiles. “Shall we head back?”

“What about the minerals?”

Adrienne smiles again. “I didn’t bring you here to see minerals, Louella. This is what I wanted to show you.” She motions to the rockslide. “We call it Siren’s Slope.”



One year later.

Malcam Luft sits at the kitchen table watching the microwave clock. His wife, Louella, is next to him, head in hand. It’s how he found her when he came in. When he asked what was wrong, she told him to give her a minute. So, Malcam watches the microwave clock, the neon green 16:44 searing into his retinas.

Finally, it turns. 16:45.

“Lou, what’s wrong?”

“I told you I needed a minute,” comes her muffled reply.

“I gave you a minute. Would you like another?”

Louella lifts her head. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“No. Sorry, I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Louella continues staring at him, studying the features of his face. His long, slender nose. Dark, almond-shaped eyes that crinkle when he smiles. And now, pearly white teeth after his recent bleaching. She looks down, below his face, at his sculpted chest, the definition pressing against his t-shirt. His robust arms, ripped and shredded, even after the month he’s had to take off from daily weight training. It’s amazing how like himself he looks, as though nothing happened at all.

There are a few noticeable differences though. The cast on his left arm, some bruising around his nose, the bandages wrapping his crown.

“I’m fine,” Louella says. “My cake didn’t place at the Thanksgiving Fair today, and I worked really hard on it, that’s all. It’s not a big deal.”

“Sure, it is!” Malcam cries. “That cake was beautiful. And if it tasted anything like the practice cake you made, they’ve gotta’ be crazy. The lemon filling was so...so...what’s the word?”

“Smooth?” she offers.

“Well, it *was* smooth. And delicious. But I was thinking...it was like, it was almost *lustrous*.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Louella cries, smiling for the first time that afternoon.

“I don’t think losing means yours wasn’t the best. Sounds to me like those judges are a bunch of old hags who can’t stand a new, beautiful, *younger* woman waltzing in and stealing *their* cake contest. Or they’re in the pockets of the Yucani Council, and it’s solely political. Rigged.”

Louella smiles. It's so nice having Malcam take an interest in things that matter to her, like baking and decorating the house. Even after a year, there are still unfinished rooms, but lately, Malcam's been so much more involved. You'd actually think he *enjoyed* picking out curtain fabrics and matching them with paint colour swatches. He understood why it was essential to get the shade of coral right and wasn't impatient when she spent forty-five minutes going back and forth between two tones that looked exactly the same. It was—

“Are you *kidding me?*” Spirella's voice slices through the scene. “If you weren't the one telling this story, Callum, I'd assume it was satire. I mean, *come on*. Do you honestly think all women's primary interests are baking and shades of wall paint? And that all they want in this world is a husband who cares about those things too?”

Spirella's doll make-up gives her vexation a sense of eerie insurgency, like a puppet with a machete and freshly severed strings.

“And for the record,” she continues, “a woman would never describe a man as *ripped and shredded*. I know, I know. You're used to reading airport thrillers that rely on female stock characters with dynamic attributes like, ‘plump, curvy breasts’ and ‘hips that sway rhythmically when she walks,’ combined with a brief shoutout to her biting wit and bad bitch attitude that never actually feature. *But*—and I'm gonna go as far as calling this a perennial truth—a woman will never look a man up and down and describe him as *shredded*. I don't care if he's a living conglomerate of *People's* sexiest men. It isn't going to happen. If your female character is calling a man *shredded*, he'd better have tripped into a giant cheese grater.”

Callum groans. “Alright, Spirelly, as much as I appreciate you shesplaining my own story to me, let's take it down a notch, yeah? Oh, and you know who might describe a

man as 'shredded?' A female bodybuilder. That's right, *women* are bodybuilders too. Because women can be all sorts of things."

Spirella crosses her arms.

"Women," Jasper snorts, putting air quotes around it. Callum looks over, snickering.

"There it is," Spirella sighs. "Sure, maybe a female bodybuilder would describe a man as 'shredded.' Is Louella a bodybuilder? I must've missed that."

"Oh, piss off Spirelly, you don't speak for all womankind. If anyone's putting women in a box, it's you. I recognise that women are diverse. That means, there are some women out there who aren't bodybuilders and who *would* call a man 'shredded.'"

I don't even realise I'm shaking my head until Callum glares my way and shouts, "you can piss off too, Adaline." He returns to Spirella. "Maybe, if you actually wait 'til the end, instead of jumping to your own biased conclusions, you might actually see where I'm going with this story."

"Are we in for some unexpectedly profound enlightenment or socially conscious perspective?"

"If by socially conscious, you mean *your* perspective and only yours, then no. But, if you're open to alternative perspectives, then you might be surprised by the way this story goes. If you give me a fucking chance to tell it. Also, it's got nothing to do with feminism. Stop making everything about feminism. We all know you hate men. Men are to blame for all the world's problems. Trust me, we get it. But this story is about *mind-control*. Now, do I have your permission to resume or are there more feminazi war-cries coming?" Callum eyes Jasper, a look that reeks of entreaty. *Are you proud of me, Daddy?* Jasper responds, "here, here!" and the conspiratorial snickering commences.

"Just get on with it," Spirella says.

It was so unlike him to be patient with her. And now? Being so supportive of the cake contest. What more could she ask for? It appears moving to Yucani Valley really was the right choice for them. Their relationship has never been in such a good place.

“How are you feeling today?” Louella asks.

“Better,” Malcam says. He glances at the cast on his arm. “Can’t wait to get this thing off and back in the gym.”

“Dr Yes *did* say you could do some exercises. She said you could go running.”

Louella knows Malcam hates running. She’s spent years trying to get him to run with her. When they lived in San Francisco, it always left her furious and jealous when she’d see couples their age out running together, smiling, waving as they jogged by. That’s the kind of marriage / should have, she’d think. They looked so happy and perfect, doing things together, sharing common interests. But not Malcam. He said too much running would make him skinny, that he had to lift weights to maintain his shape. But he never suggested Louella come with him to the gym. It wouldn’t be her first choice, but she’d settle for being part of a couple that goes to the gym together. Like those gym-couples on Instagram that do crazy exercises on top of each other, like the one where the girl sits on the guy’s back while he does push-ups. They could do that. Then they could build it up to the trickier ones that garner more likes. But Malcam went to the gym to lift weights. He didn’t care whether she or Instagram was a part of it.

“Running?” Malcam sinks in the chair.

Louella fakes a smile. "You could come with me this evening." Usually, she wouldn't bother, but he seems more open to her since they moved to Yucani Valley. Malcam considers it.

"Yeah, I could do that," he says. "Six, right?"

"Right," Louella says, grinning. He even remembered what time she goes!

Malcam goes to make a coffee. "Want one?"

She nods, but when he grabs his cannister of Columbian beans, she can't suppress irritation. She *hates* super strong coffee. How does he not know that by now?

"What?" he says. Louella reminds herself how considerate he's been about cakes and decorating. And that he's agreed to go running. She shouldn't be *too* snarky.

"It's just...I've told you that I hate strong coffee, and you still always use those beans. Even when I buy the vanilla ones."

Malcam frowns at the pantry door, at the vanilla beans behind it. He sees them every time he goes in there; Louella places them front and centre. The liquid those beans produce isn't coffee. *Coffee is coffee*, he's explained so many times, *this is caffeinated sugar milk*. She calls him a snob, but he's not. It's simply true. Still, there's no arguing with her. The truth will never prevail against shrill, stubborn insistence.

Malcam opens the cannister with his Colombian beans.

"*Malcam*," she whines.

He ignores her, scooping beans into the grinder.

"*Malcam!*" Still whining. "I want—"

The grinder drowns her out, and he smiles to himself. It's a fleeting victory. The moment he releases the button, an earful awaits. With a sigh, he lifts his finger.

“What the hell, Malcam? I was clearly saying I wanted vanilla beans.”

“You want me to use the vanilla beans?” he says.

She gives him a bitchy nod.

Malcam looks at the ground Columbian coffee. *It's not so unreasonable. So, you have to drink the vanilla one time. Big deal.*

He pours the ground coffee into the trash.

“What are you doing?”

“Using the vanilla beans.”

Louella watches him, smiling. Now, *this* is the husband she signed up for.

The following day, Louella is meeting Adrienne Woodwall for lunch at *Rafael's Bistro*, a quaint café facing the Yucani Valley square. They became fast friends after Adrienne helped her secure their Hillside Falls property. When Louella arrives, Adrienne's already got a table outside. She's looking at her phone, arms bent on the table in a way that squeezes her large, tanned breasts together and pushes them forward, out of her low-cut sundress, giving bystanders a tiny peek at her lacy red bra. Louella approaches and Adrienne jumps up to embrace her, D-cups bouncing freely.

“How *are you?*” Adrienne cries. “Your hair looks amazing! Did you go to Antonio?”

“Yes, he's *amazing*. You were so right,” Louella says, stroking her new blonde highlights. She realises she hasn't seen Adrienne since Malcam's accident last month. It was just so hectic that Louella found it challenging to manage all her commitments.

“So...” Adrienne says knowingly, “how's it going?”

“Really well. Like really, *really* well.”

“Oh, I’m so glad. Honestly, though, I had no doubt you’d love it. I don’t know a single girl that’s been disappointed by the results. Tell me everything. Have you noticed any improvements yet?”

“Well...” Louella begins, grinning mischievously, and they fall into a fit of giggles. She tells Adrienne how Malcam’s whole attitude has changed since moving to Yucani Valley, how he listens, cares, makes an effort to spend time with her and share her interests.

“And the recovery?”

“He’s feeling much better physically. We actually went on a run together yesterday. Of course, he’s ready to get his cast off so he can get back in the gym, but that’ll take time.”

“It’s a shame you can’t choose which bones break when falling down a rocky slope.”

They laugh and clink their strawberry martinis.

That evening, Malcam’s muscles are really feeling that run, and he’s looking forward to soaking them in a hot bath of Epsom salts. The tub’s half full when Louella comes in.

“Oh *no*,” she whines, “you’re not taking a bath, are you?”

Malcam looks between her and the bath, hoping the obvious will answer for him.

“I wanted you to come running,” she moans. “The Hartfords go running on Thursdays.”

“So?” Malcam says, dropping in some peppermint oil (not for the scent or anything, for the menthol. He read in *Men’s Fitness* that the menthol in peppermint oil is good for sore muscles, and naturally, Louella’s always stocked up on that crap).

“I want them to know that I’m not a mopey divorcee,” Louella says.

“Who cares what they think?”

“It would just be nice for them to see us together. Maybe, then, they’d invite us to one of their functions. They’re not going to invite some single divorcee to a doubles tournament full of couples. The teams wouldn’t be even. And it’s not like I can stop them in the middle of their run and say, *oh, hello, I’ve got a husband and a tennis racket. Anyway, as you were.*”

Malcam rolls his eyes. “So, we’ll go next Thursday.” He starts undressing.

Louella watches him pull off his shirt one-handedly, his chest toned like halved beach balls, abs rippling like the Yucani hills—

“Halved *beach balls*?” Spirella cries.

“What the hell, Spirella? Do you need a muzzle?” Callum looks to Dr Eto. “Aren’t you supposed to be moderating or something?”

Dr Eto appears unenthused to have been summoned.

“Alright, simmer down,” Albert says to Callum. “No one needs a muzzle. Maybe, just crack on a bit, yeah? Get to your point.”

“*I’m trying,*” Callum hisses.

“I don’t want to go next Thursday,” Louella cries. “I want you to go *tonight.*”

Malcam stops, one foot in the bath. He considers it. Then, he pulls his foot from the bubbly water.

“Alright, let’s go tonight,” he says, wrapping a towel around his waist. “I’ll just get dressed.”

Louella reconsiders her request. Maybe it *is* a touch unreasonable when he’s already halfway in the bath. “Malcam, wait.”

Malcam stops in the doorway. She waits for him to turn but he just stands there with his back to her.

“You could look at me, you know.”

He turns and looks at her.

“We don’t have to go tonight. Have your bath.”

“Okay,” he says, moving past her, pulling off the towel and descending into the bath.

Louella notices her jar of peppermint oil. “You should use the lavender and clove oils too, they’re amazing.”

“Okay,” he says, pushing himself up again.

“I’ll get it,” Louella says, giving him a funny look.

“Okay.”

“Stop saying *okay*, it’s annoying.”

Silence.

Louella returns with the oils and sprinkles them into the bath. “What do you think?”

“Not sure how I feel about lavender,” he says.

“What?” she says, laughing, “you have to like lavender. Everyone likes lavender.”

“I do like lavender.”

“But, you just said...”

Malcam shrugs. “I dunno. Changed my mind.”

Louella watches him a moment. “Malcam,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“Stand up.”

Malcam stands up. Bubbles drip down his muscular physique. A look of confoundment crosses his face.

“Malcam. Go sit in that chair.” She points to the wicker chair on the other side of the bathroom.

Malcam steps out of the bath, walks over, and sits. “I don’t know why I did that,” he says.

“Don’t speak until I tell you to.”

Malcam’s eyes widen, but he says nothing, bewilderment turning to fear.

“Just wait there,” she tells him and hurries out of the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and pressing her back against it.

It wasn’t supposed to be like *this*, was it? Is this what Dr Yes meant when she warned about potential glitches? *Of course, nothing is 100% effective. So far, we’ve had all positive results, but it is possible for one to develop a glitch of sorts. Highly unlikely, though. Don’t concern yourself about it. Just, if anything seems strangely amiss, give me a call. Anytime. The great thing about glitches is that they’re easily fixed.*

Louella isn’t sure if this constitutes a glitch. Maybe, she should she call Dr Yes. Just in case. But she’d hate to bother her after business hours with something silly. It might come across like she hadn’t adequately prepared herself for the results. *You do understand that there will be noticeable changes? And you’re fully prepared to engage these changes? If you need more time to think about it, that’s perfectly understandable...*

Louella had assured Dr Yes she was ready. She was fully prepared.

But...was it really supposed to be this literal?

I know. I’ll call Adrienne.

She grabs her phone off the kitchen counter. As it rings, she thinks back to that day a year ago when she and Adrienne first met. *I didn't bring you here to see minerals, Louella. This is what I wanted to show you. We call it Siren's Slope.*

Siren's Slope.

"But, why?" Louella had asked.

Adrienne's smile was red and vulpine. "The properties you're considering are for yourself and your husband, yes?"

"Yes."

"Will Mr Luft be joining us for the viewings today?"

Louella was struck with a mental image of Malcam at the Cliffwater Yacht Club with his friends from the Yale rowing team. He couldn't understand why it was a problem that he was spending the day with his friends instead of her. *I've had a long week at the office. Is it a crime to want to relax and enjoy myself a bit?*

Apparently, selecting their new home together didn't fall into the 'enjoyable' category. Louella could feel the muscles in her face tense.

"I'll take that as a *no*," Adrienne said.

Louella attempted a breezy laugh, but it came out so false that she resorted to honesty. "I'll be handling the property search. Malcam would just be a drag, especially with the prices here. He doesn't appreciate the pedigree of an area like this. Not like I do. He'd happily spend the whole day grumbling, lecturing me about all the bigger, better houses we could get for these prices in other areas. Less prestigious areas. He wouldn't understand the delicate elegance that makes Yucani Valley stand out. Malcam's palate isn't sophisticated enough for the taste of ideal."

“No straight man’s is,” Adrienne replied. “It’s why I wanted to show you Siren’s Slope. You saw how easy it would be to slip down. It would be even easier to administer a tiny push, one so tiny, it needn’t be felt. A push can very easily be played off as a slip.”

Louella had stared at her, not quite believing what she was hearing. “You think I want to kill my husband?”

Adrienne laughed, her perfectly melon-shaped breasts bouncing. “Of course not, silly! He wouldn’t die. The slope has been carefully designed to ensure that.”

“Designed?”

“Oh yes.” Adrienne paused, smiling. “Louella, I saw you watching those men walk past the window, carrying gifts for their wives or taking an interest in their babies and tiny dogs. Did you really think those men were able to act so sophisticatedly all by themselves?”

“Well...”

“It’s not possible. *But*, with a tiny push, any husband can become the husband you deserve. The husband he should be.”

“How?”

“You remember I mentioned Dr Yes, the reconstructive surgeon? Well, when I said her work was cutting-edge, I meant it. You see, she doesn’t just reconstruct them physically—you know, to repair any damage their appearance may suffer during the fall—she also reconstructs them mentally. It’s not brainwashing or anything, they’re still totally themselves. She implants a microchip into their brains that, sort of, *conditions* them. The effect is super subtle. Like I said, she’s an expert. But, you’ll start to see a more doting, amiable, caring man. It’s not changing him or controlling him. He’s free to make his own decisions. It just refines his thinking slightly, makes him more perceptive to our feelings, aware of our likes and

dislikes, attuned to our reasoning. Basically, the chip heightens your husband's investment in you and in maintaining a happy, devoted, loving marriage. It's as innocent as that."

As innocent as that, Louella reminds herself, the phone still ringing. *Come on, Adrienne, pick up ...*

"Hey!"

"Adrienne, I think something's wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Malcam. He's acting weird."

"The change does take time to get used to, you know that. I told you it would feel a little weird at first."

"I know, but...it's like...it's like he does everything I tell him to."

"You mean he suddenly gives a crap about what *you* want? Validates your right to an opinion? Acknowledges that your suggestions might actually be helpful? Yep, that's the stuff that'll take getting used to."

"No, it's weirder than that. Like, just now, he was in the bath, and I told him to get out—"

"Why?"

"Because I wanted him to go running with me, but then—"

"Louella, relax. It just sounds like he's putting you first for once. Trust me, I know it's like living with a different person inside your husband's skin. Like, *who is this strange, caring, loving man and what did he do with my apathetic, verbally abusive husband?*" She laughs.

"No, Adrienne, listen to me. I tell him to stand, *he stands*. I tell him to sit, *he sits*. I'm worried I could tell him to jump off a balcony and he'd do it."

“You never know until you try.” Adrienne laughs again. “Honestly, it’s probably just his brain getting used to the chip. Things will settle down. If you’re really worried, call Dr Yes. She’s really helpful. I mean, no one wants a Stepford husband, right? We want husbands that *want* to do all these things, not husbands that do them because they’re robots without a choice.”

Louella doesn’t say anything.

“Right, Louella?”

“Right. Yeah. You’re totally right. It’s probably just the chip settling into his brain. I’ll see how it goes and if I’m still concerned, I’ll call Dr Yes.”

Louella hangs up and returns to the bathroom. Malcam’s still sitting on the wicker chair, naked and shivering.

“Oh, Malcam, I’m so sorry,” Louella cries, grabbing a dry towel and wrapping it around him. He looks at her silently.

“You can speak.”

Malcam’s face contorts into a scathing snarl. “What have you done?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I’m not—”

“You crazy fucking bitch,” Malcam says, “tell me what the fuck you’ve done to me.”

“I’ve made you better.”

Malcam shakes his head. “When I figure out what you’ve done...oh, you bet your ass, I’ll make sure you never see another free day for the rest of your life. And I’ll manage it too. See this giant house? Who paid for it? That’s right, *I did*. And that silver Porsche? Also, me. Who

pays for you to sit around at home baking cakes and going to yoga with your airhead friends? I do. Who funds your shopping sprees to Home Décor? *Me*. And you know who's going to pay for the best lawyer in California? I am. And I'm damned sure not paying a cent for yours, you evil bitch."

Louella smiles. "Sorry, Malcam, but you're not going to tell anyone about this because I forbid it. You're going to keep paying for me to do whatever I want, and you're never going to threaten to put me in prison again."

Malcam stares at her. "Okay," he says. Moments later, his vacant stare turns back to hatred. "You won't get away with this," he says. "I'll figure out a way around it. You can't have total control over me."

"Let's find out, shall we? Get up."

Malcam gets up.

"Good. Now, let's see if you'll follow me into the garden like a little puppy dog. Come, doggy, follow me." Louella leads Malcam to the garden. "Maybe you'll sleep out here tonight, little doggy. But first, let's get you that bath. Into the pool." She points, and Malcam obeys, wading into the pool. "All the way in, Malcam. Come on, into the deep end."

"Fuck you, Louella," Malcam says, water rising to his neck.

"That's not very nice. You're a bad doggy. Go stand in doggy time-out, over there. Face that way." She points to the beautiful view their pool overlooks. Malcam turns. "Go on, closer to the edge, I want you to take it all in, all of Yucani Valley." Malcam moves through the water towards the edge. "Look at it. I did this for us," Louella says, "so we could be happy. I wanted to start a new life here, away from everything that happened in San Francisco."

"Louella, you act like this was something I caused. *You* cheated on *me*."

“Yes, and I told you I was sorry, but you were going to leave me anyway. I found the divorce lawyer’s card in your jeans.”

Malcam looks at her. “That’s why you bought this house without my consent? To trap me?”

“To give us another chance somewhere new.”

Malcam frowns. “Well, I’m here, aren’t I? I came. Gotta’ say, though, whatever fucked up thing you’ve done to my brain *really* makes it difficult to trust you again.”

Louella sighs. “Yes, you came, but you acted like I didn’t exist. You weren’t even trying. You were just spiteful and angry all the time.”

“Well, you did trap me into coming here—”

“Let me speak,” Louella cries, growing hysterical, “I just wanted another chance to prove myself, and you wouldn’t let me. I didn’t know what else to do!”

“You can’t force someone to love you, Louella.”

And there it is. Louella stares at him, fists trembling, eyes welling up, a combination of fury and heartbreak. Malcam doesn’t love her. But she would change that.

“I can make you do anything I want.”

“Not that,” he says.

“Go to the edge,” Louella screams, pointing to where the infinity pool falls over into the hillside. There’s a panel of clear glass to keep swimmers secure, and an iron balcony just below, low enough to not be an eyesore, high enough to safely break a fall should the glass ever break.

“Climb over the glass.”

“C’mon Lou—”

“No. You think I don’t have total control over you? Well, we’re gonna find out. Climb over it.”

Malcam’s face pales as he wades toward the glass wall, hoisting himself easily, even with his cast. He swings his legs over, so he’s sitting on top.

“Alright, you’ve made your point, Lou. You completely control me.”

“Just to be sure, jump into the balcony.”

Malcam looks down. The drop is only a few feet, and the platform will easily catch him. But it’s the hollow canyon below that causes the wave of dizziness to come over him.

“Lou, please,” he says, rubbing his face to try and steady his senses, “I’m not feeling well.”

“Get on the balcony *now*.”

Malcam looks down again, and the scene sways. His heart palpitates, his hands getting clammy.

“Please, Lou. Can I do it tomorrow? I just need to lie down and—”

Before he can get out the rest of the words, he loses consciousness, and his limp body plummets head first.

Louella rushes to the edge of the garden, screaming his name. She reaches the ledge just in time to watch his pelvis hit the iron bar at the edge of the balcony, catapulting him into the dark canyon below.



You are now leaving Yucani Valley. We hope you enjoyed your stay.

The tale-Plane vanishes, and Callum's priggish face greets us.

"Now, *that's* mind-control."

I glance around, wondering if anyone else thought the names Louella and Malcam were curiously similar to Spirella and Callum. Well, Calamm... Maybe I'm reaching.

Albert sighs. "I get what you're saying. Literal mind-control is demonstrated with a brain chip or some variant of that. Fine. But are you really dismissing all other avenues? That mind-control could be more complex than being steered like a remote control car?"

"Sorry—brain chip or various equivalent. Simple as that. Unless the NeuroPath reprogrammed Buryakov and Lang's brains to respond to specific instructions, it wasn't *mind-control*. Again, doesn't mean I think Jacob's innocent. I sure as hell believe that if he didn't mind-control them, he probably dished out some cult-leader levels of manipulation. If that's the case, it just means all three of them are guilty, and Jacob didn't create some futuristic mind-control technology. He's just your run-of-the-mill Charles Manson."

"So, even if it was just great manipulation tactics, it isn't relevant that it occurred in such a sensitive and personal space, *like their minds*. The potential for manipulation could be unprecedented. What if, inside the mind, manipulation can result in control? *Literal* control."

Callum rolls his eyes. "Yes, Bertie, what if? What if none of this is real and we're all in the Matrix?"

Albert nods. "Good question." Then he's out of his chair. "Rosalie, I know you've given up your turn once already, but it would really mean the world to me if I could go next." He shoots Callum a grin. "I've got the storytelling bug at the minute."

Another eyeroll from Callum and he catches Lazarus grinning. "Well, go on, then. Speak your bloody nonsense."

"There is no experience without understanding."

"Lovely," Callum snaps. "You read that in a fortune cookie?"

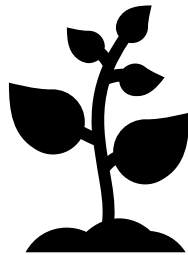
"*The Observer*," Lazarus says, inspiring Callum's trillionth eyeroll.

In my mind, Harold Lipton's beaten face appears. I look over at Lazarus, and he's watching me. A silver smile.

Who the hell was that guy?

It's right there in the paper.

ALBERT



9.

Tell us about your childhood.

I was a freak.

You mean, you were treated like a freak, or you were a freak?

Both. I was considered a freak, so I was treated like a freak. Because I was treated like a freak, I believed I was a freak, and so, I acted like a freak. What is it that defines me if not my beliefs and my actions? The way others perceive me? As you can see, I fulfilled my neighbours' expectations by turning out to be the freak they expected me to be, because it was made clear to me, early on, that a freak is what I was. So, what else would I be?

That must've been nice, growing up in a community where you could be yourself and be treated accordingly.

Yeah, it was great. When you have sepals for hands, you can't exactly hide them with a pair of gloves. Everyone knew from the get-go. I didn't have to spend years and years discovering myself, developing into the person I was or wanted to be, bombarded with a whole world of options and opportunities. I was told from the beginning who I was. I didn't have to discover that I was Other or spend years developing into a Villain because those around me were kind enough to make sure I knew what I was before I could even fully comprehend it.

And what an active Villain you've been! Would it be fair to infer from your previous comments that you credit your ability to attain such villainous achievements, at least in part, to having received a head-start in life that others may not have?

Oh, absolutely. Like I said before, there aren't a lot of gloves out there made for sepal-hands, so there was no disguising it. People noticed. I mean—look at them, they're bright green. Doesn't matter how colour blind someone claims to be, everyone can see green. So, I knew I was a freak and an Other which, as you know, is the precursor to becoming a Villain. I've never known anything but Villainy, so I've been working towards it and developing the skills for it all my life. I recognise this started with privilege. Not everyone is provided with such a narrow path.

But, there are those of your kind—other Villains, I mean—who would disagree that being told who they were early on gave them any sort of head start in life or that the narrow path they were provided helped them get where they are today. I have a quote here from the Prime Villister, who says, “it doesn't matter where you were born, how you were raised, or what you were or weren't told early in life. What it boils down to, whether you're Villain or non-Villain, is the willingness and discipline to work hard for your goals. Success isn't easy, but if you're willing to put in the work, anyone can achieve it.”

Ah, yes, the Prime Villister. What a privilege it must be not to have to see other people's problems.

Well, it seems we've only got time for one more question, and I know our viewers would very much like to know, what's next for Calyx?

I'm going to eradicate the city and plant a jungle in its place. And this time, not even Spandex Man can stop me.

The screen cuts out, television interview vanishing to blackness. I know what happens next. A few more seconds...

The screen squiggles, rewinding like a VHS tape to the same starting point. Again and again and again.

Tell us about your childhood.

I was a freak.

I'm standing in a jungle looking up at an enormous jumbotron screen hanging in the branches. The interview segment plays on a loop. Two yellow armchairs face each other in front of a wide television audience. More fans gather behind the stage, separated by barriers. The screen itself is damaged, a long slash down the middle. It divides the interviewer, a blonde woman in a sparkly jumpsuit, from her guest, a man in dark green armour and a mask with kaleidoscopic eyes like a dragonfly. And green flower buds for hands.

In this jungle, billboards grow like trees. Crumbling concrete walls are staggered throughout, overgrown with moss and vegetation, but you can still see the colourful graphics painted beneath, scenes with speech bubbles, comic strips, cartoons. Stories told in pictures. The story of a freak. An Other. A Villain. The story of Calyx.

A billboard to my left shows Calyx as a small boy with flower-petal hands, bell-shaped when closed, long and curling when open. He's peering up at a larger boy who has a tall sunflower in his palm.

When Calyx was ten, he became a target. The bully stuck out his hand, palm up, open wide. "Empty your pockets, freak." The freak turned out his pockets. No money, only these seeds. "Just gimme' what you got." He gave the bully what he had, dropped the seeds into the bully's palm. Moments later, the bully yelped in pain, shaking his hand to get rid of the seeds. But the seeds had planted, they were already sprouting. Up and up, a green stem grew. It sprouted leaves and stalks and little round buds. The bully watched, wide-eyed and stunned, as a bright yellow sunflower bloomed. He cried out, horrified. "What have you done to me, freak?" I gave you what I had, I gave you the otherness. Now they will call you Sunflower boy.

Sunflower boy. Sunflower boy.

Now they will call you Freak.

There's a comic strip on another wall, squares of black and green graphics. Two villains, Calyx and Helianthus, terrorising a city with vegetation. Calyx shoots vines from his sepal hands that coil around buildings, squeezing until they crumble and collapse. Helianthus shoots sunflower seeds from his palms, which spread rapidly and bloom within seconds, growing to heights and sizes that rise above lampposts and rooftops. The stalks secrete a sticky liquid that traps anything that strays too near. Who will save the city from this botanical terror?

Another wall further down shows Calyx, Helianthus, and a female villain called Winter Creeper, who's actually just Spirella in black and green body armour wrapped in foliage. Her lilac hair is parted into two French plaits that drape forward over her shoulders and have purple hyacinth woven throughout. Tall, leafy vines rise up behind her like charmed cobras.

I wonder if Spirella's seen it. Glancing around, I pinpoint most of the jurors, but no Spirella.

"Fuck's sake," says Jasper, looking up at a giant comic-book image of Albert in shiny green armour. *The Revenge of Calyx* is written underneath in font that looks like curly vines.

"Nice suit, Bertie," Callum sneers from Jasper's side.

Albert doesn't seem to hear them; he's staring into his oversized face, absolutely chuffed. But hear them he does and turns with a grin. "Right back at you, Spandex Man."

He points to a massive vertical billboard, a full-body image of Callum in a silver unitard with a cape billowing behind him, flexing in a pose of bravado. Written across the top is: *Spandex Man and the Supremes, protecting YOUR city from Freaks and Villains*. The word *douche* is spraypainted diagonally over Callum's chalky white smile.

Callum turns, clenching his fists. "Take that down."

"Nah."

Callum's face darkens, and he steps toward Albert. Before anything happens, Spirella cries out, "OH! Look at ME!"

Spirella's looking up at the pictures of Winter Creeper, aka herself. Her hair is back. Tresses of lilac cascading down her back like a waterfall.

Albert's face falls. "Well, this is awkward," he says, rubbing the back of his neck as he goes over to her. He looks up at the wall, cheeks pinkening. "I think maybe it's just because, you know, we're in my mind, so lots of stuff is merging together. I see you every day, so I guess my mind must've just merged you into Winter Creeper. Er...I can erase it. I'm sure I can do that. I'll just get rid of it."

"No!" Spirella cries, turning. "No, don't erase it. I love it!"

“Really?”

“Are you kidding? She’s badass, I love her! Who’s Calyx?”

Albert looks up at the figure on the wall. The man in the green suit with sepal hands, spread open, propelling thorny vines that coil around the waist of an unsuspecting businessman.

“He’s a misunderstood superhero I invented when I was a kid. I still jot down stories here and there, whenever they come to me. Maybe one day I’ll try and do something with them. Get together with a graphic artist, design a comic or something.” He shrugs like it’s a passing thought.

But it isn’t a passing thought. You only have to look around at the pictorial narratives that construct his Plane to see that.

“Are you going to tell us a Calyx story?” Spirella asks.

“You know, I wanted to tell a story about a guy like Callum. A big creep up his own arse who meets his well-deserved downfall—that sort of thing. I know it’s not directly related to the trial, but hey, someone’s gotta’ point out that not all jurors are created equal. Some have minds that are literally made of rot-stinking sewers and sexism personified.”

“Calm down, Bertie, you’ll fog your glasses,” Callum says.

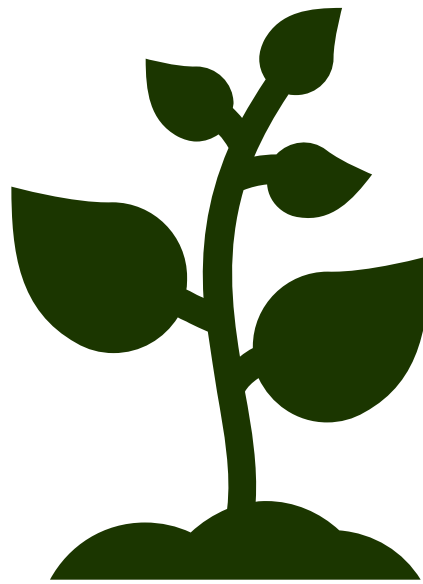
Albert removes his glasses and steps on them. “Don’t need them here. Anyway, looking around my Plane makes me think I probably owe it to fourteen-year-old Albert to tell a Calyx story. Sorry, Callum, you would’ve made an excellent character.”

“Oh, but Albert Radley Rayhawk, age 33, are you not overlooking something terribly obvious?” Lazarus puts an arm around Albert’s shoulders and turns him toward Callum’s billboard. “This time, not even Spandex Man can stop you.”

The Revenge of

CALYX

DAYS HE DID NOT SAVE SERIES



**VOL.
1**

**THE TIMEPIECE TRIALS
OF FREAK WEEK**

Albert's Tale:
The Timepiece Trials of Freak Week

Once upon a precise time in the 22nd century, on a warm, polluted, patchily affluent planet called Earthworm, there was a woman known as Whiney Viney, whose real name was Rose—

“Woah, woah, woah,” shouts Carney. “What’re your folk doing on my planet?”

Albert grins. “My folk liked your planet, so they moved there.”

“Oh yeah? Where’d they move from?”

“Earth,” Albert says, “after we murdered it.”

Carney crosses his arms, smug that Albert’s fictional family wanted to move to Earthworm, but not willing to let him have it so easily. “How’d they get there from Earth huh? It’s all the way in Arsehole Galaxy Maroon55.”

“Inter-dimensional wormhole pods,” Albert responds, deadly serious.

“When?”

“Waaay in the future, like thousands of years.”

Carney’s nodding. “Alright. So, you’re telling a little bit ‘bout Earthworm’s future, and I was telling a bit about its history.”

“Exactly.”

Still nodding, Carney says, “well, remember to keep it honest. Earthworm ain’t all shits and giggles, y’know.”

“I know,” says Albert gravely.

Rose lived on a tiny, grey, wet island called the Supreme Citizens of Great United, and because of Rose's big fat voice, two things happened: 1) The Supremes of said island nicknamed her Whiney Viney, and 2) the Villains of said island decided to stop taking Supreme shit. It was time to fight back. Or...just leg-it right out of there and live on a different island of their own. A turning point in the history of Great United, but it didn't happen out of nowhere. No, Legs-It was a long-time coming, a long-time brewing, bubbling, toiling, troubling...

A century past, the Supreme Citizens of Great United was the United Kingdom of Great Bitchin until the Old Bitch War of 2016 turned it into the Divided Kingdom of Great Bitchin for a few years before it eventually collapsed. The events which led to the collapse of Great Bitchin are relatively standard. The Purely-Bitchin grew alarmed after large influxes of Not-Purely-Bitchin (otherwise known as Other-Bitches) started migrating to their great nation. You see, Great Bitchin was an urban paradise, and considered itself the greatest empire on Earthworm (though, not actually an empire in the slightest). Naturally, this attracted Others from all over the Worm, and they swarmed Great Bitchin like flies on bin day. Great Bitchin became a multinational hub, no longer populated by purely Purely-Bitchin, but also Bad-Bitches, Boss-Bitches, Little-Bitches, This-Bitches, Broke-Bitches, Basic-Bitches, You-Bitches, Dumb-Bitches, Snitchin-Bitches, Fake-Bitches, and Bitches-Becrazies. As if this wasn't enough for the Purely-Bitchin to endure, then, in response to the massive contribution all the immigrants made to Great Bitchin's economy, the Queen Bitch went and passed an "Open Astroskies" policy making it *easier* for Other-Bitches to enter the great non-empire.

WELL. As you can imagine, this led to the second great migration, and the Purely-Bitchin were forced to share their towns and cities with even more Other-Bitches. We're talking Side-Bitches, Pussyass-Bitches, Punkass-Bitches, Hoeass-Bitches, Skinny-Bitches, Cave-Bitches, Floor-Bitches, Jealous-Bitches, Biggity-Bitches, Burrito-Bitches, Greedy-Bitches, Bomb-Bitches, Biznitches, Biznachos, Bizzitchies, Bizdigits, Biatches, Bigotches, Bitchatchis, Bitchlamies, Bizzywiznitches, Bitch-Mades, Mitch-Bades, and Betches.

WELL. The Purely-Bitchin had had enough. They didn't even recognise their own non-empire anymore. It wasn't Great Bitchin the way Great Bitchin was supposed to be. And if you think saying things like *peace and love, better together, or bitches be bitches* helped matters, then I'm here to tell you BITCHIN HOME OFFICE, THINK AGAIN. Bitches *not* be bitches. Bitches be Purely-Bitchin, or they be Others.

So, the Old Bitch War was initiated. To avoid actual war, the Prime Bitcher opted to hold a referendum. Purely-Bitchin citizens would vote on whether all of these Others could remain in Great Bitchin, or whether they'd all have to Legs-It back on home to whatever the hell shithole countries they came from.

WELL. The result of the referendum was clear. It couldn't have been clearer. The great non-empire had cleared its throat and spoken, a clear 51 to 49 percent. The Purely-Bitchin had made a clear choice: Others were outer space aliens whose existence was now illegal in the United Kingdom of Great Bitchin. In the UK illegally? GO HOME OR FACE ARREST. Stirring up division and tension in the UK *illegally*? BITCHIN HOME OFFICE. THINK AGAIN. Are you a Not-Purely-Bitchin-Illegal-Bitch? THE FUCK OUTTA HERE. BITCHIN-BITCHES FIRST.

It took a few years for Legs-It to be officially completed, between fifteen and twenty depending on who you ask or what you consider to be the official completion. Some consider

complete Legs-It to have occurred *fifteen* years after the vote, when the final Others, a family of Pastrypriss-Bitches, were deported from Great Bitchin back to their home country of Prance. Others consider complete Legs-It to have occurred *twenty* years after the vote when Great Bitchin collapsed. *Plooop*.

What's important, however, is that from the United-Divided Kingdom of Great Bitchin's ashes grew something supreme, a new non-empire. No longer divided by pure bitchiness and not-pure bitchiness, the people of this tiny, grey island on the planet of Earthworm in the Arsehole Galaxy of Maroon55 rose from their self-imposed implosion and came together to create the Supreme Citizens of Great United (Great United for short, or simply and fondly, Supreme). Once this new nation had re-established itself as a non-empire, they got right down to the necessary business of figuring out what divided them. They quickly discovered that certain citizens of Supreme were more supreme than others, and this led to the divide between Supreme Citizens and Others. Acknowledging that this was a recycled term from Great Bitchin times used to describe Not-Purely Bitchin from Other countries and was now being redeveloped to differentiate un-supremes from Supremes regardless of citizenship, the Supreme Citizens' new government pushed for the term *Villains* instead of *Others* to avoid confusion.

Of course, there were those doughcake Dribble-rolls who argued that *Villains* sounded an eentsy-weentsy-peentsy-teentsy derogatory, while of course, *Others* was perfectly inoffensive, but it didn't matter. Once the *Sendumtoo Jaily Wail* heard the term, they fuggin loved it. Mass-printed it. Took it and ran the circumference of the Worm with it. There was no going back after that, and Great United was swiftly divided into the politically correct categories of Supremes and Villains.

Almost understandably, the Villains were miffed because it wasn't just about terminology, was it? It was about lifestyle. Supremes were wealthy elites while Villains were forced to eat in fish and chips shops or not at all. Who were Supremes to decide that they were better than everybody else and so, deserved better things than everybody else? But it was hopeless for Villains. They couldn't disguise their villainy; most were classed as Villains due to physical attributes. Anything remotely Other, really. You can't hide the Otherness if it's all over your face or hands or hairy bat wings. Supremes can spot the Otherness on your lack of bank notes or education or birthright. Better hope you're not born with only one parent or two non-Supreme parents or no parents or too short or too fat or too female or too clever or not clever enough or without two working legs or two working eyes or two working hairy bat wings or with too few skills or too few connections or too few hands or too few working hairy bat wings.

For the record, anything *other* than Supreme and you're Other. You're out. You're Villain. Anything that isn't Purely Bitchin—oops, *Supreme*—is Villainy. That's science.

WELL. You'd think history being recorded would prevent it from repeating itself, but the way things were going in the new Great United, they were heading for a Great Divide.

Sure, it was all about referendums again, but this time, it wasn't the Purely-Bitch—the Supremes—who called it; it was the Villains. Remember Rose? She proposed it. It's why the Supremes called her Whiney Viney: because she ate vines and because she raised her voice up loud, rallied the Villains to protest the Supremes, and demanded the Villain independence referendum. The Villains planned to buy a deserted island to the north of Great United and become their own nation. Naturally, the Supremes were having none of it. Sure, they didn't want to see Villains in public or breathe the air polluted by Villains' existence or expose their

angelic Supreme children to the vine-smoking, hoodie-wearing rappers of the Villain youth, but they sure as all bitchin hells didn't want the Villains thinking they had a say in the order of things, or even worse, *sovereignty*. To be Supreme, you have to be better than someone and without Villains, who would they bully, oppress, and vilify? Who would they moan about? Each other? Great Scott, no! Referendum refused.

Still, the Villains didn't need permission to buy that island. By pooling their money together, they had enough to buy it from its current owner, Sir Bitchin Hansom.

But the Supremes beat them to it.

When they realised the Villains were leaving them either way, they figured they'd better make sure it was on their terms. So, they bought the deserted island and allowed the Villains to buy it from *them*, as long as it was understood that Vile Isle, while technically an independent country belonging to the Villains through legal purchase as shown on the receipts, was, and always would be, a Great United commonwealth nation. And from then on, the Supremes new factory-of-fun was to make sure the Villains never forgot it.

Fast forward three generations, and this is where our tale finally begins. The tension and rivalry between Supreme Citizens and Vile Isle are blazing strong. The Prime Villister, Motherkiller Byantichoyce, takes care of the diplomatic blah-blah, while the island's Supreme-Villain, a bloke by the name of Calyx, oversees the protection of Villainy business from Supreme interference, and it is Calyx that our story is not about...

Every year, the Villains of Vile Isle hold a week-long event celebrating the anniversary of their separation from Great United, and every year, Great United's Supreme-Hero, Spandex Man, has nothing better to do than everything he can to ruin it.

As the Supreme-Hero, Spandex Man is expected to hold open cortege every Sunday in his Pantyhäus so that Lesser-Supremes, Lower-Supremes, and Hardly-At-All-Supremes can come and beg for vegetable seeds, or for him to plead their case to the Prime Supreme, so they don't have to spend life in prison for not paying the toll on the toll road, or for him to come and save their village from illegal hairy bat-winged Villains terrorising their children and stealing their jobs. A tedious affair, but duty calls. So, Spandex Man, a slimily handsome follower of the Shredded Gainz religion (or Swollists) in a skin-tight silver leotard, lounges on his diamond ottoman while the Lesser, Lower, and Hardly-At-Alls queue up to dribble on his shiny pointed shoes.

"Next," he calls after ordering his guardvarks to quarantine an incurable case of the uglies.

"Name?"

"Roofus Valnexy. Please, Spandex Man, my family and I need—"

"*Valnexy?*" Spandex Man cries, sitting up to look at the man. A skinny freak in baggy clothes with a female freak and two little freaks. Disgusting. "Valnexy is a villainous name. What is your family doing in Supreme? Do you have papers?"

"We do, yes, all the necessary papers. I'm here for work, but please—"

"The woman doesn't have papers," Spandex Man says, looking through them.

"No, but—"

"And your children were born in Supreme?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely, they're Supremie-Dreamies. We just—"

"Detain them all. Organise immediate deportation."

"But Spandex Man, please! I'm here for work. I only came to ask if you would stamp my work visa so I could mail it to the ministry..."

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have the proper papers to be spawning out Supreme-Villains on Supreme soil. Don’t think you can come into our country, have hundreds of babies, and expect them all to be Supremie-Dreamies. Go find a job on Vile Isle and take your little Villains with you. NEXT!”

“But...but I’ve been here 22 years...my children know no other—”

“SPANDEX!”

Spandex Man shrinks in his ottoman as 3BM, an enormous brass man, comes thumping through the Pantyhäus. 3BM looks like your classic tinman, if the classic tinman had swallowed a second classic tinman, both whole and horizontally, and was then popped into a real-time photoshop booth by a twenty-year-old fashion intern at MødE who addressed all the awkward, misshapen edges that suddenly adding the length of your height to your girth would cause, creating a silhouette more evenly rounded. In fewer words, if you’re struggling with word-count restrictions or something, then 3BM is a gold snowman with one large body ball and one smaller head ball, standing on two legs and with two arms, and instead of snow, he’s hollow, brassy, and pure Bitchin tin. He’s Spandex Man’s official sidekick—every Supreme-Hero needs a sidekick—but it so happens that Spandex looks to 3BM as more of a hero, which I suppose makes *him* the sidekick, and for this reason, blindly goes along with anything 3BM says, despite most of it being nuts and bolts and watery-cucumber-tosh. Truly, 3BM is a proud Tosh from the Borough of Tosh and to this day speaks only in the Tosh dialect.

“What?” Spandex says, recoiling, “should I go easier on them?”

3BM barely glances at the weeping Valnexy family. “Na, they’re vile. Don’t you worry your pretty head about it. Guess what day it is?”

Spandex Man's spirits lift.

"That's right, the first day of Freak Week!" 3BM hollers. "Go on, zip up your best unitard. We've got a parade to ruin!"

Spandex Man jumps up but then stops. "What about all that stuff the scissor man told us?" he asks. "He must really believe it if he came all the way from Vile Isle just to warn us."

3BM's head starts spinning. He clasps it between his hands to stop it and twists his face back to the front. "You know what happens when you bring up stuff I don't wanna' think about," he warns. "Now, I didn't like what the scissor man said either. It was incredibly inconvenient because he wanted us to withdraw from the Freak Week battle, and I thoroughly enjoy ruining Freak Week. If we had to stop doing it...well, frankly, I'd be peeved. So, y'know what I think? All that stuff he said is just a big villainous hoax. That's right. I don't believe it. The scissor man, well, he's one of those 'calculators,' those 'analysers,' 'sciencers,' 'experts,' whatever you wanna' call 'em. I think he's just spouting off rubbishy shite to ruin everybody's fun. Wouldn't be surprised if the Villains are in on it too. I'd go as far as saying the Injustice Team probably made up 'smogpoison' as a scare tactic to try'n get us to stop attacking their dumb parade."

Spandex Man is nodding eagerly. "Well, 3BM, you've done it again. You've confirmed everything I wanted to hear and convinced me to agree with every word of Tosh you've said. How do you do it?"

3BM slaps him on the back. "Ain't got a fuggin' clue," he shouts, and they laugh and laugh and laugh. Ladidadidadida!



On Vile Isle, Professor Scissoreyes has called an emergency council meeting of the Injustice Team, so Calyx is grumbling to his sidekick, Helianthus, the boy who once bullied him in school on Supreme (before Calyx was banished to Vile Isle) and whom Calyx turned into Sunflower Boy as payback. Well, Sunflower Boy, all grown up, is Helianthus, a fierce Villain who's mastered the skill of spontaneous sunflower combustion, which means giant sunflowers burst from the ground and destroy buildings. Furthermore, the two buried the hatchet of the past and Helianthus became Calyx's official sidekick. Every Supreme-Villain needs a sidekick. Calyx chose Helianthus because he's an eight-foot-tall mutant freak. Calyx is a regular sized mutant freak, so it's nice to have a giant sunflower monsterman around when you find yourself in a sticky situation. For instance, when your sepal vine suction is malfunctioning, and you've got Spandex Man laser-roasting you, or there's a horde of angry farmers who aren't too pleased about you running through their wheat fields.

Also attending the Injustice Hall council meeting is Doctor Cleaverfingers, Bardshee Screecher, Peg-Leg Perceval from Cornfence, Petri Dish, Spic'n'Span Sue, Snowborg, Maximus Mazemaster, and Winter Creeper. Winter Creeper is the great-granddaughter of Vile Isle's founder, Whiney Viney, and therefore, received her powers genetically from all those vines her great-grandmother ate. Calyx doesn't know why he was born with the unique mutation of sepal hands because his dad is Supreme and his mum is Manty Snake. Must've been an ancient race of sepalpeople or something. Naturally, he was awkward as a kid. I mean, fitting in is hard enough with regular hands, but try doing it when they're sepals. However, he's now Calyx, Supreme-Villain of Vile Isle. He gets shiny green armour with built-in jetpacks and a goggle-eyed helmet with 360° panoramic vision.

When everybody's arrived, Professor Scissoreyes stands. "I called this meeting because I've made some alarming calculations—"

"Here we go," Calyx groans, "he's brought us some of his mysterious mythical calculations."

"Actually, they're all based entirely on data I've been collecting and researching for years. Everything's completely scientific."

Calyx and Helianthus exchange amused looks. "Go on then, tell us your scientific calculations."

"It appears that your constant battles with Spandex Man and the Supremes have been emitting alarming numbers of smogpoison into the astrosky. All the explosions and laser beams and toxic rubbish left behind from these battles have caused the smogpoison volume to increase from 20 billion units to 39bu in the last ten years alone. Now, this sounds ominous because it is. I implore you to take it seriously. My calculations indicate that if the smogpoison volume in the astrosky reaches 40bu, then it could rupture and—"

"When Helianthus and I fight," says Calyx, "we're restoring vegetation and botanical life to both Vile Isle and Supreme ever since the Bitchin Dust Trial Revolution and Supreme's continuous urban construction practically wiped it from this side of Earthworm. We're fighting the good fight. We fight for natural restoration. I don't see how that could be harming the planet."

"That may well be," Scissoreyes responds, "but you're doing more harm than good if your 'natural restoration' comes at the price of the astrosky. Is there no way to restore vegetation without battle? Without emitting 3bus of smogpoison every year? Because that's what I've calculated are your emissions per annum. And you know where the largest yearly percentage

of those emissions comes from? The annual Freak Week battle with Spandex Man and the Supremes. I've calculated how much damage this year could cause, and it's catastrophic, enough to push the volume of smogpoison over 40bus, and if the astrosky bursts, it could very well shatter the timeline."

There are gasps and shouts, hoots, and howls. Moans, groans, and wild bemoans. Swaying, swooning, swearing, sighing. Sweating, wetting beds, and dying.

Actually no, nobody died.

Unlike the rest, Calyx isn't concerned. "If you were *really* so worried about smogpoison in the astrosky, why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Because I've only just compiled enough data to make the calculations and determine these numbers accurately."

Calyx and Helianthus exchange smug grins. "So, we're supposed to just let the Supremes come to our island and ruin Freak Week because you had some apocalyptic determination?" They laugh.

Professor Scissoreyes shoots two pairs of scissors out of his eyes so forcefully that both stick into the wall at the back of the room like darts.

"Listen to me," he says, "I did not *have* a determination. I *determined*, through scientific analysis and calculation, that destruction from this year's Freak Week battle will almost certainly topple the astrosky, which could have the even worse effect of fracturing time. There you go. I've said it, you've been warned, I've done my part."

Professor Scissoreyes goes to the wall, pulls out the two pairs of scissors, and drops them into the school supplies donation bucket. "See you at the parade...*hopefully*," he says, cackling his way out the door.

Calyx and Helianthus are still laughing when Winter Creeper launches herself into the air and lands in the centre of the hall.

“We need to listen to him,” she says. “He isn’t some mystical fortune teller spitting out prophecies. He’s a scientist. He’s literally warning us with facts and evidence. How are you going to ignore that?”

“I didn’t see any evidence,” Calyx says, crossing his arms.

“He gave you his figures.”

Calyx shrugs. “I didn’t see any evidence though.”

“That...is the evidence. Scientifically proven results. He’s left the binder with all his calculations for us to read.” She holds up the massive binder.

“You think I’ve got time to read all that?” Calyx says.

“You’ve only got two choices here,” Winter Creeper says. “Either read it and decide for yourself or trust Scissoreye’s report of it.”

“I think not,” says Calyx, “and, to be honest, I really don’t have time to go back and forth about this. Helianthus and I have the battle to prepare for. I would advise anyone else who still considers themselves a part of the Injustice Team to do the same.”

And with that, Calyx and Helianthus shoot vertically from their seats and blast through the hall’s dome ceiling, causing pieces of plaster and rock to crumble down. Winter Creeper faces the remaining members of the Injustice Team, who aren’t quite sure what to do.

“What should we do?” asks Doctor Cleaverfingers.

“Nothing,” says Winter Creeper. “I have a plan.”



That afternoon, as the Freak Week parade is about to get sloshy, Spandex Man, 3BM, and the Supreme Dreamy Hero Team (or Supremes, for short) come blasting into Vile Isle's airspace, ready to attack, just as they do every year. Because, as every Supreme knows, a Villain having fun is a Villain that needs to be dead.

Calyx and Helianthus are waiting for them, severely outnumbered no thanks to Scissoreyes and his scary-stories collection. Calyx must admit he's surprised Scissoreyes managed to convince the entire Injustice Team, leaving the two of them to face ten Supremes alone. But that won't stop them. They'll show those Supremes the ass-kicking of the year.

Spandex Man opens with his usual laser-roast, essentially just shooting laser beams into the screaming public and shouting things like, "ready for the light show?" and "what a great crowd, positively *beaming*." Once he's set the tone of disarray and panic, he opts for more classic questions like, "*leaving so soon?*" and "did someone have a party and forget to invite me?" Then he flies around pretending not to see the Villains waiting for him on the parade route so he can say, "*heeyyy Calyx, come out and play!*"

Calyx responds by shooting out long Venus flytraps from each of his hands. The jaws reach Nifty Condor, the Supreme's fancy bird-man, and tear his jugular from his throat. *Plooop.*

"You'll pay for that," Spandex Man declares, puffing out his chest mid-air, and pointing.

The Villains dodge Spandex Man's lasers. 3BM removes his head and chucks it at them, but they're able to jump out of the way as it explodes mid-air, by which time, 3BM's grown another head, and is preparing to throw that one too. Slick Slinky is lassoing his long spaghetti

arms to try and trap them, but it's no use as Slick keeps bumping into things because he's a big lanky clutz. Truly. Born'n'bred in Clutzshire.

Helianthus blasts sunflower combustion at Slick and a giant sunflower explodes from the ground, knocking Slick onto his long rubbery backside. Then, Helianthus uses his mind-capitula connection to bend the sunflower over and squash Slick like the stick insect he is. This causes Sooty Pigeon, the Supreme's not-as-fancy bird-man, and White Spider to retaliate. White Spider is spitting venomous steam into the air, attempting to put the Villains to sleep, but their plant-based powers make them immune. But, as White Spider and Sooty Pigeon are closing in on them, the Villains realise their shoes are stuck to the ground because of the sappy sunflower gunge. There's a moment of panic until vines wrap around each of the Supreme's necks and pop their heads off like champagne corks. Their bodies drop to the ground, *plooop*, revealing Winter Creeper behind them.

Calyx grins. "I knew you'd come around—"

She shoots out more vines, and they coil around Calyx and Helianthus, wrapping them up like flies in a spider's web.

"What're you...*ummglmnnnglumm*," Calyx cries as his head is absorbed by Winter Creeper's vine mummification. Doctor Cleaverfingers cuts the vines and sticks them in place with the sap, then Snowborg uses her blizzard breath to blow the two vine-blobs onto the side of a nearby building. They stick to it like spitballs. Winter Creeper slays the disposable Supremes, captures Spandex Man and 3BM the same way she did Calyx and Helianthus, and they're also stuck onto the building. Only then, does Winter Creeper allow the vines over their faces to unravel.

"What the hell?" Calyx demands.

“We’re trying to save the astrosky.”

“Is this about what that stupid scissor freak said?” Spandex Man wails.

But as he does, there’s a clap of thunder, and a hunk-o-chunk comes crashing down from above. They look up and find the astrosky cracked, and a piece of the timeline has fallen out. Another piece tumbles down soon after, followed by another, and another, all crumbling down.

Snowborg flies up and freezes the astrosky in place to prevent more timepieces from falling, while Bardshee Screecher blasts the fallen pieces back up with his voice. More timepieces crumble down as another section of astrosky cracks. Snowborg can only freeze so much of it together, and if she moves from the section she’s blizzarding now the icy plate will surely break. Bardshee attempts to screech more timepieces back up, but it looks like they’re only prolonging the inevitable. The astrosky is bursting, the whole timeline will shatter, and time will stop.

“See what you’ve done?” Winter Creeper cries, “we’re doomed.”

“Not necessarily,” says Scissoreyes, emerging from behind a nearby tree. “You need to gather the fallen timepieces and put them back in their proper place on the timeline. You can’t just throw them back up willy-nilly, or it will cause chronological mayhem. It’ll be tricky, but if you can fit the timeline back together properly before the astrosky bursts completely, you may be able to prevent it from bursting at all.”

Then, Scissoreyes reverts back into the shadows behind the tree.

“Quickly, gather the timepieces and bring them all here,” Winter Creeper orders the other Villains. “Bardshee, go get the ones you threw back up! Snowborg, hold the astrosky in place as long as you can!”

The Villains return with all the timepieces and Winter Creeper instructs them to lay them out flat. “We need to see them all, so we can figure out how to organise them.” Once they’re all laid out, the Villains find there are thirteen fallen timepieces.

“Here’s what we need to do,” says Winter Creeper, “everybody take a timepiece and try to get as close as you can to figuring out its exact date. Centuries, decades, years, months—as close as you can get. I’ll take two and Calyx will take two because we’re the smartest—”

“I’m the smartest,” says 3BM, “when I was a wee tin can—”

“Fine,” says Winter Creeper, “you get two, and I get two.” She props five timepieces up in front of the four spitblobs on the wall, then starts on her own.

1]...*Knights entered into quests heralded by mysterious dwarves appearing to them in the forest or at the edge of questionable bridges. The most famous of all their quests, however, was the quest for the Holy Granola...*

2]...*Ozzars saw the start of the Emu Wars. Emu populations had grown so populous, with a rise of some 20,000 Emus...*

She knows the first one instantly. Her great-grandmother, Winey Viney, read her all the Knights of the Crowned Bagel tales. But the second one...

“DONE,” 3BM roars. “2013 and 1066.”

Winter Creeper inspects his timepieces.

3]...*Anglo-Saxophone military engagement, none of the 400 saxophonists were injured, and they brought back three new Cream-Danish friends from Fluteland!*

4]...*allowed the parrot to attend the president’s funeral, but the bird was removed on account of its constant swearing at the casket...*

“I don’t think those dates are right,” she says.

“Why the bolts and baubles not?”

“Because the Anglo-Saxophonists didn’t exist in 2013, and we haven’t been an empire at any point this common era.”

3BM’s head starts spinning. “Brrrrrrbrrrrumbbbrlllrr bbbrrrrubbburr.”

“You have to steady his head!” Spandex cries. “Now, listen here, Winter Creeperelly. My timepiece is 2020. Let me go this instant.”

Winter Creeper stops 3BM’s head and checks Spandex Man’s timepiece, ignoring him as he whines and squirms like a prat tangled in his own unitard.

5]...little did the Ima Wreckins know, he would be the last to serve two full terms as President of the United States of Ima Wreck Her, for the following president stirred one too many hot-pots in his first term, and the North Courier Nation responded by shipping billions of lavathrax-filled packages to the Ima Wreckins in the post, resulting in 95% of Ima Wreck Her melting off the face of Earthworm. Alas, in the face of tragedy, there was a silver lining, for, after a thorough clean-up by the neighbouring Canabanadabians, Earthworm gained a new ocean!

“I think that’s right, let’s start a chronological line. #1 is the earliest so far, so it goes first, and #5 comes a while after, so it goes way over here. 3BM’s got his all wrong, but I’m pretty sure #4 was the funeral of Android ‘Trail of Tears’ Jack, best known for his forced removal of hundreds of Native Ima Wreckins from their land, so that would be...1850.” She places the timepiece in the middle.

“YOU’RE WRONG, YOU’RE WRONG, YOU’RE ALL WRONG!” shouts 3BM, “I’M RIGHT, I’M RIGHT, I’M RIGHT—” His head starts spinning again.

“One day I’m gonna scrap and recycle that blabber-breathing big mouth, 3BM,” Calyx says. His eyes widen. “3...Bs...and M.”

“Well done,” says Winter Creeper. “Where are you on your timepiece?”

“Easy. 1889. Birth of Azole Hittelritz.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t put that one back...”

Scissoreyes reappears from behind the tree. “Couldn’t help overhearing. I’d advise you to put all of them back. You don’t want to start cutting and rearranging the timeline, could get very messy. Just a thought...” He slinks back into the shadows behind the tree.

“Mine’s 1777,” says Spic’n’Span Sue.

6]...when she saw the spritzaraspritzer through her telescope. Following this discovery, she became the first woman elected to the Bitchin Academy of Space Aces and went on to discover the first fritzatata moonspiral...

Winter Creeper places it in the line.

“I’ve got 813,” says Peg-Leg Perceval from Cornfence.

7]...that the empire’s collapse was caused by the gods playing a board game, given to them by Fortuna, the Two-Faced lady...

They spend another hour fixing and rearranging the pieces, continuously disagreeing about where each should go, what historical event it’s referring to, and when any of these events actually occurred.

Eventually, Snowborg’s strength begins to wane and the ice starts dripping. “I can’t hold it much longer,” she shouts.

Winter Creeper reassesses the timepieces one last time, switching two around that they couldn't agree on, and says, "we'll just have to risk it and hope everything's right. We'll have no chance of saving the astrosky if it bursts before we even try. Bardshee?"

One by one, Bardshee screeches the timepieces back into chronological order. They all watch, desperately hoping they didn't fugitup. Just as Bardshee lifts the final timepiece, the ice barrier shatters. There's a crunching sound from the astrosky, but Bardshee screeches his most powerful screech, and the timepiece secures in its place. As soon as it does, the astrosky quiets. They wait. After a while, the cracks begin to fill, merging the pieces of astrosky back together, securing the timeline in place.

There are cheers and shouts, jumps, and jolts. Claps and zaps and snazzy snaps. Dancing, prancing, spinning, crying. Sweating, wetting beds, and dying.

Again, nobody died.

Except for Nifty Condor, Slick Slinky, Sooty Pigeon, White Spider, Redcap Greatagain, Mammothina of the Golliath Alliance, Icicle Hood, Rocking Chair Rave-Rider, Bobalobblob, and Earnest Splinter.

R.I.P.

In the end, the astrosky was saved, and the timeline remains secure. Calyx now makes real effort to take Scissoreyes seriously and be more aware of his smogpoison emissions. Spandex Man and 3BM continue to believe that smogpoison is a hoax and see no reason to inconvenience themselves by altering any of their activities. The Supremes returned to Supreme to hold open auditions for the Supreme Dreamy Hero Team. The Villains enjoyed

the rest of Freak Week, and Calyx even acknowledged that, if it weren't for Winter Creeper, they would all be frozen bones of dead time.

So, as you can see, the hero of this tale is not Calyx or Spandex Man, or in fact, any hero at all; rather, our heroine is Winter Creeper, for despite being laughed at, ridiculed, ignored, dismissed, and refuted, she still goes out and fights for shit that matters.

Whiney Viney be with you. Amen.

Albert's story earns him applause (except from Callum and Jasper, obviously).

"You think you're really clever, don't you?" Callum says.

"Was everyone in it?" Jasper shouts. "Why wasn't I?"

We look at him, and his face screams *well?!*

"You were the king, mate," Albert says. "Maybe you nodded off during that bit."

Jasper crosses his arms. "Maybe you should've told a better story."

When Rosalie starts eyeing the ground, Lazarus moves toward her. "Rosalie Jane Watson, age 47, I have a feeling your Plane is a monstrously magical place. Are you hungry?"

She looks up. "Not particularly."

"Strange. I sense hunger from you."

"Bugger off," Jasper snaps, shooing Lazarus away. "Leave the poor woman alone."

"Yes, the poor woman, the poor, poor woman. Jurors, I was hoping we'd have a little more fun today. You've been terribly boring so far."

"We're not here to have fun," Atticus says, surveying the rest of us, "we're here to experience the NeuroPath and the Fourth Dimension to help inform our verdict."

"But you haven't experienced the Fourth Dimension," Lazarus replies, appearing next to Atticus. "If you want to experience it, you'll need to try harder. Have a little imagination. A little *fun*." He does a twirl and is back in front of Rosalie. "Tell me, Rosalie, what is 'living-dead'?"

Rosalie shrugs.

"Anybody?"

"Mummies?" Albert offers.

Lazarus makes the game show buzzer noise.

“Zombies,” says Max.

“That’s the one.” Lazarus swoops over to him. “And what do the living-dead eat when they’re ever-so-hungry?”

“Brains.”

Lazarus claps and flutters back to Rosalie. “Rosalie, what’s a wife?”

“A wife?”

“A wife’s a wife?”

“No, I meant—”

“A wife’s a wife’s a wife!” he cries, “it’s got a nice ring to it, yes? *A wife’s a wife’s a wife*. Hold on.” He taps his head. “Someone’s heard it.” He does a spin, running his eyes over us. “Come on, don’t be shy. *A wife’s a wife’s a wife... Who knows the rest?*”

When no one speaks, he shrugs. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Figure what out?” Jasper demands.

“The rest of the thought. *A wife’s a wife’s a wife... It’s in one of those heads.*” He motions around at us. “I’ll find it. I always do.”

ROSALIE



10.

*A wife's a wife's a wife,
She'll be that all her life,
And this is all she has to do
Aside from being very true.
She has to not complain at all
She has to greet him in the hall
With all the muster she can grace,
With pretty, clean, and smiling face.
She lets him read and keeps real still,
She tries to lower every bill,
And never, never does she say
She's had a very tiring day—
'Cause tiring days are strictly male,
All others do beside them pale.*

"See, I always find it."

Lazarus grins at me from the foyer of a suburban home, immaculately decorated, sparkly clean.

"Where was it?" I ask.

"Where do you think?" He gestures around the house. "Something Rosalie's grandmother read to her from a magazine called *Good Housekeeping*. Do you know it?"

"How do you find 'em?" Max asks, coming up behind us. "Our thoughts, I mean."

Lazarus considers him a moment. Then he smiles. "I sweep them. I am your minds, after all."

Max holds his gaze until Rosalie appears around a corner.

“Come in, come in,” she says. “The lounge is just through here, make yourselves comfortable.”

It’s the most I’ve heard her speak since she was forced to introduce herself on selection day. She’s wearing a white collared dress with a frilly yellow apron and a red raspberry smile.

Everything here is perfection.

No, *uncanny*.

Something’s off, and I can’t tell what it is which unnerves me.

Rosalie presses against a periwinkle wall, out of everybody’s way as they shuffle further into the house, her smile plastered wide. A painted message. *I’m out of the way, but ever-available.*

Because a good wife knows her place.

Lazarus is still next to me. “Something’s off,” I say under my breath. “What is it?”

“Where to begin...”

“It’s the house, innit?” Max says, swirling his finger, shuffling over to the wall and tapping it. He points to a side table. “It’s sort of...you know...” he snaps his fingers, “like a cartoon...nah, that’s not what I mean. It’s like...like one of them old-timey adverts, yeah?”

The moment he says it, I see what he sees. It’s a collage. As a whole, the house comes together, but individual pieces are disparate. Dislocated bits of a Home & Architecture Magazine. Reality reassembled. Reimagined. Then again, isn’t every Plane a collage? An assemblage of discordant images from the Primary-User’s unconscious. Arlo’s dancing scissors and manikins. Carney’s dragon-ship. Albert’s comic-book-jungle. Rosalie’s Plane is just more obvious about it. More literal.

Max nudges my arm. "Look at this," he whispers, pointing to a narrow hallway, a dim red glow streaming out. The walls are covered in magazine clippings, all retro adverts and dated articles. 1940s maybe? 50s? 60s? I follow Max toward it, and it greets us. The hallway greets us. A pleasant, semi-robotic female voice. "Welcome to the Woman's Sphere." Max looks at me quizzically and steps inside. I go in after him, and the moment I do, I'm bombarded by chattering words.

HOW DO YOU LOOK AT FIRST GLANCE?

The first thing anyone notices about you-

-is your overall outline.

So let's find out how you compare to the ideal silhouette.

6:30 Make yourself delicious for him. Put on your prettiest face; wear the dress he likes the best; stroke perfume gently on your wrists and shoul-

We wish we could give you some magic,
fairy-tale formula, some shockproof
method of Keeping Your Man. But

we just don't know one.

It's nice to look younger than you are;

it's vital to look no older

They fly at me, pushy and entitled. I thrust out my hands, pushing back. But they keep coming. Swirling. Swarming.

I feel sorry for any woman who suffers from
menstrual pain.

But

I also feel sorry for her
husband.

Cramps, headaches and body aches
used to make my wife so depressed, so irritable
that I suffered through those bad days each
month, too.

I suffered from menstrual cramps.

This is the way we figure it:

If 1 girl
can dust the living room
in 20 minutes

then 2 girls
can finish the job
in 10 minutes

These words are more than felt. They're heard, absorbed, digested. They're forcing me to swallow them. *Eat them.*

ASK HIM ABOUT PLAID

SEE HOW HE FEELS ABOUT QUILTING

THE BEAUTY CLINIC

See what he likes about home clothes

Maybe he does know best

at home. Every housewife can help her husband

Some women use a daily diary as reference for a record of their husbands' business trips, home entertaining of business acquaintances, and other business outlays.)

The woman-of-the-house should know these family costs

1. Interest charges on purchases
2. Entertainment at home—the cost of food and drinks bought for those outside your family whom your husband's job specifically requires him to entertain.
3. Theft
4. Loss of retail sales taxes.
5. Losses resulting from hurricanes, heavy rains, freezing, lightning, floods, storm, cyclones
6. Costs of license plates for the family automobile.
10. Fire losses, destruction of...

➔ 25 ways a wife can help save on income taxes

how to look younger ★

Shun that tired look

"You alright?" Max asks.

My hands are over my ears. "Don't you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

Man Sized

Almost a meal—the kind he'll vote for when it's

lunch, supper, or one of his stag get-togethers

S MILING LIPS

Red attracts the eye.

That's why it is vital to have

the prettiest lips you can—

*Is it always illegal
TO KILL A WOMAN?*

I stare at Max like he's crazy. He stares at me like I'm crazy. Lazarus slinks around the corner.

What To Do

This

Afternoon

Try on all your clothes

Take a walk in the country and gather some interesting branches, pine cones, col-

Take out your flower books and seed cat-

Eat your raspberries, dear. Eat them.

Lazarus's eyes dart back and forth like he's watching flies trapped in a window pane.

"Maybe you should step out of the little hallway, Adaline," he says, 'your mind will suffocate in there."

alogues, and plan next summer's garden.

5 P.M. Take your facial slowly

Plan to redecorate the room you like least in your house.

When you are done, your skin will be rose-petal fresh.

how You know
means much he
to you—

I dash out of the red hell-space, and the words die. Max is behind me.

“Why couldn’t he hear it?” I ask Lazarus.

He shrugs. “They weren’t talking to him. Or any *hims*.”

“What were they saying?” Max asks.

I tell him as we head into the lounge. He looks around Rosalie’s house, nodding.

“That adds up.”

Rosalie comes in carrying a tray of sparkling waters. “Please, help yourselves to anything in the bar, we always keep it fully stocked. Would anyone like tea or coffee before dinner? I’ll be happy to get it from the kitchen.”

“We...” murmurs Lazarus.

Carney grins at the word *dinner*, a hammock of wrinkly skin. “We gettin’ a nice, home-cooked meal outta’ this?”

“A pretend meal,” Lazarus says, but Carney waves a hand.

“Absolutely,” says Rosalie, smiling sweetly, lips like fresh-picked raspberries, red that attracts the eye.

“Let’s just have a look-see then,” Carney says, heaving himself off a saffron loveseat and leaning on his walking stick. “Ooh-wee, bet it smells like heaven in there.” He follows Rosalie down the hall to the kitchen.

I turn to Lazarus and discover an empty space. I find him in front of the fireplace, studying a family portrait on the mantle. Two little girls in identical white dresses, blonde ringlets, pink ribbons. Rosalie is behind them, possibly smiling genuinely, and next to her is a smartly dressed man with a raspberry head.

“A beautiful family,” Lazarus says.

“An interesting family.”

Lazarus looks at me. “Judge *and* jury, I see. Do they not fit your description of the perfect little family? Rosalie will be disappointed. She does try *so* hard.” He turns back to the photo, grinning.

Rosalie announces that dinner’s ready, and we follow her into a beautiful dining room with a long table, ornately laid with china and crystal and candelabras. In the corner are two boxes of vinyl records next to a gramophone. One of the boxes is labelled *play me*, and the other *do not touch*. We take our seats as Rosalie flits back and forth from the kitchen, serving all sorts of dishes. Roast duck, garlic potatoes, creamed asparagus, wild mushroom salad, leek and bacon quiches, bread rolls, wine, and five raspberry pies.

Rosalie goes to the gramophone. “Music?”

“Springsteen,” Jasper says like it’s decided.

Rosalie shuffles through the *play me* box. “Sorry.”

“Bee Gees?” (Spirella).

“Corelli?” (Arlo).

“Iron Maiden? Black Sabbath?” (Carney).

No. No. *NO*.

“What *do* you have, Rosalie?” Atticus asks.

“The Raspberries.”

“That’s all? All those records?”

“Yes, that’s all,” she says, holding up multiple copies of the same record and shrugging apologetically.

No one says anything, most likely no one wants to be the one to say what everybody's thinking. *What about the other box?* Rosalie pulls a Raspberries record from its slip.

"What about the other box?" Max asks, balancing his chair on two legs.

She stiffens. Eventually, she turns. "You think I'm a stereotype, don't you?"

A question for all of us, not just Max. What could we say?

There's silence, until Lazarus says, "Of course, they do. Aren't you pleased?"

"Pleased?" she says quietly. "Why would I be pleased?"

"Because...all of this. You've worked so hard to maintain your Imaginal home, to keep it Spic'n'Span Sue. No one doubts your role in the world. You're a *good* wife. A *good* mother. A *good* woman."

"No."

"No?" Lazarus looks surprised.

"I lie to my husband."

"Really?" He peers around excitedly. "You surprise me, Rosalie! Do tell."

For a moment, she looks like she's going to speak truthfully, shatter her façade, let us into the real Rosalie. I mean, even the inside of her mind is a mask. Then her eyes land on the table.

"Who ate all the pies?"

We look. All that's left of the pies are five trays of flakes and crumbs. Eyes go to Carney, but he's fuming. "Don't look at me. Didn't get a single lousy bite."

"There were five pies on this table," Rosalie says. "I swear, there were five pies."

"We know there were bloody five pies," Callum says.

"I come back to the table, and the pies are all gone," she says. "Where have the pies gone? Who ate all the pies?"

Max stands up suddenly, eyes fixed on Rosalie. He's got a strange look on his face like he's pushing back a grin that he's not even sure is warranted. He opens his mouth to speak, hesitates, then, with an air of scepticism, says, "I bet it was that boy who took 'em."

Rosalie raises her eyebrows, nodding. "It was that boy."

"It was him, weren't it?" Max says.

"Yes, it was that boy," Rosalie agrees. "He took the pies. It was him."

Max moves around the table and goes toward the *do not touch* box. "You mind if I just...?" He doesn't wait for an answer before shuffling through the records. "Ah," he says, pulling one out and placing it on the gramophone.

A jarring beat plays, followed by rapping.

If you see a pie, go and eat that pie

I'm like, where's that pie?

Every day I eat pies

If you're not hungry, then you can stand by

Eat pies from London to NY

Every pie I eat, my belly gets bigger

Who ate all the pies?

Me.

Max claps loudly. "Wiley, innit?" he cries, grinning and looking around.

Rosalie's frowning.

“Pies, innit?” he says. “Treddin’ On Thin Ice. Look, I know it’s dated, but I’m not crazy, yeah? This is the founding of grime, right here.”

Lazarus claps, bouncing in his seat gleefully.

“It’s not my music,” Rosalie says, “it must be my daughter’s. I let her listen to whatever she wants when Hugh’s away on business.” She looks at her feet and smiles.

“You’re a cool mum,” Max says, grinning.

“Don’t tell me this is the lie you tell your husband,” Lazarus says, suddenly looking disappointed.

“No, it’s much worse. Hugh thinks our daughters are taking afterschool piano lessons, but they wanted to take Kung Fu instead and, well, their instructor—in Kung Fu, they’re called *Shifu*—”

We’re suddenly hit with a vision, blasted into a memory. A park. Kids running, eating ice creams. Adults chasing after them or sitting on picnic blankets. A slightly younger Rosalie strolls with a man of smaller build than the man in the family photo. They hold hands, and he carries a picnic basket. When they find a spot, he pulls out a chequered blanket and flaps it onto the grass. Rosalie sits by the basket, pulling out wrapped sandwiches, cheeses, tomato salad, fruit pie, and a carton of raspberries.

The man is saying, “my boss was impressed with you the other night. Said it was refreshing to find some good old family values in a home. Nostalgic tradition, I think he called it. And his wife complimented you too. Said you were an excellent hostess and that you wore your dress divinely. Are you listening to me?”

Rosalie’s desperately rummaging through the basket.

“What is it?” the man asks, popping a couple of raspberries in his mouth.

Rosalie seems relieved by this. “I forgot the cream,” she says, “but you seem to like them plain, so it’s fine, right—” She stops.

The man’s staring at her, clenching his jaw. For a moment, he doesn’t move. Then he says, ever-so-quietly, “you did *what?*”

“I—I must’ve forgotten to pack the cream...”

You shouldn’t have done that.

The man laughs. The laugh of outrage and disbelief. “So, I’m just supposed to eat them all like this? A whole carton of raspberries with no cream?” He keeps laughing. “*You seem to like them plain so its fine,*” he says, mocking her voice, moving his head so violently that his gelled hair falls out of place like he’s transforming into a deranged Batman villain.

“You don’t have to eat them,” Rosalie says, looking at the grass.

The man’s eyes turn red. Literally. “Oh, I see. I’ll just eat my slice of dry pie and follow it with nothing because, oh yes, you *forgot to pack the cream.* Tell me, Rosie. And be honest, now. Do you prefer to eat your raspberries with or without cream?”

Rosalie’s still looking at the grass. The man snaps his fingers under her nose.

“Hello? I asked you a question.”

“With cream, Hugh. Of course, with cream.”

Hugh appears to accept this answer. Rosalie peers at him, nervously picking blades of grass. Then, she adds, “but...”

Hugh’s eyes blaze. A single red tear slides down his cheek. I want to scream, *no, no, no, just leave it alone!* It’s like a horror film that’s all going wrong because the characters are morons. Obviously, Macheteface is in the dark shed, *don’t go in there.*

“But,” she says, “I don’t mind plain raspberries. I don’t *need* cream to enjoy them.”

The way Hugh looks at her, you'd think she just told him she'd shagged his brother and liked it better. Or that his mum isn't his real mum because his real mum was a cyborg with red eyes. Or something else packed with high drama. Not a raspberry preference. It makes me think of that *Eastenders* episode when Trevor Slater pours ten gallons of gravy over Mo's roast dinner, then slams her face into it when she doesn't eat it, and I suddenly want to laugh. What's wrong with me?

HahaHhAHAhaHhAHhhAHA

Yes, what is wrong with you?

Hugh gives a breathy laugh, red tears streaming from both eyes now. "You don't need cream to enjoy your raspberries. I guess that makes me an incredible stickler. Completely unreasonable. How dare I expect so much of poor, stupid Rosie? Packing cream is *hard*. It's *hard* to remember all the contents of a picnic, isn't it? Stupid woman." He leans forward. "Lucky for you, you don't mind plain raspberries. So, here you go, dear. Eat your raspberries."

Hugh takes a handful of raspberries from the carton and shoves them into Rosalie's face, squashing and smearing them around her mouth.

HahaHhAHAhaHhAHhhAHA

What is wrong with you?

It reminds me of Eastenders.

The vision flickers, blurring. It hovers in the background as it blends with another, overlapping. The other vision is full of hazy hues and white sunlight. A little blonde girl in a garden, picking raspberries. The basket's almost full, but she keeps picking, smiling and humming.

A man with a black chevron moustache staggers out of the large house behind. In one hand is a bottle of Gordon's, and in the other, a glass of tonic with cucumbers. He pours what's left of the gin into the glass and moves toward the girl.

"Picking those berries again?" he says, tossing away the bottle. It breaks in the grass nearby.

"Yes, Daddy. I'm going to bake a pie for Danny's birthday."

"HA! Don't waste your time. Boy's too funny to register birthdays." He taps his head.

The little girl keeps picking, but slows her movements, like she senses what she's doing has become something she shouldn't be doing.

"*I said* don't pick those berries." His posh voice slurs. "What...you don't listen to your daddy no more?"

The girl looks in her hand. Two raspberries. They need to go in the basket. She can't abandon them on the ground.

"*Hello!* I'm talking to you, Rosie."

She risks it, dropping them into the basket, and wipes her hands on her apron.

"Oh, come now. Don't get that red all over your pretty white dress."

"Sorry, Daddy," the girl whispers, hanging her head, seeing the red on her dress.

"Sorry iss'right. Get yourself up and clean. I don't want to see you looking so dirty. Come on, up." He grabs her roughly by the arm. She wriggles and screams, reaching for her basket, so he kicks it over, trampling the berries into mush. Shrieking turns to crying as he pulls her toward the house and into the glass conservatory.

"Look at the state of you. You've ruined your white dress, now your red guts are dripping all over my carpet. Go on, get in there," he shoves her forward, "clean yourself up, you're disgusting. I don't ever want to see you looking so dirty again, you hear me?"

The memory fades into another. The same garden, same little girl. This time she's on a blanket pouring invisible tea for three teddies. Her father's sitting in a lawn chair with his back to her. In one hand is a cigar, milky smoke streaming out, and in the other, he's shaking the ice cubes at the bottom of his empty glass. The gin bottle is on its side next to his feet. He reaches down for it, finds it empty, and lobs it furiously into the grass in front, watching it roll to the edge of the house. Behind him, the girl is oblivious, chatting merrily to her guests.

"Where's Danny?"

The woman's voice causes the girl to stop. Beautiful and immaculately dressed, her mother stands over her father with a raspberry frown.

"I don't know," her father snaps, "probably digging a hole in the bushes or whatever it is he does."

"I told you to watch him." Her mother's voice trembles. "You have to watch him, George. The whole time. You can't take your eyes off him."

"It's been five minutes. What could possibly happen in five minutes?"

"Where's Danny?" her mother asks again.

"He was back there not two seconds ago," her father motions behind him to the end of the garden where there are swings and an open gate.

Her mother's beautiful face pales, a ghostlike, haunting expression. "Oh no, no," she murmurs, walking briskly past Rosalie, knocking the big teddy face first into a saucer of invisible cream. Her mother breaks into a run, and the memory blurs, returning to the scene in the park. Hugh smearing red raspberries across Rosalie's face, juice dripping down her chin, staining her dress. Juice streaming from his eyes. Blood-red tearstains.

“Come on, eat them,” he says, grabbing another handful, shoving them in her face.

“Eat them. Eat your raspberries, dear. *A good woman always eats her raspberries.*”

Another vision blasts into view, loud and colourful and urgent.

**YOUR LOVE ROSALIE IS IN MORTAL
DANGER.**

**IF YOU WANT TO SAVE HER LIFE, GO
TO MEPHISTOPHELES' PLAYGROUND AND
CHALLENGE THE ENEMY TO A FIGHT TO
THE DEATH.**

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO?

CONTINUE SAVE GAME QUIT



Back in the park, a few yards from Hugh and Rosalie, the man with the raspberry head appears, flickering and pixelated. Chimes of a retro arcade game announce his arrival and the whole atmosphere instantly changes. Colours are bolder, faker, and the scene transforms into something halfway between the park and an old-school video game. Hugh's on his feet, throwing his head back exaggeratedly and cackling—in case anyone was unsure about who 'the enemy' was.

The raspberry man runs closer and demonstrates his Kung Fu moves. Hugh responds by doing the same, then a loud voice says:

ROUND 1.

FIGHT!

The raspberry man and Hugh charge at each other. It's over in a single punch.



The raspberry man smashes Hugh's head clean off his body, and it swivels through the air like an American football. It breaks through the invisible barrier that separates us from being inside of the vision and plops into an empty pie dish in front of Spirella.

She groans, pushing it away.

In the vision, the raspberry man shoves Hugh's bloody, headless body aside and reaches into the picnic basket, pulling out a knife and fork. Then, he passes them

through the invisible barrier to Rosalie. “Here you go, my love,” he says, “for your raspberry pie.”

Rosalie turns to the table, smiling. Her stomach grumbles. Hungry. So hungry. Starving. Famished.

Eat your raspberries.

She walks over to the table, lifts the pie dish with the head in it, and carries it to the end of the table.

“The *head* of the table,” says Lazarus, grinning.

“I suspect this might be some variant form of a Copycat,” Dr Eto says quietly, eyes on Rosalie.

Carney crosses his arms. “Thought we were done with them?”

“I thought they were supposed to happen at the beginning of the Plane,” says Callum.

Dr Eto’s pensive. “It’s just a guess at this point, but I think what might be happening...” He trails off as Rosalie picks up her utensils. We all watch, morbidly intrigued, as Rosalie considers the decapitated head on her plate. Then, she cuts off a piece of cheek and brings it to her mouth. There are groans, but I’m too fascinated to move. After some tepid bites with the utensils, Rosalie tosses what’s left of her etiquette and digs into it with her hands, ripping flesh from the bone, shovelling it into her mouth greedily. The more she eats, the more grotesque her eating becomes. Red-guts and juices cover her, fingers to forearms. Fatty bits hang from the corners of her mouth. Blood smears the lower half of her face, staining her teeth, dripping from her chin, down her neck, over the tablecloth, onto her white, collared dress. Drip, drip, drip.

Rosalie eats until she's down to the bone, lifting what's left, cupping the skull like a halved watermelon. Then she pushes away the empty pie tray and leans back in her chair.

"How was he?" Lazarus asks.

She nods, smiling as a crowd of Rosalie doppelgängers flood the dining room. Except they're creepy, possessed-looking Rosalie's. White-eyed and stiff. I feel their words whisper around me.

It's done. It's done. It's done. It's done.

"It's done," Rosalie agrees, opening her arms to embrace the doppelgängers. They all hurry over, pushing past us to get to her, forming a teary-eyed group hug. "That's right," she tells them, "we've done it. You're free. You're all free." She glances over to the place where the vision had been and smiles.

"Shit's weird, innit?" Max says, sitting next to me with a grin.

Jasper glares at Dr Eto. "Thought you did a psychological profile on everyone?" The doppelgängers weep with joy. "Missed the signs, did you? Nothing hinting this one might be a psychopath? Cannibal? Nothing?"

Before Dr Eto can respond, Lazarus claps. "Oh, but Jasper Horace Sharpe, age 56, the mind speaks a thousand different languages, but rarely the most obvious one." He swirls around the table to Jasper. "If you want to know the dark parts of a person's mind, find the ceiling collecting the most dust and sweep it." Jasper opens his mouth, but Lazarus says, "you want to know *how* to find the right ceiling. Here's the trick. We learn more when we listen and less when we speak. Shall we try it?"

"What the ruddy hell are you on about now?" Jasper cries.

Dr Eto is scrolling through his note-screen, reading his scribbles. “To continue what I was saying earlier about Copycats, I think...well, it may be possible, in certain types of minds, for a Copycat to be *triggered*. In this case, perhaps it was the memory that triggered it. Or the discussion which led to the memory. I haven’t figured all the pieces yet, but that’s how this strikes me. Consider Atticus’s Copycat, it was carnal and gory, but no one was overly concerned about its implications. Once we ‘woke up,’ Atticus was able to interpret his Copycat event for us, relating it to his experience dealing with Parkinson’s. Now, this time, we’re all lucidly aware, but when we came out of Rosalie’s memories, she seemed—how do I put this—*changed*.” He pauses, glancing at Rosalie in the chair. She smiles.

“Question,” says Lazarus, “what do you mean by *certain types of minds*? As in,” his voice suddenly changes into Dr Eto’s, “it may be possible, *in certain types of minds*, for a Copycat to be triggered.”

Dr Eto shakes his head. “I won’t be discussing details about anyone’s mental health.”

As soon as he says it, you can see on his face that he knows he’s misspoken and will now be assailed.

“Mental health, huh?” Jasper shouts, “so you *do* know what’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing’s *wrong* with her,” Dr Eto says.

“Nuh-uh, don’t start with the political correctness rubbish. Nothing’s *wrong* with Mrs Lector, she’s merely suffering *mental health issues*. She ain’t a psycho—*hooohno*—she’s got the ‘mental healths.’ That’s why she eats people. The *mental-healths*. And a retard ain’t a retard, he’s *special*, right? Nothing wrong with ‘em, in fact, something’s gone bloody right with ‘em, yeah? They’re special.”

“Special *needs*. Mental *illness*,” Dr Eto says, “and frankly, everything you’re saying is appalling—”

“I know, I know, you’re offended. You’re all offended. I can live with that. Tell me this, though. How’s it fair to us that we’ve come here without getting all the facts, huh? Woulda’ been nice to know she were a crazy before we arrived.”

Dr Eto looks flabbergasted. “I never said she was crazy or had mental health issues. I didn’t say anything. I—”

“You said enough, Doc. You don’t—”

Max slams a fist on the table. “Would you just shut your fucking mouth?”

Jasper whips around.

“That’s right,” Max says. “Always chatting bare shit and I’m sick of it. You’re done now, get me? Let the doctor get a fucking word in.”

Jasper stares, stunned, but doesn’t say another word.

Lazarus leans back and points at him. “You’ve just been sharpened.”

Not long after, Rosalie is back to her old self, totally unconcerned about eating a head in front of us. Dr Eto claims that’s to be expected, as a Copycat State could be considered a type of therapeutic purge for the Primary-User. I remember what Dr Weltz said about Copycat States diminishing with every Plane and feel a pang of jealousy about being Juror Ten and not Juror One. The doppelgängers bring out a batch of fresh pies, not that anyone’s particularly hungry, except Carney, who digs in so furiously he’d make the Cornish warlords proud.

“You gonna tell us a horror story then?” Jasper asks, sharing a piggy-snigger with Callum.

“No, my story is inspired by my mother and late brother, Danny,” Rosalie says.

“What’s that got to do with mind-control?”

“Nothing.”

Rosalie's Tale:

Funny Boy

At the checkout counter. Anxiety's creeping in. You're jumping up and down beside me; a six-foot-two sixteen-year-old, boyish and lanky, too skinny for that height. But there's no time to eat, never any time. There's too much jumping to do, too much clapping and skipping, and those circles aren't going to run themselves around the house. You'll spend an hour running laps, mind so lost in the far-off land of your iPod that I'll have to stand outside too, your personal traffic guard, redirecting your path when it strays too close to the road. Because you don't notice the road. You wouldn't notice the car either. Once the iPod's on, the land you're in is even further away than your normal one. But what is normal anyway?

It's our turn to check out. No incidences so far. We've almost made it to the end, almost home free. The little girl behind me whispers, "Daddy, he's *funny*." You're clapping your hands loudly now because the lady at the checkout has handed you *There Goes a Fire Truck*, the DVD you've been tirelessly obsessing about since Tuesday. For me, it's still Tuesday. You wouldn't get to sleep last night or the night before. And you were up again the moment my head touched the pillow, like you knew, instinctively protecting the dark circles under my eyes which you've grown so used to. One big, fat Tuesday.

You're waving the DVD around now, jumping, like you do, like it's a sacred offering, a tribal dance revering the gods for the blessing of rain, or in your case, fire trucks. There's a blue circle on the front that says *Ages six to ten*, not the most typical pick for a sixteen-year-old. You're not really sixteen, though, are you? Not *in there*. Just on the outside. What is typical anyway?

The dad whispers back. “Yeah sweetie, he’s funny.” There’s no malice behind it, no uncomfortableness or disgust, no pity, no annoyance, no underlying meaning, but inside, I want to lose it. I want to whip around and smack that ice cream cake he’s waltzed up here with, all care-free, zip-a-dee-doo-dah, straight onto the ground. I want to scream at him, correct his ignorance, his impudence. *There are ways of saying it, you know?* That’s what I would shout at him. *On the spectrum, special needs, Autism, — pick one, but for God’s sake, pick one of the right ones.*

You’re not jumping anymore. For a brief moment, you’re still, standing like any other boy, absorbed by the pictures on the back of the DVD. It makes me hate myself. For degrading you, categorising you, defining you, turning you into a label—another stupid label. And me, on my high and mighty horse, getting defensive about the *right* label, the *politically correct* label. Me, robbing you of a description that would, for any other boy, be a compliment. You *are* funny. You make me laugh every day. What is the ‘right’ label anyway?

You’re smiling to yourself. The last item beeps past the scanner, a bag of green apples. I’ll slice one up for you later. You’ll eat half a slice and a box of Cheerio’s for dinner. But, hey, it’s something, and we gotta’ pick our battles, right? We’re almost there now. You look over at me and shove the DVD in my face, pointing to a picture of a clown on top of the fire truck. You’re giggling. “Look, Mummy,” you say, “that’s funny.”

Groceries are bagged, anxiety’s shifting. Just need to pay. I rummage around my handbag looking for the wallet, sifting through layers of last month’s shopping lists and crinkled receipts, the dirty tissues, clean tissues, and wet wipes. No wallet. I wiggle my hand deeper, past the grime covered strawberry lip balm with the missing cap, the pharmacy-brand Jojoba body mist, and the empty tube of peppermints. Still no wallet, so I’m forced to go in elbow-

deep, a midwife at full dilation and still no baby. I'm feeling around the absolute bottom now, the land of lost mints, forgotten pennies, and sticky mysteries. My wallet's at home, which means I've been carrying around a pleather pouch filled with rubbish and this was all for nothing.

You're getting impatient. I can tell by the way you start pacing back and forth. Anxiety is in full force when I realise I'm going to have to pull that DVD out of your hands. You won't go down without a fight. There will be screaming, kicking, pushing. There may even be tears, from both of us. Everyone will stare. It really shouldn't matter. But there won't be anything funny about it.

A tap on my shoulder. It's the dad behind me, the unknowing recipient of some undeserved internal wrath. He's probably going to let me know there are people waiting. It's well within his right since I'm just standing here, temporarily out of order, the result of an anxiety-induced brain malfunction. I inhale deeply, preparing to face him, along with the rest of the irritated wolves in the checkout queue, because, they have places to be, don't you know? 3-2-1, okay, turn.

He's smiling. "You need me to get that?"

I refuse automatically, excessively. "Oh, no, no, no, no," I say, as graciously as I can, "Really, no, no, no, you don't have to. Really."

"Please," he says kindly, "It's no trouble. We've all been there."

In the end, I let him pay for my groceries and the fire truck DVD. He wants nothing in return, waves the suggestion away to the winds. No IOU, no phone number, no online bulletin alerting the world of his good deeds. Just tells me not to worry. That I'll laugh about it later.

“Look, I didn’t mean what I said about retards,” Jasper says. “What I really meant was—”

“Maybe you’ll just sit this one out, fam,” says Max.

“What happened to Danny?” Spirella asks, going over and sitting next to Rosalie.

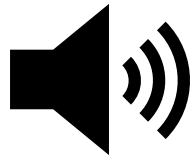
“My dad left the back gate open, and he ran into the road. A car hit him—it wasn’t the driver’s fault. Danny had Autism, so he wasn’t looking. The thing that gets me to this day though is that the driver didn’t stop. It wasn’t their fault, but they’d still hit someone, you know? You could at least get out and see if they’re okay. But, they just kept driving. They didn’t even care. I’ll never understand how a person can do that and live with themselves.”

Silver eyes bore into me. I know what he’s thinking. I’m thinking it too.

It’s right there in the paper.

I look at Callum, his face beautiful and unaffected.

JASPER



11.

Inside a claustrophobic bunker furnished with junk piles and floor-to-ceiling rubbish shrines, I think to myself, *have any of the Planes been truer to form than this?*

Underneath the clutter and useless objects, I think is a living room. A doorway to my right leads into a ramshackle control centre with 1970s-era TV monitors lining the walls.

Jasper's in another room to my left rummaging through the clutter, "...nope, don't know what this is. Or this. Or this," he chucks a spin-dial telephone over his shoulder, dirty trainers, a digital clock. He stops for a moment, studying a framed photograph, "nope, those're the Kennedys," and tosses that too. "What happened?" he demands, shoving his way into the room. "None of this crap is mine. Where's Dr Eto?"

"It's unlikely that none of this is yours. We're in *your* Plane," Albert says.

Jasper shoots him a glare. "Oh, are we? Really? How come I don't recognise a damn thing in here? I'd know my Plane if I saw it. This ain't it. There's been a cock up here. Where's Dr Eto?"

Albert motions over his shoulder and Jasper charges toward the control centre, knocking about the clutter in his way. There are boxes everywhere. Browning wallpaper. Torn maroon carpet, spots of dusty cork and rubble underneath. A dartboard dangling crookedly on the wall. Ceiling lights tangled in extension wires, VHS tape, pennant strings, knotted yoyos. Stacks of magazines and books that touch the ceiling and form a paper-tower maze. Dead plants, broken chairs, cracked clay pots, empty beer cans, a rusty sewing machine. Just *rubbish*.

The control centre is shaped like an octagon and has a big angled window with a control-system underneath, flashing buttons, levers, gears, like the cockpit of a giant spaceship (that travelled through time from the 1970s). Behind the cockpit are rows of swivel chairs. So more of a space *bus*. On the other side of the window is an enormous junkyard. Rubbish piles as tall as mountains.

“This is exceptional,” Lazarus says, sailing into the room. “It’s so completely full of shit. Have any of the Planes been truer to form than this?”

He shoots me a grin, tapping his head, reminding me I don’t think to myself here.

Jasper narrows his eyes and points. “I know you’re tryna’ say my mind is full of shit but jokes on you. This ain’t my mind.”

“No? Whose is it?”

“Beats me,” Jasper says. “Gets me thinkin’ we may be dealing with some sorta mind-control contraption, after all, if this NeuroPath is gonna be sending us who-knows-where? Anyone else smell the bullshit? ‘Cause summin’ ain’t right here. The pieces ain’t—”

Pang, pang, pang.

Outside in the junkyard is a news crew. A reporter peers in eagerly, motioning the camera crew forward. She taps the window, pushing her microphone against the glass.

“Mr Sharpe, would you care to comment on President Nixon’s resignation?”

Jasper gives her a blank stare.

“Mr Sharpe,” she says again, tapping the window, “what do you make of prison governor O’Friel’s comment that the Strangeways prison riot was an ‘explosion of evil?’ Do you think the release of the Woolf Report will have an effect on prison conditions?”

“Well?” Lazarus says. “Are you going to answer her?”

Before Jasper can say anything, another news crew appears. A tall man in glasses taps the window. "Mr Sharpe, what would you say to those raising moral concerns about the recent cloning of Dolly the Sheep?"

Another news crew. "Mr Sharpe, the prime minister assured displaced survivors of the tragic Grenfell Tower disaster that they would be rehoused within three weeks. Why, almost six months later, are 80% still without permanent housing?" Another tap. "Mr Sharpe..." *Pang, pang, pang.* More. *Mr Sharpe. Mr Sharpe.* More news crews scrambling over each other to get to the window, stacking on each other's shoulders, faces pressed against the glass. Asking their questions. Demanding their statements.

"What the bloody hell is this?" Jasper cries. Dew drops form at his brow. "What the hell's this got to do with me?"

A woman with an aubergine-shaped nose and a polka dot nightie pushes her way to the window, stirring a bowl of mashed potatoes. She raps the glass with her wooden spoon.

"Jazzy," she hollers, face flushing the same way Jasper's does. "Jazzy, are you listening to me? Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Jasper's already looking, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Jazzy," she cries, banging the spoon on the window. "I don't want you bringin' that Arab boy over here again. I worked my arse off all afternoon in that kitchen makin' sure we had a good roast for your *guest*, and he didn't even *touch* his pork loin. Never trust a fella' who don't eat his Sunday roast. You hear me, Jazzy? You can't trust a fella' who don't eat the pork loin!"

"Oi, clear off, Mum!" Jasper shouts, spreading his arms.

"Jazzy," she warns, waving her spoon, "don't make me come in there."

“You dun’ listen, do yeh? Had’ve been a hundred times I told yeh, *HE AIN’T GON’ EAT PORK.*” Jasper leans toward the glass, tapping his ear. “You dun’ listen.”

Pang, pang, pang. “Mr Sharpe, you owe me ten pounds.” A young man in a newsboy cap pushes Jasper’s mum aside.

“But what about the *Chinese?*” A man in a floor-length trench coat. “Everyone’s worried about the Americans, *but what about the Chinese?*”

“SHARPE!” A freckled, ginger woman smashes a paper document against the glass. “Alien sighting in Chisolm. Crop circles, UFO, the works. Gotta’ be secret government airspace. Bet they’re sending troops to Japan!”

Tap, tap, tap. BANG. A newspaper slams against the window. *The Daily Mail.* TAKE A BOW, BRITAIN!

“Isn’t it funny?” says the man behind it, a voice snooty and petulant. “You know, when I came here seventeen years ago, and I said that I wanted to lead a campaign to get Britain to leave the European Union, you all laughed at me.” Nigel Farage pops his head out from behind the *Daily Mail*. “Well I have to say, you’re not laughing now.”

He’s shoved aside by a Catholic cardinal. “Mr Sharpe. We’ve got to stop the doctors from prescribing birth control. Imagine a world where women think they have rights...”

The crowd is shoving ferociously, banging fists and microphones and wooden spoons on the window, and one of them cracks. A tiny fissure, but the more they pound, the longer it grows, winding diagonally.

“Bugger this,” Jasper says and manoeuvres to the far end of the controls. He opens a metal compartment in the wall and slams a red button. After a loud click, steel panels lower over the windows, forcing the crowd to move away or be crushed.

“Jazzy, you’re in for a world of...”

The panels meet the ground with a clattering thump.

Jasper wipes his sweaty forehead. "Took care of that lot," he says.

"Still convinced we're not in your Plane?" Lazarus asks.

"Shut it," Jasper snaps. "Where's your mask? Get outta' here so I can concentrate on my story. Look, there aren't even enough chairs for you. Maybe, this is my mind after all," he laughs, "twelve chairs. Perfect number. You're the odd one out."

Lazarus places a hand over his heart as a thirteenth swivel chair spins up from the ground like an electric drill. He smiles and sits. "Go on, then. Tell us a story."

"I will," Jasper shouts, pointing, "but not because you told me to."

"So, I've heard," Lazarus says, eyeing Callum, who said the very same thing in his Plane.

There's a smash of cymbals, and the room erupts with climactic music. Basically, a snippet of the pressing score that accompanies every dire minute of a Marvel film. After twenty seconds, it reaches the height of intensity, an orchestral climax followed by a few seconds of lingering musical winddown. Planes overlap. We're in the control centre. We're in another place, a studio. The broadcast is about to begin.

Jasper's Tale

Elucidation Radio

Gooooood morning London, you're listening to 9999.9999 Elucidation Radio. I'm your host Andy Moore, bringing you today's Inconvenient Truths.

Moore: *Today's guest is someone I've been going on about for ages. Elucidites know who I'm talking about. That's right, my private investigator. Now, before I introduce him, let's do a catch-up for those just tuning in. As you can imagine, hosting a show that exposes the most shocking conspiracies happening right here in our own city requires a band of tremendously incredible informants. And believe me, I got 'em. Now, the last couple months I've been getting info and putting pieces together, and I reckon I've stumbled on something big. HUGE. I've got an eye for these things, believe me. Someone else may have missed it...but we're talking about Andy Moore here, folks, I don't miss things [laughing].*

Now, I'm not here to make mountains outta' molehills; I'm here to expose big truths, the truths that mainstream media and the left don't want you to know 'cause it messes with their agenda, yeah? So, when I sensed I mighta' stumbled across something big, I did some digging of my own. And I ain't here to bring you fake news or nothin.' Just the truth. Believe me, the left hates Andy Moore. They'll do anything they can to try'n discredit this show. You know what that means? Yep, I've got 'em where I want 'em. Smart people can see it. Andy Moore's exposing and exploding the inconvenient truths and they don't like it.

So, I was doing my research...like I said, this ain't a fake news show, had to get my facts straight. And here's the dinger—

Actually, why don't we just get into it? I've got my PI here, and he reckons he's got something big. And believe me, it's BIG. HUGE. You'll see. You're gonna wanna' stay tuned, folks. Now, we ain't gonna use his real name on-air—don't ask, don't tell, amiright?—so, we're gonna call him Forty-Five because...HE'S OUR FORTY-FIFTH GUEST THIS YEAR.

[cheering]. Thanks for being on-air with us today, Forty-Five.

Forty-Five: *Happy to be here, Andy, love coming on the show.*

Moore: *And we love having you. Never a dull moment with this guy, believe me. How long has it been since you last came on? Couple months?*

Forty-Five: *Sounds right. I was 'two-forty-four' that time. I remember it was winter 'cause we were laughing 'bout broads who wear opaque tights when it's minus three, shivering their tits off for a bit of attention.*

Moore: *[laughing] Yeah, yeah, that we were. These birds'll do anything for it. What's the word? Thirsty?*

Forty-Five: *You're showing your age, mate. Think they're saying 'famished' now.*

Moore: *Famished?! Well, famished is right. I'll tell you what—*

“Oh god, *enough*,” Lazarus says, *clap-clap-clapping* like Solstus. Shots fired. “You’re bleeding all the minds dry. Spare us the details and tell us your point. Paraphrase, if possible. Maybe just bullet points. Bin them. Tell us how it ends. *And then she threw herself onto the train tracks. The end.* You see? Quick and easy. *And the creature wept for the death of his creator before departing to end his own suffering. The end.* By the time they realised who was really to blame, the wrong man had been put to death. The—well, let’s hope not.” He grins.

“Did that *thing* just cut my story short?” Jasper’s seething red.

“Your story made no sense,” Albert says, swivelling in his chair, “genuinely couldn’t tell you what was going on.”

“It was gonna be really good, *epic*, so it’s your loss. See, there’s this cannibal-daughter, yeah? A *literal* man-eater after her scientist-dad botched an experiment. Clever, huh? To feed her, the dad kidnaps rich blokes and clones them. He’s invented this machine that accelerates the clone’s growth from ‘birth’ to the age of the original subject, and while the clone is growing, the original bloke is daughter-dinner. Then the clone takes the place of the original, and no one’s the wiser for it. Here’s the catch—it’s this liberal snowflake MP funding the whole project, and in return, the scientist-dad alters the minds of the clones to be his die-hard supporters. A bunch of brainwashed clones placed into society as these influential rich blokes, converting loads of people to the Left. It’s not that far-fetched if I’m honest.”

“Brilliant,” Callum says, nodding fervently like he’s never heard anything so profound, so beautifully intricate.

“A real game changer this story,” Jasper agrees. “Epic scale conspiracy. Don’t know how I came up with it. ’Spose I’ll have to write a book.”

"I can guess where you came up with it," Lazarus says. "A premise inspired—"

"Yeah, well, none of 'em are very original, are they?" Jasper shouts. "Deal with the devil, tortured composer, Greek gods, superheroes—they're all tired."

Lazarus smiles. "Humans have been telling stories for thousands of years, can any idea be truly original? Perhaps. But it would be unfair of me to expect it from any of you. No, I was merely pointing out that *your* premise was almost certainly inspired by Rosalie's most recent meal."

"Take it as a compliment," Jasper says, nodding to Rosalie. "When I write the book, publishers are gonna line up around the block. I'll stick your name in the acknowledgements, love."

"I'd rather you didn't," she says.

"Then I bloody won't."

Lazarus claps like Solstus again. *CLAP-CLAP-CLAP-CLAP-CLAP*

"Well, Jurors. You've come to the end of day two. Certainly, you must be ever-so-much-closer to understanding *now*."

"Course we are," Jasper says. "Here's my understanding. The technicians need to figure out how to block thingamajigs like you," he waves at Lazarus, "mind-characters or what-have-you. Too distracting. Big nuisance is all."

"Anchor," says Dr Eto. "Possibly, *Copycat-character*."

"Copycat-Anchor-mindpal-character," Lazarus says. "See you all tomorrow."

I do hope you'll be thinking about the things we've been thinking about.

Lazarus looks directly at me. I already know they're his words, but this time, there's something else about them I recognise. Something I've felt before. Words intersecting.

Callum's sewer.

Paranoia, me, and a third silent voice. A separate mind.

HaahaHAhahhAHahaahhA

Oh Adaline, I am—

But you're not.

You're not my mind.

EDENBRIDGE



12.

What did I just hear? No, think. Feel. Doesn't matter.

What just happened?

Face panels lift. The Annexe unlocks, technicians spill in. My pulse is throbbing as they detach us from the NeuroPath because Lazarus is not my mind. Not in any way.

Max throws me a look as we're walking out. *Everything okay?*

I nod. But I'm not sure yet. It could mean nothing, and once I've had time to fully detach from the 4D blur, I'll see that. But Lazarus communicated with me, thoughts merging, mind-to-mind. One mind to another mind. Not my own mind. And it's not a theory. It happened.

I consider the worst scenarios first. That this anchor has been Jacob Lazarus all along, following us through our minds, dropping seeds, waiting for mind-control gardens to grow. But *how*? How would he get past the info-security experts? There's no way he'd manage to fool them and not me. Why was I able to tell that he isn't my mind? What happened?

The same questions. Always the same.

I do hope you'll be thinking about the things we've been thinking about.

New questions. *What drives your life? What makes you angry?*

There's added dimension to all of it now.

It's right there in the paper. Harold Lipton. The way I'd lied to Arlo. Why did I do that? Was that mind-control? Is that how it feels?

But then, if I was being mind-controlled *not* to tell anyone about Harold Lipton or Lazarus in the sewer, wouldn't it carry over into the Physical? Otherwise, why would Buryakov and Lang have shot those MPs?

I catch Max's eye. "Living room. Midnight?" He nods.

I have to tell someone.

I'm not in the mood for dinner, so I ask Jalis to set aside some bits from the cold platters for me. Spirella had the same idea because when I reach the dining room that evening, she's alone at the table with a plate, her long lavender hair in a plait down her back.

"There's another one," she says, pointing to the catering trolley.

We talk for a while, chewing rolled-up ham slices, building cheese and cracker sandwiches. It feels good to talk. *Really* talk. Verbally.

I consider telling Spirella about Harold Lipton. Maybe, even Lazarus. But something stops me. Mind-control? Or am I paranoid?

Maybe I should tell Spirella just to prove to myself I *can*.

No. Max.

The door creaks open. Carney pops his head in and when he spots me, comes toward us, walking stick rapping against the floorboards. He tosses *The Sword and the Stone* on the table.

"I'm done with that. 'Spose I'll hafta' sit through another." He looks at Spirella. "No tellies or nothing," he adds.

"Did you like it?" I ask.

Carney shrugs, non-committedly. "Wasn't total crap. What else you got?"

Spirella's clearing away our plates. "Good luck with the books," she says, smiling. "I've got some stuff to do."

I laugh like it's a joke. What do jurors have to do besides wall-staring and chatting with Tudor paintings? Spirella gives me a look. *You'll see.*

I turn to Carney. "Did you actually like it or do you want something different?"

"Just gimme' another like that. I'll stick with what I know."

"There are plenty—"

He taps the book. "Like this."

I nod, understanding him. We go to the living room, and I give him *Once and Future King*. He mumbles, "thanks," and turns to leave. At the door, he turns halfway around, clearing his throat. "I jus' wanted to say sorry for laughin' over in Callum's thingy." He clears his throat again. "It couldna been nice for you'n the other girls; I see that now. So...jus' hope I didn't make it any worse, is all. I gotta' head fulla' wet towels sometimes."

The door closes behind him, and I wait for midnight.

When Max arrives, I tell him about Harold Lipton *and* Lazarus, proving to myself that I've not been mind-controlled to keep anything quiet. "Do you think I should tell Dr Eto?" I ask.

Max thinks for a moment, then says, "Nah, not yet. Maybe see how it goes in your own Plane first."

"Do you think it means anything?"

“That Lazarus spoke to you as a sentient entity? Yeah. I think it means exactly that. But who or what, man’s got me stumped. I’ll tell you what I am wondering. Does he speak to anyone else? And if not, why’d he speak to you?”

“Does he not speak to you?”

“Never.”

DAY THREE



13.

The next morning, I sit at the breakfast table avoiding everyone's eyes.

Conversations make me feel stupid when I haven't taken my meds.

Rosalie's milling about the buffet, tidying spoons. Callum and Jasper are at the end of the table, talking over one another, likely on two separate topics. Carney's alone with *The Once and Future King*. I pick at my plate and think about my Plane. In a couple of hours, we'll be inside *my* mind. I wonder what it'll be like. I genuinely have no guesses, but that might be the absence of Adernal in my dumb, spacey brain.

"Morning everyone!" Spirella says.

I look up lazily, and the thought-ghosts in my head receive a surge of life. Spirella's long lavender hair is now an undercut. Multicoloured dyes blend into each other along the sides of her head, which she's buzzed into geometric shapes, like a stained-glass window. The hair on top curves over to one side, thick and wavy, a harmony of metallic rose-pink and deep violet. She strolls into the dining hall well-pleased with herself because she's just demonstrated how hair stylists are artists.

Callum's scowling. He initially looked like Bugs Bunny whenever Lola Bunny walks into a room, which translates to utterly fucking stupid, but he caught himself. Jasper's leaned back, belly trembling under smugchucklies. "Told you," he whispers to Callum, "Lesbian."

"Nice hair, Spirelly," Callum sneers like he can't help continually embodying Draco Malfoy.

She ignores him, pouring her coffee and sitting next to Albert.

I take back what I said before. It's Albert that looks like Bugs Bunny. But it doesn't look stupid on his face. It's kind of sweet.

“So, is this some big feminist statement? Should we alert the feminazi media that you cut your hair short?”

“Callum,” Spirella says, leaning forward, “I know you know that your opinion in this matter is irrelevant, but what I don’t understand is why you’re so irked by that?”

Feminism is equality of the sexes. My hair is art.”

“Well, actually, Spirelly, I think you’ll find that femin—”

“Where does a mansplainer get his water?” Rosalie asks, turning from the buffet.

Spirella grins. “Where?”

“From the well, actually...”

HEXTON LABS



14.

I roll the orange Adernal tablet between my thumb and forefinger.

“Are you going to take that?” Dr Wells asks, zipping up my suit.

“Just before.”

“Nervous?”

“No.”

It’s not a lie. It’s not the truth either. My thoughts are everywhere and nowhere. Film clips in low resolution. Blurry excess. Static chaos.

“Last day,” says Dr Wells, “then it’s back to everyday business. Might take some adjustment. We squashed a lot of NeuroPath into three days. I imagine it can be overwhelming. Especially, on top of jury investigation.”

I wish she would stop talking. Maybe, she’s venting. That would be okay. I wouldn’t have to respond much. She wouldn’t want me to. People only vent to hear themselves, but they need another body there, listening. Otherwise, they feel crazier than they do keeping it pent up, circulating on a loop. I hope she isn’t talking to fill the silence. That’s the worst kind of talking. Silence is always better than empty words taking up space. Silence allows me to think better, especially when I haven’t taken my meds. There’s already a three-second delay between words spoken and my brain processing their meaning when expressed in that order, that context, that sentence.

Words are words until they're in a sentence, surrounded by other sentences, with objective meaning, subjective meaning, contextual meaning, personal meaning, apparent meaning. That's the problem with my naked brain. There's so many meanings, so few neurotransmitters.

I stare at the pill in my hand. If I take it now, I won't be so bothered by people talking to me. Inside it are thousands of synthetic connections, support cushions, prosthetic transmitters. Mind-glasses.

"...and I tell him that it can cause a drop in blood sugar and that we should have glucose solution on hand for when you come out, but he doesn't think."

Has she been talking this whole time? I'm still rubbing the Adernal. I've probably whittled it down. I'll need to get a new one. That can be my excuse.

Dr Eto's in a chirpy mood, whistling to himself as he peruses his notes. He brightens as I approach and motions to a chair. *Sit, sit*, say his hands. *We have exciting things to discuss*, says his grin. *In your own time, of course*, say his carefully considerate doctor-eyes.

"Fifteen minutes," he says, looking at his watch. "All set? Got your Adernal?"

I show him the tablet.

"There it is," he says, peering at it like it's a diamond. "I can't tell you how much of a treat this is for someone in my field. To be able to analyse how this type of treatment affects the mental plane, to actually *see* the before and after ADHD mind and the way a stimulant medication treats it. Really, this is...it's just the opportunity of a lifetime. Career-defining research. Your Imaginal Plane, this experiment, so to say, well it's potentially what Jacob Lazarus created the NeuroPath for."

“No pressure,” I say, smiling.

“No, no pressure at all,” he replies, patting my shoulder.

It’s such a cordial lie.

ADALINE



15.

Drifting weightlessly. Made of air.

A helium-filled balloon.

Anti-gravity somersaults.

Moonlight blue and drowning.

Wavy lights flicker below me, oscillating, fading in and out; purple to blue, to green to yellow. Rippling, wobbling. Light reflections on the sea. Skittish lines that overlap like braided hair or the double helix of my DNA.

I'm in a beautiful mansion floating over the grand staircase. A grey mist pours through the open windows. Everything's in sepia. The rusty yellow of an old photograph. Great-great-grandparents holding up a dimple-faced baby, looking happy. *Janusz, 18 mos., Dec. 1912* written in pencil on the back. Great-grandad. Taken before the war. The first one. When life was a shade of burnt sienna and golden caramel apples.

Everything's blurry, but I can make out some of the others. They're drifting too, making swimming movements like we're underwater or on the moon. A sad, sepia moon.

...roast potatoes, then add a drop of spicy mustard on...that sunflower's seen better days...patient is showing signs of dehydration, look at the urine sample...totally off, brass instruments, trumpets, tubas, your timing is a...broken glass of chardonnay, tasted like cold butter and...the old pound coin...that damn cat must've got in and nicked the last...astrolabe of Abyssinian gold, a fine piece...with honey-blond highlights and a trim, not too short, I'm trying to grow...scented candles, 'Sugar Cookie' and 'Sandy Moroccan Beaches'...in the sample trays, considering the wide-spectrum of copper-alloys that occur in...hash browns instead of melon, the crispy ones that...turned on a lightbulb in my

head...sun shining through the clouds like a doorway to heaven...so I know a migraine's coming on because I get this rusty-coloured aura, and my head is...filled with silver-tongued words, I almost didn't trust him.

I hear their thoughts. Mixed up with my own. Flying at me like a breaking windshield. I wish they'd stop thinking. I manoeuvre towards Spirella. Albert is doing the same. When we all meet, I tell them to stop thinking for a minute. Just stop thinking.

They don't respond. I imagine them staring oddly at me with whispering faces. *Look at that freak, isn't she strange?* Maybe I am strange, but I can't think with them thinking.

"I can hear what you're thinking," I say, motioning to my head like it's a necessary gesture for context. Like we're communicating through water, even though we're not.

Albert responds, "Ką?"

Spirella turns to him. "Ti ennoeís?"

"Kokia kalba tu kalbi?" Albert says. They both look at me.

"I don't know what's happening," I say...and I hear it. *Nie wiem co się dzieje.*

I'm speaking English, but it's coming out...

Polski.

Polish?

Tak, Polski.

Max and Arlo approach, and in my peripheral, I see Jasper and Callum closing in on us. *Świetnie.* Great.

Jasper shouts at me as soon as he sees me look over. "CHTO, NAKHREN, PROISHODIT ZDES'?"

I shrug, because I speak Polish, not...

Rosyjski.

...Russian.

Max and Albert are laughing, engaged in a volley of sentences, lost in translation.

“Like the Tower of Babel,” Lazarus says, coming up behind me, his eyes sharp through the hazy yellow tones.

“Che lingua parlo?” Arlo asks Lazarus.

“Tu parli Italiano!” he replies, gesturing wildly.

Jasper’s voice is nearing. “Ia polozhu konech etomu. Gde Doktor Eto?”

“U tebia est’ bol’shoĭ zhirnyĭ rot,” Lazarus replies, smiling.

Jasper’s eyes bulge, the red shade of his face bleeding through the sepia. He hurls abuse in Russian.

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him that he has a big, fat mouth,” Lazarus replies, “or, more precisely...*you did*. I am—”

“You’re not my mind.”

We stare at each other until I’m distracted by gurgling, a slow *blub...blub...blub*. A force in the air moves us around. Invisible waves. I look up. Jellyfish. Huge, undulating Medusas, floating down. Incandescent mushrooms blubbing along, tentacles twirling like capellini noodles and tresses of frilly ribbon. I reach my hands up, unconcerned by potential stingers. They’re *my* medusas. They’re not going to sting me.

As a curly arm is just about to graze my fingertips, I’m sinking. Down, down, down. The others dropping too, slowly, easily. When I reach the floor, I’m able to walk normally. The medusas keep bobbing through the air around us, and I sense something coming.

Past the grand staircase is an antique sitting room, cobwebbed and dusty. I stop in front of a grandfather clock, examining weird symbols where numbers should be, three hands spinning quickly.

There's a thud, and Jasper shouts, "Chto, chert vozymi?"

I turn and Jasper's lying on the floor, rubbing his arse.

Callum helps him up. "La chaise!" he cries, motioning to the armchair behind Jasper. "La chaise c'est déplacée toute seule!"

I shrug and give him a face that I hope conveys: *OBVIOUSLY I CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOU. Co za debil.*

Arlo goes to the chair and motions for me to watch. "Guardami, guardami." He pretends he's going to sit, runs behind and pulls the chair backwards, returns to the front, and falls. "Tutto da solo," he says, sitting down for real this time. The chair shifts. Arlo's bum misses the mark, and he tumbles backwards. "Mamma mia!" he cries, which makes Spirella laugh.

More jellyfish flow into the room, lifelessly carried by an air current. I think for a moment.

Anti-gravity. Out-of-focus. Sad, sepia hues. Cloudy waterfalls and rolling fog. Words lost in translation. Strained communication. Weird, unintelligible clocks. Furniture that won't cooperate...that makes it impossible to...*connect*. That's it. That's what this is. Everything is disconnected. We can't sit properly, can't read properly, can't understand each other. The connections we need are just out of reach. Everything is in a language that nobody speaks. We can be listened to, but not really *heard*. Listen, but not hear. Not *understand*.

This is my brain. My naked ADHD brain. Foggy. Drab. Flat. Stale. Blurry. Spacey. Disconnected. I don't have the right tools for thought construction. All I've got is a half-empty workshop and the materials I'm given. The result is a shoddy construction job. That's if I even finish it. But how can I finish something if I can't even sit in a chair? If nothing will stay where I put it? If everything is either floating aimlessly or jumpy and shifty and agitated? But then...*then*...a knock on my workshop door. It's a delivery, a package. A plastic bottle. My missing tools have arrived. Adernal. Amphetedrine. They're coming. They're almost here.

The others watch the jellyfish dancing, blubbing, shimmering. They really are beautiful, but I sense something else coming. I go to a window, mist swirling around me, swooping down like the train of a wedding dress. I see them in the distance, emerging out of the foggy abyss that surrounds the house. A swarm of eels coming from all directions. Their bodies move up and down in long squiggly waves, pulsating with electrical surges. Tiny flickers of lighting in an approaching storm.

"Look!" *Patrz!* I point out the window. "They'll fix it." *Oni to ogarną.*

The others move to the windows, watching the eels until they're upon us. We move out of the way. They barrel through, at least a hundred in this room, charging toward the jellyfish. Once they're in, the fog recoils out of the window. The eels shock the jellyfish, creating a flurry of sparks, bursts of electricity. Waking them up. One by one, the jellyfish burst with magnificent colour. A symphony of light saturating the sepia. They're no longer stationary, but actively moving. The eels wind through them, igniting them, sending them spinning and twirling. Everything sharpens. My vision is pristine.

Carney's next to me, looking up. "...the bloody hell is this...lightning bugs...?" He's mumbling to himself, but I hear him. I *hear* him.

“English!” I cry, pointing at him, startling him.

“Oi!” he shouts, waving his walking stick at me, “mind where yeh point that thing.”

“What an event to witness, Adaline,” Dr Eto says, coming over, grinning widely.

“Neurotransmitter jellyfish, Adernal electric eels. Just fascinating. How do you find it? The way your mind interprets the effect of your treatment.”

“Surprisingly appropriate.”

“Like putting glasses on your brain,” Lazarus says, moving beside me.

“I wish I could express how ground-breaking the Imaginal Planes could be for psychological medicine and mental health,” Dr Eto continues.

I keep my eyes fixed on Lazarus, and he grins.

Dr Eto is still going. “I had a patient once, schizophrenic, who described her illness as ‘brain-lice’ because she felt beetles crawling around her head. They whispered all sorts of things to her. Things that made her suspicious of others or want to hurt them. If she ignored the beetles, they spoke over each other and grew louder, more chaotic. The only way to calm them was to actively listen, which inevitably meant hearing the things they were saying. Things that upset her or gave her unwanted thoughts. Now imagine if we could use the NeuroPath to help her. We could work with her inside of her mind, peel back layers, possibly examine the brain-lice until we have a better understanding of what’s going on. Imagine going inside of the mind, and it reveals to us what it is about a particular medication that isn’t working *in that particular mind.*”

He peers up at the jellyfish and eels swimming around each other, and nods. “I know it’s not my place to comment on anything case related that doesn’t concern me, but I can’t help acknowledging Jacob’s claim about the research possibilities this machine could provide. The NeuroPath could help doctors better understand mental illness, and

more importantly, help those suffering from them to better understand themselves, help them cope.”

“Preposterous,” Lazarus says. “It’s got to be mind-control.”

A jellyfish tentacle slides across my shoulder. Dr Eto says something, but it’s lost under an increasingly loud electrical hum. I look up, and the room is densely packed, eels slipping in and around fat medusa bodies, the gaps between them narrowing. Why are there so many?

“Perhaps you should use them,” Lazarus says. “Go on Adaline, tell us a story.”

Adaline's Tale: ***Bureau of Blockage***

Scribbler's Block. The most frustrating, inconvenient, unproductive regulation of the Creative Department known to...well, Scribblers. No one else is affected. Regardless, one of my sincerest hopes is that whoever came up with it died a horribly painful death. Suffocating in a car boot or slow decapitation. Not that I'd ever say it out loud. I'd especially never write it down in an official scribble—I could be thrown into Wasteland Prison. It's probably why I've never won any awards in my field. I'm not daring enough to write things that could get me thrown into prison. Any decent Scribbler knows, if your sentences haven't offended someone or put you at risk of arrest, you haven't said what really needs saying.

None of that concerns me now, not with this shit-of-all-shites Bureau worker on my doorstep, tossing out phrases like "Scribber's Block" and "for you." It's just...well, it's just the shoddy timing of it, really. Some might argue there's never a good time for a Scribbler's Block, and Some would be right. But let's be honest, there's inconvenient timing, bad timing, badder timing, all the way down to outright malapropos (I'm not supposed to use that word in official scribbles because it's considered unnecessary jargon, but it's a real word and deserves some page time occasionally) (and in case the context didn't do it for you, let me be the one to tell you that outright malapropos is the worst timing of all).

"Wait a minute," Carney says, banging his cane on the floor. "Where are we?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Where's this taking place? Another dystopia land?"

I shrug. “Somewhere sort of like London, but not actually London—”

“Sounds like Earthworm to me,” Carney says. “When?”

“Around now, I guess.”

“Great Bitchin before the fall,” Albert says, raising an eyebrow at Carney.

He’s nodding. “Now we got past, future, and present. Cracking on with some real world-building, we are.”

Arsehole Galaxy Maroon55, Planet: Earthworm

Divided Kingdom of Great Bitchin

2030 C.E.

It figures I’d be dealt a Block now. Scribbling’s been going better than it has in years. Got me thinking that maybe I *am* cut out for this whole scribbling endeavour. Maybe I *didn’t* make a dog’s dinner of my entire life when I wrote ‘Scribbler’ as my first choice on the Role-Request Form twenty years ago.

Still doesn’t change the fact that it was an imbecilic move of grand proportions. Second person in the history of the Assignment Bureau to *request* the role of Scribbler. *Story*-Scribbler that is. Plenty request News-Scribbler (not that there’s much difference these days). First one was a Pizzaghetti-Bitch recently over from Titaly, still rocky on the language and customs. A couple of Manchunker nobs at the pub saw him filling in the application and suggested he write ‘Scribbler.’ Taking the piss, of course, but he actually wrote it. How was he to know? Joke’s obvious to a Bitch, but he didn’t grow up here. They have a different Assignment system in Titaly, don’t think they even have Scribblers (from what I know, they’ve got something called Dantes which people seem to denote as the nearest equivalent).

Problem is, Dantes aren't treated like shit on a shoe, so they're actually nothing like Scribblers).

To the Titalian's great misfortune, once you've submitted your Role-Request Form, there are no take-backs. He was condemned to a life of scribbling, and in *Blackpool* (or was it *Blackpond?*), poor chap. Hanged himself a year later (in true Scribbler fashion). No choice, really, when it's that or life as a Scribbler in Great Bitchin's crown rectum. Show me a sentient being who wouldn't choose the noose, and I'll show you a Tory who isn't cock-hard for a fox hunt.

Point is, nobody *chooses* Scribbler. They're either forced into it (*sorry, all three roles you requested are full at the moment*), or they're demoted there after one too many poor performance reviews (*show us a few good scribbling years, and we'll reconsider your role as Screen-Giggler*). I'm sure I knew that, but I was a stupid twenty-something bohemian. I probably thought that *choosing* Scribbler was a one-man revolution. My middle finger to society moment. Bet the Role-Placers got a good laugh out of that. *We'll take your middle finger, you-fucking-sap. Enjoy the rest of your miserable Scribbling life.*

Who knows? Perhaps my whole career won't be remembered for its slew of crap sentences. It probably won't be remembered at all. I'll just be the guy who chose Scribbler and then disappeared off the grid. Of course, I'd like to be remembered as the guy who chose Scribbler and became a Scribbler Great. Fat chance of that these days if Scribblers keep getting Scribbler's Blocks whenever they're scribbling success. Hour upon hour we Scribblers spend, organising the finite amount of words we're provided by our assigned priority language. All that meticulous arranging and rearranging, coming up with word strings to please Readers, Agents, Publishers, Critics, Departments, Screen-Scribblers, that evoke

meaning, particularity, uniqueness, aesthetic—for what? To be served a Scribbler’s Block when it finally seems like something more than a mindfulness exercise in futility, and that I, Floris Hill, was meant to give society the middle finger and be a Scribbler.

“Floris Hill, I’m here to serve you with a Block notice.”

I scowl at the offensively average man in my doorway (yes, his averageness is so robust as to be offensive) holding out the dreaded paper notice. We in the Scribbler community call these particular Bureau minions *pen-pushers*, for what I hope are reasons obvious.

“There’s clearly been a mistake,” I reply. “I’ve already served three block periods in the last two years. My name shouldn’t even be in the pool.”

The pen-pusher shrugs. “Your word-count monitor must’ve calculated your daily-average as meeting the quota and put your name back in the pool electronically.”

That can’t be right. Sure, my scribbling’s picked up these last few months. My word count’s nothing to sniff at. But the amount of time I’ve spent serving block periods the previous two years, I’d say it’s impossible I’ve met my daily-average word quota for the month. Yes, impossible. No way has my name been legally placed back in the Block pool.

“No, that can’t be right,” I say.

“Look, I’m just the messenger. If you have an issue, take it up with the Bureau or purchase Immunity.”

“Fuck the Bureau,” I say. “I tried to take it up with them last time, and they put me on a three-week waiting list just to get a callback. By the time I got an appointment, my block period was nearly over. And Immunity? Seriously? Do you know how much it costs to get Immunity? Honestly, if you think the average person can afford Immunity, then you’ve been living far too north up the Bureau’s arse tunnel, my friend.”

“You could apply for Immunity Insurance. That’s what normals do, isn’t it?”

“What would you know about ‘normals,’ pray tell, with your little gold Bureau pin and your Daluvenci sports jacket? Anyway, I’ve already applied for Immunity Insurance. Twice. Rejected twice too. I’ve got arthritis in my scribbling hand. See?” I hold up my right hand, which looks like a claw and demonstrate the stiffness in my joints. “Can’t get Immunity coverage with a pre-existing condition that affects your ability to scribble. You should know that; you’re a Bureau-butler.”

“Sad story. Now, you gonna sign for this or do I need to stamp it Refused?” He wiggles the notice, and I have no choice but to sign it. Refusal to accept notice could be pricey, possibly land me in Wasteland Prison (and with no scribbling awards to show for it). The pen-pusher holds out a clipboard and a pen (yet another insult; as if a Scribbler doesn’t have a pen on his person at all times).

“How does it feel working in a role that leaves a trail of hanged bodies wherever it goes?” I ask, signing the form and shoving it back to him. “Statistically, the third highest per quarter.”

“Feels like six-figures,” he says, tearing off my copy and handing it back. “Have a blessed day.”

I watch him trod down my garden path. Then I look at the notice in my hand.

Bureau of Blockage
Creative Department, Scribbler Division
Block Notice, 1st Attempt
To Scr. Floris Hill
Block Period: 16 mos.

F. Hill
SIGNED

Wait. I'm sorry...does that say...

Hahaha, it couldn't have...

Not *sixteen* months...why that's...

...

.....

.....

ONE YEAR AND FOUR MONTHS???

Birds scatter at the colossal volume of my thoughts.

I dash after the pen-pusher, down the garden path, to the edge of the pavement, the end of the road. I'm running, I tell you. Forehead-sweat-crying, your-dad's-gardening-pit-stains running. I'm looking every which way. I'm rabid. But somehow, he's gone.

Bastard. Asscuntfuckershitheadcuntsuckingbastard. Probably used those six-figures to have a helicopter pick him up at the end of the road. Dodgy neighbourhood. Can't risk getting his sportscoat nicked by a gang of normalkind youths.

You know something? I'm not gonna take this lying down. I'm gonna march down to the Bureau right this minute and demand to be seen. There's no way this Block is going through. Not today, Bureau. Not to-fucking-day. A sixteen-month Block period? Sod off. Sod right off back to the sod factory, you soddy sod-goblins.

Back of the bus on the way to the Bureau, I start recalling Scribbler's Block horror stories. I heard about one bloke who got served a four-year Block period. Spent three of those years fighting the Bureau in vain, and the fourth dead. Hanged himself with a tablecloth. Another lady got served ten years. *Ten years*. That would be a record-breaking case. She signed for it,

shut the door, and hanged herself with a scarf right there in her hallway. Pen-pusher came back five minutes later. Apparently, there was a typo on the notice, and there wasn't supposed to be a zero after the one. About three minutes too late though. She'd already resolved herself to the eternal Block period. But I'm not going down that way, as just another Bureau-invoked statistic. Not a chance.

When I arrive at the Bureau, I'm told by a blonde-haired, blue-eyed cherub-male to take a number and have a seat in the waiting area. *Keep an eye on the screen, when your number is called, it'll appear up there.* Waiting area's bloody packed, of course. Not a single open seat. I look at my number. 331. I look up at the screen. 94. Well, if they think standing for another...331-94 numbers is going to deter me, they've got another thing coming.

$$\begin{array}{r} 331 \\ - 94 \\ \hline 237 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Sheesh. Two-hundred and forty-seven people ahead of me? When I got my last Block, I rang the Bureau for an appointment. Obviously, this Block is a different matter entirely, things could get heated, and I'm not risking any Bureau ninny putting the phone down on me. But godblimey, this is a farce. How do they propose to get through all these people before 5pm closing? I return to reception and ask. The cherub-male responds with a patronising shrug, indicating he has not a single shit to give.

"Well, then. Thank you for *lih-trelly* nothing," I say, turning as aggressively as I can, hoping to demonstrate that I will not be taking the gestured lip of a Bureau butt-hugger.

"Have a blessed day," he calls after me. It takes everything in my power not to whip around and offer him my most canine snarl. But I refuse him the satisfaction.

Two hours go by, and we're only on number 167. It's already 2pm, so I'm increasingly concerned I'll be among the turkeys left in the coop at closing. There's been a shift change at reception. A pale woman with an actual smile instead of the standard Bureau ice grin has taken the place of the Aryan cunt from earlier. I approach her with my concern, and she seems genuinely worried about it like it hasn't occurred to her that three hours isn't enough time for 331-167 people to be seen.

"Can you imagine? Making these people come back and start again tomorrow, after waiting here all afternoon!" she says (Haggis-Bitch, it turns out), and I'm nodding so fervently at the one person who actually cares that I get a stitch in my neck. "You know what? Hang on a minute, I'll go check with Alan about the protocol for this sort of thing."

My heart drops. If she doesn't already know, that must mean...

"It's my first-day training." She smiles sweetly. It'll be one of the very last times. I suspect it doesn't take long for the Bureau to freeze the hearts of their pleasant new workers, thus completing their transformation from humans to cold demon ice-grinners.

She whisks off, leaving the reception unmanned. I consider peeking over, not that I'm sure what I'm expecting to find. Before I can do anything, the blonde Bureau butt-hugger from before slides into view from somewhere below like a charmed snake. "Good afternoon. How may I help?" he asks, ice-grinning.

I walk off, the familiar feeling of futility washing over me when...wait...could it...can it truly be? A small paper on the floor. Someone's dropped their number! I snatch it up and actually gasp. It's 174. That's only—I look up at the screen, 168—six numbers away. This sort of number would guarantee me being seen today.

I glance around the waiting area. Still packed, not a seat in sight. Taking this number would be wrong. Someone's probably been waiting for hours. It could be one of those frazzled, apologetic mothers with their screaming young or one of the rickety-backed crones here with their caretakers. It makes me wonder which other divisions receive Blocks and what their Blocks block. Anyway, it wouldn't be right for me to take this number. I should give it to reception. I look over, and the Haggis woman catches my eye and motions exuberantly to the ice-grinning-but-hugger standing next to her. "Found him," she mouths to me. He grins icily and gives me a wave. Oh, fuck you, Alan. Hug a butt and die.

No, going back to reception won't do. I return to the waiting area where I intend to come up with a plan. I find a spot against the wall, snugly wedged between an over-perfumed woman talking at an offensive volume into her phone, and a stubbly man in a trench coat, bent toward the sliding exit doors, trying to inconspicuously light a fag. Right, landed me a good spot. Time to consult the scales of justice.

In one hand, I have my God-given number, 331, which will most likely afford me a bus ticket home with nought accomplished. In the other, I have 174, which may not be my God-given number, but doesn't preclude the possibility of it being a God-*sent* number. Perhaps, I was meant to stumble upon this number, this key to being seen in the next hour. I shake my head. This has nothing to do with Fate. Fate has better things to do than bump me up in the queue at the Bureau of Blockage. Like serving me a Scribbler's Block in the first place. What's that about? Unless...unless, this is Fate providing me with an opportunity to stick it to the Bureau. To start a revolution that will change the world as we know it, end the Bureau of Blockage tyranny forever and bring freedom...

Nope. Simmer down, Floris. You're a middle-aged Scribbler with three Blocks to-date and an acute case of arthritis in your one good scribbling hand. Better just take what little the world gives. Middle finger to the rest. 174, it is.

I drop my hand and let 331 drift to the floor, maintaining the balance of the universe. However, in what was supposed to be a discreet movement, I accidentally elbow the bearded trench coat, still fiddling with his fag. He snaps halfway around, and for a moment we stare at each other, both wearing the expression of a naughty dog caught weeing on an Aynsley floor vase. Recognising this, a silent agreement is formed between us that neither saw or knows anything of the others infraction, and he turns his back to me once more.

When 174 is called, I assess the situation, waiting to see if anyone heads toward the office door or starts frantically emptying out their pockets. The number is called a second time, and with no obvious indications of its rightful owner, I beeline to the door. I keep my eyes on the plump, cherry-cheeked clerk holding it open, hoping to avoid the face of anyone who may know my crime. I hand over my ticket, he glances at it, then tells me to follow him to Appointment Office 6B.

Once inside, he shuffles himself behind the desk, plops into his chair, and motions for me to sit also.

"Got your forms and original notice with you, yeah?" He reaches for them before I can answer. The individual features of his face are all round and pink. This is what I imagine Father Christmas must look like underneath his beard.

"Of course," I reply, giving them to him. "It's not my first blockage. Sort of why I'm here."

"Mm," he says, looking through my paperwork, then up at his computer screen.

"Scribbler Division," he murmurs to himself, running his finger over the scroller on his mouse.

After a few glances between the screen and my papers, he types something into the computer and says, “we can get you in for a consult January 14th of next year. Shall I go ahead and book you in?”

January 14th? That’s in four and a half months! The nerve.

“I was of the impression we were having a consult right now,” I reply.

He looks at me oddly. “Thought this wasn’t your first blockage?”

“Well, no—but its only my second time disputing. The other time, I was on a three-week wait list, and it was a four-week Block.”

The clerk laughs a big, hearty laugh, shaking his belly like a bowl full of jelly. “Sounds about right. Four-week Block’s never worth the hassle.”

I remember the promise I made myself. The Bureau would not win today. And if I can’t do this for myself, I must do it for the rightful owner of 174. Their place shall not be nicked in vain.

“I’m sorry, but January 14th will not do. I’ve been wrongfully and illegally placed back into the Block pool, and I refuse to serve a moment of unlawful blockage. I must insist on having the Block repealed at once.”

The clerk’s tubby grin falls. He replaces it with a look of raised concern. “Good God, you mean to tell me you’re here to report a case of wrongful blockage? Why on earth didn’t you say?” He leans back in his chair, crosses his arms over his big jelly-belly, and stares at me.

“Shall I book you for the 14th or have you decided to go ahead and serve the Block?”

“How is it that you people care so little for the well-being of others? How do you sleep at night knowing that hundreds of people file in and out of here each day, their livelihoods on the line, and you’ve done less than the bare minimum to help them?”

“Look, Mr...Hill. I’m not your enemy, okay?”

“You work for the Bureau, don’t you? But you don’t lift a finger to help someone out.”

He taps the metal sign on his desk with his name and title. “I’m a Clerk of Consultation Appointments. There’s literally nothing I can do to alter your situation. Wanna’ know what I’m able to do?” He taps his computer screen. “I’m able to click on this little icon on my desktop and open the Bureau Appointments Scheduling System. I’m able to scroll through it, insert new appointments in available time slots, and erase cancellations. I can also click on this other icon,” he taps the screen again, as though I can see it, “it opens the Client Profiles Database. Guess what I can do on that? I can input the information from these forms,” he pats my forms, “right into the database.”

“Well, is there someone else I can speak to?”

“Sure is,” he says, leaning forward, “you can speak to a Consult Administrator on January 14th at 11am. All you gotta’ do is say the word.”

It appears that there’s nothing to do but accept defeat and so, I morosely book the appointment in four months’ time, snatch my papers off his desk, and turn sharply toward the door.

“Have a blessed day,” says the blobby-wobby demon.

On the bus going home the most unfortunate recollection comes to mind, that today is my niece’s second birthday party and Terry the-Whinge-Muppet Hill (my brother, works as a Safeguarder, Equities Division, right ponce) hasn’t forgiven me for missing the first. This in itself could hardly sway me to attend. However, I *do* owe him a few quid from my last Block

period, and thus far, he's been surprisingly dignified about collecting. Wouldn't want him to suddenly shed that dignity. Bugger.

I get off the bus and pop into the shop for a present, some plastic doll with blonde hair in a Hawayana hula costume (call me crazy, but I always thought Hawayanans were descendants of aboriginal Polygonesians, not the Third Reich). Then, I'm on a different bus heading to Terry's. Five stops in, I see a sticker on the package that says *not suitable for ages 3 and under*. Nice.

Oh well, my niece (what's she called? Amelia? Anita?) won't remember anyway. She might even choke on it and put an end to these annual parties for good.

I arrive at Terry's feeling terribly sour-dour (about my Block, not the stupid present) and this cunt flings the door open and flaps me inside with his oven mitts like he's so in-the-weeds it could trigger asthma.

"Hiya Floris, come on in. Berlyn's in the back with the rest. You know the way. Got an iced-bun situation at the minute." Terry bustles off like a flapping chicken.

I head into the garden where I'm greeted by his wife, who, oh yeah, is named *Berlyn*. Acts like a broad named Berlyn, too. Cuts her black hair short and boxy like she's a Tokyian fashion model and pronounces Prench words in a Prench accent like she's Coco-ruddy-Chanel. Lots of *Farr-ees* and *borr-dohs*. Anyway, I toss the blonde-Hawayanan gift-wrapped in a Tesco's bag onto the presents' table and seat myself away from the others under the shade of a sycamore tree. I get a few peaceful minutes to lament my circumstances before I'm inevitably interrupted.

“Brooding in the shadows then, are we?” Terry asks, dragging a fold-out chair, my niece clenched under his armpit. He sets up across from me, bouncing the curly-haired chipmunk on his knee while she chews and dribbles all over his Range Rover keys.

“Iced-bun situation under control, then?” I respond.

“Berlyn’s on this flour-free thing at the minute, completely slipped my mind when I bought the buns, so I was burning the packaging in the fireplace. Evidence. You know the drill.”

“High stakes, then.”

“Mm.” Terry gazes around. “Catch *Bake Off* this week? Paul wanted Swiss Meringue, and Richard made Prench—”

“Unthinkable.”

“What about you then? Why’re you such a misery?”

“Got another Block notice. Sixteen months, can you imagine? Spent the whole morning at the Bureau. Bloody knackered.”

“Fuck-a-doodle-do. We’ve all got problems. I’ve not had a full night’s sleep in two years, don’t hear me whinnying.”

“No one asked you to reproduce, Terry. For once, the Bureau’s not to blame. They should serve baby blocks instead of Scribbler Blocks, then we could all just be happy.”

Terry’s not listening; he’s busy sniffing his daughter’s bum. “Uh-oh,” he says, giving me a face like we’re two rascally Peter Rabbits stealing Old Mr McGregor’s carrots.

Piss off, Terry, you wanker.

And piss off, he does, so I stare into the empty corner of his garden and contemplate what to do about this Block and the diabolical uselessness of the Bureau of Blockage. What a

pain in my arse. I mean, that's what blockage is, isn't it? Another word for constipation. Shit rammed up your bowels for days and days, going with you wherever you go. To the Bureau, the shops, your niece's pointless birthday party. It's there with you as you envy your niece when your brother sniffs the air, and says stupidly, "uh-oh...think we've got a situation here," and she gets to leave. She gets to leave for the simple reason that she *doesn't* have blockage. Babies really have it good, don't they? Shame their brains haven't the capacity to know it.

I slump in my chair. Yes, Terry, we sure bloody do have a situation. It's called a *sixteen-month blockage*. It's me that needs the change, Terry. *Me*. Floris Hill. Your brother. But you're too busy vomiting sterling into the toilet to pay for baby-birthday-parties and iced-buns full of flour.

After an hour, I feel I've served my time and slip out of the party undetected. I see the bus arriving in the distance, so I'm power walking to the stop when I hear Terry shouting after me. Sonofashitcake.

I turn and wait for him to reach me as the bus comes and goes.

"Sorry, did I not say I was off?"

"I think you know you didn't, but I assure you, I didn't sprint all this way in the middle of Constance's party to simply bid you *adieu*."

"Constance?" I whisper, not sure why I'm whispering, "not Alice?"

"No, your niece's name is Constance. Has been since birth. That was two years ago in case you've forgotten. Anyhoo, despite your clear disdain for courtesy and tact, I have something for you that I think you'll quite like." He hands me a piece of paper with a name, Darla Runskell, and a phone number, 55555555555-55555555555. You know, a typical Bitchin phone number.

I use my canine snarl on Terry. “Do I seem in a mood to be set up, Terry? What’s wrong with you?”

Terry guffaws. “Dream on, Floris,” he says, patting the side of my arm. “Darla’s way out of your league, not even playing the same sport, I’m afraid. But funnies aside,” he taps the paper, “works at the Bureau. Give her a call, tell her you’re my brother. I suspect she’ll be inclined to assist.” He raises his eyebrows and gives me a *know-whadda-mean* look.

“Why’s that?” I ask, taking the bait.

Terry takes a few moments to chitter, pitter, and twitch like a squirrel, smirking ridiculously. I wait patiently at first (after all, he might actually be saving my arse), but there’s only so much time one can allow to be wasted, no matter the circumstance.

“Well?” I cry when enough time has passed. “Spit it out, Terry.”

“I did her a favour once. Equity stuff. Pulled some strings. Really helped her out, used my position to trap some people between a rock and a hard place. Made a few of them cry, I did. Got the job done. So, when everything was settled, she gave me her personal number and told me to call if I ever needed Bureau-related help. You know—so she could return the favour.”

“Why did you trap your colleagues and make them cry?” I ask, and it comes out like a bit of a nursery rhyme. *Terry, perry, pudding and pie, trapped all his colleagues and made them cry.*

“To get the job done, Floris. It’s called being proactive.”

“It’s called something,” I reply, then flap the piece of paper, “in seriousness, cheers for this. If she can get my appointment bumped up, I’ll really owe you one.”

“One?” Terry responds. “You owe me two thousand three hundred in sterling.”

“Well, aren’t you bloody dignified?” I reply, flapping the paper once more, “cheers, again.”

“Alright. Let me know how it goes,” says Terry, noncommittedly, and we’re both off, opposite ways down the road.

First thing the following morning, I ring the number Terry gave me. Naturally, I get Darla Ruskell’s voicemail because, while she may actually be helpful this once, she is a Bureau worker after all. I can almost hear her ice grinning through her outgoing message.

“Hi, Floris Hill, here. Got this number from my brother, Terry Hill. Equities guy, hopefully, you remember him. He told me to give you ring, thought you might be able to help with a little Scribbler’s Block issue I’m having. My number is 222222222-22222223, typical Bitchin phone number. Look forward to hearing from you. Cheerio.”

I review my message in my head, making sure I provided all the vital information: name, problem, why she should care (brother of Terry, whom you owe a favour), and where to reach me. All good. Could’ve done without the *cheerio* at the end, but what’re you gonna do? Messages are awkward, people panic. It happens.

I make a coffee and sit down at my typescribbler, ready to knock out a few lines of scribble, when I remember that I’m Blocked and might end up in Wasteland (again, for all the wrong reasons). Blast. What to do with myself? I decide to be proactive rather than sulk. After all, Darla will ring me back at some point and most likely sort this whole mess out. I should treat this as a day of unexpected holiday, use it wisely. Might as well catch up on things around the house. The garden’s been an overgrown jungle for almost a year now, could start there. Could call someone in to fix the dishwasher. And the bathroom radiator.

Might as well put a wash on. Tidy the study. Make the bed. Wipe the windows. Dust the bookshelves. Vacuum the carpets. Mow the lawn. Scrub the tiling. Fix the bedpost. Straighten the pictures. Could even treat myself to a bath. Wave to a neighbour.

Seems I've got plenty to do. I'd better crack on.

When a week passes with no word from Darla, it's safe to say my enthusiasm for an unexpected holiday is shot to Abaddon. I ring Terry but guess who answers the phone? That's right. The bleeding chipmunk.

"Hewwo."

"Put Terry on."

"Gaarrgrllee jaaajawa...hewwo?"

I hear Terry whispering in the background. *"Un-cle. Flo-ris. Go on, Un-cle..."*

"Gaaheeh. Ukk-ell. Froris."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Terry," I shout.

"Hewwo."

"PUT DADA ON."

"Hiya Floris, isn't that neat? She's started repeating sounds."

"Delightful. Listen, I rang that Darla woman a week ago and haven't heard back."

"Left a message?"

"Course I ruddy left a message."

"Mm. Odd. Sure you dialled the right number? Want me to read it out to you?"

"No, for the love of...argh. She said 'Darla' in the outgoing message."

“Right. Well, that’s a shame. Worth a shot, though. Oh, Floris, did you hear Mum’s bought a new car? Green Peugeot. I thought, *green?* Bit flashy—”

I hang up, desolate, discouraged, depleted, depressed. Destitute, destroyed, dismayed, disheartened, downcast, dispirited. Daunted, distressed, demoralised, dejected. I could go on. Synonyms for *depressed*. I really resonate with all the ‘D’ words, and there’s plenty of them. Being a Scribbler really is death. Death. It’s my only option. Hopefully, after I’ve hanged myself, someone—probably Terry—will understand the direness of this Bureau Block situation, how there’s no way to refute it, no way to reach them, no way to get a straight answer or any assistance. There’s no way of getting anywhere. Everything is futile. The Bureau owns your life, and when they destroy it, they shut you out, refuse to acknowledge you. You’re dead to them. In fact, you were never really alive. Not in their eyes. You’re just a name on a piece of paper. A nuisance in a waiting room. An unreasonable voice on the other end of the phone, a phone which they will waste no time putting down on you. To the Bureau, you’re a faceless nothing. You’re no one.

Well, we’ll see what they’ve got to say for themselves when I’ve hanged (*I won’t, of course, but someone will—again, probably Terry*). At least, once I’ve hanged, someone will finally hear me. Can you imagine? A world in which you have to loop your neck through a noose and drop for people to give a crap. I’m already standing on the table. Grabbed a tie from the wardrobe. There’s a perfect light fixture in the ceiling to knot it through. Used to be a chandelier there, but it was among my losses from the break-in last year—not important. Just know, it’s available, and it’s sturdy. It’s not coming out of the ceiling. It’s gonna let me dangle.

Tie's in a double knot. You know what? Let's make it triple. This isn't a cry for help, it's serious business. Scribbler business. Alright, round the neck, nice and tight. I look at my toes, curled over the edge of the table. I'll probably shit myself on the way down. Released from my blockage. What a metaphor. Well, here goes. Congratulations Bureau, you've crossed off another Scribbler.

I lift one foot over the edge, hold it there, take a final breath, and drop.

The moment I do, the

front door is kicked open

and a woman of great authority

and a woman of great authority
and a woman of great authority
and a woman of great authority

SCCCRREEEECHHHHH

PART III.

*Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the Sparrow,
with my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.*

*All the birds of the air
fell a-sighing and a-sobbing
when they heard the bell toll
for poor Cock Robin.*



EDENBRIDGE



1.

SCCCRREEEECHHHHH

I'm torn from my Plane, severed from myself. Ripped like a page from a book.

WAKE UP.

It's all the revulsions. Nails on a chalkboard. Tongue-biting. Blood and dizziness.

Amputation. Electrocution. A bad trip. Paranoia. Nightmares. Pig-men.

All the revulsions and more. Scalding water. Bones snapping. A hand from behind.

Strangulation. Decapitation. Hyperfocus. Shattered. Shards of glass. The final heartbeat.

Unheard. Forgotten. And worst of all, ignored.

I'm lunged into blinding light, panels lifting, three technicians closing in on me.

"Vital signs, good," says one, while another holds a light to my eyes. *Follow its movements.* I'm spacey and disoriented, but I slide my eyes left, right, up, down, wherever the light goes. A greying man leans toward me. Little black circles splatter my vision.

"I'm going to ask you a series of five questions," he says. I stare into his face. *Who is this man?* He's asking me something. But his voice is far away. My ears are ringing. I wish they'd stop crowding me. I watch his lips move. *Answer him.* But I don't know the question. What is the question?

I glance to my right. I recognise Dr Eto. He's standing, angry. I look back at the man in front of me. Dr Fern. The light in the room becomes less intense. In fact, it's dim. Too dim. The ringing in my ears fades.

"What is your full name?"

Awareness engulfs me. "Adaline Nora Tour."

"Do you know where you are?"

I do know. I'm somewhere I shouldn't be. Not yet. Not like this.

"Edenbridge...Hexton Labs."

I answer the rest of his questions, and he backs away. I sit up, scooch to the edge of the seat. "What happened?"

Dr Fern has a hand over his mouth. He doesn't know what to say, so he nods toward the partition that separates the Annexe from the lab. Four guards pacing amongst the computers, guns pointing outward. *Ready-set.*

"How could you let this happen?" Dr Eto's shouting at a technician. By the technician's gesticulated response, he's making it abundantly clear they didn't *let* this happen. Dr Eto looks through the partition and pales.

"BLEEDING HELL," Jasper roars, wriggling his big body up out of his chair. I shock myself by laughing. It's the oddest time to laugh, but it escapes me watching Jasper roll about in his protective suit looking like a beached whale. Beached whales aren't funny. But Jasper is.

What's wrong with me?

Spirella looks over, face white, and it punctures a hole in my amusement.

"What do you think happened?" she whispers.

"I don't know." I glance at the guards.

Max moves around my chair and sits next to me. “Looks like they cut the generators.” He points around at the dim lighting and then to the NeuroPath’s main computer. It’s completely dark. Dead. All flickering lights and buttons and screens, the tesseract and floating symbols gone. It’s lifeless. A piece of grey metal stuck against a wall.

“But why?” Spirella asks. “Why didn’t they signal us to end the programme?”

“We did,” says Dr Fern. “We sent all of you the emergency signal. Twice. But, nothing. No response. Everything was working fine from our end. The outgoing signals broke the projectional barrier and reached the Fourth Dimension. We saw it on the computer. There’s no logical reason why you shouldn’t have received them.” His face is pensive and distant. “You’re right, by the way,” he adds, looking at Max. “They cut the generator and both backups. Complete system shut down. So far, only one’s come back on.”

“Why?” Max asks.

Fern glances through the partition. “They just thundered in here like a S.W.A.T. team, shoved an order in our faces signed by Solstus. We were to pull you from the NeuroPath so you could return to London immediately.”

A guard that looks like Thing from Fantastic Four appears in the doorway. “Arrigh, errybody up. Let’s do these psychology checks quick an’ get moving. *NOW.*”

Dr Fern leans toward us as we stand. “It’s Jacob Lazarus,” he whispers. “Apparently, he’s offered a confession.”

2.

Dr Weltz is waiting in the main area of the lab and insists on giving each of us a brain scan. According to Thing, who’s real/ non-real name is Raptor, there isn’t time, and Fern

and Wertz are ordered to find a quicker alternative for checking if the improper shutdown fried our brains. Dr Wertz isn't having any of it and refuses to sign the release forms without a scan.

"Lucky for us, we only need one of you to sign," Raptor snarls, shoving the form into Fern's chest.

"Fine, I'll sign," Dr Wertz says, snatching the paper from Fern. She goes into the nearest egg-chair room and grabs a pen. Then she heads back to the main floor, and just as she reaches the door, hits a button on the wall. The glass slides shut, locking her inside with the form.

Raptor loses his shit and threatens to shoot through the glass. When he's ignored, he actually does it. *Dhok-dhok-dhok-dhok-dhok-dhok-dhok*. A string of AR-15 gunshots pummel the doors.

There's a chorus of shocked cries. Carney shouts "*COR*," Rosalie's hands are over her mouth. Albert reactively grabs Spirella's arm and pushes her backwards. The jolt of adrenaline makes my tongue fuzzy.

The doors appear to be completely bulletproof.

But did he know that? Or was he was fully prepared to mow her down?

Raptor whips around. "Bitch is lucky we dun' got time to starve'er out." He pushes past Fern, twirling a finger in the air. "Go on then, brain scans all around." Then he disappears into the break room, a trail of guards following behind.

After our scans and psychological evaluations, Dr Wertz opens the glass door and hands over the signed release forms. No one gets a chance to thank her or say anything at all before we're herded out of Hexton Labs and on our way back to Hever.

3.

The ushers are already waiting for us in the dining hall of the castle when we arrive. Condall's as perturbed and flustered as usual, trying to set up the latest Slimscreen XV. His eyes whisk back and forth between the screen and the instructions manual.

"*Sashimisticks*," he mutters, throwing down a cord he can't fit anywhere. He looks over. "Pardon my crassness, it's just His Lordship is waiting, and this *thing*—"

"G'wan, give'er here," Max says, motioning for Condall to shift over.

Condall flaps a hand dismissively at the Slimscreen and moves.

"Yep, I've seen one of them before," Jasper announces, plopping into a chair. "High tech stuff that is, pricey too, I tell ya'. Only ten thousand units released so far. What's it for?"

"We're trying to video chat with His Lordship," says Condall.

Albert laughs. "And you couldn't use a regular phone because..."

"Security. *Security*," Condall cries. "Slimscreens are the most *secure*."

Max examines the screen. "You got one of them EasyKeys?"

Condall hands him a transparent plastic rectangle. It's completely blank. I don't know how anyone could use it as a keyboard. Max places it on the table, eyes on the Slimscreen and taps away with such graceful dexterity it's like watching a master pianist.

About a minute later, the Slimscreen rises into the air. Max adjusts the height, plays another quick concerto on the EasyKey, and Solstus's giant rosy face pops into view.

"Jurors! I'm going to cut straight to it. We've been sent word from the defence team that the defendant has offered a confession—"

“I knew it!” Jasper roars, banging the table. “I knew that sonofabitch was guilty as charged—”

“Not what I said,” Solstus says. “He wants to make a confession, not change his plea to guilty. Still, it’s imperative that we hear the confession, which must be given before the entire court as soon as possible. So, apologies for all the bustle, cutting your 4D investigation short—”

“Were we in danger?” Dr Eto asks.

Solstus dismisses this with a snorty laugh. “There was nothing that indicated that in the defence’s communication, only that Jacob wishes to provide an immediate confession. I made a judgement call to pause the 4D-Trip because it could turn out to be useful for you to have. We want you to get the most you can out of the NeuroPath; we didn’t spend—”

“Then it was incredibly irresponsible for the security team to do what they did,” Dr Eto says, looking sharply around at the guards. “If we weren’t in immediate danger, there’s absolutely no excuse for enacting an incorrect shutdown. You’re *so* lucky there are no signs of neurological damage or you’d have twelve massive lawsuits on your hands.”

Solstus appears perplexed. “What do you mean ‘incorrect shutdown?’”

Dr Eto sighs impatiently. “*I mean* having your team disconnect us from the NeuroPath by shutting off all the generators. I don’t care that no one was receiving signals. If we weren’t in immediate danger—”

“Those weren’t my instructions,” Solstus says, looking genuinely taken aback. “If the security team pulled you out incorrectly then they were taking matters into their own hands. Who was leading the team?”

“I was, Your Lordship,” Raptor says, moving from his post toward the Slimscreen. “Must’ve been a mix up with one of your clerks then. Message we received was to get the jurors back here as quickly as possible, *by any means necessary*.”

“Which clerk?” Solstus demands.

“Couldn’t say, My Lord. Older fella, grey hair.”

“Thank you. You’ve just described half the clerks in our employment.” Solstus looks to Dr Eto. “This *will* be dealt with.” Then, to Raptor. “Can I trust you to bring the jury to the Old Bailey without causing them brain damage?”

“Course, My Lord,” Raptor replies. “My team will exceed your expectations this time. You have my word on that.”

4.

Solstus’s face vanishes from the Slimscreen and Max types in a command that causes it to float down and secure into a stand on the table.

Condall looks at the clock and sighs laboriously. “*There’s just so much to do*. Let’s say...meet back in an hour. Full juror uniforms.”

“Half an hour,” Raptor growls.

As we get up from the table, Max whispers, “That’s got me vexed, that does.”

“How come?”

He doesn’t answer straight away, just looks past me, pressing his lips together.

“Guess we’ll see what Jacob says, but I think I know what he’s going to confess, and I think he’s going to change his plea.”

“You think he’s guilty?”

“That’s the thing, I know he ain’t. But, you can’t be charged with the death penalty if you plead guilty. Max you can get is life.”

“So, maybe he just doesn’t want to die.”

Max shakes his head. “Nah. The patterns don’t add up. Something’s off.” For a moment, he looks like he’s going to tell me something heavy, but he catches the eye of a guard and steps back. “Later. Stay sharp.”

When I get to my room, I exchange nods with Buzz, an initiation back into routine. I close the door behind me and take a deep breath. The curtains are drawn, so it’s dark. Dark and clean and unwelcoming. The same, *always the same*. I move toward the window to open them when I hear the bathroom tap start running. Not *drip, drip, drip*. Gushing.

It takes a second before I think, *holy shit*.

There’s someone in here.

The water stops. I freeze as the bathroom door opens and—

No.

No fucking way.

There’s no—

haaHhahaHAhAhahAHaa

Jacob Lazarus steps out, dressed in his white jumpsuit, carrying my electric kettle.

5.

“Adaline,” he says, going over to the tea table and turning on the kettle.

“You’re supposed to be in jail,” I say stupidly.

“Yes and no,” Lazarus replies. “*Jacob’s* in jail. I’m supposed to be in there.” He puts a finger to his temple and grins. “But, I’m not in there, am I? I’m out here!”

“How?”

He grins and shrugs and laughs and rips open a Twinings. I edge back to the door, reaching my hand behind me to yank it open and reveal him to Buzz.

“I wouldn’t bother.”

I hesitate. “Because...the guards are in on it?”

“God, *no*,” Lazarus says, “how simple that would make things.”

“Then—”

“Because they can’t see me, Adaline. Only you can.”

I stare at him. He holds my gaze. Silver eyes. Silver like scissors. Silver like blades. Grinning, always grinning. *HaahAhhAhhahAh*.

I reach for the handle and open the door slowly but widely. As far as the hinges will go. I move into the hallway. Buzz watches me, but I don’t say anything.

“Alright?” he asks.

I still say nothing, though I glance into the room to make sure Lazarus is still in full view by the tea tray, which he is. Silver smirky-smirking away.

“Adaline?” Buzz peers at me, then looks in my room. He turns back smiling.

“Uninvited guest?”

I feel my eyes widen. So, they *are* in on it. Should I run?

No, that’s stupid. They have guns. But—

“You show me where it is, and I’ll get it for you,” Buzz says, moving into my room.

“You got a glass, or you want me to just squash it?”

Lazarus gives me a vulpine smile.

6.

Once I've convinced Buzz that the spider must have crawled out the door, I'm once again alone with Lazarus. He sits in an armchair by the window, sipping his tea.

"They really spoil you, don't they?" he says, peering outside at the castle grounds.

"Could you please just explain this to me?"

He looks over. "I wish I could. But I have to say, I'm stumped."

I sit across from him and put my face in my hands because *oh my god*, I'm crazy. I'm having delusions of Jacob Lazarus, or the Anchor-Host, or something. I'm suddenly struck with the horrifying thought of being one of those people in a mental institution who live in an entirely delusional reality. What if all of this—the trial, the NeuroPath, all of it—what if it's all in my mind? What if I'm on Shutter Island right now and Dr Eto is like Mark Ruffalo, and I'm Leonardo DiCaprio and—

"Please, relax," Lazarus says.

I feel his silver eyes on me, so I look up. "All this time..." I say, "and you really were just my mind?"

"A part of it. What did you think I was?"

I turn to the window. Across the courtyard is the other side of the Astor Wing. Tudor walls with dark pinstripe panelling and triangular roofs. It could be a film set. I turn back to Lazarus. Silver eyes bore into me.

I don't know what I thought he was, but I thought he was *something*. Something real. Not completely imaginary. *Imaginal*. I was certain he wasn't just a fabrication in my mind. He was separate from me. I touched his hand in Callum's Plane. It was warm. Alive.

I suppose that's impossible. If he were real, what real thing would he be? A part of the NeuroPath's design? Someone would have picked up on that, surely. So many specialists and experts wouldn't have missed something like that. It would have to be something else. Maybe it's what Jacob's going to confess. Maybe, he really is guilty.

Maybe, it's all in my mind.

All in my mind. All in my mind.

"Am I schizophrenic?" I ask him, although it does seem counterintuitive to ask your schizophrenic hallucination whether or not they're your schizophrenic hallucination.

Lazarus laughs. "That's your first port of explanation? Schizophrenia? You don't think it might have something to do with, *oh I don't know*, being Primary-User during an improper shutdown?"

That does seem more fitting.

"It's also the actual case," Lazarus says, grinning. "The improper shutdown has corrupted the barrier between dimensions somehow and prevented your mind from fully disconnecting from it. You see, I exist in the Fourth Dimension, and yet, I'm now tethered to your perception here in the Physical, which allows me to move about it freely—but only through your mind. Does that make sense?"

"Not even a little bit."

"Well, for the sake of time, let's move this from science-fiction to fantasy and just say it was magic that caused it. Do you believe in magic, Adaline?"

"I need to tell someone," I say, getting up. "Dr Eto. Someone needs to know. *Someone* needs to fix me."

7.

Dr Eto watches me with a pensive expression. I've told him that Lazarus the Host is following me around in *this* dimension, only I can see him, and that doesn't mean I'm crazy because he told me so.

I couldn't sit still as I told him either, so I paced around, which probably didn't do me any favours. Dr Eto is sitting in a burgundy armchair, chin resting on clasped hands. His room is called the Edward VII. It's bigger and nicer than mine (in a relative sense—the whole place is an opulent Tudor spectacle). I think it's a suite because it's got a whole living room with a fireplace and a brocade sofa and *three* armchairs. I only have two.

"You should complain," Lazarus says.

Eventually, Dr Eto starts nodding and stands. "Let's go back to the dining hall before the others start piling in and see if the Slimscreen's still there. I think the best place to start would be calling Weltz and Fern."

I follow him out to the hall, Lazarus trailing behind me. "Shouldn't we grab Max?"

"For what?" I ask.

Dr Eto turns and looks at me curiously. "What did he say?"

I face Lazarus, which to Dr Eto must look like I'm preparing to listen to Mary Boleyn, whose stoic face is hanging on the wall behind him.

"He thinks we should get Max."

"Well, do either of *you* know how to work a Slimscreen?"

"Because Max can work the Slimscreen," I tell Dr Eto.

"That's a fair point," Dr Eto says reluctantly, glancing at Mary Boleyn.

Once we've got Max, and he's set up the video call to Hexton Labs, we explain my situation to Weltz and Fern.

"How remarkable that nothing showed up on the brain scan," Dr Weltz says.

"It's not remarkable," says Lazarus, who's sitting in a chair with his feet up on the antique dining table.

"Why?" I ask discreetly, out the side of my mouth, but they all notice and watch me expectantly.

"What did he say?" Dr Fern eventually asks.

I look at Lazarus and motion for him to elaborate which he does.

"He says it's the dimensional barrier that's corrupted. That because I was the Primary-User at the time, it's leaked through my consciousness...or something. He says it wouldn't have shown up on a brain scan because it's not an anatomical corruption."

I'm not exactly sure what I'm talking about, but it seems to make sense to them, which I suppose lends support to this not being a hallucination (something I'm still concerned about despite everyone appearing to believe me).

"What does he suggest we do about it?" Dr Weltz asks.

"He was hoping you would know."

Weltz and Fern look at each other, and I have to say, their bewilderment is disconcerting.

"Perhaps, we'll be tethered this way forever," Lazarus says, "and become the best of friends." Grins. Smirks. *haaAHahAha*

"There's nothing you can think of?" I ask, desperation in my voice.

Dr Weltz opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. They both look stupidly confounded, and I'm beginning to get angry.

“Relax, Adaline. Relax,” Lazarus says, getting up and moving toward me, placing his hands on my shoulders. I feel his touch like he’s real and it seems unfathomable to me that no one else in this room can see him. “There is one hope yet.”

“What?” I say quietly, but everyone hears. Everyone waits. Everyone’s eyes on me.

Lazarus nods his head towards Max.

“Max?”

All eyes turn to Max.

“That’s chilling, that is,” Max says, pointing a finger at nothing in particular. Then, he nods. “I was just thinking...assuming, really...that the NeuroPath, as a computer system, must run on a series of codes, yeah? Each trip has to be written using a certain matrix of instructions for the NeuroPath to carry it out.”

The technicians are nodding.

“And for the programme to function properly, the instructions would have to be written correctly, yeah? The programme would need to be exact.”

More nodding.

“Well, I just thought that if you haven’t already started the NeuroPath back up, our programme might still be on there since the whole system was abruptly cut off without the chance to properly exit the programme, yeah?”

“We haven’t turned the NeuroPath back on,” says Dr Fern.

“Bet. What I’m thinking is that when you do, our programme could potentially resume at the exact point it was cut off from in Adaline’s Plane. And *if* we could recreate the circumstances of the cutoff point *exactly*, it might be possible for us to fast track through to the end of the programme, disconnect properly, and sort out whatever

corruption is causing Adaline's consciousness to remain linked to the Fourth Dimension."

Fern looks at Wertz hopefully. "When you say *recreate the circumstances exactly*, you mean...?"

Max nods, acknowledging this to be the downside. "Getting every single User to agree to a final 4D-Trip."

I deflate. "There's no way they'll all agree to reconnect to the NeuroPath once they know about the corruption."

"Then we don't tell them," says Dr Eto. "We lie and say Solstus wants us to fast track to the end of the programme just to be safe."

We all look at him, astonished. I wait for the inevitable, for someone to declare *we can't do that!*

But no one does.

"What about guards?" Dr Wertz asks bitterly. "How will you convince them to bring you back?"

Max wags a finger. "Give me an official looking letter with some signatures on it so they can claim they were tricked, and I may be able to round up a few who'll agree."

We wait for him to elaborate but he says, "look, I'll explain later, but we better do this quickly if we're going to slip out before Raptor gets back with his AR-15."

8.

Somehow, Max manages to get four guards to take us back to Hexton Labs, to pretend they were convinced by a letter signed by Dr Eto and not Solstus, to go behind Raptor's back. *Four*. My guard, Buzz, is one of them. Good guy.

It doesn't take much to convince the others to go with us since we lie. It's a lie told by Dr Eto, supported by *four* guards. It's virtually foolproof.

I realise this makes it sound like I'm proud of lying, which I'm not. If it hadn't been Dr Eto's suggestion, or if Weltz and Fern were in anyway concerned that it put the others in danger, of course, I wouldn't have agreed. But there are some jurors who could make it so that Lazarus and I really are together forever, simply out of spite or unnecessary conspiracy-thinking. I'm not staying corrupted for that.

Driving away from Hever Castle, I imagine the stress tsunami Condall will spin himself into once he realises we're gone. However, a part of me suspects that Condall enjoys being given a reason to transform into a flapping rooster, so I don't feel that bad.

Once we're at Hexton Labs and all suited up, we're back on the blue-light beds, cords extending. The technicians clear out, and I spot Lazarus standing in the corner of the Annexe, watching me. As the lucidity imaging panels lower, he smiles. "Safe travels, Adaline Nora Tour."

?



9.

This isn't my Plane.

It's not the Collective Plane, either. Not No-Where. But it feels like nowhere. Empty and grey. Complete nothingness.

"Where are we?" By *we*, I mean Lazarus and me. No one else.

He scrunches his face like he's about to confess a *wee little secret*, and I immediately feel the panic.

"Just hear me out," he says.

I pause the panic. It was welling up fast, but I manage to stop it around chest level.

"I'm not sure how long I can hold it there," I tell him, hearing spite in my voice. I glance at my wrist, just to make sure the screen is there. It is.

"This is what I call the Middle Plane," Lazarus says. "Basically, it's just the NeuroPath. Pure NeuroPath."

"Like the Matrix?" I say. I'm joking, but Lazarus nods.

"Yes, like the Matrix."

I dismiss this comment. "What are we doing here? Where are the others?"

"I need to talk to you before we fast track to the end of this little adventure, so I've paused the feed and taken us outside of it."

"You don't think the technicians will notice that?"

He shakes his head. "I've paused the others in No-Where, exactly where they're meant to be."

"How can you manipulate the NeuroPath like that?" I stop and think for a moment.

"The emergency signals that didn't reach us..."

“Yes, that was me.” Grins. *HahaahAHah*. “There were still two Planes left to see, so I blocked the signals. Allow me to explain.” He circles me. “Like Jacob, I too have a confession. In fact, my confession may spoil Jacob’s, but I think you’ll want to hear them both. You remember Ratna Amin, yes? The designer of the programme. Well, she wasn’t entirely truthful in her testimony. I can see in your memories that Flint asked her if there had ever been an incorrect shutdown, and she replied, *no, never*.” He laughs. “Liar, liar. There was one incorrect shutdown, *waaay* back at the beginning when testing first began. The NeuroPath was in preliminary stages, a prototype, and some of the accessories were absolute jankery. Those blue-light beds you like so much were but a twinkle...you get it. Anyway, whoever put together the original chairs did a shoddy job because a screw came loose in Jacob’s headrest. It broke mid-session, and Jacob’s neck fell back, away from the lucidity imaging panel. *Oops*. This abrupt disconnection from the Fourth Dimension caused Jacob to leave something behind.”

He laughs and motions to himself.

“Stop doing that,” I snap, grabbing his arm to make him stop circling me like a fucking vulture. I don’t know why, but I’m triggered. I eventually let go of his arm, and he stays in place. Grinning.

“So...what? You’re part of his mind?”

“The NeuroPath is a neurotransmission scanner. For this reason, during the first few tests, when he was the only User, the machine was scanning his mind as a blueprint—essentially, teaching itself on how to assess future minds it may encounter. When he improperly disconnected, it didn’t have the chance to finish and delete the scan. So...aspects of his mind remained uploaded and essentially became part of the NeuroPath. Of the Fourth Dimension. That’s why nothing showed up in any of those

rigorous security tests.” He smirks and adds, “I know this machine better than anyone ever will, even Jacob. If I don’t want to be detected, I won’t be.”

“So you’re like a clone?” I feel stupider and more triggered with every question I have to ask. Why won’t he just spit it out?

“Not a clone, an uploaded mind. *Disbodied consciousness*. Part of it, at least.”

I don’t know why I’m angry. Why is this making me so angry?

“I don’t know, Adaline, why *are* you so angry?”

“Because...why have you been *lying*? All this time, lying, just to confess now? Why?”

“I never lied.”

“*I am your mind. I am your mind*. Do I look like Jacob fucking Lazarus to you?”

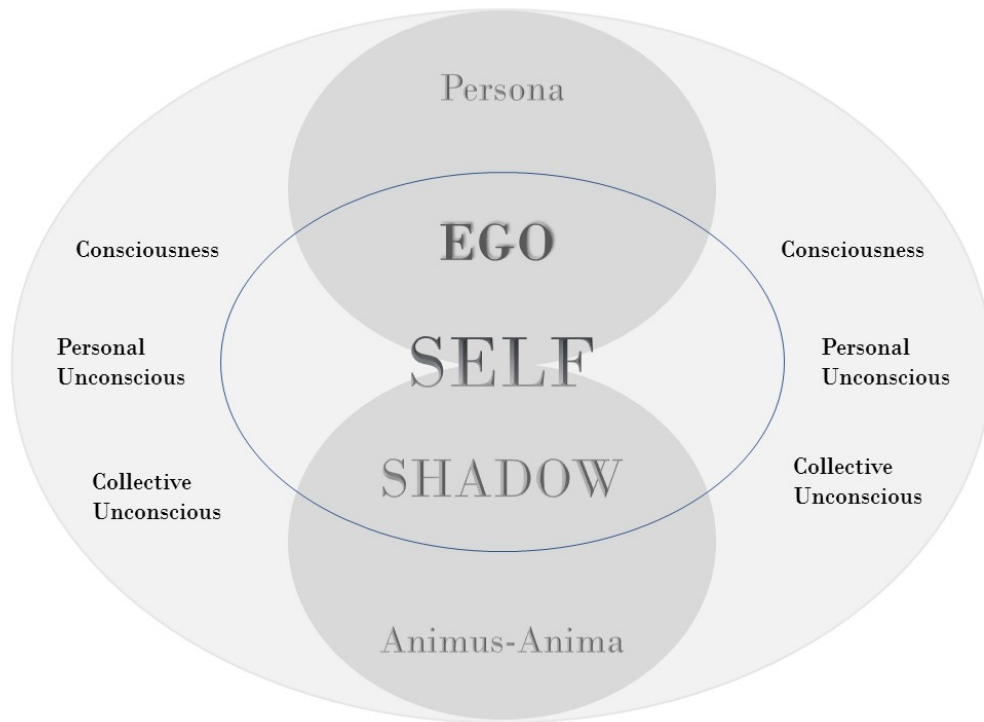
“But I *am* your mind. I’m part of everyone’s mind. Perhaps, not specifically *me*. But every one of you has a version of me in there. Have you heard of the Jungian shadow, Adaline?”

I cross my arms.

Lazarus grins. “Why don’t we take a look?” He turns, widens his arms, and encompassing the grey space in front of us is an image.



Outer World



Inner World



“That’s me,” he says, pointing to the word *shadow*. “The part of your mind that you repress, where all your darkest ideas go. All those stray thoughts that cross over into your consciousness that you consider *wrong* or *immoral*, things you tell yourself you’d never *actually* do and nervously laugh off, dismiss, shove away. What do you think happens to those thoughts? They simply disappear? *Poof! Gone.*” He laughs. “No, they come to me. Pressing on me. Forming me. I absorb those thoughts, so you don’t have to see them. So, you can be the good person you are. I know what you’re thinking. *But I am a good person. I’d never kill anyone. I’m not a criminal. I get to work on time, sacrifice my seat on the tube, drop 5p in a hobo’s cup.* Well, whoop-dee-fucking-do. Heaven’s missing another angel. Truth is, you’re only a ‘good person’ because of me. Because I hold onto all those things that you fear most about yourself.”

He starts to circle me, so I grab his arm again. It makes him laugh, but he stays in place. “Problem is, some of the thoughts you shove onto me are thoughts you need to let in. But you won’t, because they don’t fit the neat-and-tidy version you’ve crafted of yourself. They don’t suit your persona. They’re not Spic-n-Span Sue. But they’re real, and some of them are necessary. Do you see what I’m saying?”

I don’t say anything.

He doesn’t care. “Sometimes, the outer world needs a shadow too. They need just *one* person to do what they’re unwilling to do themselves. What *needs* to be done. With all these good people running around, someone has to be the bad person, to take one for the team, so the rest can keep their hands clean. All the while, they’re collectively raped by their public servants, and they know something has to be done. Just not by them. By someone else, so they can say things like *well, I would never go about it like that, but I*

can see what drove them to it... Because you can't join in the communal back-patting if your hands are dirty, can you?"

"It was you," I say, "you're the reason Buryakov and Lang killed those MPs. Not Jacob, *you*." The panic turns to anger, and once again, it's rising. I try to push it down because the reason I'm angry isn't the right reason. I should be angry because he might be a murderer or a mind-controller. But I'm not. I'm angry because of the lying. I'm just sick of all the *lying*.

"What do you want me to say?" Lazarus asks. "I didn't do anything that Jacob hadn't thought of first."

"I just want the truth. All of it."

"No, you don't." He laughs. "But I'll tell you anyway. The reason you feel unheard, Adaline, is because you are. You're unheard because you're silent, and nobody can hear silence."

I stare. "Not exactly the truth I was after."

"I know. But it's the truth you need to hear. What are you going to do when you sense the pig-man coming, and you can't wake up? Because you're already awake. Because it's the real world and he's coming for you, and if you don't do something, he *will* get you. Just like all the others, the ones that aren't like you, that you watch in comfortable assurance. *That'll never be me*. What will you do when it is you? Will you stand around, motionless and silent, waiting for the inevitable, wishing you had done something sooner? Or will you do something *now*?"

"What are you talking about?"

It's not that I don't know; I just want him to say it. Because I'll never say it to myself. And I want to hear it.

“What is your pig-man, Adaline? What is he *really*? The animus behind the shadow?” Silver eyes press on me. They’re sharp, trying to slit me open. “You want to be heard,” he continues, “but you’re one voice in a crowd of millions that have been desperately screaming, trying to be heard for fifteen years. Yet, here we are. In the last fifteen years, the British public has voted in party majorities with such vile priorities, incompetence, and negligence that we’re beginning to resemble the United States—though, I hesitate to call it that now that three states have effectively seceded—”

“Three and a half,” I say. He watches me. “The division of Texas was ratified in December.”

He laughs. “Imagine spending trillions of dollars on a border wall, and ten years later it’s in the wrong place.” He laughs again. “And is President Isaacs still wearing his white uniform?”

I nod.

He stops laughing. “It’s not funny because we have our own Mason Isaacs in Derek Rapier. US cultural norms were shattered in 2016 when it became evident that the president was accountable to no one. He could do whatever the fuck he wanted, even cheat his way to the presidency, and no one did a damn thing. So now they have President Isaacs for an unlimited term. Congratulations America. But more to the point, we have Derek Rapier, and if the UK continues the way it is, it could lead to something as stark and dramatic as what’s happened to the US. Do you want the UK to become a collection of walled communes? A place where no one gets in or out? Gaslighted by propaganda and government-controlled media? Think of how dangerous it is for US citizens attempting to cross the border into the Republic of California. They get eaten by rabies-infected dogs released by their own nation’s Boundary Guard, it’s disgusting. But

they still try because no one wants to be confined to a place where abortions and homosexuality are punishable by death, women over twenty-eight without children pay a Barren Tax, anything that isn't New Religious American-Christianity is an illegal 'alt-practice,' school teachers wear AK-47s on their backs, and anyone outside of their commune after curfew is shot on sight. Isn't it amazing just how many black and Asian individuals can't seem to stay inside after dark?"

He frowns. "Now, consider the UK. We've left the EU, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Paris climate agreement. We accept the lowest percentage of asylum seekers of any European country and still introduce segregated schools for citizens and non-citizens. We've reintroduced capital punishment. Guns. Death by hanging. We have officials pushing for death by beheading like it's the bloody 1500s. The TFP own 67% of UK media outlets now, did you know? That's an 8% increase from last year. And while we're bickering amongst ourselves, the TFP is forcing people out of the NHS into private healthcare and cutting corners in our cities' safety codes so they can afford summer homes in Tenerife.

"They can do this because nobody holds them accountable. They're above the law. They lie blatantly, force garbage into our mouths, down our throats, into our gut where it festers. *Eat it*, they say. And you do nothing. Well, you shit what you swallow. Traditional Freedom. It's just too predictable. What happened when news broke that Rapier was slipping public funds into the pockets of white supremacist groups? *Nothing*. Outrage and protests. What does Rapier care? He's learned from experience that the masses can't—no, not can't, *won't*—touch him. They can shout outside Number 10 all day, but when the protest's over, they'll disperse and get on with their lives. Unheard and traditionally free.

“And you know what, Adaline? You’re just as guilty. You’re frustrated with the way things are, the way they’ve been. You’re tired of the lies, but what about the lies *you* tell? Every performer needs an audience, and you are your own audience. Glued to the lies that you tell yourself until you bleed from the eyes, until it trickles down your face, staining your hands. Sound familiar? They’re the words of a hypocrite. Do you know why you had to move out of the flat you loved? Why you have to work six days a week to afford medication? Why you abandoned journalism? Because you stood around waiting to be heard for fifteen fucking years and still haven’t caught on that *no one’s listening*. You’re a lost voice in a single-bodied crowd. If you want them to hear you, you have to *make* them hear you, and you can’t do that with words alone.”

He stops and looks into my face, reading my whole being with his eyes, those nacreous mirrors, silver like scissors, like blades that cut into me, scatter me, and leave me in pieces on the floor.

“Those fleeting moments when you let the futility in, the disillusionment, powerlessness, what you otherwise describe as *unheard*, and you find the anger rising from where you bury it in the shadow, those moments are what truth is. Everybody says they want the truth, but it’s another lie. Just like you lie to yourself. In your case, Adaline, lying is silence. And to use your words, the ones you tell yourself in your head: *silence is for graveyards. For winding round headstones and treading on ashes.*”

He’s right. Maybe not about everything, but he’s right about me. I hate his intrusive silver eyes and the reflection I see in them. I hate his grinning and his knowing. I hate all his secrets that were never really secrets at all. They were lies. *My* lies.

I’m suddenly so angry, and I hate him, except I don’t hate him. I don’t know what I hate, but I hate something, and I’m so angry about it.

Feelings are irrational.

I think I'll just let myself be angry.

I still want the truth.

There's truth in my feelings. But not facts. Facts and feelings aren't the same. What I need are facts. Explicit, no bullshit *facts*. He's generous with truth, but can I trust him to give me facts? Something can be true without being a fact. But a fact is always true. It's not debatable or deniable. It's not dependent on feelings or perspective or belief or opinions or you. There's no such thing as an alternative fact. There are facts, and there's bullshit in a mask. I'm so sick of masks.

"Did you use mind-control on Buryakov and Lang?" I ask.

"No. The NeuroPath can't mind-control." He says this like it's the stupidest thing he's ever heard.

I watch him, and he watches me. He waits.

"Did you convince Buryakov and Lang to kill those MPs?"

"Yes. And I'll do it again. Because unlike the rest of you, my voice *will* be heard."

"Is that why you blocked the signals? So, you could do the same to us?"

"No," he says. "Like I said, there were still two Planes left."

"Don't insult me." The anger's rising through my chest, into my throat. "There's obviously more to it than that. Spit it out or don't, but don't dangle it over me like you have something I want. I don't need anything from you." I place my fingers on my wrist-screen. "Well?"

He looks pleased. "Why don't you have a seat?" he says, stepping aside. Behind him is the OfficeCloud 7000. Shiny, brand new leather. Perfect lumbar support. I go to it and run my finger over the armrest.

“Why do you have this?” I say.

“I swept it from your mind because I told you that you’d see it again. And when I say something, you can be sure that I mean it.”

I sit, and it’s just how I imagined it would be.

“Like a cloud?” Lazarus says. Grins.

I watch him, waiting for him to continue.

“From the moment you first connected,” he says, “I could sense one of you had a secret. Even more interesting was that I couldn’t tell who it was, as if this person had learned to conceal their thoughts. But how could that be? How could someone have that sort of control over their mind’s accessibility if they’d never used the NeuroPath before? Better yet, why did they need to? To figure out which one of you it was, I knew all I had to do was wait. Someone with that level of control over their mental plane would never let me inside of it. And as I’ve been able to enter each Imaginal Plane thus far, it’s down to the last two. Spirella Adrina Panagopoulos, age 34, or Max Kyrian Dumah, age 41. I’m fairly certain I know which it is, but like you, Adaline, I prefer facts to speculation.”

That throws me, and I hesitate. “What kind of secret?”

“Somebody isn’t who they say they are. Between Spirella and Max, who would your guess be?”

I watch him, my expression pleading with him not to fuck with my head like that. For once, his response isn’t a grin. It’s a silver stare. Truth that cuts. Sharper than scissors. Sharper than blades.

Sharper than the sparrow’s arrow.

ADALINE



10.

When Lazarus releases me from the Middle Plane, I'm thrust forward. Air particles. Lighter than air. Faster and faster.

The moment I'm in my Plane, I feel it. Home. Right where I left it.

steps inside. I can tell she's a woman of great authority, despite my fading consciousness, because she's wearing the bright gold sash of a Bureau Informant. They're designed to be unmissable, even as you slowly die. Perhaps, in some cases, so you know *why* you're slowly dying.

"Cut him down," she orders, and a big ogre steps forward and yanks my tie off the ceiling like a string of paper dolls.

I gasp for air. No matter how much I gasp, I can't seem to get any. *Where is all the air?*

"Stand him up." The ogre jerks me up like...well, again, like a paper doll. Forgive me if I lack similes at the minute; I'm half-dead.

"Floris Hill?" the woman asks.

I nod and croak some garble.

"Floris Hill, my name is Darla Ruskell. I'm afraid you're under arrest for crimes against the Bureau."

"I'm *what?*" I manage to croak. A few heavy breaths later (which they wait for me to take, how courteous), "What crimes?"

"Bribing a Bureau Informant."

“Bribing? *What? You?* I thought you gave Terry your number as a favour?”

“As a test, Mr Hill. You and I and Terry all know it’s a crime to ask Bureau workers for off-the-record favours.”

“Poppycock,” I spit, “you lot grant favours all the time.”

“I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.” She turns to the ogre. “Chain him in the back of the van.”

“Is that really necessary?” I cry. “Did you not see what I was doing? You would’ve saved a lot of Bureau resources if you’d just left me there.”

Darla Ruskell laughs. “Your life is not for you to determine, Mr Hill. That’s what the Bureau is for.”

When I’m shoved out the door and see the prison van, I lose it. I’m screaming god-knows-what: *MURDERERS! HELP ME! CURSE THE BUREAU! GOD SAVE THE KING! LET ME GO! DON’T LET THEM TAKE ME! POP GOES THE WEASEL! ASHES, ASHES, WE ALL FALL DOWN!*

They handcuff me and shove me in the van like an *animal*. When I find there are no seatbelts either, well, that’s just the cherry, isn’t it?

“Terry *trusted you*,” I shout as Darla reaches to close the doors (I don’t know if he did or not, but I’m not sure I know anything about anything at all).

“Never trust the Bureau,” she tells me.

The last thing I see before I’m enclosed in darkness is the twinkle of Darla’s gold sash and her Bureau butt-hugging ice-grin. “Have a blessed day,” she says and slams the doors.

“Never *ever* trust the Bureau,” Carney says, thumping his cane.

“Here, here,” says Jasper, throwing Dr Eto a cautioning look.

Dr Eto ignores him. “Alright, just so we’re all on the same page, we’re going to fast track through the remaining two Planes. All Users will travel through Spirella and Max’s Planes to complete the programme, but we won’t stay in their Planes long enough to actually witness them manifest. You may catch glimpses of it, but most likely won’t remember any of it. It’ll feel like a blur and the next thing you know we’ll be back in the NeuroPath Annexe. Alright? Everyone good?”

There’s nodding from everyone but Spirella.

“Spirella?” Dr Eto says. “All set?”

“I was wondering—”

“Ugh, it’s not that complicated, Spirelly,” Callum groans.

“*I was wondering,*” Spirella continues, “if we could maybe stop in my Plane for just like...five minutes.” She shrugs. “It’s okay, if not. But after seeing all of yours, I was really keen on seeing mine.”

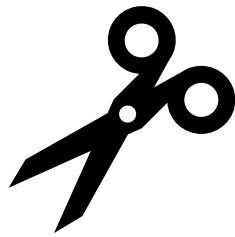
I can see Dr Eto preparing to deny this request.

“Fine with me,” I say, looking at Dr Eto. “If it’s only five minutes, why not?”

Dr Eto considers me. He doesn’t know why I’m willing to put off completing the programme, finding out if it worked or I’m still tethered to Lazarus. But I am, so he reluctantly agrees. “*Five minutes.*”

I lied to get Spirella here; the least I can do is give her five minutes in her brain.

SPIRELLA



11.

We progress out of my Plane and into Spirella's, a temple with neon pink walls and Classical columns that glow in alternating colours.

Wig Haus.

It's crowded with manikins in wigs, all colours, lengths, sizes, and mediums. Satin. Lace. Feathers. Tin foil. Mostly flowers. A garden of wigs.

The walls are teeming with images. Hairstyles. Fashion. Art.

And messages.

I know this place. Not this exact one, but this type. It's just like—

“Rosalie?”

Spirella manoeuvres through the manikins. I turn, and Rosalie's looking up at the images too. The words.

Rosalie looks at me and smiles. “It's just like mine, isn't it?”

I don't know how she knows I've seen her hallway, but I nod. I suppose it's like that thing Atticus mentioned, a sort of holistic awareness in your Plane. Well, not everyone. Callum didn't have it. Maybe that's because I've seen more than just his Plane. Maybe I've seen his shadow.

“What a cluster-fuck,” Spirella says, stopping next to me, examining the wall. As soon as she says it, I know what's coming.

HOW DO YOU LOOK AT FIRST GLANCE?

The first thing anyone notices about you-

-is your overall outline.

So let's find out how you compare to the ideal

Bitch

The STANDOUTS of the season?

Vintage-


inspired silhouettes.

What's old

is new again.

It's fun, it's fearless, it's fashion...
and now it's easier than ever to give one of our favorite looks a modern trendy twist.

 9003 likes

 Comment

Words chattering. Swirling. Swarming.

HOW DO YOU LOOK AT FIRST GLANCE?

The first thing anyone notices about

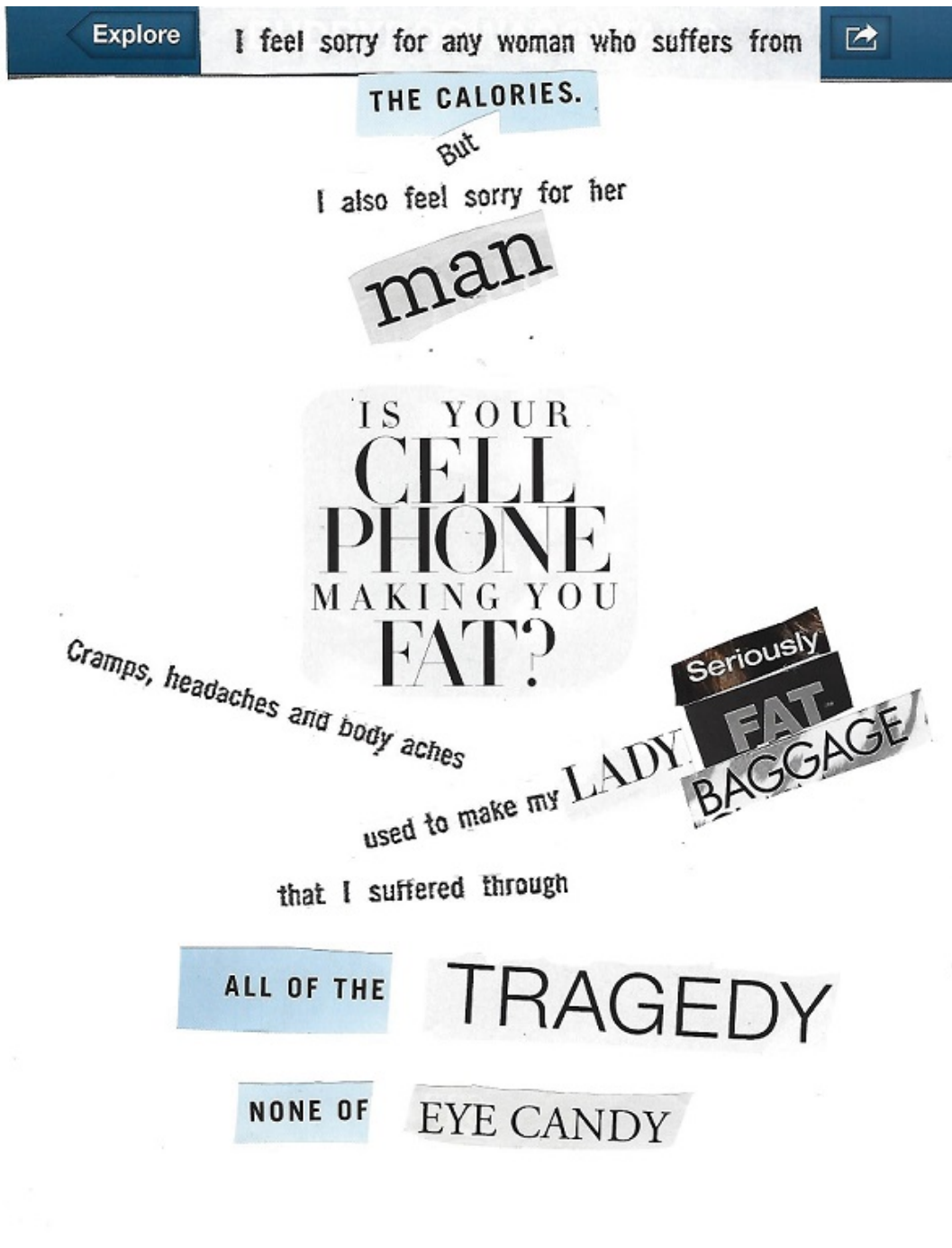
THE MODERN WOMAN

from plain and simple to Instagrammable.



Spirella reactively looks around, like the words are physical entities closing in on us.

But they're invisible like a disease.



"We can't just let my brain speak to us like that."

"It's not your brain," says Rosalie. "I think, it's mine."

Spirella turns to Rosalie. "This is my TweetstaGram," she says. "I have a style blog. I'm a fully integrated participant in the Social Network," she air-quotes and rolls her

eyes. "I know these words well. They follow me around every day. These, and worse. A fun place, the cybersphere." She frowns and can't help darting her eyes again.

"It's all of our brains," I say. "Every woman has heard these words."

"Explains why we're the only three here."

I'm still angry. I feel myself losing patience with everything. Every single shitty thing.

5 P.M. Take your facial slowly

Plan to redecorate the room you
like least in your house.

When you are done, your skin will be
rose-petal fresh.

You know
how much he
means to you—

**IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK,
IS YOUR MAKEUP STILL FABULOUS?**

redefine your beauty sleep

Go boho with a wine-tinted lip, glow-y skin,
and the prettiest braid ever.

Eat them.

EAT THEM.



Spirella tears a big chunk off the wall.

For a moment, the words quiet. A slow breath. We wait, glancing at one another.

Could it really be so simple?

HaAahHAahAhaa. Nope.

We wish we could give you some magic,
fairy-tale formula, some shockproof
method of Keeping Your Man.

What do **YOU** want

the code of seduction for men **VS.** your guide to the male brain

Male Order

Spirella responds to the words by jumbling them.

9 out of 10 women preferred
menstrual cramps.

The words don't care. They have other offers, other ideas, other ways of forcing themselves down your oesophagus.

Eat them.

✓ TAKE A "ME" DAY!

Revisit a Classic

In honor of Orlando Bloom's Broadway debut in *Romeo and Juliet* this month, brush up on your Willy Shakes with Baz Luhrmann's film version. Oh Leo, Oh Orlando, Oh Romeo! (Collect them all!)

Binge-Watch Nashville

Take a LOLz Break!

What To Do

This

Afternoon

Try on all your clothes

Take a walk in the country and gather some interesting branches, pine cones, col-

Take out your flower books and seed catalogues, and plan next summer's garden.

"If I may..." Lazarus appears between two manikins.

I shoot him a look.

He puts his hands up, conceding. The words keep swarming, swirling, choking. Rosalie and Spirella look over at him, and he grins. *HAahaAhaaha*. Still wearing his mask for them. Games and riddles. Because they don't know it's a mask. But I do. I've seen what's underneath. His secret is my secret. Our secret. He gives me a wink like we're a team now.

"Shall we get on with the fast track now?" I say.

"Yeah, times a-ticking Spirelly," Callum sneers.

We turn and find the others. I steal a glance at Max. I can't help it. *Spirella or Max?*

It suddenly hits me. Lazarus is here.

The moment it does, I feel silver. I taste it, metallic and cold. Hear it and smell it and when I look at Lazarus, I see it. He tells me with his eyes.

"Just a quick story." Spirella rearranges the words on the wall, then steps back and examines her work proudly. Her reimagined reality.

HOUSE OF WIGS

THE STORY OF A WOMAN AND HER HAIR

MY HAIR
DEFINES
MY LOOK.

IN VIVID COLOR

IN KNOTS

from nature

gilding lilies

blooming

FLOWER DIADEMS

fantastical, futuristic

INTIMATE

garden

OF **Hair**

Don't let the pretty ingredients fool you.

When you CUT me

I suffered

FOR hair, is me

HAVE YOU
REALIZED THAT

you CUT Me



I don't believe in a MASK,

DON'T MASK ME.

Now,

HEALING

IS LIKE BUILDING

IT TAKES ALL THAT YOU ARE

IT DOESN'T COME IN color

work for Color

COLOR Is HOPE

pink INGREDIENTS

The secret?

Hair

Can you **think of the** **HAIR** killer. ?

first step

**LATHER
RINSE**

RETHINK

**WE CAN
DO BETTER**

so we pulled ribbon out of a cassette tape and made it into a wig."

EACH WIG, A

**m o d e r n
m u s e**

*"It was a
mash-up of mediums."*

DESIGNERS

creating images that were

COMPLEX.

MAKING

HAIR

n o w .

**SNIP IT
OFF**

*"It feels freeing to
cut it all off."*

imagine

Now, reimagine.

Spirella doesn't keep secrets.

Honesty is part of her being. Where most people put effort into concealing their flaws, their insecurities, she puts effort into wearing them, moulding them, facing them. Being them. It's not her confidence and self-assuredness that makes her inspiring; it's her honesty about how hard she has to work for them. *It's hard to be comfortable with yourself, let alone love yourself, she told me once, but it's the most necessary challenge to face, and keep facing because it never goes away. But once you're on your side, you'll realise there's a whole lot of shit that you shouldn't be taking. And you'll stop taking it.*

"I'm happy enough to fast track the whole way through my Plane," Max says, tapping his wrist-screen. "The sooner we hear that confession the better, yeah?" He looks between Lazarus and me. I hear the words under his words. *The sooner we see if you're still corrupted the better, yeah?*

He knows my secret.

I want to know his.

13.

Air particles. Lighter than air. Faster and faster. Further and further. A hand on my arm. Pulling me back. Keeping me here. Not letting go.

I'm No-Where. Rusty desert and golden hues.

Alone.

"Not alone."

"What now?" I say as Lazarus sidles up beside me. "Come to say goodbye?"

"More of a parting word."

I give him a face. *Get on with it then.*

"Adaline, when the programme ends, you'll have a choice to make. A verdict."

"Guilty," I say. "Whatever your reasons, you still killed three people."

Lazarus laughs. "Not me. I'm not on trial. But I suppose, while we're on the subject of me, you'll have to decide where you stand on that too. But regarding Jacob, you know he's innocent."

"I know."

"Good. Because it's imperative that he isn't found guilty. He cannot be sentenced to death."

"Suddenly you care about Jacob?"

"I care about myself."

I look at him. Silver eyes, full of...truth. No bullshit.

"I have no idea what happens to me if Jacob dies," he continues. "Probably nothing, but I'm not willing to risk it. There's too much left to do, and I'm too important. Can I count on you for a not guilty verdict?"

“Obviously my verdict’s not guilty,” I say, “but that’s because he isn’t guilty. Not because I care what happens to you.”

“I thought we were being honest with each other. *No bullshit.*”

My hands start to tingle, to feel lighter. Air particles. Lighter than air. He can’t hold me much longer.

“Adaline,” he says, more urgently this time. He feels it too; he’s losing his grip on me. “It’s vital that you convince the other jurors to a unanimous verdict. Otherwise, they’ll declare a mistrial and Jacob will be in the hands of a new jury.”

Lighter and lighter.

He grabs my hand. “*Make them hear you.*”

Faster and faster.

“Adaline,” he says again, pulling me toward him, making sure I hear him. His final seconds. “Never trust the Bureau. Trust—”

THE VERDICT



14.

Make them hear you.

Never trust the Bureau.

Trust...

Who? What?

Goddammit.

I guess that confirms I'm no longer tethered to Lazarus.

As we're disconnected from the NeuroPath, the first thought that hits me is how the fuck I'm going to fix a unanimous not-guilty verdict between now and when we get to the Old Bailey. Because it has to be today before any more masked bullshit pushes us further from the truth. Before Jacob gives a needless confession and condemns himself to death.

The second thought I'm hit with is who the fuck Max really is.

The third...who can I trust with this? Before, I would've told Max. Who do I tell now?

My fourth thought is that I have a lot of thoughts, but I should start with the most important.

The verdict.

The technicians inform Dr Eto that the rest of the security team is on their way to make sure we go straight to the Old Bailey. So, once everyone is successfully detached and out of their rubber suits, he gathers us around one of the tables and tells everyone we lied.

There's loud outrage, quiet outrage, silent outrage. Glares all around. An equal share for me, Max, Dr Eto, Wertz, and Fern. This really gives me a leg-up in convincing them to trust me about the verdict.

Make them hear you.

It's strange how I can almost feel Lazarus's words. Out here. In the Physical. I can't feel them. Not in the same way. It's more the memory of feeling them. An imprint.

I stand up. Outrage lingers, chatters, questions. I move to the front by Dr Eto and indicate that I want to speak. No one cares. They act like I'm not even there.

Make them hear you.

But how? I wish I could ask him.

No, I don't. I can do this on my own.

I look around for something to make noise with, something louder than their jangling. My eyes land on Buzz standing against the back wall. I go over to him (again, no one cares what I'm doing. They're too busy competing to be heard).

"Shoot your gun," I tell Buzz.

He laughs. When I don't, he gives me a dubious look. "You taking the piss?"

"Not *at* anyone. Like, in the air. To get their attention."

"*Ohh*, just a little *bang bang* in the air, yeah?" When I nod, he frowns. "This isn't a cowboy revolver," he says, lifting his rifle, "it's an AR-15. You don't shoot it into the air because you want to make a speech."

“Do it,” Max says, coming up behind me. I glance at him, not really sure how to act.

Buzz stares a moment, then points his rifle upward.

DHOK-DHOK-DHOK-DHOK-DHOK-DHOK-DHOK-DHOK

It gets their attention.

It also breaks six lights in the ceiling and one of the rafters, which comes plummeting down. It lands on a computer and Dr Fern races over to it like it’s a dying loved one. But what’s done is done. That computer’s gone from this world.

Everyone’s eyes are on me. I’m about to speak when I’m distracted by the fact that Buzz listened to Max so readily. I should’ve taken an Adernal twenty minutes before asking Buzz to shoot the ceiling with an AR-15. Too late now. One more side-eye at Max and I return to the table.

“Jacob Lazarus is innocent,” I say.

“Why the hell should we listen to you?” Jasper shouts, standing and pounding his fists. “You could’ve gotten us all killed!”

“That’s not true at all,” Dr Eto says, but he’s drowned out.

“You lied to us, Adaline,” says Spirella. She looks at Max. “Both of you did. And you didn’t even have to. We would’ve understood why you needed to go back in.”

“Speak for yourself, Spirelly,” Callum snaps.

I’ll do you a favour and fast forward. All you need to know is we go back and forth like this for an hour, and by that point, between Max, Dr Eto, and myself, we’ve convinced everyone except—you guessed it—Jasper and Callum.

Make them hear you.

I wonder if Callum would be able to convince Jasper. Because I have a feeling I can persuade Callum.

I move around the table and pull a chair up beside him.

“Nothing you say is going to break me,” he says as I scoot right next to him.

“Not even Harold Lipton?”

Callum falters. His whole charade drops instantly. He’s suddenly a naked, vulnerable little boy.

He had it coming.

“Where did you hear that name?” he hisses under his breath.

I shrug. “Does it matter?”

He eyes me and attempts to save face. “What are you going to do with a random name? Never heard of the guy.”

“Nothing? Maybe think back a few years. Sometime around the exact date of January 1st, 2019.”

He pales. I don’t need to say anymore. “I’ll leave Jasper to you,” I say. “Convince him, and I won’t tell anyone what you did to Harold Lipton.”

It’s a lie, and I don’t care.

15.

R. v Lazarus, Day 43
08 May 2030

Solstus is waiting for us in the jury room. Condall’s there too, sulking in the corner like he’s had a good telling off. I suppose we made him look bad in front of the Lord Commander.

“I trust you have a good reason for returning to Hexton Labs without court approval?” he says to Dr Eto.

“Of course,” Dr Eto replies. “We detected a corruption that required immediate rectification.”

Solstus’s face reveals nothing but he accepts this answer. I suppose anything’s better than twelve lawsuits and a brain-dead jury.

“And everything’s in working order, then?” he says, eyeing us.

Dr Eto nods.

“Alright then. Masks on. Let’s go and hear a confession.”

“Your Lordship?” I step forward, holding out an envelope. It’s the verdict we wrote together before leaving Hexton Labs. I don’t know what Callum did to convince Jasper, but he managed. It contains all eleven signatures; a unanimous not-guilty verdict. “We’ll hear Jacob’s confession, but we know what happened. The 4D-Trip revealed everything. This is our verdict.”

Solstus watches me as he takes the envelope, opening it with his thumb. After he reads it, his eyes are momentarily back on me before surveying the room. “You’re sure?”

I could be projecting again, but I detect a hint of relief in his voice.

“We’re sure,” I say before anyone else has a chance. They can forever hold their peace.

He folds the verdict and nods, handing it back. “Very well,” he says, taking his *medico della peste* from the table and placing it over his face.

“We’d like to read the verdict before the confession,” I say as he turns to leave. He looks sideways, and I see the long beak of the mask’s profile. I think he nods, but I’m not sure.

Condall looks at us a moment, then purses his lips. “*Well?* You heard His Lordship. Masks on. Let’s go, let’s go.” He scurries over to the box of masks on the table and starts laying them out. I take my medusa-moth creature and pull it over my face.

From the jury box, I watch Jacob Lazarus handcuffed in the defendant’s dock. He looks pallid and exhausted like he’s suffering a colossal hangover. Maybe I should just call him Jacob. To separate him from Lazarus. Because they’re the same, but not the same. When Jacob first arrived, I could have been looking at *him*, the one in my mind. It’s the eyes, though; they aren’t the same. Jacob’s are silver and striking, but they’re not *his*. They’re not Fourth Dimension silver. They’re human silver.

That’s not what I mean.

I mean, they’re as striking as they can be without being from another world. Lazarus has eyes like starlight. It’s such a cringeworthy way to describe someone’s eyes, but it’s the closest I can think of to what they are.

Anyway, that’s how I know I’m looking at Jacob, not Lazarus. It’s how I know they really are two separate people. People? *Entities? Beings?* I don’t know. But they’re not the same. Jacob is innocent, and Lazarus is guilty.

I nominate myself to read the verdict. Max nudges me and leans over. “You need to read it before he confesses.”

“I know,” I say. I still haven’t had a chance to ask Max who he is or what Lazarus meant or even just assess his reaction when I do ask, to see if maybe Lazarus was lying. Everything’s happened so fast. It feels like another cliché. The blur, the whirlwind-time-

lapse that keeps you so occupied in the present, that when you consider for a second how you got from A to B to X in a matter of hours, you don't actually know. There wasn't a single paused moment for me to speak to Max properly. That means *alone*. Because as questionable as he may seem to me right now, I think he's my friend. At least, he's been my fill-in friend throughout this trial. I'm not going to sell him out without giving him a chance.

As we were walking in, he pointed out one of the guards to me, one of the ones that agreed to take us back to Hexton Labs. A woman with a face to match Callum's in chiselled perfection, and arms that are quite possibly made of solid rock. I wouldn't be shocked if she could rip a door off its hinges and crush it between her hands like a beer can. I suppose all the guards are built for that sort of physical destruction should the situation call for it.

"That's Spirella's guard," he whispered, from behind his mask. "*Flamingo*."

"So, she was right. Kind of breaks your whole bird-of-prey pattern."

"Sure does."

As we reached the side door of the jury box, he said, "listen, you need—"

But then Condall made a *psssttt* noise at me, flapping his hand, herding me into the box and I never found out what I need.

So, as it stands, I know to *never trust the Bureau*, which kind of only applies to Floris Hill. I don't know who I *should* trust, and now, I don't know what I need either.

I wish people would be allowed to finish their sentences.

Flamingo's standing directly in front Max and I in the jury box. Buzz is on the left of her, slightly further down. I can see Raptor across the courtroom, his boorish face in a

permanent scowl. Ernest Flint is leaned back in his chair, tapping a pen on his notes, his black holes fixed on Jacob.

Solstus stands and removes the face of the plague doctor. "As I'm sure you're all aware, we've assembled to hear the defendant's confession. First, however, I must inform the court," he looks down at some papers on his podium, and I assume he's going to announce that we've reached a verdict, but he says, "the defendant, Mr Jacob Lazarus, has changed his plea to guilty on all accounts."

The courtroom suddenly feels colder. The masked faces in the jury box all turn to me. Max leans forward.

"Well, shit," he whispers.

I don't know what to do. Do I still read the verdict? Would it change anything? I'm frozen, clutching the envelope. I suppose it doesn't matter now if he gives his confession since he's changed his plea. Pleading guilty eliminates the possibility of the death sentence. It's now illegal for him to die. It's the only reason I can think of for why he did it. He just doesn't want to die. Unless....unless he really thinks he's guilty.

The guards lead Jacob to the stand. He gives the oath, and I'm still frozen. What do I do?

Jacob leans toward the mic. The frequency must have been adjusted because it doesn't screech. When he speaks, there's no lead-in. He just says it. Repeats the confession I've already heard.

"After reading Dr Eto's reports on the jurors' 4D-Trips, it came to my attention that a glitch occurred in the first few months of testing the NeuroPath. It's called mind uploading, and it appears that the NeuroPath scanned and uploaded aspects of my mind which it never deleted, even after I disconnected. This, in essence, means that a partial

form of my consciousness exists within the NeuroPath and would be able to talk and think and communicate with the Users. Furthermore, I'm certain it was this partial-consciousness that manipulated my research assistants into committing the crimes they did. Although I was unaware of it, it is still, technically, *my* mind that did this, and therefore, I must take responsibility for the actions of my disembodied con—"

"The jury has reached a verdict." I'm on my feet making this announcement before I know what I'm doing. All eyes turn to me. Well, fuck. If this isn't making them hear me, then I don't know what is.

Ernest Flint leans forward, black eyes threatening.

I look down at my paper because I've forgotten what to say. I'm so nervous I can barely read it. Oh, fuck again. What is it they say in films?

"Uh...we the jury, find the defendant, Jacob Lazarus, *not guilty*," I say and give my paper with all the signatures a little wave, so everyone knows it's official; I've not gone rogue.

I can't help looking at Ernest Flint again. He shoots me a disdainful glance, then he's on his feet. "My Lord, the defendant has changed his plea to guilty. This verdict cannot stand. In my learned opinion, this constitutes a mistrial. The NeuroPath System must be surrendered into judiciary custody immediately. It is clearly dangerous, and the defendant must be retried according to the new plea."

Solstus narrows his eyes. "Thank you, Mr Flint, for your *learned opinion*." He stands, addressing the court himself. "I was aware of the jury's verdict before this session began. I chose to let the defendant give his confession first because I felt it lent weight to the jury's decision, and I wanted to give the court the opportunity to hear it. The fact of the matter is, the defendant has not *officially* changed his plea yet, not according to

court records. I recognise that this is unprecedented, but as this is an unprecedented trial, we have to take things as they come. I will accept the jury's verdict of not guilty."

I look at Jacob, and he appears emotionally startled like he can't quite believe he's free.

Ernest Flint is still on his feet, and he's smiling.

I'm not sure I like that.

"Forgive me, My Lord, but I can't accept that."

Solstus hardens. "Careful, Mr Flint. This is *my* courtroom, and I will have you removed from it."

Flint goes to his lectern. "The defendant has changed his plea to guilty, and as far as the Crown is concerned, the plea stands. Further to this," he steps around the lectern and slides a document onto the surface in front of Solstus, "it appears there has been a circumstantial amendment to the protocol in this case. As you say, we must take things as they come. You'll see here" he points to the document, "in this particular case, a guilty plea does not eliminate the death sentence. And here," he points lower on the page, "is the Prime Minister's signature. A guilty verdict *or plea*, and a sentence of death automatically places the NeuroPath into government custody, as it is a threat to public safety. Now, the Crown rejects the jury's verdict of not guilty and accepts the defendant's plea of guilty. Therefore, we will seek the aforementioned sentence, and the NeuroPath will be surrendered into government holding, effective immediately."

Solstus rips the document in half. "It's unlawful, and I'll not allow it."

Flint shrugs. "My orders come from above you." He turns to Raptor. "Take him," he says, motioning to Jacob.

Six guards surround Jacob, forcing him from the stand.

“Mr Flint!” Solstus booms, moving sharply across the bench.

“And His Lordship too,” says Flint. More guards race forward, surrounding Solstus, blocking him in.

Flint turns his black eyes on us. “And the jury.”

Guards enclose the jury box. Buzz is in front of me, grabbing my arm, forcing me down the steps. I give him a look of shock which he doesn’t see because I’m hidden behind a mask.

“*Eto*,” I hear Max hiss to Flamingo as she clutches his arm aggressively and moves him from the box. He motions with his head to the benches where Dr Eto has swiftly risen to his feet.

“This way,” Flamingo orders Buzz. We’re pulled toward Dr Eto, and Flamingo grips him by the bicep as we pass.

“What is the meaning of this?” he cries.

Dr Eto’s seen the films. He knows the question to ask, the classic line in the face of betrayal and chaos. *What is the meaning of this?* It’s been bored into his brain. I’m surprised we didn’t hear it from Solstus, too.

Flamingo pulls both Eto and Max to the doors. They don’t stand a chance against her.

“Government orders,” I hear her say.

I glance behind me. The jurors are dispersed, guards pulling them in all directions. Divide and conquer, I suppose. Two of them are brought the same way as us, but I can’t tell who behind the masks.

The guards pull us across the main entrance and out the front of the Old Bailey. My senses are immediately overwhelmed. The road is swarmed by police and swirling

sirens. Further down, the barred crowd is hysterical, screaming, shouting. Camera flashes splatter my vision. My tongue is so fuzzy, it starts to hurt.

Flamingo motions to one of the police vans and Buzz's grip on my arm tightens as he leads me toward it. *Never trust the Bureau.*

I can't believe this is happening.

Flamingo pulls the doors of the van open and pushes Dr Eto and Max inside.

She motions for Buzz to hurry, which he does, and I'm shoved into the van. Not long after, the two jurors behind us get pushed in also. The doors shut, the van starts up, and we're driving. I scramble over to Max and yank off his mask.

"Tell me right now what's going on," I demand. "I know you're helping them, so don't you dare lie."

Max grabs my arms and looks me in the eyes. "Adaline," he says. "It's okay. We're going somewhere safe, okay? Remember, *Flamingo*? She broke the pattern. She ain't like the others."

16.

A week later, I'm sitting on a step outside of Hexton Labs drinking black coffee from a Styrofoam cup. Max is next to me. He finished the last of the half-and-half, so his coffee is thick and creamy.

In front of us is a landscape that's empty but full. Miles and miles of rolling hills and farmland, and soldiers. A sea of soldiers. But they're not the court's security team. They're a private military company called LEGION International, hired by Hexton World Labs' headquarters to protect the NeuroPath from the TFP. According to Hexton, the

TFP was reaching out its feelers for the NeuroPath, probably to test it for potential mind-controlling abilities, or any other advantages it could offer them. Max thinks they want to study ways it can be used to enhance military personnel by altering neuro-conditions.

“Y’know, to create super-soldiers and that. Nothing new.” He shook his head when he told me, a forced laugh. “They coulda’ just asked, don’t you think?”

I suppose now would be a good time for a story. Max’s story.

Let’s start with the obvious: Max isn’t a private-hire driver.

He’s actually one of the most skilled computer hackers in the world. He calls himself a White-Hat, some sort of hacker slang to differentiate good hackers from criminal hackers or Black-Hats. Either way, Lazarus was right. He’s not who he said he was.

Max started hacking when he was fifteen, but what he really loves are robots. Ever since his dad took him to see *The Iron Giant* as a kid, he’d been obsessed with robots. When he told me, I remembered his little robot toy in the Collective Plane. As he got older, he made efforts in school to earn a scholarship so he could study robotics at university. At fifteen, when he still lived in Nigeria, just outside of Lagos, they offered a computer programming class at his school, and from there, he met some people who belonged to an underground computer group. Because of his eye for patterns, he picked up both computer programming and hacking quickly, and soon shot to the top of his class and also, his underground group. Despite his skill, he said that hacking was only ever a hobby for him. *Robots are the endgame.*

A year later, Hexton World Labs came to the University of Lagos to hold open applications for three positions in a summer robotics programme for students third

year or higher. Max was only sixteen, but he took his brother's student ID and went anyway.

"I didn't stand a chance," he told me, laughing, "there were seniors there, *master's* students, folks who'd been studying robotics for years. I didn't know anything about it. But I was a kid with a dream, the hell with logistics."

He made it to the first round of interviews, but as soon as he stepped into the room, the interviewers quickly realised that he wasn't even old enough to be a student, let alone apply to their programme.

"There were four of 'em. Three of 'em dismissed me instantly. *G'wan, get outta' here, don't waste our time.* But there was a small bloke on the end, didn't talk much to begin with. He said, *hold on a minute.* So, I waited at the door wanting nothin' more than to be released from my shame, so I could run to the loo and have a good cry. But he says, *if you could apply to this programme, what makes you think we should choose you over all the other applicants?* At first, I didn't say nothin.' Just looked at my shoes like the little boy I was. So, he says again, *what makes you different from all the others? What have you got that they don't?* Honestly, I suspect he were just being constructive. Giving me some stuff to think about for future interviews. But then I thought, I gotta' tell him. I gotta' tell him what makes me different than all the other applicants. So, I said, *if you gave me a computer and twenty minutes, I could break into your network security system and destabilise it entirely.*"

Max shakes his head again, smiling. "Man, you shoulda' heard the laughs from the other three. This is Hexton World Labs we're talking, yeah? They ain't fucking around with security; it weren't gonna be Norton AntiVirus I'd be up against. But I thought I

could do it, that I could crack any system. The others laughed, but that small bloke on the end weren't laughing. He looked me square in the face and said, *let's see it then.*"

I'm sure you can guess what happened. Max successfully breached the Hexton World Labs security system in twelve minutes at sixteen years old. Understandably, he was offered a position on their information security team in London. In addition to compensation, they offered to pay for him to study robotics in any of their London programmes. And that's how Max came to live in London and work for Hexton World Labs.

Now, for part two of his tale: Max the Juror.

Apparently, the Chief Executive of Hexton World Labs' European operation, Hye-Su Min, was fuming when the director of one of their funded projects was arrested without due cause, and the entire Hexton World Labs Centre in Edenbridge was seized as evidence in the case. Max suspects this was partially fuelled by the fact that Hexton Labs is currently in a lawsuit with the TFP after the party made a Compulsory Purchase Order of land they own where they're halfway through construction of a new Hexton World Labs Headquarters and training base for LEGION (information that we, as a jury, were never given). He suspects Hye-Su Min felt the same thing was happening with the NeuroPath Project; the TFP was slipping its sticky fingers into places they didn't belong.

For this reason, Max was brought on to be an informant since he could hack into the court's system and ensure himself a place on the jury. So, Max-the private-hire-driver was to be Juror 11, giving Hexton an insider's view of the proceedings. For six months leading up to the trial, Max underwent rigorous training with an expert in psychological resilience to keep his thoughts confined, all based on the off-chance that the jury would be asked to use the NeuroPath. If that were to happen, Max needed to be unbreachable

so he wouldn't be compromised. Since the NeuroPath was evidence at the time, it was the only way to prepare his mind. And this is why Lazarus couldn't read his thoughts.

When Hexton learned that the court had hired the private security company Britanica Group for the trial, they infiltrated it with members of LEGION, placing them undercover to keep Max secure. However, because guard assignments were made after the jury selection, they wouldn't know which, if any, of LEGION's members would be selected for the trial. And once Max was sequestered, there was no way for Hexton to communicate with him due to the high security and embargo on communicative technology. Max wouldn't know which (if any) of the guards were undercover until they could reveal themselves to him without compromise. Most of the trial, for all he knew, he was on his own.

In the days between selection and sequestration, Max hacked into Britanica Group's email server. Amidst the information he gathered, there was one thing that struck him particularly: constant references to something, or someone, called SPAR-ROW, which appeared to be in charge of an external security unit called S.A., brought in specially to Britanica Group to provide guards for the trial. He'd passed the information along to Hexton, but there wasn't much more he could figure out before being sequestered. This is partly why he was so interested in the guards' bird code-names.

"It couldn't be a coincidence that they were using bird names and were also somehow connected to this mystery person or organisation called SPAR-ROW. *Sparrow*," he said. "Figuring out what S.A. stood for weren't easy. I gotta' give credit to my kids for it. You ever heard the nursery rhyme *Who killed Cock Robin?* 'Cause I've heard it right around six billion times. And you know who killed him, yeah?"

The sparrow.

“That’s right,” Max said, “The sparrow with his arrow. S.A. SPAR-ROW’s Arrow. Anyway, the code-names are also how Hexton managed to get the message across that they had guards onto the jury security team. Spirella’s guard, whose code-name was actually Gyr Falcon, told Spirella her name was *Flamingo*, hoping this might eventually be conveyed to me. They knew it’d throw off the birds-of-prey pattern. I’d pick up on that. Took me longer than I’m proud to admit though, figuring out why there was a break in the pattern. But that’s how I knew there’d be a guard willing to take us back to Hexton Labs. Didn’t realise *four* Hexton guards had managed to get onto the security team until they took us, though.”

Fuck am I lucky Buzz was one of them.

17.

I stare out into the sea of soldiers and consider how surreal it looks. You know how people overuse the word *surreal*? Saying things like, *can you believe I bumped into Sharon at Tesco today? Sharon! It was so surreal.*

It fucking wasn’t. But this is. It looks like an optical illusion, a strange Max Ernst image. They don’t belong there, filling the emptiness.

I’m thinking about how lucky I am to be here, how I managed to be one of four jurors who wasn’t taken by the S.A. to nobody-knows-where. We’re also fortunate that LEGION reached the Hexton World Labs Centre first, that the undercover guards alerted Edenbridge to what was happening at the Old Bailey as soon as they put the van into drive. LEGION sent a dozen units at least to make sure the TFP didn’t get their claws on the Hexton Labs Centre, on the *NeuroPath*. More followed. And more.

But it would never be enough, would it? Not to outnumber government forces. Not LEGION on their own. The soldiers keep telling us, *it's covered. We've got it covered.* No details. But it's covered. We have no choice but to hope that's true because we can't leave Hexton Labs. The one thing I *do* know that they've got covered is ensuring the TFP can't get within ten miles of the NeuroPath. That low iron fence around the area—well, it's not a fence. It's the base container of a protective covering called the Falaxi Pyramid. Once we arrived at the lab, it was activated, luminous shards shooting from the ground, up over Hexton Labs, and meeting at a point to form a shield. Max says it's made with this new technology called falaxiglass which isn't actually glass.

"It's some sorta gelatin-like substance coated around a magnetic field," Max said. "It's not actually gelatin, obviously. But honestly, I'm not one hundred percent on the specifics yet either—totally different department from robotics. Dr Fern said that the falaxi substance absorbs and regurgitates most modern forms of weaponry—bullets, lasers, even explosives. He says it would have to be really high tech stuff to be able to fully penetrate the falaxi gel and reach the magnetic field at the centre. Whatever does push through gets fried into atoms, I guess. I'm wanna' have Fern explain it again when my head's in more of a space to listen, but the main thing is that the Falaxi Pyramid is virtually indestructible."

Max made sure to emphasise this: *virtually* indestructible.

"It is 'til it isn't, you know?" he said, shrugging. "Until someone comes up with some newer, more advanced approach to penetrating it. And they will. Especially now."

We may be trapped in here, but the LEGION soldiers are constantly coming in and out. They make sure we're never without a food supply and running water. Max suspects there's a storage base nearby with an undetectable route into the Falaxi

Pyramid. His guess is that it's underground, but they won't tell him anything. They won't even tell Weltz or Fern.

The other two jurors in here with us are Albert and Jasper.

Yep, you read that right.

Albert's fixated on LEGION's investigation into where they took Solstus and the other jurors. He's like a cheerleader, always there to remind them how important it is that they're found and retrieved. While I'm sure he's concerned about all the jurors, it's clear to everyone that his investment is predominantly fuelled by Juror Nine.

I've slept on a mattress on the floor of Hexton Labs for the past six nights. Luckily, I was able to get a message to my parents and my brother, Cav, to let them know I'm safe, but that's about it. Didn't know I had parents or a brother, did you? Or that Max has not one, but *two* sets of twins, fifteen years apart. That's because, for the last three months, we weren't Max or Adaline. We were Jurors 10 and 11. We didn't have families or friends or lives. We were property of the red judge. I suppose, now, we're property of Hexton World Labs.

I'm tired of being property. And I'm sick of being subordinate.

Make them hear you.

I feel the anger rising as I stare out into the military horizon. It rises higher the more I think about how small I felt last week, seized in the middle of the courtroom like I was something to be claimed. Less-than-human. Property of the TFP.

Then I think about Jacob, and I'm crying. It happens so abruptly that I'm startled by it, which causes me to cry more. Perhaps, some feelings seem irrational, but really, they're the most rational reaction you could have to something. And sometimes, you need to let those feelings through, instead of pushing them into your shadow. I feel

Max's hand on my back as I cry, and he doesn't say anything because it's the understandable thing to do.

Yesterday, Jacob Lazarus was executed.

When I've somewhat collected myself, my emotion turns back into anger. I hold onto that anger tighter than I've held onto anything before. I'm not letting it go this time.

Make them hear you.

I turn to Max. "Is someone going to check if Lazarus is still in the NeuroPath?"

"Where else would he be?"

I stare into my cold black coffee. "He told me he didn't know what would happen to him if Jacob died. It's why he was so adamant that I secure a not-guilty verdict."

I feel Max's eyes on me. "Then, he lied. Lazarus is completely separate from Jacob. He's not tethered to him like he was to you. He doesn't need Jacob to exist."

"You're sure? Maybe he didn't realise."

"You really believe that I could know something about Lazarus that he doesn't know about himself?"

I can see the outline of my reflection in the coffee. Dark and distorted. "Then, why—" It hits me. *Never trust the Bureau.*

"He knew," I say, turning to Max. "He knew Jacob would be sentenced to death either way. He must have known—or at least suspected—that the TFP was secretly running that courtroom. A guilty verdict, *or plea*, would make it easy for them. He wanted to expose them, and the only way to do that was to corner them with a not-guilty verdict that they'd be forced to publicly overrule."

Max is nodding, eyes forward. "I think you might be right. But how would he know...?" He shakes his head. "He knows a hell of a lot, doesn't he?"

I don't answer. My thoughts are spinning, spilling over, raining down. I'm not even sure if what I'm thinking is possible, but then, six months ago I didn't know mind uploading and walking around your own brain was possible. I didn't know government overruling of a trial-by-jury verdict in a developed nation like the UK was possible. But I guess, now it is.

I think of what Max said to me at the beginning of the trial. *We gotta' stay sharp. Only one thing sharper than the sparrow's arrow.* I thought he meant our minds. Maybe he did in a way.

"What is sharper than the sparrow's arrow?" I ask him.

"Silver," he answers immediately and looks at me. *Silver like scissors.*

Silver like blades.

I can't believe I'm thinking what I'm thinking.

"You like robots," I say.

Max knows what I'm thinking; he's thinking it too.

We need to get Lazarus out of the NeuroPath.

We need to *make* them hear us.

THE END

Index

Allure: The Hair Guide 2018, 425, 432-435

Cosmopolitan, 425-430

Femicin Ad. (1968), 316, 426, 430

Good Housekeeping, 313, 315-319, 424-425, 427, 429-430

Vol. 125, No. 6 (1947), 313

Vol. 127, No. 6 (1948), 317

Vol. 128, No. 2 (1949), 315, 317, 429

Vol. 128, No. 3 (1949), 315, 424-425

Vol. 129, No. 6 (1949), 318

Vol. 130, No. 2 (1950), 315

Vol. 130, No. 3 (1950), 316-317

Vol. 130, No. 5 (1950), 318

Vol. 131, No. 5 (1950), 315, 319, 427, 430

Harper's Bazaar, 424-426, 428

In-Style, 425-426, 428

Chaucer, Geoffrey, 105

Pitney-Bowes Postage Meter Ad. (1947), 318

Shakespeare, *Othello*, 145

Wiley, 324

Appendix

Collages

The Woman's Sphere Collection, 315-319

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p. 427, 'It's Five O'Clock'

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House of Wigs, 432-435

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